Life's journeys: MacIntyre's idea of life as enacted narrative

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ABSTRACT The starting point for this work is MacIntyre's idea of life as an enacted narrative. MacIntyre introduces the idea of narrative in *After Virtue*, as part of his theory of virtue, after the concept of practice and before the concept of tradition. The representation of human life in narrative terms brings to the fore the longstanding relationship between philosophy and literature. In the following text I will try to examine the concept of the narrative structure of human life as it was first presented in *After Virtue* and demonstrate its continuity in MacIntyre's later work. In this context, I will attempt, first, to examine whether MacIntyre's idea of narrative can provide a basis for the unity of human life and action and, second, to identify its main differences from theories that emphasize fragmentation and see life as a series of disconnected events and interpretations challenging the notions of coherence and unity.
KEYWORDS Alasdair MacIntyre; narrative; unity of life; philosophy; literature; postmodernism.

RESUMO O ponto de partida para este trabalho é a ideia de MacIntyre da vida como uma narrativa encenada. MacIntyre introduz a ideia de narrativa em *After Virtue*, como parte da sua teoria da virtude, depois do conceito de prática e antes do conceito de tradição. A representação da vida humana em termos narrativos traz à tona a relação de longa data entre filosofia e literatura. No texto que se segue, tentarei examinar o conceito de estrutura narrativa da vida humana tal como foi apresentado pela primeira vez em *After Virtue* e demonstrar a sua continuidade na obra posterior de MacIntyre. Neste contexto, tentarei, em primeiro lugar, examinar se a ideia de narrativa de MacIntyre pode fornecer uma base para a unidade da vida e da acção humanas e, em segundo lugar, identificar as suas principais diferenças em relação às teorias que enfatizam a fragmentação e vêem a vida como uma série de acontecimentos desconexos e interpretações que desafiam as noções de coerência e unidade.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE Alasdair MacIntyre; narrativa; unidade da vida; filosofia; literatura; pósmodernismo.

And keep Ithaca always in mind.
It's your destination,
But don't rush the journey in the least.
Better for it to take a long time
So that, finally, in spite of the accrued years,
You will cast anchor fresh with all of the journey's riches
And not require any of Ithaca's.
For Ithaca gave you the journey.
Without Ithaca you would not have set out.
It has nothing else to give.
If you find it empty, you haven't been tricked.
You've become wise with experience
And you already have what Ithaca means.

Konstantinos Kavafis, "Ithaka" (1911)[1]

1 Contexts and settings

The idea of life as a journey is not new. We can trace it back to Homer. The metaphor of life as a journey is a theme common in philosophy and literature. Like a journey, life is perceived as having a beginning and an end, choices that may lead to different destinations, obstacles and challenges that must be overcome, ends to be achieved in interaction with others. Along the journey of life, men shape who they are and realize (or fail to realize) their potential in a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The idea of life as a journey is one of the common threads that philosophy and literature share in their long complex and ambiguous historical symbiosis. Literature often raises philosophical questions, and it seems rather unlikely that we can find any great work of literature that does not illuminate in its own distinctive way existential questions, moral dilemmas, social and political relations, aesthetic ideals or even our ideas about reality. In addition, there are writers, such as Dante, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoi, Kafka, Camus or Thomas Mann for instance, who do not just present in some way or another philosophical ideas but their work as a whole and their way of writing is formed in light of a specific philosophical perspective.

1 https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19871219&id=GGZIAAAAIBAJ&sjid=jgYEAAAAIBAJ&pg=4828,1382820&hl=en

Philosophers turn to literary narratives for insights, patterns, hypothetical situations, or possible worlds that stretch our imagination, offer examples and counterexamples for philosophical thought, and intellectual stimuli for our thought experiments. Moral philosophers often draw upon literary themes to exemplify their theory, and upon literary characters to portray moral properties.[2] This kind of philosophical references to literature is often associated with realist metaethical assumptions (Virvidakis & Reed-Tsocha, 2008, p. 188). However, the normative framework of the philosophical theories in which these references are embedded may be quite different.[3]

Philosophers use also literary techniques within philosophical writing to convey philosophical ideas. These include philosophical texts that come close to literature or even adopt some literary form to express philosophical ideas. Platonic dialogues are perhaps the most famous example, just as well-known as Plato's objections to art. The Dialectic is inseparable from the dialogical form of Plato's works. Also, for philosophers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, or Martin Buber, for example, style and form are not mere ornaments but matters of philosophical substance.

So, the relations between philosophy and literature are already complicated, and we cannot possibly attempt to follow all the various trends and their different manifestations here. Instead, I will focus on what I consider to be distinctive of the 20th century, namely the inner transformation of art into philosophy associated with a self-referential reflection of art on its own nature. Danto (1985, p. 177) identifies a danger of "philosophical disenfranchisement of art" and defends the need of "emancipating art from its philosophy" reaffirming their differentiation.[4]

2 Noël Carroll (2002) conceptualizes such an analysis in his "wheel of virtues". Virtue wheels can be regarded as "thought experiments because they possess comparable structures (a polarized set of contrasts) and perform comparable functions (such as eliciting conceptual discrimination), as do certain philosophical thought experiments". He argues that thought experiments frequently take the form of narratives, but at the same time, they also function as arguments. He concludes that there should be no problem in admitting the existence of virtue wheels in much art, notably narrative artworks (p. 15).

3 See, for example, Shklar, 1984; Nussbaum, 1990; Singer & Singer (eds.), 2005.As far as Neo-Aristotelianism is concerned, besides MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum focuses on the role of literature in ethical development stressing the moral and emotional dimensions of narrative. Charles Taylor (2004) is interested in the role of storytelling in the formation of identity both individual and collective. Aristotelian themes are also integrated in the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1994) who inquires the narrative construction of identity focusing on mimesis (***μίμησις***) and the ethical dimension of storytelling. In mimesis and katharsis (***κάθαρσις***) is also interested Richard Kearney (2002) who examines the role of narrative imagination focusing on how storytelling shapes ethical understanding.

