

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE AND MARTHA NUSSBAUM ON VIRTUE ETHICS

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Abstract: Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha C. Nussbaum are two prominent contemporary moral philosophers who attempt to rehabilitate Aristotle's conception of virtues. Although both agree that virtue ethics can be considered as a strong alternative to our search for commonalities in a pluralistic society such as Indonesia, each chooses a very different path. While MacIntyre interprets Aristotle from his traditionalist and communitarian perspective, Nussbaum construes the philosopher in a non-relative and essentialist point of view using the perspective of capability. Consequently, MacIntyre construes a more particularistic view of virtue ethics, whereas Nussbaum presents a more universalistic view of virtue ethics. Applying virtue ethics to the Indonesian context, this article argues that each approach will be insufficient to address the highly pluralistic societies such as Indonesia. Therefore, we need to construct a virtue ethics proper to the Indonesian context that takes both approaches into consideration.

Keywords: Virtue, virtue ethics, community, capability, incommensurability.

Abstrak: Alasdair MacIntyre dan Martha C. Nussbaum merupakan dua orang filsuf moral terkemuka pada masa kini, yang berusaha merehabilitasi konsep Aristoteles mengenai keutamaan. Sekalipun keduanya sepakat bahwa etika keutamaan dapat dipertimbangkan sebuah alternatif yang memadai bagi usaha kita dalam mencari kesamaan di tengah sebuah masyarakat majemuk seperti Indonesia, masing-masing memilih jalan yang sangat berbeda. Sementara MacIntyre menafsirkan Aristoteles dari perspektif tradisionalis dan komunitarian, Nussbaum

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memahami sang filsuf dari sebuah sudut pandang esensialis dan non-relatif dengan memakai pendekatan kapabilitas. Akibatnya, MacIntyre mengkonstruksi sebuah pandangan yang lebih partikular atas etika keutamaan, sementara Nussbaum lebih menghadirkan sebuah pandangan yang lebih universal atas etika keutamaan. Mengaplikasikan etika keutamaan pada konteks Indonesia, artikel ini berpendapat bahwa masing-masing pendekatan tidak akan memadai untuk menjadi masyarakat yang sangat pluralistis seperti Indonesia. Untuk itu, kita perlu mengkonstruksi sebuah etika keutamaan yang kontekstual di Indonesia yang mempertimbangkan dan memanfaatkan kedua pendekatan tersebut.

Kata-kata Kunci: Keutamaan, etika keutamaan, komunitas, kapabilitas, inkomensurabilitas.

INTRODUCTION

Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha C. Nussbaum are two of many contemporary philosophers who endeavor to reanimate the Aristotelian idea of virtues. Both are critical of the modern project of Enlightenment especially promoted by Immanuel Kant. Already in his *A Short History of Ethics*, MacIntyre criticized Kant's ethics of duty as "parasitic upon some already existing morality."¹ In Kant, according to MacIntyre, we find that the rational being obeys no one but himself so that "Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is as useless for morality as Christ's law."² His harsher attack on Enlightenment project is extended in his *After Virtue*. He argues that "any project on this form was bound to fail, because of an ineradicable discrepancy between their shared conception of moral rules and precepts on the one hand and what was shared—despite much larger divergence's—in their conception of human nature on the other."³ In short, the Enlightenment and modern philosophical traditions are the source of the

1 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 197.

2 MacIntyre, *Short History of Ethics*, pp. 194-195.

3 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 52.

4 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 6.

absence of a “rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”⁴ Nussbaum is obviously at the same critical position as MacIntyre, although she is much softer in condemning Kant and other modernists. In her effort to regain Greek philosophical legacies, Nussbaum considers Kantian ethics as so influential on our intellectual culture that it “has led to a long-standing neglect of ... Greek ethics.”⁵

Both philosophers, thus, try to rehabilitate Aristotle’s conception of virtues, although each chooses a very different path. While MacIntyre interprets Aristotle from his traditionalist and communitarian perspective, Nussbaum construes the philosopher in a non-relative and essentialist point of view. At first glance, therefore, we find in both projects a strict dialectic between moral relativism and objectivism. Nevertheless, it is not fully the case, as I will argue in this article. Both thinkers are aware of the possibility for their positions to fail into either relativism or objectivism, and thus they try hard to make their philosophical and moral understandings as balanced as possible. However, before dealing with this issue, I will initially focus on each position and show to what extent they are successful in reanimating Aristotle in two different ways of thinking.

