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**Virtues, Managers and Business People: Finding a Place for MacIntyre in a Business**

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# **Virtues, Managers and Business People: Finding a Place for MacIntyre in a Business**

## **Context**

### **Abstract**

Critics point to four issues as presenting barriers to the use of virtue in the context of business. They focus on the relationship between management and practice, the potential for virtuous behaviour in a competitive environment, the ability to develop a reflexive critique of management that can be acted on, and the differentiation between work and wider social roles and people's propensity to take responsibility for them. In this paper we propose a solution to criticisms levelled at the use of virtue within Business Ethics. We examine the critiques of management in the context of virtue ethics and the application of these to business.

In arguing for a role for business in being virtuous and promoting virtue we accept that the concept of management that is based on the type of liberalism founded on personal preference and benefit is deeply problematic and that management that is driven solely by profit is not compatible with the development of practice based virtue. However we argue that to exclude those activities in which management is involved as a result would be wrong and dangerous. Instead we see the great advantages of a virtue ethic is that it conjures up an alternative vision to the dominant practice, and such an alternative vision is urgently needed in business today.

## **Introduction**

Authors such as Foot (1978 and 2001), Hursthouse (1999), MacIntyre (1985, 1988 and 1999), Slote (1996 and 2001) and Swanton (2003) point towards Virtue Ethics as a solution to problems that are posed by modern act centred consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics. Consequentialist approaches can be criticised for leading us to conclude that any act is justified if the outcomes generate enough good. Deontological approaches, on the other hand, can be criticised on two counts. Firstly, they need a commonly accepted enforcing power. Anscombe (1958) argues that without the ascendance of the church, this power no longer exists. Secondly, the different pieces of advice they give often conflict when applied to practical problems, meaning that they are not helpful in practice. By shifting the focus from the act to the agent, virtue ethics overcomes these problems.

The virtue approach to ethics emphasises people's character. It stresses how the good habits or virtues inherent in a person's character give them the propensity to act in ways that promote human flourishing. Human flourishing is seen as the ultimate end of humans and incorporates those things that help ensure our well being. When people think about what to do they take into account the available facts and, using the practical wisdom given to them by the virtues, come to a decision (Whetstone 2001). People will consider the consequences of acts for their ability to think about and perform future acts (Koehn 1995) but also whether this leads to the human good. As Shaw (1997:36) notes this requires "... a balanced and coherent notion of the good". This balanced view needs to go beyond the economic and may need to incorporate environmental, social, religious and maybe professional based concepts of well being. Furthermore, the virtue approach relies on

communities (Marchese et al. 2002) and their traditions to support the habits and virtues that guide action. Indeed, it is through witnessing, imitating and learning from other people in the community that people become virtuous (Murphy 1999, Solomon 1992).

This wider interest in Virtue Ethics, has led a number of business ethicists including Arjoon (2000), Chismar (2001), Limbs and Fort (2000), Soloman (1992 and 2000) and Warren (1996), to adopt it as a way of making managers see the relevance of ethics. Indeed, Whetstone (1998) argues that by focusing managers on their character we are asking them to move on from the examination of the moral elements of their decisions. Rather, we ask them to take a perspective that emphasises the morality of their overall approach, and thereby improve their business practice. As managers cultivate this approach for themselves they are more likely to see its relevance to how they behave as individuals in a business context.

The virtue approach has nevertheless run in to some criticism. On a wider scale, Schneewind (1990) argues that Virtue Ethics does little to help us know who is virtuous and hence, how to determine whose action is virtuous. Echoing this view Louden (1985) notes that Virtue Ethics cannot give guidance in solving specific ethical problems. He goes on to add that Virtue Ethics cannot account properly for people's mistakes, changes in behaviour, guard against moral backsliding or state what is morally unacceptable. Moreover, he suggests that the approach promotes style over substance and utopianism. Whilst sometimes supporting Virtue Ethics other authors, including Beadle (2001), Dobson (1997), MacIntyre (1985, 1994) and Sundman (2000), put forward arguments that management cannot be virtuous. Between them these critics point to four issues as presenting barriers to the use of virtue in the context of business. They focus on the

relationship between management and practice, the potential for virtuous behaviour in a competitive environment, the ability to develop a reflexive critique of management that can be acted on, and the differentiation between work and wider social roles and the ability of people to take responsibility for those roles.

