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Part V. The Subject versus the Structure

2. Alasdair MacIntyre's Virtue Ethics

Up till now, I have been concerned with *explaining* the manifestation of the Will in individual and collective actions. Now the question shifts: given your commitments (See Part III, §3), what is the right action to take? This is a different problem.

Your actions generally follow from your commitments, but the shift from the explanation of activity to a guide for action requires me to confront the problem which was beyond the scope of Psychology and Sociology – the unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of every action.

In many cases, this distinction is immaterial, because the aims in any action lie more or less within the domain of foreseeable consequences. Actors rely on the existing framework of law and custom to manage unforeseen consequences which result from the combination of their act with the actions of others.

However, many of us who are motivated by ideals which transcend the norms of modern capitalism – *remote* ideals. For socialists, anarchists and pacifists, the problem of unforeseeable consequences is of fundamental significance.

As Hegel (See Part II, §4) and Anthony Giddens (See Part V, §1) have shown, there are unforeseen consequences to every action and some of these consequences are in principle unforeseeable. Sociology and Psychology do have some capacity to explain what people do given their situation. However, the concern of the subject is not that their action is explicable but that it be *right*. This is an ethical problem and not one which can be answered by Psychology or Sociology. The modern reflexive subject to which Giddens introduced us is also a subject acting according to ethical principles. As Marx said: 'An idea becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses' (1843). The practice of an ethical principle likewise becomes a material force when a subject acts upon it.

In this chapter, I address the problem of the Will that has proved insoluble for both Sociology and Psychology – that of the unforeseeable consequences of any action. Hegel based his conception of the State on this same insight. The problem of what is to be done in the face of unforeseeable consequences cannot be resolved without reference to Ethics.

As the discipline which answers the question 'what is the right action?', Ethics is an indispensable component of the science of the Will.

One strand of Ethics is uniquely equipped to meet this challenge in a way that makes sense on the basis of the theory of personality which I set out in Part III, §3. In that chapter I took the basic unit of the personality to be a commitment (*otnoshiniye*) – a really-existing ongoing form of practice to which a person is committed. The virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre is based on much the same concept, but he refers to it as a 'practice'.

In appropriating MacIntyre's virtue ethics cannot ignore the fact that MacIntyre himself regarded modernity *in toto* as an unmitigated disaster and the conclusion he drew was a return to the Catholic Church and obedience to its tradition. There is no need to accept MacIntyre's analysis of the failure of the

Enlightenment project. We already agree with the idea of a world made up of practices and traditions of practice sustained by virtues oriented to the furtherance of goods internal to practices. This feature of MacIntyre's virtue ethics makes it attractive for those of us engaged in radical social change activism.

Practices

In appropriating MacIntyre's virtue ethics, I shall take MacIntyre's 'practice' to be a 'commitment' in the sense in which I used 'commitment' in my appropriation of Leontyev's theory of the personality.

MacIntyre defines a 'practice' as:

> 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.
>
> 1981, p. 175

He goes on to give examples: games such as chess or football, professions such as architecture, enquiries such as physics, chemistry or history, arts such as painting and music, and the creation and sustaining of households, cities and nations. All practices are oriented towards the achievement of some good.

A virtue is defined as:

> an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.
>
> op. cit., p. 178

Virtue is *meaningful* only in the context of the practice in which it is manifested. No human quality is *absolutely* virtuous.

Practices, as MacIntyre sees them, are components of a *tradition*. A tradition is

> an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute a tradition.
>
> op. cit., p. 207

Internal Goods

Participants in a practice are striving for some *good* which is intrinsic to that practice. However, participants may be motivated instead by *external* goods. The distinction between goods internal to a practice and goods external to the practice is crucial. The successful solution of a difficult problem in medical science is an example of an *internal* good. The Nobel Prize in Medicine, bringing with it fame and fortune, is an *external* good. In both cases, the scientists concerned experience pleasure, but only in the case of the internal good does the community as a whole receive a benefit. The enjoyment arising from the successful practice of medicine, for example, is not the end at which medicine aims. Rather this enjoyment *supervenes* upon the successful activity (1981, p. 184). This enjoyment is a by-product of pursuing the good of the practice, which is the well-being of patients.

