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Practices: The Aristotelian Concept*

Abstract: Social practices are widely regarded as the bedrock that turns one's spade, beneath which no further justifications for action can be found. Followers of the later Wittgenstein might therefore be right to agree with Heideggerians and neo-pragmatists that philosophy's traditional search for first principles should be abandoned. However, the concept of practices has played a very different role in the philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre. Having once helped lead the assault on foundationalism in both moral and social philosophy, his elaboration of an Aristotelian' concept of practices in *After Virtue* has since led him to embrace a metaphysical teleology. This paper attempts to outline MacIntyre's Aristotelian concept, and to identify its ethical, political and philosophical significance.

0. Goods, Rules, and Institutions

Aristotle was the first great philosopher of *praxis* or action, and of human beings as actors. He begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the proposition that "every craft and every enquiry and every action and pursuit" aims at some good, and it was in pursuing this thought that MacIntyre first characterized his own philosophy as 'Aristotelian', in *After Virtue*. There, MacIntyre says that some good is aimed at by each of many artistic, intellectual and other disciplines, and it is these that he denotes by the term 'practices'.

MacIntyre's Aristotelian concept of practices immediately contrasts with more familiar accounts of practices, conceived in terms of rule-following. For MacIntyre, also, rules are necessary to a practice, but what is more essential are the goals or goods that give point and purpose to those rules. Whereas practices are usually conceived in terms of rule-conforming behaviour, MacIntyre describes them as social kinds of goal-orientated action. On his Aristotelian account, to engage in a practice is to participate in the sharing not only of rules but also of goods, and therefore of reasons for action and—potentially, at least—of cooperative reasoning about action.

This relation of rules to goods may be illustrated by reference to *After Virtue*'s famous account of teaching a child chess (MacIntyre 2007a, 188). The good that the child wants is 'candy'. The child is bribed to play chess by the offer

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of candy, and of more sweets if she wins. She is thereby initiated into a social practice, and is compelled to learn its rules. However, so long as the only good she pursues is that of candy, she will only act in conformity with the rules of chess insofar as such rule-following enables her to acquire candy. She will be motivated to cheat if this might enable her to acquire yet more candy, and she will be motivated to abandon chess if she can more easily acquire sweets in some other way—sweets, like the money that can be used to purchase them, being a good that is ‘external’ to chess. Against this, MacIntyre postulates another kind of good which is ‘internal to the practice’ of chess. The goods internal to chess include the good of becoming an excellent chess-player, and this is a good that can only be acquired through practice, through conscientiously following the rules of chess, and through learning skills and emulating standards of excellence that have been developed by other chess-players. Insofar as our child internalizes this good, she will have a reason to act in pursuit of it rather than of candy, and such socialization into a practice may be regarded as socializing and educating her desires. This is a good that is internal to the practice of chess, in the sense that it is limited to those who participate in the practice of chess-playing. More precisely, it may be said to be ‘internal to’ individuals qua chess-players. However, the goods internal to chess are not all reducible to the good of its individual participants. In advancing standards of excellence in chess (e.g. through refining an opening variation), chess-players also progress the game itself, as a historically and socially given kind of activity, in an analogous way to that in which excellent artists, scientists, engineers and farmers can progress their particular practices.

On an Aristotelian account, practices require rules but are not defined by them. To non-participants, a practice may appear to be constituted by rule-following behaviour,¹ but to its participants (at least, if the practice is in good order) these rules are means to a good internal to the practice. Therefore, even though a practice cannot be sustained if its participants do not normally act in accordance with its rules, those rules may be broken or changed in a way that advances the practice rather than transforms it into a different practice. This is what renders MacIntyre’s concept of practices progressive, rather than conservatively conventionalist.

MacIntyre differentiates practices from ‘institutions’.² Practices, he says, require organizational institutions. The latter work for the good of practices by enforcing the rules of the practice, and also by acquiring and distributing such external goods as money, power and status. For example, chess is sustained locally by chess clubs and internationally by the Fédération Internationale des Échecs. Together, the practice of chess and its regulatory institutions form what MacIntyre calls “a single causal order” (194). The good of chess is actualized by

¹ As ‘institutions’ are on the account of John Searle. For what is presented as an Aristotelian (and MacIntyrean) critique of Searle, see Rust 2006, 166–182.

