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MacIntyre and the Anatomy of Patriotic Morality*

Abstract

Patriotism has recently become one of the most important concepts of contemporary political philosophy. Its contemporary practical and theoretical poignancy has been vividly presented in Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of patriotic morality. He presents conflicting approaches and views of the patriotic morality as polarized around two moral categories: virtue and vice. The paper is devoted to the discussion of the relation between liberal tradition and a concept of patriotism which would be acceptable within its discourse on the one hand, and, on the other, the contents of patriotism within the communitarian tradition. The aim of the paper is to answer a question whether, from the perspective outlined by MacIntyre, patriotism is compatible with liberal values, and whether the patriotic morality will necessarily generate an internal conflict within that tradition.

Patriotism: a virtue or a vice?

Patriotism as a particular attitude in political practice and as a category of political philosophy is currently having a renaissance that can hardly be ignored. Especially today, this concept has become the subject of intense controversies, political as well as philosophical.¹ In the ongoing debate, some argue that, dangerous as it is, it should be irrevocably relegated to the junk room of history.

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¹ The concept of patriotism has become the subject of particularly heated ideological and political debates in contemporary Poland; see, e.g., A. Wolff-Pawęska, 'Jak dziś być patriotą' ['How to be a patriot today'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 23–24 September 2006, pp. 21–22; A. Hall, 'Jak w IV RP być patriotą' ['How to be a patriot in the Fourth Republic of Poland'], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 May 2007, p. 20; A. Podraza, 'Patriotyzm a historia' ['Patriotism and History'], *Forum Myśli Wolnej*, 32–33 (2007), pp. 5–13. Patriotism as a category that requires a new, deideologized definition, also provides inspiration for many of today's socio-economic initiatives, such as 'Patriotism of Tomorrow', 'Tax Patriotism', etc. This kind of engagement and such debates are not the subject of my interest here. For a more extensive treatment of the philosophical context of the debate on the concept of patriotism, see my article 'Kosmopolityzm i patriotyzm: spory starożytne i współczesne' ['Cosmopolitanism and patriotism: disputes ancient and modern'] (in press).

Others strive to restore its traditional sense, while still others attempt to give it a new sense, more adequate amidst the circumstances of globalization and ever more widespread cosmopolitan attitudes.

Richard Rorty once surprised his liberal readership by publishing a text in which he appreciated the role of patriotism in the contemporary world.² He appealed to the American left not to disdain patriotism as a value and to recognize the significant weight of the emotion of national pride and the sense of a shared national identity. Like John Stuart Mill before him, who believed that “free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities” because “the united political opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist” without patriotic feelings,³ Rorty argued that a sense of communal belonging and patriotic feelings are not at odds with the tenets of liberalism.⁴

Rorty’s opinion provoked a negative reaction from Martha C. Nussbaum, who formulated a contrary argument, demanding that the principles of patriotic education in the United States be abandoned in favour of cosmopolitan education. She stated that the American nation was appallingly ignorant of the rest of the world; the only acceptable remedy to that situation was, in her view, cosmopolitan education, which, by pushing other, especially particularistic, forms of belonging into the background, focuses on “reason and the love of humanity”; in her opinion only this kind of attitude, open to others, can teach people something else about themselves.⁵ A similar sentiment was expressed by Georg Kateb in his recent book, where, in line with the title of the book, which presented patriotism as one of the contemporary world’s mistakes, he attempted to demonstrate in multiple ways that “patriotism is a jealous and exclusive loyalty”⁶ and an expression of a “readiness to die and to kill for what is largely a figment of the imagination”.⁷

The numerous philosophers who have expressed their views on patriotism also include one representing communitarian thought: Alasdair MacIntyre. As a matter of fact, his article on this subject, first published in 1984, a decade before the discussion sparked off by Rorty and Nussbaum, and reprinted many times since,⁸ was the actual starting point of the philosophical debate on patriotism within American philosophy. It is worth pointing out in this connection that it was yet another demonstration of the intellectual power and the position of this philosopher, whose work had several times before constituted such important interven-

² R. Rorty, ‘The Unpatriotic Academy’, *New York Times*, 13 February 1994.

³ A. Mason, ‘Political Community, Liberal-nationalism and the Ethics of Assimilation’, *Ethics*, 109 (1999), p. 264.

⁴ R. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard 1998), pp. 85–86.

⁵ See, e.g., M.C. Nussbaum, ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’, *Boston Review*, 19 [4] (1994). Other participants in this debate, published in the same issue of “Boston Review” included Hilary Putnam, Benjamin Barber, Judith Butler, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., William E. Connolly, Sissel Bok, and others.