Another purpose of this article is to place the discourse of virtue ethics in the Indonesian context. My hypothesis is that virtue ethics can be considered as another alternative to our search for commonalities in such a pluralistic society, instead of leaning merely on the foundationalistic “natural law.” However, this attempt will not be easy, given the fact that the theories of virtues themselves are widely varied.

MACINTYRE, VIRTUE, AND COMMUNITY

A Short History of Ethics (1966) can be best understood as the mark of the first period in MacIntyre’s philosophical career. In this book, he attempts to present to his readers a “universally human, culturally

5 Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 4.

neutral grounds” theory of the virtues in Aristotle’s ethics, “in order to distinguish between that which in Aristotle’s theory ... is permanently valuable and that which I then took merely to reflect the ideological and cultural biases of Aristotle and his milieu.”⁶ Later, he admits that this understanding of Aristotle is mistaken. MacIntyre’s realization of his error as well as the shift to the second period of his philosophy is triggered by his reading of George H. Mahood’s article on Confucius and Aristotle.⁷ MacIntyre finds through his reading a basis for his later understanding of Aristotle’s virtues:

... every major theory of the virtues has internal to it, to some significant degree, its own philosophical psychology and its own philosophical politics and sociology ... no neutral and independent method of characterizing those materials in a way sufficient to provide the type of adjudication between competing theories of the virtues which I once hoped to provide and to which some others still aspire.⁸

The transitional time between the first edition of *A Short History of Ethics* (1966) and the first edition of *After Virtue* (1981) is for MacIntyre an opportunity to rediscover two lines of enquiry. First, he finds that the history of modern morality can only be written adequately from an Aristotelian point of view. Second, he also takes seriously the possibility that the history of modern secularization can only be written adequately from the standpoint of Christian theism. These two lines of enquiry conjoin in a Thomistic Aristotelianism, which is his standpoint in *After Virtue*.⁹ In short, according to MacIntyre, Aquinas successfully links Aristotle and Christianity.¹⁰

6 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, “Incommensurability, Truth and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues,” in *Culture and modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), p. 104.

7 George H. Mahood, “Human Nature and the Virtues in Confucius and Aristotle,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1, no. 3-4 (1974).

8 MacIntyre, “Incommensurability,” p. 105.

9 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 177-180; Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 68.

10 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter XIII.

However, it may not clear enough for his readers what MacIntyre means by “Thomistic Aristotelianism,” since he does not elaborate this notion at length. Michael Fuller deals with this issue by elaborating at least four possible interpretations of such a notion.¹¹ First, there is a maximum interpretation in which MacIntyre accepts everything that Aristotle and Aquinas said as true. The second is a minimum interpretation, according to which MacIntyre only adopts their talk about “human flourishing” and “common good.” Third, MacIntyre possibly thinks that Aquinas provided a set of metaphysical and moral principles, that these should be translated into new contexts today. Fourth, MacIntyre understands Aquinas as the improver of Aristotle and that Aquinas himself can be improved on.

I agree with Fuller when he says that the fourth interpretation is the best one to understand MacIntyre’s notion of “Thomistic Aristotelianism.” In this interpretation, MacIntyre puts “Thomistic Aristotelianism” as the example *par excellence* of how a tradition should be interpreted in an open-ended continuity, or a “continuing elaboration and reformulation.”¹² However, it is not as simply as replacing the Enlightenment project with an older tradition such as Aristotelianism, *as if* there are only two competing players. The problem is that MacIntyre brings the third player to the stage: Fredrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Thus, already in his *After Virtue*, MacIntyre places these three rival participants in the moral discourse — Encyclopaedia (Enlightenment), Genealogy (Nietzsche), and Tradition (Aristotle).¹³ Nietzsche has a unique place in MacIntyre’s plot, for he is the one moral —or better, non-moral— philosopher of the modern era who has the sensitive discernment to expose the falsity of modern “morality.”¹⁴ Therefore, we have so far two alternatives in MacIntyre’s project:

11 Michael B. Fuller, *Making Sense of MacIntyre*, Avebury Series in Philosophy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 23-26.