² MacIntyre here differs from Rawls (and from Searle, following Rawls; Searle 1964, 55), who differentiated from act-utilitarianism a rule-utilitarianism conceived in terms of the constitutive rules of social practices. He retained his use of ‘practices’ and ‘institutions’ as synonyms in elaborating his contractarian theory of justice; compare Rawls 1999a, 20, and 1999b, 47, with 1999c, 48.

chess players, but institutions serve this end by organizing, funding and policing chess tournaments.

MacIntyre conceptualizes institutions, like practices, in terms of good-orientated action. “Characteristically”, an institution is not itself structured in terms of the rules of the practice it organizes, and nor is it characteristically structured by pursuit of the good internal to that practice. Rather, institutions are “structured in terms of” external goods (194), rather as practices are structured in terms of internal goods. The acquisition and use of power, money and status informs the reasons for action of officials, rather as the actualization of goods internal to practices informs the reasoning of practitioners. Therefore, the single causal order paradigmatically constituted by a practice and an institution is the site of an ineradicable tension, and of a potential conflict, between the active pursuit of two different kinds of good.

After Virtue accords priority to practices over institutions because it prioritizes goods over rules, and because it prioritizes goods internal to practices over goods external to practices. On MacIntyre’s Aristotelian account, the point of attributing power, money and authority to a chess club, or to FIDE, is to sustain and progress the playing of chess. The goods internal to chess therefore provide a standard by which to judge the actions not only of chess-players but also of the game’s officials, and all participants in the practice can participate in reasoning about those goods, standards and actions.

Officials are most likely to act for the good of a practice insofar as they are themselves participants, who themselves understand and freely pursue that practice’s internal good. However, there is always the danger that an institution may use the external goods at its disposal for ends other than that of the good internal to the practice it organizes. The greater the separation of an institution from the practice it sustains, the greater is this danger. As MacIntyre says, “without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions” (194). From his Aristotelian perspective, and (on his account) from the perspective of individuals qua practitioners, the causal order constituted by a practice and an institution is in good order insofar as the goods pursued by the institution are deployed to subserve the good internal to the practice.

1. Effectiveness, Excellence, and Moral Virtue

MacIntyre intends his sociology of practices, institutions and goods as an analysis of real social relations, and he has therefore called for “empirical studies of past and present relationships between institutions and practices” (2008a, 6) that would be susceptible to verification or falsification. However, an Aristotelian sociology cannot be a positivist one. MacIntyre’s express motivation in elaborating a social theory is to identify plausible bases for a causal, explanatory account of such virtues as truthfulness, courage, and justice. A “function of the virtues” (2007a, 194) is to resist the corrupting power of institutions, but more important is the function of practices in cultivating the virtues.

The ‘causal order’ constituted by a practice and an institution involves two different kinds of causality, because it includes two very different kinds of good. One kind of good is teleological. That is, it is a kind of good that inheres within a being as a potentiality which can be actualized within that being over time, given favourable external conditions. The classic account of such a good is elaborated by Aristotle, especially in his *Metaphysics*, and his *Ethics* may be interpreted as an account of the actualization of naturally and specifically human potentialities. This is how MacIntyre has always understood Aristotle’s account of the virtues.

The second kind of causality is efficient causation. If the first kind of causality is internal to a being, this second kind concerns the effect of one entity upon another. For actors, effectiveness is the quality of being able to bring about some state of affairs; sometimes, by manipulating or controlling other individuals or by contracting with them to construct an institution apart from any practice (1998a, 239–240).³ Power, money and status, which *After Virtue* characterized as goods external to practices, are redescribed in the sequel to that book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (henceforth *Whose Justice?*), as ‘goods of effectiveness’. Such goods may be acquired, possessed, accumulated, disposed of, and used. From an Aristotelian standpoint, they are indeed properly regarded as goods but ethically only as *instrumental* goods, necessary conditions, or “external means to an end” (184).

