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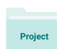
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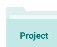
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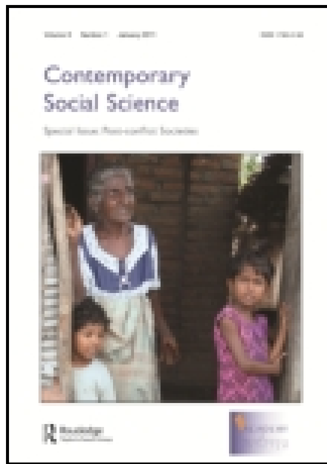

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Aristotle's ethics and contemporary political philosophy: virtue and the human good

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This paper addresses recent attempts in political theory to interpret Aristotle's account of the human good, *eudaimonia*, and uses it as a foundation for political philosophy. Nussbaum defends 'perfectionist political liberalism' on the following interpretation of Aristotle: the term 'human good' refers to the capabilities of each person, and conceptions of the good are incommensurable. For MacIntyre's 'tradition-dependent communitarianism', standards of rational action that direct us towards *eudaimonia* must be embodied in practices, and one can pursue the good only by conforming to practical standards of excellence. I describe Gadamer's position as 'radically undogmatic communitarianism'. He assumes that the human good is attained by openness to otherness and through suffering. This paper defends a fourth position, 'non-relative communitarianism', which is based on the idea that the human good is 'good without qualification for humans'. Community can be an arena in which to develop and exercise virtue, in particular, practical wisdom and justice. However, political philosophy must have a non-relative basis, and it must guarantee respect for persons. The concept of 'good without qualification for humans' provides a tradition-independent standard for the analysis of different communities, and also, experiences of harm.

Introduction

Can a compelling account of the human good be offered as a foundation for political philosophy? It has been argued that, in a situation of pluralism, there is 'a diversity of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the meaning, value, and purpose of human life', and therefore, agreement about the human good is possible only through the use of oppressive state power (Rawls, 1987, pp. 424–425). However, in this paper I defend the view that an interpretation of Aristotle's

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conception of the human good (*eudaimonia* or flourishing) can still be rationally justified as a foundation for political philosophy. For Aristotle, the human good is a life of virtue, and the virtues of justice and practical wisdom have particular relevance for political philosophy. I will argue that the human good is 'good without qualification for humans', and this is the basis for 'non-relative communitarianism'. However, I first discuss the work of Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1990, 1996, 2000), Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, 1988), and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975).

Nussbaum argues that, according to Aristotle, emotion itself singles out 'the features of ethical relevance' in a situation (1986, p. 315). However, as reasons to desire goods are not commensurable, each person's flourishing comprises various incommensurable goods (1986, p. 294, p. 315). Nussbaum defends 'perfectionist political liberalism'. She offers a perfectionist account of well-being, 'combined capabilities'. Although political liberalism guarantees respect for the capability of each person, it does not presuppose one moral doctrine or conception of the good (2000, p. 75).

For MacIntyre, 'standards of rational action directed towards the good' are 'embodied' in systematic activities (1988, pp. 140–141). One can attain *eudaimonia* only as 'goods of excellence' (1988), or the 'internal goods' of practices (1985), and therefore, only by exercising virtues and 'conforming' to practical standards. MacIntyre defends 'tradition-dependent communitarianism'. The 'Aristotelian tradition' teaches that one becomes rational only by participation in practice-based communities (1988, p. 396).

According to Gadamer, humans have a vocation, to be 'discerning and insightful' (1975, p. 375). However, as we move towards the good by openness to otherness and by suffering, the good person is 'radically undogmatic' (ibid. p. 355). Gadamer provides the rationale for 'radically undogmatic communitarianism'. We are obliged to treat 'the other', not humanity, as an end. Although understanding occurs when we are addressed by tradition, tradition is made present in a plurality of unpredictable ways.

The interpretation of Aristotle offered in this paper is that the exercise of virtue is a means to, and constitutive of, the good without qualification for humans. This provides foundations for non-relative communitarianism. As Nussbaum argues, emotion is not simply inert, and pleasure, honour and wisdom differ *qua* goods. Moreover, political philosophy should seek universal agreement and also guarantee respect for persons. Nonetheless, Aristotle illustrates the significance of communities in the formation of virtue, in particular, practical wisdom (EN, I. 7, 1099 a 14ff; I. 10, 1100 b 16–20). MacIntyre is right that Aristotle begins from the views of, among others, 'men of old', and life in a community is a prerequisite for the exercise of virtue. Yet, the exercise of virtue brings about success with reference to, not any practical goal, but what is 'an end in the unqualified sense' (VI. 9, 1142 b 29). Therefore, political philosophy should provide tradition-independent rational standards with which to analyse communities. Finally, as Gadamer argues, one may exercise virtue and yet suffer. However, the exercise of moral virtue ensures one aims for what is 'both rare and laudable' (II. 9, 1109 a 34). Political philosophy can identify

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experiences that are harmful because (among other reasons) they prevent the pursuit of human perfection.