This paper does not attempt to counter the wider criticisms levelled at the virtue approach, although it would be possible to do so. Instead, we propose a solution to criticisms levelled at the use of virtue within Business Ethics. We first introduce a form of practice based Virtue Ethics by focusing on the work of MacIntyre (1985, 1988, 1990, 1994 and 1999) who has been credited with the recent resurgence of interest in virtue ethics. We then examine the critiques of management in the context of virtue ethics and the application of these to business. In particular we examine the relationship between management and practice when discussing ‘MacIntyre’s critique of management’ and the affect of competition on virtue in the section ‘extending the critique to business’. We then examine business’ ability to develop reflexive critique when considering ‘business practice and the ability to critique’ and, finally, fragmentation of roles and issues of responsibility when discussing ‘business and the development of virtuous habits’ in the penultimate section. We find MacIntyre’s critique of management and business important, but find that it enhances, rather than detracts from the importance of relating management and business to virtue.

## **Virtue Ethics**

In the face of a range of different lists of virtues, MacIntyre (1985) notes that we might wonder if the virtue approach is one that we can defend. In response, he argues that that these doubts stem from a limited understanding of the virtue approach. Indeed, if we are going to make sense of the virtues we need to understand them in conjunction with the practices in which they are developed, the narrative of the tradition to which these practices belong and the social institutions which they are fostered within. These components are all needed if a person is to achieve excellence in life.

MacIntyre (1985) argues that the virtues underpin the pursuit of excellence in the practices in which a person partakes. Excellence is reached through the mastery of the internal goods of a practice. For instance, obtaining a deep understanding and mastery of the strategy of chess would be characteristic of mastering an internal good. To suggest that obtaining internal goods was the objective of mastering a practice would be wrong. The point of a practice is to contribute to the good of humans, both the wider community and ourselves.

This leads us to the question; what is the wider human good? What is the end that we will be aiming for? This, it is argued, will depend on the narrative of the tradition of which we are part. What that wider end is will probably be unclear to the individual, at least initially. Indeed, one of the great advantages of Virtue Ethics is to make people conscious of the tradition they inhabit and alternative traditions. Social institutions are both supported and perpetuated by the narrative as they provide the structures through which the practices embedded in the tradition operate. In themselves they may not help us understand the human good and they may actually divert us from that cause. Nevertheless, they are essential to our success in being virtuous.



The narrative present in a tradition, in revealing the end, influences more than social institutions. The end that is adopted will also affect the concept of practical rationality, which will in turn influence the way people think and the way they act. This will be reflected in the virtues that are adopted. Indeed, MacIntyre (1988) shows how within traditions the type of practical reasoning adopted will have to fit with the tradition's understanding of what he sees as the key virtue, Justice. Of course it will not only be Justice that will be influenced in this way, but all of the virtues that surround Justice will also have to fit within this network.

Assuming that our tradition is actually committed to a concept of virtue based in practice, tradition and social institutions, we also need to accept that virtues support and are supported by a community. A community based on virtue will depend upon complex social relationships that are based upon non-reciprocal debt. An important example of non-reciprocal debt is education. Our parents and teachers educate us and we owe them a debt for this. Nevertheless, we may not pay our parents and teachers their due. Instead we are obliged to teach our own children, if we have them later on in our lives, or perform other tasks that will contribute to the community. A community depends on these non-reciprocal relationships for its long-term survival and this requires its members to have certain virtues. It can ensure that people develop these virtues through the social institutions it has and in big part the education and induction of its young into the community.

On the face of it, the manager should have little problem fitting within this framework. The manager is part of a practice that contributes to human good and will, in turn, be

underpinned by the virtues. Central to these virtues will be a form of Justice that fits with the form of reasoning that is accepted by the prevalent tradition and supported by the institutions and relationships of the community. However, MacIntyre (1985) appears to suggest that this is not the case as is apparent from his attack on so called ‘managerial practice.’

