

The ethical debates of the last century show a titanic conflict between the ethical theories of deontology and utilitarianism. The deontologists have their history in Kant and a champion in David Ross. The utilitarians have their history in John Stuart Mill and their champion in R.M. Hare. Yet to even write of the histories of these traditions is to point out something that these traditions largely ignore. These ethical philosophers of the twentieth century largely ignore the ethics of the past. Rather they seek to build systems out of the concepts of ethics; without any thought as to where these concepts have come from. Yet there has been a recent ethical movement that began in the 1950's and has steadily gained in strength and power to the present. This movement is called Virtue Ethics and it has for its history the entire moral tradition of the west. For its champion, the movement has Alasdair Macintyre. His views on the history of ethical theory have a great bearing on his own philosophy of ethics.

Moral Philosophy is often written as though the history of the subject were only of secondary and incidental importance. This attitude seems to be the outcome of a belief that moral concepts can be examined and understood apart from their history. Some philosophers have even written as if moral concepts were a timeless, limited, unchanging, determinate species of concept, necessarily having the same features throughout their history, so that there is a part of language waiting to be philosophically investigated which deserves the title '*the language of morals*' (with a definite article and a singular noun).<sup>1</sup>

The last statement as regards "*the language of morals*" is possibly intended as a stab at Hare, whose own philosophy of ethics begins with moral language. Macintyre believes that the ethical theorist cannot simply choose a starting point, as he has already been thrust right into the middle of a history and tradition. It is in tradition and telos that Macintyre makes his greatest claims about Virtue Ethics. He draws primarily on Aristotle, but he does invoke the whole tradition of western philosophy in setting forth his own ethical system. However this essay will focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998). 1.

only a part of Macintyre's system, and that part is his theory of practices. Macintyre's theory of moral practice has long been misunderstood and maligned; particularly his view of what is not a practice. He first introduced this idea in its entirety in his ground breaking work *After Virtue*. In that work Macintyre puts forth a brief history of ethics in the western tradition from Homer to Nietzsche. On Macintyre's view the west has suffered a catastrophe in ethics, to the extent that the tradition has been all but lost. Macintyre attempts to show how the tradition remains and how it is relevant to a modern world. Much of this work is dedicated to the historical account of the virtues, but beginning in chapter fourteen Macintyre starts to put forth his own view of what he calls the "core concept of the virtues." This core concept is what Macintyre identifies as the most basic conception of the virtues, common to all systems and thinkers who have a virtue ethics. To that end he begins his own theory with what he calls the practices. Yet virtue ethics is not without its criticisms and Robert Louden puts forward one of the strongest critiques in his paper, *On the Vices of Virtue Ethics*. Yet it is just Macintyre's theory of practices that may be able to make a response to Louden's objections. As regards practices specifically, several thinkers, most notably Joseph Dunne, have taken issue with what Macintyre will and will not include as a practice in his system. A better understanding of Practices may help one to form a response to these criticisms. Now this paper will put forth a view of Macintyre's theory of practices, as found in *After Virtue*, and answer some critiques of this theory and virtue ethics overall.

## **Practices**

Macintyre identifies the concept of practice as proceeding historically from the Homeric view of the virtues. The practice exemplifies the earliest concept of the ethical, and is the first point of departure for Macintyre's account. "In the Homeric account of the virtues – and in

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heroic societies more generally – the exercise of a virtue exhibits qualities which are required for sustaining a social role and for exhibiting excellence in some well-marked area of social practice...”<sup>2</sup> The Homeric account of the virtues is a very act-centered concept. Much of the controversy over virtue ethics in general stems from the fact that it seems to be exclusively focused on one's character, to the total disregard for one's actions. Yet in the Homeric account, one's virtue is defined by one's actions. However these are not single isolated actions, but rather consistent modes of action. The examples that Macintyre gives are based on classical Greek heroes. “...to excel is to excel at war or in the games, as Achilles does, in sustaining a household, as Penelope does, in giving counsel in the assembly, as Nestor does, in the telling of a tale, as Homer himself does.”<sup>3</sup> These practices are very much tied to social roles, as evidenced by the history of each hero. Achilles was a strong man of war, and excellence for him was excellence in his social role. Penelope was a good wife and homemaker, and excellence for her was defined within that role. Specifically excellence and virtue are defined within the social role by certain modes of action, the practices, particular to those roles.