⁶ G. Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven–London 2006), p. 10.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁸ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism a virtue?*, [in:] D. Matravers, J. Pike (eds.) *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Anthology* (London–New York 2005), pp. 186–300.

tions in the philosophical matter that they brought about major reorientations of the subject matter of philosophical debates or even the emergence of new strands of intellectual activity.⁹

From the perspective proposed by MacIntyre, patriotism is not merely a possibility of human moral life but a constitutive necessity. Opposing the cosmopolitan orientation, for which patriotism, through association with nationalism, is undoubtedly a vice, he formulated a number of arguments in favour of an anti-cosmopolitan communitarian policy, from the perspective of which patriotism should be regarded as a virtue. MacIntyre frames the area of contradictory attitudes and notions concerning patriotism as polarized by two moral categories: virtue and vice. In an effort to define this ambiguous concept, frequently equated with other attitudes, he proposed that it should be considered a *sui generis* loyalty as an attitude peculiar to the representatives of a particular nation. Loyalty in a general sense is the expected attitude in numerous interpersonal relations; usually, however, when someone is expected to be loyal, an arithmetical exchange of favours is anticipated. This is not a relation that MacIntyre would consider a characteristic of patriotism understood as loyalty. Patriotism is not a course of action that requires the payout of dividends on accumulated capital as a result of the economization of all values, as expected by many in accordance with the well-known cynical principle that only cash is a fact, all else is an opinion. "What patriotism and other such attitudes involve is not just gratitude, but a particular kind of gratitude; and what those who treat patriotism and other such loyalties as virtues are committed to believing is not that what they owe their nation or whomever or whatever it is simply a requital for benefits received, based on some relationship of reciprocity of benefits".¹⁰

It is worth emphasizing at the outset that in liberal societies, for which freedom of association on a voluntary basis is an inalienable value, all forms of relationships that call for a deeper commitment of individuals are, for obvious reasons, approached with reluctance and suspicion. This leads to the conviction that it is safer to replace the notion of communal ties with institutions and technologies. Many thinkers, not necessarily associated with the communitarian movement, point out that "we are witnessing a crisis of behaviours based on the model of service".¹¹ Ever more widespread are attitudes of entitlement patriotism, manifested in demands addressed to the state based solely on the fact that one is a citizen. At the same time there is a growing tendency to "reduce patriotism to such virtues as diligently paying taxes and being law-abiding, decent, honest and punctual".¹²

⁹ His works that have played such a significant intervention role in Anglo-American philosophy include *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to Twentieth Century* (New York 1966), which resulted in the appreciation by Anglo-American moral philosophy of the historical dynamics of the contents of moral concepts, which had previously gone unnoticed and/or been completely ignored there due to a focus on analytical techniques. The work that initiated the rebirth of the communitarian movement in contemporary times was naturally *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame 1981).

¹⁰ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, p. 287–288.

¹¹ Z. Najder, 'Kto potrzebuje patriotyzmu?' ['Who Needs Patriotism?'], *Znak*, 4 (2002), p. 53.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 54. For a more extensive treatment see M. Cichocki, 'Solidarystyczne podstawy patriotyzmu' ['Solidaristic foundations of patriotism'], *Znak*, 4 (2002), pp. 13–30.

Pointing out the minimalism in allegiance to one's nation on the part of the proponents of liberal morality, MacIntyre does not embark on the simple exercise of formulating an opinion contradicting the above. One example of such an opinion is the assertion that patriotism requires unconditional and mindless devotion to one's own nation. This position is not only foreign to MacIntyre, but it also represents a misguided path of unconvincing argumentation where the participants concentrate on schematic oppositions. The debate on patriotism proposed by MacIntyre reveals differences of attitudes originating from two rival approaches to morality. The problem is that it cannot be correctly recognized and defined if we do reduce this to a dispute between different approaches to morality, i.e. if we conclude that there exists in the social space an independent object that needs to be adequately described. To use MacIntyre's words: "[...] if it is understood simply as a disagreement between two rival accounts of morality, as if there were some independently identifiable phenomenon situated somehow or other in the social world waiting to be described more or less accurately by the contending parties. What we have here are two rival and incompatible moralities, each of which is viewed from within by its adherents as morality-as-such, each of which makes its exclusive claim to our allegiance".¹³ If we now return to defining patriotism as a commitment, we begin to comprehend the nature of the broader context and the deeper reflection on the different understandings of morality and the continual process of confronting the results of this reflection: patriotism as a virtue versus patriotism as a vice. MacIntyre associates patriotism as a commitment with specific characteristics of a given nation, its merits and achievements. It is an inextricable association: the special character of merits and achievements is imparted by a particular nation; extracted from this relation, autonomous, they are incapable of being the object of loyalty understood in this way. These characteristics in MacIntyre's opinion "are indeed valued as merits and achievements and their character as merits and achievements provides reasons supportive of the patriot's attitudes. But the patriot does not value in the same way precisely similar merits and achievements when they are the merits and achievements of some nation other than his or hers. For he or she – at least in the role of patriot – values them not just as merits and achievements, but as the merits and achievements of this particular nation".¹⁴