### **MacIntyre's Critique of Management**

At the outset of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that moral discourse is in a state of “grave disorder” in the West today. The dominant moral theory is emotivism, which is “the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (MacIntyre 1985: 11-12). The fact-value distinction is deeply embedded within emotivism and this manifests itself in emotivism’s characteristic obliteration of the difference between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations (MacIntyre 1985). MacIntyre describes three characters who embody emotivism in different social contexts, namely, the rich aesthete, the therapist and the manager. The manager

represents in his character the obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and nonmanipulative social relations ... The manager treats ends as given, as outside his scope; his concern is with technique, with effectiveness in transforming raw materials into final products, unskilled labor into skilled labor, investments into profits. ... Neither manager nor therapist, in their roles as manager and therapist, *do or are able to engage in moral debate*. They are seen by themselves, and by those who see them with the same eyes as their own, as uncontested figures, who

purport to restrict themselves to the realm in which rational agreement is possible ... the realm of measurable effectiveness. (MacIntyre 1985: 30. Italics ours)

MacIntyre's (1985) attack has two elements. Managers justify their power and money in terms of their being "Scientific managers of social change" (1985 :86). However, human society is far more unpredictable than these claims suggest. MacIntyre shows through his analysis of the social sciences that managers cannot substantiate their claim that by instituting a certain set of circumstances that a certain outcome can be produced. To accept this argument is to accept that management is a false practice. The second element of MacIntyre's attack is based on the claim that management is not a practice in the sense that he understands practices. To put it in his terms bricklaying is not a practice but architecture is. That is, a practice must clearly contribute to the development of wider human good. Managers by performing a technical task have no clear objective in relation to human good and thus cannot be performing a practice. In short MacIntyre (1985) sees managers as partaking in an occupation that is the product of the worst type of self-interested liberal individualism that is characteristic of our current social order.

To be sure, the authors are not by any means fans of what often passes as managerial practice. But we also recognise that to exclude business people from the pursuit of human goods based on these arguments is misguided. Trade and business of some sort has been an integral part of societies throughout history (Klein 2002) and for this reason we want to counter MacIntyre's (1985) critique with our concept of a business person. First, unlike Brewer (1997), we accept that managers may not have the knowledge to back up claims of expertise which are based on being able to predict outcomes with near scientific precision, far from it. However, accepting this is not to say that there is not an important role for people to play in organising and sequencing the activities of organisations so that

they can contribute to the human good more effectively. Admittedly, this still does not sound like a practice, but at least it gives us a more honest representation of the managerial role in business. Our defence against the second of MacIntyre's (1985) points nevertheless does show business people to be partaking in a practice. This is because we differentiate between managers who have little or no knowledge of the way in which they contribute to the human good and those who do.

It is our position that those that know how they are contributing to the wider good are partaking in what we would call 'business' rather than 'management.' Business has a social element to it that will entail an awareness of how the product or service produced contributes to society and the human good, a point that Brewer (1997) and Moore (2002) make clear. Still, we go further in that we see that practising business means that a person will do more than understand how the good or service their organisation produces contributes to human good. They also need to have a depth of knowledge - perhaps through experience - that supports this understanding. This knowledge is only evident when the person understands the wider process of production or service provision and the social interactions that take place. In effect, we are demanding that they have an involvement that will allow them to influence the development of human good through the process of production or provision. That is, in the same way that bricklayers may understand how they can contribute to better architecture, some business people can contribute to the development of human good through consciously contributing to improving what their organisation does. There is then a clear link between the organising and sequencing, knowledge of the social dynamics of a product and the development of human good and the conclusion that business people can partake in practice.

To leave the argument at this point would be to leave a job half done. As Beadle (2001 and 2002) points out you cannot properly interact with MacIntyre's arguments about management without addressing wider questions on the social order. We need to recognise that MacIntyre is highly critical of the individualistic, profit led and consumerist elements of the competitive capitalism we have at present. When we start dealing with the arguments at this level we move on from critique of management as a practice to a critique of competitive business.

### **Extending the Critique to Business**

Whilst MacIntyre (1985) and Beadle (2001) focus on management in particular, MacIntyre does make the link with business. At the conclusion of a chapter he describes the links in the chain:

So we can now see in bare skeletal outline a progress first from the Enlightenment's ideal for a social science to the aspirations of social reformers, next from the aspirations of social reformers to the ideals of practice and justification of civil servants and managers, then from the practices of management to the theoretical codification of these practices and of the norms governing them by sociologists and organization theorists and finally from the employment of the textbooks written by those theorists in schools of management and business schools to the theoretically informed managerial practice of the contemporary technocratic expert. (1985: 86)

A good example of a textbook that embodies managerialism is March and Simon (1993). This book exemplifies the value free scientific approach, the authors saying in their introduction to the second edition that "the intent [of writing this book] was to list generalities... to assess the empirical evidence supporting them..." (1993: 1) and "...to

understand how collections of individuals and groups co-ordinate themselves in relatively systematic ways" (1993: 2). Indeed, Kilduff's deconstruction of *Organizations* shows that whilst the text says that it moves from seeing people as machines to seeing them as decision makers, the subtext shows that "the new model of the employee is as mechanical as the old" (1993:28). The over simplistic analogies remain in place.

