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Virtues and Practices*

Abstract: MacIntyre presents an account of the virtues first in terms of practices and then in terms of the narrative unity of a person's life. He fails, however, to observe an important distinction between self-contained and purposive practices; if the virtues are to be understood by reference to practices, they must be of the latter kind. By the same token, a defence of the virtues must refer to the social purposes which practices serve rather than to the goods internal to practices. An appeal to the idea of narrative unity does not save the position in the absence of any concrete specification of the good life for man. MacIntyre's attempt to reconstitute the virtues falls foul of the moral pluralism that he has earlier diagnosed so acutely.

I want in this paper to examine Alasdair MacIntyre's attempt to explain the idea of a virtue by reference to the idea of a practice. This attempt, it seems to me, is central to the constructive task of *After Virtue* (AV), which is to provide an alternative to the aridity of modern moral philosophy. According to MacIntyre, the general defect of that philosophy, when it is not merely emotivist or subjectivist, is that it tries to derive moral rules and injunctions from an abstract principle of reason. But such an enterprise is bound to fail, for none of the principles that have been proposed can actually be made to yield concrete conclusions, as the history of both utilitarianism and Kantianism shows. In contrast, MacIntyre wants to place the virtues in the context of specific practices, and in this way to provide them with the only kind of justification of which they are capable. To show that a quality is a virtue is to show that its possession is essential to sustain a practice and to achieve those goods which the practice is meant to foster. If one tries to provide an account of the virtues outside of such a context, MacIntyre claims, one ends up with a counterfeit article - for instance with a list of qualities useful for succeeding in a competitive society, as in the case of Benjamin Franklin.

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Before looking more closely at MacIntyre's notion of a "practice" and its connection with the virtues, some caveats must be entered. First, MacIntyre acknowledges that the virtues are not exercised solely when engaging in practices, and indeed maintains that one cannot possess them unless one is disposed to exhibit them on all appropriate occasions. Second, he also acknowledges that some practices may simply be evil, so that a complete account of morality (and by implication a complete account of a good person) will in addition have to make reference to certain absolute moral prohibitions, such as that against the taking of innocent life. Third, he admits that an account of the virtues in terms of practices runs the danger of fragmenting human life unduly; so a picture of a good life will also have to indicate the unifying thread which runs through a person's participation in a number of distinct practices (in other words a life that exhibited virtue in a number of disconnected areas but had no inner coherence would not qualify as a good life overall). None of this, however, is meant to undermine the basic thesis that the virtues can only be understood (explained and justified) with reference to their primary role within practices.

What, then, does MacIntyre mean by a practice? It is, he says, "any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (AV 175). Among the examples he gives are games (chess and football), productive activities (farming and architecture), intellectual activities (science and history), artistic pursuits (painting and music) and politics (creating a political community). Other activities are firmly ruled out: tic-tac-toe, bricklaying and planting turnips. To make sense of the inclusions and the exclusions, we need to pay attention to two elements in the lengthy definition cited above: the idea of internal goods and the idea of standards of excellence. Goods internal to a practice are distinguished from those external to it by the fact that those in the former class can only be achieved by participating in the practice in question. To borrow MacIntyre's example, the enjoyment that comes from playing chess well is an internal good, whereas the money one may earn through being a champion chess player is an external good: it is merely contingent that one achieves the latter by playing chess, whereas it is obviously necessary to play chess to achieve the former. Moreover the good in question has to be achieved by attempting to excel, that is by endeavouring to rival or outdo those previous practitioners whose activities make up the history of the practice. Thus (presumably) the ground for excluding tic-tac-toe, bricklaying and turnip-planting from the list of "practices" is that, although there may be specific kinds of pleasure to be had from engaging in them, there are no

historically developed standards of excellence to apply, and hence no internal goods of the right kind to be enjoyed.

