

MacIntyre and the Catch-22 of Aristotelian Moral Education

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According to Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotelian moral education is caught in a kind of Catch-22: We become virtuous by acting as a genuinely virtuous person would if they were in our shoes, but we cannot judge how a genuinely virtuous person would act without already possessing the intellectual and moral virtues! In my essay, I will take a closer look at this apparently vicious circle within Aristotelian moral education and at MacIntyre's attempt to escape it. I will argue (a) that MacIntyre's attempt fails because his explanation of how we can learn to become genuinely virtuous is incomplete; and (b) that his explanation is incomplete because MacIntyre lacks an account of intrinsic moral goodness. Finally, I will propose that developing an adequate conceptual framework for a genuinely Aristotelian moral education would require more attention to the quality of human experience than is found in MacIntyre's ethics of virtue.

MORAL EDUCATION AND ITS CATCH-22

On MacIntyre's interpretation of Aristotle's ethics, we are practically rational when we know and do what contributes to our ultimate happiness and fulfillment. Our ultimate happiness and fulfillment lies in realizing the proper end or *telos* of human life. Accordingly, the deliberation that precedes a sound practical judgment combines an adequate *conception* of the human *telos* with an accurate *perception* of the situation at hand. An adequate conception of the proper end of human life establishes our proper long-term goals; an accurate perception of the situation at hand shows us what actions are consistent with those objectives. Of course, we must do more than exercise sound judgment in order to be practically rational. We must also act according to what our best judgment recommends and with the right motivation.¹

MacIntyre reaffirms the Aristotelian position that, to be practically rational, we must possess both the intellectual virtues and the virtues of character. To develop our potential for these two different kinds of human excellence, we must take part in two different forms of moral education: "intellectual virtues are acquired through teaching, the virtues of character from habitual exercise."² He adds that, although they are distinct, each form of moral education requires the other. For example, in order to build character by performing virtuous deeds, we need the intellectual virtues to help determine *which* inclinations and desires we should cultivate and *which* acts we should perform. In order to benefit from systematic instruction, we need a well-formed character so that we will not be distracted from intellectual development by more immediate gratifications (*WJ*, 110, 128-9).³

It is this very interdependence of the two forms of Aristotelian moral education that creates its apparent Catch-22: it seems we cannot perform the actions through which we become virtuous without possessing the capacity for sound practical judgment, but the capacity for sound practical judgment consists precisely in the

intellectual and moral virtues.⁴ This apparently vicious circle has a motivational dimension as well as an epistemological one. MacIntyre himself observes that, while we become just through the performance of just acts and courageous through the performance of brave acts, it is only *retrospectively* that we can appreciate how becoming just or courageous is related to our ultimate happiness and fulfillment. He concludes that we have to gain experience in living a life informed by an accurate conception of the human *telos* in order to appreciate the point of the virtues (*WJ*, 109-10; *TRV*, 15). But if we can only fully appreciate their point *after* we have acquired the virtues, then it is not clear why we would be initially motivated to perform virtuous acts, or even to try to learn to judge what a genuinely virtuous person would do if they were in our shoes. MacIntyre sums up the epistemological and motivational Catch-22 of Aristotelian moral education in this way: “We cannot judge and act rightly unless we aim at what is in fact good; we cannot aim at what is good *except on the basis of experience of right judgment and action*” (*WJ*, 118; *TRV*, 19, 63).

MACINTYRE’S RESPONSE:

THE DIALECTIC OF THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL MORAL ENQUIRY

MacIntyre claims that the appearance of vicious circularity in Aristotelian moral education disappears when we take a closer look at how we could develop our capacity for sound practical judgment. To substantiate his claim, MacIntyre describes the educational process through which we might gain the capacity to know and do what the virtue of justice requires in particular circumstances. We would begin by following specific injunctions or precepts that define just conduct in relatively straightforward situations. A respected teacher, representing the accumulated wisdom of one or another tradition, would provide us both with the rules to follow and with the inspiration to follow them (*WJ*, 114, 194; *TRV*, 63, 130). These initial efforts to observe rules of just behavior would represent opportunities for two complementary kinds of learning, for through practical experience we can develop accurate perception of the relevant features of particular contexts, and in reflection upon practical experience we can formulate general principles of just behavior. The result? According to MacIntyre, learning to articulate principles of justice would not only enable us to appreciate the reasoning behind the rules we have followed, but would also help us to discern what justice requires in situations too complex for the simple application of rules. “So the order of learning is such that we first have to learn in certain initial situations what is *always* enjoined or always prohibited, in order that later we may become able to extrapolate in a non-rule-governed way to other types of situations in which what courage or justice or truthfulness, together with prudence, demand is more than conformity to the universal rule.”⁵ MacIntyre’s response to the Catch-22 of Aristotelian moral education is thus to propose that we can become genuinely virtuous through a dialectic of theoretical reflection and practical experience: “In developing both our conception of the good and the habit of right judgment and action — and neither can be adequately developed without the other — *we gradually learn to correct each in the light of the other, moving dialectically between them*” (*WJ*, 118; *TRV*, 128-30).