Aristotle, political philosophy and the human good

I first look at Aristotle's account of the human good. Aristotle offers only what he calls an 'outline' of the good. It is left to the good person to 'carry on and articulate' that account.

Aristotle conceptualises the human good as an 'end'. There are as many ends as there are actions, arts, and sciences, but each is rightly desired for the sake of a final end.

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. (EN, I. 2, 1094 a 19ff)

The 'human good' is that for the sake of which other goods are desired. Some ends desired for the sake of the human good are activities, others are products (I. 1, 1094 a 4). For instance, the products 'of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel...' (1094 a 8). However, the end of virtue is not a product, as 'good action itself is its end' (VI. 5, 1140 b 6). If we do produce anything while exercising virtue, the thing produced is not itself the end or purpose of virtue.

There is an end appropriate to each activity, and Aristotle is here engaged in 'political science' (I. 2, 1094 b 3–4). A more appropriate term is 'political philosophy'. It is not simply an empirical science, for its end is 'the good for man' (ibid.). It incorporates the ends of all other human activities: strategy, economics and rhetoric 'fall under it'; and it ordains which of the sciences should be studied, by whom, and up to what point.

In political philosophy, knowledge is sought for the sake of action, so as to *be* good. With this knowledge, 'Shall we not, like the archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?' (1094 a 22). The student of political philosophy is an 'educated man'. He is not an expert, a good judge of some one subject: '... the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general' (I. 3, 1095 a 1). The educated man is 'experienced' in the sense that he exercises virtues: 'things in virtue of which we stand well ... with reference to the passions' (II, 5. 1105 b 24). While knowledge of the human good is of no use to the 'immature', those who pursue 'each successive object, as passion directs', '... to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit' (I. 3, 1095 a 7–10).

The educated person also looks for the appropriate type of precision from political philosophy: '... it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs' (1094 b 33). Premises and conclusions are universally true in mathematics, but not in political philosophy (or rhetoric).[1] This is the case as 'fine and just actions', the subject matter of political philosophy, 'exhibit much variety and fluctuation, so that they may be

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thought to exist only by convention ...' (1094 b 15). Therefore, in political philosophy we indicate the truth only 'roughly and in outline' (1094 b 20). Nonetheless, what we account for is the 'good of humans'. Not only do we exercise virtue for the sake of our good *as* a human, and not merely *as* the bearer of conventions; it is 'fine and just' acts that are said to admit of fluctuation, not just any acts and not those that fail to meet the requirements of virtue.

So far we have seen that, for Aristotle, every activity aims at some good. Political philosophy is concerned with 'the human good', which he refers to as *eudaimonia*. It can be translated as flourishing or happiness.

There is a plurality of goods, according to Aristotle. 'Of honour, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse' (I. 6, 1096 b 22–25). The good is not 'something identical in them all, as that of whiteness is identical in snow and in white lead' (ibid.). Nonetheless, *eudaimonia* is a 'final end'. Some things are desirable only as means to some other end. Honour, wisdom and pleasure are desirable as ends, but *also* as means to *eudaimonia*. Flourishing, *eudaimonia*, alone is desirable for its own sake, and *never* as a means to anything else. For that reason, it is an end of action that is 'final without qualification' (I. 7, 1097 a 32). It is also 'self-sufficient'. Aristotle does not mean that a flourishing person is self-reliant, living 'a solitary life ...' (1097 b 10ff). Indeed, 'man is by nature a political animal' (Pol. I. 2, 1253 a 2).[2] Rather, *eudaimonia* is 'that which when isolated makes life desirable and wanting in nothing' (EN, I. 7, 1097 b 19ff). *Eudaimonia* is the good of humans, it is desired for its own sake, and it in itself makes life good. It is 'good without qualification for humans'.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the ultimate aim or purpose of a good life. It has been argued that this is not a logical or factual truth. That is, people need not, and do not, pursue Aristotle's definition of flourishing. This is the case if one's 'final end' can be to devote oneself to the care of a sick relative (Kenny, 1965–1966, p. 29). Nonetheless, it may be true that all *should*, morally speaking, seek flourishing as the final end. *Eudaimonia* is the *ergon*, 'function' (or 'characteristic activity') of humans (EN, I. 7, 1098 a 10). It is what humans are *for*, as humans. Caring for a sick relative may not bring riches, power, and prestige. However, *eudaimonia* is 'not a thing counted as one good thing among others. If it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods...' (1097 b 19ff). Therefore, caring for a sick relative may well be a life of flourishing, if, but only if, it fulfills that person's function as a human. What is a human's function?