Finally, to round off the account, MacIntyre claims that virtues such as truth-telling, justice and courage are required in order to sustain the relationships that practices require. Practices characteristically demand that we speak honestly to one another, that we deal fairly with one another in allocating rewards, and that we take risks on behalf of those we care for. Here MacIntyre is not so much deriving a list of virtues as explaining why the virtues, conceived in a particular way, should be regarded as valuable qualities. The ultimate reason is that they make possible the achieving of internal goods, which it is supposed are in some way superior to external goods such as money, status and power.¹

A critical assessment of MacIntyre's argument must begin by looking closely at the related notions of a practice and of an internal good. It is immediately apparent that the list of practices supplied is somewhat heterogeneous, and it is possible to connect this with a certain obscurity in the notion of an internal good. There is an important distinction to be drawn between practices which have no *raison d'être* other than the particular excellences and enjoyments which they allow to participants (I shall refer to such practices as 'self-contained') and practices which have a wider social purpose (I shall refer to these as 'purposive'). Games, from which much of MacIntyre's thinking about practices seems to be drawn, are the main exemplars of the first category. Here the contrast between internal and external goods has its clearest and most straightforward application. The good which consists in playing a fine innings at cricket is obviously incomprehensible in the absence of the game itself, and moreover the standard of excellence involved - what it is that makes the innings a fine one - can only be identified by reference to the history of the game, to the canons of judgment that have been developed by practitioners and spectators.² This is obviously distinct from the money or prestige which a successful player may additionally acquire. On the other hand, in the case of a productive activity like architecture or farming, or in the case of an intellectual activity like physics, there is an external purpose which gives the practice its point and in terms of which it may be judged - in the cases in question we might say, respectively, the creation of attractive and comfortable buildings, the production of food for the community, and the discovery of scientific truth. Now this introduces a certain complexity into the argument. There is still a distinction to be drawn between the good of being an excellent architect, farmer or physicist and the various extrinsic goods which may be achieved by being successful in these fields. But the former good is not simply constituted internally to each practice. Indeed one might say that insofar as it is so constituted, the practice is to that extent a deformed one.

Take the example of medicine, a practice not included in MacIntyre's initial list, but mentioned in the course of his discussion (and surely properly so in view of its Aristotelian associations). In contrast to the external goods of money, etc, the internal good provided by this practice is the good of being an excellent doctor. But this in turn may mean, simply, 'an excellent healer of the sick' or 'an exemplar of those standards of excellence which have evolved in the medical community'. To the extent to which these two meanings diverge - say if the medical community has come to attach special weight to the capacity to perform certain spectacular operations whose long-term effectiveness is doubtful - the practice has fallen victim to professional deformation. A good practice here is one whose standards of excellence are related directly to its wider purpose.

The distinction I have just drawn, though of cardinal importance for our later discussion, does not sort all practices unambiguously into two categories. In the case of artistic activities, for instance, our classification will depend on our theory of aesthetic judgment. If we believe that there are immutable standards of beauty which it is the business of artists to realize, we will regard art as a purposive practice. If, on the other hand, we believe that aesthetic standards emerge only within particular artistic traditions (this seems to be MacIntyre's view), we will look at art as a self-contained practice. Somewhat the same might be said of the practice of politics (compare the views, say, of Oakeshott and Lenin).

But let us continue with the cases where the distinction can be applied without ambiguity. A major difference between the two kinds of practice is that, in the case of self-contained practices, critical assessment can only be carried out from within the practice itself, whereas in the case of purposive practices, the whole practice may be reviewed in the light of the end it is meant to serve. The rules of cricket may be changed to encourage the batsmen to play more ambitious strokes, or to discourage the bowlers from bowling merely defensively. Here the point of the change is to foster those excellences already recognized in the practice. On the other hand it makes perfect sense to compare entire forms of medicine (say Western medicine and Chinese medicine) in respect of their effectiveness in curing the sick. (I do not mean to imply that the result of such a comparison will necessarily be a straightforward preference for one form over the other regardless of context.) Or one might wish to compare the results of a private system of medicine with the results of a state-funded system. If these comparisons are made, and the results accepted, standards of excellence may be changed: a good acupuncturist is not the same as a good surgeon. This follows immediately from the fact that, in these cases, the standards in question ought to be related directly to the ends of the practice.

