



## Ethical consumption of food

*What virtues are needed for the individual consumer that seeks for ethical consumption?*



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### **Abstract**

This thesis aims to identify the virtues necessary for ethical behavior-seeking consumers to develop in order to create an attitude that enables ethical decision-making. In order to do this, firstly the main aspects of the virtue ethical theory of Aristotle were discussed to create and enhance a basic understanding of virtue ethics. Following this, a contemporary virtue ethical approach of Alasdair MacIntyre was explored through the explication of his view of society and discussion of his theoretical approach of the practice, moral tradition and the narrative. Subsequently, ethical consumption was analyzed using MacIntyre's practice by focusing on aspects of the practice in today's society, produced goods and related institutions. The following virtues were identified to be necessary for ethical consumption: *knowledge-seeking*, *empathy*, *reflection*, *responsibility*, *truthfulness*, *consistency*, and *courage*. Finally, it was concluded that MacIntyre's theory is not suitable to meet the specific characteristics of today's society.

**Keywords:** Virtue ethics, Aristotle, applied ethics, consumption, ethical consumption, MacIntyre, globalization, and community.

## Prologue

On YouTube there is a short video about two basketball teams. One team is wearing black shirts and the other is dressed in white. All team members run around throwing balls. You are asked to count: how many times does the white team pass around the ball? As the players move quickly, strong focus is needed. After thirty seconds the video stops and the following question is displayed: “*Did you see the moonwalking bear?*” Then the movie is repeated and indeed, a huge black bear crosses the playfield from side to side. Conclusion: “*Easy to miss something you’re not looking for.*”

Exactly one year ago, I completed my bachelor degree in *International Business and Management* at the University of Groningen. Instead of counting balls I learned to look for market opportunities, for effectiveness and efficiency, for growth and for profit. Developing those skills was what counted. Over the years however I slowly started feeling less comfortable with developing these skills. I ended up looking at the playfield but not counting balls. What else I wondered, could I look for? What would make sense to look for?

This was the start of an interesting search: a search for learning what is important to me in life, for responsibility; awareness; meaning. Happily I was accepted for the Applied Ethics program at the Utrecht University where I found support in continuing this process.

With this thesis, I aim to contribute to finding a balance between my developed skills to count the balls, and my awareness of and ability to see any moonwalking bears crossing the field. I would like to thank my teachers and specifically Prof. dr. Frans Brom; dr. Franck Meijboom; dr. Marriëtte van den Hoven and dr. Ineke Bolt for making this possible to me.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumers who seek to do good face a lot of challenges today. Globalization brings along the urge to re-embed the conditions of production and trade to contribute to an ethically just economy and social relationships.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the behavior of consumers is necessarily related to both what is being produced as well as the conditions under which this production occurs. What behavior then is desirable or expected, and by whom, from whom?

Questions such as these will not cross the mind of every buyer when facing consumer choices in the super market. But a certain group of consumers who seek to choose in an ethical manner face the difficulty of determining how to make the most ethically desirable decision. Should they buy only local products, fair trade products, or perhaps low-cost products and give the euro saved to the homeless guy begging outside the shop? What choice would contribute most to society, and to their individual good lives? What impact does access to information such as ethical traceability of the production make, and how does it relate to this?<sup>2</sup> What difficulties do ethical behavior-seeking consumers face, and what skills are needed for them to overcome the obstacles faced in the field of ethical consumption?

Answering the above questions is relevant and valuable for many stakeholders in the field: consider the rights of farmers; marketing effective ethical consumption campaigns; government regulation; think of your own inner morality. In September 2013, I joined the Master's program in Applied Ethics at the Humanities Department of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. During the program I became increasingly aware of the many choices I had to make in my daily life. The more I became aware of this, the more I started to reflect on the choices I made and the more I began to feel 'lost' in how to make ethical consumer choices. How can moral theory help?

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman, M. K. (2004). Reading fair trade: Political ecological imaginary and the moral economy of fair

<sup>2</sup> Beekman, V. (2008). Consumer rights to informed choice on the food market. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 11 (1), 61-72; Coff, C. (2004). *Fair trade and ethical traceability*. European Parliament.

The challenges that relate to ethical consumption are of such an extent that I will be unable to cover all issues in this thesis.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I will single out one aspect and analyze this hoping to then be able to contribute to the larger problem. My focus will be the question: *What virtues should the consumer, who seeks to consume in an ethical way, develop in order to be able to make ethical choices?* To answer this question, it is necessary to clarify what ethical consumption entails. Virtue ethics is a suitable approach for this, as the act of consumption does not consist of acts that are constantly and consciously morally reflected upon. Rather, consumption consists of certain behavioral components that one engages in over and over again. As virtues are learned by practice and repetition, virtue ethics is likely to offer a better solution to this issue than reflecting on every single consumer decision individuals make every day, which would be a demanding and nearly impossible task. Additionally, referring to virtue ethics allows to focus on the impact *individual* consumers have regarding ethical consumption.

In essence, I want to learn what *individuals* can do to make the world a better place, instead of blaming institutions and governments without taking into account individual behavior. Therefore the research question is: ***‘What virtues must the individual consumer develop to engage in ethical consumer behavior?’***

While many approaches towards defining ethical consumption are possible, for the scope of this thesis I will interpret ethical consumption as Alasdair MacIntyre’s *practice* in order to determine whether this supports the problem consumers face. To answer the main question above, this thesis is structured as follows: First, I will answer the sub-question regarding why virtue ethics is an appropriate approach to ethical consumption by referring to the roles of norms and values, pluralism and relativism and moral motivation in our society specifically. Following this, counter-arguments will be provided discussing why, as often argued, virtue ethics is not an egoist approach. Subsequently, Aristotle’s virtue ethical approach will be discussed, contributing to a basic understanding of virtue ethical theory. Here attention will be

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading about ethical challenges faced by international food industry-related consumption see for instance Silk, J. (2004). Caring at a distance: gift theory, aid chains and social movements. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5 (2), 229-251; Patai, D. a. (1991). *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. Routledge; Corbridge, S. (1993). Marxisms, modernities, and moralities: development praxis and the claims of distant strangers. *Environment and Planning*, 11, 449.

paid to the concept and role of the praxis, attitude and the golden mean specifically. Having created a basic understanding of virtue ethical theory, virtue ethics in today's society will then be discussed by referring to the ethical theory of Alasdair MacIntyre. Here I focus on three elements specifically: the practice, the internal and external goods produced by the practice and the role of institutions. Additionally several main differences between the approaches of Aristotle and MacIntyre will be analyzed to contribute to the readers' understanding of virtue ethics in the contemporary society. Knowledge of the virtue ethical approach of MacIntyre is necessary to move on to discussing ethical consumption as a practice, in efforts to finally arrive at identifying the virtues needed for ethical consumption. Based on this, I then discuss ethical consumption as a practice, first by further exploring the field of ethical consumption, and then discussing consumption as a practice. Following this, I discuss internal and external goods produced by this practice, as well as the role of institutions focusing on consumers' decision-making. The final sub-chapter on ethical consumption is based on the above, identifying the virtues necessary for development in consumers seeking to behave ethically, followed by a discussion of final conclusions. Finally several critical notes regarding MacIntyre's theory are provided followed by suggestions for further research on this inspiring topic.

## 2. Why virtue ethics?

In this chapter I provide arguments in support of virtue ethics as an appropriate approach to ethical consumption. The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, I explain the suitability of virtue ethics for the purpose of this study, focusing on norms and values, pluralism and relativism, and moral motivation. Then I argue that virtue ethics is not an egoist approach, in contrast to claims made by a number of people. The reason I pay attention to this aspect is because consumption is embedded within a social context, and thus an egoist approach could be argued as unsuitable for this matter. Finally I discuss what an Aristotelian virtue looks like, paying attention to the praxis, attitude and the golden mean. A basic understanding of this is necessary for the understanding of the contemporary virtue ethical approach by Alasdair MacIntyre, which I later refer to in order to analyze consumption with the aim to identify the virtues that will contribute to ethical consumer behavior.

### 2.1 Why virtue ethics?

Why would it make sense to refer to a virtue ethical approach in order to look at ethical consumption? What makes virtue ethical theory an attractive and useful theory for today's postmodern society? Postmodernism developed after WWII, as a reaction towards modernism, which dates back from 1890's-1945. Many differences can be distinguished regarding art, literature, architecture and science for instance, but for now it is most important to address my interpretations of fundamental differences between modernism and postmodernism: where modernism searches for a universal truth, postmodernism denies the existence of it. Morality according to postmodern thinkers is relative and, because knowledge is constructed in one's mind, universal truth, postmodernists believe, does not exist. In the postmodern world, general agreement on norms does not exist, causing both the absence of universal goals and pluralism and relativism related to values.

I discuss three societal characteristics in the following paragraphs that make virtue ethics a useful approach in the context of this problem: 1) the previous decade's societal attention towards norms and values<sup>4</sup>; 2) pluralism and relativism: the awareness

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<sup>4</sup> The former Dutch prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende (2002-2010) pled for increased societal attention towards norms and values; this was one of his focus points specifically. Norms and values are not high on



of existence and acceptance of different morals and values and 3) moral motivation: the need for ethical theory that contributes to increased awareness of these and that motivates to be focused on.

### 2.1.1 Norms and values

While the word ‘virtue’ is not often heard in today’s society, ‘norms’ and ‘values’ are words often used in present societal and political context. Norms and values are often used together, which is interesting as their meaning is rather different. This may be problematic and as Paul Van Tongeren suggests in his book ‘Deugdelijk Leven’, virtues provide the missing link between these two concepts.<sup>5</sup> To further illustrate that, I briefly discuss the individual meaning of ‘norms’ and ‘values’. *Norms* are *objective* in that they do not relate to one’s inner motivations: whether one likes it or not, behavior according to a certain norm is desired, and when legally-binding it is even obliged that you act in line with the norms. This relates to a specific shortcoming of norms. Most of the time, norms *forbid* you to perform certain actions. Secondly, they most often articulate a certain threshold, sketching a box within which you are allowed to behave freely. But the question remains: what behavior within this box is most desirable? Furthermore, we all remember from when we were young that the forbidding of a certain action heightens the urge to “cross the line”.

*Values* on the other hand, seem to be mostly positively formulated, articulating a *maximum* or an optimal situation as opposed to a negative threshold. Due to this, Van Tongeren suggests that values seem to motivate certain behavior but only for the ones that feel connected to the specific value. This demonstrates the subjective nature of values, which only exist for people that are aware of them and that ‘value’ a certain value.

In society there seems to be a need to articulate values. This need is illustrated by for instance the existence of ethical codes. In most practices nowadays, ethical codes exist. Examples of this in practice includes professional groups require you to act upon their ethical code for membership, or research institutes that require permission from an ethical committee to perform their animal experiments. More and more businesses have ethical behavior codes and all these ethical codes make normative certain desirable

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the agenda in politics however I still consider these aspects to be characteristics of how we organize our society these days.

<sup>5</sup> Van Tongeren, P. (2003). *Deugdelijk leven: Een inleiding in de deugdethiek*. SUN. p17.

behavior. However, values, as previously touched upon, relate to what you feel *inside* of you and will not accomplish much if you do not sympathize with them. Norms, on the other hand, are drawn from outside of you (for example, from your surroundings) and tell you what behavior is desired, regardless of whether you like it or not.

The articulation of certain values in ethical codes in attempts to make them normative does not fully get us where I would like us to be. Consider what you think would make a good physician. Would that be a physician that acts upon the code? Or would you prefer to be treated by a doctor that is passionate and, because of what he has practiced and what he inwardly feels to be right, behaves like what we would call an exemplary doctor—caring about his patients, being honest and involved, and trustworthy for instance. Is an ethical code likely to create such an exemplary person? An ethical code is normative and does not tell you how to *practice* to behave desirable. To be such an exemplary doctor, a certain inner attitude is needed to lead to moral behavior (that is, values) instead of imposed codes of conduct (or norms). This demonstrates the substantial difference between the concepts of norms and values.

However, despite this difference, virtue may serve as a means between the two concepts. Where norms are related to authority and can incite infringement, and where values tend to be too idealistic and lacking of sufficient guidance on how to act upon them, virtues may actually offer what is needed to fill the gap between these two, paying attention to inner morality and desirable behavior. A virtue can be interpreted as an attitude that articulates specific inner values, respecting and acting upon internalized norms that are related to how to live the good life.<sup>6</sup> Thus, where norms are sanctioned and values are desired but often remain written down in mission statements, virtues are learned by doing, by practice and repetition. Indeed, the above shows that the current role of values and especially norms in society is slightly problematic and virtue ethics might be an interesting approach to meet the need for awareness, reflection and moral motivation in the field of ethical consumption. I will further elaborate on the concept of virtue during the next chapter.

### 2.1.2 Pluralism and Relativism

Another distinct aspect of the society we live in is its pluralistic character. Nowadays, the ideas that different morals exist and that moral attitude is based on

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<sup>6</sup> Van Tongeren (2003): 23.

individual choice seem more and more accepted in society. Uniformity in individual values seems unthinkable in present-day society. Due to this, focus on a theory takes into account this characteristic is a necessary requirement. What do virtue ethics offer to a pluralistic society that is accepting of different morals? We can choose our own morals, but the downside to this freedom, that you *have* to make choices in life and, when looking at societal difficulties, we at least need to achieve certain agreements or rules to reach decisions from individual moral ideas.