The function of man is 'an active life of the element that has a rational principle' (1098 a 2). It is within 'the soul' we have a rational principle, and the active life of the soul is the exercise of virtue. 'Human good turns out to be the activity of the soul exhibiting excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and most complete' (1098 a 15). Aristotle is offering an 'outline' of the human good; and 'any one is capable of carrying on and articulating what has once been well outlined' (1098 a 24). The human good is a life of virtue, and through the exercise of virtue, in particular practical wisdom, we carry on and articulate what has been outlined.

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Recent Aristotelian political philosophy

Nussbaum, MacIntyre and Gadamer each offer an interpretation of Aristotle on *eudaimonia* and then, on that basis, provide an account of political philosophy. For Nussbaum, the term 'human good' refers to the capabilities of each person, and she defends perfectionist political liberalism. MacIntyre proposes tradition-dependent communitarianism, and he assumes that one can attain *eudaimonia* only by pursuing the internal goods of practices. Gadamer defines the human good in terms of openness to otherness, and this is the basis for radically undogmatic communitarianism.

Liberalism: the capabilities approach

Nussbaum offers a revised version of Rawls's political liberalism. Like Rawls, she defends liberalism as a 'political' conception that does not rely on a comprehensive moral doctrine. However, while Rawls is concerned with the 'fair' distribution of resources, and assumes only a 'thin theory of the good' (1971, p. 396), Nussbaum is concerned with the use we make of resources. She defends an Aristotelian substantive—perfectionist—account of the human good: 'central capabilities' (2000, p. 85).

Aristotle assumes that certain 'ethical beliefs' are beyond doubt. They cannot be questioned, or even defended (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 321). In particular, '... we believe that human life is worth the living only if a good life can be secured by effort, and if the relevant sort of effort lies within the capabilities of most people' (ibid. p. 320). The term 'capabilities' refers to developed or mature abilities: the abilities (i) to live to the end of a complete life; (ii) to have adequate health and nourishment, and the opportunity for sexual fulfillment; (iii) to avoid unnecessary pain; (iv) to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason; (v) to love, grieve, feel longing and gratitude; (vi) to conceive and plan one's own good life; (vii) to live with and for others; (viii) to have concern for and relation to other animals; (ix) to laugh and play; (x) to live one's own life; and (xi) to have recognised one's desire for separateness (1990, pp. 220–226). The most important of these are (v) emotion, (vi) practical reason, and (vii) affiliation.

A central theme of Nussbaum's work is the 'fragility' of goodness. 'The condition of a virtuous character, like good athletic conditioning, is a kind of preparation for the activity; it finds its natural fulfillment and flourishing in activity' (1986, p. 324). The human good flourishes in activity. There is, then, a gap between being good and living well, and so 'luck' may disrupt attempts to bridge that gap. As Aristotle argued, 'the *Eudaimon* person needs the goods of the body and external goods and goods of luck, in addition, so that his activities should not be impeded' (EN, VII, 1153 b 16–22). Further, his *The Art of Rhetoric* shows (1389 b 13ff), according to Nussbaum, some 'circumstances of life' may make 'even acquired virtues difficult to retain' (1986, pp. 338). As the 'virtuous condition is not itself something hard and invulnerable', in old age, we may lose 'those virtues that require openness' and 'trust in other people and the world' (ibid. p. 340).

Nussbaum shares Rawls's commitment to the moral equality of each person. Each person should be treated as an end. Further, like Rawls's primary social goods,[3] Nussbaum's list of 'central capabilities' is neutral between different conceptions of the good life; they are what it is always rational to want, 'whatever else one wants' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 88). This is 'the principle of each person's capabilities' (ibid. p. 74). It is a 'liberal' interpretation of Aristotle's ethics. She assumes the effort required to exercise virtue 'lies within the capabilities of most'. She also rejects communitarianism. As a 'preparation for the activity', virtuous character cannot be equated with any practical purposes or norms, or any functions in which we exercise capabilities. Nussbaum also defends what Rawls refers to as a 'political' conception of justice (ibid. p. 75). Although conceptions of the good are 'conflicting, and indeed incommensurable' (Rawls, 1987, pp. 424–425), pluralism can be 'reasonable'. Reasonable citizens view one another as free and equal and offer each other fair terms of social cooperation (Rawls, 1997, p. 578). Nussbaum's list of capabilities does not presuppose a liberal moral doctrine and conception of the good. Therefore, there is no reason why members of non-liberal communities should not accept the list of capabilities as the basis for constitutional guarantees.