Practices arise in response to some problem or opportunity with the formation of a concept of the problematic situation or of its resolution. The end (or 'motive') at which the practice aims is the normative concept which orients all actions within the practice, often giving its name to the practice. The concept of the end undergoes development as people learn by trying to realise it.

The good toward which the practice is directed is definitive of the practice even though both the practice and the concept of its aim change over time. The practice maintains a narrative unity as it undergoes historical development and changes both its ends and its means.

World-historical practices

What if a project is to bring about radical social change of some kind, such as the abolition of capitalism or the establishment of world peace, rather than the perfection of a practice in itself? I will use 'world-historical' to refer to activities, practices and traditions whose motive is the realisation of some remote state of the world.

Such practices are problematic because the aim, conceived in terms of a utopian vision such as the abolition of capitalism is, by its nature, *remote*. Pursuit of such radical change is not the same as working within existing laws and customs to create some good. Practices such as Medicine, Education or Cinema are the kind of practices that MacIntyre has in mind. National liberation is a finite goal and falls legitimately under the category of 'practices' for which MacIntyre's virtue ethics is relevant. However, the twentieth century has demonstrated that the *nature* of state which emerges from a war of national liberation has been shown to generally fall under the category of 'remote'.

Pursuing some utopia is not the same as contributing to life under existing conditions.

For a 'world-historical' action to be judged worthwhile presupposes a *social theory* allowing the *contribution* of an action to the achievement of that remote end to be assessed as an 'internal good'. There is no action which will directly and immediately bring about Socialism. We are not going to witness the overthrow of capitalism as the outcome of any action I take today, but some step in that direction would mark the success of an action which would be judged as an internal good. Such a judgment depends upon some socio-historical *theory* generally an integral part of the relevant tradition. 'World-historical' practices are invariably aimed at 'small steps' of that kind.

A 'world-historical' practice which is *not* aimed at taking small steps towards achieving the ideal which motivates it, may be a game or a fantasy of some kind, but it is not what I call 'world-historical' practice. The argument about what is or is not a step towards Socialism is embedded in the history of the socialist tradition. At this socio-historical juncture, looking back at the history of the past two hundred years we can see the implausibility of claims that some finite action would be a step along the road to the socialist utopia.

No theory, sociological or psychological, can validate such a claim.

For a Socialist, the question of what is to be done at the present juncture is one of socialist ethics. The conception of a socialist utopia must be simply the concept of a social formation in which socialist ethics is universal.

The ‘world-historical’ practices I have in mind include the dozens of revolutionary socialist parties that are to be found in every country, anarchist groups and any number of political, religious or environmental groups that define themselves in terms of taking steps towards realisation of some remote utopia. I use the word ‘utopia’ only to refer to the end, not the means. Socialism is a utopia and I count myself a socialist.

Institutions

MacIntyre distinguishes between institutions and practices. Institutions, he says, rely on external goods so as to sustain themselves and the practices of which they are the bearers. Good performances are rewarded, wages are paid for full-time commitment, and apprentices are given formal training by old hands. Education systems based on formal testing regimes, for example, illustrate how institutions can undermine the very virtues that they set out to sustain by the use of external rewards.

> For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions … institutions and practices form a single causal order in which the creativity of the practice is always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution …without the virtues … practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.
> op. cit., p. 181

I have argued above for the use of a concept of ‘activities’ in which institutions, social movements and ongoing social practices are all taken to be ‘activities’ at different stages in their lifecycle. Without external rewards of *some* kind provided from *outside* the practice itself, how are the practices to be sustained and the virtues fostered and maintained? This distinction excludes the possibility that the internal goods provided by the practice itself can sufficiently motivate participants. Moreover, even informal social movements or volunteer organisations recognise that people need to receive benefits of *some* kind for the movement is to survive. My point is that what MacIntyre says about institutions is an observation that is relevant, in some degree, to *all* practices.

