The Light in a New Dark Age: The Church in After Virtue

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Abstract

This essay proposes a role the Church in Australia can play in developing virtues amongst its members and society at large. Alasdair MacIntyre's seminal work, *After Virtue*, outlines the need and specifications of this role. It is posited that both corporate and state institutions as they exist today cannot strengthen the moral fabric of Australian society. The Church on the other hand is excellently positioned to play a strengthening role in Australia's moral character. A concise summary of Alasdair MacIntyre's reasoning and conclusions is provided, followed by application to the Australian Church at large and then an example from the author's personal life.

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* was originally penned over three decades ago and remains an immensely popular work in the field of moral philosophy and beyond.[1] *After Virtue* is credited with a renewal of virtue ethics that continues to this day.[2] The third edition, published in 2007, was used for this essay. This essay will highlight the conclusions offered by MacIntyre and the opportunity they present to the Church in Australia to take a leading role in the development of virtues in its members and society at large. Indeed, MacIntyre paves the way for the Church to be a light in the shadows cast by moral emotivism and uncertainty. A specific and personal application of *After Virtue* concludes this essay. It is to be noted that MacIntyre's argument is severely summarised and missing many of its compelling nuances, nevertheless, it is hoped that his rationale remains intact. Also, the term 'practice' used throughout this essay is essential and has the specific meaning attributed to it by MacIntyre, defined subsequently in this essay.

After Virtue

With a computer tablet at their disposal, an individual could make complicated mathematical calculations with the aid of a vast array of applications. Imagine that instead of using an application, this individual uses the blank screen of the tablet along with a whiteboard marker to perform their arithmetic. Either this individual is an artist making some sort of social comment, or they do not understand the operation of a computer tablet the way the manufacturer intended. In a similar way, MacIntyre believes that contemporary Western society holds what looks and feels like moral discourse and philosophy, but lacks knowledge of the foundation

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[1] Joseph Boyle, *On MacIntyre's "After Virtue"* (The World and I Online, 2014), Loc 20.
[2] Marcel Becker, "Virtue Ethics, Applied Ethics and Rationality Twenty-Three Years after After Virtue," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (August 2004): 267.

underpinning many of these moral concepts.[3] The result of this incomplete moral framework is the emergence of emotivism as the popular conception of moral philosophy: "all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference…"[4] Emotivism guarantees interminability to all moral debate.[5] *After Virtue* is MacIntyre's attempt to trace out the historical reasons for why Western society talks in moral terms they don't fully understand and conducts moral arguments that can never be resolved.

Modernity has liberated the individual from limits imposed by class, gender, religion and other societal structures.[6] Yet it seems that this moral progress adopted a scorched earth policy that also eliminated helpful structures. In an attempt to keep an objective distance from their theories, moral philosophers in the time of the Enlightenment began to deconstruct the assumed telos and overarching narratives of society. MacIntyre believes the Enlightenment project of providing rational justification for moral beliefs is a partial cause for the emotivism of today. He sees the project as a succession of failures. Justifications of morality on the basis of reason were proved wrong through justification on the basis of passion and desire, and visa versa.[7] In McIntyre's view this led to Kierkegaard's reconciliation of these failures: moral beliefs are a matter of choice,[8] a philosophy from which emotivism was bound to emerge.

The Enlightenment philosophers failed because they did not recognise that the moral injunctions they had inherited from bygone generations were married to an ethical framework that they were bent on rejecting. Ethics was the science of human development. It required a strong conception of human telos and narrative, an understanding that humans are not complete

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[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Third Edition*, 3rd edition. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 2.
[4] Ibid., 11.
[5] Ibid., 6.
[6] Ibid., 34.
[7] Ibid., 47.

as they are and are thus on a journey towards completeness through development of self in community. Ethics previously understood moral injunctions were in aid of an individual and society reaching their telos. Thus moral beliefs are not justifiable based on the character of humanity as it is; only a properly understood human telos can justify these moral beliefs. By dissolving the notion of human telos, the Enlightenment philosophers doomed their project to failure.[9]

Today, the social world divides into the 'organisational realm' and 'personal realm'. The organisational realm takes telos as an undefined given and instead elevates efficiency as the highest goal. The individualistic personal realm is disconnected from socially dependent definitions of self and has no agreed upon telos; thus, contains no reference for rational debate around morality.[10] The political consequence is an oscillation between an emphasis on individual liberties and a necessary bureaucratic control over unrestrained self-interest.[11]