Virtue ethics allows one to look at his inner values and needs. Virtue ethics asks the question '*How should I live?*' instead of '*What should I or society do?*' This allows one to look at life as a whole instead of looking solely at specific actions. In essence, focus is on ideals rather than on rules, and one looks at what *attitude* is desirable rather than what *behavior*. This attitude incorporates character traits, moods, emotions, and habits for instance. Virtue ethics allows you to stay close to your inner values, which is relevant to today's society. In our pluralist society, chances are that when rules do not reflect one's inner values, it will be hard for one to feel a connection and find the motivation to act upon them. By looking at exemplary people and at qualities that are needed to become such an exemplary person, virtue ethics enables and inspires one to learn how to become a more virtuous person. Virtue ethics shows awareness for the fact that we have a history and a personality that shape us. It does not ignore these elements but instead allows one to take personal circumstances into account. These aspects are important in a society made up of people from many different backgrounds.

In our contemporary society individuals are free to choose what they want. Choices seem to reflect individual preferences rather than moral ideas. Moral judgments reflect in fact subjective preferences and moral utterances actually reflect utterances of emotions. When discussing Alisdair MacIntyre's approach to virtue ethics, I will come back to this latter tendency of emotivism. Virtue ethics is aware of the fact that moral judgment is related to the specific context you find yourself in, and is therefore a particularistic rather than a universalist approach. The theory does not, however, argue that it does not matter what we choose. Taking into account time and place, virtue ethics gives practical guidance on how to live, which makes this approach more suitable to the needs of our pluralist society.

### 2.1.3 Moral motivation

When in our pluralist society we wonder how we should make decisions, then providing rules or criteria when answering this question leads to certain difficulties. As previously mentioned, when you do not agree with a certain rule, you are not likely to feel motivated to act upon the rule. You will also not be very likely to analyze the whole situation in a way that will make clear to you why a certain action would be best according to the specific rule. Virtue ethics, however, does leave room for your desire. This approach seeks to develop your attitude in such a way that you will automatically *want* the right action. To make clear that moral motivation for behavior is important, consider the following example. Imagine you are in a relationship and your partner is not cheating on you because he has learned that being honest works best for most people, or because he discovered that lying would be contradictive to how he desires the world to be. Would that be sufficient grounds for his non-cheating behavior? Not breaking moral rules and doing what you have to do, would that be a complete foundation for an ideal relationship? Indeed, this does not demonstrate the kind of personal relationship I desire to have in my life.

With the above I have shown how the approach of virtue ethics answers the needs of specific contemporary characteristics of society. As it is sometimes argued that virtue ethics is an egoist approach, I will in the following paragraph briefly show how virtue ethics can be argued to do the opposite. That is, how does virtue ethics take into account the broader aspect of consumption?

### 2.2 Is virtue ethics an egoist approach?

What distinguishes virtue ethics here from other ethical theories is that the approach is, in a way, more inward-looking than other ethical approaches. For instance, where other theories may define 'morally relevant' by the impact certain actions have on others as opposed to the acting person himself, virtue ethics allows labeling actions that do not impact others as morally relevant. According to virtue ethics, what is morally relevant is not directly related to social aspects per se, and therefore this approach is sometimes argued to be egoist. This is however not the case, virtue ethics simply examines it in a different way, as I will demonstrate in the upcoming paragraphs through two arguments.

First of all, it is impossible to see the lives of most of us in a way that is totally unrelated to other people. Due to the way we live, the products we use and technological developments, we are constantly related and interconnected. How then can one say they are happy and succeed in living the good life when the people they are related to are unhappy or are not succeeding in their lives? How can one say they are well when they are not paying attention to the unhappiness among those they are related to? Secondly, virtue is, as I discuss in the next paragraph, the excellent performance necessary for acceleration in certain practices. If you want to be a famous football player, you need to take part in the practice of football to be able to develop the virtues related to playing football. However, in order to do this you need other people to train with. Also, being a good team member is part of the overall practice of being a good football player, showing again the importance of the social aspects of developing virtues.

Previously, the concepts of practice and virtue were noted without any further explanation defining how these concepts should be interpreted. In virtue ethics, the concept of the practice is really important, as taking part in *practices* is a necessity for developing virtue. Therefore, in the next paragraph I will further discuss virtue ethics, in particular its definition and the role of the practice.

### 2.3 What does a virtue look like?

As previously argued, virtues may fill the gap between norms and values, and virtue is the human quality necessary for the excellent performance of practices. But this knowledge is, of course, insufficient foundation to be able to identify the virtues that are necessary for ethical consumption. To contribute to the essential basic understanding of virtue ethical theory as well as clarify the meaning of practice and virtue, I will discuss Aristotle's virtue ethical theory as reviewed by Van Tongeren, focusing on the role of the praxis, attitude and the golden mean.<sup>7</sup> I choose to discuss Aristotle's approach as he is often referred to as the founding father of virtue ethical theory.

#### 2.3.1 Praxis

In order to understand the concept of virtue, it is first necessary to understand Aristotle's praxis. This is necessary as in the praxis virtues can be developed. Praxis refers to those activities of which the goal is to be found within the act itself. For example, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Van Tongeren (2003): 46.

act of listening to your favorite song, the final goal of this action is found within the act itself. Or consider the example used by Van Tongeren: playing football. Those who enjoy football are most likely to reach their goal, which is presumably the joy of playing football, through actually playing football. This shows that for attaining the joy of playing football, football itself is not only the means to get to this, but also the final goal in and of itself. Winning is part of the game, but also taking into account the rules of the game, and other quality criteria such as feeling joy, being able to deal with losses, having a balance between technical skills, condition and pace, and having good relationships with your fellow team players is what defines one's excellence as a player. The praxis of playing football does not solely incorporate the acts related to the game; it also incorporates *how* you perform certain acts, how you *experience* certain performance, what kind of *feeling* that gives you, as well as how you respond on other actions. All these elements are certain qualities of the praxis of playing football.

When the goal of playing football would not be within the act itself (for instance when a famous football player plays for the goal of earning wages) then the play would become the *means* to the end of earning money. In that case, football would be *poiesis*, referring to an activity of which the final goal is not to be found within the activity itself. Another example is as follows: a carpenter makes a table and his goal is to sell the table to someone that will use the table to work on. Again, the goal of the activity is not the joy of making the table (praxis), but the goal is to be found outside the activity itself making the activity a means, or poiesis. The concepts of praxis and poiesis are not mutually exclusive—most of the time both aspects are represented within certain acts. For instance, while writing this thesis serves the final goal of earning my degree, it is also an interesting learning process in itself. Moreover, praxis activities often require poiesis activities: I enjoy playing the violin, but to do so I need to earn money by working in a bar so that I can afford to buy the violin. Also, I perform the praxis of playing violin because I hold the idea that playing the violin is part of how I think my life should be lived.

This idea of thinking how life should be lived, Van Tongeren explains, illustrates how one's entire life is the praxis that incorporates all the activities in life. The goal of life itself is to be found within living one's life. When this would not be the case, one could just stop living when a certain goal would be reached, and one would be better in life the sooner the external goal would be reached. That would not make sense. Instead, the final goal of living is to be found in life: live your life in a good way, taking into account all

characteristics related to that, like the example of being a good football player. Just as it is in football, certain rules exist in life. Specific conditions determine whether we would refer to one's existence as being human or having human dignity. Ideas about that are influenced by history, culture and social context. In virtue ethics it is not solely rules or norms that determine how life ought to be lived. We strive to reach our goal in life: succeed, living the good life. Due to this, in virtue ethics aspects of life are morally relevant when they are part of the praxis of life, comply with the rules, go against them, detract from or contribute to the final goal of the praxis of life.

### 2.3.2 Attitude

Having created a basic understanding of the concept of the praxis, I can now discuss a second distinctive characteristic of Aristotle's virtue ethics: attitude. As Van Tongeren puts it: virtues are the characteristics necessary to perform with excellence in the praxis of life, or the characteristics necessary to realize your potential to the fullest. He states that virtue in general incorporates characteristics that you need as a human being to succeed in life, regardless of the natural capacities you are given (such as the quality of your sight) and irrespective of the role that you are fulfilling (such as being a football player). Virtue should be a quality that respects, on the one hand, the given differences between people, but on the other hand takes into account the general part of being human through looking for aspects that are relevant for everyone. This can be illustrated by the idea that one should realize his potentials to the fullest, which may of course hold a different meaning for different individuals. For being a virtuous human being, it is not enough to be an honest friend but meanwhile a lying lover. Based on the description of the character virtues as provided by Aristotle in the sixth chapter of Nichomachean Ethics book II, van Tongeren describes virtue as being *an attitude that results from choices one has made and that motivates towards making the right choice*. Here the word 'right' refers to the ability of finding the right means over and over again. The right means is always relative, nevertheless the right means is decided by a certain measure: the measure shown by the sensible.<sup>8</sup> In the next paragraph I will further elaborate on how to determine this right mean. First, however, it should be clarified that virtue does not refer to act but to attitude. But what then does that mean? Helping an elderly woman cross the street once does not make you a friendly person instantaneously.

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<sup>8</sup> Van Tongeren (2003): 57.

However, by helping an elderly woman cross the street every time the situation presents itself, you can develop a certain kind of friendly character that gives you the right attitude to feel willing to help the elderly cross the street again and again. When you are hungry and you teach yourself not to start eating until everyone is seated and served, you develop patience. Virtue is not an act, but an attitude that results from practice and education, and as a result of this attitude you will be likely to act in certain ways. One distinctive feature here is the fact that as virtue refers to an attitude as described here, and this attitude can become one's characteristic by repetition and practice, virtues are learned by *doing*. One cannot studying friendliness in order to become a friendly person, neither is one born with the full capacity of being friendly. By acting friendly over and over again, one develops the attitude that will make you willing and able to behave in a friendly manner.

Van Tongeren emphasizes the role of *choice* in virtuous behavior. He illustrates this by referring to the Pavlov experiment. By ringing the bell every time the dog was fed, the dog acted in reflex of being fed every time he heard the bell. This however is not how one develops virtues, Van Tongeren argues, because in this situation one cannot speak of choice and thus one cannot develop a certain attitude. This does not hold that every act one performs results from an active choice one makes; however, it should be clear that developed attitudes make one 'automatically' act in a certain way which is not similar to automatic reflexes.

Also important here is the role of *feeling*. By trying to become aware of the impact your consumer behavior has on the environment and by learning about this impact, you will train yourself in becoming more sensitive to environmental wellbeing and the impact you have on that. Van Tongeren argues that we can train ourselves to become either more or less sensitive. This sensitivity is important in virtue ethics because, in improving the praxis of life, we not only want to improve our behavior but also develop a certain way of feeling. Due to this, I sympathize with the reference made by Van Tongeren illustrating virtue ethics in the context of the novel written by Gustave Flaubert called an 'Education Sentimentale'; this novel emphasized the role developing and being aware of certain feelings that accompany specific acts.

### 2.3.3 The Golden Mean

As a final characteristic of Aristotle's virtue ethics I will now briefly discuss the role of the Golden Mean. Previously I wrote that Van Tongeren refers to the right choice



as based on finding the right means. However, how can you find the right means when it is relative? How can you know how sensitive you should be in order to find the right mean? You do not want to have to cry every time you see a sheep standing in the rain or when you see someone buying a plastic bag in the supermarket. But how then are you supposed to know which attitude is sufficiently sensitive to be able to find the right mean?

In Aristotelian virtue ethics the role of exemplary people is important in this: the boy who wants to become a successful football player looks at the international football stars playing matches, the babysitter admires the young mother with the child and learns by watching and imagining how to do it herself. When you see the star footballer playing or the amazing mother babysitting you just ‘know’ that they do it right, and watching them will help you learn what kinds of skills to develop and train yourself. To learn what kind of person to be, and to learn about right characteristics and right attitude, Mark Timmons (2012) refers to Jesus, Buddha, Socrates and Martin Luther King to illustrate modeling role that inspires individuals to develop certain character traits and attitude that they should develop.<sup>9</sup> The idea is similar for morality: through looking at exemplary people, and you just ‘know’ who that may be, you can find support in developing the right moral attitude yourself.

What I have discussed here on what virtue is can be captured in three necessary components of the virtue as discussed by Timmons (2012)<sup>10</sup>: The *intellectual component* holds that an exemplary honest person is a person that knows when it is desirable and appropriate to tell the truth and when it is better to remain silent. However, to be virtuous also requires the second component, the *affective component*: this honest individual is “*disposed to feel and express approval towards those who tell the truth and feel and express disapproval towards those who lie*”. In essence, this person will feel good about himself when telling the truth and bad when telling a lie. Finally the *motivational-behavioral component* is required, which holds for the virtue of honesty in that the honest person feels “*disposed to tell the truth and avoids telling lies across a range of different circumstances, where one is motivated to do so by a direct concern for honesty*’. These three elements show again the important role of feeling and individual capacity in virtue ethics.

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<sup>9</sup> Timmons, M. (2012). *Moral theory: An introduction*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 269.

<sup>10</sup> Timmons, M. (2012):270.

## 2.4 Sub-conclusions

Throughout this chapter I attempted to answer the question ‘Why is virtue ethics an appropriate approach for ethical consumption?’ I argued that virtue ethics meets with certain characteristics of our contemporary society, such as plurality in different backgrounds and preferences. To better understand this argument, and as a foundation for understanding the contemporary virtue ethical approach that will be discussed during the next chapter, I further clarified what a virtue looks like. In order to do that, I discussed certain key-characteristics of Aristotle’s virtue ethical theory by referring to the work of Van Tongeren and Timmons. I concluded that virtue is not a value, neither is it an activity. A virtue is an attitude that one develops by practice, that one learns by repetition and that one cannot develop by merely studying it.

Having discussed this fundamental understanding of virtue ethics, I have created a basis for discussing ethical consumption by the means of virtue ethics. However, when doing so, I will not refer to the traditional virtue ethical approach of Aristotle. Instead, I will refer to a contemporary virtue ethical approach as provided by Alasdair MacIntyre. Building upon the basic understanding I have created by discussing Aristotle, I will now be able to discuss MacIntyre’s approach in the next chapter in order to finally describe what MacIntyre’s virtue ethical approach may tell us about virtues needed for ethical consumer behavior.