In the early days of working class organisation, breaches of union discipline were punished with fines. Gradually, over a period of a hundred years, these sanctions faded away as the norms of unionism were internalised and new generations were raised in the necessary virtues. No one would argue that avoidance of such fines exercised a ‘corrupting power’, but the point is that the virtue of solidarity took a took a long time to become instilled in the broad mass of the working class. Where unions are still strong, the commitment to solidarity is sufficient to maintain the union without sanctions beyond the disapproval of one’s colleagues.

Key to the maintenance of any practice and in particular its broader recognition, is the strengthening and weakening of social ties. Such ties in turn depend on what is deemed to be ‘the right thing to do’. Ethics, the determination of what it is the right thing to do, is a practical problem for anyone with a commitment.

Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism and Deontology

There are three broad approaches to ethics: Consequentialism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics.

According to *Consequentialism*, the rightness of an act must be judged according to its consequences. There are two difficulties with this: (1) at the time of acting you do not know what the consequences of your action will be, beyond the proximate outcome, and (2) how are all the myriad outcomes, good and bad, to be aggregated? The most established version of Consequentialism, Utilitarianism, answers that the total utility (interpreted in economic terms) summed across all affected persons must be maximised. Apart from the implausibility of this calculation, it leads to perverse and unjust outcomes. It is perverse for example, to rob someone and distribute their wealth to a number of poor people. This would lead to a greater sum of utility, but to justify robbery on this basis is the 'law of the jungle'. It would be unjust, for example, if a driver driving with care and within the rules, injured a person who unexpectedly ran in front of the car were punished because of the consequences of their driving.

However, the rejection of Consequentialism does *not* mean that a person should be indifferent to the consequences of their action. The reason for doing something is *always* the consequences of doing it. However, because there are always unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences to an action (and this is the crucial point), the worth of the action cannot be judged absolutely by its consequences.

According to *Deontology*, the rightness of an act must be judged by its conformity to a set of rules of the form 'Thou shalt …' Foremost among these rules is the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have done unto you', and in modern communicative ethics (Habermas 1984, 1987), decisions about how to act must be made according to rules governing how *collective* decisions are made: consulting all those affected, benefiting the most disadvantaged, eschewing domineering or exclusionary speech, etc.

The rejection of Deontology does not mean that there are no rules which people ought to consider in deciding how to act. On the contrary, the rules just mentioned by way of illustration certainly should be attended to in deciding how to act. But *which* rule should one obey when two or more rules are in conflict, and mandate different actions?

Both consequences and rules will indeed inform our actions, but neither can offer a comprehensive and reliable direction. Reflecting on abstract and implausible criteria while carrying out elaborate hypothetical calculations is just not how people actually make decisions.

This is not surprising because it would actually be impossible to make decisions in that way and attempts to do so invariably lead to perverse outcomes. It is when two or more rules conflict and we are called upon to decide *which* rule to prioritise or find a creative *via media* that ethics comes into play at all, and neither Consequentialism nor Deontology can help us when facing these kinds of quandaries. The richness of the vocabulary for virtues and vices – prudence, courage, self-respect, humility, intelligence, intuition, firmness, kindness, fairness, empathy, flexibility, consistency, …. versus carelessness, cowardice, hubris, insensitivity, … – demonstrates the complexity of the process of determining one's course of action in difficult situations and the depth of personal character that is called upon to act wisely. For correct decisions we must rely upon the judgment of a person in command of the relevant virtues and in possession of all the facts. This is why we have judges and juries and we

do not simply appoint a clerk to look up the legal provision relevant to the charge and read off the sentence. It always requires *judgment*, and the virtues needed to make a good judgment and carry it through can only be acquired through a moral education in the relevant tradition. Aristotle called the wisdom entailed in knowing how to act in the face of complex and conflicting imperatives *phronesis*.