4 Danto (1985, p. 184) refers to Marcel Duchamp's *Fontaine* which he believes "raises the question of the philosophical nature of art from within art" as "a cosmic way of achieving the second stage of the Platonic program, which has always been to substitute philosophy

At the same time, we find philosophical texts that are increasingly difficult to differentiate from literary texts. After the linguistic turn in philosophy, we observe an expanding emphasis on the importance of a shared linguistic practice. This has led to a process of convergence and, in some cases, of an eventual abolition of traditional boundaries between philosophical and literary expression. There is an effort to deconstruct philosophy by treating it as though it were art. Therefore, we could reverse the terms of Danto's dilemma and ask whether there is an analogous risk of "literary disenfranchisement of philosophy".

The background of all this is the "end of the grand narratives". Narrative is yet another concept common in philosophy and literature. It is basically a form of storytelling that in literature involves the (re) presentation of a sequence of events (plot) in time and place (setting) where the people who move the story (characters) interact in a meaningful, structured, and cohesive way. Philosophy has its own overarching narratives that provide frameworks for understanding the world, human existence, history, and society. In philosophy storytelling functions as a connective link between abstract philosophical ideas and lived experiences. In the postmodern condition the grand narratives of modernity are called into question and their ability to constitute valid and comprehensive explanations of the world is undermined. In both philosophy and literature, plurality and diversity of perspectives, complexity, contingency, and fragmentation are highlighted and in the end skepticism and relativism remain the only justifiable stances.

In the following text I will attempt to examine Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of the narrative structure of human life presented in *After Virtue* against this background. Of the two main problems it is linked to, namely the identity of the person and the unity of life, I will focus on the second. Since the formation of identity presupposes the unity of life, it is necessary to answer the second question before attempting any answer to the first. Finally, there remains of course open the consideration of the shared narrative framework that integrates individual lives into the broader context of a tradition.[5]

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for art". He argues that art ends when it turns into philosophy (p. 185).

5 MacIntyre (1977) first highlights the role of narrative as enabling agents to account for errors that have led to epistemological crises within their traditions and thereby enables agents from one tradition to recognise the superior resources that another provides for resolving their disputes. On this point, see Caiazza (2014).

2 Against moral relativism

MacIntyre locates the turning point from modern to contemporary philosophy between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. On the one hand, Kierkegaard presents moral commitment as the expression of a criterionless choice between incompatible and incommensurable premises and thus reveals an element of arbitrariness in our moral culture. Kierkegaard's philosophy is at once the outcome and the epitaph of the Enlightenment's project to discover a rational justification for morality (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 39). On the other hand, Nietzsche, the philosopher who grasped this failure more clearly than anyone else, calls for the abandoning of traditional morality both in the sphere of everyday life and in the context of theoretical constructions (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 256). In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, "Genealogy" is presented as the source of postmodern thought (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 50).

MacIntyre (1984, p. 118) is clear: "*either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic or one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative." For MacIntyre, the dilemma *Aristotle or Nietzsche* is not simply about two opposing theories, but it goes deeper in the theoretical specification of two different ways of life (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 118, 2016, 1.9).[6] I believe that a major problem of modernity, for him, is its collapse into genealogy first and postmodernism afterwards, and that much of his criticism is a critique of the postmodern condition. His opposition to emotivism is at its core a reaction against moral relativism.

MacIntyre argues that modern moral philosophy, in its attempt to create abstract philosophical systems universally binding for all humans independently of their historical and social context – what he later on

6 MacIntyre initially argues that Aristotelianism survives Nietzsche's polemic (1984, chap. 18, p. 257). However, he reopens the question in the contrast between (Aristotelian-Thomist) Tradition and Genealogy (1990). In the end, whilst he admits there are no philosophical 'knock down arguments' available to exponents of either side, he argues that "a philosophical impasse is not necessarily or even usually a practical impasse." (2016, p. 63). Philosophical positions are expressions of, indeed the most sophisticated expressions of, distinct forms of life. So, if one's life narrative is understood as an inheritor of a farm or as a musician, then one will be far more likely to understand one's life in terms of the virtues than if one were, for example, a financial speculator. For, in the former case, one would be likely to see oneself as inheriting practices began before one's birth and of contributing to the narratives of others who continue these practices after one's death, thereby marking one's place in an ongoing community.

calls Morality with a capital *M* (2016, pp. 65 ff., 114-117)- neglects history and tradition and separates moral inquiry from lived human experience as expressed in practices and narratives. Modern moral philosophy fails to provide a coherent framework for understanding ethics and moral reasoning, and that goes for postmodernism too. He asserts the importance of narrative for moral understanding and evaluation and stresses the unity and coherence that narrative must have if it is to ground a meaningful and worth living life. The prominence of unity and coherence puts MacIntyre at odds with the postmodern emphasis on fragmentation, diversity, and rejection of universal truths. For him, postmodern philosophy suffers a similar loss of moral framework and, despite its criticism of modernity, in fact it exacerbates this loss due to its skepticism against grand narratives. The result is relativism, fragmentation, and lack of moral orientation.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre criticizes modernity for its rejection of traditions and the rise of individualism which contributed to the fragmentation of narratives and the collapse of shared moral frameworks that used to guide human action. He perceives Enlightenment as a destructive force that brings about the breakdown of traditions (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 69-72). However, from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* onwards, Enlightenment itself is recognized as a tradition, the tradition that refuses to understand itself as a tradition.[7] I think that the concept of narrative should be approached in the light of what he writes about modernity and tradition. It should therefore be admitted that modern culture has finally constructed, along with its own tradition, its own narratives as well, narratives which MacIntyre finds deeply flawed. These are the grand narratives of modernity that postmodern criticism turns against. For MacIntyre, however, postmodern criticism rests on a wrong basis and merely escalates the interrelated problems of modernity: moral relativism, social alienation, and political manipulation.