Whilst MacIntyre (1985) concentrates on the links between enlightenment thought and business, Dobson (1997) focuses the debate on business and virtue more specifically on business as a whole. Dobson (1997) argues that all businesses that operate in a competitive environment will be forced to adopt immoral practices in order to survive. In short, where being virtuous puts obligations on organisations to raise their costs they will be put at a disadvantage. This will ultimately mean that the organisation will have to follow the other organisations in some suspect practice or face going out of business. As Dobson says, "...it is not just that the virtues are incompatible with business, but also that business actually tends to draw out the virtues" (1997:8). He directs us, as does Beadle (2002), to MacIntyre's (1994) example of two fishing crews as the best way to demonstrate this point. The first crew does not partake in fishing as a practice.

MacIntyre states:

A fishing crew may be organized as a purely technical and economic means to a productive end, whose aim is only or overridingly to satisfy as profitably as possible some market's demand for fish. Just as those managing its organization aim at a high level of profits, so also the individual crew members aim at a high level of reward... When however the level of reward is insufficiently high, then the individual whose motivations and values are of this kind will have from her or his own point of view the best of reasons for leaving this particular crew or even taking to another trade... [M]anagement will from its point of view have no good reason not to fire crew members, and owners will have no good reason not to invest their money elsewhere (1994:285).

Here the owners and crew accept the need for high profit in order to survive. They are unable to develop virtues in the context of their practice because its adoption is conditional on it being profitable. In these circumstances practices are merely temporary contexts for an individual, and virtues are not developed in the short term.

Consider by contrast a crew whose members may well have initially joined for the sake of their wage or other share of the catch, but who have acquired from the rest of the crew an understanding of and devotion to excellence in fishing and to excellence in playing one's part as a member of such a crew... So the interdependence of the members of a fishing crew in respect of skills, the achievement of goods and the acquisition of virtues will extend to an interdependence of the families of crew members and perhaps beyond them to the whole society of a fishing village (MacIntyre 1994:285).

Here the crew has a commitment to the practice that is far from temporary. They are committed to fishing and will remain crew members whether profits are high or not. They have a permanent and socially bound context in which to develop virtues. Here Dobson (1997) follows MacIntyre in making the case that in our current capitalist society business cannot be other than profit led, and as such, is only a temporary context in which people cannot develop virtue as part of a practice.

At first sight these arguments seem plausible as a critique of business with virtue. Nevertheless, pausing for a moment, we can see that this need not be the case. This argument depends on the profit motive being the dominant driver of business practice. Even in our current capitalist society this is not always the case. Charities operate perfectly well within a capitalist system but do not have profit as their objective. Many

privately owned firms also operate with profit as a subordinate end. Companies like Morgan cars in the UK value the practice of making the product first and still survive. These organisations do not see the need to compete on the basis of profit but still survive because the ideals they represent are valued. This shows that the situation on the ground is not as clear-cut as Dobson (1997) and MacIntyre (1994) might have us believe.

Still, to leave it at this would be to ignore that fact that some large organisations with shareholders would find it difficult to survive and be virtuous in a neo-liberalistic, profit led, capitalist society. Indeed, where shareholders are led predominantly by short-term profit and it is important for business to keep investor confidence these organisations have to focus on profit. To promote virtue, then, we need to move beyond the capitalist system as it is currently constituted. This raises an important question. What place, if any, is there for competition, profit and wealth in a society that moves beyond the capitalism we currently have and emphasises the virtues? Whilst the pursuit of profit as a dominant end is not congruent with virtue, does this mean that it has no place as an end at all?