MacIntyre does not make the distinction I have been making between self-contained and purposive practices. It is nevertheless clear that, for the purpose of developing his account of the virtues, he takes all practices to be of the first, self-contained sort. This is indicated both by his choice of examples and by the way in which he treats standards of excellence as developing through internal debate within each practice, rather than in response to wider needs. It is this assumption that practices are self-sustaining that allows him to present the ethics of virtue as categorically distinct from both teleological and deontological ethical theories, as these are usually understood. To interpret virtues as qualities needed to achieve some goal such as the general welfare, or as qualities that allow their possessor to conform to certain rules, is to fall victim to the error of liberal individualism. Instead, a virtue properly understood is a quality that is necessary to achieve the goods internal to one or more practices. These goods may change over time as practices develop, so the virtues themselves are not immutable, but at any moment the list must be taken as given.³ There is no external standard that could be brought in to show that a particular quality was indeed a virtue.

But suppose instead that the virtues were to be understood primarily in terms of purposive practices. It would then be impossible to defend any particular list of virtues without making reference to the social purposes which the practices that require them are meant to serve. To the extent that there is controversy about the proper form of any practice - of the kind that I tried to bring out through the example of medicine - such controversy is almost certain to spill over on to the associated virtues. Thus the virtues will no longer be self-sufficient; although it may still be impossible to reduce them to other kinds of moral considerations (considerations of goodness or rightness), they will nevertheless have a dependent status.⁴ It will be impossible to understand them except by reference to the needs and purposes that predominate in a particular society.

The issue we must therefore face is whether the practices with which the virtues are centrally connected are (in the terms I have been using) self-contained or purposive. Here I want to make two observations about the self-contained practices. The first is that they can only exist on the proviso that more basic social functions have been discharged. They are in that sense luxury items: they can be brought into existence only when spare time and resources are left over from the demands of material production, the maintenance of social order, and so forth. No doubt it is an important feature of human beings that they engage in play (understood here in a broad sense to mean rule-governed activities that have no immediate instrumental purpose). On the other hand it seems reasonable to suppose that originally forms of play were linked more closely to wider social needs (for instance that games were developed in order to encourage those skills and abilities required in hunting or battle) and that it is only

with the arrival of modern society, with its huge material surpluses, that completely detached sports and games have been able to flourish. This observation has worrying consequences for MacIntyre's thesis. For if the virtues are to be understood in terms of self-contained practices, and if these practices are able to flourish to an unprecedented extent because of the free time and resources which modern society makes available, then it is surely paradoxical that the modern world should have witnessed the almost complete erosion of the virtues, as that thesis maintains.⁵

My second observation is that it is doubtful in any case whether the virtues have their central application in the context of self-contained practices. Certainly it is possible to use such practices as a kind of training ground for the virtues, as Victorian public schools tried to do with their practices of sport. No doubt too every practice requires at least one quality of its participants, namely a willingness to abide by the rules and conventions that sustain it. But if we consider the cardinal virtues and the contexts in which we normally speak of them as being displayed, I do not believe that self-contained practices will figure significantly in the result. Take the examples of courage and justice. When would we think of people as displaying courage? First of all, and most obviously, on the battlefield; next, when carrying out some humane act in circumstances of danger - say manning a lifeboat in high seas; third, when facing intense pain with equanimity or deciding to carry out some arduous task such as raising a severely handicapped child. These are some central cases. We might also speak of courage as being displayed in certain sporting activities such as parachuting or hang-gliding, but interestingly enough we might here prefer some alternative term such as "daring". Why is this? The very fact that these activities are optional, in the sense that participants are not required to engage in them either by physical necessity or by a sense of moral obligation, counts against the application of an essentially moral term like "courage". Courage displayed merely for its own sake is hardly the genuine thing: courage displayed in the pursuit of some end such as the saving of life or the defence of one's homeland is.