MacIntyre points to the undermining of the distinction between rational justification and rationalization, as well as between truth and manipulation, as key features of the moral crisis of our time. For him, philosophical critique does not necessarily result in pure skepticism or relativism but rather presupposes their refutation. If moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, insofar as they are

7 See MacIntyre, 1988, p. 360 for an illuminating comment on the Cartesian tradition and 1990, chap. VIII "Tradition against Encyclopaedia: Enlightened Morality as the Superstition of Modernity".

evaluative or normative in character, and agreement cannot be secured by any rational method, for there is none, then justification becomes a criterionless choice. Therefore, agreement can only be reached by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree. "Others are always means, never ends" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 24). MacIntyre first uses the term emotivism (1984, pp. 11-12) and later the term expressivism (2016, p. 17) to describe this moral stance. He argues that this is a consequence of the failure of the Enlightenment's project for a rational justification of ethics due to the rejection of the Aristotelian tradition.

For MacIntyre, disagreements about what it is good or best to be, do, or have, must be settled by appeal to an independent standard concerning the requirements of human flourishing (2016, p. 25). His Aristotelianism is inseparable from the concept of practice, since in *After Virtue*, he distances himself from Aristotelian "metaphysical biology" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 162) and turns to history to build a social teleology based on human practices. By the term "practice" he means "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 187).

However, the claims of practices may be incompatible in such a way that one may find oneself oscillating in an arbitrary way, rather than making rational choices (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 201). Such a life would be marked by excessive conflict and arbitrariness. When different goods summon in different and incompatible directions, "I" must choose between their rival claims (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 202). By introducing the idea of a narrative unity of life, MacIntyre attempts to solve the problem caused by the lack of external criteria for evaluating the internal goods, that is the different and possibly conflicting goods particular and specific to each practice. Otherwise, we run the risk that the modern emotivist self will reappear in the context of what was claimed to be an Aristotelian world (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 202). Narrative appears in *After Virtue* within an extended argument as to what is required to identify a feature of character as a virtue in the context of different virtue traditions. MacIntyre's argument is that any such candidate (courage, for

example) must play a role in the three orders of practices, narratives of whole human lives and communal traditions, to be considered a virtue because virtue traditions –despite having different lists of the virtues– all locate the virtues in all three orders.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre claims that "man without a culture is a myth … man who has nothing but a biological nature is a creature of whom we know nothing" (1984, p. 161). At that time, he hesitates to introduce a more robust philosophical anthropology. He seems to believe that whatever man might be becomes visible only within history and society, and that this visibility is made possible through narratives. MacIntyre (1984, pp. 180, 200) rejects Aristotle's and Aquinas' account of the unity of virtues and admits that there may be practices that are merely vicious. However, the problem turns out to be more crucial than he let us suppose in *After Virtue*, and this is one of the reasons for his conversion to Thomism. He now admits as a mistake his previous attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, i.e. in terms of practices, traditions and the narrative unity of human lives, and recognizes the need of a metaphysical and biological grounding: it is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like can function as they do (MacIntyre, 1999, pp. x, 5, 2007, p. xi).

The absence of any mention of the notion of *narrative* in *Dependent Rational Animals* may have left a passing impression that MacIntyre abandoned the idea of a narrative unity of life.[8] This, however, is proved to be a false impression, as evidenced by the final part of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. Indeed, I think that his renewed anthropological conception can be incorporated into the basic narrative schema of *After Virtue* without disturbing its structure. The concept of the good is now related to the facts of human vulnerability and disability, and therefore to the need to develop the virtues of acknowledged dependence. Our path to independence goes through participation in community practices and traditions.

However, if we end up with different incompatible stories of equal validity, we cannot tell the difference between history and fiction. This would be tantamount to what Lamarque (2004, pp. 393-394) calls "radical epistemic anti-realism" where history, philosophy and even

8 See M. Fuller, 1998, pp. 117-118.

science would be reduced to a product rather than a subject of narrative, and questions regarding narrative would overwhelm questions regarding truth. The concept of narrative raises relativistic doubts especially when, as it is often the case in postmodern literature, we face the possibility of a breakdown into multiple layers or webs of narratives that may conflict with each other, be false or deceptive, so that one can deceive and be self-deceived. MacIntyre (2016, p. 232) acknowledges the danger but argues that it does not mean that "the narrative structure of the story itself falsifies." His strategy against relativistic objections is three-pronged.

First, he provides a realistic background to his narrative theory, arguing that there is a strong connection between narrative and life. This is the first barrier against relativism, though not a conclusive argument. For MacIntyre, the narrative forms are not mere reflections of an era or a lifetime but, nonetheless, they reveal the individual and collective morality, as well as the social structure of a given historical society, expressing the way the author perceives human life. For example, Sophocles "portrayed human life in dramatic narratives because he took it that human life already had the form of dramatic narrative," an approach different from the epic, the medieval or the modern (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 143-145, see further pp. 124-125, 128-129). On the contrary, for modern individualism, life itself has no form, save that which we choose to project onto it in our aesthetic imaginings (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 144).

MacIntyre recognizes a narrative structure not only in literature but also in life. He does not simply draw conclusions from the stories of literary heroes but also moves the other way around when he asks what literary genre a life belongs to.[9] I cannot expand on this issue here, but it should be noted that MacIntyre stresses the importance of writing a particular type of virtue informed narrative biography to undertaking moral enquiry today.[10] "Narratives is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which have no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise not decoration" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). It seems that for him narrative has an existential grounding in the events of someone's life and indeed in a way that transcends the limits of an individual

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9 Cf. the point where Macintyre, 1984, pp. 212-213 asks whether Thomas Becket's life is best told on the lines of medieval hagiography, saga, or tragedy.