### 3. Virtue ethics in the postmodern world: Alasdair MacIntyre

During this chapter I will discuss the virtue ethical approach of the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. This is necessary as knowledge of his approach will contribute to understanding virtue ethics in our postmodern society specifically, which will enable us to see what virtues are necessary to develop for individuals in order to overcome difficulties faced when seeking ethical consumption and in effect enhance ethical consumer behavior.

To understand MacIntyre's approach to virtue ethics I will first explain the nature of society today according to him. He refers to society's illness as *emotivism*, and I will discuss based on his arguments why this is problematic. Following this, I will discuss the moral theory he developed and conclude that virtue ethics in the postmodern world focuses on three elements specifically: the practice; its related internal and external goods, and the role of institutions. Subsequently I will evaluate a number of aspects that specifically differ from Aristotle's traditional virtue ethical approach. Before this, however, I will discuss MacIntyre himself.

#### 3.1 Society today: emotivism

Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre was born in Scotland in 1929. MacIntyre published his first book in 1953 when he was 24 years old. Since then, he has authored 30 books and hundreds of articles. In 1981 Alasdair MacIntyre wrote the highly influential book *After Virtue*. The main message taken from his work is his specific attitude towards the liberal capitalist world. According to his interpretation of life as we know it, we live in a society that is based on anything but morality; our society is characterized by the lack of a coherent moral code and individuals have no awareness whatsoever of individual meaningfulness, goals of their existence and their contribution to the communities they are part of. According to MacIntyre, living in communities is what people should do, and only within these communities can individuals can develop their virtues and find and fulfill their goals. Only by doing so, he argues, can humanity be saved from the liberal capitalist society that keeps people from developing virtues and living the good life.

For the scope of this thesis I will mainly focus on MacIntyre's book *After Virtue*. In this book he first explains what, according to his view society nowadays looks like. He

refers to an imaginary world in which natural science would have been banned, and most of the research would have been burned and destroyed by an anti-science activists group. Then natural sciences would be built up again, seeking to find logic and develop theories solely based on the rare sheets of research left after the destruction. The people who seek to restore natural science, however, do not know the context of any of the results left. Definitions of natural sciences do not exist anymore. Science would not be science at all after that destruction; it would just be fragmented pieces without any coherence. Seeking to put them together and make a story out of it would not be likely to result in any coherent logic at all.<sup>11</sup>

Now this imaginary situation, MacIntyre argues, is similar to the moral world we live in nowadays. Where his imaginary scientists claimed to have found theories and understood logic after the destruction, actual logical results and theories did not exist anymore, it was just fragmented pieces of incoherent science left. Morality nowadays is similar to this: there is not such a thing as a coherent perception of morality, as we live in a fragmented moral society. In political and philosophical debate he argued, moral reasoning is not how it should be: the moral language nowadays is used in order to gain one's personal preferences. Moral reasoning would hardly be possible in contemporary politics, as a coherent, common understanding of the good for human beings would be a requirement to be able to do so. Similarly a shared understanding of a definition of natural science would be necessary in the example of trying to build up natural science theories out of fragmented pieces after the destruction.

One of the consequences of this fragmented morality, MacIntyre argues, is that we have ongoing political and philosophical debates that in fact do not bring forward any of the desired results. Debaters argue and use objective assumptions and moral reasoning that they claim to be universally applicable. MacIntyre, however, argues that this is not the case. Where the scientists after the destruction did not understand how to do real science, moral reasoning is not possible in society nowadays. Where one seeks for moral reasoning, individuals instead use moral language to express their personal preferences and to convince others to act in line with these preferences. Real moral reasoning is, according to MacIntyre, not possible because in order to do so, a shared understanding of the good and of the sense of morality would be necessary. According to this line of

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<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011). *After Virtue*. Bloomsberg: 2.

thinking, moral reasoning nowadays is not real moral reasoning: it is merely the expression of one's personal preferences in a way that seeks to influence others' attitudes or feelings in order to make them act in line with your own personal preferences.

The described situation is problematic not only in politics: if there is no such thing as reason to convince other people, how are you supposed to convince yourself of making moral decisions? On what grounds are individuals supposed to guide the decisions they face in their lives? It seems then that you can choose any kind of life you want to live and when you feel like it you can just switch to any other kind of life with accompanied moral viewpoints. In that way, you could simply choose the values that are supportive to reach a status that you value, and even switch values if that is more convenient to reach what you want to reach instead of making a rational decision on what values go hand in hand with a rationally defensible and comprehensive perception of the good life.

This moral vacuum of expressing ones preferences instead of real moral arguing is referred to by MacIntyre as *emotivism*, one of what he believes to be several characteristics of today's society.<sup>12</sup> To find a way out of the moral-less society, he argues that developing virtues is necessary. Therefore he developed a virtue ethical theory that mainly exists of three aspects: the practice related to the internal and external goods and institutions; the moral tradition and the narrative. In the following paragraphs I will discuss his approach.

### 3.2 The practice

An important aspect in MacIntyre's virtue ethical theory is the *practice*. This aspect is necessary, he argues, to develop virtues. He defines this concept as follows:

*"By a 'practice' I am going to mean 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*

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<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 13.

*result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”<sup>13</sup>*

I will attempt to clarify what he means in this extensive definition by giving my own example. Imagine you are a great football fan and you always dreamed of your son becoming a good football player, as you were unable to do this. Your son however is not interested in football at all. Aiming at changing this attitude, you promise to give him one euro in pocket money for every time he trains or plays and even two euros for every time he wins a match. As he is a fanatical money-saver, this tactic makes him train every week and he turns out to be very motivated to win. During the matches however it does not matter to him how he wins and it has happened more than once that he purposely injured the best player of the opponent team. Indeed, the money clearly is just about enough motivation to make the boy want to win but not enough to make him want to play a good game. After a while though, the boy actually becomes a really good player: technically skilled, fast and in good shape but also a real team player. As he develops his skills, not just for winning but also for all aspects related to the game such as team sport elements, he actually starts enjoying further developing these skills. As this happens, the boy will want to play football not merely to win the game and receive the money; he will find joy in a well-played match. From this state on, winning while injuring the other team's goalkeeper injured (to give an exaggerated example of unsportsmanlike behavior) will ruin the boy's own joy in the game. This real joy, one that can only be experienced by participating in a way that suits real football, shows the kind of authentic practice MacIntyre refers to.

One important aspect of the practice is the social aspect. The social aspect is related to all practices. To learn how to play football the boy depends on the ones who already know how to play. All authentic practices take place in communities that consist of individuals that take roles of either being the teacher or the student. By becoming a better football player, one will also better be able to identify well-played football and value excellent players.

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<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 18.

### 3.2.1 Internal and external goods

The concept of *practice* can be analyzed a little further. MacIntyre identifies both external and internal goods related to each practice. In the example above, the pocket money given to the boy can be referred to as being an *external good* to the practice of playing football. In typical society, this could also be money or prestige.<sup>14</sup> Characteristic of these external goods is that they can be achieved in numerous manners: perhaps the child could also earn extra pocket money by mowing the lawn. Furthermore, when he receives these external goods, they become his property and another person cannot get them: the same euro goes either to him or to his sister. Too many external goods are, for that reason likely to foster competitiveness and corruption in society.

The *internal goods* are goods that can only be accomplished when taking part in the practice itself: the boy has to play football to achieve these goods. To develop techniques and insight in the game he has to participate, and only by doing so he will experience the joy of playing a good match. Here, another internal goods characteristic can be illustrated: developing the right skills will be of great value for the whole community participating in the practice: even the team that loses the game will experience more joy when all participants obeyed the rules; had highly developed technical skills and insight and enjoyed playing because of this. Furthermore, during well-played games (such as the one described above) one develops the capacities needed for games like this even further, which is clearly not the case when playing by cheating just in order to win.

### 3.2.2 Institutions

Another element MacIntyre discusses to argue for his thesis is the role of *institutions*. Where internal goods can be developed within practices, external goods receive the support from institutions. "*Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions.*"<sup>15</sup> The latter produce goods like money, power, and authority, while the first contribute to bringing forward virtues. Institutions and practices are closely related, and practices will not persist without the existence of institutions. Despite this, it is important to understand that it is *because* of the virtues of courage, honesty and justice that practices can proceed to exceed and resist turning into institutions. Due to certain governmental institutions we have organized our

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<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 230.

<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 194.

society in a way that we earn enough money to buy a football and freely participate in the practice of football. It is institutions that organize football matches and that build the stadiums. Some institutions may foster the development of virtues; others may more likely narrow down virtuous behavior. Nonetheless, without the presence of institutions, many practices would fail to succeed.

When there would be no virtues at all, MacIntyre argues, only external goods could be valued. Also, as I mentioned previously, external goods differ with internal goods amongst others in the following: the specific extent of the external goods the boy gains cannot go to his sister anymore: if his father has one euro he can give it either to him or to her. This fosters competitiveness in society: *“In any society which recognized only external goods, competitiveness would be the dominant and even exclusive feature”*.<sup>16</sup> The virtues that can be developed in practices and that are necessary to achieve internal goods may place a barrier on the achievement of external goods: when the boy would lie to his dad and tell him he won the game, he would receive two euros instead of one. Thus, the gain of external goods would be greater. Now the virtue of being honest here keeps the boy from gaining this extra euro. In a society where external goods take a dominant position (bringing along competitiveness and materialism) virtues are not likely to be developed. But why is it desirable to develop virtues? What does MacIntyre mean by his concept of virtue? This will be discussed in the following paragraph.

### 3.2.3 Virtue

According to MacIntyre virtues are developed only within the context of practices. Where external goods can be acquired in different ways, internal goods can only be acquired by taking part in a practice, and by the help of the virtues. Additionally, by participating in a practice, virtuous behavior is practiced and virtues are developed. MacIntyre defines virtue is as follows:

*“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and the exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 196.

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 191.



This definition shows how virtues are there to serve the practice, they are secondary to it. Also, virtues only make sense in a social context: virtues are determinants of social relationships within the community the practice takes place. Due to the social context of the virtues, they need shared understanding of its aims and rules, as well as reflection upon it. The virtues are needed for authentic, well-functioning practices:

*“The virtues are those goods by reference to which whether we like it or not we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the same kind of purposes and standards which inform practices.”<sup>18</sup>*

The virtue of honesty and justice can easily be illustrated with the example I gave before: if the boy wins a match because he has purposely injured the best player of the opponent team, he refers to standards that are his own and not part of the practice. Developing the virtues of honesty and justice in the practice of football will only be possible when he understands and agrees with the shared goal and standards inherent to the practice. For instance, for the virtue of justice, impersonal and commonly accepted standards in the community are necessary and the virtue of courage becomes present where one risks one’s own situation in order to take care of other community members. Only then real practice of the virtues and real joy of the game will be possible. Without honesty, justice and courage, production of internal goods is impossible and practices will be lost. Because of that, MacIntyre argues, performance in practices is what we refer to when valuing others and ourselves, leaving aside particular societal codes.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, virtues mainly have three functions: to support the development of internal goods in practices; to support overcoming obstacles in one’s search for what is the good in his life, and to support moral traditions both as part of practices and in personal life. These latter aspects will be further elaborated upon in the following sub-paragraphs.

### **3.3 Moral tradition**

Another aspect of the virtue-ethical theory of MacIntyre is what he calls *moral tradition*. Football has a long history and knowledge and understanding of the development of star players’ careers’ will inspire you on how to become like them. You

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<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 191.

<sup>19</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 192.

cannot simply decide that people may use their hands in football because you are better at throwing balls. Of course over the past decades certain rules have been changed, however these changes took place because people in the community of the practice of football were under the impression that changing these rules to a certain extent would allow the production of a greater amounts of internal goods; it would contribute to the practice of football. Practices according to MacIntyre are not fixed in such a way that they may never change; respect for and understanding of the tradition is important. Change is only desirable when it contributes to the authentic practice and the possible extent of internal goods produced and virtues developed.

Another characteristic of practices related to the moral tradition is the absence of a fixed goal. Indeed a football match lasts for 90 minutes and then it ends, but the joy of the game continues, as does the development of certain related virtues. Courage, for instance, can be shown when you take care of your injured team player and when you honestly tell your father you lost the match. The boy, who became real fanatic over time, may find joy in the idea that he practices a sport that has been practiced for many decades. Or consider an artist painting: before he starts he will most likely not be able to tell you when his practice of painting will be completed.<sup>20</sup> The same counts for the beginning: when did an artist become an artist? Due to this, by participating in a practice, one automatically enters into social relationships with other individuals that are now, but also were in the past and will be in the future, taking part in the practice.

### 3.4 Narrative

One final distinctive characteristic of MacIntyre's conception of virtue ethics is the role of the narrative. The narrative helps individuals to construct their goals in life because, he argues, individuals belong to certain stories in their lives. As a virtue ethicist MacIntyre does seek to develop a theory that can help individuals to live the good life. His perception of the good life is strongly related to the understanding of your own narrative. What is good for one strongly relates to how one can create unity in his life. Over the years our lives became more and more fragmented: we talk about the private sphere and the public sphere, young and old, personal and organizational, and other aspects. Individuals are inclined to take over this line of thought more and more, losing the last pieces of unity in their lives. The search for unity is necessary to restore morality in

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<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 194.

society, and this is what MacIntyre seeks by referring to the practice, the moral tradition and the narrative. His theory allows him to look at practices in the light of a certain narrative and, in order to determine individual goals, individuals should ask themselves to what narrative they belong, or what the story is that they are part of.<sup>21</sup> He emphasizes that individual actions cannot be understood without taking into account intentions, and intentions cannot be explained separated from its context. When you walk on the streets and a woman comes to tell you that she found ‘it’, you will most likely have no clue of what she is talking about. Perhaps you dropped something or perhaps she had seen you unsuccessfully search for a specific book in the public library and she followed you to tell you that she had found it. Or perhaps she is just a crazy old woman seeking for attention. Understanding her utterance requires understanding her intentions and her context. Conversation is of great importance for understanding the narrative in life.