MacIntyre paints a picture of three 'characters' that play the key roles in the 'bureaucratic individualism'[12] of contemporary society. The 'Rich Aesthete' lives to avoid boredom and does not consider the teleology of their life.[13] The 'Manager' does not trouble themselves with conceptions of telos, for there is no basis for determining what a 'correct' end goal is. They are instead absorbed with being 'efficient'.[14] Similarly, the 'Therapist' is not permitted to engage in moral discourse, but instead seeks to help individuals improve their measurable markers of wellness.[15] It becomes clear that MacIntyre sees contemporary society as busying themselves

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[8] Ibid., 49.
[9] Ibid., 55.
[10] Ibid., 34.
[11] Ibid., 35.
[12] Ibid., 35.
[13] Ibid., 73.
[14] Ibid., 30.
[15] Ibid., 30.

with labour and leisure, with out a sense of narrative and thus, without a sense of meaning. To sustain the functionality of this individualistic bureaucracy a number of residual elements from the Enlightenment project have remained in vogue, namely: individual rights, utility, and managerial effectiveness. MacIntyre seeks to demonstrate that these are fictitious concepts with no rational justification.[16] But one may ask, "What is the problem? If they keep our society running let these figments of imagination play their useful part." The problem is that an individualistic bureaucracy will still lead us to an ends and Nietzsche was perceptive enough to discern the telos of modern humanity.

Nietzsche saw redundant residuals of a bygone morality and sought to remove these irrational inconsistencies that act as a barrier to human development.[17] Nietzsche honestly sketched an image of the person who overcomes the 'rational disguises' of modern moral philosophy and perceives the irrational reality behind it.[18] This *ubermensch*[19] wills to determine his own moral framework, to control all around him; this kind of individual is the rational product of the current irrationality of moral philosophy.[20] Thus, to MacIntyre's reckoning, either the Enlightenment project had a hidden, intrinsic flaw, or Nietzsche's conclusions are correct. MacIntyre argues that Nietzsche's conclusions are not justified, reasoning that the Enlightenment philosophers ignored the Aristotelian tradition that provided context for the morality they were seeking to justify.[21] MacIntyre traces the crucial historical influence of Aristotle and particularly his *Nicomachean Ethics*. He then seeks to rework Aristotle's system of virtue ethics that it might not be dependent on Aristotle's understanding of metaphysics and the societal peculiarities of his

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[16] Ibid., 76.
[17] Ibid., 113.
[18] Ibid., 117.
[19] Over-man, Super-man
[20] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*., 259.
[21] Ibid., 117.

day.[22] He aims to provide a modern framework of ethics that moves from the question, *what rules should one follow*, to the question, *what person am I to become*?[23]

MacIntyre uses medieval history as an example of a fractured and pluralistic society that reworked Aristotelian ethics to bring some level of uniformity to moral discourse and behaviour.[24] MacIntyre believes that the key in every era that has successfully applied an Aristotelian approach to ethics is an appreciation for the narrative structure of human life.[25] Aristotle had a human narrative informed by Greek heroic poems and his notion of the good life.[26] When Thomas Aquinas appropriated Aristotle, the New Testament informed his human narrative.[27] In looking for a relevant narrative structure for contemporary Western society, MacIntyre identifies three crucial accounts that form the overarching narrative of a society.

The first is a *practice*. Given how fundamental this concept is both to MacIntyre's thoughts and the subsequent proposal of this essay, it bears repeating his full definition:

"…any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative 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."[28]

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[22] Ibid., 158, 163.
[23] Ibid., 118.
[24] Ibid., 173.
[25] Ibid., 263.
[26] Ibid., 184.
[27] Ibid., 184.
[28] Ibid., 187.

Practices are sustained by institutions and may also derive external goods. Examples are financial payment or fame as a result of the ends or goods produced by the practice.[29] Virtues then are the human qualities that enable someone "to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevent us from achieving any such goods."[30] Because practices are cooperative, virtues are thus developed in community. It therefore follows that the institutions that house practices will either flourish or decay on the basis of the acquired virtues of the practitioners.[31]

The second necessary account is that of a narrative order of human life. MacIntyre argues in chapter fifteen, through use of examples, that narratives in art are only reflections of the actual narrative structure of life.[32] He eventually does little more than parrot Aristotle in saying that the unifying human narrative is a quest for the good life. With such a narrative in place, he can add that virtues are necessary for this quest and aid in the perception of the good life.[33]

The final account necessary to complete this overarching narrative ensures that the good for one is also the good for another.[34] This is an account of a moral tradition. MacIntyre believes a moral tradition allows the development of a virtue that resides between rusted on traditionalism and ambivalence towards the past. This virtue allows one to grasp the 'future possibilities which the past has made available to the present'.[35] While not going into depth of application, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* offers a theoretical construction of virtue ethics that can be applied in contemporary society.