From such a teleological standpoint, external goods of effectiveness are necessary conditions of the actualization of one’s internal potential as a human being. A *telos* may be understood as an internal cause or power of development and motion, but actualization of the human *telos* is always dependent upon external causes or conditions. It is a failing of Michael Thompson’s recent quasi-Aristotelian account of practices that he fails to distinguish between internal and external goods, even in this sense. Thompson (misquoting Hegel) rejects the “‘external’ point of view of teleology” (Thompson 2008, 13), but nonetheless says much in the name of ‘life-forms’ that might be similarly said in the veritably teleological terms of a specifically *internal* causation. If he were to more happily accept the teleological idea of a good internal to individuals of a specific kind, then he might happily move on to MacIntyre’s idea of a good internal to shared kinds of activity. Thompson’s attempt to advance an Aristotelian concept of practice in critical engagement with contractarian accounts would be greatly assisted were he first to engage critically with the advances already made by MacIntyre.

³ MacIntyre would not deny that contractarian *explanations* of action accurately describe the individual motivation for much that occurs within, for example, capitalist markets, but he would likely say that such accounts are ‘moral fictions’ that represent an ‘institutionalized mistake’ about the social nature of human agency. Therefore, from Aristotelian view, contractarian explanations of action are inferior to explanations that can fully account for the *social* nature of human agency (and of individuals’ rational choices, in a way that is incompatible with the idea of an aggregative ‘public choice’). Here, those concerned with elaborating contractarian *justifications* of action would likely concede much, as in what is said by Rawls of “natural duties” (Rawls 1999c, 98–100, 293–299) and by Scanlon of “the Principle of Established Practices” (Scanlon 1998, 339).

The theorist who has taken most seriously the implications of the essential human need for external goods is Karl Marx. For Aristotle, as for Marx, one cannot actualize one's potential if one has to labour under another's command because of one's lack of resources, but on Aristotle's account goods of effectiveness can also *detract* from the actualization of one's potential for excellence as a human being. Aristotle had no idea that one's effectiveness over others might corrupt one's own character, but he did argue that the accumulation of money through commerce—as opposed to its use, for the good of one's household—is a goal that is incompatible with the actualization of one's human potential. This argument informs ethical critiques of 'capitalism', as a social structure that makes human beings means to the accumulation of capital. For MacIntyre, as for Aristotle, one should act in pursuit of goods of effectiveness only to the extent that one needs these goods in order to exercise control over one's own further agency.

In *Whose Justice?*, MacIntyre contrasts goods of effectiveness with 'goods of excellence'. These goods of excellence are the moral virtues, which are goods of character or personality internal to human beings. They are teleological goods to be aimed at, cultivated, and progressively actualized. They are that for the sake of which goods of effectiveness should be expended, in a teleologically rational ordering of goods.

MacIntyre had already described goods internal to practices in terms of 'excellence'. Goods internal to practices include both the excellence of the best practitioners qua practitioners and "the excellence of the products" (189), and these two kinds of excellence internal to practices inform "standards of excellence which are [...] partially definitive of" practices (187). Such standards of excellence internal to a practice are the best approximations to perfection so far achieved, and provide it "with the good toward which those who participate in it move". This standard is something achieved and advanced by the best practitioners, and MacIntyre insists on the importance of two kinds of qualitative distinction:

"that between what merely seems good to us here now and what really is good to relative to us here now, and that between what is good relative to us here now and what is good or best unqualifiedly", as with the difference "between excellent apprentice work and a supremely excellent masterpiece." (1988, 30–31; cf. 1998b, 140; 1998c, 121; 1990, 61–62)

All participants in a practice can reason about the good internal to that practice, but some are best able to judge and to innovate because they best understand the highest standards so far achieved. Others are able to advance their own understanding insofar as they are willing 'to learn as an apprentice learns'.

MacIntyre argues that the two kind of excellence—of individuals qua moral actors, and of individuals qua practitioners—are related, in that practices are the schools of the virtues. "It is through initiation into [...] practices, through education into the skills and virtues which [...] they require, and through an understanding of the relationship of those skills and virtues to the achievement

of the goods internal to [...] those practices that we first find application in everyday life for just such a teleological scheme of understanding as that which Aristotle presents at a very different level of philosophical sophistication in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.” (1998b, 140)

On an Aristotelian account one becomes virtuous by training one’s inclinations, though practice. Such training will involve rule-following but cannot be exhausted by it, and MacIntyre draws on post-Wittgensteinian rule-scepticism in arguing that “what can never be done is to reduce what has to be learned in order to excel at [a practice] to the application of rules” (1988, 31; cf. 1999, 93).⁴ More important than conformity to rules is the emulation of standards of excellence. Only by purposively striving to understand and to emulate what is the best practice so far can one actualize one’s own practical excellence. And when one successfully emulates those standards, one will find that further “achievement proceeds both by rule-keeping and by rule-breaking” (1988, 31).