10 He outlines this argument first in his autobiographical essay (MacIntyre, 2013, pp. 17-34) and then in full form in *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity* (chap. 5) where he gives us illustrations of the writing of a certain type of biographical narrative.

life as it is evident in the narrative phenomenon of embedding: the individual pursuit of the good takes place within practices and traditions that include and transcend individual lives. The history of a practice is embedded and made intelligible in terms of the larger and prolonged history of the tradition through which the practice was conveyed to us, and the same holds in terms of the larger and longer histories of several traditions (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 222).

Second, as we have seen in the above mentioned passage (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 161), MacIntyre claims that man without culture – in culture we should also include narratives – is "a creature of whom we know nothing". There is no textual evidence that this is an ontological claim stating that man or life is nothing but a narrative. The verb he uses is "know". At this point, MacIntyre hesitates to tell us what might lie beyond narratives. The discussion about human nature begins later. I think that his original argument in *After Virtue* is mainly an argument against modern individualism, and this perhaps explains why it's strongly worded. MacIntyre at that time seems to be more concerned with refuting the idea of individuals as *ab initio* fully developed autonomous personalities and society as the sum of such individuals. From *Dependent Rational Animals* onwards, MacIntyre develops a teleological account of human flourishing based on human nature. I do not think we have reasons to suppose that the latter approach is incompatible with the claims of *After Virtue*. The narrative structure of human life seems more like a precondition for a life lived within and made intelligible to agents by virtue traditions. Thus, at the social level, when it comes to human relations and how we understand ourselves and others, narrative retains its fundamental significance. For him, autonomy – *independence* is the word he uses – is a potential that may develop (or fail to develop) only intra-socially and intra-historically, within a community. From the outset, this criticism forms a solid basis for his theory which he never abandons.

Third and most important, the narrative is not meant to be our only compass for navigating life, granted his theory of practical rationality; this theory sets limits to the narrative design, but cannot provide unity. His idea of practical rationality is not about making decisions, based on abstract principles detached from the social and historical context, but about living a worth-living life, namely a life in accordance with the specific purpose (*τέλος*) inherent in human nature. He emphasizes the social and historical dimensions of practical reasoning. A coherent and meaningful life unfolds like a story embedded within the specific

social practices and larger communal traditions within which we place ourselves.

His criticism of contemporary moral philosophy is based upon the idea that meaningful human action cannot be understood in isolation from the narratives that shape it. Thus, I think that the need for a unitary narrative expresses MacIntyre's holistic understanding of morality. Partial perspectives, moral choices and actions begin to make sense when integrated into a unified, coherent and comprehensive narrative framework as parts of a larger narrative history of our community. Practical rationality unfolds within these narratives that provide the backdrop for unity of life and action. Therefore, his approach stands in contrast to postmodern deconstruction that emphasizes the fragmented nature of our world and hence the partiality of interpretations and the contingency of meaning. Whereas postmodernism challenges the idea of a unified narrative advocating plurality and diversity, MacIntyre aims to identify the underlying patterns that bring coherence and consistency to human life.

3 Narrative unity: In life and literature

MacIntyre's narrative framework is formed, first, by his critique against the "empiricist concept of experience." If our experience were to be characterized exclusively in terms of bare "sense-data" we would be faced not only with an uninterpreted, but an uninterpretable world. Our perceptions are identified by theory-laden concepts (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 79-80). Human beings, as well as their societies, are creatures made of stories. One way of making sense of an event is to tell a story about it. By integrating it into a narrative, of a novel or cinematographic, but also within the narratives of everyday life, we try to find a meaningful order of things and make sense of the world that would otherwise seem incomprehensible and chaotic.

Second, it is formed by his critique of determinism.[11] MacIntyre focuses on free human action in its historical dimension. The self isn't a disincarnated mental entity; it has a body, roles, language, and history. Morality is linked to the historical and social context in which it emerges, and for this reason the attempt to detach its rational

11 Discussed at length in Macintyre 1984, chap. 7 & 8.

justification from its historical and social context is doomed to fail. The turn to history and the focus on free human agency brings to the fore the problem of conflict which is alien to the harmonizing Aristotelian framework of thought. So, on the one hand, MacIntyre must find a way to introduce the problem of conflict, a modern problem *par excellence*, in an Aristotelian framework. On the other hand, he seeks differentiation from the dominant modern tradition "which holds that the variety and heterogeneity of human goods is such that their pursuit cannot be reconciled in any single moral order and that consequently any social order which *either* attempts to such a reconciliation or which enforces the hegemony of one set of goods over all other is bound to turn into a straitjacket and very probably a totalitarian straitjacket for the human condition."(MacIntyre 1984, p. 142).[12]

By introducing the notion of narrative, MacIntyre tries to solve a problem, that of the threat to the coherence of a single notion of virtue tradition from the multiplicity of virtue traditions. For MacIntyre, the fragmented moral landscape of modernity prevents the design of any overarching narrative that would allow us to adjudicate between competing moral frameworks. He argues that "any specific account of the virtues presupposes an equally specific account of the narrative structure and unity of a human life and *vice versa*" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 243) and that to adopt a stance on the virtues is to adopt a stance on the narrative character of human life (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 144).

This is the starting point of MacIntyre's journey from heroic poetry to the modern novel. We will focus on four stages of this journey and briefly refer to the evidence that MacIntyre draws to build his own conception of narrative. Out of these four stages, on which his critical opposition to modern and postmodern theory is based, two differ from Aristotelian theory.

(a) The link between morality and community practices: MacIntyre refers at length to the concept of social role which he derives from epic poetry. This idea is important for man's moral orientation and is part of his functional conception of man, which is connected to the ergon (*ἔργον*) he performs. The social role may be called into question, as later becomes evident in the tragic poetry of classical times, yet we remain accountable for our stance towards the community (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 138-145). For MacIntyre (1984, 126-127), what we learn from heroic

12 MacIntyre (1984, p. 143) argues that this is the view of Isaiah Berlin and its ancestry is in Max Weber's writings.

societies is "first, that all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion; and secondly that there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition."