12 MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, p. 269.

13 MacIntyre explores those three more fully in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

14 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter IX.

*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...*¹⁵

It is difficult for MacIntyre to solve this either/or dilemma. In order for MacIntyre to prove the validity of his Aristotelian notion of "Tradition," he has to disprove Nietzsche's genealogical approach. He provides two reasons to reject Nietzsche and other genealogists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. First, the result of the unmasking of the modern philosophers by the genealogists has been at the end "the self-unmasking of the genealogists."¹⁶ Secondly, MacIntyre's project to develop his notion of narrative is only intelligible and truthful if done in Aristotelian terms and that the Thomistic version of Aristotelianism is "a more adequate account of the human good, of virtues, and of rules, than any other I have encountered [including Nietzsche]."¹⁷ Having described this, I am sure that we now have a clearer way to elaborate what MacIntyre means by his theory of virtues, tradition, narrative and community, which I will do now.

In Chapter XIV of *After Virtue*, "The Nature of Virtues," which is central for his entire work, MacIntyre argues that, even within a "relatively coherent tradition," there are many different and incompatible conception of a virtue. He compares the usages of virtues in Homer, Aristotle, New Testament, Jane Austen, and Benjamin Franklin, in order to show how they give "different rank order of importance to different virtues."¹⁸ This comparison leads MacIntyre to the question that precedes his central theory,

¹⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 118.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, p. 263.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, p. 263.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 181.

If different writers in different times and places, but all within the history of Western culture, include such different sets and types of items in their lists, what *grounds* have we for supposing that they do indeed aspire to list items of one and the same kind, that there is any shared concept at all?¹⁹

At first glance, this seems to push MacIntyre to a conclusion that there is “no single, core conception of the virtues which might make a claim for universal allegiance.”²⁰ However, we have to be careful here, since he quickly asserts that there *is* indeed such a core conception. This is exactly the brilliance of MacIntyre’s project. On one hand, he has to declare the possibility of the core conception; otherwise, his project will fail into the same mistake as Nietzsche does. On the other hand, he is aware of the fallacy of the modern ahistorical foundationalism that he attacks tirelessly. Therefore, the “core conception” he proposes should not be both *ahistorical* and *foundationalistic*.

The best candidate for his searching for a core conception is the triadic practice-narrative-tradition—MacIntyre call them *stages*—which order should be precise and not *vice versa*.²¹ Thus, by proposing those three notions, along with virtues, MacIntyre’s rejection of the Enlightenment project comes clearer, since this project has repudiated all things social (virtues and practices) and all things historical (narrative and tradition). The first stage deals with *practices* that MacIntyre defines as

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*.²²

19 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 183; italics mine.

20 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 186.

21 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 186-187.

22 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187; italics mine.

This complex definition can be simplified by unraveling from it four aspects: 1. Practices are human activities; 2. Practices have goods that are internal to the activities; 3. Practices have standards of excellence without which internal goods cannot be fully achieved; 4. Practices are systematically extended.²³ MacIntyre distinguishes internal goods from external goods and focuses primarily on the internal goods as the qualities of human practices. Such internal goods to some extent echoes what Wittgenstein means by “language game,” a certain grammar that can only be “identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question.”²⁴ Consequently, those who have no such experience cannot be “judges of internal goods.” Here, MacIntyre starts to introduce the notion of “incommensurability” that is central in his later writings. Against the backdrop of practice, virtue can be comprehended as “an acquired human quality” that enables us to achieve the internal goods.²⁵

The goal of practices for MacIntyre is to meet the *standards of excellence* that is *systematically extended*. The historical wholeness of the practices to attain the goal is to be put into a context, which is simply called narratives. This is the second stage of MacIntyre’s project. Only through the narratives can an individual understand her/his selfhood. He tells us that the concept of the self “resides in the unity of a narrative which link birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”²⁶ This narrative is signified by MacIntyre’s notion of man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*.²⁷

23 Brad J. Kallenberg, “The Master Argument of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*,” in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, eds. Nancey C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 21-22.