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[29] Ibid., 188.
[30] Ibid., 191.
[31] Ibid., 194.
[32] Ibid., 211.
[33] Ibid., 219.
[34] Ibid., 220.
[35] Ibid., 223.

Yet MacIntyre ends with sober pessimism and hope intermingled. He posits that we are already in a 'new dark age' and Western society is largely unaware of its predicament, as it makes emotivist assumptions about reality. MacIntyre does not counsel revolution at the level of government but instead sees a pivotal role to be played by 'local forms of community' in developing virtues in society.[36] The second part of this essay will explore the possible role of Christians and churches in Australia in the development of virtues in society.

Application to the Australian Church

Christian churches are well positioned to play a role in developing the virtues of Australian citizens, for the Christian faith provides both a moral tradition and a clear conception of the human narrative and telos. To live up to its virtue building potential, the Church must give greater consideration to the 'practices' that congregants are engaged in outside of church gatherings. Corporations dominate the life of many Australians, whether working within the corporate environment or sustaining corporations through discretionary consumption when not working.[37] Thus, it is essential for the Church in Australia to consider how its members can develop virtues in a corporate environment of work and leisure, an environment that, in MacIntyre's view, currently lacks virtue nurturing narrative. The following are some considerations for the church desiring the development of virtues in its members and in broader Australian society.

The first suggestion is to continue making disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is essential to the Christian moral tradition and human telos. Jesus provides the first model of what

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[36] Ibid., 263.
[37] Geoff Moore, "Re-Imagining the Morality of Management: A Modern Virtue Ethics Approach," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (October 2008): 491.

a human practicing virtues looks like.[38] Furthermore, the Holy Spirit gives capacity for those

baptised into the name of Christ Jesus to practice divine virtues.[39] One recent quantitative study,

though not substantive, did provide evidence of a positive correlation between conversion to

Christ and the development of virtues, particularly hope and faith.[40] However, that divinely given

capacity for virtues must be followed up with virtuous actions that become habitual.

The second suggestion is for the Church to harness the power of MacIntyre's conception

of practice in better understanding the roles of work and leisure. Given the amount of time

people spend at work each week, vocational practice becomes a key arena for the development of

virtues. The Christian scriptures point to the blessings inherent in work and work constituting

part of the good life.[41] However, how can the Church work with institutions committed to

managerial effectiveness above any other ends?

Although MacIntyre takes a bleak view of managers and sees them generally as

compartmentalised and committed to efficiency above all other goals, there is cause to take a

more positive view on the role of the manager. In fact there is good evidence for managers acting

as moral agents and playing a role in determining the ends of their business.[42] Christians in high

level management must be equipped in church to play a role in defining the telos of their

particular business. This can be as simple as extending conventional applications in preaching to

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[38] Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, "Virtue Ethics: Natural and Christian," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (June 2013): 465.

[39] Zondervan, *NIV Study Bible*, Leather edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bibles, 2011), 2 Pet 1:3-4, Gal 5:22-23; Daniel Castelo, "Tarrying on the Lord: Affections, Virtues and Theological Ethics in Pentecostal Perspective," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13, no. 1 (October 2004): 44.

[40] Sarah A. Schnitker et al., "Virtue Development Following Spiritual Transformation in Adolescents Attending Evangelistic Summer Camp," *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 22, 27.

[41] Brian Brock, "A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation," *European Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (April 2008): 93–94.

[42] Moore, "Re-Imagining the Morality of Management," 490.

the managerial context. Furthermore, teaching must cover the kinds of virtues that can be developed through vocational practice and create expectation for God to be teaching and developing through work. Churches must encourage congregants to value the internal goods derived from work: the satisfaction of giving your best work, the pleasure of producing an excellent product that will serve people, etc. Churches embracing this framework will encourage managers to develop people, not just goods and services.[43] If the corporate environment is pumping managers full of more technical knowledge, then let the church contribute by pumping managers full of better ethics derived from the Scriptures.[44] As MacIntyre pointed out, institutions will rise and fall on the back of the virtues of their participants, particularly their leaders.

Leisure activities make up another significant part of the average Australian's week. Creation theology gives value to the activity of rest and it is essential for churches to teach the disciplines of Sabbath and church participation.[45] Nevertheless, many Australians enjoy and engage in leisure practices.[46] Watching television does not constitute a practice, but playing sport, being part of a dramatic society or playing music in a band does. The participation rates in sport, particularly amongst children, are over 60%.[47] Churches have an opportunity to equip parents who can coach teams and lead sporting clubs. These are generally small, flexible

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[43] William J. O'Brien, "The Soul of the Organization," *Reflections* 10, no. 1 (September 2009): 28.