¹³ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, p. 293.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 287. In light of the above deliberations it is worth noting the position of Leo Strauss, who, when pondering the essence of politics, returned to the classical political philosophy's cardinal question about the best political system. The issue of the forms of the state leads him to the question about the good citizen. Aristotle defines the good citizen in two of his works in different ways. In *The Constitution of the Athenians* he favours a "loyalty" definition of the attitude of a good citizen and thus a patriot. A good citizen is the one who invariably, regardless of the political system, serves his country; in other words, a good citizen is a patriot, for whom the country is the object of loyalty. In *Politics*, the good citizen is no longer an absolute attitude, free from assumptions, but rather one radically dependent on the system. Commenting on this Leo Strauss stressed that Aristotle in *Politics* questions the claim that patriotism is a sufficient attitude, for from a point of view of a patriot someone who values a particular regime over and above the country is an opponent, if not a traitor altogether; according Strauss whole humanity is subject to a law demanding to love both what is one's own

Understood in this way, patriotism is a specific, special kind of gratitude. The special character of this kind of gratitude includes the weight of another kind of bond. MacIntyre goes on to introduce an entire network of relationships, arguing that the specific nature of the set of relations emerging as a result of the receipt of benefits concerns not only the benefits themselves, it also being not insignificant from whom the benefits are received and what obligations their receipt entails. Benefits are an integral part of a particular tradition; benefits, as values, are conditioned by the context of their origins and the relationship of the history of “the benefactor and the recipient.” Thus, the attitude of an apologist of the interests of his or her own nation who sees that nation as the sole defender of some inherent moral ideal is not a manifestation of patriotism.¹⁵ An ideal, a model, something to desire and strive for can become a model for any person not associated with a given nation; an “unassociated” ideal can give rise to a number of arguments in favour of supporting a foreign nation. This sort of attitude is, according to MacIntyre, different from patriotism for two reasons: “first it is the ideal and not the nation which is the primary object of their regard; and secondly insofar as their regard for the ideal provides good reasons for allegiance to their country, it provides good reasons for anyone at all to uphold their country’s cause, irrespective of their nationality or citizenship”.¹⁶ At the same time, breaking the causal relationship between the ideal and the nation and making the latter independent of the ideal as the object of allegiance leads to an attitude that is no less distant from patriotism as understood here.

The virtue of patriotism

The definition of patriotism proposed by MacIntyre situates this attitude within the realm of virtues based on loyalty. It is an attitude whose proper significance necessitates the identification of a number of assumptions in the area of recognized morality as a sphere constituted by a network of relationships among categories that impart sense to one another. The author of *After Virtue* advocates a virtue defined in a local or particular manner, the existence of which is guaranteed by a particular community with its own history and tradition. This kind of definition of patriotism does not fit into a moral tradition according to which a moral judgment expressed by any rational individual is objective, impersonal, and independent of individual interests and circumstances. A significant assumption underlying morality understood along these lines, which MacIntyre terms “liberal morality”, is precisely the rejection of its particular character, which in the light of the above-mentioned meanings of patriotism as a virtue is the chief argument allowing us to exclude patriotism understood as a virtue from the realm of liberal morality. “The potential conflict between morality so understood and patriotism is at once clear. For patriotism requires me to exhibit peculiar devotion to my nation and you to yours. It requires me to regard such contingent social facts as

and what is good, and that there is a necessary tension between what is one’s own and what is good; see L. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Chicago–London 1998), pp. 9–55.

¹⁵ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, p. 287.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

where I was born and what government ruled over that place at that time, who my parents were, who my great-great-grandparents were and so on, as deciding for me the question of what virtuous action is – at least insofar as it is the virtue of patriotism which is in question. Hence the moral standpoint and the patriotic standpoint are systematically incompatible”.¹⁷ The incoherence of objective and objectivizing morality and the virtue of patriotism manifests itself with particular clarity where patriotism requires sacrifice to one’s nation. Readiness to sacrifice oneself for one’s nation is a requirement that manifests the incontrovertible need for particularity. In other words, making such an exceptional commitment to one’s nation is motivated by events that are irrelevant from an impersonal moral point of view.