24 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 188-189.

25 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191.

26 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 205.

27 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 54.

It is the narrative that gives the virtues their historical significance. However, this personal narrative cannot be understood individually. It also has communal as well as historical dimensions, without which personal virtues fall into individualism: "For I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual."²⁸ Here, MacIntyre takes the third stage, tradition, to the fore. He tells us, "A living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."²⁹ Tradition is very important to provide communal continuity to a human pursuit. It is not only "historically extended," but also "narratively extended," as Kallenberg argues.³⁰ In short, tradition is collective narratives!

After the first edition of his *After Virtue*, MacIntyre uses many occasions to answer some criticisms to the first edition of his book. One of them is the issue of relativism.³¹ He argues that those who impute relativism to him have misunderstood both his position and relativism. He tells one of his disagreements with relativism in these words,

These are the possibilities which the relativist challenge has failed to envisage. That challenge relied upon the argument that if each tradition carries within it its own standards of rational justification, then, insofar as traditions of enquiry are genuinely distinct and different from each other, there is no way in which each tradition can enter into rational debate with any other, and no such tradition can therefore vindicate its rational superiority over its rivals. But if this were so, then there could be no good reason to give one's allegiance to the standpoint of any one tradition rather to that of any other.³²

28 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 220.

29 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

30 Kallenberg, "Master Argument," pp. 24-25.

31 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, "Postscript"; Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), chapter XVIII-XX; MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, pp. 272-273.

32 MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, p. 336.

Thus, MacIntyre argues, the possibility to enter a dialogue and conversation among competing traditions should be supported.

So far, I have discussed the centre of MacIntyre's ethics of virtue. I will now summarize his understanding in two ways. First, I will borrow Kallenberg's diagram of the triadic practice-narrative-tradition (fig. 1).³³



Fig. 1 — Practice, Narrative, and Tradition in MacIntyre's Theory of Virtues

A second way to summarize his thought is by quoting his own words:

Once again the *narrative* phenomenon of embedding is crucial; the history of a *practice* in our time is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer history of the *tradition* through which the *practice* in its present form was conveyed to us; the history of each of our own lives is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of *traditions*.³⁴

³³ Kallenberg, "Master Argument," p. 29.

³⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222; italics mine.

NUSSBAUM, VIRTUE, AND ESSENTIALIST CAPABILITY

Those who discuss Aristotle's theory of virtues cannot neglect Martha C. Nussbaum as one of the most authoritative interpreters of Aristotle. Her "Non-Relative Virtues" has been quoted often and used as a reference in many academic courses.³⁵ Her mastery in classical Greek literatures is indisputable as shown in her magnum opus, *The Fragility of Goodness*.³⁶

Nussbaum starts by arguing that virtue ethics as defended by Aristotle is now more popular than Kantian and utilitarian ethics, because it is not "remote from concrete human experience,"³⁷ while still being theoretically rigorous. She makes a case for Aristotle's theory of virtues in a straightforward manner: The philosopher provides a single objective account of virtues. She writes,

He was not only the defender of an ethical theory based on the virtues, but also the defender of a single objective account of human good, or human flourishing. This account is supposed to be objective in the sense that it is justifiable with reference to reasons that do not derive merely from *traditions and practices*, but rather from features of humanness that lie beneath *all local traditions* and are there to be seen whether or not they are in fact recognized in *local traditions*.³⁸

This rejection of relativism appears soon after she mentions some "relativists" such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Philippa Foot. Against the backdrop of relativism that she rejects, her position is to establish that Aristotle provides a way of relating the virtues "with a search for ethical objectivity and with the criticism of existing local norms."³⁹

35 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue; Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol. XIII*, ed. Peter A. et al. French (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988).

36 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*.

37 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 32.

38 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 33; italics mine.

39 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 34.