Yet Macintyre also draws on the tradition of Aristotle and the philosophical society. “When Aristotle speaks of excellence in human activity, he sometimes, though not always, refers to some well-defined type of human practice: flute-playing, or war, or geometry.”<sup>4</sup> It is in the ancient traditions of the Greeks that Macintyre finds the first aspect of his core concept of virtue. “I am going to suggest that this notion of a particular type of practice as providing the arena in which the virtues are exhibited and in terms of which they are to receive their primary, if

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

incomplete, definition is crucial to the whole enterprise of identifying a core concept of the virtues.”<sup>5</sup> The definition of virtue as practice is the first and most crucial step in Macintyre’s ethics.

Macintyre first points out two caveats on his way to defining practice. The first caveat is that Macintyre is not implying that the concept of virtue is limited to the practices. This is simply the first step of a three step process. He also means something very particular in the use of the word “practice”.

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 human activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.<sup>6</sup>

Macintyre’s definition of practice is one of his best known pieces of writing. A commentator named Bruce Ballard, suggests breaking the definition up into four clauses for ease of understanding.<sup>7</sup> The first clause is, “A, coherent, complex form of socially established cooperative activity...” The second clause is, “...that produces internal goods of the activity...” The third clause is, “...by participants striving to excel by the standards of the activity...” The fourth and final clause is, “...that systematically extends participants’ skills and their concepts of the goods and purpose of the activity.” Macintyre deals with each of these clauses in kind, and they each contain key ideas that he explains in detail in the rest of chapter fourteen. “Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Ballard, *Understanding Macintyre*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000.) 11.

practice; farming is.”<sup>8</sup> At first glance this seems like something of an arbitrary list, but Ballard once again comes to our aid with this explication.

Tic-tac-toe lacks the complexity and systematic extension of goods and goals inherent to chess (clauses 1 and 4). Skillful passing is incoherent without the game of football, as are brick-laying and turnip-planting apart from the practices of which they are elements (1). Each of these activities is too basic or too narrow in itself to qualify as a practice. Further criteria have at best a faint satisfaction. For example, the good intrinsic to turnip-planting, if it exists at all, is a pretty well-kept secret (2). And we say “excellent tic-tac-toe playing” either to very young children or as a joke (3).<sup>9</sup>

Each of the examples either meets or fails to meet the definition as it is provided in Macintyre.

Ballard does an excellent job of pointing out the shortcomings of tic-tac-toe and turnip planting.

He also points out the nature of how chess meets these requirements. In addition commentator

Kelvin Knight points out another example of a practice. “Politics, as Aristotle understood it, and

as it was sometimes embodied in institutional life in the ancient and medieval worlds, was a

practice. Modern Politics is not.”<sup>10</sup> Modern Politics is an institution, and this is an opposition that

Macintyre will explain fully. Yet there are concepts here, like intrinsic good, which need not

only explanation but context as well. To that end let us return to Macintyre as he points out the

distinctions between two goods.

## Goods

Macintyre posits that practices are involved with getting goods, as stated in clauses 2 and 4, yet there are two different types of goods the, extrinsic and the intrinsic. “On the one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstance...in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status, and money. There are always alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement

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<sup>8</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.) 187.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Ballard, *Understanding Macintyre*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000.) 12.

is never to be had only by engaging in some particular kind of practice.”<sup>11</sup> External goods are not bound to practices in some basic a-priori manner. One receives money for winning at chess only in the social confines of winning a tournament or professional game. Chess itself does not inherently grant money to its winners, as evidenced by the fact that one can play chess and win for free. External goods can also be gained in some other way. Prestige can be gained by making sure people watch you perform great acts. The acts aren't as important as the approval of the masses. Status can be contingent on having the right friends in the right social circles. Money can be gained in numerous ways, and more often than not by taking it from someone else. Extrinsic or external goods are only sometimes awarded to chess players.