The problem with MacIntyre’s response is this. In order to become genuinely virtuous through a dialectic of reflection and action, we need to be able to recognize

when our practical judgments are sound. Specifically, if we are to evaluate principles of justice or theoretical conceptions of the good life with reference to the outcomes of our judgments and actions, then we must have some way of knowing when we have judged and acted as a genuinely virtuous person would. In the case of MacIntyre's example, unless we are able to recognize when our decisions and actions are genuinely just, our life experiences provide no grounds to assess the principles and theories of justice that inform our practical judgments.

MacIntyre does allow that the principles formulated in theoretical moral enquiry are open to revision in the light of inadequacies revealed through the experience of living out the practical implications of those commitments (*WJ*, 85; *TRV*, 95-6, 129). Indeed, he allows that people with life experience can make sound judgments prior to and independently of philosophical reflection, for MacIntyre cites with apparent approval Aristotle's observation that practical judgments based only upon experience with particulars are often more accurate than those informed only by philosophical theories (*WJ*, 92).⁶ However, while MacIntyre does refer to a kind of knowledge of the goodness of genuinely virtuous actions that comes from experience, he never describes how this knowledge is acquired or in what it consists (*AV*, 178-9). MacIntyre frequently explains how theoretical reflection can serve to remedy the deficiencies of practical knowledge, but nowhere does he illustrate *how* experienced practitioners of virtue are able to compensate for the limitations of general moral principles (*WJ*, 117).⁷ It is ironic that, although the development of sound practical judgment is a key feature of MacIntyre's ethics of virtue, *how* people can learn *from experience* to progress beyond rule-following is left an unexplored mystery in his work (*WJ*, 93, 95-96; *TRV*, 139).⁸ In short, MacIntyre fails to explain how we can learn to become genuinely virtuous because he fails to supply an adequate account of the *experiential* side of the theory-practice dialectic in moral education.

INTRINSIC GOODNESS AND THE VIRTUES

MacIntyre's inability to explain how we can recognize genuinely virtuous acts is directly related to his inability to explain the sense in which virtuous acts are intrinsically good — that is, properly valued for their own sake as well as for their contribution to human fulfillment. Aristotle can be read as defining the human *telos* as an entire life in which our innate potentials are actualized in various kinds of activities, in which the end or good is the activity itself and not some outcome distinct from the exercise of our capacities.⁹ In other words, because the various kinds of virtuous acts are understood within Aristotle's teleological scheme as the perfections of the various potentials of a biologically-given human nature, virtuous acts are necessary components of the best human life by definition. In this Aristotelian view, then, virtuous feeling and conduct is correctly desired for its own sake in part because the life of happiness and fulfillment that we all desire is precisely the life of virtuous activity.¹⁰

Aristotle's view of the good life can be contrasted with that of Thomas Aquinas, who saw perfect happiness and fulfillment as something only achievable "outside and beyond this present life." In this Thomistic view, the virtues are understood

instrumentally as the *means* to attaining the human *telos*. Consequently, once MacIntyre opts for Aquinas's over Aristotle's conception of the final end of human life, it is no longer clear in what sense — if any — he can affirm that virtuous acts are properly desired or valued for their own sake. This represents a problem for his ethics of virtue because, on the one hand, MacIntyre wishes to maintain the Aristotelian position that part of what makes genuinely virtuous people virtuous is that they perform just and brave and generous acts out of love of justice and courage and generosity for their own sake and *not* just for the sake of their consequences (AV, 150, 198; WJ, 112-3). On the other hand, however, MacIntyre almost invariably describes the goodness of the virtues in *instrumental* terms, as human qualities and capacities that are desirable because they are necessary to success in our quest for our final good (AV, 144, 219, 223, 233; WJ, 122, 194; TRV, 62, 130, 140). The result is an unresolved tension within MacIntyre's ethics between understanding virtuous action as a means and understanding it as also an end-in-itself.