Nussbaum argues that those relativists, who are impressed by the “locality” of Aristotle’s list of virtues, have misunderstood Aristotle. What Aristotle does is “to isolate a sphere of human experience that figures in more or less any human life, and in which more or less any human being will have to make *some* choices rather than others, and act in *some* way rather than other.”⁴⁰ In other words, the philosopher provides for each case a particular definition of the virtue. Based on the correspondence of a certain sphere to its specific virtue, Nussbaum maintains that whenever one chooses *the* virtue in a certain case, “no matter where one lives,” the options are just two: “if not properly, then improperly ... If it is not appropriate, it is inappropriate.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, Nussbaum refutes to romanticize Aristotle’s virtues as absolutely true. What she tries to do is to ensure that Aristotle’s theory of virtues is a “plausible *candidate* for the truth”⁴² and that this theory allows us to continually search for the ultimate good, not just for traditionally good ways of behaving as sanctioned by our ancestors.

In her later article, “Human Functioning and Social Justice,”⁴³ Nussbaum defends more explicitly her non-relative theory of virtues by using the term “essentialism,” by which she means, “the view that human life has certain central defining features.”⁴⁴ However, she rejects her critics that equate her essentialism with Kantian metaphysical essentialism. She names her own position as internal or non-metaphysical essentialism. It is called *internal* in the sense that it “does not claim to derive from any source *external* to the actual self-interpretations and self-evaluations of human beings in history.”⁴⁵ In other words, the search for the essential norms is done *from within* basic human functions and capabilities.

40 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 35.

41 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 36.

42 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. 34.

43 Martha C. Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 20 (1992).

44 Nussbaum, “Human Functioning,” p. 205.

45 Nussbaum, “Human Functioning,” p. 215; italics mine.

Having described her theoretical standpoint, Nussbaum sketches her internal-essentialist proposal in a more concrete way. Beginning with the conception of “a creature [human being] who is both capable and need,”⁴⁶ she lists two levels of what she calls “thick vague conception” (fig. 2).⁴⁷ The central principle that Nussbaum employs in this sketch is the notion of “human capabilities.” Here is the list:

THICK VAGUE CONCEPTION	
LEVEL 1: THE SHAPE OF THE HUMAN FORM OF LIFE	LEVEL 2: BASIC HUMAN FUNCTIONAL CAPABILITIES
1. Mortality	1. Being able to live to the end of a complete human life, as far as is possible; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living
2. The human body	2. Being able to have good health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction; being able to move from place to place
3. Capacity for pleasure and pain	3. Being able to avoid unnecessary and nonbeneficial pain and to have pleasurable experiences.
4. Cognitive capability: perceiving, imagining, thinking	4. Being able to use the five senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason.
5. Early infant development	5. Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves ... to love, grieve, to feel longing and gratitude.
6. Practical reason	6. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life.
7. Affiliation with other human beings	7. Being able to live for and with others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of familial and social interaction
8. Relatedness to other species and to nature	8. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. Humor and play	9. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Separateness	10. Being able to live one's ... life and nobody else's; being able to live one's own life in one's very own surroundings and context.

Fig. 2 – Two levels of Thick Vague Conception

46 Nussbaum, “Human Functioning,” p. 216.

47 Nussbaum employs this “thick theory” in contrast with John Rawls’ “thin theory of the good;” see Nussbaum, “Human Functioning,” pp. 214-215; the list is adopted

In order for a human being to attain her/his end and, therefore, to be recognized as human, some capabilities should be developed. Here, she agrees with Kant's categorical imperative in believing that each person has value in her/his internal life. Kant's "principle of each person as end," thus, is rephrased as a "principle of each person's capability."⁴⁸ In so doing, Nussbaum is interpreting Aristotle in a new and fresh way by emphasizing its objective moral principle. She maintains,

As I interpret Aristotle, he understood the core of his account of human functioning [and capability] to be a free-standing moral conception, not one that is deduced from natural teleology or any non-moral source. Whether or not I am correct about Aristotle, however, my own neo-Aristotelian proposal is intended in that spirit ...⁴⁹

Insofar as these capabilities are fulfilled, a human being can live truly humanly. On the contrary, Nussbaum maintains, "a life that lacks any one of these, no matter what else it has, will be lacking in human-ness."⁵⁰ However, it is important to note that for Nussbaum, there are two capabilities that play special roles and have special importance in making a human being different from an animal: practical reason and affiliation.⁵¹

The essentialist-capability approach has at least two strengths. First, it can be a powerful critique for concrete problems that emerge in social and political realms. For instance, Nussbaum believes that her theory can confront the inequality of women better than any other theory. Since human capabilities are universal, they do not depend on gender difference. She states, "Women, unlike rocks and trees and even horses, have the potential to become capable of these human functions, given

from pp. 216-222; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 348-349.