In a sense MacIntyre’s idea of the good life is teleological, as there are purposes to be found within the stories. The purposes however are not set; they are determined by the stories as well. Finding one’s goals is not to be compared with a search for gold. The purpose of the search is to be found within the story and the individual has to develop its own purpose during his search. MacIntyre compares this with the story in a novel. The reader does not know the future situation of the main character when starting to read and neither does the main character. The story however would not be the story without its certain purpose.<sup>22</sup> Life is participating in the narrative search for cohesion and unity and when choices have to be made, this search for cohesion and narrative should motivate choices rather than having choices determined by one’s individual desires.<sup>23</sup> How well you make your moral choices will therefore strongly be influenced by how well you are able to interpret your narrative.

This explanation of the narrative again shows the importance of the *social aspect of morality*. One’s narrative only exists in relationship with others. For instance, when you are born, you are part of other people’s stories. While this is not a story you have individually chosen, it does however become part of your own story. The specific combination of your individual narrative and the narratives you are related to is what

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<sup>21</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 201.

<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 201.

<sup>23</sup> Sandel, M. J. (2012). *Rechtvaardigheid*. Have, Ten.: 261; MacIntyre, A. (2011): 201.

creates the unity in your life. Also, because of the role of one's narrative in making moral decisions, it can very well be that at certain moments in time, other people are better able than you to identify and understand the story you are part of. Therefore, sometimes others may very well be able to better determine what choice would be morally most acceptable for you to take.<sup>24</sup>

Another aspect brought forward by this idea of the narrative is the role of *reflection*. You have to be able to reflect upon your stories in order to understand them. Understanding of your narrative is only possible only when you have found the right attitude towards it. Identifying different roles and the goals inherent to practices related to these roles contributes to developing this right attitude. In life you take many roles: for example, a mother, a daughter, a member of a sports club or a certain nationality. The right thing to do in a certain role should be the right thing to do for everyone in that role.

Based on the history of the roles you have, you may have inheritances and debts and face certain obligations and expectations. These are part of your narrative and therefore form a moral starting point.<sup>25</sup> This supposition of individuals being inherently related to their narrative is in contrast with individualism. Individualists believe that they can choose the person they want to be, which is not the case according to MacIntyre's theory. MacIntyre illustrates this with referring to Americans who refuse to take any responsibility for slavery by arguing that they in person never owned any slaves. MacIntyre does not agree with this individualist perception; according to him your life is part of your individual story and your stories are embedded in other stories. Cutting the lines with your past will change your relationships towards others. Only when you understand your stories, your narrative, you find your place in communities and you will be able to find and finally fulfill your individual purpose.<sup>26</sup> This understanding of one's narrative is the most important search in one's life; it is the foundation of being able to live the good life. The individual good life is a life in which one searches for what is good for society in general.

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<sup>24</sup>Sandel, M. J. (2012): 261; MacIntyre, A. (2011): 204.

<sup>25</sup> Sandel, M. J. (2012):261; MacIntyre, A. (2011): 204-205.

<sup>26</sup> Sandel, M. J. (2012):263; MacIntyre, A. (2011): 205.

### 3.5 MacIntyre and Aristotle compared

In the previous paragraphs I have created a basic understanding of virtue ethical theory by discussing Aristotle's traditional virtue ethical approach, followed by a discussion of the approach as provided by Alasdair MacIntyre. Throughout the following paragraph I will briefly note some critical differences between both approaches in order to contribute to an understanding applying virtue ethics in our contemporary society.

Both Aristotle and MacIntyre refer to virtues in order to set out their ethical theory. And as I argued, understanding of the first is valuable to understand MacIntyre's approach. The societies both philosophers lived in while developing their theory however are not even close to being similar to each other. On what aspects did this influence their theories? How do both approaches differ from each other? I identified several critical differences between both virtue ethical approaches. During the following paragraph I will briefly discuss two of these differences to contribute to the reader's understanding of virtue ethics in the context of today's society. The differences that I will discuss are firstly the manner in which society nowadays differs from Aristotle's era, and secondly the difference in both philosophers' conception and role of the telos.

First of all, the way society was organized in the time of Aristotle differs from the way society is organized today. According to MacIntyre, Aristotle's theory focused on refining the virtues that previously served the heroic society, necessary for the Athenian society Aristotle lived in. The heroic society was mostly set up around family and cognation, whereas the Athenian society was organized around equality and political activity. According to MacIntyre, philosophy in this Athenian society was focused on reshaping the heroic virtues to make them suitable for this new kind of polis. This illustrates how society and philosophy relate to each other and mutually influence each other: a shift in society leads to a shift in philosophy. Following from this idea and based on MacIntyre's picture of the current state of *emotivism* in society we live in, virtues should nowadays contribute to restoring communities and practices in society. Unity contributes to the development of communities, and the realization of the human good as a shared aim is important here. For this shared aim however, a certain degree of agreement on goods and virtues is necessary. MacIntyre wants to return to the polis, to living in small, meaningful communities. This shared agreement on goods and virtues is

what he sees as necessary to arrive at living in small communities: “... and it is this agreement that makes possible the kind of bond between citizen which, on Aristotle’s view, constitutes a polis”.<sup>27</sup>

A second element I want to discuss here refers to the idea of the telos. This telos, or goal, can be referred to when determining certain thresholds or standards. Think of an acorn: the acorn has done well or is successful, when he has become a strong and tall oak tree. It is then that he has succeeded in his life and met his purpose. However, non-natural elements also have a purpose. For instance, consider a set of speakers. They may look perfectly nice with your furniture, complete with subwoofers, cables and other accessories, but if they are not able to produce sound then they are not fit for its purpose. This assumes that you bought the speakers for the purpose they are usually meant for: producing sound. When they look nice but are not able to produce sound, the quality of the speakers cannot be considered good, as they are not able to meet their telos. According to Aristotle, human beings also have a telos, or a purpose; namely, this is to find happiness, which can be found only when being a virtuous person. Here again one can be judged according to how one fulfills its telos: people that are not leading a happy life due to virtuous acts are less moral people than the ones who do.

These days however, there is, according to MacIntyre, no such thing as agreement on the purpose of the human life. This is exactly what constitutes the problem of today’s society as referred to as *emotivism*: Individuals lack meaning, tradition and context in their lives resulting in behavior of merely ‘choosing’ preferences and acting upon that. Believing in the existence of this telos does not fit our era: all citizens have never been made to agree on the one purpose of human life, or even about the fact that human life would have a telos at all. Our liberal society focuses on protecting individuals’ property and bodies, but one is free to do whatever one desires with its thinking, feeling, and with its soul, as long as it does not hurt others. Lack of a common understanding on how to take care of the soul and what human beings should strive for is problematic: an example of people fighting about the purpose of life can be found in religious conflicts for instance. We perceive it to be normal that the government protects our body, but should not souls receive protection too? As MacIntyre sees *emotivism* as problematic, he does certainly believe in some kind of telos. However, the telos he believes in is not to be found in

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<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 155.

human nature in the way Aristotle compares human beings with acorns becoming oak trees when succeeded, fulfilling their purpose. According to MacIntyre the role of ethical theory is to bring human beings from nature of life when we do not purposely intervene to “*human nature as it could be if it realizes its telos*”.<sup>28</sup> It is important to have a certain agreement of the telos of human beings in life because without a goal, theory how to reach the goal will not make sense and, consequently, people will not be likely to feel motivated to act upon a certain theory.

The differences between Aristotle and MacIntyre that I have discussed here relate to a choice MacIntyre serves his readers in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book *After Virtue*: In order to serve morality, should society change back towards the community life, and Aristotle? Or is it desirable to organize society in such a liberal way, fostering emotivism? Indeed, Aristotle and community life is the answer. Finding agreement in communities about the telos gives morality a context to exist in. With this I hope to have illustrated why and how certain aspects of MacIntyre’s virtue ethical approach differ from Aristotle’s traditional view, which will contribute to a better understanding of how to apply virtue ethical theory to the contemporary problem of ethical consumption faced by ethical behavior-seeking consumers. First, I will first provide my sub-conclusions about MacIntyre’s virtue ethical approach and following this, based on the fundamental understanding I have created by discussing both traditional and modern virtue ethical approaches, I will during the next chapter explore what MacIntyre’s virtue ethical theory has to offer to ethical consumer behavior.

### 3.6 Sub-conclusions

During the previous paragraphs I have discussed the virtue ethical approach of MacIntyre. I argued this to be a requirement to understand virtue ethics in our postmodern society specifically, which will finally help to see what virtues are necessary to develop in order to enhance ethical consumer behavior. I demonstrated how, according to MacIntyre, practices are important in society. Virtues are needed to serve the practices and because of virtues, internal goods can be produced by participation in practices. The better one’s skills are in participating in the practice, the more internal goods can be

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<sup>28</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 52.

brought forward. Virtues are the qualities that are necessary to achieve excellence in practices. Institutions bring forward external goods and are likely to foster competitiveness and materialism. Most practices however will not maintain without the existence of institutions. Understanding one's narrative will help to find and develop the right attitude, and having the right attitude will again help to better understand one's narrative and purpose. In this way, narrative contributes to recognition and reflection. Developing virtues internal to practices is stimulated and reflected upon as it contributes to one's performance in certain practices, which determines one's social position. This way the development of virtues is important in life and stimulated. The individual 'good life' is a life in which one searches for what is good for society in general. One's search in life to understand his purpose, which is strongly related to one's narrative and to creating unity in one's life, is amongst the most important aspects of how to live the good life. It should be re-emphasized that this search is not an individual aspect of life, as one's narrative is embedded within the narratives of others and with finding his place in community.

I conclude that virtue ethics in the postmodern world focuses on three aspects specifically: the practice and its related internal and external goods and the role of institutions. Having done so, I am now able to move on to further discussing ethical consumption by the means of these specific aspects.



## 4. Ethical Consumption

I will in this chapter move on to explore what MacIntyre's ethical theory can offer to the difficulties in decision-making faced by consumers seeking ethical behavior in society today. How can MacIntyre's virtue ethical approach provide any practical guidance to the daily decision-making procedures and difficulties these consumers face? What virtues are necessary to be developed in order to overcome the obstacles for ethical consumption?

This chapter is structured as follows: I first discuss what the field of ethical consumption looks like; then I focus on the three virtue ethical aspects: ethical consumption as a practice; internal and external goods related to ethical consumption and the role of institutions. After having evaluated these ethical consumption aspects I am able to move on to see what consumers should now actually do: during the final subparagraph I discuss what virtues are necessary for ethical behavior-seeking consumers to develop in order to deal with challenges they face.

### 4.1 Exploring ethical consumption

#### 4.1.1 Exploring the field

I have used the word 'consumption' heavily throughout the previous sections of this thesis. However, the question must be asked: what are we precisely referring to when using this concept? How can we clearly delimit the field when discussing virtuous consumer behavior?

Defining and delimiting consumption is not easily done. First of all, the concept is used in many different disciplines. For instance in sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology and marketing, many articles have been written discussing different aspects and meanings of consumption.<sup>29</sup> Also in the field of ethics much has been written about

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<sup>29</sup> For further reading on different interpretations among different disciplines see for instance: Wilk, R. (2001). Consuming morality. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2 (1), 245-260; Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of consumer culture*, 5 (2), 131-153; Røpke, I. (2009). Theories of practice—New inspiration for ecological economic studies on consumption. *Ecological Economics*, 68 (10), 2490-2497; Joy, A. a. (2012). Studying consumption behaviour through multiple lenses: an overview of consumer culture theory. *Journal of Business Anthropology*, 1 (1), 141; Evans, D. (2011). Consuming conventions: sustainable consumption, ecological citizenship and the worlds of worth. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 27 (2), 109-115.

consumption<sup>30</sup>; nevertheless, theory lacks any generally accepted, comprehensible and clearly delimited definition of the concept. Because of this and because the field in itself is of such a broad extend, I as a researcher am likely to lose myself in the field of ethical consumption. Indeed, not only as a researcher I am likely to lose myself in this field: also as a consumer I feel lost in a certain way. If the goal of consumption is not clear, it is not possible to determine what ethical consumption would then look like. When I seek to consume in an ethical manner, what is it that I should strive for? Go to the supermarket and ask ten people at the counter what consumption means to them. When you ask a student who has a pizza and a can of ice tea in his basket, he will probably stammer something like: “*Well, I need to eat, right?*”. If you ask a mom buying a whole bunch of breads, meat, vegetables, peanut butter and juice cans, she will probably say something like: “*Well, I need to feed*”. An interesting follow-up question would then be: if that is the goal, why did you choose these products and these brands specifically? Ask again what consumption means when instead a birthday cake is being bought, or when someone has a basket full of local products, all fair trade or all organic. Or go to a place where another kind of consumption takes place such as a movie theater, and ask again: What does consumption mean to you? I acknowledged the difficulties faced by consumers that seek to do good in a more detailed fashion during the introduction of this thesis. Certainly, consumption is a broadly used concept and individuals are likely to be unaware of the meaning or goal of (certain aspects of) their consumer behavior. With the lack of a shared understanding of the purpose of consumption, how are we supposed to determine what ethical consumption looks like?