INTRINSIC GOODNESS AND THE FINAL END OF HUMAN LIFE

The contradictions among MacIntyre's references to the goodness of the virtues are symptomatic of a more basic problem internal to his ethics. This basic problem comes to light when we consider the broader question of what it could mean to say that an end or action is intrinsically good, in the sense of being correctly desired or valued for its own sake. Now, in MacIntyre's scheme of beliefs, the final end of human life is the paradigm of intrinsic goodness because it is by definition the only end of human action that is desired purely for itself and not also desired for the sake of some other good. This suggests that MacIntyre's general understanding of the nature of intrinsic goodness can be sought in his answer to the question: "In what sense is the final end of human life *correctly* desired *for its own sake*?"

In explaining why realization of the human *telos* is correctly desired for its own sake — and not just for the fulfillment it affords or for the sake of its part in some divine scheme — MacIntyre, like Aquinas, follows Augustine. The Augustinian-Thomistic conception of the final end of human life is similar to Aristotle's in holding that realization of the human *telos* affords complete satisfaction of human desire *because* it is a realization of what is intrinsically good. The Augustinian-Thomistic view adds the important point that realization of what is intrinsically good satisfies human desire completely because *the* good — that which in itself *merits* being desired — is what humans long for most deeply.¹¹ And, finally, the Augustinian-Thomistic view is similar to Aristotle's in holding that there is a supreme good, the experience of which fully illuminates the intrinsic goodness of particular virtuous acts.¹² In Augustine's Christianized neo-Platonism, the perfect good that all humans desire — the Being, Truth, and Goodness that is the ground of all particular objects, truths, and goods — is God (WJ, 173-74; TRV, 26, 122).¹³ MacIntyre is thus committed to the belief that we will only fully appreciate why the human *telos* is correctly desired *for its own sake* when we achieve knowledge of the goodness of God: "that divine goodness by reference to which alone, in Augustine's Platonic terms, the unity underlying and ordering the range of uses and applications of the concept of good can be discovered" (WJ, 178; TRV, 137-38, 154).¹⁴ For MacIntyre,

then, it is in contemplation of the divine nature that our quest for *the* good attains its final end.

Everyone desires perfect happiness, and everyone has as the true end of their nature, that for the sake of which they move towards all other goods in the way that they do, the goodness of God. This latter movement toward their final cause human beings share with all other created beings, but nonrational beings cannot of course know or acknowledge this about themselves. Human beings can and before Adam's fall did. In their present state they often do not recognize, what nonetheless they possess all the means for recognizing, if only they would attend to them, that in being moved by a love for their own good, they are being moved by a love of and desire for God (*WJ*, 192).

In what does divine goodness consist and how is it known? How does knowledge of God's goodness help us learn to love virtue for its own sake? MacIntyre provides us with some idea of his thoughts on these questions when he states that we are not capable of self-education "into the virtues" until our pride has been transformed into charity (*caritas*) by God's gift of grace (*WJ*, 205, 182; *TRV*, 84, 91-92). This suggestion that the apprehension of intrinsic goodness is internal to the life of faith is consistent with MacIntyre's claim that we must *experience* genuinely virtuous activity in order to appreciate why virtuous acts are properly done for their own sake (*WJ*, 106, 109-10, 177-80). Unfortunately, however, MacIntyre does not describe the transformation that enables us to be charitable and so genuinely virtuous, or the apprehension of divine goodness that comes from learning to love God "more and more," or the knowledge of the virtues that is made possible by God's gift of grace. Because he says very little about the specifically Christian component of his ethics of virtue, MacIntyre's account of how we can become genuinely virtuous is radically incomplete. I can only guess at what it could mean within his moral theory to speak of God as supremely good, and at how contemplating the divine nature would fully illuminate the intrinsic goodness of the virtues.¹⁵

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOODNESS AND THE QUALITY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

