# MacIntyre on work as a practice

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Two aspects of MacIntyre’s moral philosophy are relevant for his reflections on work: the notion of practices and the idea that our practical rationality is developed as we learn to educate and transform our desires. Both ideas are intimately connected. The first notion was introduced by MacIntyre in *After Virtue* when he was trying to develop a sociologically grounded account of Aristotelian ethics. The second idea, although present in most of MacIntyre’s work, emerges more prominently with the publication of *Dependent Rational Animals* (MacIntyre 1999). I turn to practices first, since this is the standard way of explaining the relevance of MacIntyre’s philosophy for contemporary discussions on work.

Practices, in the MacIntyrean sense of the term, are socially established and cooperative activities, with various degrees of complexity, whereby agents pursue certain goods that are constitutive of those forms of activity. In this context, agents are expected to gradually internalize and develop themselves those standards of excellence that are required for the achievement of the goods ‘internal’ to that form of activity, thereby extending or developing their human potentialities and their understanding of the goods involved in whatever practice they find themselves engaged in. Examples of practices include the arts and sciences, games like chess or basketball, the activities of farming communities or fishing crews, and the making and sustaining of family life or schools (see MacIntyre 1981, 187).

It is worth expanding on some elements of MacIntyre's account of practices. First, it is important to notice the sharp distinction between internal and external goods. Internal goods are those for the sake of which the practice exists; they are constitutive of that practice and provide it with its end or *telos*. In contrast, goods externally related to a practice are not constitutive of it, in the sense that they might be present in any kind of practice. Classic examples of these goods are financial resources, prestige or social status. Unlike internal goods, external goods are only instrumentally good and thus the role they should play in a practice is only intelligible in light of those goods that are internal to it.

Another characteristic that MacIntyre assigns to internal goods is that they are common goods, i.e., goods for the whole community of practitioners. By contrast, external goods seem to be ‘rival goods’, i.e., the more someone has of them the less there is for other practitioners. In effect, a crucial difference between internal and external goods is that the latter, once achieved, are always part of someone’s property and possessions. For this reason, MacIntyre thinks that external goods are “characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners” (MacIntyre 1981, 190). Internal goods are also the result of a certain kind of competition, but it is the competition to excel in the particular practice, and they are essentially “a good for the whole community who participate in the practice” (MacIntyre 1981, 191).

In addition to the distinction between internal and external goods, there is a distinction to be made between those standards of excellence which are specific to a particular practice from the qualities of character that are required by any kind of practice. The former are better understood as skills that are practice-relative, such as the ability of a car mechanic to do a compression test on an engine, or the ability of a schoolteacher to master quadratic equations. Skills are necessary but not sufficient for the sustenance of practices. As it will become clearer below, social practices require that agents exhibit, at least to some degree, those qualities of character that allow them to recognize the goods internal to a practice and to structure the common goods implied by the cooperative nature of the activity. These qualities of character, the virtues, also help to expand and transform the practitioners’ conception of the goods internal to that practice and the ways in which those goods are perfective of their rational powers. Thus, there is an intimate connection between the goods internal to a practice, the skills which serve those goods, and the moral development of the agents involved. In MacIntyre’s words,

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 […] (MacIntyre 1981, 193–94).

It is important to mention that the standards of excellence that make a practice possible are not static. Characteristically, they find expression in the form of norms that should be taken for granted and followed by those who are initiated in that practice. This does not imply that the standards of excellence cannot be challenged or transformed by the relevant practitioners. Rather, the point is that one cannot be "initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far" (MacIntyre 1981, 190). This authoritative force of the standards of excellence seems to rule out any subjectivist account of the goods constitutive of practices.

Lastly, MacIntyre points out that practices are always embedded in particular organizational contexts, which can either facilitate or endanger them. He uses the term institutions to name the organizational context that makes practices possible. Thus, car restoration, as a practice, requires a shop or a car restoration company. Similarly, a group of physicists usually work in the context of a research laboratory or a university. Now, since institutions are generally structured toward the achievement of external goods, they can either foster or undermine the practice itself. This will depend on whether the external goods that the institution provides override, in the deliberation of the relevant practitioners, the internal goods of the practice. In MacIntyre’s words, "[p]ractices are often distorted by their modes of institutionalization, when irrelevant considerations relating to money, power and status are allowed to invade the practice" (MacIntyre 1994, 289). Thus, practices and institutions are so intimately connected that they form “a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution” (MacIntyre 1981, 194). Now, what prevents a practice from being corrupted by an institution? This is where the virtues of the relevant practitioners play a crucial role. If at least some of them do not exhibit the virtues of justice, courage, or temperateness, it becomes more likely that the practice will be subject to the "corrupting power of institutions" (MacIntyre 1981, 194).