Morse (1999) argues that the accumulation of some wealth is essential to the development of virtues. Without wealth we cannot provide for our basic needs and have an environment where the virtues can prosper. This gives a role to business in generating limited wealth. Indeed Morse (1999) takes us back to Aristotle's arguments to support this point. Aristotle notes that "In so far as he is a human being, however, and [hence] lives together with a number of other human beings, he chooses to do the actions expressing virtue. Hence he will need the sort of external goods [that are needed for the virtues], for living a human life." (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X 1178 b). Here there seems to be a middle ground where business people would have a role in creating limited



practice-based wealth, wealth that is restricted in that unfair advantage is not taken of others.

Indeed, when discussing Aristotle's concept of the mean, Hadreas (2002) argues that virtuous business needs to moderate its pursuit of wealth. The problems of wealth lie "with motivation and not with accumulation itself. There is nothing in the principals which found Aristotle's ethics to prevent the accumulation of capital wealth provided it is put in service of higher goods" (Hadreas 2002:371). Moore (2002) goes so far as to say that business, as an institution, can help protect practices by making it possible to develop virtue. As Beadle notes, MacIntyre might see institutions as being legitimate if they protect practices from "the acquisitiveness, individualism and vice involved in the pursuit of external goods" (2001:16). If we accept that in generating limited wealth that is directed at developing virtue with the ultimate end of human good satisfies these claims, then even in MacIntyre's view this version of business could stand. Indeed, Mason (1996) argues that a move to social markets may provide social structures that would distribute wealth in a way that is compatible with MacIntyre's (1985) virtue ethics.

But as we say this is a middle ground. Suppose for a moment that we had come to the view that the accumulation of wealth excluded us from developing the virtues and that people followed a virtuous life, would this mean that that there would be no place for business? Put in another way: can business survive without profit? The fact is that goods are not distributed evenly. Communities hold unequal amounts of resources. People have to specialise in particular skills in order to become proficient and safe in their practice. Hence the idea of practice itself requires trade in that it requires the exchange of goods. Only through trade can goods be redistributed between communities and people within

communities and Klein (2002) notes that this has been happening since humans were hunter gathers. This exchange may be based on barter or made using money, but it does not require profit, organisations or markets (Hadreas 2002). As a consequence where trade and the exchange of goods predate the capitalist economies by millennia and profit is not an essential part of trade, it would seem to be the case that there would still be a place for business.

### **Business, Practice and the Ability to Critique**

Given that we have demonstrated that business can survive with profit as a subordinate end, business cannot be the problem. The problem becomes one of the social structures in which we work. If we are convinced that our current form of capitalism is incompatible with virtue and that we should follow the virtue approach, we need to change things. As Gare (1998) notes in the context of Environmental Ethics, we need to develop a coherent critique of our current system and develop an alternative that is compatible with virtue. Whilst this is obviously beyond the scope of this paper it does lead us to another critique of the use of virtue in business.

Sundman (2000) argues that the virtue approach's focus on practice precludes business people from giving a coherent critique of their role and the institutional context in which they work. We will firstly take this argument in the context of practice. Sundman (2000) suggests that in proving that they are fulfilling their role as members of a practice, managers need to show that they are helping to further its aims. As a result members of a practice focus on solving problems that hinder it from furthering its aims. Where

Sundman (2000) argues that for managers these problems are business survival through the more efficient generation of profit, it will be difficult for a critique of the practice to emerge. All that will emerge are criticisms of techniques for generating profit in terms of their efficiency.

We think that we have already countered this argument. Sundman's (2000) idea of practice is mistaken. He ignores the social element of practice and therefore misses an important component of our concept of the businessperson. In being a businessperson, by definition, we will take into account wider social considerations when trying to further our practice's aims. This will enable not just a critique of the techniques used to reach those aims, but also a critique of those aims where there is doubt about their legitimacy. In this way, business practice will be able to maintain its health through a process of reinvention; through change that is based on the debate of problems.

Moving on to address Sundman's (2000) argument at the level of the social order it is clear that MacIntyre's (1985) framework does not preclude us from working to change practice, the wider tradition in which these practices are embedded and the institutions that support these traditions. Indeed, MacIntyre (1988) has a lengthy discussion of how traditions can be challenged by its members from within in the way we have already discussed in the context of practice, and moreover, from outside by different traditions. That is, there is nothing to say that we cannot, if we want to, use the virtue approach to develop a critique of capitalism in its current form (Shaw 1997). We do not have to accept that a tradition is one that actually aims for human good. Will taking this position make virtue any less relevant to business people? We think not. Remembering that virtuous business people have one eye on bettering the society in which they live when