I have claimed that MacIntyre's failure to explain how we can recognize genuinely virtuous acts is directly related to his lack of an account of intrinsic moral goodness and particularly of the sense in which virtuous acts are correctly desired for their own sake. What is the link? In my eyes, both reflect a subordination of practical to theoretical knowledge that MacIntyre inherits from Thomism. Consider the case of an apprentice to the healing arts who learns from experience to recognize that such and such specific treatments will cure people of such and such particular ailments. In Thomistic terms, that apprentice has practical knowledge of particulars but as yet lacks the understanding of causes that theoretical knowledge would supply: *why* and not just *that* those kinds of treatments will restore people to health. Within the Thomistic tradition, it is only such an understanding of causes that is considered knowledge (*episteme*, *scientia*) in the full sense of the term.¹⁶ Accordingly, with regard to the question of *why* the virtues should be valued as ends and not only as means, MacIntyre seems to be looking for a *moral theory* to supply the answer.

It is conceivable that theoretical reflection could supply an answer to the question of why virtue is properly desired for its own sake if knowledge of the good

was understood to consist simply in a representation of the intelligible order of the cosmos. As medical science can provide an explanation of why certain treatments are effective and others are not, so moral theory would provide an explanation, in the form of a classification of the human species and its final cause, of why certain kinds of activity satisfy human desire and others lead us to frustration. However, to establish on teleological grounds that a life of just and generous and brave acts will satisfy human desire does not explain why a genuinely virtuous person loves justice and generosity and courage for their own sake. Given that MacIntyre presents sound practical judgment as resulting only from a life of faith infused with *caritas* (charity), I would expect that becoming able to appreciate the intrinsic goodness of virtuous acts would be more like coming to appreciate why good health is desired for its own sake than like coming to understand the causes and remedies of disease. What I want to suggest by this analogy is that MacIntyre, in fixing his attention upon moral theory, is looking for knowledge of moral goodness in all the wrong places.

For a sense of how we could come to value just and generous and brave acts for their own sake, we would do well to take a closer look at what Aristotle says about the life of ultimate happiness and fulfillment. Aristotle holds the life of virtuous activity to be good, not just in the sense of completely satisfying desire, but also in the sense of actualizing what is *intrinsically good*.¹⁷ Specifically, he characterizes the good life as consisting of virtuous acts that by nature *merit* being performed for their own sake because they are inherently “noble and fine.” Indeed, it is precisely because just and generous and brave deeds are inherently noble and fine that Aristotle maintains that they are properly valued for their own sake and only incidentally for their consequences.¹⁸

How can we recognize when our acts embody what is inherently noble and fine? If I interpret Aristotle correctly, it is with reference to the quality of our experience that we can differentiate what is intrinsically good from what is only pleasant or useful. The term that Aristotle uses to characterize genuinely virtuous activity is *kalon* (noble and fine).¹⁹ According to Joseph Owens, *kalon* is the neuter form of *kalos*, meaning *beautiful*, precisely because people in Aristotle’s day named as noble or fine what they experienced as inherently and profoundly pleasing or appealing.²⁰ Furthermore, and most significantly in this context, Owens argues Aristotle uses *kalon* to indicate a *moral* kind of goodness precisely because part of perceiving something to be noble or fine is experiencing it as intrinsically *compelling*: “In its own way it prescribes fulfillment. It presents itself as something that *ought* to be done.”

That genuinely virtuous acts are recognized by the quality of human response is implicit in the traditional affiliation between the good and the beautiful, between moral and aesthetic perception. It is also implied in Aristotle’s position that the acts of the person of good *character* are the best measure of what is inherently noble and fine, for to have good character is to have feelings “at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way.”²¹ It is for this reason that the cultivation of dispositions to *feel* as well as act correctly is so important within Aristotle’s ethics.²² It is also why Aristotle holds that genuinely virtuous people can be recognized according to whether or not they take pleasure in

what is “pleasant by nature”²³ and why moral arguments will have no effect upon those unfortunate souls who, through lack of proper education, “have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never *tasted* it.”²⁴

To propose that it is with reference to the quality of our experiences that we can recognize genuinely virtuous action provides no immediate escape from moral education’s Catch-22. The problem is that we can only trust our perceptions of what is inherently noble and fine to the extent that we are persons of good character. However, we cannot know which actions to perform to develop good character unless we know when to trust our feelings! How can we learn to recognize when we are experiencing as pleasant what is truly “pleasant by nature?” Aristotle provides no easy answers to such questions.²⁵ This could be because, as MacIntyre’s own reference to the central role of *caritas* in human development suggests, answers to such questions are not easily available.