On the other hand there are goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind. We call them internal for two reasons: first, as I have already suggested, because we can only specify them in terms of chess or some other game of that specific kind and by means of examples from such games...and secondly because they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question.<sup>12</sup> Internal or intrinsic goods are those goods that are particularly difficult to define. Part of Macintyre's definition seems to circle back in on itself as he puzzles out the fact that it seems quite impossible to define these goods outside of a particular context. Indeed even feelings of bliss, happiness, or the joy of beating a challenge can be gotten in numerous ways other than playing chess. In fact chess does not often evoke these feelings save to those who are very good at it, and therein lies much of the mystery of the internal goods. These are goods that cannot be accessed by merely the curious or even always the amateur participant in a practice. Certain internal goods are rewarded only to the practitioner with the greatest skill, or to the victor in a practice. Certainly the inner goods of war are only awarded to the practitioners who win wars, as

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<sup>10</sup> Kelvin Knight, *The Macintyre Reader*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.) 71.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.) 188.

the losers are often killed. Macintyre draws upon the example of the artist in order to illustrate this point more fully.

The internal goods of the artist follow in the terms of the art. “The internal goods are those which result from an extended attempt to show how Wittgenstein’s dictum ‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul’ (*Investigations*, p. 178e) might be made to become true by teaching us ‘to regard...the picture on our wall as the object itself (the men, landscape and so on) depicted there’ (p. 205e) in a quite new way.”<sup>13</sup> This example illustrates how the internal goods of a practice are to be communicated. The internal goods of the artist must be communicated in an artistic way. This example does not even describe any internal goods at all, but only how the artist may access them. To be sure these are goods that are delivered to the artist only upon achieving a level of excellence and skill in showing the face of humanity in their art. Indeed it is in excellence and skill that Macintyre will posit his first true internal goods.

Internal goods must be understood in the context of the rest of Macintyre’s definition of practice. This is particularly true of clauses one and three, as seen in Macintyre’s further explanation of painting. “There is first of all the excellence of the products, both the excellence in performance by the painters and that of each portrait itself. This excellence – the very verb ‘excel’ suggests it – has to be understood historically. The sequences of development find their point and purpose in a progress to and beyond a variety of types and modes of excellence.”<sup>14</sup> The good of excellence is that which a practice stems from and strives to. It is both the tradition of the standards in a practice, and the goal towards which practitioners ever strive. Geoff Moore makes use of a helpful example in illustrating this point.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 188-189.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 189.

Suppose I deliver a course of lectures (the product) through which not only are my students edified (one lives in hope), but I myself, through “trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity” attain the internal goods of the intellectual stimulation of putting together and delivering a course of lectures, and the satisfaction of enabling others to learn.<sup>15</sup> Moore appeals to the third clause, of Macintyre’s definition of practices, to explain his second clause. Now whether or not teaching is a practice is still up in the air at this moment but Moore’s illustration is still a good one. External goods can be had in any number of ways, but the internal good of excellence is defined particularly for every individual practice. To be excellent at chess is to devote oneself not only to the tradition, but also to pushing that tradition forward.

This leads one to discover the second kind of internal good. “...the good of a certain kind of life...it is the painter’s living out of a greater or lesser part of his or her life as a *painter* that is the second kind of good internal to painting. And judgment upon these goods requires at the very least the kind of competence that is only to be acquired either as a painter or as someone willing to learn systematically what the portrait painter has to teach.”<sup>16</sup> The good life is a concept as old as Plato, and it is one that is central to the virtues. It is an internal good of a practice that one has the experience of living their life as a practitioner of that practice. That may seem circular, but that does not make it less true. I cannot know what the good of painting is unless I live part of my life as a painter. Then part of the good of being a painter is that I get to live my life in that way. When one comes to a practice seeking what goods it may provide, they may be satisfied by the external goods or seek something deeper. The revelation that comes from years of seeking the internal good of a practice is that one has in some ways become that practice, and lived as part of it.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Geoff Moore, “On the Implications of the Practice-Institution Distinction: Macintyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* Vol. 12. Is.1 (2002) 20-21.

This talk of the internal goods of the practices leads Macintyre to a formulation of a core definition of virtue. First he reiterates the facts that excellence and obedience to rules are as much a part of a practice as are the internal goods. The practice has a history and a tradition that defines certain standards for excellence and achievement within itself. That tradition may change, but it is only open to change by expanding the standards of excellence, not supplanting them. “In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment.”<sup>17</sup> Macintyre then points out that external goods are always made to serve the self as an individual. Yet internal goods can be made to serve the community at large. External goods of money and prestige are only afforded to the winner of a game. However internal goods are afforded, in some ways, to all the participants of a practice.<sup>18</sup> This leads Macintyre to his first definition of a core concept of virtue. “...A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and 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>19</sup> This is an important definition for Macintyre as it enables him to form a community around the practices.