However, Nussbaum's position is not strictly compatible with that of Rawls. While Rawls often seems to equate deliberation with self-interested utility maximisation (1971, p. 143, p. 408), Nussbaum argues that emotion, in particular 'compassion' for others (1996, pp. 34–35), plays an important role in deliberation. She assumes that 'choice resides in a perception that responds flexibly to the situation at hand' (1986, p. 312). Passion itself, the 'intentionality of ... desires', singles out 'the features of ethical relevance' in a situation (ibid. p. 315). As the appropriate emotional response is 'flexible' and 'concrete' (ibid. p. 316), she concludes that conceptions of value are incommensurable: 'values that are constitutive of a good human life are plural and incommensurable' (ibid. p. 294). She accepts Rawls's thesis of pluralism. However, Nussbaum is concerned with capabilities, not primary social goods. She claims that capabilities 'have value in themselves' and also 'have a particularly pervasive and central role in everything else people plan and do' (2000, pp. 74–75). For that reason, 'they have a special importance in making any choice of a way of life possible, and so they have a special claim to be supported for *political* purposes in a *pluralistic* society' (ibid. p. 75; emphasis added).

Nussbaum concludes that political philosophy cannot presuppose a comprehensive moral doctrine, in particular, the doctrine of a given community or tradition. Her reading of Aristotle supports this position, she argues. She assumes that emotion plays a leading role in deliberation and also that the individual's virtuous character is a 'kind of preparation for the activity'. The exercise of reason, and in particular, the exercise of reason in accordance with practical standards and aims, cannot make different goods commensurable. However, Nussbaum defends a perfectionist account of well-being. Other perfectionist liberals assume that such a position is not compatible with Rawlsian impartiality (Raz, 1986, p. 253). Moreover, communitarians provide good reasons to suggest that communities can be (at least) arenas in

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which to develop and exercise virtues. Through the exercise of practical reason perhaps we can make different goods commensurable.

Communitarianism I: tradition and goods of excellence

MacIntyre defends tradition-*dependent* communitarianism. He assumes that to attain the Aristotelian human good one must pursue goods of excellence, and conform to the rational standards of practices. He also assumes that tradition constitutes rationality, both political philosophy and the virtue of practical wisdom.

The human good is, for Aristotle, a life of activity and flourishing. According to MacIntyre, people pursue the human good only as members of a community.

> The person whose actions are formed by both *arête* [virtues of character] and *phronesis* [practical intelligence] has ... developed originally, biologically given capacities, which could, however, have been developed instead so that they were put to the service of injustice. And this is how they would have been developed in a human being deprived of the law and justice which only the *polis* affords. (1988, pp. 97–98)

MacIntyre rejects liberal political philosophy. The claim 'that *everyone* is to count for one, that everyone's desires are to be weighed equally...' is, he argues, 'deeply incompatible with Aristotle's standpoint' (ibid.). The rules of justice cannot be understood as the expression of, nor will they serve to fulfil, the desires of those not yet educated into the justice of the *polis* (MacIntyre, 1988). Liberalism also leads to indecision in moral matters. This is the case as it does not generate the 'moral unity' required for *phronesis* and *arête*, which he defines as 'a common allegiance to and a common pursuit of goods' (1985, p. 156).

In systematic activities (or 'practices'), '... standards of rational action directed towards the good and the best can be embodied' (1988, p. 141). In turn, the exercise of virtue 'tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices ...' (1985, p. 191). In contrast, 'external goods' are rewards for winning. They include 'riches, power, status, and prestige, ... objects of desire by human beings prior to and independently of any desire for excellence' (1988, p. 32). However, the qualities required to pursue goods of excellence may not be compatible with those required to attain external goods. Moreover, Aristotle defines the human good, at different points in the text, both as a life of moral and political virtue (I. 13) *and* as a life of contemplation (X. 7, 1177 a 14). According to MacIntyre, Aristotle resolves these tensions as follows:

> We need ... to pursue the external goods of the body in order to engage in those activities in which the soul perfects itself. So the life of moral and political virtue exists for the sake of ... the life of contemplative inquiry. But the latter is impossible ... without the former. Hence the two modes of life must be combined in the overall life of the *polis*, which itself [exists] ... for the sake of that in human beings which links them to the divine. (1988, pp. 142–143)

Communitarians would agree that communities provide the contexts in which we exercise virtues. For Michael Walzer, moral questions arise 'within a tradition of moral discourse' (1985, pp. 21–22). The question 'what is the right thing to do?' is

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always also the question 'what is the right thing *for us* to do?' (ibid.). However, MacIntyre goes further. If standards of rational action directed towards the good and the best must be embodied in practices, and if we can only seek goods of excellence by striving to attain the standards appropriate to a given practice, then 'To be a rational individual is to participate in such a form of life and to *conform*, so far is possible, to those standards' (1988, p. 141; emphasis added).