Attempts to remove this discrepancy between liberalism and patriotism were an expression of an interpretation of the nature of the dispute that was negated by MacIntyre; those attempts relied on such subordination of patriotism to a particular conception of morality as to make patriotism a dedication to the cause of the nation but always within limits established by the objective point of view. Such approaches to the removal of the incompatibility did not gain the appreciation of critics on either side, including MacIntyre; in his view, the effectiveness of such efforts did not go beyond empty postulates, which, as such, could not lead to the actual resolution of the conflicts; at most, they could result in their intensification. One of the major and unavoidable reasons for this state of affairs stems from the scarcity of basic natural resources.¹⁸ To illustrate his thesis, MacIntyre outlines a hypothetical situation where a particular type of natural resource is the cause of a conflict, with at least two competing communities striving to secure rights giving them the exclusive use of the resource in order allow them to survive and transform themselves into separate nations. Two attitudes are possible in such conflicts: one stems from the requirements of objective morality; the other is the patriotic attitude. The imperative of objective morality imposes an obligation to divide resources without regard to belonging to a particular community; in this case the division criterion is not membership but humanity. The patriotic attitude, in contrast, requires not only an awareness of shared values but also efforts to make them a reality; therefore, it also requires that in the face of a threat to the existence one’s nation one should put up a fight in its defence. As Henryk Elzenberg put it, “one’s homeland is no longer one’s homeland if one does not fight for it”.¹⁹

Another category of disputes identified by MacIntyre, relating to ineffective efforts intended to unify two separate moral orders, arises from differences in beliefs promoted by communities with regard to the proper, desired way of life. A requirement of objective morality is that one must remain neutral “between rival and competing interests, but also between rival and competing sets of beliefs about the best way for human beings to live. Each individual is to be left free to pursue in his or her own way that way of life which he or she judges to be best; while

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 288.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ H. Elzenberg, ‘Naród i wojna’ [‘Nation and War’], *Etyka*, 25 (1990), p. 77.

morality by contrast consists of rules which, just because they are such that any rational person, independently of his or her interests or point of view on the best way for human beings to live, would assent to them, are equally binding on all persons".²⁰ Objective morality makes it possible to settle this conflict from the position of an independent arbitrator; since it is not entangled in the particularity of the interests and beliefs of either side of the dispute, a judgment expressed on its basis takes on the semblance of an objective opinion. From the point of view of patriotic morality, the essence of the dispute again makes it impossible to consider the dispute "from a bird's eye perspective"; a patriot's judgment must be marked by a lack of objectivity required by liberal morality.

It should be emphasized that MacIntyre uses the phrases "liberal impersonal morality" and "objective liberal morality" in a very generalized sense. In the sense in which he uses them, these descriptions refer to standardized criteria for the perception and evaluation of different traditions of moral doctrines. This generalized interpretation of the moral thought of liberalism can only be accepted as a certain formula that becomes necessary in order to carry out its model critique. It is significant that MacIntyre, who attributes a constitutive role to different contexts, rather easily abandons compelling distinctions where he arbitrarily concludes they contribute no significant substance.

Patriotism as a vice

In line with his intended reduction of the differences between such moral doctrines as the Kantian and the utilitarian ones or projects rooted in the contractarian tradition, MacIntyre identifies five postulates he considers common to each of these conceptions of morality. The first of the postulates, which according to MacIntyre are necessary elements of a rational reconstruction of the foundations of liberal morality, is that morality is a set of rules to which under ideal conditions all rational human beings would assent. The second one states that rules impose certain constraints on human conduct and are neutral with respect to antagonistic interests. The third one says that the neutrality of the rules in question also applies to competing sets of beliefs about the best way to live. The fourth postulate states that every human being should be understood as a "unit" that is both a moral agent and the subject-matter of morality. The fifth postulate expresses the idea that in the area of moral actions every individual is subject to objective, universalized laws, independent rules allowing one to evaluate any social structure. MacIntyre finds each of these postulates incompatible with his understanding of the concept of patriotism, because morality determined by the above assumptions stands in sharp contrast to patriotism as a virtue. For this reason, patriotism in the strong version must be treated as a vice. MacIntyre in fact develops his argument in such a way as to demonstrate that liberal morality, which inevitably leads to the recognition of patriotism as a vice, turns out to be a "morally dangerous phenomenon" itself.²¹

²⁰ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, pp. 289–290.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

Using the language of Kant, it can be said that the process of extricating oneself from moral immaturity, leading to attaining the ability to use one's own reason "set [...] free from foreign direction", is the process of transcending social constraints. It is a path of liberation from dogmas and formulas, "the shackles of a perpetual state of immaturity".²² This liberation path leads to the independence of one's reason, one's self, and thus to the realization of human individual freedom. Perceiving oneself as a genuine agent, an unencumbered being, an independent self makes possible, according to Kant, the further realization of freedom, manifested in the formation of voluntary associations with others, the creation of communities in the cooperativist sense.²³ Liberated in this way, the self-consciousness of the moral agent is capable of attaining a viewpoint transcending any temporary social order, defined by a specific set of rules. In other words, an autonomous moral agent is able to put parentheses around – to challenge – everything that contains only casual social features of his or her existence. An individual becomes an autonomous agent to the extent he or she is able to free himself or herself from existing social and historical roles. Liberal ethics places the moral agent outside his or her personal experience, condemning him, in Sandel's words, "to lurch between detachment on the one hand and entanglement on the other".²⁴