In moral theory, the paradigmatic example of a practice is normally taken to be that of promising. MacIntyre would not dissent from the general equation of morality with promise-keeping and of moral virtue with promise-keeping that is habitual, but he argues that there are reasons for which it is clearly right to break a promise (2006a, 97–98). So, for example, a promise made to one who “has inadvertently disclosed confidential information concerning future events on the stock market [...] that the information will go no further” ought to be broken if “passing on this information to the trustees of a charity for gravely ill children can [avert] a financial calamity for the charity” (2006a, 86). On MacIntyre’s account, common goods determine rights and trump rules.

It is through being socialized into the idea that there are goods greater than the satisfaction of one’s immediate passions and desires that one learns to subordinate those feelings to one’s practical reasoning, and thereby educates and orders one’s desires and dispositions. Morality is a shared set of rules and virtues, but its shared rationale derives from shared goals.

2. Goods of Conflict

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle differentiated efficient from final causation, and production from *praxis*. In the *Ethics*, he differentiated skill from excellence. On his account, excellence in production was an attribute of the product, not of the producer, and any life spent in production was incapable of achieving virtue. Here, MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism departs from that of Aristotle.

MacIntyre’s idea of production is anthropocentric. Production is a human activity that occurs in society, not, as for Aristotle, a process that occurs in the product. MacIntyre’s sociology of practices, goods and excellences theorizes how human beings can transform their desires, and therefore their actions and themselves as actors, when they engage in “any coherent and complex form of

⁴ For *After Virtue*’s discussion of the relation of virtue to law, see 150–155. The most incisive statement of rule-scepticism was published in its final version, Kripke 1982, the year after *After Virtue* first appeared.

socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve [...] standards of excellence” characteristic of that practice (2007a, 187). What he says of institutions, of external goods, and also of money, power and status as ‘goods of effectiveness’, theorizes why individuals often fail to emulate standards of excellence internal to any practice, and therefore fail to actualize their potential. If social activities are dominated by institutions that pursue only goods external to any practice, then actors will be precluded from pursuing goods of excellence. Under capitalism, most work is so dominated. Whereas acting in pursuit of a good internal to a practice inculcates the virtues, being alienated from one’s own activity can only cause demoralization. Here, MacIntyre follows the early Marx. What Aristotle explained naturalistically, by reference to the alleged incapacity of certain kinds of human actor, MacIntyre explains historically and sociologically.⁵

What MacIntyre says of practices, goods and excellences is intended to be more than an empirically applicable and explanatory theory. Like the early Marx, he wishes to overcome the standpoint of capitalism and thinks that this cannot be done “by theory alone, that is, by theory divorced from practice, but only by a particular kind of practice, practice informed by a particular kind of theory rooted in that same practice” (1998d, 225). He does not intend by this either what later Marxists called ‘praxis’ or what post-structuralists have called ‘theoretical practice’. To the contrary, he intends “the standpoint of social practice” that is “prior to both enquiry and theory” (230). This must be an indefinitely plural standpoint, internal to a multiplicity of different practices. Aristotelianism—which allows for an indefinite plurality of different goods, each understood as a specific reason for action—is, MacIntyre argues, the philosophical perspective that articulates the common sense of artists, artisans, and other kinds of practitioner. His Aristotelian tradition is, therefore, intended to be understood as much more than a philosophical tradition. It is also to be understood as a tradition of practical rationality; of, that is, the rationality of those engaged in social practices.

Here, it is necessary to move beyond such sociologically underdetermined examples of practices as those ‘games’ cited by Wittgenstein. MacIntyre’s candy-desiring child might be thought to learn either of two contrary lessons from her initiation into the practice of chess. MacIntyre would have her learn the moral lesson that it is good to *become* an excellent chess player, to transform her desires and her self through practice in playing by the shared rules of the game. However, she could as easily learn that it is good to win, to succeed at the expense of others. In this case, she should value goods of effectiveness rather than of moral excellence. If this were the lesson learned, then she need not transform her desires. Instead, her instinctive desire for candy would be supplemented by a socialized desire for money, status and power. Indeed, on a rival account, this lesson could reinforce an instinctive will to power. Here, personal excellence is equated with one’s effectiveness rather than with any adherence to shared

⁵ To this, MacIntyre (1999) adds a strongly egalitarian argument for the virtuous treatment of actors who really are incapacitated, through age, illness or physical or mental disability.

precepts. After all, an excellent chess player must be capable of defeating other players.

