

MACINTYRE: THOMISTIC ARISTOTELIANISM OR ARISTOTELIAN THOMISM?

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The works and the studies by Alasdair MacIntyre introduce, often, a presentation and a relecture of Aristotelian themes and ideas, placing itself in the same way (but not in the same direction) of the new contemporary interpretations on Aristotelian thought rise up in the 19th century¹. However, the Scottish philosopher's personal reading on Aristotle seems to be influenced in a meaningful way by the St. Thomas reading of the Stagirite's philosophy². Unlike the Heidegger's interpretation on Aristotle, MacIntyre doesn't fix on the problem of the return to the original and authentic reading of the ancient greek thought, cleaned by the medieval deposits, but he is concentrated on a sort of new (revised) Aristotelianism, that gives, especially in *After Virtue* (1981), to this old philosophy a new form and a new reading³. Insomuch as MacIntyre self-defines his thought a Thomistic aristotelianism. But, is this really his philosophical position? Or is it more an Aristotelian thomism?

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I.

In *After Virtue*, reading the path of the virtue's idea from Homer, differentiating this last one from the Aristotelian, MacIntyre writes that:

on Aristotle's account [...] it is the *telos* of man as a species which determines what human qualities are virtues. We need to remember however that although Aristotle treats the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end, the relationship of means to end is internal and not external. I call a means internal to a given end when the end cannot be adequately characterized independently of a characterization of the means. So it is with the virtues and the *telos* which is the good life for man on Aristotle's account.⁴

MacIntyre, here, advises that the distinction between internal or external means to end is not findable in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, but it's typically of the defence by St. Thomas of the virtue's idea of St. Augustine⁵. But, continuing his analysis, MacIntyre affirms that the *New Testament's* account, even if it's different «in content» from the Aristotelian one, has «the same logical and conceptual structure as Aristotle's account»⁶. In the exegesis of MacIntyre, both the philosophers, Aristotle and St. Thomas, want to propose the idea that, reading the virtue as a quality, the exercise of it allows to attain the human *telos*, that is, the good. For the contemporary thinker this is the theoretical reason that brings the Aquinas very close to the virtue's idea of the Stagirite. But, following his argument, seems to pop up a problem. Indeed, MacIntyre, developing the examination of the human *telos* of the good, says: «*the* good for man is of course a supernatural and not only a natural good, but supernature redeems and completes nature», and he continues: «moreover the relationship of virtues as means to the end which is human incorporation in the divine kingdom of the age to come is internal and not external, just as Aristotle»⁷.

From an historical-philosophical viewpoint, this position is problematic because, as the recent critic noticed, the ideas of the God and of the Divine by the Greeks, during the age of Plato and Aristotle, were different from those of Christianity⁸, here, of St. Thomas. The ancient greek concept of religion, may be seen in the word *pistis*, that, in the context of the *polis*, doesn't take on the meaning of a direct e personal relationship with the God, but it has a juridical significance. As it is possible to see in the Socrates' vicissitudes, the religion, or, what it is better to call religiousness, is linked to the laws of the *polis*, so, if someone transgresses a religious law, will be try in a law action. Therefore, historically, is possible to say that the value and the strongness of the greek religiousness, are not derived by the value and the strongness of the God (least of all of a legislator God), but they are due to the value and the strongness of the *polis* and its legal regulations. Looking beyond this historical fact, from a philosophical point of view, the God of the Aristotelian metaphysic, or rather the *noesis noeseos* (read out of the Thomistic revival), the Immobile motor, expresses an idea very far away from a personal God, it is a sort of atmosphere, something that is in another world and it influences this world, but not something that is in everyman and it influences everything. To the other side, St. Thomas, leaving from Aristotle, talks about the God of the Christian tradition, after more than a millennium of theological (and philosophical) thought.