In exercising phronesis, a judge, for example, takes into account foreseeable consequences of their decision and also attends to rules of conduct to ensure justice and fairness. Judges view the actions of those before them in the same way. Judges are subject to a protracted education and training in the practice of the law in order to instil the appropriate virtues and develop the capacity for phronesis. *There is no rulebook* for this. But in every case, this judgment entails an indefinitely complex balancing which can never be definitively resolved by rules or a utilitarian calculus.

It is the tradition to which the practice belongs which provides the resources for the exercise of phronesis, the various rules of conduct, concepts and narratives which can call upon in judging what to do. And there is no substitute – no abstract set of procedural rules or decision guidelines – that can substitute for the exercise of phronesis by virtuous actors, determining their action as participants in the relevant practice.

Virtue ethics offers a *realistic guide* for the exercise of phronesis, but does not exclude the need for deontological and consequential considerations, but on the contrary attends *realistically* to their application.

The point is that the consequences of, for example, adopting a certain organisational structure are significant in deciding whether to adopt the structure, but it takes judgment. One ought to know the proximate outcome of any decision one makes. For example, if adopting a 'horizontalist' structure for a campaign will lead to failure of the campaign, this has to be taken into account and *weighed* alongside benefit the new structure offers. But the tradition of which one is a part and the self-concept of the practice, generally includes a body of social theory and concepts, rules and inferences to guide such a decision. Whether or not to let a campaign fail in the interests of, say, preserving relationships within the campaign and being able to learn from a failure – these are matters of judgment. To adopt virtue ethics is not to turn a blind eye to the proximate consequences of one's actions and certainly not to ignore the wisdom accumulated by the tradition over the centuries, encoded in its founding principles. It is to know how to apply them.

Making a virtue ethic the basis for an approach to social change activism means *cultivating* the capacity for ethical judgment, phronesis, among the activists and building organisations which are themselves virtuous, and not captive to rigid dogmas and procedural imperatives (deontology).

Goals and Motives

One knows, or ought to know, the proximate outcome of one's actions. Any person or organisation bears moral responsibility for those outcomes and other unintended outcomes insofar as they were foreseeable. But a remote outcome such as socialist society (or world peace, or humanity living in harmony with Nature) is never such an outcome. By any reasonable judgment, any of these

remote utopias is at least generations into the future. No course of action can be judged in consequentialist terms on the basis that its outcome will be socialist society or world peace. In the light of the experience of the twentieth century, only a fool could believe that.

An action has effects; these effects combine with the totality of conditions at the time and the responses of all the other players to produce a new configuration of conditions. One can never know the ultimate consequences of one's action. However, history *is* intelligible and the socialist, anarchist, feminist and environmentalist traditions have built up a body of social theory over the past two hundred years which provides rules of conduct and a capacity to analyse conditions and estimate the consequences of different conditions and events. There is always going to be room for argument about how the struggle may unfold. "But we can leave this question entirely to posterity, who will be more intelligent than we are" (Trotsky, 1936). What Ethics can provide, however, which social theory cannot, is: guidance on how people can work together when they do not agree about this or that decision, or indeed, disagree with the whole tradition.

Virtues and Practices

The traditional concept of 'virtue' is implicitly individuated, in that it refers to an aspect of a person's character. On the other hand, an aspect of an individual's character is only a virtue if its exercise contributes to the internal goods of the practice of which it is a part, and what counts as the social good is determined by the social practice and the tradition of which it is a part. Further, character is shaped by participation in practices even though the character is a *psychological* formation. Virtue references both a person and a practice.