To develop moral and political virtue and practical wisdom we must conform to the rational standards of practices. This is the case with political philosophy itself. A *polis* can be judged good if it succeeds in doing '... what a *polis* at its best does and is'; but to apprehend 'what the good is which is its function to achieve, ... all require membership in a *polis*' (ibid. p. 122). MacIntyre argues that Aristotelianism is a 'tradition'. The Aristotelian tradition also teaches 'that it is only by participation in rational practice-based community one becomes rational' (ibid. p. 396). Traditions sustain distinct approaches to political philosophy by providing aims of deliberation. But what reasons can be given to move towards the aims of a tradition, or, more to the point, towards aims supplied by *another* tradition? We may be forced to accept that our tradition no longer supplies first principles. However, this crisis may be resolved with help from a competing tradition (ibid. p. 361). For MacIntyre, Aristotelianism can do just this for those in contemporary society who are 'alien to every tradition' (ibid. p. 396), but only, it seems, if they already can judge liberalism from MacIntyre's communitarian perspective. That is, they must come to 'understand themselves as hitherto deprived of what tradition affords' (ibid.).

Can MacIntyre offer a convincing argument for tradition-dependent communitarianism? He assumes that indecision is endemic in liberal culture as its academic political philosophy cannot make different conceptions of the good commensurable (ibid. p. 6). Such indecision is avoided if we accept that rational standards directing us to the human good are embodied in practices. However, as MacIntyre assumes we move towards the good by 'conforming' to practical standards of excellence, his version of the human good is not appealing in a 'liberal' culture. MacIntyre explicitly reject 'perspectivism': 'that no claim to truth made in the name of any one competing tradition could defeat the claims to truth made in the name of its rivals' (ibid. p. 367). However, if one is to choose between incompatible forms of reasoning, MacIntyre is left with the familiar problem of relativism or perspectivism: that is, if reason discovers first premises only within traditions, then there can be no way to determine what is to count as a good reason to choose one tradition over another.

Communitarianism II: radically undogmatic hermeneutics

The good of each human is to be discerning and insightful, according to Gadamer (1975, p. 357). His 'hermeneutic' approach is concerned with the attainment of understanding. Although we always proceed from a 'horizon', or traditional perspective, we seek insight through a 'fusion of horizons', through openness to otherness and also suffering. In this way, Gadamer provides the rationale for radically undogmatic communitarianism.

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As we saw, according to Aristotle, the 'good man' can exercise virtue and move towards the human good. He has 'developed a demeanor that he is constantly concerned to preserve in the concrete situations of his life and prove through right behaviour' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 313). However, Gadamer argues that we have an 'historically effected consciousness' (ibid. p. 341). We have 'prejudices' (ibid. p. 269 ff.), an horizon, that we can step back from and test: 'the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come' (ibid. p. 306). We must seek a 'fusion of horizons' (ibid.), and we do so by being open to other horizons. Openness 'has its proper fulfillment' in 'openness to experience' (ibid. p. 357). It follows, although the 'vocation of man' is 'to be discerning and insightful' (ibid.), 'the experienced person proves to be ... radically undogmatic ...' (ibid. p. 355). As Aeschylus's tragedies show, according to Gadamer, experience is a kind of suffering, providing an 'insight into the limitations of humanity' (ibid. p. 357). Although insight 'involves an escape from something that deceived us in the past' (ibid.), as we must remain radically undogmatic, we never overcome the danger of being deceived.

To be open to experience we must be open to 'otherness'. In contrast, in an 'I-Thou' relationship, we often hope to make the behaviour of someone else predictable, using him or her as a means to our end. From the moral point of view this orientation towards the Thou ... contradicts the moral definition of man. ... Kant said, *inter alia*, that the other should never be used as a means but always as an end in himself' (ibid. p. 358). In the highest type of relation, we do not treat the other as a *means*: '... the important thing is ... to experience the Thou truly as a Thou, i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us' (ibid. p. 361).

However, Kant's argument is different in an important respect. Kant had argued that the autonomy of the other, *qua* rational being, is the source of moral obligation. He enjoins us to treat 'humanity' 'never simply as a means', 'whether in your own person or in the person of another' (Kant, 1785, § 66–67). In contrast, Gadamer assumes 'otherness' itself is the source of our moral obligation. It follows that, for Gadamer, the good person is 'radically undogmatic' with regard to morality as well. The basis of morality is established, and disrupted, and re-established, and so on, through an ongoing fusion of horizons.

Gadamer assumes we pursue the human good within communities, but also, he accepts the view that fragmentation and conflict are crucial parts of community. Discernment and insight is our vocation, but understanding is an 'occurrence'. It 'means the coming into play, the playing out, of the content of tradition in its constantly widening possibilities of significance and resonance, extended by the different people receiving it' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 462). He does not accept tradition-dependent communitarianism. Although understanding occurs when we are addressed by tradition, tradition is made present in a plurality of unpredictable ways. The plurality of perspectives is also conflictual. A genuine dialogue involves a 'standing up for' the truth of our perspective (ibid. pp. 260–1n). Further, Gadamer does not accept

the liberal account of reason and autonomy. Although it is *we* who must keep ourselves open to otherness, understanding 'occurs' to us in ways we cannot control.

