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BOOK REVIEW: *Virtue and Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, edited by Andrius Bielskis and Kelvin Knight. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. 264 pp. ISBN: 978-1472412560

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The introduction to this collection states that “Aristotelian philosophy has been strong on ethics and politics, but it has been much weaker on economics. This volume seeks to fill the lacuna” (1). Given this aim it is something of a shame that, while there are two brief references to Scott Meikle (1995), there are none to Ricardo Crespo (2014), James Murphy (1993) or Irene van Staveren (2001), all of whom have produced valuable work on Aristotelianism and economics. The likely explanation for this apparent oversight is that, while Aristotelian ethics underpins much of the book, it is Alasdair MacIntyre’s version of Aristotelianism that is central. In fact, most of the papers included in this collection were originally presented at a conference on MacIntyre’s work and the economy in 2010.

Despite the title, there is not much of a focus on virtue ethics, per se. The volume’s central theme is that contemporary neo-liberal capitalism is antithetical to virtue, and tends to corrupt all spheres of human life. Whereas economics could and should be directed towards facilitating human flourishing, contemporary economics is not. Much of the focus is on how the present order undermines moral agency. While effective moral agency is a pre-requisite of virtue acquisition, it is an idiosyncrasy of MacIntyre’s version of virtue ethics to grant such prominence to this broader issue, rather than particular virtues. As such, it may surprise the unwitting reader interested in virtue ethics, upon picking up a volume entitled “Virtue and Economy,” to find that the focus is somewhat narrower.

Against the dominant paradigm, which takes instrumentalism and preference maximisation to be central tenets of rationality, the volume’s various authors hold that “ethical reasoning about human ends is essential to any economy and that economic theorising should necessarily start from the notion of ethically justifiable human needs and desires” (1). Section one consists of papers concerned with criticising neo-liberal capitalism, and begins with MacIntyre’s most sustained discussion of business ethics, entitled “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” since he first suggested that its problems were insoluble (MacIntyre, 1977).

Due both to MacIntyre’s pre-eminence as a moral philosopher, and to the quality of the paper itself, this is the highlight of the volume. MacIntyre is sometimes charged with saying too little about business and finance, and insofar as this charge is well-founded, MacIntyre goes some way to answering it here. In this chapter he goes beyond his longstanding misgivings about role-structured activity, and the compartmentalisation to which it gives rise. He argues that not only does high finance undermine the moral agency of those employed in the industry, but is incompatible with four habits that must be acquired in order for us to be morally responsible agents: “a tempered realism about oneself,” the ability to “judge which risks it is reasonable to take and which are foolhardy,” a commitment to the common good, and the habit of focusing neither “on the present at the expense of the future nor on the future at the expense of the present” (9-10). On all four counts financial traders fail because their role demands extreme

self-confidence, prevents them from adequately distinguishing between rashness, cowardice and courage, requires them to ignore the larger human costs their market transactions may have, and requires the prioritisation of short-term goals.

MacIntyre also seeks to challenge what he regards as the dominant view of the financial crisis, i.e., that there is nothing inherently wrong with the activity of money-making as such, but that individuals have often been misguided or are otherwise morally inadequate in some way. On this dominant view what is needed is more and better ethics education. This is mistaken, according to MacIntyre, partly because of the way in which success in finance precludes success in developing a moral character, but also because ethics education is ineffective, and because of the divergent paths ethical and economic thought have taken since the Enlightenment. There seems to me to be some tension between these latter two points. On the one hand, MacIntyre seems to lament the fact that one set of students might read Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, while another might read his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and, on the other hand, he claims that courses on ethics are ineffective. We can freely admit that no one goes from knave to *phronimoi* over the course of a single ethics module, but if the rift between the study of ethics and economics is regrettable, it is presumably because the study of ethics can, in principle, help to develop moral character. With this in mind, while MacIntyre's arguments about high finance give us reason to prefer an economy in which finance is less dominant and to reject claims that the problems facing that particular industry can be solved through ethics education alone, the broader conclusion that "business ethics ... is a dangerous distraction" (8) seems to be unwarranted.

The other papers in section one are similarly critical of contemporary capitalism. While he makes an essentially Kantian case, Bob Brecher draws on a number of MacIntyre's works in "Neoliberalism and its Threat to Moral Agency" to support his thesis that neo-liberalism is incompatible with moral agency, a thesis that Brecher himself takes to be "a statement of the obvious" (23). Dixon and Wilson reach a similar conclusion, but by way of a foray into Plato's *Republic*. Echoing MacIntyre, they argue that the causes of the credit crisis and resulting financial crash are inherent to contemporary capitalism, rather than being an accidental feature.