This analytical framework, where the virtues are situated in the context of practices, and practices are embedded in institutions is what is known in the literature as the virtues-practices-institutions framework. The framework has been applied to a wide variety of contexts, ranging from discussions about meaningful work to debates on corporate governance.[[1]](#endnote-1) Now, if practices are, to a significant extent, sustained by the virtues, how are the virtues themselves acquired?

## Moral learning and practical reason

So far, I have only stated that practices have the potential of fostering those qualities of character that we call the virtues, but I have not explained how those qualities are acquired by individuals. MacIntyre accounts for this process by resorting to the relationship between desire and practical reasoning.[[2]](#endnote-2) The acquisition of the virtues is a process of moral development which MacIntyre describes as that whereby agents learn how to distinguish between what is actually good for them from what they take to be good here and now. What agents learn in this process is to evaluate their reasons for action according to what is good for them as members of their family, workplace, or local political community. In MacIntyre’s terminology, agents become ‘independent practical reasoners’ when they can educate their desires by evaluating their reasons for action according to what is best for them as members of this or that social role, but also according to what is best for them qua human beings. An independent practical reasoner is someone able to exercise

“human powers of rationality in very different types of culture and economy and therefore in very different contexts of practice: hunting, farming, mercantile, industrial. What it is for human beings to flourish does of course vary from context to context, but in every context it is as someone exercises in a relevant way the capacities of an independent practical reasoner that her or his potentialities for flourishing in a specifically human way are developed” MacIntyre 1999, 76–77).

On his view, human beings flourish when they develop their powers as rational agents and developing those powers is not only good for them, but more profoundly, this is what the good life consists of (see MacIntyre 1999, 64; see also Foot 2001, chap. 3). In other words, human flourishing and the development of practical rationality are constitutive of each other. MacIntyre draws on two central theses of Aristotle for making this argument. The first one relates to the fact that human beings can act for reasons, and those reasons have certain features that other living animals do not exhibit. MacIntyre suggests that what is characteristic of us as human beings is that we are able to stand back from our initial judgements and to evaluate our reasons for action according different standards. The second thesis is that our capacity of evaluating our reasons for action allow us to direct, educate and, sometimes, transform our desires. Thus, human beings flourish insofar as they develop their capacity to desire and act for the sake of what is good for them.

This is a standard argument in the context of contemporary neo-Aristotelianism. Thus, for example, Daniel Russell argues that on a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue, “ancient and modern alike, […] we are defined […] by our capacity for practical reasoning, both in thinking intelligently about what to do and in acting with emotions that can be intelligently trained” (Russell 2013, 13). Similarly, Elizabeth Anscombe suggested that to desire something rationally “should be explained in terms of what is wanted being wanted qua conducive to or part of ‘doing well’, that is, conducive to or part of human flourishing” (Anscombe 1965, 155).

MacIntyre frequently illustrates the process whereby agents learn to direct and transform their desires with reference to the psychological processes involved in the transition from infancy to childhood, because it is in these early stages of our lives that we learn to distinguish between an object of desire and the good. In effect, young children usually pursue “the satisfaction of their wants and felt needs without any reference to a good beyond that satisfaction” (MacIntyre 1999, 86). Similarly, most of us have experienced situations in which what is good or best for us is different from what our present desires or motivations lead us to pursue. MacIntyre suggests that in “the case of both children and adults there is a gap between what they have good reason to do and what would satisfy some present desire” (MacIntyre 1999, 86). It is first as children, and then as adults and in the context of a variety of different practices, that we learn to recognize what we have good reasons to desire versus what we happen to want here and now. In MacIntyre’s words,

“We do so […] in the context of a variety of practices, each with its own ends internal to it, […] activities as different as solving equations, growing vegetables, mending broken machines, playing the clarinet, reading Greek poetry, drawing cartoons, making clay pots, playing soccer. If all goes well, we develop in each area those habits, those dispositions, without which we cannot exercise the moral virtues. We also develop a habit of good practical judgement, the moral and intellectual virtue of prudence. Both types of habituation involve a transformation of desires and an increasingly sophisticated grasp of those standards, initially accepted on the authority of our teachers, by which they and hopefully we distinguish good from bad making and doing” (MacIntyre 2016, 49–50).