In view of these considerations, it is important to stress that MacIntyre's analysis refers to the issues exposed in the I Book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle would deal with a divine good, that is the *telos* of the human virtue⁹. On one hand, is true that, for MacIntyre, in Aristotelian philosophy the good for the man is something, not only natural, but also supernatural, divine, however, on the other hand, this religious

dimension on the earth, for men, is guaranteed by the law of the *polis*. And, even if, is equally true that in the metaphysical perspective of Aristotle this good «completes nature», because it is the Uncaused Cause, the first motor, is more difficult to assert that this kind of good «redeems [...] nature». Is it possible an idea of redemption in Aristotle's philosophy? The same MacIntyre puts some reservations on that prospect when, in *After virtue*, relates to the John Lloyd Ackrill's Aristotelian interpretation¹⁰. So, for the Greek philosopher the *telos* of the good life has its height in the contemplation, but, in the Aristotelian thought, the idea of contemplation «is still situated within an account of the good life as a whole in which a variety of human excellences have to be achieved at the various relevant stages»¹¹. Therefore, MacIntyre continues: «this is why the notion of a final redemption of an almost entirely unregenerate life has no place in Aristotle's scheme»¹². First of all, it must be said that the reference to the concept of redemption, in both quotations, appears in the matter on Aristotelian human good and its connexion with the *telos*. Besides, it is important to point out that this idea, peculiar of Christianity and, here, of the Aquinas philosophy, even taken beyond the one of «final redemption»¹³, is not directly referable to the possible Aristotelian dichotomy between natural and supernatural. Indeed, the divine good of Aristotle, certainly completes nature in its supernatural pre-eminence, but plays unlikely the role of nature's redeemer in its supernatural primacy.

Furthermore the, viewed, idea of the «relationship of virtues as means to the end», that would be internal, is understood by MacIntyre like the «human incorporation in the divine kingdom of the age to come»¹⁴. But this point is not so instantly approvable, as the Scottish philosopher wants, if is it read «just as Aristotle»¹⁵. The Greek thinker, never deals with an

existence of a divine kingdom that will be in the future, or of another divine world in which the man will be included. Even when he exposes, in the *Metaphysics*, his critical account on Plato's world of ideas, he doesn't think it like a future kingdom for the men, or for the virtuous, at most he has in the mind something like an ideal world in which there are the supreme forms of the ideas, and so, the pure virtues. In the light of this, is possible to notice that in the «parallelism» between Aristotle and *New Testament*, in which the Aquinas would be the «synthesis», the MacIntyre's reading of the Aristotelian idea of virtue is meaningfully moves on the side of the St. Thomas' thought¹⁶.

II.

Moving the attention from Aristotle to the Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae*, in the matter of natural and supernatural good, is written:

non est conveniens quod Deus minus provideat his quos diligit ad supernaturale bonum habendum, quam creaturis quas diligit ad bonum naturale habendum. Creaturis autem naturalibus sic providet ut non solum moveat eas ad actus naturales, sed etiam largiatur eis formas et virtutes quasdam, quae sunt principia actuum, ut secundum seipsas inclinentur ad huiusmodi motus. Et sic motus quibus a Deo moventur, fiunt creaturis connaturales et faciles; secundum illud Sap. VIII, et disponit omnia suaviter. Multo igitur magis illis quos movet ad consequendum bonum supernaturale aeternum, infundit aliquas formas seu qualitates supernaturales, secundum quas suaviter et prompte ab ipso moveantur ad bonum aeternum consequendum. Et sic donum gratiae qualitas quaedam est.¹⁷

As far as is it possible to think similar the Aristotelian issue to the Thomistic one, in the passage just now quoted, it seems to be clear that the whole speech has its foundation on the *New Testament's* idea of grace. This concept regulates the relationship God-man, and, in the perspective of the good, it affirms the self participation of God to his goodness:

et secundum huiusmodi boni differentiam, differens consideratur dilectio Dei ad creaturam. Una quidem communis, secundum quam diligit omnia quae sunt, ut dicitur Sap. XI; secundum quam esse naturale rebus creatis largitur. Alia autem est dilectio specialis, secundum quam trahit creaturam rationalem supra conditionem naturae, ad participationem divini boni. Et secundum hanc dilectionem dicitur aliquem diligere simpliciter, quia secundum hanc dilectionem vult Deus simpliciter creaturae bonum aeternum, quod est ipse.¹⁸

The divine good here seen appears in a constitutive relationship with that kind of special love, the grace, that makes possible the idea of a participation *to* and *in* this good. Human good and divine good are connected by a positive stretch that allows the man to aspire asymptotically to this divine good, of which he's participated and participating. Although the idea of participation is alive in the ancient greek idea of *methexis*, the idea of a personal God that feels something like the love for «all the things that exist», instead, is a characteristic of the *New Testament's* religion. After all, it seems to be meaningful, and it is no accident, that MacIntyre in *After virtue*, in the few lines devoted to the concept of grace (after the quotation of Aristotle in the context of modern philosophy) writes: «the contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos* remains and the divine moral law is still a schoolmaster to remove us from the former state to

the latter, even if, only grace enables us to respond to and obey its precepts»¹⁹.