As I said before, one is likely to lose himself within this field. It is because of this that I focus on a virtue ethical approach to ethical consumption, which I break down into ethical consumption as a practice, the related internal and external goods and the supporting institutions. Before I do so, however, I must first further define the concept of consumption as referred to in this thesis. Also, I limit the scope by focusing on the ethical behavior-seeking consumers specifically: I seek to find the virtues that the ethical behavior-seeking consumers need to develop in order to have an attitude that will make

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance Barnett, C. (2005). Consuming ethics: articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption. *Antipode*, 37 (1), 23-45; Goodman, M. K. (2004). Reading fair trade: Political ecological imaginary and the moral economy of fair trade foods. *Political geography*, 23 (7), 891-915.

them consume in an ethical manner. To do so, I will illustrate why I focus on the ethical behavior-seeking consumers and how these individuals can be described; then I will discuss what I mean when referring to ethical consumption. Here I will illustrate how consumption cannot be seen separately from any social aspect: consumption in itself depends on social relations, which is the reason that it is of importance for many individuals to investigate ethical consumer behavior.

#### 4.1.2. Defining consumption

First of all, I narrow my focus on the consumption of fast-moving consumer goods and, more specifically, the international food industry within this specific market segment. Some examples of the kinds of consumer products of I target can be demonstrated by the football boy's mother buying bananas, a pumpkin, coffee and chocolate bars when doing her weekly groceries. I thus focus on products, rather than services, which would be optional here according to the Oxford English Dictionary that defines 'consumption' as: "The action of using up a resource; the action of eating or drinking something; The purchase of goods and services by the public: The reception of information or entertainment by a mass audience."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore I sympathize with Michael Goodman's interpretation that refers to consumption as being a meaningful act of consumption (the intake) but also engagement with products.<sup>32</sup> Presuming the individual consumer was in the position to choose between different acts of consumption, a certain meaning can be attached to his consumer behavior: one chooses to consume a certain product and you made that chose for a reason, whether consciously or not. Perhaps the choice was based on purely financial grounds, but even then the choice reflects a certain consumer attitude towards certain aspects in the world. First of all, by buying a product, one is able to express values, aspects in life towards which he likes to express a certain attitude. When I bought some nuts last week in the super market in my neighborhood, there were two types of almonds offered. I value equality and justice; I believe it to be fair to give farmers in less-developed areas in the world a price for their products which enables them to send their children to school. I have had access to information about Fair Trade where I learned that Fair Trade values these ideas that I sympathize with. Based on this, as I see

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<sup>31</sup> Definitions derived from Dictionary, T. O. (n.d.). *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved April 2014, from <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/consumption?q=consumption>

<sup>32</sup> Goodman, M. K. (2004): 895.

that one of the two almond options is labeled Fair Trade, and as I have the financial resources to buy the Fair Trade almonds, I chose to buy this version.

Another important aspect is related to this choice. To get the Fair Trade package of almonds in my local super market, many people have contributed to a part of the production chain. Through the financial transaction of giving money in order to own the almonds, a certain relationship within the products' value chain is established. I will further elaborate on this social relationship between production stakeholders and the consumer in the following subparagraph, as awareness of this relationship is relevant for ethical behavior-seeking consumers.

#### **4.1.3 The ethical behavior-seeking consumers**

Now I will further explain what I mean by the term 'ethical behavior-seeking consumers' and why I have chosen to specifically focus on this kind of consumer. The reason I refer to this consumer is because I aim to focus at individuals that see their act of consumption as more than simply meeting their need for food (for example, being hungry, or satisfying a craving). I refer to consumers that see consumption as a more 'meaningful' act, and these consumers are willing to make an ethical choice.<sup>33</sup> In addition, this kind of consumer considers buying a certain product based on the establishment, or the realization of a social relationship with all stakeholders, related to the production of the product. This consumer consciously seeks to perform behavior that is right, that is most justifiable in his eyes. In other words: ethical behavior-seeking consumers feel that the act of making consumer choices are related to a certain social relation to others, and thus an act that, when the right choice is made, contributes to being a good person and to living the good life.

When doing so, this consumer faces certain difficulties. When seeking to know what kind of products are desirable to consume, he can appeal to many different sources: labeling organizations that tell consumers what choices are healthy, thousands of academic articles on food, justice and environmental-related issues, as well as marketing campaigns to name a few. However, knowing all there is to know in this area is simply impossible to demand from ethical consumers. How much knowledge is enough? How is one supposed to know which sources to believe when results conflict? What about

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<sup>33</sup> Guthman, J. (2002). Commodified meanings, meaningful commodities: Re-thinking production-consumption links through the organic system of provision. *Sociologia ruralis*, 42 (2): 299; Goodman, M. K. (2004): 895.

information that is kept inside of the company to save its image? I delineate the main areas of these consumers' difficulties under the names of *information issues*, *accountability issues*, *competition*, and *corruption*, and whether or not one *dares to choose differently*. Throughout the next paragraphs I will further analyze these issues when discussing influential related institutions.

## 4.2. Virtuous consumption and practices, goods and institutions

I will in the following pages discuss how ethical consumption can be argued to be a practice in the light of MacIntyre's theory. To do so I will further analyze and narrow down the act of ethical consumption in different aspects. Doing so will enable me to see what internal and external goods are produced, what institutions are related to these goods, and in what ways they are related.

### 4.2.1 Ethical consumption as a practice

Before I am able to see how MacIntyre's theory of a practice meets the act of ethical consumption, I will further explore this act of which I speak. Following this, I will see how this correspond with the different aspects of MacIntyre's practice. Before I do so, I want to note that a thorough analysis of a number of ethical consumption aspects requires an extensive amount of psychological research and knowledge. These aspects, however, fall outside the scope of my thesis. Therefore, my analyses here are concise but, in my opinion, meets the standard needed to be able to move on to the final goal of this thesis: identifying a number of important virtues necessary for ethical consumption.

### Analyzing ethical consumption

The first element I identify is the element that moves someone to ethical consumption: the *need*. As I focus on the food industry, the basic need is clear: I go to a super market because I either want to eat or I want to feed and I want to make the most right choice in what to consume.

Secondly, there is the *time and place* that I need to take action in order to consume. The place is a place that sells food, such as a grocery store or a bakery. When living in a big city there are many options to choose from when you want to buy a bread for instance: do you go to your supermarket so you can combine doing your regular shopping with buying bread and in this way save time to play football with your son, or do you go to the bakery around the corner because you want to support the old man running his family

handicraft business, or moreover do you go to the bakery in the next block because they sell the special spelled bread you like so much?

The third aspect is also related to *choice*: when you are in the super market, what kind of products are you going to choose? I have previously discussed the difficulties consumers seeking to do good face here regarding their decision-making strategy. Think for instance of the question whether or not to buy local products, seasonal vegetables, organic, fair trade? Do you buy cookies and sweets, or solely nutritious items? Or, perhaps, do you choose budget products in order to save for charity? Making the most ethical choice is a very complicated task to do, for instance due to access to information and knowledge. If you buy a pizza, what do you know about the tiny piece of ham on it, what the quality of that pig's life was, or how the tomato farmers had been treated? Perhaps one pizza brand composes its pizza's fully from American products, the other combines products from all over the world and a third one has its pizza's produced almost completely within western Europe, something you sympathize with upon considering carbon dioxide emissions sympathize. In essence, how is one supposed to know *all* of these things? It is impossible to want to know and compare all aspects like these, nevertheless the level of information and knowledge that you base your choice on is still likely to contribute to making an ethical consumer choice.

The next step I identified in the process is the *financial transaction*, the exchange between the seller and buyer. A simple step: you give the requested amount of money and that act makes you the official owner of the product. As prices for food are relatively low, consumers are not likely to go back home and reconsider their purchase. The impact of one person buying one product is relatively low for this specific market segment of fast-moving consumer goods, and also the frequency of using the product will be, as characteristically of food, a small number of times. Due to this, and because of the regular, daily pace on which food shopping is performed, the act often relates to unconscious, routinized decision-making and action.

The final element I identified is the actual *intake of the commodity*. After the exchange with the seller, the buyer is to a great extent free to choose where and when the product will be consumed. Again, the choice for consumption at a certain moment and location can be based on many different aspects which falls outside the scope of my thesis.

## Assessing MacIntyre's practice' requirements

Having sifted through the main aspects of the act of ethical consumption, I will now move on to see how different aspects of MacIntyre's practice apply to the aspects discussed above (need for consumption; place and time of shopping; choice for product; buyer-seller exchange; actual intake commodity).

To begin with, the act of ethical consumption has a shared goal; it has a purpose. This shows a first requirement of MacIntyre's practice: a *telos*. I discussed the first aspect of ethical consumption: the need to consume a product, and by doing so the attempt to contribute to a better world. Meeting that certain need is the purpose of the process. Conscious choices lead according to choices that in some way express a certain political standpoint on how the world should change in order to become a better place; for example, I buy fair trade because the way the world organizes its regular business is unfair. In this manner, the shared telos of these consumers is to be found in the literal intake of a commodity combined with the desire and conscious choice and contribute to make the world a better place.

A second aspect of MacIntyre's theory is *rules* related to the practice. The second aspect I discussed above was time and place of consumption. To this aspect certain rules are related: shops need to be registered, licenses are required and products need to meet with the set European or national requirements. Special licenses are required to be allowed to sell alcohol; minors are prohibited to purchase the product, and only official euros are accepted as a means to pay and so on. These rules relate to a third requirement of MacIntyre's practice: *respecting authorities*. It is certainly authorities that set up these rules, control their implementation, and monitor compliance. The Dutch *Nederlandse Voedsel en Warenautoriteit*, part of the government's department of economic affairs, is an example of such an authority.

Then I identified the aspect of choice between products. This element can be related to several aspects of the practice as follows: first of all, established *standards of excellence* are reflected here. This can easily be illustrated by referring to a certain product group provided in the Dutch retail chain Albert Heijn, which sells products under the label 'Albert Heijn Excellent'. This is a more luxurious product line that provides products that are composed of higher quality ingredients resulting in, for instance, better structure and taste. I am aware of the fact that here I use the word 'better', which expresses a subjective preference regarding products and tastes like sweet, salt and sour.

However, when discussing *quality* there do appear to be standards. Comparing the cheapest figs with Albert Heijn Excellent figs, you will see that cheap figs are covered in a thin layer of sugar and a number of antioxidants are added to facilitate mass production and conservation, contributing to lower production prices. The Excellent figs, on the other hand, do not contain any additives, which better allows the actual taste and structure to be expressed. This shows how, in a way, consumers agree on purity of commodities to relate to a certain standard of excellence. Furthermore, the differentiation between 'regular' and fairly-traded products shows a standard of excellence. The more conscious consumer that has the financial assets to pay more for products will be more likely to consumer Fair Trade-labeled products. As the name already suggests, unfairly-traded products are of lower ethical standard than products for which stakeholders have received 'fair' prices, demonstrating another example of standards of excellence within the field of ethical consumption. Also, products labeled 'organic' show a set standard of excellence: the conscious consumer that has developed a certain amount of knowledge on food production and results of non-organic agriculture will be likely to value organic over non-organic as this will be perceived to cause less environmental damage, something the ethical behavior-seeking consumer desires to see in the world. Another example of standards of excellence relate to the amount of food that you take in. All product packages provide, as required by food authorities (again, respect for authority and obedience of law), information about nutritious values including the amount of calories the commodity contains. Next to this most product packages contain the information that the average person is suggested to consume an average of 2000 calories per day. This suggested threshold of food intake again shows a standard of excellence that is apparently shared within the field. Being obese and consuming four times the set daily nutritious standards would be a less ethical thing to do: you do not need that amount and others that may not have as easy access to food as you do. In short: a good ethical behavior-seeking consumer is a consumer that recognizes and meets standards of excellence internal to the field of ethical consumption: he recognizes the quality of products for instance by preferring the least number of additives in commodities, and he is able to consume the right amount and he recognizes and meets ethical standards, such as fair trade and organic.

In addition to the standard of excellence that influences one's choices, intentions and motivations are of great influence in choosing to consume a certain product. To understand why someone chooses to consume a certain product, looking at the exact



moment isolated from the rest of the individual's life is simply impossible: the choice will inherently be related to behavior of people that inspired the individual, such as his parents, financial assets, established habits, or even cooking a loved one's favorite dinner. Only through understanding the context within which the choice takes place can the intention of the choice be understood. This relates to the aspect of the *narrative* as I discussed more extensively during the previous chapter.

A previous element I identified was the financial transaction. Here again aspects of MacIntyre's practice are met: rules exist such as paying the requested amount, using the currency of euros, giving the money at the counter, and indeed related authorities are respected. I then discussed the actual intake of commodities. The aspect of MacIntyre's practice related to this element is reflected in the *production of goods*. I will further discuss the production of both internal and external goods related to consumption in more detail during the following subparagraph.

As a final aspect I refer to the overall search for the ethical behavior-seeking consumer of how to do good. This search relates to understanding one's specific position and role in society, feeling responsibility to aspects related to. The overall search for how to contribute to a better world can be summarized in the word *quest*, one's ongoing search in life to understand one's *narrative*, and thereby contribute to your purpose and the communities you belong to (to speak in MacIntyre's terms). Responsibility according to MacIntyre is, as I previously discussed, strongly related to one's narrative, one's specific context, and the search for the individual good life is a search for what is good in life in general. In other words: searching for ethical consumption to contribute to the world is a final aspect of consumption that I identify and discuss here that meets with MacIntyre's theory of the practice.

Having mapped out a number of elements I identified as being main components of the act of ethical consumption I was able to relate these components to aspects of MacIntyre's practice. In other words, the act of ethical consumption as I discussed here can be considered a practice. One important element of MacIntyre's interpretation of a practice, as I discussed during the previous chapter, is the production of goods. During the following chapter I will explore how the production of goods relate to the act of ethical consumption by again assessing the main components I identified as constituting the act of consumption.

