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Thick Descriptions and Common Goods:
MacIntyre and Dewey on the (Im)possibility of Educating for Justice in a Liberal Democracy

ABSTRACT: With liberal democracy's commitment to the individual's freedom to pursue his or her particular conception of the good life, many have questioned whether educating for the Common Good is still possible. This paper examines John Dewey and Alasdair MacIntyre on the limits and the possibilities of educating for civic virtue in the United States today. Recognizing similar challenges, MacIntyre calls for local communities of practice, while for Dewey, democracy is both the end and means of education. Both offer important insights for the potential and roles of public and religious education today.

Since Greek antiquity, philosophers have recognized education's powerful potential for shaping the moral character of the community. This insight has gained new vigor with the emergence of service-learning pedagogies and practices. In both public and private institutions, from grade school through higher education, community service opportunities are available through extracurricular activities, as components of courses, and increasingly, as a requirement for graduation. The impetus behind these trends is the noble desire to promote a heightened sense of citizenship and community engagement in the next generation. Yet beyond vague notions civic virtue, the content of this moral character is perhaps not as evident as it first appears.

In our contemporary context, promoting and passing on an inherited system of moral ideals is not the unambiguous good that it once was. An historical appreciation for the development of ideas and the undeniable plurality within society has undermined the authority of any single received tradition. Moreover, as a political structure, liberal democracy is grounded in a commitment to tolerating others' moral traditions and a refusal to endorse any particular vision of the good life. Under such conditions, many have begun to question whether education for the common good is still possible. This essay will examine two of the most prominent voices from the 20th Century on the limits of liberal democracy and possibility of civic education. Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment project and call for a return to a tradition-based method of inquiry has been heralded as one of the most significant contributions to political and educational thought in recent times. Yet, writing nearly a century earlier, John Dewey identified many of the same challenges and opportunities. Though there is much upon which the two authors agree, their areas of contention lead to significant disagreement on the possibility and means of educating for civic virtue in both contexts of public and religious education.

This paper briefly sketches the historical interpretation of modernity offered by the two authors, beginning with MacIntyre's more familiar appraisal of the 'Enlightenment Project. Next,

I identify ways in which Dewey anticipated MacIntyre's concerns with political liberalism, but offered drastically different conclusions about the goals of education. I compare the similarities and differences of both authors, but also point to valid critiques against both of their works. The essay concludes by identifying implications for religious and public education in the United States today.

MacIntyre begins his seminal work *After Virtue* with a dire vision of our contemporary political climate.[1] It is not merely that we frequently fail to agree upon the best means toward achieving a mutually desired goal; rather, the social vision we are hoping to achieve is itself a matter of disagreement. Further, what qualifies as legitimate foundations and sound principles in an argument is likewise contested. We use the rhetoric of justice, dignity, and rights with no shared understanding of what these terms mean. When your interlocutors share neither your goals nor your sense of reasonableness, it is little surprise that recourse to political maneuvering appears necessary.

In MacIntyre's purview, how we arrived at such an impasse requires a long narrative of good intentions and unforeseen consequences.[2] The turning point was the dawn of modernity and subsequent Enlightenment period. Following the religious wars that devastated Europe, it became clear that moral consensus could no longer be achieved by recourse to religious authority. Differing views of human nature and destiny provided Europe with its first modest experiences of pluralism. Thus, Enlightenment philosophers sought to ground morality in universally available and accepted rational principles such as desire, duty, utility, or self-interest (each carrying an implicit view of human anthropology). One's particular vision of the good life was relegated to the private sphere and no longer an admissible element in the discussion.

This was a radical shift from the classical method of ethical inquiry, which takes as its point of departure a vision of the human good or *telos* toward which we strive as individuals and communities. Ethicists have traditionally asked three related questions: *Who are we? Who ought be become?* and *How do we get there?* What Enlightenment philosophers had essentially done was greatly truncate our answer to this first question and render inadmissible any answer to the second. We are not clear on where we're starting from and cannot say where we are going, but are nevertheless trying to articulate a comprehensive set of directions. Under such conditions, it is not simply the fact that these modern moral traditions *happened to* have failed to establish a universal discourse, but rather that they *had to* fail. The reason, claims MacIntyre, is that it is in our nature to think in terms of the ends we seek – both immediately in any given action, and more broadly as we strive to articulate the narrative unity of our lives. Thus MacIntyre is not surprised that though Enlightenment philosophers offered distinctly differing foundations for their moral enquiry, the content remained that of Northern European Protestants. Early modern thinkers never lost their vision of the good life; they simply developed new rationale for its promotion. Still today, we cannot avoid smuggling our particular vision of the good into our shared moral discourse.

