MacIntyre's Ethics - What is a Social Good?

In order to advance a modern virtue ethics we must reconcile such apparently disparate programs as that of Homer's, the New Testament's, and Aristotle's, among others. Homer, for one, basically translates 'arete' as strength, but we may now reiterate this in a broader sense of excellence. Does our own sense of excellence map on to Homer's sense of strength?

Aristotle introduces a word 'phronesis' into his virtue theory that goes lost on many. But divisively, what for Homer was a matter of brute physicality, Aristotle esteems at least in some part this notion of mental wisdom or intelligence. The New Testament, then in turn, introduces a self-effacing notion of humility, that might seem detestable to both Homer and Aristotle. Homer and Aristotle first differ in that Homer refers to virtues as qualities, whereas for Aristotle they constitute the actions (of virtuous people), which MacIntyre will spend much time attempting to analyze through his modernist notion of 'practice'. Initially, it may been seen that practices can be described as possessing both qualities and associated sets of actions. MacIntyre advances this definition, and he posits that practices are additionally, "Socially established cooperative human activity." This entails that we can now divide up many simple or partial activities that may seem like practices from the complexity of actually fully qualified, whole practices shared by communities.

During the early modern period, Jane Austen developed further a troubling notion of simulcra virtues, that stand in place for actual ones. As such, what Aristotle refers to in general as agreeableness, Austen will claim that these events sometimes constitute ones that fail to reveal? a virtuous affection for people when they are rather just the mere manipulative appearances thereof. Aristotle himself had even insinuated that forced military service is a simulcra of instances of truly self-willed courage.

At this point, MacIntyre attempts to introduce his own fraught distinction between that of the external and the internal in so far as they relate to human practices. As he describes, "Aristotle treats the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end, the relationship of means to end is internal and not external. I call a means internal to a given end when the end cannot be adequately characterized independently of a characterization of the means." He claims that although this distinction is missing from Aristotle's Ethics, it is an important inclusion that must be made in order to clarify his account. He also explains the issue we continually ran into last week with picking out particular practices: "So intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question — that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution." We must be most wary of the simulcra virtues, and not necessarily all

external goods in particular.

Franklin insists upon the utility of the virtues, that they have no existence beyond the extent to which they serve man's ends, which he understands as, "Success, prosperity in Philadelphia and ultimately in heaven." This could easily be translated to a striving for perfection wherever one would aspire to end up, through a cultivation and proper acting out of one's virtues.

In consideration of all this, MacIntyre demands of us: does the virtue as for Homer allow the heroic figure to dispense of some special energy invested within them, or does it allow one to maximally carry out one's telos, either toward human (Aristotle) or supernatural (New Testament) ends, or as for Franklin should it hold purely external utility in achieving certain earthly and/or heavenly ends? In spite of their discrepancies, MacIntyre points out that each author sincerely claims to be describing not only their respective society's presently existing institutional functions, but also in the last instance, a real, sufficient theoretical account of how the virtues for their society generally generally operate. Each author posits that the populace of their own society exemplifies the virtues which they write about, and also that some sort of outside barbarian force fails to live up to them. So, they each believe we have clear examples of whether it is possible to live up to the demands of the virtues, and that some people do and some people do not.

MacIntyre advances his primary claim on page 193, where he says forcefully that, "Where the virtues are required, the vices also may flourish. It is just that the vicious and mean-spirited necessarily rely on the virtues of themselves the experience of achieving those internal goods which may reward even not very good chess-players and violinists." Those who fail to take up a practice in which internal goods are achieved are missing out on something essential that no amount of external goods make up for????, MacIntyre might even say this is essential to being human. Modern societies which could be viewed as moving in the direction of giving up on such practices, by replacing them with automated technological production, are at risk of losing their humanity entirely. We lose our sense of history with those who came before us and helped develop the practices that are in place today, we forget what it was that has shaped who we are.

The objection that holds the most force against virtue ethics is the "justification problem." I am aware that this objection can also be posed to both deontological and utilitarian theories, but there seems to be a greater threat to virtue ethics. The main qualm is deciding what justifies an act as right or wrong for a virtue ethicist. Such theorists would argue that an action performed in certain circumstances is morally right if a virtuous agent who is acting in character would perform the action. So, the rightness of the action is determined by the virtues of the acting agent. The question then becomes, what about the virtues makes the action right. For example, suppose that a virtuous person is asked a question and provides an honest answer. Assuming that this is the right action in the current circumstances, then the question that arises is: "What is it about

honesty that makes telling the truth the right thing to do?" The standard approach would be to claim that the character trait of honesty is good, so the action (truth-telling) flowing from the trait of honesty is right. But, what is the connection between honesty and rightness of an action?

One response could be that it is merely a brute fact that honesty is good; therefore, since the action flows from a character trait which is unexplainably good, then the act is right. However, this seems unsatisfying because there seems to be some reason for thinking that honesty is good. An explanation could be that honesty often benefits others. However, the problem that then arises is that the rightness of the action can be explained in terms of how the act affects others. So, the rightness of an action is derived from certain considerations regarding the consequences of the act. If this is the case, then the rightness or wrongness of an act is not derived from one acting from virtue, but is derived from the affect it has on another.