#### 4.2.2. Internal and external goods of the practice of ethical consumption

Internal goods are goods that are produced by participating in the practice and can only be gained by real participation in the authentic practice. Try to remember the example I provided of the boy playing football, initially for the money and finally for the joy of participating in the team, the match, and his own growth. These latter elements cannot be achieved in any way other than by fully committed participation: in the same way, to become a good morally reflecting, ethical consumer, studying consumption is simply insufficient. One should also take part in the act of consumption to develop the right attitude to become better able to make ethical consumer decisions. This leads to the questions: what is produced during consumption, and how is that only produced by real committed participation in the act?

During the first phase where the consumer had developed a certain *need* for consumption, no goods are produced. Most likely the need one develops is a need that many others recognize; the need to feed is a need that is shared by all of us and therefore does make us in some way part of a group of people that share this need. Here, intentions for consumption are developed but no real act takes place yet and therefore no goods are being produced yet.

By choosing a *place and time* and the *choice* for a specific product, the first goods are being produced as this choice enables one to express a certain attitude towards different aspects in the world, which was illustrated previously in the example of choosing where to buy bread. The joy of making a choice that suits your values is only to be experienced when actually buying the organic local bread: your perception of buying local, organic bread to be more ethical than buying supermarket bread does not alone give you the joy that you will experience when you actually go to the bakery and consume the organic local bread. This shows how the internal good of certain joy is experienced only when taking part in the act. But even more important than the production of the internal good of joy is the contribution to create a better world. From the point of view that, for instance, reduced transportation carbon dioxide and absence of chemical additives contribute to the environment which results in a better world, only *real* participation in this practice of ethical consumption (in this case, choosing the local organic bread) results in the internal good of a better world. This internal good of

contributing to a better world is important for the practice of ethical consumption. For the sake of clarity and space, I identified three main areas in ethical consumption that contribute to a better world. These are a focus on *social justice* (which is enhanced by, for instance, buying FairTrade products), a focus on *environmental care* (which relates to, for instance, buying organic products, reusing plastic bags and consuming only permitted kinds of fish); and *individual health*. This last aspect can be illustrated by labels that seek to enhance healthy consumption by indicating which products are a good pick in its product group and by indicating the appropriate amount of calories to be consumed. Ethical consumer choices are likely to produce internal goods in either one of these categories, all contributing to the overall, shared goal of a better world. These categories are not fully in line with the three focus points of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which focuses on the triple bottom line of People, Planet, Profit. The focus points I identified namely social justice and environmental care cover the first two aspects of CSR, while profit is not covered. The reason for this is that profit is an external good. More profit gained out of ethical consumption does not contribute to all participants of the practice. Additionally, as I previously indicated, profit, being an external good, is likely to foster competitiveness and materialism. The euro that goes to one, cannot go to another and the standard of excellence here is the more profit, the better. For that reason I argue that a focus on profit does not fit in ethical practices; profit is an external good and production of it exposes the practice to being institutionalized.

A characteristic related to this is that developing the right skill will be of great value for the whole community participating in the act, in the field of ethical consumption. When all your neighbors and the rest of your streets' inhabitants would consider it to be more ethical to consume the local organic bread produced at the small family bakery right at the corner, the bakery would perhaps be able to lower its prices due to the higher production volumes caused by the increased demand. This may for instance result in consumers, who first did not have the financial possibility to buy the more expensive organic local bread, now seeking to consume ethically by switching from the supermarket bread to this more ethical product.

To be willing to buy this organic local bread, certain attitudes for ethical consumer behavior are needed. Think of the standards of excellence: for example, the more consumers able to meet the standards of organic and local consumption (and by doing so contribute to a better world), the more other individuals in the field will benefit. The joy

of a better world, in the sense of awareness of it, is something many people can at the same time experience, which is opposed to the characteristically competitiveness of external goods. On the other hand, if in a certain district shoplifting has reached intolerable levels and shop owners have to hire expensive security guards to will check customer bags, participants that are breaking the rules reduce the amount of internal goods produced by the practice. This shows another specific characteristic of the production of internal goods: developing the right skills will be of great value for the whole community participating in the practice.

Furthermore, during the *financial transaction* a real tangible good is produced; namely, this is the good that one chooses to consume in exchange for the set financial asset. Clearly this good cannot be produced when one does not participate in the practice of consumption: without recognizing the authorities, obeying the rules, or feeling the need to do so, one will not be able to consume the specific product. Of course one may here argue that an individual that grows and eats his own cabbage is considered a consumer too, or one that steals a candy bar and eats this at home. Many other ways of interpreting consumption are possible; however, for the scope of this thesis I consider it to be most clear and reasonable to narrow down and simplify consumption as discussed above; essentially as the whole act from feeling the need up to the intake of the commodity, performed by one single person.

The above also holds true for the actual *intake of the commodity*: as I have described consumption, the one that pays for the commodity and becomes the owner is the same individual that possesses the good and is able to finally consume it. When seeing it this way, the joy of taking in the commodity and experiencing its nutritious values, tastes and looks, can only be experienced when possessing the good, which I argued to be a part of the overall act of consumption. This way the joy produced by eating a banana can only be considered to be a good internal to the practice of consumption.

As a final aspect of the act of consumption that produces important goods, I refer to what I previously discussed as the *quest* consumers experience when seeking to consume in an ethically desirable way. This is related to understanding one's narrative and purpose, and developing a sense of responsibility towards the people one is related to

in his life. By participating in ethical consumption, one practices to make ethical consumer choices and to behave in an ethical manner in the field of food, taking into account the search for knowledge needed for this, the awareness of impact in the world and related responsibilities to different aspects surrounding this. By participation, these aspects can be practiced; studying is not enough to develop a certain attitude that will contribute to making ethical choices. This shows how these goods are internal to the practice. And the more these internal goods are being developed, the more joy of ethical consumption is likely to be experienced and more participants in this field are likely to experience joy of this as well.

As previously discussed, external goods are goods such as money, power and status. Characteristic of external goods is that they are produced by a practice but other channels can produce them as well: in essence, good participation in that one practice is not the only way to create this good. Many individuals can obtain the skills one develops by participating in ethical consumption at the same time; there is no need to fight about the last piece of knowledge-seeking behavior. If I buy the last bottle of Champagne for New Year's Eve, my neighbor is no longer able to buy it. As he promised to bring home a bottle to his horribly strict and aggressive wife, he will perhaps ask me to sell him the last bottle, which gives me a certain power. This situation however is not likely to occur. Food is not a scarce good in our society and regularly no power is related to the possession of these kinds of consumer goods. With prestige, one could argue things are a little different. When I take a look at the people around me I identify a trend of buying organic food. When asked to justify their behavior, a number of the people will likely share how they believe that by doing so they contribute to a better world,. Some of them, however, will buy organic products on local markets because it is part of a certain lifestyle they pursue, which is purely based on some fashionable image they have in mind and has nothing to do with responsible behavior and a better world. Again, further sifting through psychological factors is not within the scope of my thesis and will therefore not be done here. For this reason I will be brief on discussing any further external goods produced in during consumption, most goods produced are simply internal to the activity. I do not argue here that there are no external goods related to the field of consumption, as this would be far from truth. These external goods however are not produced *in* the practice but in the *institutions* that are related to the practice. To create as complete a picture as

possible of the field of consumption through the eyes of MacIntyre, which is necessary to finally be able to discuss the virtues needed for ethical consumption, I will therefore analyze the role of institutions and the related external goods produced during the next subparagraph.

#### 4.2.3. Role of institutions

Like many other practices, the practice of ethical consumption can only persist with the support of related institutions. Identifying and discussing all related institutions and its functioning regarding the practice of consumption is excessive in relation to the scope of this thesis. However, as certain institutions do play a key role in ethical consumer decision-making, I have identified a number of these that I will briefly discuss. In doing so, I will also pay attention to difficulties these consumers face related to certain roles of institutions. This will contribute to finally identifying the virtues that will help these consumers to make ethical decisions.

For the act of consumption I identified the following groups of influential, supporting institutions: *producers* and related institutions; *sellers* and other shop-related institutions; *financial institutions*; and *lobbying and labeling institutions*. With the exception of the final category, these institutions are all related to MacIntyre's external goods such as money, power, and status, and are therefore much more sensitive to fostering competitiveness and corruption in practices than the earlier discussed internal goods, which in contrast contribute to the development of virtues. Remember, one unit like a product, a shop, a euro or being the highest authority cannot belong to two individuals or institutions at the same time.

First of all, the *producers* that deliver goods to shops are institutions supporting the practice of consumption. Other institutions related to this are, for instance, the Dutch Voedsel & Warenautoriteit, which is of relevance for regulating quality and sorts of products that are allowed for production and sale.

How do these institutions influence ethical decision-making? Meat that is nearing its expiration date cannot be sold due to the rules enforced by such authorities. Chicken that contains above threshold amount of antibiotics cannot be produced. Using the least amount of additives as possible in products aligns with certain discussed standards of excellence and, for this reason, a threshold on antibiotics in chicken will most likely not be

problematic for most ethical behavior-seeking consumers. However, what about bananas that, due to the laws of European authorities, cannot be sold because they are shaped in a distinctive manner?

What I attempt to illustrate here is that, even when you go to the largest super market you can think of, your choice will be both limited due to regulating food authorities, but also influenced by lobbying and labeling organizations that contribute to setting standards of excellence. Some institutions are likely to support standards of excellence that are recognized by the ethical behavior-seeking consumers like setting a maximum threshold of additives. Others are more likely to have a negative impact regarding ethical consumption, like banning extraordinarily-shaped products. This will perhaps not influence large players in the market but such a rule might certainly have a significant impact on smaller farmers. That does not align with certain values like seeking for fair chances, social justice and reducing food waste. It is important to keep in mind that the main goal of most producing institutions is to make maximum profit, not to create a better world. Examples of other production-related, supporting institutions would for instance be organizations regulating labor laws.

Secondly, *shops* and other related institutions: without places to sell products and regulate their sale, products cannot be sold and bought, and government authorities determine the rules for shops and selling. How do these institutions influence the consumers' decision-making?

Of course consumers have their demanding power, however shops and regulating authorities finally determine what products are being offered. Additionally, shops determine how offering and pricing strategies are organized. Consider for instance Albert Heijn, which developed its own '*Gezonde Keuze*' label. Anticipating on the government's requirement for increased investment in consumer health and on a consumer trend towards healthy lifestyles, this label influences consumers' decision making by referring to the standard of excellence that healthy products are a good choice.

Furthermore, implementing a label like *Gezonde Keuze* might seem philanthropic, and both producers and shops are likely or even required to pay a certain amount of attention to social and environmental responsibility aspects; however, one should keep in mind that contributing to a better world will not be the institutions' main goal. Perhaps this will even be done solely as a means to 'greenwash' their image to gain more loyal

customers or to prevent the government from intervening. Why is it we rarely see labels like *Gezonde Keuze* or *Ik Kies Bewust* on products like fresh vegetables or fruit? Because of a focus on profit over contributing to a better world, a conflict of interests is likely to have an undesirable influence on for instance standards of excellence. I will further elaborate on the impact of labels later in this paragraph.

The third kind of institution needed to support consumption is *financial organizations*. Without products, shops and financial assets, consumption, as I previously discussed, cannot take place. The amount of financial assets one has strongly influences ones' possibility to spend more on products that are perceived to be more ethical for consumption, such as fair trade products, products with less additives, organic food, local food and fresh food. I will not further sift through the financial aspects here, as this requires financial knowledge that falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Then there is one important field that is not a requirement for the continuation of consumption; however, as these institutions also have a significant impact on consumers' decision-making I consider it of relevant importance to be discussed here. These are *lobbying and labeling organizations*. As I noted earlier, analyzing the psychological aspects of shopping behavior, including intentions and the behavior gap, is outside scope of my thesis. For that reason I will be brief about the actual exact effect of labeling products and perceived standards of excellence within the field. What I do want to address is how labeling organizations contribute to setting standards of excellence; how these organizations may face a conflict of interest due to which their labeling may mislead consumers and how conflicting labels may pose problems on individuals' decision-making.

How do labeling organizations contribute to standards of excellence within the practice of consumption? Many such organizations perform research, inform the public about production processes, and create awareness misconduct and perceived wrongs. The Dutch foundation *BeterLeven* is for instance responsible for a star-system on eggs indicating the chickens' quality of life, and *Greenpeace* provides indications on what species of fish are, in respect of the environment, acceptable to be consumed. As a consumer you are likely to believe that the goal of such an organization is solely to create



a better world. But what if a conflict of interest can be identified and labeling is influenced by the desire to increase profits?

This situation can be more easily illustrated when referring to labeling organizations that argue to seek to contribute to the consumers' health. A couple of years ago the 'Ik Kies Bewust' (which means: 'I have consciously chosen') label was developed and implemented. Uninformed consumers would easily be convinced that products labeled with this would be better to consume. But why would that be the case? The multinational food concern Unilever was one of the initiators of this label and the reason that organizations started labeling this way was to keep the government from intervention to contribute to more informed, conscious consumer behavior. By developing the label themselves, they would be better able to focus on financial strategy and profit maximization, which are interests that conflict with the goal of informing consumers to contribute to a better world.

Also, as I discussed previously, Albert Heijn has its own food label to foster healthier consumer choice. Again, one may wonder how potential conflicts of interest influence this labeling. Indeed, there are many more organizations seeking to claim what consumer behavior is most desirable. Many organizations tell you what to do and what not to do, trying to implement their own sets of standards in the market—some with the goal to increase their profits and some with the goal to create a better world. I am not arguing here that labeling organizations are useless for this reason; rather, without labeling organizations, which often also take part in doing research and lobbying, it would be much harder for consumers who seek for ethical consumption to gain the needed amount of information and knowledge. Nevertheless, for consumers nowadays it is simply impossible to know everything there is to know about different brands, labeling organizations and the politics in which they are involved, health, production processes and other aspects of consumption. In other words: the influence that institutions such as those I have discussed have on decision-making of consumers who seek ethical consumption is significant in two ways: they contribute to knowledge needed for ethical decision-making, but due to conflicting interests accountability might be questionable. For this reason, a certain level of skepticism is desirable here.