Our choice, in such a context, is to either acknowledge the role that the *telos* plays in our deliberations, or accept the necessity of imposing our views on society through whatever

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6.

[2] Ibid., 37.

political means available.[3] Yet, MacIntyre readily acknowledges there are good reasons for leaving Aristotle's classical method behind. The religious wars were themselves testaments to what becomes of any attempt to enforce a single vision on society, and Aristotle held a metaphysical biology and vision of society (in which good life is only attainable by select few) that we would find unacceptable. MacIntyre's constructive proposal seeks the possibility of returning to a method of inquiry that again places our vision of the good at the center of the process. He begins by articulating a highly specific notion of practices that warrants quoting in full:

> By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[4]

What MacIntye has in mind are practices such as medicine and law: complex and coordinated activities that maintain standards of entry and excellence. Through these, practitioners come to know and experience a set of goods that are only available through participating in the shared endeavor. For MacIntyre, the virtues are those excellences of character (habits and dispositions) that enable the community to further its pursuit of the goods internal to the practice. Thus, though MacIntyre is credited with heralding a return to the virtues, it is important to note that they actually play a secondary role in his theory. What is primary is the sustained vision of the good.

Practices establish mechanisms for incorporating new practitioners into the field passing on inherited visions of the good. Yet, this vision is never settled. Through time and in response to new challenges and opportunities, the practice's vision of excellence evolves, becoming a tradition. Therefore, and importantly for this essay, a second set of virtues is required: those which are necessary for the tradition to continue to evolve and develop. Honesty and courage undoubtedly play a role in practicing medicine well, but they are vital in establishing the trust necessary to enter into a discourse about how to move the practice forward. So it is with moral traditions. Rather than abandon our claims to the good life, MacIntyre argues for moral communities and traditions that sustain a thick vision of the human *telos* and cultivate the virtues necessary to bring these visions into open and public debates. As with professional practices, these moral communities commit to ongoing conversations both internally and externally about the goods they seek and virtues necessary to reach them.

MacIntyre builds on his understanding of the development of traditions further in his subsequent work, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[5] Here he traces the close link between our visions justice and practical reason, and offers his most sustained critique of liberal democracies. As with any moral tradition, MacIntyre argues, liberalism has articulated a distinct vision of the good life (one committed to procedural justice and in which all particular moral horizons are

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[3] Ibid., 109.
[4] Ibid., 187.
[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

privatized) and a corresponding set of virtues (with tolerance receiving the highest value). Rather than escaping moral traditions all together, MacIntyre concludes, we have settled for a thin and procedural notion of justice that can only provide abstractions that "are far too thin and meager" to shape the moral imagination of a community.[6] Though the critique he offers may appear severe, MacIntyre contends that this liberalism is the closest we have come and are likely to come toward realizing the Enlightenment's ideals. MacIntyre strongly resists the communitarian label that is often ascribed to him, and is wary of any program that would enforce a particular vision of the good onto a pluralistic population. His is more a program of articulating the challenges we face and offering resources for survival.

It is not surprising that MacIntyre's philosophical work has been embraced by educators – particularly those within religious spheres who readily view the Church as the sort of moral community MacIntyre proposes. Yet his work offers cutting critiques of the American democratic project and the character of community we are cultivating. One location in which this become clear is his aptly titled essay "How to Seem Virtuous Without Actually Being So,"[7] in which he considers the possibility of educating for civic virtue in a liberal setting with no particular vision of the good. He articulates his thesis frankly: "There can be no rationally defensible shared programme for moral education for our society as such, but only a number of rival and conflicting programmes, each from the standpoint of one specific contending view."[8] Thus, while civic education and service-learning in a liberal democracy may promote a particular set of pro-social behaviors, it cannot provide thicker elaborations or justification for *why* these activities are desirable. Students may learn that a set of behaviors pleases their instructor or helps to attain educational goals, but will not be able to generalize from these acts to a more fundamental moral disposition. What they will not learn is how to recognize when it is necessary to act in a way that displeases authority or sacrifices one's own good.