(b) The idea of tragic conflict as inherent to the human condition: MacIntyre draws this idea from ancient Greek drama. It's an idea that differentiates him from Aristotle, who (i) adopts the Platonic idea of the unity of the virtues and thus leaves little room for conflict (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 142 ff, 157) and (ii) understands moral failure as a fault (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 157, 179). This idea of tragic conflict enables him also to criticize the idea of conflicts as fundamentally random and arbitrary confrontations in the context of emotivism (MacIntyre, 1984, 33, 142). MacIntyre believes that human life takes the form of unresolvable dramatic conflicts, as it is evident especially in the tragedies of Sophocles. The human condition is tragic in that we must recognize the authority of rival and incompatible moral claims (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 143).

The idea of tragic conflict gives existential depth to MacIntyre's philosophical anthropology. We already know from Homer that human life is fragile and death is the common human fate (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 124). During our lifetime, as individuals and groups, we are faced with moral dilemmas arising from incompatible and competing visions of the good life and the human flourishing (*εὐδαιμονία*), and therefore our choices, as it is evident in the case of *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*, involve unavoidably suffering and loss (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 142-143). Tragic conflicts also threaten to break down the narrative unity of our lives. The principle of the unity of the virtues, which MacIntyre later adopts, provides an answer to the problem of evil practices but does not preclude the idea of tragic conflict. Yet the person who possesses the virtues and the practical wisdom (*φρόνησις*) which enable him to exercise judgment in particular cases, will manifest these qualities even in cases of moral ambiguity and tragic conflict in which there is no certain solution. Like the heroes of ancient Greek drama, he will manifest his virtue by facing the circumstances with courage, justice, temperance, and humility. Aware of the limitations of moral life, he will try to respond in morally justifiable ways striving to be consistent with his overarching moral commitments and to maintain the unity of his life.

(c) History and the idea of life as a quest or journey: The sense of historicity first appears, along with the idea of sin and redemption

(MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 168, 174-175), in Christianity and is expressed in medieval stories through the idea of life as a quest or journey. MacIntyre argues that the medieval vision is historical in a way that Aristotle's perspective could not be. Man is essentially *in via*; the search for the good takes place in time. The medieval vision situates the quest for the good not just in specific contexts but in contexts which have its own history (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 174-176).

The unity of an individual life consists in the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life and is basically the unity of a narrative quest (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 218-219). "[B]ecause my life is to be understood as a teleologically ordered unity, a whole the na¬ture of which and the good of which I have to learn how to discover, my life has the continuity and unity of a quest, a quest whose object is to discover the truth about my life as a whole which is an indispensable part of the good of that life", (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 197). In our narratives, unpredictability and teleology coexist since, on the one hand, free human action is not determined, and we never know what will happen next but, on the other hand, we live our lives in the light of a certain future which presents itself in the form of ends and goals (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 215-216). Such a narrative is not a search for something already specified, yet without some at least partly determined conception of the final end (*τέλος*) there could not be any beginning to a quest. Therefore, some conception of the good for man is required (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219).

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre does not tell us what that end might be, and his definition of the good life seems somewhat circular: "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man" (1984, p. 219). Later, he explores the nature of the dependent rational human animal and provides a narrative moral anthropology on Thomistic terms.[13] It is still a teleological understanding of human nature but whereas in *After Virtue* the good was exclusively associated with practices and traditions, now MacIntyre maintains that human beings have inherent purposes and ends toward which they naturally tend, and, when they succeed in fulfilling them, they attain the good life. "Reflective agents thus increasingly understand themselves and others in terms of a certain kind of narrative, a story in which they as agents direct themselves or fail to direct themselves toward a final end, the nature of which they initially apprehended in and through their activities as rational agents"

13 For MacIntyre's Thomistic integration of natural teleology within his narrative model, see R. Gahl, 2019, pp. 289-295.

(MacIntyre, 2016, p. 54). This does not mean that indeterminacy is eliminated. The good is always understood in terms of human flourishing (*εὐδαιμονία*) and the virtues as those dispositions that help individuals realize their inherent potentialities. I don't think that any of the above prevents the conception of human life as a journey or quest, and certainly does not preclude its dramatic character. It doesn't even rule out the possibility the narrative of our individual and social lives to lapse into unintelligibility (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 216).

(d) Constancy and integrity: In an era dominated by postmodernism, MacIntyre advocates the unity of life and the integrity of the human person. He stresses the importance of these two virtues which he finds in Jane Austen's heroines, such as Anne Elliot (*Persuasion*) and Fanny Price (*Mansfield Park*). MacIntyre (1984, p. 183) claims that constancy plays a role in Austen analogous to that of phronesis (*φρόνησις*) in Aristotle; it is a virtue the possession of which is a prerequisite for the possession of other virtues. For him, there is no sense of moral commitment when life is dissolved into a series of separate present moments, in which the unity of a human life disappears. Virtues enable the individual to capture a form of unity in his life, unity which can no longer be taken for granted (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 242). In constancy, MacIntyre (1984, pp. 241-242; 2006, pp. 192-193) recognizes a particular threat that the modern social world represents to the integrity of the person.

However, for MacIntyre (1984, p. 204), any attempt to envisage human life as a unity encounters, first, social obstacles that derive from the modern segmentation of human life and, second, philosophical obstacles that derive from (a) analytical philosophy's focus on "basic action", that is its tendency to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions in terms of simple components, and (b) sociological theory and existentialism when a sharp separation is made either between the individual and the roles he or she plays, or between the different role –and quasi-role– enactments of an individual life so that life comes to appear as nothing but a series of unconnected episodes.