Much the same may be said about the virtue of justice. We think of justice (or fairness) as being displayed by legislators, administrators, judges, educators and employers - people whose decisions may significantly affect the interests of numbers of others. There is a justice-like quality which may be manifested in games and other such self-contained practices, namely a willingness to abide by the rules and to apply them as strictly to oneself as to others. But this would normally be referred to by some term such as "good sportsmanship" rather than by "fairness" (and certainly not by "justice") - I suggest in order to indicate the relatively trivial nature of the interests that are served by exercising this quality. (Children may talk a lot about fairness and unfairness in games, but children of course tend to think that much more is at stake in games than adults do.⁶)

My argument, then, is that the virtues - especially the cardinal virtues such as courage and justice - owe their moral status to their connection with the basic ends of human life, and that this connection shows up in our use of the relevant language. In this light, MacIntyre's attempt to place the virtues in the context of self-contained practices is misguided. If a "practice" account of the virtues is going to be successful, the practices concerned must be those I have called purposive, and moreover those whose aims are fairly central to human existence. By implication it is a mistake to try to explain the virtues by reference to goods internal to practices.⁷ Although MacIntyre is quite right to draw our attention to the existence of such goods - for even in the case of purposive practices standards of excellence will develop whose achievement will be regarded as an internal good by the participants - the virtues themselves must be understood in relation to those wider social purposes which practices serve.

But now we must face the difficulty that such practices are not self-justifying. The virtues apparently associated with one may be criticized in the light of those associated with another (military courage, for instance, may be condemned from the point of view of humanity); and any individual practice may itself be a subject of critical debate from the standpoint of the ends it is meant to serve. MacIntyre concedes that practices are open to critical review; but (with the exception of practices that are simply "evil") the only vantage point from which he envisages such a review proceeding is that of the unity of an individual's life. He believes, that is to say, that a person's life should have sufficient coherence for it to be described in terms of a single narrative. This implies that no-one ought to participate in practices which require him to exhibit incompatible qualities. Having identified the narrative structure that characterizes my own life, I am then in a position to reject certain practices as requiring me to manifest qualities that cannot be fitted into that narrative. But this of course only moves the problem a step further back. Starting from the present moment, I can tell innumerable different stories about the course of my future life, each one representing an intelligible continuation of what has happened already. (MacIntyre does not, I assume, want to rule out Pauline conversions, where the impetus to one's new mode of life is a conviction that one's life up to now had been lived according to all the wrong principles.) How can I decide which of these stories is the most appropriate?⁸

MacIntyre rejects the Aristotelian view that there is some identifiable form of life that represents "the good life for man". Indeed he says, in a sentence whose logic baffles me, that "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is" (AV 204). The oddity of this, obvious-

ly, is that if we interpret the good life in the form of a quest, we presuppose that the quest has some object beyond the quest itself, even if the nature of that object is not fully known before the quest begins; anyone who accepted MacIntyre's view that the goal of the quest is nothing other than the quest itself would have nothing to quest for. But if we remove this paradox by relativizing the object of the search - by saying, in effect, that the good life for man is the quest for that mode of existence which satisfies me personally - we are presented with one very contestable view of the good life; a view which finds its apotheosis in contemporary America with its innumerable mock-religions and cults of personal development, each claiming to offer believers genuine self-fulfilment. The good life becomes a tramp around the temples of San Francisco. It is, presumably, very far from MacIntyre's intention to idealize such a state of affairs.

Thus the unity of a person's life offers no criterion for assessing practices unless some one mode of life is picked out as morally privileged. The problem with the modern world is that it contains too many internally coherent modes of life for MacIntyre's purpose. Take just two of these: the city stockbroker and the commune-dweller. Each will typically engage in a number of practices that hang together in the sense that all of them are informed by the same set of underlying principles and values. The stockbroker's practices are those of the establishment: the traditional rules of private school, ancient university and gentleman's club. The commune-dweller's are those of the counter-culture: organic farming, anti-nuclear demonstrations, mutual aid. Each style of life has its own unity, but this unity is of no help to us in deciding (say) whether the practice of education should be carried out along the lines of the traditional private school or along the lines of the experimental "free school".

We therefore have no option but to assess practices in the light of more basic principles. We have to ask questions such as: what, essentially, is education for? What ends do we want it to serve? This search for foundations is not merely an intellectual aberration induced in us by the rationalizing tendencies of modern culture, but a necessary response to the diversity that confronts us. It is of course possible to embrace a mode of life unthinkingly and then to answer all controversial questions from that standpoint. But I take it that this also is not what MacIntyre intends. His account of the virtues is supposed to satisfy someone who is worried about the status of his moral convictions. He is not merely supplying balm to the know-nothings.