It is thus in the context of learning to recognize the goods internal to practices that we develop those capacities that are conducive to human flourishing. For MacIntyre, there are two aspects in which the acquisition of the virtues is indispensable to human flourishing. First, without at least some level of virtue we cannot do well in exercising our capacities for practical reasoning. Secondly, taking notice of the rage of activities in which our fate and that of those we care about are mutually dependent, without the development of the virtues we cannot “cannot adequately care for and educate others so that they first achieve and are then sustained in the exercise or practical reasoning” (MacIntyre 1999, 97).

It is worth noting that MacIntyre’s account of the relationship between desire and practical reason presupposes two important theses: (i) agents can have reasons for action other than what their present motivations and desires dictate; and (ii) when trying to give an explanation of why an agent did such and such, we should not conflate evaluations and expressions of desire. The two theses are intimately connected, but they have their own particularities, and they refer to different philosophical discussions. The first one seems to be incompatible with internalism about reasons, whereas the second runs against Donald Davidson’s claim about the connection between expressions of desire and moral evaluations.[[3]](#endnote-3). What is relevant for the present discussion is that the idea of work as perfective of our human capacities only becomes fully intelligible in the context of a non-subjectivist account of the connection between practical rationality and moral development.

## Work and moral development

How does MacIntyre's account of practical reason apply to the realm of work? Recall from the previous section that agents become independent practical reasoners when they learn to evaluate their reasons for action and direct their desires with a view to what is good and best for them. Now, productive work is precisely one of those realms of practical activity where workers can expand their capacities of practical reasoning. In effect, in *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* MacIntyre analyses different working arrangements and the ways in which they can either foster or undermine our ability to become independent practical reasoners. The examples studied by MacIntyre include the automobile manufacturing industry in Japan after the reforms introduced by W. Edward Deming, Wendell Berry's account of good farming, sociologist Tom Burns's account of work at the BBC, and the history of the Cummins Engine Company (see MacIntyre 2016, 130, 170–72).

A recurrent theme in these passages of *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity* is that when workers have discretion over their working conditions, they are more likely to develop their capacities as rational agents. Put differently, when working arrangements are controlled and designed by managers rather than workers, its capacity for fostering workers’ moral learning is undermined. An important implication is that when a particular type of work is ‘housed’ in business environments, where managers control most of the working process, the possibilities for moral development are seriously compromised.

Let us see how these ideas play out in one of the examples studied by MacIntyre, namely, the case of the reforms introduced by W. Edwards Deming in the context of Japanese automobile manufacturers. In MacIntyre’s account of this case, Deming convinced Japanese manufactures that the traditional production line –where monotonous, repetitive work looms large– was problematic. Under these circumstances workers are not able to envision the end product to which their activities should be directed, and the quality of those products is monitored by supervisors and managers. A central theme in Deming’s work is that, ideally, quality control over production should be done at the lowest level possible, insofar as those with more direct knowledge of the production line are better placed for evaluating what might have gone astray in the process. Thus, workers should be able not only to participate in deliberations about quality, but even also to ‘challenge’ managers’ account of the process.

According to MacIntyre, after Deming’s visit to Japan, workers in the Japanese automobile industry were organized as teams working cooperatively by moving the car together through different production stages. This allowed them to minimize the gap between execution of different tasks and the final product. Under these circumstances, workers were better off than by simply repeating simple operations in the context of the so-called Taylorist production line. Thus, MacIntyre argues that the “ends informing the workers’ activity are now those of achieving through shared deliberation and decision the making of an excellent car and of becoming excellent in making such cars” (MacIntyre 2016, 170).