MacIntyre (1984, pp. 206, 208) argues that human action cannot be characterized independently of the agent's intentions and that intentions are intelligible only within their contexts and settings. We render human actions intelligible when we place them in stories because action itself has in essence a historical character (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 212). The ability to grasp the thread of a conversation involves the ability to bring

it under some description, like, "a drunken quarrel," "an intellectual disagreement," "a tragic misunderstanding," "a struggle to dominate" or "a trivial exchange of gossip" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). We allocate conversations to genres, just as we do with literary narratives; not only conversations but human actions in general can be presented as enacted narratives. They have beginnings, middles and endings, just as literary works do. They embody reversals and recognitions; they move towards and away from climaxes; they include digressions and subplots (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do but in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 215).

MacIntyre (1984, pp. 213-215) argues that every human story is fundamentally an enacted narrative, in which the perspectives of the author, the narrator, and the character are in a dynamic relationship. A narrative is not an arbitrary story. The story characters never start literally *ab initio*; they plunge in *medias res* and what the agent can do and say is deeply affected by other persons and previous acts; each of us, being the protagonist in his own drama, plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others. And just as we do not start where we want to, we cannot continue as we like. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. We play on a stage we did not design, and we find ourselves part of a plot that was not of our making. In these narratives, we are not only the protagonists but also the authors of our story; authors who both constructs, and participate in, our own moral narrative (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). And it is this same story that *we* as narrators are telling, trying to interpret its events and experiences into a meaningful narrative framework.

MacIntyre (1984, pp. 212 ff., 2016, pp. 238 ff.) addresses four main criticisms against his narrative approach:[14] (a) An argument supported by the phenomenological tradition, notably Merleau-Ponty,[15] that there is a "wild region" in human life beyond all cultures which itself cannot find narrative expression. Therefore, to understand life in narrative terms is

14 Cf. Carr (1986) for a critical reconstruction of the main criticisms against the narrative approach that helps, first, to understand MacIntyre's theory and the criticism against it and, second, both to trace the history of each position (e.g. from Husserl to Merlau-Ponty) as well as to understand the unfolding of certain key positions in different authors (e.g. Mink and White). See also Rudd (2007, pp. 60-67) for defending the narrative approach against different criticisms (Strawson, Lamarque, Christman) that although accept the narrative form of human action, they deny the idea of narrative connection in the large scheme of a whole life maintaining that all we need is a simple listing in temporal order (chronicle) or a mere causal sequence of events.

15 See further Carr, 1986, pp. 121 ff.

to confer upon it a coherence that it does not possess and to disguise what belongs to the "wild". MacIntyre (2016, pp. 238-239) admits that there are experiences in life whose significance we do not know how to spell out; experiences that threaten its coherence. The incoherence and unintelligibility are part of our lives, but he does not believe that we necessarily conceal, disguise or misinterpret such experiences when we tell a story about them. On the contrary, he claims that narrative is the only way of acknowledging these aspects of our lives adequately.

(b) The "happy-go-lucky" argument supported by Galen Strawson (2004) who turns against both the descriptive empirical thesis about the nature of ordinary human experience as a narrative (*psychological narrativity thesis*) and the normative ethical claim that we ought to live our lives narratively (*ethical narrativity thesis*). Strawson (2004, p. 430) sets up a distinction between two different kinds of self-experience: (a) the "Diachronic": "one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future" and (b) the "Episodic": "one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future". He argues that those whose self-experience is Episodic do not tend to see their lives in narrative terms and furthermore that taking life in narrative terms is not necessary for a good life. Isn't it better to adopt a "happy-go-lucky" stance, that is, to live without a plan and just take things as they come? MacIntyre (2016, p. 241) does not claim that human beings most of the time experience their lives as narratives; it is not as if in constant reflection we update every moment the narrative of our lives, something like that "would involve a remarkable and unfortunate degree of self-dramatization." However, first (an argument similar to the one he uses against Sartre), if Strawson were to justify the "happy-go-lucky" way of life he would have to give us examples of such lives, that is, to provide us with narratives (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 241) and, second, that those who live in this way are able to do so only because others who are not leading happy-go-lucky lives are sustaining the relationships and institutions that make their lives possible (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 242).

The next two points seem like a two-level development of the same basic position.[16] MacIntyre disputes that (c) stories are not lived but told

16 However, as Lamarque (2004, p. 398)) points out, they are rather contradictory: the stronger anti-realist claim, that narrative "creates the events at least in the sense that there are no plot-like structures of events independent of narrative", conflicts with the weaker

because life has no beginnings, middles, or ends (Mink, 1970, pp. 557-558;). He agrees that only retrospectively we have the whole story and we can characterize, for example, hopes as unfulfilled or battles as decisive, yet when it comes to endings he asks "But have you never heard of death?" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 212). (d) An argument expressed by Sartre via Antoine Roquentin that living is one thing, telling stories another. Things just happen; not only narrative is different from life (Mink) but also to present human life in the form of narrative is always to falsify it (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 232). MacIntyre (1984, p. 214) points out that Sartre, in trying to prove that there are no true narratives, he himself writes a narrative. The characterization of actions allegedly prior to any form of narrative, imposed upon them and thus clear from any narrative misconception, will always turn out to be the presentation of disjoined parts of some possible narrative (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 215).

In this kind of arguments, as Rudd (2007, p. 66) rightly points out, "[i]t is actually the anti-narrativists who seem, at least implicitly, to appeal to an Archimedean Point, a God's Eye view, from which we could contrast the narratives we tell with the Plain Facts and thus decide if our narratives are distorted. But there is no such point and such Facts." Being unable to discover such a point, they dismiss narrative altogether. This argument is consistent with MacIntyre's questioning of the idea of an Archimedean Point, as well as with his criticism of an "empiricist concept of experience." But it does not amount to the claim that there are no real-world events apart from the stories we tell about them, in the sense that life narratives create the events of a life, as happens in literary or fictional narratives.[17] It's more like as if life's events carry stories. A life narrative is not pure fiction as it is in art; it is someone's life, and it is grounded in the events of that life.