MacIntyre shares with Nietzsche the idea that practical reasoning should neither idealize categorical imperatives in isolation from hypothetical imperatives nor be conflated with the rationality of institutions, and this because ethics should be inseparable from individuals' real character and practice. Unfortunately, as William James regretfully acknowledged, the practice in which shared goals have seemed to most forcefully motivate actors is that of war. MacIntyre has also acknowledged this in following Nietzsche and Heidegger's tracing of the history of Western ethics back to Homeric Greece. Here, the highest personal excellence was regarded as that exemplified in martial heroism and victory over others, but MacIntyre argues against Nietzsche that these heroic actions are to be explained by reference to the actors' social roles. It is a long way from this masculine ideal to contemporary ideas of virtue, including MacIntyre's, but he still cites those subject to military standards and threats of death as amongst the paragons of virtue, and he still refers to morally educative "goods of conflict" (e.g. MacIntyre 2006b). In *Whose Justice?* he also still illustrated the participatively impersonal form of goods internal to practices by reference to a game, albeit now the kind of team game learned on the playing fields of Eton or Rugby in which one has "a structured role" (1988, 141). Here, although one has to cooperate with others, the reason for action remains victory.

Aristotle here poses a radical alternative to Nietzsche. On Aristotle's account, war should only be waged for the sake of peace. Victory may be a sign of excellence, and one's domination of others may be a necessary condition of one's excellence, but domination or competitive success are not good in themselves. He begins the *Ethics* by postulating a teleological hierarchy of goods in which bridles are produced for the sake of war, but adds that the rational ordering of goods is the architectonic task of politics, that politics is a peaceful occupation, and that the highest occupation of all is the entirely unproductive and self-sufficient activity of contemplation. For Aristotle, if there were no such ultimate good, the pursuit of all goods would be empty and vain.

MacIntyre's ethical objection is that Aristotle's hierarchy of goods was also a hierarchical ordering of human beings, in which the lives of the many were expended and managed for the good of the few. It is therefore for egalitarian reasons that MacIntyre elaborated the idea of goods and standards *internal* to a plurality of vocational practices. Where Aristotle argued that the best judge of the excellence of a rudder or a meal is a pilot or a diner, MacIntyre argues that the best judge is an excellent carpenter or an excellent cook. The proof of the pudding may be in the eating, but an excellent chef knows both this and far more besides. A grandmaster who knows what is best for himself will likely continue to try to progress his own game, but perhaps a grandmaster who knows what is good for human beings as such might rightly abandon chess for politics.

3. Digging Through Bedrock

Philosophers who refer to ‘practices’ in the wake of Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars, or even Heidegger, may have read the above with exasperation. They will likely understand practices to be the prelinguistic and, therefore, preconceptual bases for rule-following. Insofar as they are concerned with normativity, and with the justification of rule-following, they will also understand practices as ethically primitive and elemental. They will regard language-use as a social practice that is fundamental to all other social practices, and they will regard this as a philosophical insight that undermines traditional philosophy—not just that which began with what MacIntyre once called ‘the Enlightenment project’, but also that which began with Plato’s entrenching of concepts. From this perspective, MacIntyre might appear to miss the philosophical point of discussing practices.