In this context, workers become aware of the fact that the standards required for the production of excellent cars are standards that they have internalized, not standards simply imposed upon them by supervisors and managers. In addition, it is in the context of the new design of the production process, that workers are able to make distinctions regarding the excellence of the car and their particular inclinations and desires, so they can direct their attention to the final product and to the ways in which their inclinations and reasons for action should be oriented. Therefore, in MacIntyre’s view, when enough discretion is allowed in job design, excellence in the final product and the development of practical rationality are fruitfully intertwined. If this discretion of tasks is significant “desires are educated and transformed. Distinctions are made between real and apparent goods, between objects of desire that agents have good reason to pursue and object of desire that need to be set aside if excellence is to be achieved. Feelings are transformed as what agents care about changes" (MacIntyre 2016, 131). In other words, when workers have more discretion over their tasks, and when they are cognizant of the connection between those tasks and the final product, their human powers of practical rationality can be systematically extended.

Two things are important to note in this case. First, MacIntyre restricts his analysis of the teachings of Deming to the case of automobile manufacturers, but it is worth noting that Deming was not only involved with automobile manufacturers, but more generally with the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers (JUSE). As reported by Mary Walton (1986), in March 1950, the director of the Union contacted Deming and asked him to deliver a series of lectures to Japanese research workers, plant managers, and engineers on quality control. The influence of Deming among Japanese manufacturers was significant enough to explain the creation of the Deming Prize, awarded by the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers to an individual for achievements in statistical theory – Deming’s main area of research – and to companies for outstanding accomplishments in statistical application.[[4]](#endnote-4) So it turns out that Deming did not introduce significant reforms, rather than influenced Japanese scientists and engineers to apply ‘statical control’ techniques, which later had an impact in various industries, not only in automobile manufacturing.

Second, it seems to me that MacIntyre takes too much for granted the standard story of how Deming’s approach to manufacturing is supposed to give workers more room for personal development. Deming’s method is certainly an improvement compared to classical Taylorist approaches, but it is strikingly similar to what is known as ‘lean production’, commonly associated with Toyota, winner of the Deming Prize in 1965. Although Deming seems to combine the benefits of mass production with the idea of trying to maintain a craft mentality in the shop floor, it is far less amenable to the notion of a MacIntyrean practice than other production strategies. In fact, it is illustrative to compare Deming’s approach with the idea of ‘reflective production’ which inspired Volvo’s Uddevalla plant in Sweden.[[5]](#endnote-5)

According to Åke Sandberg, the production process in the Uddevalla plant involved a group of approximately nine workers assembling a car from beginning to end. In this context, teams of workers not only had the end product in mind in a more radical sense, but also constantly deliberated among themselves about alternative ways of organizing their own work, which implied substantial discretion over their daily activities (Sandberg 1995, 5). Sandberg acknowledges that there are similarities between the Uddevalla model and that of ‘lean production’, at least in aspects such as their efforts to be oriented to the needs of customers, or to promote worker involvement and learning opportunities. However, it seems to be the case that ‘reflective production’ is closer to the notion of a MacIntyrean practice than ‘lean production’.

The Uddevalla case is relevant for yet another reason. Recall from the first section that MacIntyre emphasizes how practices are always embedded in specific organizational structures, which he calls institutions. In addition, he has been explicit about the ways in which boarder social structures, like markets or sates, interact with different institutions either promoting or endangering the development of practices (see, for example, MacIntyre 2011). Now, one does not have to accept MacIntyre’s endorsement or Marxian economic theory in his later work to recognize that markets do in fact exert significant pressures on alternative ways of organizing production.[[6]](#endnote-6) It seems to be the case that these are precisely the types of forces that explain why the Uddevalla production model was not viable in the long run. In effect, research on the Uddevalla case illustrates how this model was not necessarily less efficient than ‘lean production’ models. The reasons that explain why Volvo finally closed the Uddevalla plant have to do more with market pressures and the politics of the Volvo itself rather than with downsides in productivity (see Pil and Fujimoto 2007).

Now, whether one focuses on the case of Japanese manufactures or on the Uddevalla case, it seems that on MacIntyre’s view instances of ‘meaningful work’ are the exception rather than the rule. One possible explanation for the exceptional nature or working arrangements that are conducive to moral development is that, on MacIntyre’s view, business managers not only have weak incentives to introduce reforms such as the ones mentioned above, but more radically, introducing such reforms could compromise their claims to authority. In effect, it is MacIntyre’s thesis that the justification of corporate authority has an ideological twist, insofar as corporate managers justify their claims to authority and control of the production process appealing to some kind of scientific expertise, an expertise supposedly justified on scientific grounds.[[7]](#endnote-7) In MacIntyre’s words:

the major justification for the intervention in society is the contention that government has resources of competence which most citizens do not possess […] Private corporations similarly justify *their* activities by referring to their possession of similar resources of competence. Expertise becomes a commodity for which rival state agencies and rival private corporations compete. Civil servants and managers alike justify themselves and their claims to authority, power and money by invoking their own competence as scientific managers of social change (MacIntyre 1981, 85–86, emphasis in original).