As he has defined the virtues; they are the entities that enable relationships to form within the practices. “Every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it. Now 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 kind of purposes and

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<sup>16</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.) 190.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

standards which inform practices.”<sup>20</sup> The three virtues that Macintyre espouses at this juncture are honesty, justice, and courage. Honesty is a necessary virtue in the practices, for through it we define our relationships with each other. To be honest with some and false with others defines a special relationship between oneself and others, and it is a relationship of unfairness. Justice is as important as honesty since, “justice requires that we treat others in respect of merit or desert according to uniform and impersonal standards...”<sup>21</sup> Justice requires honesty, as much as honesty demands justice. If these virtues are breached, then the community is threatened, relationships amongst practitioners break down, and so also must the practice itself break down. On the other hand courage defines oneself to the community as being a person who cares about self or others. “At this point one might fear that Macintyre is instrumentalizing the virtues, seeing them as mere means to external goods (the internal goods of practices). But what Macintyre has in mind in exercising the virtues is partly constitutive of excellent practice.”<sup>22</sup> Macintyre makes it clear that a practice can only flourish within a society that values certain virtues. However at this point Macintyre feels compelled to draw a distinction between practices and skills based on a strong internal good, the end in and of itself.

Macintyre further clarifies what he means by practices as opposed to skills. “The discussion so far I hope makes it clear that a practice, in the sense intended, is never just a set of technical skills, even when directed towards some unified purpose and even if the exercise of those skills can on occasion be valued or enjoyed for their own sake.”<sup>23</sup> One of the greatest inner

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, “Introduction,” in *Virtue Ethics pgs.1-26*. ed. by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.) 12.

<sup>23</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.) 193.

goods in a practice is that a practice can be enjoyed for its own sake. One can play chess just to play chess, and one can paint art just to paint art. However a practice is not simply any skill set, even one that may enable a person to enjoy using those skills for their own sake. “What is distinctive in a practice is in part the way in which conceptions of the relevant goods and ends which the technical skills serve...are transformed and enriched by these extensions of human powers and by that regard for its own internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice or type of practice.”<sup>24</sup> It is this explication of practices that most strongly elaborates on the fourth clause of his original definition. Practices are not fixed, and indeed they are open to complete and total paradigmatic shifts. However these shifts are not made arbitrarily, but rather by a slow working out of the tradition. A practice is informed and created by the tradition within a social context. A practice is set up so that it can be extended and changed by its practitioners. Change is possible as the practitioners push the limits of the practice and reach its goals of excellence. They then set new goals and redefine the practice itself. One of the inner goods available to only the most skilled practitioners is the power to change the practice itself. Yet those who would change the practice still stand in relation not only to their peers but to their ancestors as well. “To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point.”<sup>25</sup> Thus strains of the first clause float back to the ears of each practitioner. The practice is a social and historical construct that is established for cooperative behavior. Yet that cooperation is across time as much as it is across distance. Even those who would seek to surpass their predecessors in the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 194.

practice, must first seek to achieve their level. Yet it is here that Macintyre puts practices into a stark contrast with Institutions.

### **Institutions**

Now Institutions are essentially the anti-practices, and they may look very much like practices. However institutions are distinguished by several factors, and can be seen easily displayed in some examples.

Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities, and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards.

A hospital is an excellent example of an institution. It is in a hospital that Doctors practice medicine, but they do so not to enhance the field, as often as they do because they are paid to.

The hospital, as contrasted with medicine simply, is primarily concerned with the external goods of money, prestige, and status. A good doctor makes not only money, but is also afforded prestige and status by practicing at a well known hospital. Yet Macintyre still notes an interesting relationship between practices and institutions.

...no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed 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 acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.<sup>26</sup>

Institutions stimulate interest in practices, and indeed provide more people with access to practices. Much of the interest in the practice of football is generated by institutions like the NFL and BCS. Much of the practice of football at the highest levels of the practice is done within those institutions. Indeed all artists might be starving were it not for wealthy patrons who allow

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the artist to be able to excel in their art. Yet for all that institutions also have negative effects on practices. The drive to make money as an artist often squelches creativity and genius for the sake of paying the bills. The drive to get funding for research often pushes physicists to explore the more profitable areas of study to the denigration of other perhaps more important areas. “In this context the essential function of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.”<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion this paper has put forth the historical aspect of Macintyre’s ethics and how practice fits in to that account as found in *After Virtue*. Macintyre follows his writings on practice by creating a full concept of the virtues based on traditions and narrative founded in history. His view of practices is foundational to his ethical project yet it is only the second step of his ethics. His first was to lay out the history and his third and fourth steps are found in the rest of his ethics, in the form of traditions and narrative. The character of his ethics cannot be judged until he has laid out a full theory. But for those who would judge Macintyre on a single act in his theory, the act of practices can withstand their criticisms.