Moral particularism

MacIntyre contrasts liberal, universal, objective morality with an alternative approach, which could be described as particularist. MacIntyre's moral particularism departs from the recognition of the inevitability of locally shaped moral principles. It is based on the recognition that we learn the rules of moral conduct by living in a particular community, with its specific "institutional systems". The specific conditions of a particular community, its history, its collection of canonical texts, and a particular social order generate the specific content of moral rules and terms of respecting them. Arguing in favour of such an understanding of morality, MacIntyre does not allow for the possibility that moral precepts originating as particular could be subjected to a procedure of universalization in an uncontroversial way. This is because he takes the view that we initially learn and acquire moral rules in a particular community, where they adopt a form "infected by particularity and partiality"; we practice them as we observe them in particular social institutions, which makes our conduct acceptable and comprehensible. The conception of the autonomy of the moral agent need not and does not imply creation *ex nihilo*.

A similar argument is advanced by David Gauthier: "It would be absurd to identify an individual with the formal process of reflection and choice in which autonomy is manifest. This process requires material – preferences and capacities

²² I. Kant, *An Answer to the Question "What is Enlightenment"*, [in:] I. Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, transl. D.L. Colclasure (New Haven–London 2006), pp. 17–18.

²³ M.J. Sandel, *The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self*, [in:] M.J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge–London 2006), p. 163.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

– to serve as inputs, and there is no threat to autonomy in the recognition that these inputs are not, at least initially, autonomously determined. What makes a being autonomous is his or her capacity to alter given preferences by a rational, self-critical, reflective procedure, not a capacity to produce preferences with no prior basis”.²⁵ What is crucial is that such preferences and, to some extent, capacities “are not fixed by their socialization, which is not a process by which persons are hard-wired, but rather, at least in part, a process for the development of soft-wired beings, who have the capacity to change the manner in which they are constituted”.²⁶ In extreme liberal circles, it is not uncommon to hold the belief that the past is nothing but an encumbrance. In their view, being an autonomous moral agent does not involve recognizing externally imposed rules and observing them, but freeing oneself from their “yoke”, weakening their constraining force. The attitudes and actions of a self-conscious autonomous being must be created independently and autonomously. Only with time does an autonomous moral agent come to recognize independence, primordiality, and universality in such specific, socially concrete rules. Proper morality consists precisely in identifying and moving from particular applications of moral rules to their framing as universal and general. Thus, impersonal morality provides universal standards, which in turn become the touchstone by which the diversity of social structures and behaviours can be judged from an independent standpoint. “Freed from the dictates of nature and the sanction of social roles, the human subject is installed as sovereign, cast as the author of the only moral meanings there are”.²⁷ Who we learn moral principles from is of no consequence for the content of morality or for the nature of our relationship to it. Under this conception of morality, patriotism again proves impossible to regard as a virtue; it must be considered a vice.

The escape from particularism into the space of objective and universal moral rules that should apply to a person “as such” is according to MacIntyre a manifestation of the hard-to-reject but also illusory belief in one of the greatest achievements of mankind, which is individualism. MacIntyre also believes, however, that the special relationship between individualism and universalism is essentially directed against the human being, that it hurts individuals. He further believes that one cannot just shake off particularism, criticized from the universalistic perspective. MacIntyre believes that any attempt to shed it is an artificial effort, in consequence leading to deformities or even a loss of understanding of one’s own identity and one’s individual relationship with the world.

The narrative constitution of morality

MacIntyre contrasts the liberal, universalist-individualist conception of morality with his alternative approach, based on three claims. The first one is that an individual apprehends the rules of morality only in the form in which they function in the community to which he belongs. According to the second one, the

²⁵ D. Gauthier, *The liberal individual*, [in:] D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (New York 1986), p. 349.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ M.J. Sandel, *The Procedural Republic...*, p. 163.

justification of morality is in the goods that individuals benefit from within their community. The third one is that an individual becomes a moral being within his or her community thanks to the sustenance provided by its members. As MacIntyre wrote in a well-known passage in *After Virtue*: “We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a person is, what the cast of characters may be in drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their action as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources”.²⁸

Thus, what I am, says MacIntyre, requires the recognition of the narrative phenomenon of contextuality, for I am in large measure what I inherit; I am part of the history of my community, in which every deed is always an episode in some possible story. “A central contention of the morality of patriotism is that I will obliterate and lose a central dimension of the moral life if I do not understand the enacted narrative of my own individual life as embedded in the history of my country. For if I do not so understand it I will not understand what I owe to others or what others owe to me, for what crimes of my nation I am bound to make reparation, for what benefits to my nation I am bound to feel gratitude”.²⁹ A similar argument against the liberal understanding of man, morality, and society is advanced, under the influence of MacIntyre, by Michael Sandel: “Having character means ... [being] aware of the fact that moving within the story, which I neither chose, nor subject to my will, but that still affects my choices and behavior”.³⁰ Thus, an essential condition for understanding oneself is to master the language and the characteristic narratives, which include stories about the past of the community, its heroes and its established norms of behaviour. Upon entering a community, we become part of the accepted narrative, which we did not invent, and at the same time we start a new thread, a story in which everyone is a protagonist whose actions are episodes in some story. This nonnegotiable entanglement of the moral agent in a live narrative network is not a threat to the autonomy of his or her identity; it does not make him or her a slave.