Rajeev Sehgal's interesting paper, "Is Aristotelian Capitalism Possible?" sets out to argue that Aristotelian capitalism is impossible, but tellingly concludes that it is not possible "for the most part" (70). The secondary aim of the paper is to defend MacIntyre against critics who claim he "misapplies his own Aristotelian insights" (56) when criticising capitalism. To do so Sehgal focuses on the work of John Kay, and while his criticisms are largely convincing, it is a shame that subtler versions of this position (e.g. Moore and Beadle 2006) are not considered. Sehgal also wisely points out that there are "no truly capitalist economies. Even in the most *laissez-faire* capitalist economies there are some restrictions and regulations on the right use of property in production" (57), an important point that challenges the claim sometimes made by other authors in the volume that moral agency is impossible under neo-liberal capitalism.

Section two aims to "polemicize" the (already polemical) critique established in section one. It consists of papers largely concerned to relate MacIntyre's work to the work of other thinkers, and in so doing to deepen the critique of the 'market society'. John O'Neill offers a defence of egalitarianism by way of an examination of the work of Smith, Rousseau and Richard Titmuss ("Equality, Vulnerability and Independence"). Peter McMylor, drawing on his own previous work on bureaucratic modernity and MacIntyre's thought, highlights some noteworthy

similarities between MacIntyre and Zygmunt Bauman, which may serve to facilitate further collaboration between virtue ethics and sociology. Mustafa Ongun argues in “Reappraising Neoliberalism: Homo Economicus, Practitioners and Practices” that MacIntyre provides us with resources superior to those provided by Michel Foucault when it comes to understanding and assessing neoliberalism, in part because MacIntyre’s notion of a practice is clearer than Foucault’s, and illustrates his case with the example of the reorganisation of the BBC during the 1990s. MacIntyre cites Karl Polanyi’s work, and in particular his economic history “The Great Transformation,” as an influence on his thought. Niko Noponen helpfully elaborates on the relationship between their work in “The Great Perverting Transformation” and suggests that just as Polanyi can help us to understand MacIntyre, MacIntyre’s distinction between internal and external goods can help us to properly understand Polanyi. For the most part, the papers in this section are informative and will primarily be of interest to those who wish to understand how MacIntyre’s work relates to other critics of capitalism.

The papers included in section three set themselves a harder task and seek to outline alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. Piotr Machura finds some cause for optimism in the work of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen in “Goods, Interests and the Language of Morals.” Korkut Raptis takes issue with MacIntyre’s claim that institutions are required to sustain practices, and seeks instead to promote a “revolutionary ethical discourse” based on trust and honesty. Kelvin Knight offers an erudite history of alternatives to the current economic paradigm in his chapter entitled “Formalising Functions: The History of a Passing Challenge to Capitalist Economy.” He focuses in particular on G.D.H. Cole’s guild socialism and R.H. Tawney’s critique of the acquisitiveness of capitalism, and sees parallels between the guild socialist conception of the goods of work and MacIntyre’s conception of practices outlined in *After Virtue*. In one of the strongest essays in this collection, “Toward a Critical Ethical Economy,” Russell Keat argues that MacIntyre is mistaken to think capitalism is inherently antithetical to morality, but also that the mainstream schools of social criticism, deriving from John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, have failed to learn from Marx’s early humanistic work.

While Keat rejects Marx’s arguments against the market, he accepts that there are sufficient problems with capitalist market economies to warrant establishing boundaries around the market and “using the powers of the state to prohibit the sale and purchase of various goods, to support the non-market provision of others, and so on” (199). Keat sees in MacIntyre’s work a powerful alternative to Marx’s critique of capitalism, and one that illuminates an ideal of human production. Without overstating the point, Keat concludes by suggesting that given there can be varieties of capitalism, some variant of a coordinated market economy (CME), like that found in Germany, is superior to the Anglo-American liberal market economy (LME), and to various forms of socialism. While I am sympathetic to Keat’s position, it is easy to imagine critics of a more utopian bent objecting on the grounds that “actually existing” CMEs seem to offer such meagre improvements on LMEs, and suggesting that this reveals a more radical approach to be necessary if we are to achieve a society conducive to human flourishing. Nevertheless, Keat’s is a valuable contribution to the debate.

In the concluding chapter, “Anti-Capitalist Politics and Labour for the Twenty-first Century: History and Future Challenges,” Andrius Bielskis offers one way to approach the questions raised by Keat’s paper, and suggests three conditions for “a more modest utopia— economic democracy” (244). These are: democratic control of production in workers cooperatives, “subordination of capital to labour,” and somewhat cryptically, the “abolition of the principle

or, at least, legal regulation of profit maximisation” (244). Bielskis acknowledges that more needs to be done to spell out the details of this alternative, a wise move given that the goals of abolition and regulation are so very different, but he has provided a useful starting point.

While this collection will be enormously valuable for anyone with a serious interest in MacIntyre’s work, it is also valuable because it is all too rare these days for defenders and critics of the market to be in dialogue. As such it will be of interest to those business ethicists who seek to engage with critics of capitalism. At times the view that contemporary capitalism is irredeemably flawed is taken to be so obvious that it is barely worth arguing for, which may be problematic both for readers who agree and readers who disagree. However, overall there is much to recommend it, a timely volume on an important topic, containing many highly stimulating and challenging essays.

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