In his defence it has been noted that Gadamer rejects authoritarian and insular communitarianism. 'Gadamer does not accept tradition uncritically; he says that we must do our best to overcome our narrow prejudices, ...' (Palmer, 2002, p. 479). Gadamer's use of the concept prejudice may not have reactionary political implications. However, perhaps Gadamer's belief that we should overcome 'our complacent sense of cultural superiority, especially our modern scientific superiority' (ibid.) indicates that his radically undogmatic approach is open to the charge of relativism. Standards of truth and goodness are 'relative' in Gadamer's work as they arise from an ongoing fusion of horizons. As the 'educated man' is radically undogmatic, he is willing to suspend giving assent to any first principle. It is also 'occurrences' that lead him to change his presuppositions. If occurrences constitute rationality, no non-relative rational justification can be given for welcoming, or challenging, such changes.

Good without qualification for humans

A different interpretation of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* is defended here. This also provides foundations for a distinct political philosophy, as we shall see below. Exercise of virtue is a means to, and constitutive of, the good without qualification for humans. It is not simply either emotional responsiveness, or practical excellence, or openness to otherness.

Reason and community

Nussbaum defends political liberalism by arguing that conceptions of the good are incommensurable and also that the human good refers to each person's capability. I take issue with Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle with regard to the following two claims: that virtue is a 'kind of preparation for the activity', and that, as emotion 'singles out the features of ethical relevance', goods are incommensurable.

What is the relation between reason and emotion for the good person? The human good is 'an *active* life of the element that has a *rational* principle' (EN, I. 7, 1098 a 2; emphasis added). Although the emotional part of the soul '... has such a principle in the sense of being *obedient* to one', 'life in the sense of *activity* is what we mean' (ibid.; emphasis added). Virtue requires emotion to, in some way, 'obey' reason. As Nussbaum argues, the good person does take pleasure from pursuing what is good. And 'of honour, wisdom, and pleasure, just in respect of their goodness, the accounts are distinct and diverse'. Nonetheless, Aristotle's argument is that different goods *should not* be incommensurable. 'Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because these are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things which are by nature pleasant; and virtuous acts are such ...' (1. 8, 1099 a 14ff). The emotions help discern what is good and bad only to the extent they obey reason; and reason rightly orders the emotions only to the extent it directs them towards virtue; and the exercise of virtue is then a means to,

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and constitutive of, the function of humans. The exercise of virtue should overcome what is only an apparent incommensurability of goods.

Aristotle is clear that moral virtue has a rational cause, and so, its 'prize and end' is 'something godlike and blessed' (I. 9, 1099 b 13ff). Therefore, '. . . all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by a certain kind of study and care' (1099 b 20 ff.). As Nussbaum argues, ill luck may disrupt attempts to pursue flourishing. We must be 'sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life' (I. 10, 1101 a 15). Nonetheless, the source of permanence required for flourishing is virtuous *activity*. 'For no function has so much permanence as virtuous activities . . .', and 'those who are blessed spend their life most readily and most continuously in these' (1100 b 16–20). Virtuous character, then, is not 'a kind of preparation for the activity'. Nussbaum's interpretation would be correct only if virtues were not dispositions (*hexis*), as Aristotle argues, but natural faculties or powers (*dunamis*) (II. 5, 1106 a 8ff.). However, Aristotle is clear that 'natural virtues' become 'virtues in the strict sense' only if reason is acquired. Without reason such states are in fact harmful, for not only children but 'brutes' also are 'fitted for self-control or brave or have the other moral qualities' (VI. 13, 1144 b 5).

We develop virtue only when reason is acquired, but we acquire reason only in virtuous activity. One develops virtue only to the extent that emotion *obeys* reason, and virtue succeeds in regard to an unqualified end, an end *of action*. This suggests the significance of community, *if* it is an arena of virtuous activity, for the development and exercise of virtue. However, the two communitarian positions discussed so far are not satisfactory.

Tradition-independent virtue and political philosophy

MacIntyre assumes that political philosophy is constituted by tradition (and so there are many different traditions of political philosophy) and that the virtuous person conforms to practical rational standards. He derives this position from his interpretation of Aristotle's account of the goods of excellence attained by exercising virtue.