Countering possible objections, MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, states as follows: “It is important to notice that I am not arguing that the concept of narrative or of intelligibility or of accountability are *more* fundamental than that of personal identity. The concepts of narrative, intelligibility and accountability presuppose

²⁸ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216.

²⁹ A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, pp. 297–298.

³⁰ M.J. Sandel, *The Procedural Republic...*, p. 168.

the applicability of the concept of personal identity, just as it presupposes their applicability and just as indeed each of these three presupposes the applicability of the two others. The relationship is one of mutual presupposition. It does follow that all attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity independently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative, intelligibility and accountability are bound to fail. As all such attempts have”.³¹ MacIntyre considers the moral agent, the “I”, to be the bearer and co-creator of the living tradition, i.e. the historically ongoing and socially embodied dispute over the goods of the tradition. The moral agent, as part of the tradition, in a manner typical for himself or herself searches for his or her good in the context delimited by the framework of tradition, and it is only in this context that it is possible. Goods internal to practices are a compass providing orientation within the space of a specific tradition for any agent seeking the goods of an individual life, for knowledge of who I am, is also orientation in the moral space, in which questions about what is good and important and what is trivial and wrong have a permanent place.

It is worth noting in this context that a closely analogous understanding of the importance of language in shaping individual human identity has been formulated by Charles Taylor. The language faculty is what, in his opinion, makes us persons, because we become persons by being introduced through language into an incessantly ongoing conversation. Reflection on the human being entails “[studying] beings who only exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language”.³² Language exists and is maintained only within a particular community, which leads to the conclusion that a self can only exist amongst other selves. “A self can never be described without references to those who surround it”.³³ The dialogically acquired ability to judge what is good leads to the understanding of the background of the forms of social interaction in a given society and its conception of the good. In his *Sources of the Self*, Taylor expresses the conviction that every person’s self is formed within the space of questions within which orientation towards the good is sought and found. He adds that concepts such as good and fair are not features of the objective world but, on the contrary, are properties imbued with sense by reference to people and their lives.³⁴ The history, activities, and evaluation of a moral agent become meaningful in terms of broader and longer-lasting histories of a certain number of traditions. A person’s self-definition should be understood as an answer to the question “Who am I?” This question, in turn, derives its original meaning from a dialogue between people. “I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out”.³⁵ A call for dialogue is a necessary precondition

³¹ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 218.

³² Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge 1992), pp. 34–35.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

for the development of the self, i.e. the process in which we learn the language of moral and spiritual orientation. A key feature of a dialogue about a particular object is that we make it our common object. "I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are through my and others" experience of these being objects for *us*, in some common space. [...] Later, I may innovate. I may develop an original way of understanding myself and human life..."³⁶

Taylor's statement that "[a] self can never be described without references to those who surround it", can be paraphrased to accurately capture MacIntyre's idea: a patriot's attitude can never be described without reference to other patriots who surround him or her, and that is impossible to accurately describe from an objective viewpoint.

The axiological conceptual framework

Only from this perspective does patriotism take on a fully intelligible form of a virtue. It is a moral perspective in which moral agents have convictions according to which there are desirable goods or goals whose value is impossible to measure with the same yardstick that we use for ordinary goals, goods, and objects of desire. It is a situation where some goals and goods are independent of particular desires, inclinations, and choices; moreover, they also constitute criteria for the evaluation of those choices. Within this moral perspective, agents realize specific standards of conduct, which consists in acting with a sense of qualitative distinctions. Recalling Taylor's position, it should be noted that he introduced the pertinent category, helpful in these deliberations, of a conceptual framework that provides a background for respected moral evaluations, intuitions, and reactions; its articulation is also an explication of what gives meaning to our moral reactions. The way to understand this notion of conceptual framework is that when we try to articulate the premises decisive for our evaluation of a given way of life or when we define our moral obligations, we situate ourselves within a moral space understood and explicable thanks to the accepted conceptual framework. Discarding it, shedding it as unnecessary, constraining baggage is as impossible as it is impossible to discard such particularities. Moreover, the horizons within which we conduct our lives and which make it meaningful must also include strong qualitative distinctions.³⁷ Each person's identity is defined by the conceptual framework within which every agent is involved in the process of dialogically determining what is good, valuable, what to do, how to proceed. Therefore, one's stance can only be defined within a community-constituted horizon, within which goods are situated providing a conceptual framework that allows orientation.³⁸ It is precisely the overriding goods that are the source of numerous conflicts; the most important ones, those that have the most followers, emerge by displacing prior, less adequate ones. For example, the modern principle of equal respect has developed through the negation of earlier, hierarchical conceptions of society. The conflict between the defenders of differently motivated patriotic attitudes, which are examples of

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

different and disparate understandings of the intrinsic value of patriotism, arises in a similar manner.