48 Nussbaum, "Universal Values," p. 37.

49 Nussbaum, "Universal Values," p. 39.

50 Nussbaum, "Human Functioning," p. 222.

51 Nussbaum, "Human Functioning," p. 222; Nussbaum, "Universal Values," p. 43.

sufficient nutrition, education, and other support.”⁵² By saying this, two important ideas come out; first, woman and man are equal in the sense that they share the essential human capabilities; second, these capabilities are possible insofar as certain conditions are fulfilled. The fact that women are often treated unequally —that is, to attain their human capabilities— points out for us the problem of social and political justice, in which the certain conditions above are not available for them. Capability, therefore, is “the appropriate political goal.”⁵³

Secondly, the essentialist believes that once we have the non-relative virtues and the capability as the essence of human beings, the search for universal values is possible. Nussbaum writes that with the account of essentialism we have “the basis for a global ethic and a fully international account of distributive justice.”⁵⁴ However, these universal values, Nussbaum argues, are attained cross-culturally and without neglecting the particularity of each tradition. “Aristotelian particularism,” therefore, “is fully compatible with Aristotelian objectivity.”⁵⁵ In addition, the list of features Nussbaum proposes —the human forms of life and the human functional capabilities— is to be open-ended, in order to allow new traditions to participate in this never-ending cultural conversation.

INCOMMENSURABILITY IN MACINTYRE AND NUSSBAUM

Having described both theories, I will try to put them together and compare some aspects of these two theories. However, despite their disagreement, we have in both thinkers —as well as others such as Charles Taylor, Bernard William, and John Casey— a reemergence of virtue ethics, based on Aristotelianism. It has been commonly accepted that virtue ethics becomes the third major approach in contemporary ethics, along with deontology and consequentialism. It is fascinating for many, because it offers an *internal* basis of human moral engagement,

52 Nussbaum, “Universal Values,” p. 67.

53 Nussbaum, “Universal Values,” p. 48.

54 Nussbaum, “Human Functioning,” p. 205.

55 Nussbaum, “Non-relative Virtues,” p. 45.

while the two others base their justification from either *external* norms or calculus of benefits. We can also put the difference in this way: while the first two models are act-centred, the virtue ethics is agent-centred. The most important question is not “What should I do,” but “What kind of person should I be?”

However, this virtue ethics does not lack of problems, as we have seen in MacIntyre and Nussbaum. At first glance, the central issue between MacIntyre and Nussbaum is classic one of the dialectic between relativism and objectivism. Yet, I have confidence that it is not *fully* the case. For both thinkers realize fully the possibility of their positions to fall into one of the extremes and, therefore, they try hard to avoid the traps. For instance, while MacIntyre attempts to prove his disagreement with relativism, Nussbaum tries to show her sensitivity to particular traditions. Both agree that there are or should be moral commonalities among traditions. What differs between both thinkers is in their “core conceptions.” While MacIntyre puts the triadic practice-narrative-tradition as the core conception among traditions, Nussbaum begins her theory by assuming the existence of certain virtues and capabilities, which are inherent in all traditions. In short, MacIntyre is more interested in the *epistemological* legacy of Aristotelian theory of virtues,⁵⁶ whereas Nussbaum in the *functional* aspect of Aristotelian ethics of virtues.