It may be said in reply that assessing practices in terms of basic principles will turn out to be a fruitless exercise, for these principles themselves will have as little foundation as the practices they are meant to justify. This reply contains a kernel of truth: at some point moral principles must simply be accepted or rejected. But this does not mean that we

cannot make surprising discoveries in the space between principles and practices.

Consider the example of justice, to which MacIntyre devotes the penultimate chapter of his book. His complaint against modern theories of justice, such as those of Rawls and Nozick, is that they merely reproduce at a more abstract level the conflicting opinions of ordinary people about the nature of distributive justice. That complaint is in order inasmuch as both men believe that their theories rest on foundations that are more secure than this - even if not on premises that are uncontested. Suppose, however, that they had understood their project somewhat differently. Suppose that they had said, in effect: here is an important intuition about the nature of distributive justice (in Rawls' case, let us say, that the institutional arrangements that would be chosen by rational persons under conditions of ignorance are fair; in Nozick's case, that persons possess inviolable rights of a certain kind); let us now see what this intuition implies about the design of a number of major social practices.

The value of such an undertaking would be to show people who accepted one or other of these underlying views about justice what else they were committed to - perhaps to practical arrangements that they had never yet contemplated. The shopkeeper who objects to tax increases on the grounds that he is entitled to keep the money he has earned by fair trade may be surprised to discover that his principles rule out anything beyond a minimal state.

MacIntyre, on the other hand, suggests that an authentic theory of justice will give a central place to the notion of desert, a notion that languishes on the periphery of the two accounts just mentioned. It is difficult to see why this view of justice is any less controversial than the views that are mirrored in Rawls' and Nozick's theories. Although it makes an appearance in some earlier theories of distributive justice (Aristotle's, for instance), and has been widely employed in theories of penal justice, desert as a basis for distributing material goods has flourished under the conditions of a market society. It reflects a social order in which each person appears as an independent, self-directed atom, related to other people only through competitive exchange in the marketplace.⁹ Even in market societies such a view of justice has seemed challengeable, because we neither are nor could be related to others solely in this way. We also participate in other practices and institutions that demand the use of different principles of justice (in families, to take only the most obvious example). The contestable nature of the idea of justice is rooted in the institutional pluralism of contemporary society.

Admittedly there are moments at which MacIntyre appears to agree with the proposition just enunciated. He claims to have shown "that we have all

too many disparate and rival moral concepts, in this case rival and disparate concepts of justice, and that the moral resources of the culture allow us no way of settling the issue between them rationally" (AV 235). This highlights a deep ambiguity in the general thesis of the book, which other critics have already spotted. On the one hand, it may be read simply as an account of the disappearance of the authentic language of morals in the face of the rampant individualism of modern society. On the other hand it may be read (as I have read it here) as an attempt to reconstitute this vanishing language by tying the virtues to practices. MacIntyre is telling us, on this second reading, that we can continue to use the language of virtue, provided we realise that it must be applied centrally in the context of practices. It is the latter argument that I have been challenging. To recapitulate very briefly: self-contained practices provide no real foothold for the moral virtues, and purposive practices stand in need of external justification by reference to the wider ends that they serve - so no practice-related virtue can be an ultimate moral consideration.¹⁰