In sum, MacIntyre proposes that we can become genuinely virtuous through a dialectical educational process in which theoretical reflection and practical experience play complementary roles. However, his characterization of this theory-practice dialectic is incomplete in lacking an account of the kind of experiential knowledge of intrinsic goodness that comes from striving to do what the genuinely virtuous person would do. MacIntyre focuses his attention upon acquiring theoretical knowledge of the proper end of human life, but on his own account developing the capacity for sound practical judgment depends at least as much upon having the right kinds of firsthand experience. In particular, in order to appreciate why the life of virtue is its own reward, we must come to appreciate through our own attempts to live virtuously what it could mean to have feelings “at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way.”²⁶ How we might characterize the experiential side of the theory-practice dialectic in moral enquiry requires more space to explore than I have available here. What I think we can conclude is that an adequate conceptual framework for a genuinely Aristotelian moral education would require more attention to the *quality* of human experience than is found in MacIntyre’s ethics of virtue.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 126, 136, 189. This text will be cited as *WJ* for all subsequent references. Also *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 62. This text will be cited as *TRV* for all subsequent references.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 154. This text will be cited as *AV* for all subsequent references.

3. Compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1947), 1095a1-11.

4. Joseph Dunne, “Virtue, *Phronesis* and Learning,” in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. D. Carr and J. Steutel (New York: Routledge, 1999), 49-50.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues, and Goods,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1992): 10.

6. See Aristotle’s remarks that “some who do not know [theoretically], and especially those who have experience, are more practical than others who know” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b16-17) and that “arguments about matters concerned with feelings and actions are less reliable than facts; so when they clash with the facts of perception they are despised” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1172a35).

7. MacIntyre, *Plain Persons*, 19.
8. *Ibid.*, 10.
9. On this point, see Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," in *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J.C. Cleary (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), 158; compare *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1176b1-9.
10. J.L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A.O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 19-22.
11. On this point, see Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 339; also Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2d ed. (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1973), 35-36; compare Jonathon Jacobs, "Why is Virtue Naturally Pleasing?" *The Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 1 (1995): 26-27.
12. Joseph Owens, "The KALON in Aristotelian Ethics," in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. D.J.O'Meara (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 1981), 268-69.
13. Compare, Vernon J. Bourke, *Ethics: A Textbook in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 37 and Gilson, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 340, 344.
14. MacIntyre, *Plain Persons*, 10-11.
15. A final point on this topic: MacIntyre states that "even the best theoretical enquiry yields an inadequate knowledge of our ultimate end, and even the revealed truth that that end is the enjoyment of the beatific vision involves a reference to aspects of the divine nature of which we can only have the most inadequate apprehension." Yet, he also quickly adds that the knowledge afforded by theoretical enquiry is only inadequate in comparison to "that which we shall enjoy if we achieve our ultimate end" (*WJ*, 193). MacIntyre does not explain how he is able to be confident in these claims about the relation of present to future knowledge of the ultimate end of human development without having already achieved that end. In this connection, it would be strange if MacIntyre accepted Aquinas' appeals to Scripture to establish the existence of things unknowable by reason *unless* MacIntyre had grounds *other than* Scriptural authority for accepting the authority of Scripture. In any event, because "the part of Christian theology which concerns man's true end... is on Aquinas' own account a matter of faith, not of reason," even theoretical knowledge of the supreme good in MacIntyre's scheme presupposes whatever it is that he means by *faith*.
16. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1139b30-35 and Alasdair MacIntyre, *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1990), 13-14.
17. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1176b4-9.
18. Owens, "KALON," 263, 272.
19. In my interpretation of the significance of Aristotle's use of *kalon* (noble and fine) in his ethics, I am following Owens except in using the translation *noble or fine* where Owens would use either *right* or *seemly*. It appears that there is no one English word that has the same range of correct applications as *kalon*.
20. Owens, "KALON," 261-62, 268.
21. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1106b20; compare *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1113a30.
22. For more on this point, and a look at the ontological assumptions corresponding to Aristotle's cognitive view of the emotions, see L.A. Kosman, "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics," in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*.
23. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1099a10-251.
24. *Ibid.*, 1179b15, my italics.
25. Dunne, "Virtue, *Phronesis*, and Learning," 58.
26. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1106b20.