In this sense, I believe that the burden to criticize the rival is on Nussbaum; and this is why in most of her writings, Nussbaum footnotes or mentions MacIntyre’s theory as her rival, whereas MacIntyre rarely does. The reason is that MacIntyre can easily inscribe Nussbaum’s theory in his traditionalist approach, just as one of many other traditions. He has done the same with liberalism, by viewing it as *one* of many traditions.⁵⁷ Another reason is that Nussbaum’s attempt to universalize Aristotle’s virtues, according to MacIntyre, is similar to the first period of his own career, that is, the period of *A Short History of Ethics*.⁵⁸

56 MacIntyre, *MacIntyre Reader*, p. 265.

57 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, chapter XVII.

58 MacIntyre, “Incommensurability,” p. 104n1.

Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas criticizes Nussbaum as being trapped in what she tries to reject, viz. Kantianism:

The ghost of Kant is hard to shake for any of us—even Nussbaum. Our anti-Kantianism often continues to presuppose the structure of Kant’s position. I suspect this is due to the commitment to underwrite the project of political liberalism based on the Kantian presumption that we share, or we at least have the potential to share, a common humanity.⁵⁹

Is Hauerwas correct when he links Nussbaum’s desire to propose “a common humanity” to Kantian objectivism? It is true that Nussbaum and Kant share an ideal of “commonness” of humanity, but they differ substantially in finding the *source* of such commonness. Kant bases the commonness on *external* values, whereas Nussbaum on *internal* human capabilities.

Now, I would employ the notion of incommensurability to bring MacIntyre and Nussbaum close to one another as well as to show that the real issue between both is not of relativism vs. objectivism. To use Bernstein’s words, “The incommensurability thesis [is] an attack on objectivism (not, however, on objectivity) ... which assumes that there is or must be a common, *neutral* epistemological framework within which we can rationally evaluate competing theories and paradigms ...”⁶⁰

In MacIntyre, we find a clear notion of incommensurability. He strongly rejects the possibility to criticize a tradition based on *external* criteria. In short, one tradition can fail only by its own (internal) standard. He reminds us when he compares the virtues in Aristotelianism and Confucianism, “in comparing two fundamental standpoints at odds with each other ... we have *no* neutral, independent standpoint from which to do so.”⁶¹

59 Stanley Hauerwas, “Can Aristotle be a Liberal? Nussbaum on Luck,” *Soundings* 72, (1989): 680.

60 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 92.

61 MacIntyre, “Incommensurability,” p. 121.

On the contrary, a little confusion appears in Nussbaum's notion of incommensurability. In her *The Fragility of Goodness*, Nussbaum shows that in Aristotle we can find a clear rejection of commensurability between two values or conceptions.⁶² However, confusion may appear as she proposes an essentialist and non-relative approach of virtues, *as if* there are a set of absolute norms that leads to the acceptance of the commensurability of the virtues. But it is not true. First, she distinguishes two kinds of essentialism: metaphysical and non-metaphysical. While the former is based on external values, the later is internal. By accepting the later and denying the former, Nussbaum comes close to MacIntyre's standpoint. Secondly, what is essential in Nussbaum's theory is the human functions or capabilities through vague descriptions of human features. In this context, Roger Crisp is right when he maintains that incommensurability is not in contrast with practical generalizations that are linked with sensitivity and practical wisdom.⁶³ This is exactly what Nussbaum does. Her "human capabilities," in this sense, is similar with MacIntyre's triadic practice-narrative-tradition.

In conclusion, we find both MacIntyre and Nussbaum have successfully rejected objectivism through the incommensurability theory. There are no *external* criteria to evaluate rival traditions. In order to avoid subjectivism, they promote the necessity of encounter among traditions, through which the commonalities can be attained. However, they differ in defining what core conceptions should be employed: the *communal* practice-narrative-tradition or *personal* capabilities?

The distinction between the communal and personal also emerges in the way they propose the conversational process among traditions. MacIntyre would argue that the dialogue between traditions comes after the recognition of the incommensurability among them. The next step is the dialogue itself, which is performed as a communal action. An

62 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, pp. 294-8, 209-10.