There is a third possible way of reading MacIntyre's thesis. He might be urging us to reconstruct our practices so that we would then be in a position to use virtue language in roughly the traditional way (there are hints of this in the very last paragraph of the book). But this version of the thesis also encounters serious difficulties. We have to ask what status his recommendation has itself - is it a moral recommendation, and if so how is it to be justified? And in any case it is impossible for us to return to the pre-modern condition of (relative) moral certainty. We might perhaps decide to arrange our practices in such a way that they no longer gave rise to moral conflicts. But this decision would itself be a conscious choice, made for a set of reasons. These reasons would always be present in our minds as participants. We could not blind ourselves to the fact that we might have chosen other arrangements. Suppose, for instance, that we all decided to adopt the practices of the commune-dweller, as outlined above. The virtues would immediately fall into place: a good man would be co-operative, egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, and so forth. But it would be impossible to pretend that these qualities simply constituted goodness without any further argument. They would be good only in relation to the way of life we had chosen - for which, no doubt, we would be able to offer reasons of a sort. In that sense the transition to modernity is irreversible. If it is a feature of pre-modern societies that within them shared notions of rightness and virtue are taken for granted, so that objective moral argument is possible, then this is a feature which cannot be recreated. (I do not mean that it might not be recreated accidentally - say if a nuclear holocaust plunged us back into a dark age - but that it cannot be recreated by an act of conscious choice.)

With the critical aspect of MacIntyre's thesis, then, we need have no quarrel; but the constructive aspect has been seen to fall foul of the very moral pluralism that he has diagnosed so acutely.

Notes

- 1 MacIntyre does not argue for this supposition. I think he regards it as an assumption that must be made if we are to make sense of the language of virtue. The decline of the virtues in modern society is attributed to that society's tendency to elevate the pursuit of external goods above all other objectives.
- 2 Although on the whole the best player is the one who wins most often or who contributes most to his team's victory, this equation is not a precise one. Devotees will judge a player by his skill, his inventiveness and so forth, as well as by his brute effectiveness.
- 3 MacIntyre does not consider the problem posed by someone who simply refuses to recognize an internal good as a good - i.e. as a valuable human end - and who therefore rejects any virtue that is uniquely connected with the practice in question. Apparently he presupposes that there is a (shifting) consensus about which practices are valuable, so the only problem that may arise is how different practices are to be threaded together in the life of a particular person.
- 4 I enter this qualification because a classification of the virtues is likely to embody elements of convention that can only be understood by looking at the intellectual history of a particular society. Social needs and purposes will require a range of practices, and these practices in turn will require that practitioners possess certain qualities. But how these qualities are grouped together to constitute virtues is to some extent arbitrary. Often a virtue-term does not designate a single quality but several closely-related qualities. Thus the reason that it is difficult to find English equivalents for all of the virtues discussed in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics is not simply that Aristotle includes as virtues some qualities that we find it difficult to regard as such (megalopsuchia, for instance), but that he divides up and combines qualities that we likewise agree are virtuous in unfamiliar ways (his distinction between liberality and magnificence, for instance).
- 5 MacIntyre might reply here that, although the modern world materially creates an expanded space in which practices might flourish, the acquisitive culture which accompanies modernity in fact diverts people away from practices towards the pursuit of consumer goods. I am doubtful about this opposition, and more doubtful still about MacIntyre's claim that "the notion of engagement in a practice was once socially central" (AV 211-12) which appears to me to invoke a highly romantic view of the past.
- 6 "Il faut noter, que les jeux d'enfants ne sont pas jeux: et les faut juger en eux, comme leurs plus sérieuses actions." (Montaigne)
- 7 Very often a virtue is valuable both to its possessor and to those around him who benefit from its exercise. The possessor himself may value his attribute primarily because it enables him to achieve certain internal goods (e.g. a soldier may value his courage because it allows him to be a good soldier). But such an attribute only qualifies as a virtue because of other people's valuations, and these will derive ultimately from the external purposes which the practice or practices in question serve.

- 8 Similar doubts about the practical relevance of the idea of narrative unity are expressed in Schneewind (1982).
- 9 I have attempted to show this in Chapter Eight of my book Social Justice (Miller 1976), which contrasts beliefs about justice in market societies with those held in more traditional forms of society.
- 10 I have not asked directly whether the virtues do in fact have their central field of application in MacIntyrean practices, preferring to explore this hypothesis from the inside. My examples suggest, however, that we talk of virtues as happily outside of such practices as within them. Courage is frequently displayed in isolated acts that do not belong to any "socially established co-operative human activity"; and justice has a major place in what MacIntyre calls "institutions" - bodies concerned with the allocation of money, power and other external goods.

Bibliography

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