The conflict of interests I addressed in institutions during the previous paragraph is in line with MacIntyre who argued that, in institutions, mainly external goods are

produced which are mostly money, power and status. Production of these goods, coupled with lack of production of internal goods that foster the development of courage, honesty and justice, is likely to result in competitiveness and corruption. Justice, courage and truthfulness are needed to keep practices from becoming institutions. This clearly shows that consumption itself will continue to exist as long as there are producers, shops, financial assets and regulatory institutions. However, these aspects all focus on the production of external goals, on profit maximization.

When we want to shift to ethical consumption, however, several aspects have to be added amongst others: justice, knowledge, awareness, empathy, senses of responsibility and reflection. These are all internal goods, or goods that can only be obtained by participating in a practice and that will not contribute to competitiveness within its field as many individuals can gain them at the same time. Taking all the above into account, I will during the next paragraph further discuss what virtues need to be developed by consumers in order to enhance ethical consumption.

### **4.3 Virtues for consumers**

During the previous paragraphs I further illustrated the field of consumption and the ethical behavior-seeking consumer. Also I argued why I focused on these aspects specifically. I then analyzed ethical consumption by the theory of MacIntyre. Here, I argued how consumer behavior of these specific consumers meets the requirements of MacIntyre's practice. I subsequently identified and discussed internal and external goods produced by this practice followed by a discussion of several related institutions and its influence on consumers' decision-making. Performing these steps allowed me to further identify and set out the difficulties consumers who seek to behave ethically face in the field of consumption. Together with the identified internal goods that are desirable to be produced in the practice of ethical consumption, I am now able to identify the virtues that are necessary to produce these internal goods and to improve possibilities for consumers to overcome the obstacles they face in this field.

To do so, I will first rephrase what, according to MacIntyre, a virtue looks like, then I will recap the internal goods that are desirable for production by the practice of ethical consumption, and following this, I will finally identify the virtues needed to overcome the obstacles I identified during the previous pages. In total, seven areas of internal goods and obstacles will be discussed which will be depicted in a table.

MacIntyre defined virtue as follows:

*“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and the exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>34</sup>*

The goods that are internal to the practice of ethical consumption I identified relate to a contribution caused by choosing the right products to *social justice*, *environmental care* and *individual health* and of course the joy the ethical behavior-seeking consumers experiences when contributing to one of these aspects.

Other influential difficulties I identified and discussed that these consumers face relate to dealing with overloads or too little access to information and knowledge; institutions causing accountability issues related to standards of excellence and labeling internal to the practice; and the practice’s sensibility to corruption and competition.

I will now discuss what virtues are necessary to contribute to the goods and the problems identified. Many different ways of distinguishing goods, obstacles and virtues are possible here, however fully setting out my lines of argumentation for these specific elements would be too space-consuming to include in this thesis. The distinctions I made are clear and address the most important aspects and therefore I consider it to be sufficient to perform my analyses this way.

In order to contribute to *social justice* by ethical consumer behavior, standards like fair trade should be respected. When not valuing fair trade, consumers are not likely to pay more money to consume a fairly traded product. In order to value fair trade, consumers should develop a certain sense of justice. Without this, why would a consumer care about the treatment and chances of individuals that produced the coffee he drinks every morning? A sense of justice here is not enough; one should also be able to put them into the position of the other. How would you like it if you would have to work on the fields every day, at an age of ten, supporting your parents and not being able to go to school, to play, or simply be a child? Strongly related to justice is a developed *sense of responsibility*, of taking care for the stake you have in the level of justice others are treaded with. By properly developed senses of *reflection* and *responsibility*, one will

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<sup>34</sup> MacIntyre, A. (2011): 191.

automatically act in a way that one believes to carry out justice. Consider two kinds of bananas: one kind is sold by an organization that gives such a payment to its employees that parents can afford their children to go to school; the other organization does not. Now when the consumer seeking to make an ethical choice reflects upon this situation and his impact on it by making a certain choice, proper reflection and senses of responsibility will make him choose to contribute the higher payment for the first banana in order to school the employee's kids. For this reason, I refer to both virtues of *reflection* and *responsibility* instead of mentioning justice as a separate virtue. Also needed here is a feeling of *empathy*: without being able to put yourself in the position of another, understanding what treatment would be considered fair is impossible. In other words: consumers should *seek knowledge* to find sufficient information on the impact on others related to the production chain, they should develop a certain sense of *empathy* to these people; they should *reflect* on the treatment, and then they take the *responsibility* for the stake they have by choosing to consume the product that contributes to social justice in the world.

The internal good of ***environmental care*** also starts with consumers' *knowledge-seeking* attitude. Without this, awareness of a certain wrong or impact cannot be raised. Similar to social justice, senses of *empathy* are needed here and one should be able to *reflect* on the environmental treatment he is likely to impact with his consumer behavior. This reflection should then result in taking *responsibility* by choosing the product that is most desirable to be consumed in regards to environmental care.

Furthermore, the contribution of consumption to ***individual health*** was identified. Here one should not merely think of the health of the one who buys the product; the health standards of other stakeholders in the practice can also be incorporated here. How does choosing for the low-cost chemical sweets contribute to the health of your kids, and how is the health of the rice-fields kids? How much fat and sugar is desirable to be consumed? Again, *knowledge-seeking* behavior relates to the first consumer attitude needed here, followed by senses of *empathy*, *reflection* and *responsibility*.

Related to the virtue of seeking knowledge is the previously illustrated consumers' ***information issue***. How is the consumer supposed to deal with the overload of certain information and shortages of other kinds of information? Packaging of chocolate chip cookies with fairly traded cacao will, for instance, most likely proudly inform you about the fairly traded cacao. However, what about the other ingredients, and what about

environmental impact? As stated before, it is simply impossible for consumers to gather and process all that could be of relevance to ethical decision-making. What consumers *can* do though is develop an attitude that seeks for information. This attitude of information-seeking knows how to balance this search: it is not desirable that ethical consumers spend all day searching the internet, but neither is it desirable that you let one source of information inform you and result in you making the switch to certain products without ever reflecting on and reconsidering that decision. This of course counts for all the virtues I address during this paragraph. Therefore I consider being able to balance your attitude, to be able to find the right mean as an important capacity for any virtuous behavior. Characteristically this proper balance will contribute to the production of internal goods but the right, balanced attitude will also again and again help you to be better able to find the right balance.

Then I identified ***accountability issues***, or issues caused by conflicting interests within organizations who that claim to strive for maximum contribution to creating better world but are instead influenced by profit maximization or the other way around. Similar to what I identified in relation to information issues, here consumers need to be willing and able to obtain a certain amount of *knowledge*. Following this, *reflection* should be carried out and by the means of that *responsibility* to adapt behavior should be taken.

As I discussed previously, institutions produce mainly external goods such as money, power and prestige—all very sensitive to ***competition and corruption***. In order to keep practices from becoming institutionalized, virtues are needed. As many institutions support the practice of ethical consumption, consumers have to deal with institutions in this field on a daily basis. In order to keep themselves from being influenced by competition and corruption, senses of *truthfulness* and *consistency* have to be developed and practiced. Ethical consumers need to stay truthful to their final goal of the practice; to contribute to a better world. Consistent, truthful behavior is needed here in order to be able to deal with competitiveness and corrupt practices.

Another virtue that, according to MacIntyre, is needed to keep practices from being institutionalized is *courage*. Courage to stay truthful to the ethical, virtuous attitude you are developing and courage to make the choices that this certain attitude results in, which may, on certain points, differ from regular shopping behavior. Again, finding the right balance is important here, as too little courage results in the vice of cowardliness and too much courage results in recklessness.

The following chart clearly summarizes the identified issues and related virtues needed to deal with the areas of difficulty.

| Issue                                   | Related Virtues   |
|---|---|
| 1. Increased social justice             | Knowledge-seeking; empathy; reflection; responsibility  |
| 2. Increased environmental care         | Knowledge-seeking; empathy; reflection; responsibility; |
| 3. Increased individual health          | Knowledge-seeking; empathy; reflection; responsibility; |
| 4. Reduced nr. of information issues    | Knowledge-seeking; reflection; responsibility;          |
| 5. Reduced nr. of accountability issues | Knowledge-seeking; reflection; responsibility;          |
| 6. Reduced competition & corruption     | Truthfulness; consistency                               |
| 7. Dare to choose differently           | Courage   |

*Figure 1: Issues and virtues for consumers*

#### 4.4. Sub-conclusions

During this chapter on ethical consumption I have first further explored the field of ethical consumption; I defined consumption and discussed the ethical behavior-seeking consumers. This enabled me to move on to discuss how ethical consumption can be argued to be a practice: the shared goal of contributing to a better world, obedience of rules and respect for authorities, the standards of excellence; and the production of goods were identified amongst others which meet MacIntyre's practice criteria. From there I identified the internal goods produced by the practice, amongst which the main goods included increased social justice, increased environmental care, increased individual health, and increased knowledge. Then I discussed what institutions relate to this consumer practice and how these institutions are likely to influence ethical decision-making. Here I identified two groups of obstacles on the path of the consumer. The first group relates to the internal goods produced and the practice's shared goal: contributing to a better world by focusing on *social justice*, *environmental care*, and *individual health*. Related to overall aspects of the practice I identified the following areas of difficulty: *information issues*, *accountability issues*, *competition & corruption* and whether or not consumers *dare to choose differently*. I concluded that the virtues needed to overcome obstacles in these fields and to develop an attitude that will enable ethical decision-

making in the field of consumption, are *knowledge-seeking, empathy, reflection, responsibility, truthfulness, consistency* and *courage*. These virtues can only be developed by repeatedly participating in the practice. Only when virtues are possessed, the important internal goods of increased social justice, environmental care and individual health can be produced.

Finally, based on the, previous I conclude that ethical consumption results from consumer choices based on the goal of creating a better world which can be reached by participating in this practice and effectively practicing the virtues I identified in order to produce a maximum amount of internal goods. I will further discuss my final conclusions in the final chapter.

## 5. Discussion

In this chapter, I will first provide my final conclusions. Following this, in the ‘Critical Discussion’, I will identify several aspects of MacIntyre’s approach in general that leave room for improvement. I will additionally provide several points of criticism towards the applicability of his approach to ethical consumption specifically. Finally, during the paragraph ‘MacIntyre and the Postmodern World’, I will argue that MacIntyre’s approach does not meet the characteristics of the postmodern society, focusing on, amongst other things, the role and kinds of contemporary communities. Finally I will provide several suggestions for further research on MacIntyre’s virtue ethical approach related to ethical consumption.

### 5.1 Conclusion

I started this research because the way society faces some real challenges today in its functioning. Many of these challenges are, in one way or another, related to consumer behavior. There is a growing trend of consumers who seek to behave in an ethical manner. These consumers face difficulties related to how to make their consumer choices. Thus, what is needed for them to make the right choice?

Different ethical approaches would have been possible when seeking to answer this question. I argued that virtue ethics is an appropriate approach here because this ethical theory aligns with certain characteristics typical for the postmodern society we live in, such as plurality, different backgrounds and preferences. Also, because virtue ethics could trigger motivation by paying attention to inner morality, and because virtues are learned by practice and repetition, I argued this approach to be suitable here. Referring to virtue ethical theory in order to meet the challenges faced by individuals seeking ethical consumer behavior resulted in the following research question: *What virtues are necessary to practice for individuals that seek to behave ethically in order to foster ethical consumer behavior?*

To answer this question, I had to narrow it down in several aspects. First clarification about the concept of virtue was necessary. In order to further illustrate the concept of virtue, I first discussed the important characteristics of Aristotle’s virtue ethical theory and concluded that a virtue is an attitude that is learned by practice. A right attitude will enable you to find the right mean and make the right choice. This is another



reason why virtue ethics is relevant for ethical consumption, as case-by-case reasoning would be too much to require of consumers.

Having created a foundational understanding of virtue ethical theory through the introduction of Aristotle's approach, I moved on to see what a more contemporary virtue ethical approach could mean for ethical consumption. Here I referred to the virtue ethical theory of Alasdair MacIntyre. I illustrated how he referred to society as *emotivism* and why this moral vacuum in which he argues we live would be problematic. I showed that, according to MacIntyre, practices and the production of internal goods are needed to fight the problems society faces. Additionally I showed how virtues serve these practices: only because of the development of virtues can internal goods be produced. Furthermore, I illustrated that the development of virtues is motivated in society because ones' social position in society is determined by ones' ability to exceed in practices, which is caused by the successful development of virtues.