63 Roger Crisp, "Particularizing Particularism," in *Moral Particularism*, eds. Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (Oxford: Clarendon Press & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 30-32.

individual participates in a dialogue insofar as she/he is a part of a community or tradition and human virtues are meaningful only in the context of such communal circle. But in Nussbaum, we find a quite different approach. A dialogue presupposes inherent objective commonalities —human virtues and capabilities— that are attained through practical reason *within* individuals who participate in the project. She writes, “The list represents the result of years of cross-cultural discussion, and comparisons between earlier and later versions will show that the input of other voices has shaped its content in many ways. Thus it already represents what it proposes: a type of overlapping consensus ...”⁶⁴ The task remaining is to make a case for social and political reconstruction in Indonesian context, to which I now turn.

CONTEXTUALIZING VIRTUES IN INDONESIA

As Indonesia is now in the post-“New Order” era after the collapse of Soeharto in 1999, we are facing an ambiguous situation in which the channel of freedom has been opened, yet the socio-political anarchy spreads out. The escalating ethno-religious conflicts mark the lack of a “unitive factor” among religious traditions and ethnic groups. In addition, many fundamentalists groups, both in Christian and Islam sides, emerge and threaten the unity. The “majority-minority” language is used widely in everyday conversation as well as in the political competition. The burning of thousands of churches is the clearest sign of what is happening in the country that has the biggest Muslim population in the world.

Simultaneously, multidimensional crises, especially in the economy, have not been solved successfully. Injustice, corruption, ecological problems, abuses of human rights, children trade are enormously ascending. These are only few of many national problems we are facing today. In such a chaotic situation, thus, the importance of the virtues ethics is clear. However, we need to decide which model of virtues is more appropriate to reconstruct a socio-political project. Whose Aristotle should be picked up? This is not an easy task, indeed. For the first step to

64 Nussbaum, “Universal Values,” p. 38.

turn the chaos into the track of political reformation, I think, both theories are not sufficient enough. Nussbaum's essentialism requires a precondition of a fair and equal system in society, wherein the human capabilities can be developed through the guidance of some objective virtues. MacIntyre's proposal seems to be more relevant for Indonesia. Yet, I would argue by borrowing David Herbert's analysis, that his theory is not enough in dealing with such "highly differentiated societies" as Indonesia.⁶⁵ MacIntyre's theory also assumes a "symmetry of power between traditions" which is completely absent in Indonesian context nowadays.⁶⁶ It does not mean, however, MacIntyre's communitarian ethics is irrelevant for Indonesian context; it is just not enough to be the only approach. David Herbert, for instance, proposes the multiculturalist approaches from Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka to fill the gaps left by MacIntyre.⁶⁷

Once the leveling of the playing field is done, Nussbaum might have a prospective role in finding the commonalities that are based on the recognition of human capabilities and virtues. Her theory will be useful—even, necessary—at a similar historical point as 1945, when Indonesian people, with a spirit of self-appreciation, had an opportunity to declare their independence and formulate their own national identity.⁶⁸

Whatever political scenario we may write, all thinkers believe in the importance of dialogue among moral agents and traditions. Dialogue

65 David Herbert, "Virtue Ethics, Justice and Religion in Multicultural Societies," in *Virtue Ethics and Sociology: Issues of Modernity and Religion*, eds. Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 60.

66 Herbert, "Virtue Ethics," pp. 60-61.

67 Herbert, "Virtue Ethics," pp. 61-65; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford Political Theory (Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press & Oxford University Press, 1995); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

68 This national identity has been formulated in the ideology of Pancasila at that time, which is essentially a kind of "natural law" found in religious and cultural traditions in Indonesia. *Pancasila* (five pillars) consists of five principles: 1. The belief in one God Almighty; 2. Just and civilized humanity; 3. The unity of Indonesia; 4. Democracy which is guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberation amongst representatives; 5. Social justice for all Indonesians.

itself, moreover, is a kind of new virtue,⁶⁹ which should be promoted by those who have good will to build a good society. Whatever political scenario we may write, it is essential to inscribe the virtue ethics into wider contexts—political, interreligious, and multicultural—rather than imprisoning it in each religious and cultural “enclave” and treating it merely as a (inter-) personal matter.

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⁶⁹ Compare Hans Küng’s dialogability as a new virtue. See Hans Küng, “Dialogability and Steadfastness: On Two Complementary Virtues,” in *Radical Pluralism and Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*, ed. W. G. Jeanrond & J. L. Rike (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1991).

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