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<sup>26</sup> Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.) 194.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## Appendix 1: Criticisms of Macintyre's views on Teaching

Now much of the controversy regarding Macintyre's theory of practices has come up around precisely what makes an institution or a practice. Specifically Macintyre generated quite a bit of controversy in dialogues he had with Joseph Dunne about teaching. In these dialogues Macintyre claims that teaching is not a practice, but rather that "teaching is an ingredient in any practice."<sup>28</sup> Dunne's response is to accept that Macintyre probably knows what is talking about, being the philosopher who invented the concept of practice. However Dunne still takes issue with Macintyre and raises a defense of teaching as a practice. "Despite these hesitations I shall argue in this paper that teaching is itself a practice. But the argument will proceed less through analysis of the concept of practice than through reflection on the realities of teaching."<sup>29</sup>

Dunne's argument centers on defending what it is that teachers actually accomplish, as opposed to Macintyre's definition of what teaching is. Dunne's argument is very sophisticated but it centers on the idea of the inner goods found in teaching. "...What makes teaching a distinct practice—and, one might say, a high art—is neither subject-matter expertise per se, nor solicitous caring, still less methodological sophistication. Good teaching resides, rather, in care for students that is realized in helping them to become what particular practices can enable them to become..."<sup>30</sup> There is an inner good gained by a teacher in helping the student to become a certain kind of person. This is much like the good of the life of the artist, as there is a good of the life of the teacher here.

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Dunne, "Arguing for Teaching as a Practice: A reply to Alasdair Macintyre," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* Vol. 37. No. 2 (2003). 353.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 353-354.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 368.

Now much of this controversy stems from a definition of precisely what teaching is, and on that note Macintyre and Dunne are operating in different paradigms. David Carr puts forward a particularly enlightening view of Macintyre's meaning on this issue. "Indeed, if all Macintyre means is that whatever is involved in teaching people to read, multiply, grasp the causes of the pre-war inflation or play tennis is not an epistemic, technical or other enterprise in the same sense as the forms of knowledge and skill that such teaching is concerned to promote, we may readily agree..."<sup>31</sup> Macintyre thinks that physics and medicine are indeed practices, but simply teaching these practices is not a practice in and of itself. Perhaps the primary reason Macintyre sees teaching as not a practice is because it is so tied up in a particular institution, the university.

The university is concerned primarily with doling out a mark of prestige and status, the degree. The university does this by paying professors to hold classes and give lectures and assignments to those students who must excel in a set of technical skills in order to achieve the degree. It may be the case that Macintyre is overly critical of his own institution, the university, but this attitude is prevalent in education all the way down to the most basic of pre-school levels. When teachers ask children "What do you want to be when you grow up?" even very young children understand that this is a question about which job, that makes money, is what the child most desires.

Yet the fact remains that Macintyre does not view teaching itself as a practice, but rather as a necessary means for all practices. Teaching is more basic than any practice, and it is common to all practices. How would anyone learn the traditions of a practice, or the skills of a practice, if there were not others to teach them? Teaching is that particular skill set whereby the traditions of the practices are passed along to a new generation. Teaching is that which maintains

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history, as there would be no knowledge of the past without those who preserve and pass it on. The moral traditions of the west are traditions that depend on teaching in a very fundamental way. Dunne's point that teaching is more than some skill-set is already well-known to Macintyre. Indeed Macintyre knows that teaching is one of the most fundamental entities for all virtue ethics, and for that it is not a practice; it is more than a practice.

## **Appendix 2: A Defense of Virtue Ethics**

Yet virtue ethics itself is also in question, since thinkers like Robert Louden have pointed out some *Vices of Virtue Ethics*. However it is precisely in Macintyre's account of practices that many of Louden's objections may be answered.