working for human good, we can see that they may well be interested in change. There is no reason to say that this change would not be to a society that was more community based. This would not necessarily be threatening to business people as there is no reason why there should not still be a role for them even if the nature of trade changes. Indeed, rather than a threat, where the people in organisations show an aptitude for generating change, why shouldn't the business people among them be at the forefront of transforming critiques of our current traditions and institutions into action? Why shouldn't they be the ones who redistribute power in organisations to determine that "the roles and relationship[s] in question are not instruments of domination or oppression" MacIntyre 2000 cited in Beadle 2002: 52). Why shouldn't business people along with politicians and people from other traditions use their power (King 2001) to change things so that communities are once again the focus of business (Solomon 2002). The question, then, becomes how can business people promote virtue?

### **Developing virtuous habits in the business context**

Randels (1998) makes the point that business provides us with one of the many narratives that are part of our lives. Randels argues that whilst some may try to argue that business is ethically neutral the fact that it provides a narrative means that it cannot fail but to have ethical significance. In short, he presents the case that all narratives have ethical implications. When we also consider that there are many different competing narratives associated with business this point becomes clearer. The story presented about business being ethically neutral is in itself ethically charged. It is legitimising a view that sees business as scientific and hence in this the context of this story at least, neutral. It goes on

to place profit as the right end of these scientific techniques as it is taken to indicate human well being. Contrast this with our concept of the business person. We present a story where business is seen as far from scientific and profit is a subordinate end. Both of these stories have strong ethical implications.

Our point here is not to show that there are competing narratives surrounding business, as this is already clear from our argument. Instead it is to reassert the point made by Moore (2002:26) that business "is capable of generating or replenishing the stock of virtues... with its potential for moral development through the possession and exercise of the virtues". Business organisations, then, have a significant role in promoting, encouraging and developing the virtues. Not only will business people not be scared of driving ethically driven change but they are also part of the very institutions that give them tremendous opportunities for getting that change to happen (Warren 1996). As Morse says

" ...we can see that corporations have the means to persuade us to give in to short term goals or ends. These ends and desires become the 'springs of action' - they are the reasons why an individual acts. Since virtues are driven by ends, we develop habits which are in accordance with bringing about the ends of human action. If business contributes to the formation of ends, then it is also the case they contribute to the formations of habits of the character upon which we act in moral situations" (1999:53).

As organisations have such an important influence on the formation of our values and behaviours (King 2001) it is self evident that a person's moral development cannot be taken apart from their business lives. Business and its institutions are one of the important avenues through which communities promote the virtues (Solomon 1992). As such

businesses not only have the opportunity, but also have a responsibility to promote moral virtue.

However, before we can accept this argument, we need to consider two potential threats to the development of the virtue approach through business. The first is fragmentation, the fragmentation of roles and the fragmentation of character. This brings us to the second of Sundman's (2000) arguments against the use of virtue in business. He points to a situation where we might see a person as virtuous when they achieve human flourishing or excellence by mastering their role. He then raises the question as to whether that person is moral if their role supports the production of morally questionable external goods. This criticism focuses us on arguments about the fragmentation of roles or what Beadle (2002) would call managers as divided selves. Can a person who contributes to the making of arms (taking it that we see arms as harmful to human good) but is a good parent be considered virtuous?

Asking a slightly different question focuses us on the same issue from a different perspective. Harman (2000 and 2003) asks if there is such a thing as stable character. He asserts that character is determined by subtle situational differences. If this is actually the case, and Athanassoulas (2000), Solomon (2003) and Sreenivasan (2002) argue strongly that it is not, we might be led to accept that what is virtuous in business will not be the same as what is virtuous for the parent and other roles. Like Ewin (1995) and Maitland (1997) we would be arguing that business is a special case. As such, business would work towards its own conception of the 'good', one that serves business more than it does the wider human good.

In light of the idea of business as a forum for developing the virtues and our concept of the businessperson, these questions are fundamental. To allow that people could develop virtue in organisations that did not work towards the wider human good would contradict the idea that there is a link between business institutions and the development of virtue. MacIntyre (1979 and 1985) is clear on this point. A person may be more successful in being virtuous in one area of their life than another, and all of us can be expected to make mistakes, but to live part of our life in a way that consistently shows us to be other than virtuous is to show that we cannot be a virtuous person at all. In other words, we cannot distinguish between the roles an individual acts out when they are subverting the human good in some fundamental way (MacIntyre 1979). This means a person who did work associated with the making of arms could not be virtuous as it works fundamentally against the human good.