Aristotle begins his own reflections in political philosophy from the views 'held by many men and men of old, others by a few eminent persons . . .' (I. 8, 1098 b 25). They offer different accounts of flourishing: it is a life of moral and political virtue, or the intellectual virtues of practical wisdom or philosophical wisdom, or some or all of these accompanied by pleasure and, or, external prosperity. According to Aristotle, 'it is not possible that either of these should be entirely mistaken, but rather that they should be right in at least some one respect, or even in most respects' (1098 b 28). Nonetheless, Aristotle's theoretical reflection is not, as MacIntyre claims, 'constituted' by tradition. The political philosopher is a 'good judge in general', not the expert of a traditionally-constituted practice. At the same time, the person exercising virtue does not simply 'conform' to practical standards of excellence: '. . . those who act win, and rightly win, the *noble and good things in life*' (1099 a 5; emphasis added). Therefore, while 'excellence in deliberation in a particular sense' 'succeeds

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relatively to a particular end', 'excellence in deliberation in the unqualified sense . . . is that which succeeds with reference to what is the end in the unqualified sense' (VI. 9, 1142 b 29ff). For instance, one's excellences *qua* Olympian athlete are what are required to excel in a specific practice. However, one's excellences *qua* human being are virtues, qualities required where 'good action itself is its end'.

Aristotle's ethics indicate the significance of community for the formation and exercise of virtue. However, the good person is not to conform to the rational standards of practices, and political philosophy itself is not constituted by tradition. Political philosophy should provide practice-independent and tradition-independent standards of analysis. MacIntyre assumes we should engage in inter-traditional dialogue. What reason can justify this contention given that all reasoning is, he assumes, tradition constituted? It would seem that only tradition-independent criteria could justify such proposals. We could argue that inter-traditional dialogue is required of us to the extent it is also a constitutive element of the human good: that is, to the extent it contributes to our wisdom and other virtues.

Virtue and human perfection

Gadamer defends radically undogmatic hermeneutics. He argues that, for Aristotle, we pursue our human vocation, discernment and insight, only through openness to otherness, through a fusion of horizons.

As Gadamer argues, suffering impinges upon the good person's ability to exercise virtue: '. . . it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment' (EN, I. 8, 1099 a 30). One may suffer in the absence of good birth, goodly children and beauty. However, it does not follow that, for Aristotle, the virtuous person is 'radically undogmatic'. Aristotle does argue that a multitude of great events, 'if they turn out ill they crush and maim blessedness', but nonetheless, '. . . even in this nobleness shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul' (I. 10, 1100 b 24). For Aristotle, virtues are habitual states and they have a perfectionist goal. Moderation, for instance, is the mean between self-indulgence and insensibility. The moderate person does, in accordance with reason, desire external goods. However, '. . . we ourselves tend more naturally to pleasure, and hence are more easily carried away towards self-indulgence' (II. 8, 1109 a 16). We must not let ourselves be easily carried away, for the simple reason that the exercise of virtue is difficult. It is 'both rare and laudable' (II. 9, 1109 a 34). It is about human perfection.

Virtue has a goal of perfection. 'Virtue in the strict sense' is different from the natural virtue of the brute, as we saw. The 'practical wisdom' of the good person is also different from 'mere smartness'. The person exercising practical wisdom is 'able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself' (VI. 5, 1140 a 24). As Gadamer is aware, cleverness without moral and political virtue is mere smartness, and this is harmful (1975, p. 323). Because of cleverness, we are 'able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and hit it'

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(EN, VI. 12, 1144 a 3), but only virtue ensures the aim, the mark, is good. However, if this is the case, one can, and must, exercise virtue so as to respond 'well' to great suffering, that is, with 'nobility'. States of character, dispositions, thus allow the good person to respond well to suffering.

Aristotle's ethics does not support radically undogmatic hermeneutics. For Aristotle, virtue is durable as a stable disposition. Further, the virtuous person is habitually disposed to aim for what is both rare and laudable. The virtuous person is able to respond well to changed circumstances and new challenges. Moreover, through exercising virtue we can provide standards of rational analysis that are independent of each event and each context, and therefore, non-relative.

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Non-relative communitarian political philosophy

I have argued that, for Aristotle, flourishing is the good without qualification for humans. This provides foundations for what I have called non-relative communitarian political philosophy.[4]

Virtue has permanence 'as activity', I argued. It is not a natural power, but rather a state of character maintained through activity. Virtue also involves the obedience of desire to reason. If the virtuous person's desires do obey his/her reason, that person should desire only those goods that can be conceived as being part of the good life. The virtuous person should be able to avoid the dilemma of incommensurable goods. This suggests that, despite the political liberal argument, conceptions of the good need not be incommensurable. The virtuous person has the conceptual resources needed to make goods commensurable in his/her own life. Perhaps virtuous people, acting together, can agree on what is a shared good, or set of goods, for them. Political philosophy can then be based on something more substantial than Rawls's fair terms of social cooperation. This is an argument communitarians make, whether they are pluralists socialists (Walzer, 1983; Miller, 1999) or liberal-communitarians (Taylor, 1985).