In terms of the conceptual framework for patriotism as a virtue adopted here, the absence of disputes is the result of rejecting the importance of all particularities and accepting that all goods – thus including those relied on by the followers of the different patriotisms – are theoretically of equal value, and therefore it is not impossible to point to one overarching cause of all of them.³⁹ This is a picture of a world in which individuals come across a mosaic of equivalent, arbitrary attitudes and goods. However, the perspective from which it could be concluded that all orders are equally arbitrary and, moreover, that all moral perspectives are also equal is, in the opinion of the defenders of patriotic morality, not available to people. In other words, we succumb to “self-deception” when we replace the obliterated “disputes” with “permanent coexistence of views”; such opinions can only be formulated from outside the moral order, from outside the moral orientation. The language we speak is a language of evaluation, a language of declaring what is good and right, and as such it presupposes an understanding of the background of social interaction forms in a given community and its conception of the good.

The language of moral deliberation smoothly changes into a language of evaluation, which in turn becomes a language of explication of what people do and feel.⁴⁰ “When we stand within the moral outlook of universal and equal respect, we don’t consider its condemnation of slavery, widow-burning, human sacrifice, or female circumcision only as expressions of our way of being, inviting a reciprocal and equally valid condemnation of our free labour, widow-remarriage, bloodless sacrifice, and sex equality from the societies where these strange practices flourish. We do find ourselves sometimes thinking in these terms, in our reflective moments, under the impress not only of naturalist epistemology but also of our anti-colonialist sympathies”.⁴¹

The conclusion that individuals become capable of morality by functioning within a particular community is thus but a not very original point of departure for solidifying the relationships among an individual originating from a particular community, its structure, internal relationships, history, and, finally, the morality shaped within its confines. Learning behaviours and moral rules within a community, individuals acquire knowledge of goods that are the reference points for the set of rules that has evolved and which justify this set. They are also “socially specific and particular” since it is the essence of goods that they persist in a particular society, and thus the goods of every individual are always the particular

³⁹ A somewhat similar, pluralist perspective on patriotism is adopted by Marcin Król, an advocate of liberalism, who states that it is not true that “in modern liberal societies, patriotism has vanished”. He justifies this statement with the argument that in societies of this kind one should not seek a single model of patriotism, because the essence of modernity in this area rests on pluralization. See M. Król, *Patriotyzm przyszłości [Patriotism of the future]* (Warszawa 2004), p. 112. In Król’s opinion, this is due to the central assumption of liberal patriotism, according to which “there are no permanent disputes, only a permanent coexistence of views [...], beliefs [...] that differ in essential ways” (*ibidem*, p. 128).

⁴⁰ Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 57.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

goods of a particular place, recognized by specific people in specific structures. The goods of a given community are embodied in specific practices specific for that community and the rules of morality functioning within it. In other words, the goods of a given individual are the goods of a place and time, and they provide a justification for the moral rules practiced. Hence, concludes MacIntyre, "I find my justification for allegiance to these rules of morality in my particular community; deprived of the life of that community, I would have no reason to be moral".⁴²

Triple interdependence

Taking the paradigm of every individual's moral life to be determined by the above-mentioned network of relationships, MacIntyre proclaims that only within the community will the individual find a justification for allegiance to the rules of morality; only in the community will the individual find understanding and support at moments critical for the individual in terms of obedience to the moral rules. Only within the community does the individual become a moral agent, because only in the community can this kind of capacity emerge.⁴³ In moments of moral weakness as a result of being blinded by temptations or desires, the individual needs and receives support from others around him. Being a moral agent involves interacting with other members of the community based on the principle of reciprocity. Moreover, "typically moral agency and continuing moral capacity are engendered and sustained in essential ways by particular institutionalised social ties in particular social groups".⁴⁴ The expectation of appropriate behaviour and moral attitudes from the members of a particular community defines its unique character for the constitution of morality. Moral demands directed at an individual are an expression of respect, not of a benefit. The absence of moral expectations of an individual is tantamount to a lack of respect for him or her, and eventually limits his or her moral capacity; hence the conclusion that the rejection of the community leads to the loss of correct standards. Thus, patriotism turns out to be a central virtue.