MacIntyre argues that managerial experts would only have this type of knowledge if the conception of “social science as providing a stock of law-like generalizations with strong predictive power” were true. However, it is MacIntyre’s claim that this conception of the social sciences is far from being justified. He thinks that the most salient fact about the social sciences is “the absence of the discovery of any law-like generalizations whatsoever” (MacIntyre 1981, 88). This implies that, on his view, there is no reasonable justification for the way in which authority is exercised by corporate managers over workers.

Finally, there is another aspect of MacIntyre’s thought that is relevant for understanding his skepticism about the viability of working arrangements that are conducive to moral development. For MacIntyre, work can be regarded as worthwhile or not worthwhile depending on whether it is able to develop our powers of rational agency. In contrast, the evaluative standards of mainstream economics, which have had a significant impact in policymaking, lead us to regard work as “something settled by markets and by the preferences of those who engage in market relationships” (2016, 172). This critique of the normative standards in mainstream economic theory is worth emphasizing. It is not an attack on economics as such. What MacIntyre is trying to make more explicit is the gap that exists between the implicit account of practical reason in normative economics and a neo-Aristotelian account of practical reason. For MacIntyre, the account of practical reason that underlies much of contemporary economic theory leaves no room for an understanding of human flourishing that is consistent with the claims of neo-Aristotelianism. In other words, a normative standard that stops at the level of preference satisfaction misses the point by ignoring the process of evaluating the kind of preferences that are being satisfied. Although the notion of preferences can be and has been understood in many ways, a common interpretation of them is expressivist in the sense that there is no real distinction between our desires and the standards used in evaluating them.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Thus, in MacIntyre’s view, when the logic of preference satisfaction dominates the policies aiming at improving working conditions, work tends to be organized in such a way that the work performed by agents is only intelligible, for them and for their managers, as a “cost-effective means to ends imposed by others for the sake of high productivity and profitability” (MacIntyre 2016, 172). Thus, if a particular industry passes through a time of economic prosperity, workers might get a reasonable share of the profits generated in that context, but the pay they receive has no intrinsic connection with whether the work being done is worthwhile from the standpoint of an account of moral development such as that defended by neo-Aristotelians.

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1. The literature is by now extensive. Some examples include Moore and Beadle 2006; Beadle and Knight 2012; Bernacchio and Couch 2015; Moore 2017; Beadle 2019; Pinto-Garay, Scalzo, and Lluesma 2022; Sinnicks 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As mentioned, this is present in various works. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus mainly on what MacIntyre has said in MacIntyre 1999 and MacIntyre 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Williams 1981; and Davidson 2004, respectively. For example, Williams suggests that “[i]f something can be a reason for action, then it could be someone’s reason for acting on a particular occasion, and it then would figure in an explanation of that action. Now no external reason statement could by itself offer an explanation of anyone’s actions” (1981, 106). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Beginning in 1950, prizes were awarded to companies adept at using the new-found statistical tools of […] Statistical Quality Control. Soon, however, Japanese firms began to move beyond that narrow application. By the late 1970s, quality had evolved into an all-encompassing approach consistent with Dr. Deming’s Fourteen Points, which the Japanese call Total Quality Control, or TQC. Today, Japanese companies are judged on the quality, if you will, of their TQC”, (Walton 1986, 122). For a more nuanced account of Deming’s influence in Japan see Tsutsui 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I became aware of the relevance of the Uddevalla case thanks to the work of Keith Breen and Geoff Moore; see Breen 2012; and Moore 2017, 161–62. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On MacIntyre’s endorsement of Marxian economic theory see MacIntyre 2016, 93–101. For a sympathetic critique of his argument see Petersen 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This MacIntyrean critique of managerial rule also applies to state bureaucracies; see MacIntyre 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I address this problem with more detail in Petersen 2024, chap. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)