One of Louden's objections concerns the character centered nature of virtue ethics, and how it focuses on the virtue of moral agents themselves. "In focusing on good and bad agents, virtue theorists are thus forced to de-emphasize discrete acts in favor of long-term, characteristic patterns of behaviour."<sup>32</sup> Louden's first criticism, based on this inference, is that virtue ethics will be weak in the areas of casuistry and applied ethics. "...people have always expected ethical theory to tell them something about what they ought to do, and it seems to me that virtue ethics is structurally unable to say much of anything about this issue."<sup>33</sup> Louden's mistake is to assume things about the nature of ethics that simply are not true. On Macintyre's account ethics itself does not tell anyone what they ought to do, and indeed it shouldn't. Ethics is a field of study; rather it is societies' place to tell people what they ought to do. Specifically it is the job of practices and institutions to tell people what to do in both the positive and negative sense. It is

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<sup>31</sup> David Carr, "Rival Conceptions of Practice in Education and Teaching," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* Vol. 37. No. 2 (2003). 256.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," in *Virtue Ethics* pgs.201-216. ed. by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.) 205.

the job of practices like medicine to encourage people to save and value lives. It is the job of institutions like the law to punish those who do not value life.

This brings up Louden's second objection on this point, something he calls "tragic humans". This argument is based around the idea that even the best person can make the wrong decision.<sup>34</sup> The upshot of this argument is that Louden thinks one wrong act should be judged independently of a host of good acts. Macintyre's response is a simple one, in that no single act is to be too greatly prized over any other in judging a person's character. Yes, even the best can err, but if they truly are the best then how they deal with a tragedy or an error will reveal this. A truly good man will make up for his errors and show himself, even in his vices, to be a man of virtue. In a practice it is often the case that the most skilled fail under pressure or just have a bad day. If single acts were valued then one error may be enough to destroy all the good they have ever done. Yet it is the consistent actions of an individual that matter to the continued survival and expansion of the practice. Excellence is not based on single isolated actions, but rather on a consistent determined course of actions. The greatest inner goods of a practice cannot be achieved without such a consistency.

Another argument Louden raises is that we should be able to judge "intolerable actions." That is to say that there are certain actions that automatically put one out of favor with the community, no matter what they are. Macintyre's response may be to admit that there are indeed intolerable actions, but that every single act is preceded by a history that led up to that action. One cannot devalue that history in judging the severity of an action. A serial killer may commit such intolerable actions, but no killer is without their own story. The significance of that story is that serial killers are not made by single actions but rather by patterns of action. A wary society

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

will pay more attention to trends of actions than to single actions on their own, since the most heinous acts are almost always preceded by a history of bad actions. In practices one sees in the consistently bad practitioner the path to horrendous single acts.

Another of Louden's arguments centers on character change, and the fact that a good man may become bad someday.<sup>35</sup> This particular argument simply strengthens the virtue ethicist position, since the character, whether good or bad is more important than any single acts. This is especially true for practices, since over time skills will decay as one's health and strength fades in old age. The skilled practitioner of football is only skilled for so many years, and then his "character" changes. Yet this is not an overnight, single-act type of change, but rather the result of a personal history of weakening abilities. To be sure anyone's character can change, but it is more important to pay attention to the trends of their actions rather than any single action in predicting this change.

Louden's final argument on acts and agents is that a good moral person may be prone to backsliding, or occasional errors which are out of character.<sup>36</sup> His point is that someone may justify these actions as acceptable weaknesses. Macintyre's answer here draws heavily on his theory of practices. It is in practices that one continually strives for excellence; for it is in the nature of a practice that practitioners strive to push the limits set by their predecessors. Backsliding is never acceptable, and there are no acceptable minor flaws in the quest for excellence. Indeed the difference between the mediocre and the excellent practitioners is that the mediocre are content with some small amount of error. On the other hand the excellent pursue perfection and will accept no errors in that pursuit. Essentially the point that Louden is missing is that you

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 206.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 208.

can't separate a person from their acts. It's not a question of whether you should or not, it's a matter of ability. People define themselves by all the actions they take, not just by a few.

Aristotle's conception of happiness, expressed in his own Ethics, is that a man is not truly happy until he is dead. Only in looking at the full life and character of a person can they truly be judged. There is no way to separate a man from his actions, except when he is no longer acting.

For the living the only way to be judged is on the basis of their entire character. The only skilled practitioner is one with a history of failure and overcoming.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 209.

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