The paradigm of the moral life of any individual is constituted by a three-membered structure of interdependences. Recall: the individual only acquires moral rules in the form in which they function in his or her community; morality is justified by the goods the individual uses within the community; and the individual becomes a moral agent in the community thanks to the support of its members. Moral rules are legitimate in so far as their effectiveness takes concrete form in the life of the community and, at the same time, of its members. The members of the community may, in turn, assess the legitimacy of moral requirements through the prism of social roles fulfilled. Once again, the obvious conclusion is that the individual deprived of the community will not have a chance to develop as a moral agent.

⁴² A. MacIntyre, *Is patriotism is a virtue?*, p. 292.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

From the standpoint of contemporary individualism, an individual may, in the name of an overriding good, “a certain emancipating freedom”, question what he or she finds to be fortuitous features of his or her social existence and become who he or she wants to be.⁴⁵ Moreover, the author of *After Virtue* emphasizes the feature of liberal morality whereby “no limitations are or can be set upon the criticism of the social status quo. No institution, no practice, no loyalty can be immune from being put in question and perhaps rejected”.⁴⁶ The situation is different in the case of patriotic morality originating from a particular social group: precisely because it belongs to such a structured group, its source cannot become the object of unrestrained criticism. As a loyalty-based attitude, “patriotism has to be ... in some respects unconditional, so in just those respects rational criticism is ruled out”,⁴⁷ and thus it does not admit of examining certain fundamental beliefs and attitudes, which are maintained regardless of whether or not they can be justified rationally. From an objective point of view, patriotism, by condemning itself to irrationality, condemns itself to rejection, just like any other irrational attitude. In the further part of his argument, MacIntyre states that, from a historical perspective, what can be exempted from criticism is the nation conceived as a project, “a project somehow or other brought to birth in the past and carried on so that a morally distinctive community was brought into being which embodied a claim to political autonomy in its various organised and institutionalized expressions”.⁴⁸

The value of patriotism is expressed in an attitude of understanding, accepting, and readiness to implement some kind of historical continuity of the nation project, which consists in the ability to link the past to the moral and political identity of the patriot and to the future. A patriot’s indisputable and unquestionable duty is to sustain the continuity of the project of his or her nation. This is the only duty that is not open to criticism and cannot be challenged or rejected by the patriot, for the denial of loyalty would be tantamount to the loss of the values that constitute the patriot. Any form of government that frustrates the project deserves to be rejected, and the strength of patriotism in those who make the effort to overthrow governments should not be questioned. It may happen, however, that from an impartial point of view the interests of the nation will require the patriot to carry out a task that cannot be reconciled with the interests of humanity, and such a situation makes it impossible to dismiss the concern that under certain conditions patriotism as a virtue can become a source of genuine moral danger.⁴⁹

Similarly, objective liberal morality is not free of features that make it a dangerous attitude. The danger manifests itself in a situation where threats upsetting the stability of the expected interests emerge in a liberal community dominated by

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 294.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 295.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*. MacIntyre defends patriotism and only mentions in passing a real possibility of reconciling traditional patriotism with “some other morality of universal moral law, which sets limits to and provides both sanction for and correction of the particularist morality of the patriot” (p. 299). This does not preclude, in his opinion, the conciliatory coexistence of patriotism with Christianity, Thomistic natural law, or the Rights of Man.

membership based on reciprocal self-interest. Will referring to the neutral standards of liberal morality be able to counteract the destructive conflicts of interest? "The problem is," argues MacIntyre, "that some motivation has to be provided for allegiance to the standards of impartiality and impersonality which both has rational justification and can outweigh the considerations provided by interest. Since any large need for such allegiance arises precisely and only when and insofar as the possibility of appeals to reciprocity in interests has broken down, such reciprocity can no longer provide the relevant kind of motivation. The appeal to moral agents qua rational beings to place their allegiance to impersonal rationality above that to their interests has, just because it is an appeal to rationality, to furnish an adequate reason for so doing".⁵⁰

The clash between the danger inherent in the irrational attitude of a patriot and the danger to which the attitude of a protagonist of the morality of patriotism is exposed does not lead any further than to the possibility of concluding that the mutual objections are valid. Neither side's argument refutes that of the other, nor is either argument stronger than that advanced by the opposite side. These positions cannot be reconciled because they represent two different traditions speaking untranslatable languages, referring to irreconcilable values.⁵¹ Any attempt to link particularist ties with impersonal universal causes must give rise to a number of conflicts that an appeal to rationality will not be able to prevent.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 298.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 299, 303. MacIntyre believes that in North America the Hegelian categories of *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität* have been equated with, respectively, the morality of a particular society and the impersonal liberal morality. This must result in the above-mentioned inconsistency. At the same time, however, MacIntyre's statement places him among thinkers mentioned at the outset, especially Rorty and Taylor, who discern the necessity and the possibility of the constructive co-existence of liberal requirements with regard to institutional rules and patriotic requirements when it comes to the effective functioning of institutions.