A difficulty with this kind of perspective is that the doing of philosophy is itself a practice (or perhaps, from this perspective, a set of practices), that this practice involves conceptualization, that practice is itself a philosophical concept, and that (MacIntyre’s stipulative definition apart) practice has proven to be a concept that is especially elusive. Of course, this elusiveness is unsurprising from the perspective under consideration. Robert Brandom admits that Wittgenstein “does not attempt to provide a theory of practices, nor would he endorse the project of doing so” (Brandom 1994, 29), but Brandom nonetheless explicates the normativity of social practices in the Sellarsian terms of ‘giving and asking for reasons’ (and of consequent deontic commitments). For a pragmatist, a Wittgensteinian, or a Heideggerian, reasoning concerns use, which Aristotle described in terms of ‘for-the-sake-of’ relations.⁶ Heidegger was happy to talk in such terms. For him, “the ‘for-the-sake-of’ always pertains to the Being of *Dasein*” as “a possibility”, but a possibility that allows of such natural necessity as that for “shelter”. In a way that is redolent of what Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Ethics*, Heidegger explains the use of tools for the sake of building a shelter, which is for the sake of this ultimate “Being of *Dasein*” (Heidegger 1962, 116–117). From an Aristotelian point of view, Heidegger here helpfully supplements a more analytic account of inference in practical reasoning, whereas Brandom’s emphasis on the sociality of giving and asking for reasons helpfully supplements Heidegger. Insofar as what results is a conception of practices as social, discursive, and goal-orientated, MacIntyre would concur. Where he disagrees alike with Brandom, with Heidegger, and with those Wittgensteinians for whom there can be no further justification of norms than the conventional reasoning and practice of some community,⁷ is in arguing that justificatory reasoning can be grounded in a way that is thoroughly teleological.

⁶ This terminology is teleological, in that a being’s *telos* is its that-for-the-sake-of-which (*hou heneka*). Longstanding debate about how to interpret Aristotle’s economics has sometimes turned around the translation of *chreia*, which has been rendered as ‘demand’ and ‘need’ but also as ‘use’ (e.g. Frank 2005, who claims that her argument “depend[s] on an account of practices not unlike that of Alasdair MacIntyre” at 7).

⁷ Such communitarian Wittgensteinians include Peter Winch, against whom MacIntyre honed his early arguments about intelligibility, and Norman Malcolm, whom he criticizes in MacIntyre 1999 and 2006c.

MacIntyre now argues for teleology at three levels, each of which gives a deeper foundation to what he says of practices. The first of these levels is political. From *After Virtue* onward he has proposed that a local community can order goods in a way that is both rational and just, so long as its members have some way of determining the common and ultimate good for the sake of which other goods are to be ordered. This requires that the community has some institutionalized forum in which reasons are asked for, given, and communally deliberated, and that persons also give and receive needed care and assistance (MacIntyre 1999), but it also requires more. Therefore, secondly, in *Whose Justice?* MacIntyre elaborated how the idea of a rational and practicable common good depends upon a shared philosophical tradition. Identifying his own work with the tradition of Thomistic Aristotelianism, he has since increasingly revoked his previous objection to a metaphysically informed naturalism. Therefore, thirdly, he now attempts to cut through Wittgenstein's "bedrock" in order to find both "causes" and "justifications" (Wittgenstein 1997, 85e) of social practices. Although inspired by philosophical tradition he intends his naturalism to provide grounds for "prephilosophical" agreement, by inviting "recognition" of one's self (MacIntyre 2006d, 86).

MacIntyre's naturalism offers an account of human beings as embodied and rational animals, and as social and mutually dependent, so that our actions, like our bodies, have animal antecedents. In *Dependent Rational Animals* he argues that some of the reasons why "human beings need the virtues" are shared with some other species, which also have prelinguistic reasons for action and practices that extend beyond nutrition and reproduction to game-playing and, even, to productively changing their material environment. "Reasons not only can be causes, they have causes." (MacIntyre 2008b, 274) What language adds is the ability to exchange and reflect on reasons for action. This is crucial (and humanly natural), but MacIntyre nonetheless proposes that inferences from human nature admit of truth or falsity. Rather as the concept of practices terminates any regress of rule-following, so the concepts of human nature and the human good can justifiably terminate any pragmatist regression of reasoning in terms of 'means-ends' or 'ends-in-view'. To the observation that MacIntyre's concept of practices is not conservatively conventionalist because it is teleological and progressive, we can therefore now add that it is not culturally conventionalist because it is naturalistically grounded.