But what if the individual is just ignorant, thoughtless or disengaged and is not actually conscious of working against the human good? This brings us to a second threat to the promotion of the virtue approach by business, the issues of knowledge and responsibility. Schudt (2000) argues that it might not be vicious to act against the human good where we are ignorant of the harm we might cause. He argues that it may be excusable to work for an organisation that does harm if we do not know about it. Instead it becomes the organisation's problem. Similarly Koehn (1998) puts the case that the person that works for the arms company may not be vicious but, instead, just thoughtless. They have not thought the consequences through. At worst they might be accused of being weak willed through active disengagement from the issue.

The issue here is whether the person is taking proper responsibility for their actions. A virtuous person will have developed a sense of what knowledge is needed to judge the effect their actions. Thoughtlessness is not the characteristic of a virtuous agent and where information is not available they will seek advice from others who can help. Moreover, disengagement is not a defence for not acting virtuously. After all virtues are displayed through action, not inaction. Again, we see the answer in the way the person acts over time. Virtue allows for mistakes, but if a person consistently acts thoughtlessly, without proper knowledge or fails to act at all they cannot be virtuous.

Put in the context of Morse's (1999) arguments we cannot be seen as virtuous if we are working against wider human ends, even if there is only an indirect link in terms of action, because the wider values of an organisation will be reflected in our own. This is the position implicit in our definition of business people. Virtuous business people have the interest of society in mind and knowledge of the human goods to which their work contributes. If they were working to produce arms they would have to know it subverts the human good and consequently could not be virtuous. Under our definition of business people and virtue the conflicts Sundman (2000) and Harman (2003) point to do not exist. Instead what exists is an obligation for organisations to practice and promote virtue.

## **Conclusion**

In arguing for a role for business in being virtuous and promoting virtue what are we left with? We accept that the concept of management that is based on the type of liberalism founded on personal preference and benefit is deeply problematic. We agree that management that is driven solely by profit is not compatible with the development of



practice based virtue. However we argue that to exclude those activities in which management is involved as a result would be wrong and dangerous. Indeed, as Meilaender (1984:17) points out, one of the great advantages of a virtue ethic is that it conjures up an alternative vision to the dominant practice, and such an alternative vision is urgently needed in business today. The businessperson who subordinates but does not exclude profit presents a characterisation of how business might be carried out virtuously.

Here organisations run by businesspeople will be driven by a vision of the human good, based in community, that has virtue at its heart. Business strategies and the policies that implement them will reflect these virtues. These organisations will still strive for financial health, innovation and flexible working practices, but they will give equal precedence to the security, health and well being of their community. Indeed, this represents a shift in power that business people will promote. Organisation will support these changes through their educational role, a role that they will take seriously, giving people the development that they need whether or not it is central to their work role. Indeed, organisations will see the benefit in promoting concepts of the good that emphasise virtues that are environmental, professional and spiritual in nature alongside those of the practice of business.

Those who do not acknowledge this characterisation are making one of two mistakes. Either they are giving too much precedence to the role of profit and individual freedom against communal concerns or they are making the mistake of taking an overly narrow view of what business can be. Nevertheless, even if we accept the argument that business cannot have a legitimate role in generating profit this does not exclude a role for business. An alternative characterisation of business as trade without profit would also enable

business to contribute to virtue based communities. In short, we think that it is important not to exclude business from practice and virtue.

Are we naïve in thinking that characterisations of business that subordinate profit as an aim could actually be adopted by society? From the standards and rhetoric of the current liberal individualistic tradition that we have today we will, of course, be accused of such naivete. But we are trying to build a critique of the current tradition, an alternative that someday may be able to challenge the current social order. And central to MacIntyre's virtue theory is that we need to recover forms of social life in which virtue can flourish. Indeed, as MacIntyre (1988) notes, a plethora of traditions have been forced to the margins and effectively neutralised by the current social order. Traditions both religious and secular, from east and west, still have their adherents but do not represent the dominant social order. What they do nevertheless provide are resources that we might draw on when challenging the current social order. It is now important for virtue ethicists with an interest in business to examine how the resources these traditions offer may be compatible with a version of virtue based ethics, reason and justice that can be promoted through business.

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