Another confirmation of the influence of St. Thomas in the Aristotle's reading by MacIntyre may be seen also in the explication of the Aristotelian sense of the *eudaimonia* (translated with «difficulty» as «blessedness, happiness, prosperity»²⁰). Underlining the relationship between this status and the good for man, in the definition of this idea, he says that: «it is the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man's being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine»²¹. It is not so difficult to understand how much the last part of this sentence is referable to the Christian God and to His direct relationship with the man, expressing the never ending ambition of the human good to the divine one.

III.

Leaving for a moment *After Virtue*, in the *Preface* to the italian edition of *Three rivals versions of moral enquiry*, published in 1993, MacIntyre claims that who, like him, supports «le posizioni dell'aristotelismo contemporaneo nella sua versione tomistica», «deve perciò essere in grado di fare due cose»:

essere capace di dare ragioni valide per giungere alla conclusione che all'interno della tradizione costituita dai dibattiti argomentativi che si estendono da Socrate attraverso Platone e Aristotele fino e oltre i grandi filosofi medievali e della rinascenza scolastica, è proprio questa versione dell'aristotelismo che si è mostrata capace di giustificazione razionale attraverso l'argomentazione dialettica

and

essere in grado di spiegare come e perché in tradizioni rivali, nelle quali alcuni dei criteri, concetti o

argomentazioni centrali dell'aristotelismo tomista vengono rifiutati, una conseguenza di quel rifiuto sia la sterilità o almeno l'incoerenza, o forse entrambe, riguardo ai problemi sorti all'interno di queste tradizioni, sterilità e incoerenza che si spiegano adeguatamente solo mediante le risorse che un aristotelico tomista può proporre.²²

In spite of MacIntyre's self-declaration of Aristotelianism, in *After Virtue*, he criticizes the «metaphysical biology»²³, that he finds in the Stagirite's thought and that would be connected to the «Aristotle's teleology»²⁴:

human beings, like the members of all other species, have a specific nature; and that they move by nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos*. The good is defined in terms of their specific characteristics. Hence Aristotle's ethics, expounded as he expounds it, presupposes his metaphysical biology.²⁵

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This teleological inclination of the human βίος is seen by MacIntyre like a limitation for the Aristotelian position, to the extent that he opposes and proposes to replace and to cross this idea introducing a social-historical dimension, linked to the concept of *polis*²⁶. In other words, he doesn't think the *telos* like a purpose of the human βίος, but in terms of a common good of society. This view, probably inspired by Benjamin Franklin, directs MacIntyre toward a political critique to the aristocratic connotation of that (that he calls the) metaphysical biology by

Aristotle²⁷. At this point is useful to notice that MacIntyre twenty five years later *After Virtue*, returning on this aspect, corrects and reinforces his own point of view on this social sphere of the good-common-*telos* resorting, again, to the Aquinas. The continual study on the Scholastic philosopher, indeed, would have suggested to MacIntyre that his idea of a social good, opposed to the Aristotelian one, proposing merely a theory of society, wouldn't be an effective way until it would have been expressly founded on a metaphysics. Not foreseeing this basis, for MacIntyre, the same St. Thomas' perspective is darkened, inasmuch it is not possible to point out a theory of society without considering the idea of a human teleology towards which men move on for their own nature. So -writes MacIntyre in the *Prologue to the Third Edition After Virtue After a Quarter of a Century*:- «I discovered that I had, without realizing it, presupposed the truth of something very close to the account of the concept of good that Aquinas gives in question 5 in the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*»²⁸. From this point of view MacIntyre, once again, searches and finds refuge and support in St. Thomas' philosophy, going back to the teleological dimension of the good for the humans; so, he reasserts not only his steady connexion with this thinker, but even more strengthens the thesis, here suggested, of his Aristotelian thomism.