This line of thinking suggests a dilemma for virtue ethics. If we are to explain why acting from honesty is good, then it is either a brute fact that acting from honesty is good or actions flowing from honesty are right because of the affect that such actions have on others. The first horn of the dilemma (that it is an unexplainable brute fact that honesty is good) seems to be implausible because we can often provide such explanations for why some virtue is good. On the other hand, the second horn of the dilemma implies that the rightness or wrongness of an action is not determined by one's being possessed of virtue, but that the rightness or wrongness of an act is derived from how an action affects others.

A potential pushback from the virtue ethicist would be that when the virtuous agents is telling the truth, the agent is not acting from such reasons. But, the question as to why the agent should act from the virtue of honesty remains. It still seems as though there needs to be some explanation as to why it is good to act from honesty that is independent of how the act affects others. The objection above calls into question how the virtues affect the deontic status of actions. What is it about a virtue that makes an action flowing from that virtue right or wrong?

'they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods.'

The New Testament strangely agrees with Homer in the placing of the virtues as secondary to 'what is good for man'. For Homer, the virtues are carried out by heroic figures, while the masses are mostly capable of carrying out is good for man. For the New Testament, however, because the good for man is both supernatural and a natural good, the supernatural must in some sense redeem and complete the virtues that on an otherwise purely naturalistic account they could at some point be viewed as having achieved internal self-consistency.

We have moved beyond a stage today though in which mere sincerity is enough

to buy one merit. People practice honesty with their therapists all the time, as they find themselves in positions of dire circumstances. Conversely, many of the heads of corporations and states are regularly shown to be psychotics who lack any capacity for self-reflection.

One question we should pose to MacIntyre is whether the failure of the Russian communist state was a decisive historical loss for the possibility of communism in general. Does America then in turn constitute Hegel's bad infinity version of the end of history, as MacIntyre seems to describe? There may be communities on the outskirts of society that have not become fully indoctrinated into the non-virtuous Central Doctrine of the state, in which one merely obsesses over acquiring goods external to practices in the form of commodified private property.

He now argues that each account requires three significant components: a background of practice, some account of a narrative order to human life, and a much broader account than he has provided so far of a moral tradition. MacIntyre views the advancement through these stages as a culmination of human progress, and that reaching each stage does not automatically presuppose that one will advance to the next stage. We might imagine many cultures that have failed after only reaching stage 1 or stage 2.

For all the skeptical relativism beginning this chapter, MacIntyre makes a startling claim about the virtues that must be shared among all past and existing cultures in which practices that produce goods internal to themselves, not even just the ones as he described: "From the standpoint of those types of relationship without which practices cannot be sustained truthfulness, justice and courage—and perhaps some others—are genuine excellences, are virtues in the light of which we have to characterize ourselves and others, whatever our private moral standpoint or our society's particular codes may be." If we can not see the way in which our own standards of truthfulness, justice, and courage, conform to those held by other societies that have reached sufficiently advanced complexity, we are merely ourselves confused about the matter. Those societies could simply not have existed otherwise. It might also be said that society could not exist at all without following a progression through these stages, at least not in any sense that we might recognize from the standpoint of our own society.

MacIntyre makes a please which I have some sympathy for, "Yet remove conversation from human life and what would be left?" I have considered it many times, and my ideal philosophy research program exists among a small group of friends inside of somebody's personal home barroom parlor. This is the setting where the best kind of philosophy could ever get done, and increasingly it is becoming replaced by monotonous drill-instructions that makes philosophy out to be a masochistic discipline of self-inflicted misery. I disagree with him that this can be arbitrarily extended to all sorts of other settings, for the very reason I just stated. Many situations are deliberately constructed to be anti-philosophical, and philosophy can not get done inside of them. I also don't believe that conversation is necessarily narrative in form, because some of my

favorite conversations verge in and out of being completely nonsensical - and yet within this cyclical process some deep truths are arrived at.

MacIntyre says plainly that, 'The true genre of the life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy." But this is only so if one takes a view of life on the very short term, where pains, sufferings, and deaths exist in the immediate present moment. From the broadest possible perspect, it is rather a comedy that we are here at all, and no amount of suffering would make the fact of existence in-tiself not laughable. There is no reason for us to be here, we simply are, and that in-the-last-instance is comical even though it always often seems tragic presently. I would note that Kafka viewed his novels as comedies rather than tragedies. It is not that his characters are suffering, it is that there is no reason whatsoever behind their suffering no matter how deep he allows you to look into the matter. Why are they there, suffering? Why are they there?

Were there not justice, courage, and truthfulness, our relation to the past would be necessarily ambiguous. What would motivate us to continue the practices then? Unless the form of automation we are striving for is made to be absolutely perfect, we will blindly allow everything to fall into decay, and we will not even have the resources to be able to notice it taking place all around us. We will have given up all the tools we would have had to do anything about the problems that always arise internal to the exercise of particular practices.