This line of argument suggests that, to the extent that it is an arena for virtuous activity, community will be a positive influence for the development and exercise of virtue. However, I am not forced to defend either tradition-dependent or radically undogmatic communitarianism. First, my argument suggests that tradition-*independent* criteria of assessment are available and can be utilised to analyse any existing community and its practices. These standards come from not only the theoretical idea of the good without qualification for humans. As the exercise of virtue ensures one is a 'good judge in general', one can also be a critic of one's own community, and the communities of others. Second, my argument suggests that virtue is durable as a disposition and also that virtue is about what is difficult. As J. S. Mill has pointed out, virtue is 'at the very head of things which are good as means to the ultimate end' (1861, p. 169). Virtue is a necessary 'corrective', according to Phillipa Foot. Given the fact that we are prey to temptations, such as fear of danger and desire for pleasure, virtue ensures we do not become undisciplined and self-indulgent (Foot, 1978, p. 9).

If some experiences occur that make us incapable of exercising virtue, we have good reasons to describe these as significant harms. In particular, we are right to condemn or reject liberal policies, traditional behaviour, or historical events *if* any of these undermine the communal context needed to exercise virtue. Liberalism creates and protects a space within which each person is free to pursue his or her life. The rights of individuals provide a 'framework' for the pursuit of the good (Rawls, 1971, p. 31). However, as liberal impartiality forbids the *promotion* of excellence, and the practices in which excellence is pursued, it may, by neglect, undermine communal goods. Tradition-dependent communitarianism may also undermine the exercise of virtue. Practical wisdom is a disposition to deliberate well about what is good in an unqualified sense, but tradition-dependent communitarianism encourages us to conform to practical standards and accept that rationality is tradition-constituted. It may encourage insularity and submissiveness. Finally, virtue is a habitual disposition and it is about what is difficult. If radically undogmatic politics weakens long-standing dispositions and the commitment to perfection, it may also weaken the resolve needed to sustain virtue in difficult, testing times.

The final point I want to explore concerns the problem of circularity in Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle seems open to the charge of circularity for the following reason. He assumes virtue is something praiseworthy 'because of the actions and functions involved' (EN, I. 10, 1101 a 15), but he concludes that 'no one praises happiness [*eudaimonia*] . . ., but rather calls it blessed, as something more divine and better' (I. 12, 1101 b 26). Virtue is praiseworthy because it is a means to and an element of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is beyond praise because it is an 'end without qualification'. But Aristotle also argues that *eudaimonia* is, simply, a life of virtue. This would seem to be circular: it is good to exercise virtue *for the reason that* it is a means to and an element of *eudaimonia*, but *eudaimonia* is an end without qualification *for the reason that* it is a life of virtue.

The question then to be answered is, why is a life of virtue an 'end without qualification'? As both J. S. Mill and Phillipa Foot argue, the exercise of virtue has beneficial consequences. Exercising virtue is beneficial to the virtuous person (we are better off as wise, just, moderate persons). It is also beneficial to others. This is especially true of justice, as Rawls (1971), Cohen (2000) and Wiggins (2004) have all noted. If people exercise the virtue of justice then just acts will be more widely performed and just outcomes will be more easily attained. Second, as Foot has argued, virtue is about what is 'difficult' for humans. Without the use of limbs, without sight, or without mental health, we are hindered from pursuing our aims (Foot, 1958, p. 122). However, without virtue, we are unable to pursue *good* aims. Some abilities are necessary if we are to pursue a long-term goal, whatever it is. Only virtue is necessary to pursue what is good, what in Aristotle's terms is 'both rare and laudable'.

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Notes

1. Although Aristotle contrasts mathematics with both political philosophy and rhetoric he does not equate the latter two. In rhetoric, 'we must have regard not only to the speech's being demonstrative and persuasive, but also to *establishing the speaker himself as of a certain type* and *bringing the giver of judgement into a certain condition*' (Ret. 2. I. 1377 b). However, the validity of an argument in political philosophy does not rest on the perceived character of the writer or the emotional condition of the reader.
2. However, Aristotle assumed not all 'humans' have the natural ability to live a life of flourishing (natural slaves); and not all who do enjoy this capacity (women, artisans) can be citizens.
3. Rawls's 'primary social goods' are equal liberty, fair equal opportunity, a distribution of income and wealth that is to the benefit of the least advantaged, and the social bases of self-respect. Justice requires a fair distribution of goods, resources any individual would require whatever 'system of ends' he or she chooses to formulate and pursue (Rawls, 1971, p. 93).
4. Elsewhere, I have given more attention to some political consequences of this position (Fives, 2005).

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