As a matter of fact, in view of the above, that his position appears more like an Aristotelian thomism than a Thomistic aristotelianism. Indeed, if is true that the analysis of Aristotle's works made by MacIntyre is deeply and steadily influenced by the *lectio* of the Aquinas, is not so for the interpretation of Thomistic philosophy, in which survives a christianized Aristotle. The consideration of this ancient thought doesn't be never without the St. Thomas and *New Testament* outlook of a God that completes and redeems nature and infuses his grace. Under this sign, Aristotle's philosophy is read through the Neo-

Scholastic concepts, compelling this origin of the thought, that is, also, and above all, a thought of the origin, in a way in which metaphysics and ethics are thought in a system that understands the nature not on his own architecture, but in dependence relationship with a supernatural and transcendent force that is not the aristotelian *noesis noeseos*. Therefore, if it is true that the philosophy of MacIntyre is a revival of the thomism, seems to be certain, likewise, that his profession of aristotelism have to be read not in the sense of his self-declaration of a Thomistic aristotelianism, but in the direction of an Aristotelian thomism, that seems to animate his thought from *After Virtue*.

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² On MacIntyre's interpretation of St. Thomas, see Giuseppe Abbà, *MacIntyre e l'etica tomista*, in «Studi Perugini» 3 (1997), pp. 135-154; Janet Coleman, *MacIntyre and Aquinas*, in John Horton- Susan Mendus (ed. by), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1994; John Haldane, *MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?*, ivi; Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair*

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⁷Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. pp. 214-215. 228 tr it

⁸ See *Ibidem*. Seven years after *After Virtues*, MacIntyre returns on the integrative relationship between Aristotle and St. Augustine in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Duckworth, London 1988, p. 205.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. p. 215.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

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¹² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot., pp. 214-215.

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¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. p. 204.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. p. 215.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. pp. 214-215.

²⁰ St. Thomas, *SummaTheologiae*, II-I q. 110 a. 2: «it is not fitting that God should provide less for those He loves, that they may acquire supernatural good, than for creatures, whom He loves that they may acquire natural good. Now He so provides for natural creatures, that not merely does He move them to their natural acts, but He bestows upon them certain forms and powers, which are the principles of acts, in order that they may of themselves be inclined to these movements, and thus the movements whereby they are moved by God become natural and easy to creatures, according to Wis. 8:1: "she . . . ordereth all things sweetly." Much more therefore does He infuse into such as He moves towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by Him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good; and thus the gift of grace is a quality». Ref. engl. transl. by Fathers of the

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²¹ St. Thomas, *SummaTheologiae*, II-I q. 110 a. 1, ref. engl. transl.: «and according to this difference of good the love of God to the creature is looked at differently. For one is common, whereby He loves "all things that are" (Wis. 11:25), and thereby gives things their natural being. But the second is a special love, whereby He draws the rational creature above the condition of its nature to a participation of the Divine good; and according to this love He is said to love anyone simply, since it is by this love that God simply wishes the eternal good, which is Himself, for the creature».

²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. p. 64.

²³ Ivi, p. 174.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 188.

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Prefazione* alla edizione italiana di *Tre versioni rivali di ricerca morale*, Editrice Massimo, Milano 1993, p. 19.

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, quot. *After Virtues*, quot. p. 174.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 189.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 173.

²⁹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. pp. 191-197. This idea is critically examined by Giuseppe Abbà. In spite of his reading of the Aristotelian idea of virtue is not so far from the one of MacIntyre (also in the nearness with the position of St. Thomas), he opposes to the Scottish philosopher's critic to the « unsustainable» Aristotelian "metaphysical biology" and to his "social" solution. See Giuseppe Abbà, *Filosofia, vita buona e virtù*, LAS, Roma 1989, pp.110-111.

³⁰ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtues*, quot. p. 270.

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Prologue to the Third Edition After Virtue After a Quarter of a Century*, p. XI. St. Thomas writes: «bonum et ens sunt idem secundum rem, sed differunt secundum rationem tantum. Quod sic patet. Ratio enim boni in hoc consistit, quod aliquid sit appetibile, unde philosophus, in I Ethic., dicit quod bonum est quod omnia appetunt. Manifestum est autem quod unumquodque est appetibile secundum quod est perfectum, nam omnia appetunt suam perfectionem. Intantum est autem perfectum unumquodque, inquantum est actu, unde manifestum est quod intantum est aliquid bonum, inquantum est ens, esse enim est actualitas omnis rei, ut ex

superioribus patet. Unde manifestum est quod bonum et ens sunt idem secundum rem, sed bonum dicit rationem appetibilis, quam non dicit ens», ref. engl. transl. : «Goodness and being are really the same, and differ only in idea; which is clear from the following argument. The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. i): "Goodness is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing. Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present».