MacIntyre's naturalistic realism extends to an account of representation, and to practices of non-linguistic, visual representation. In *After Virtue*, he still echoed Hegel in his account of the practice of portraiture, in observing that Rembrandt progressed the practice by synthesizing the best of Renaissance naturalism with the best of medieval iconography (MacIntyre 2007a, 189). More recently, his concern has instead been with the way in which Hals, van Gogh and Turner progressed understanding of colour (MacIntyre 2006c, 48–49; 2006e, 20), both within the practice of painting and for the wider society. Our understanding of colour progresses historically and conceptually, through social practice, but that practical and conceptual understanding is grounded in the facts of colour as a natural phenomenon and of perception as a naturally human capacity and

activity. Hals' artistic achievement depended upon his ability to make "preconceptual and prelinguistic discriminations" between hues, and MacIntyre argues that such perceptual activities have an important role "both semantically and epistemologically in founding those concepts which are put to work in our judgments" (2006e, 44). MacIntyre has always been happy to agree with pragmatists that "practice is the key to knowledge" (1972, 743), but he now insists that truth is often a matter of simple fact and is never sufficiently understood in terms of 'warranted assertability' (2006f.).

4. Conclusion

The teleological account of shared practices that MacIntyre elaborated in *After Virtue* remains crucial for his moral and political philosophy, but he now articulates that practical philosophy within Aristotelianism's more traditional context of a metaphysical naturalism. This wider theory can provide criteria by which to evaluate practices, and can therefore free MacIntyre's concept of practices from the once commonplace accusation that he had no way of excluding 'evil practices'.⁸ But it does not follow from this that the concept is now somehow reducible to or negated by a such a naturalism. On the contrary, his concept of practices radically revises the traditional idea that, if there is a single human nature and a single human good, there must be a single human excellence and a single way of living the good life. What is here entailed by MacIntyre's concept of practices is that there is a plurality of ways in which people can become virtuous, and that even if some activities—including those that are exploitative and alienating—can be said to be bad, there is no single way of hierarchically ordering all goods and practices that can be said to be given by nature. The question of what is to be used for the sake of what is one that has to be resolved by giving and receiving reasons, politically.

Institutionally, MacIntyre follows Marx insofar as he refuses to ordain theoretically how practices might be ordered without alienation or exploitation (1998d). Implicitly, he also follows Hegel and Marx, more than Aristotle, in conceptualizing the human "function" (cf. 2007a, 52–61; Knight 2007, 5–7 and *passim*) as essentially social. The human function is to participate in some social practice through which the individual can actualize her good. This is the *moral* point of MacIntyre's discussion of practices. His *political* point is that such practices can be ordered to a good that is 'common', not just in the metaphysical sense of a good that is shared by all individuals of a natural kind but, more practically, in the sense of a good to which a particular community can be directed by the agreement of its members, and by their participation in particular practices that intentionally contribute to that shared good (MacIntyre 1998a). In this way, the morally educative role of practices can be progressed. On MacIntyre's account,

⁸ One example of MacIntyre's earlier way of defending himself against such criticism is MacIntyre 1984, 34–39. His arguments here are not now supplanted by his naturalism, but they are importantly supplemented. For example, he now argues that excellence in teaching is required to meet the natural and equal need of all children, if they are themselves to be able to actualize excellence (2007b, 724–726).

unlike Aristotle's, the human 'function' should be identified not with any one kind of activity exclusively (and especially not with any kind of activity that can be construed as aiming at self-sufficiency) but with activity within any of a plurality of social practices.

The moral and political radicalism in MacIntyre's teleological account of practices contrasts starkly with the conservatism to which the more familiar, nomological account leads (e.g. Bloor 2001). On the latter account, practice and use (of e.g. language or money) constitute the irreducible and unquestionable ground of human action. That what is social cannot simply be constructed from the consciousnesses of individuals may be true but it does not follow that one need deflate such intentional phenomena as goods,⁹ understood as goals of action and objects to be actualized. MacIntyre's novel distinction of institutions from practices, together with his distinction of goods of effectiveness from goods of excellence, may be understood as differentiating between two kinds of rule-following. One kind concerns the use of resources; the other concerns that for the sake of which resources should be used.

On MacIntyre's Aristotelian account, social practice is necessary for the actualization of human beings' potential and common good. Ethically, this necessity is practices' justification. Naturally, that good is action's final cause.

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⁹ Raimo Tuomela regards MacIntyre's account of practices as referring to "an interesting but rather limited subclass of social practices" (2002, 119), given his own account of practices in terms of 'collective intentionality'. It is the constructivism of Tuomela's account that places him closer to Searle than to Brandom, and further still from MacIntyre.

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