[44] Robert K. Greenleaf, Larry C. Spears, and Stephen R. Covey, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness 25th Anniversary Edition*, 25 Anv edition. (New York: Paulist Pr, 2002), 249; David W Haddorff, "Theology and the Market Ethos: Toward an Ecclesial Understanding of Work and Leisure," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 50, no. 1–4 (1996): 98.

[45] Zondervan, *NIV Study Bible*, Ex 16:23, Heb 10:24-25.

[46] Referring to MacIntyre's definition of a practice

[47] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Main Features - Sports Participation," http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4901.0~Apr+2012~Main+Features~Sports+participation?OpenDocument [accessed October 30, 2015].

institutions that individuals can have a large influence over. Sport can become an obsession and an end in itself,[48] however research has shown that virtues like humility and honour can certainly be cultivated through the practice of sports.[49] There is potential for churches to start their own clubs or societies that remain intimately connected to the wider Church body but focus on certain leisure practices.

The third suggestion is that churches look within before they look to the State for solutions to societal issues. This is not to say they should abandon protest or pleas for better governance; it is to recognise that expecting morally rational solutions from a State that has rejected a definitive telos for humanity will likely prove futile.[50] Christian churches are better positioned than the State to develop solutions that contribute to the development of virtues in society. In turn, the State is in a better position to scale successful solutions to reach a greater number of citizens. This is not to dissuade Christians from entering roles in government institutions, for while they may be even more rigid than corporate institutions, the survival of government institutions depends on practitioners rich in virtue.

Case Study

The third and final part of this essay takes the suggestions of part two and applies them to a specific real life case. I have known Adrian[51] for most of his life, seeing him grow up from childhood to the verge of entering the workforce. Adrian has some troubles speaking clearly as

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[48] Shirl James Hoffman, "WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PLAY? (cover story)," *Christianity Today* 54, no. 2 (February 2010): 21.
[49] Michael W. Austin, "Is Humility a Virtue in the Context of Sport?," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (May 2014): 209–212; David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier, "Coaching for Civic Character," *Journal of Research in Character Education* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 30–31.
[50] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 195.
[51] Not real name.

part of a broader difficulty in executing fine motor skills. I have played a key role in helping Adrian know and follow Jesus. Adrian's relationship with and imitation of Christ is evident in the way he seeks to serve others and perseveres through challenges with hope. A relationship with Christ has been the foundation for virtue formation in Adrian's life.

Five years ago I started a football[52] team through my previous church and Adrian participated from the first season. Adrian plays both for the external good of friendship within the team, but also the internal goods of producing better performances as a team. The search for these internal goods requires the development of virtues like humility, perseverance and commitment. *After Virtue* has encouraged me to be more explicit in making connections between virtues and our team's pursuit to improve our footballing performance, the internal good of our practice. It has also warned me of the dangers of focussing on external goods, such as games won. A focus on external goods will reduce the virtue building aspect of the football practice.

Adrian is currently studying, but has struggled to find work due to his fine motor difficulties. If a business assumes an indefinite telos and pursues the notion of efficiency, it is hard to imagine them offering Adrian a position. I have found it hard to know what role to play in this critical part of his life. If a Christian business manager is taught to look beyond immediate efficiency, to look for the realistic potential in candidates and for opportunities to develop human beings, they may take Adrian on. This may seem like an idealistic scenario; nevertheless, if MacIntyre's conclusions are correct, the Christian church may be the primary hope for people like Adrian to experience moral development and the 'good life'. MacIntyre has helped me see that in my role as a preacher and disciple maker I must take seriously the role of vocation and leisure in spiritual and moral development. Furthermore, in future roles I may have in government or business, I must ensure that Christ and not efficiency is my telos.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to summarise the nuanced argument of Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* and distil his theoretical vision for virtue ethics. This vision has been applied to the role of the Church in contemporary Australian society. The strength of MacIntyre's claims against bureaucratic managers has been tempered, allowing Christian business managers to play an important role in building virtues in the context of vocational and leisure practices. Finally, the suggestions for the Australian church are applied to a unique case in the life of this essay's author. *After Virtue* is justifiably a seminal work in the arena of moral philosophy and gives greater clarity to Church's role of being a light in today's world.

[52] Soccer

Austin, Michael W. "Is Humility a Virtue in the Context of Sport?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (May 2014): 203–214.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Main Features - Sports Participation." Accessed October 30, 2015. http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/4901.0~Apr+2012~Main+Features~Sports+participation?OpenDocument.

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