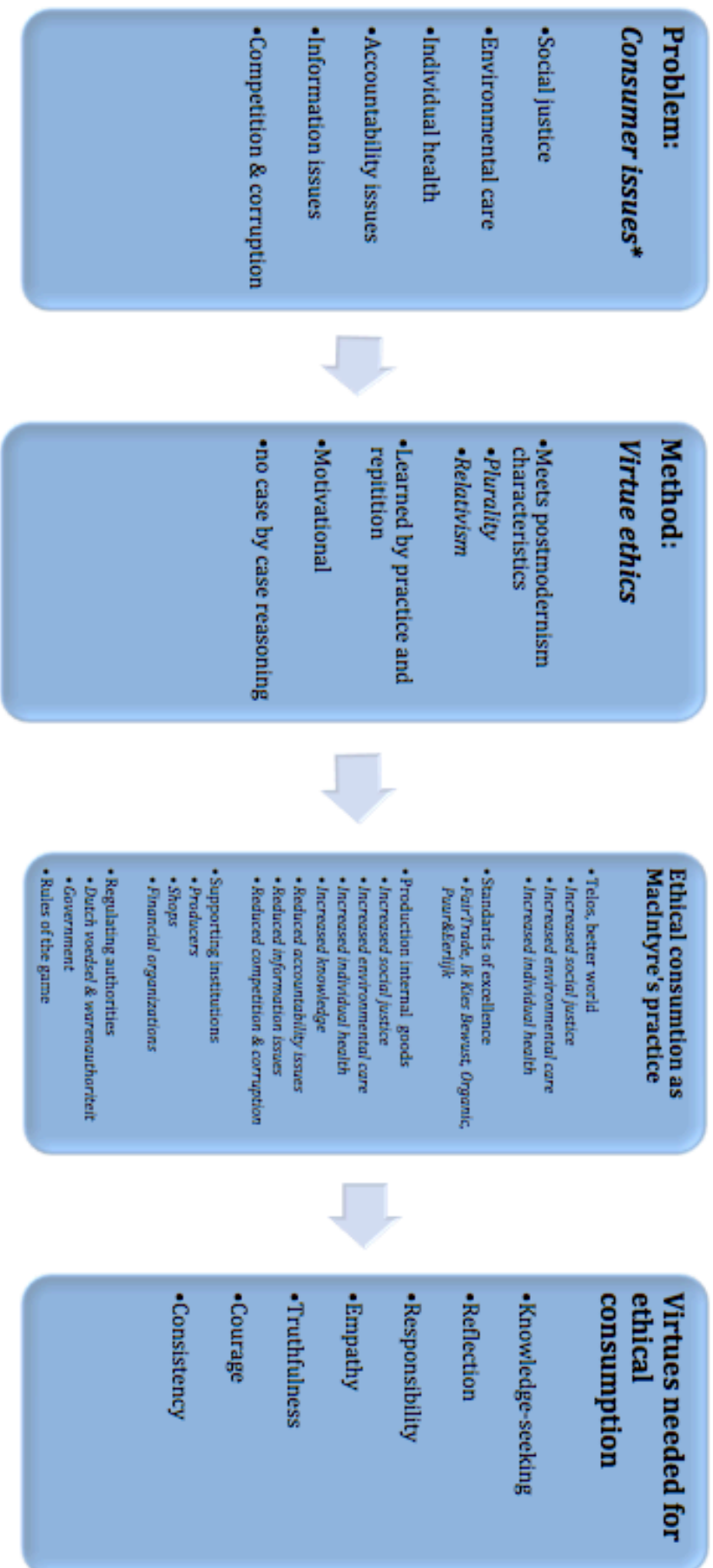
Having created the fundamental understanding of virtue ethics in general and virtue ethics in our postmodern society specifically, I was finally able to see what MacIntyre's ethical theory could offer to the difficulties that consumers who seek for ethical consumption, face. How can MacIntyre's theory provide any guidance, what virtues are needed to overcome these difficulties?

Here I clarified why I focused on the consumer who seeks to behave ethically and I noted the specific problems these consumers face, like how to contribute to a better world, focusing on social justice, environmental care, individual health, as well as how to deal with accountability issues, information issues, and balancing their behavior through knowledge-seeking and senses of responsibility and care. I argued that ethical consumption meets MacIntyre's criteria of the practice due to the shared purpose of contributing to a better world, internal rules of the game and respect for authorities, shared standards of excellence, and the production of goods. The main internal goods produced by the practice I identified were contributions to social justice, environmental care, and individual health by choosing products that seek for a positive impact on these aspects and raising awareness. Knowledge increases when consumers participate in the practice of ethical consumption. This contributes to better individual understanding of ones' narrative and purpose, which in turn helps to develop the desired attitude and to reflect on society and individual behavior.

Having argued that ethical consumption is a practice that contributes to a better world, I showed how producers, shops, governments and lobbying/labeling institutions are the main institutions supporting and influencing ethical consumption. I illustrated the specific difficulties faced by consumers in relation to these institutions, which include institutions seeking to affect ethical decision-making by, for instance, setting or influencing standards of excellence within the market, influenced by conflicts of interest.

Finally I was able to answer the question what virtues would be needed to be developed in order to produce the maximum amount of internal goods within the practice of ethical consumption, and to develop an attitude that leads to making ethically-desirable choices and overcome the obstacles discussed, such as the impact of information and related institutions on their decision-making. Through referring to issues these specific consumers face, I concluded that the virtues needed for developing an attitude that enables one to make the right consumer choice are knowledge seeking, empathy, reflection, responsibility, truthfulness, consistency, and courage. Related to all virtues is the requested capacity to be able to find the right balance, the right means. I conclude that for consumers that strive for ethical consumption, behaving in such a way that simply ‘feels good’ is not enough. Always going to the same supermarket and buying products that are labeled organic, is not enough. Following the Fair Trade label is not enough. To engage in ethical consumption, simply following rules is insufficient. Rather, an active attitude is necessary; one should actively and on an ongoing basis seek for information and increased knowledge; and one should continue to reflect on his behavior and responsibilities. One should reflect upon authorities and labeling organizations that influence the standards of excellence in the field of ethical consumption. Indeed, this is not simply to follow these standards but to also be able to critically reflect upon them and find the right balance between adapting towards their standards and following one’s own senses of ethical consumer behavior, developed by their knowledge-seeking, reflecting attitude with the right senses of empathy and responsibility. To be able to do all this, courage, truthfulness and consistency are needed. An illustration summarizing the main steps of the process is provided on the next page.

**Figure 2: process towards required virtues**



\* Here I refer to the issues that are faced by a consumer that seeks to consume ethically.

Proper participation in the practice of ethical consumption has many advantages. Besides the production of internal goods, participation gives individuals the opportunity to practice the virtues again and again, contributing to the development of the right attitude, the production of internal goods, and the ultimate goal of a better world, which is a gain not only for the individuals contributing to it but to all that participate in the practice. The search of how to contribute to a better world meets with MacIntyre's perception of how to live the individual good life: the individual good life is to be found in a search for what is good for society, for life in general. I therefore conclude that, as consumption is an act we all engage in on a daily basis, participating in the practice of ethical consumption and developing the virtues I identified is certainly an important thing to do.

## 5.2. Critical discussion

The virtue ethical approach presented by Alasdair MacIntyre has been one of the most influential works written on virtue ethics these days. I sympathize with his perception of the fragmented morality we face in our lives and I personally recognize the search for meaning and community-based activities in my own life and in the lives of a great number of people around me. Nevertheless, both MacIntyre's theory and his way of writing are complex. Also the applicability, determinacy and explanatory power of his ethical approach leave room for critique. During the following paragraph I will briefly discuss several general and more specific points of criticism regarding the definition of practices, participation in practices, the concept of traditions, authority and closed communities.

First of all, the **concept of practices** MacIntyre refers to remains rather vague. He does provide criteria, which should be met in order to be a practice like the discussed standards of excellence and internal goods produced; however, there does not seem to be any further thresholds on what may constitute a practice. Regarding the example of football, we would all intuitively agree that participation would not be a bad thing to do. However, what about practices that would not be intuitively considered as good by all? Consider torture, for example; torture is a complex process with typical goals of receiving desired information by performing certain actions intending to harm the subject. Perhaps

internal goods will be produced as the torturer will be able to develop his skills towards excellent behavior which is not possible to be done external to the practice and which will perhaps even make the torturer receive respect and feel joy about his excellence in the practice. Despite this, would you want your son to develop the virtues necessary to beat the obstacles he will face during his search for the good life like honesty, courage and justice by participating in a practice like torture? MacIntyre does identify the fact that torture can be argued to be a practice according to his theory, however he does not seem to be able to provide sufficient explanation why it would not be relevant to further address examples such as this or why it would be acceptable or even desirable to participate in all kinds of practices—even torture.

This leads to the next point of critique I would like to address. It does not become clear to me why people have to **participate in practices** sufficiently. Let us take a look at the boy playing football again. After a while the boy becomes a better player and he does not play solely for the money anymore; due to real participation in the practice, he starts developing the right skills which give him internal goods like joy of playing and being a member of the team. But why would the boy seek for this? One argument could be that within the practice of football he is able to develop the virtues of honesty, courage and justice, which will help him in the rest of his life. However, why not develop these virtues while meeting the specific obstacles in life in general? Also, if virtues can only be developed by participating in a certain practice, what about the virtue of consistency? It seems that for this virtue it is not possible to focus at participation in one practice only. And why should one strive to obtain internal goods? An explanation could be that internal goods benefit the community you are part of. However, as the goal of life is to search for the good life, MacIntyre should at least clarify how then all production of internal goods would contribute to the good life in general, or give another argument why one would be motivated to produce internal goods. MacIntyre does not seem to be able to address why specifically participating in any practices smaller than the overall practice of life specifically is what one should strive for.

Also the concept of **tradition** leaves room for improvement. Respect for tradition is supposed to contribute to the unity one seeks to find in his life. Understanding tradition will contribute to developing the right attitude, showing the normative aspect of the concept of tradition. But as many different social roles have to be taken in life, and people participate in a number of different practices, how should one deal with different moral

traditions? Is there one tradition that can be identified as more important than the others? Any hierarchy? Or just one all-determining tradition like sticking to a certain religion or nationality? What about the football boy who has a Jewish father and a Muslim mother? To which tradition is he supposed to adhere? And what about the following situation: An Eritrean family is strictly Muslim and in support of the idea that girls are not supposed to go to school. The family including one daughter arrives as refugees in the Netherlands where girls do go to school. What tradition should the family stay true to? Many more examples can illustrate situations in which traditions conflict and MacIntyre's theory does not seem to provide an answer to situations like these.

Additionally, I discussed how MacIntyre argued respect for the highest **authority** regarding practices to be an important element, a conception that reflects his Catholic point of view. In today's society, however, this is a controversial approach. In general, people do not seem to approve of one authority holding an exemplary role of determining what behaviors would be desirable in others. This is an aspect of the emotivist society we live in (as MacIntyre calls it): we live in a pluralist society, with many different backgrounds and we want to be free to choose whatever we desire. This is exactly what is, according to MacIntyre, problematic today; our moral utterances are merely personal preferences. But how does he picture our pluralistic society to respect one authority as being *the* one authority continuing certain moral trends within specific fields? How does this fit with democracy and with respect for alternative points of view?

Furthermore, MacIntyre takes **closed communities** as a starting point for society's functioning and his theoretical approach. In the society we currently live in however, closed communities barely exist. Consumption these days takes place in a globalized economy, in a world in which production lines are spread over many countries linking stakeholders all over the world in different ways to each other. A collection of individuals performing similar acts does not make a community. He identified the development of fragmentation in society and he argued that one should understand his narrative in order to identify the communities that he belongs to. In society today however, it seems to me that understanding my narrative will not be able to tell me which community I am supposed to serve when buying a certain product. As my buying behavior nowadays may have an impact on people on the other side of the world, I am in a way related to these people which could arguably make me part of their community in some way. Additionally, due to the massive extent of technological developments and the

interconnectedness of the world, it can be argued that the world functions more and more like one massive community. Individuals nowadays, when seeking to consume in an ethical manner, are not likely to be able to serve the closed communities they live in as this is simply no longer what the world looks like, showing another area of improvement regarding MacIntyre's approach.

### 5.3 MacIntyre and the postmodern world

MacIntyre's virtue ethical theory and his argumentation seem to show important missing elements here, making it hard for individuals to really find guidance, specifically in extremely fragmented lives, which were exactly the kinds of lives MacIntyre aimed at most. His theoretical approach enabled me to analyze ethical consumption as a practice and identify virtues desirable for development in order to serve the practice by producing internal goods. His theory did not, however, enable me to, amongst others, identify the communities that individuals participating in the practice should seek to serve. Due to the above-discussed limitations of MacIntyre's approach, I conclude that his approach is not fully suitable for the postmodern society we presently live in.

Considering this, how can his approach be meaningful in our postmodern society? Two options are possible to choose here. The first option is to go back to living in closed, small communities. His approach would have fit within the kind of society where there still was a shared desire to live in villages again, in small communities that did not depend on outsiders. At present, however, it does not seem possible that society can be changed in such a way that we could all start living in closed communities again. The other option is to reconsider his theory by adapting it to postmodern communities. Due to technological improvements, we do not live in merely physical communities, sharing activities with people that are physically close to us. Instead we live in virtual and global communities too; technology has enabled us to participate in practices with people that one is merely virtually connected to, situated all over the world. One of the problems consumers seeking ethical consumption face is related to the tension between these two aspects. Is it from an ethical point of view most desirable to buy local fruit, or would it be right to buy a fair trade banana transported from the other side of the world?

Some may argue for the first alternative, other for the latter. I would like to argue that, with reference to one's narrative story, a local apple would be a good pick. I would however also argue that the village I would live in should definitely have Internet access

to share practices with people sharing the same view all over the world. I will not further analyze these two options of how to deal with communities here. Instead, I suggest further research to elaborate these aspects, to analyze how the kinds of communities today's society has are organized. How can MacIntyre's focus on understanding one's narrative and serving the communities in which you are a part be valuable in a society where communities may be fragmented over time and place in a totally different manner than in the time that MacIntyre developed his theory?

Another step that would be interesting to take in the future could be to further analyze the virtues I identified to be needed for ethical consumption here. As I previously argued that virtues consist of the *intellectual component*, the *affective component* and the *motivation-behavioral component*, what do these components look like? What does that tell us about the virtues and how to best develop them? Could it give any information about any possible hierarchy within the virtues needed?



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