The narrative representation of a life provides a teleological explanation that gives the reasons of our actions. For MacIntyre (1984, p. 218), narrative is a way to (a) give meaning, (b) justify, (c) be accountable for our deeds. What underlies the idea that there are not, and there cannot be, any true stories because life is composed of discrete actions that lead nowhere, which have no order, and it is the story-teller who imposes

distortion claim. "An event can only be distorted by a narrative if it exists independent of that narrative".

17 Lamarque (2004, p. 397 ff.) argues that narrative itself presents no special problem for either reference or truth. Problems do arise from taking fictional narratives as the norm. He concludes that the idea of life narrative poses more problems than it solves and that it is better to stick to causal explanation.

retrospectively an order which they did not have when lived, is the implicit premise that the intelligibility of an action depends on its inclusion in a certain narrative sequence (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 214). Perhaps the discussion about art in postwar culture provides a counterexample in which this claim is negatively confirmed. It is a broader philosophical question stated in Adorno's memorable dictum about poetry after Auschwitz (1967, p. 19). Much of the discussion concerns the question if it is possible to represent what happened in the concentration camps in classical narrative terms. Likeminded reflections are spread across all narrative genres, for instance, in literature when Aharon Appelfeld (2014) claimed that you cannot be a writer of death, or in cinema when Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah* (1985), opposed any attempt to fictionalize this tragedy in cinema. I think that MacIntyre's idea of narrative as a way of making sense and justifying our actions, is negatively confirmed here.

4 The complex relationship between philosophy and literature

Rorty (1978, p. 143) believes that “philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing” and treats “literary” and “philosophical” texts as grists for the same mill. He takes “literary theory” as a species of philosophy, “an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labeled "philosophical" with other texts not so labeled. It names the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets and such, and your favorite philosophers” (Rorty, 1985, p. 463). Can it be argued that, in MacIntyre’s case, we have a similar fusion of philosophy and literature that consists in the practice of fusing, along with one’s favourite philosophers, not only novelists and poets but also filmmakers, painters, or musicians? Despite MacIntyre’s extensive references not only to language-based arts such as literature and poetry, and to mixed arts such as cinema, but also to art forms that use other expressive media, such as painting, especially portrait painting, and music, MacIntyre’s references to literary texts are subject to philosophical reflection. Therefore, the relationship between literature and philosophy should be examined on a different basis.

For MacIntyre (1984, pp. 37 ff.), the transition to modernity is not merely a change in philosophical theory; it is a more radical one, and

profoundly alters the world and people's daily lives; it changes faith, science and art. Modernity is studied in the light of these dramatic transformations, and therefore literature could not be absent. Apart from that, however, the project of constructing a "narrative unity of life," as we have seen, results from an inner need of MacIntyre's theory.

MacIntyre reads literature from the point of view of a moral philosopher, yet he does not offer a moralistic reading at the expense of the aesthetic value of the texts but rather highlights their philosophical interest. When we read, for example, the analysis of the aesthete, with main references *The Portrait of a Lady* (Henry James), *Rameau's Nephew* (Denis Diderot) and *Enten – Eller* (Søren Kierkegaard), we realize that MacIntyre's approach goes beyond the analysis of specific moral qualities of literary heroes. MacIntyre's references are obviously an integral part of his attempt to construct a theory of virtue, but at the same time they are a part of his conception of modernity.

According to MacIntyre's (1984, p. 25) critique, Ralph Touchett, the younger Rameau, and Kierkegaard's A, belong to a tradition where "the problem of enjoyment arises in the context of leisure." This tradition refers to "those who see in the social world nothing but a meeting place for individual wills, each with its own set of attitudes and preferences and who understand that world solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction, who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom." At this point, he does not provide us with an up-to-date illustration of the aesthete, to the effect that this character has become associated either with an outdated aristocratic way of life or with the modern consumer. However, later, in the Preface to the 3rd edition of *After Virtue* (2007, p. xv), he writes that the aesthete today "is presently emerging from a devotion to conceptual art." This comment is very elliptical, yet clearly indicates a critical stance.

MacIntyre (1984, p. 226) ascertains that the cultural place of narrative has been diminished and that the modes of interpretation of narrative have been transformed in such a way that the form of narrative is understood not as connecting story-telling with human life, but as a narrative that stands out from life, which confines it to what is taken to be the separate and distinctive realm of art.[18] He believes that the conflict between art and life cuts art off from its moral duties. If art has

18 MacIntyre's critique of modern art has common points with his criticism against academic philosophy; see MacIntyre, 1984, p. 4.

no reference and the artwork refers to itself, it turns into an activity that concerns only a minority in a way that prevents our narrative self-understanding (MacIntyre, 1984, 226-227).

As realism recedes, literary language begins to be perceived as an independent, self-contained, system that generates its own meaning. Since late modernism, and even more clearly in postmodernism, the world of the novel ceases to be a coherent, intelligible, world. The decline of grand narratives causes a crisis in the literary representation of reality. Postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives challenges linear narratives and brings about the deconstruction of traditional storytelling. Meta-narratives embrace experimentation, complexity, and ambiguity, and express awareness of the constructed nature of the narrative, as well as the impossibility of closure in an ending.[19]

All this may have been fascinating at the time when postmodernism was presented as a wave of protest and opposition to the totalitarian tendencies of modernism. However, since postmodernism became the dominant view, it sounds rather boring, at least outside the circles of certain aesthetes.