This ambiguity is not unique to the concept of virtue. It would be mistaken to take knowledge, for example, as a psychological entity, even though knowledge can only be realised in the context of social activity. What counts as knowledge depends on the practice in which it is realised, and individuals generally acquire knowledge through practical interaction with the institutions and cultural artefacts of a practice. Conversely, customs are taken to be attributes of a community, which individuals acquire through habit and conduct.

I believe it is justified to take virtue (and knowledge and custom) as in the first place *a property of a social formation*, practice or project, and *derivatively* a property of an individual. The virtues of a tradition are realised by individuals acquiring those virtues through participation in a practice which manifests that virtue. Like custom and knowledge, virtues should be understood primarily as attributes of a practice. Virtues are realised and manifested in the activities of the practice and *derivatively* as something acquired by individual human beings in and through their participation in the practice. We are all familiar with the inclusive social movement, the competitive sports club, the supportive self-help club, the solid union or the egalitarian community.

The starting point of the enquiry then is to determine those virtues which characterise anti-capitalist politics and how they are fostered by the practices which make up our tradition. This conception of *virtuous* political activities is the starting point, and it is reasonable to suppose individuals will acquire by participating in virtuous political practices. Taking everything into account, the

best possible outcome will result from the exercise of those virtues, if not some utopia.

This moves the discussion to the *virtues of social practices*, over and above the usual vocabulary of individuated virtues. As MacIntyre pointed out, the study of the virtues is fundamentally an *empirical* problem, not a theoretical exercise.

The ethics of social-change traditions

Social change practices are underpinned by the deontological maxim: *we* decide what *we* do. This is the progressive, secular version of the Golden Rule. The virtues of social change activism are developed on the basis of this maxim and the resolution of conflicts that arise from collective decision making. These virtues, in this specific sense, *prefigure* the kind of world we are fighting for, not 'in miniature' but concretely, in reality, here and now.

I have outlined the ethics of organisational practice in my book *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2016).

The characteristic virtue of the socialist tradition is *solidarity*. Solidarity means assisting another party under *their* direction. Solidarity is the virtue which fosters the development of socialism, taken to be a historically extended social movement. In this sense, I say that the 'urpraxis' of Socialism is solidarity. The exercise of solidarity is the germ-cell from which Socialism can grow; Socialism is the kind of social formation in which solidarity is universal. I believe this to be true for an anarchist as much as a Marxist.

I may not be my place to make these claims, but I think that the characteristic virtue of Feminism is recognition of the moral equality and distinctness of men and women. The characteristic virtue of the environmental movement is care of the commons. These are shared virtues.

MacIntyre does not attempt to specify what is absolutely good, and nor will I. That is a question for elsewhere. The concern here is not the ultimate justification of ends, but how an action is to be oriented in conditions where the relevant consequences are unforeseeable. Different traditions pursue different conceptions of the good; the argument here concerns the conditions under which any conception of the good can guide action.

Conclusion

There are three broad traditions of 'world-historical' activism that reject the obvious existence of unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of their actions. Instead, they substitute implausible appeals to long-view theories of history to justify otherwise unsupportable forms of activism.

First, the anarchist doctrine of 'prefigurative politics' which advises its adherents to act here and now *as if* the socialist utopia were already realised.

Second, the revolutionary socialist doctrine that the immediate task at hand is the construction of the revolutionary vanguard. This vanguard aims to lead the seizure of power and the implementation of Socialism on behalf of the working class at some future time.

I will deal with these two traditions in the following chapter.

A third route, intentional communities, which, seeing no way of living a good life within the rotten conditions of capitalist society, people choose to withdraw from mainstream society, build utopian communities and raise their children to be better human beings.

There is so little support for this program these days, so I will not dwell on it, just to warn anyone who is considering this road. This is one instance where it *is* possible to foresee the consequences of this action. It is possible because the withdrawal from the boundless context of everyday life into a finite community isolated from the outside world can lead only to one or all of three consequences: the community will become a cult dominated by one charismatic figure, or it will be forcibly dissolved by the state, or simply die a slow death.

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