MacIntyre's critique against genealogy, and its postmodern heirs, becomes crucial. He claims (1990, p. 54).) that genealogy refers to a self that dissolves into masks and moments "to the point at which there is no longer a continuous genealogical project." The genealogist writes *against*, exposes, subverts, interrupts, and disrupts therefore "the genealogical stance is dependent for its concepts and its modes of argument, for its theses and its style, upon a set of contrasts between it and that which it aspires to overcome ... it is inherently derivative and even parasitic upon its antagonisms and those towards whom they are directed, drawing its necessary sustenance from that which it professes to have discarded." (MacIntyre, 1990, 215). On this basis, he argues that the history of genealogy to this day has been one of "progressive impoverishment" (MacIntyre, 1990, 55).

The opposing side, on the other hand, accuses MacIntyre of ignoring the discontinuous, non-teleological, narratives of late modernity, and that his idea of narrative is, if not obsolete, at least inappropriate nowadays because people of late modernity are best expressed through

19 MacIntyre (1984, p. 213) claims that Kafka could not end his novels because the notion of an ending like that of a beginning has sense only in terms of an intelligible narrative.

deconstruction and feel more comfortable in the fragmentary world of postmodernism.[20]

I believe that MacIntyre's critical perspective does not imply ignorance, but rather, on the contrary, presupposes a deep knowledge that allows him, in an age of postmodern euphoria, to be aware of the limits of the postmodern project. Fragmentation and compartmentalization are at the heart of his theory. He points out the problems that emerge when our narratives break down and we are immersed in a world that ceases to make sense. He argues that "the difference between every culture of advanced modernity and other cultures is the degree and nature of its compartmentalizations" and that "in the culture of advanced modernity the practices of storytelling become such that they no longer provide resources for individuals struggling to narrate the story of their own lives and this both because of what has happened to storytelling and what has happened to those lives." (MacIntyre, 2016, p. 237).

To claim that we feel comfortable when human existence ceases to have meaning, and communication breaks down, probably indicates that we have misunderstood the nature of the absurd, or the existential anxiety it causes. To argue that MacIntyre is regressing to older traditional narrative forms, and that he fails to consider literature after James Joyce and Viginia Woolf, is equally wrong. During the 20th century, there is an indefinability of meaning and there seems to be no viewpoint external to the novel, i.e. some impression of objective reality known to the writer, from which the characters and events within it can be interpreted. There is no strict time sequence of events, but rather the real-world phenomena are randomly spread over time with no intention of bringing them to a conclusion. Long-range novels may be framed by an outwardly insignificant course of events like a man's day in Dublin or a visit to a lighthouse. The randomness of exterior events serves only as a background for an inner process, which is the real subject of the novel. It is not that, in the past, changing impressions, subjective reactions, weird thoughts, or strange feelings were absent, but that all these were rationally restricted and did not affect the author's authority and knowledge. Now, the author himself questions the truth and reality of the world he creates, and, without a navigation guide provided by him,

20 See, for example, Herselman & VanVeuren, 1995. Bradley, 1990, p. 325 claims that MacIntyre presupposes an omniscient narrator who may correspond to Austen's world, but not to Joyce's. See also Feldman, 1986, p. 325 that MacIntyre expresses a nostalgia for a return to earlier structured narratives leaving us to wait for the ideal Jane Austen.

we are often confronted with different, changing, subjective impressions of equal force and validity.

Nevertheless, we have good reasons to question generalizations such as that MacIntyre dismisses 20th-21st century literature out of hand. The dissolution of time, the focus on minor details and the fragmentation of a course of action, the continuous shifting of the narrative viewpoint without any claim to chronological order or exterior completeness, from one aspect seems to dissolve reality into random moments without meaning and purpose, leaving us with a sense of confusion and despair. If we think that all this, as it is often the case in postmodern literature, is just a discontinuous pointless rumination of subjective, possibly contradictory, perspectives, fragments of events and random moments loosely strung together, then we may find MacIntyre's theory incompatible with this literary form, especially if all this is taken as a basis for a wider dismissal of human life as empty and meaningless. But, on the other hand, if we think that there are still novels which, through the dissolution of reality into smaller trivial incidents, through the breaking up of the time continuum, and through the layering of different meanings when synthesized in a more comprehensive understanding of the narrated subject, find a better way to make sense of human life and the world around us, then we have reasons to believe that MacIntyre would not reject them. This would be the case if we supposed that through different stories we gain insight into the historical setting, if through contrasting perspectives and the multiple layers of meaning we get a synthesis that broadens our understanding, and especially if we concluded that through the representation of random fragments of everyday life, we could grasp what is elementary and common to all.

We need to remember that, for MacIntyre, we do not possess the absolute perspective of an omniscient narrator; we tell our story as we live it, and we constantly revise it as we go on. MacIntyre's approach is open-ended and flexible and therefore, his theory can absorb any constructive functions of discontinuity or fragmentation. Criticisms, such as those discussed earlier, fail because, without perhaps being aware of it, presuppose or enable the emergence of a unitary narrative. Storytelling has never been for MacIntyre a solitary enterprise, the navigation of a single narrator through the events of a lifetime. Such an approach would detract from the collective and social aspect of his narrative theory and ignore narrative's inclusion in some overarching tradition. As we have seen, we are in the midst of different narratives that may harmonize or

be in conflict with each other since our own story is embedded in other people's stories. Besides, narrative unity cannot be taken for granted; it is a goal we strive for. The question of how best we might live, and bring unity and completion to our life, remains open. The unity of a human life, as any quest, may be "frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distraction and human lives may in all these ways also fail" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219). He acknowledges that "what seemed to be an intelligible narrative in which one was playing a part may be transformed wholly or partly into a story of unintelligible episodes" as it happens to Kafka's novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* (1984, p. 213). Yet, in a sense, we are like Franz Biberkopf; we constantly struggle to give structure and coherence to events, meaning and order to our lives until the end, and I suppose this is one of the reasons why, as MacIntyre (1984, pp. 226-227) argues, the demand for narrative unity keeps recurring in art, as well as in everyday life. This way of self-understanding is now foreign to the dominant culture.

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