The contemporary portrait that MacIntyre offers seems bleak. His is an ethic of resistance and survival in a time of fragmented and confused discourse. In a liberal setting, the best that we can offer is a thin and commonplace vision of citizenship that cannot withstand vested interests (be they political or more frequently, commercial) that impose their own vision on society. Even in a context such as religious education, which embodies a moral tradition but is also often committed to serving a diverse population, the challenge can seem insurmountable.

One might expect John Dewey, a 20th Century hero of the liberal tradition, to be a stark contrast to MacIntyre's position. Yet many of the concerns that MacIntyre raises were addressed by Dewey nearly a century earlier. Like MacIntyre, Dewey traces many of the challenges we face to the Enlightenment.[9] Yet, for Dewey, the project was not so much a necessary failure as it was left incomplete. This is due in part to the early success of liberalism in the United States. The first rights established were largely negative: freedom *from* coercion and suppression. While these rights have been largely secured in our society, Dewey seeks to go further. The true measure of society is not liberty, Dewey argues, but the flourishing of the individual (an image

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[6] Ibid., 334.

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, "How to Seem Virtuous Without Actually Being So," in *Education in Morality*, ed. J. Mark Halstead and Terence H. McLaughlin (London: Routledge, 1999), 118– 131.

[8] Ibid., 11.

[9] John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1935), 13.

for Dewey that is much richer and communal than today's rugged individualism). Dewey recognizes that technological advancements have greatly increased our capacity for interaction and communication. Yet he argues, "The Great Society created by steam and electricity may be a society, but it is no community."[10] The creation of a great democratic community in which the full nature of each individual is empowered to flourish requires much more than negative rights. It requires the conscious and intelligent efforts of all of society.

Much of this work begins in our method of educating. For Dewey, the means and ends of education ought to be one and the same: democracy.[11] The degree to which students become contributing members of society is dependent upon the extent that their education relates to the challenges and opportunities in society. In this way, Dewey calls for a method of educating which models the ideals of citizenship and actively engages students in real-world problems (insights central to service-learning pedagogies). We are social by nature, yet democracy is a skill and character that we must learn. Education is an opportunity to intentionally intervene in society and cultivate these desired characteristics.

From MacIntyre's perspective, what Dewey offers is a thicker vision of liberalism as a moral tradition. While Dewey is committed to diversity and the cultivation of individuality, it is clear that his vision of democracy functions as the operative *telos* in his moral imagination. Dewey did not join a congregation after leaving Chicago; for him, democracy was his religion. Indeed, throughout his writings Dewey calls on local communities such as families and churches to offer their resources for the strengthening of the democratic project.[12] Dewey values these smaller social groups, but it clear that for him they fulfill a secondary and supportive function to the larger shared project.[13]

This short discussion begins to highlight some of the key areas of agreement and disagreement between the two authors. Both raise concerns about political and economic interests dominating civil discourse. Yet whereas Dewey still believes that the Enlightenment project could be successful, MacIntyre views it as impossible from its very inception. Further, Dewey believes that a common civic education is both possible and vital for our future as a society while MacIntyre doubts that such an endeavor could ever get beyond superficial and commonplace rhetoric. Nevertheless, both hope for a free and open exchange of ideas and view free discourse as an essential aspect of our progress.

This becomes readily apparent in MacIntyre's later writings in which he moves beyond and openly acknowledges some of the faults of his earlier works. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre admits that any attempt to construct an ethic that does not take our biological reality into account is a mistake.[14] Comparing and contrasting humans and other intelligent species, MacIntyre holds our rationality and mutual dependence as critical aspects that all people share. Perhaps more important than what he finds distinctive, this acknowledgment of our

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[10] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 1st ed. (Denver: Swallow Press, 1954), 98.

[11] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

[12] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 215.

[13] George Albert Coe carries many of these commitments to their logical conclusion in his image of religious education promoting the 'Democracy of God.' George Albert Coe, *A Social Theory of Religious Education: -1917* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969).

[14] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), x.

shared nature creates space for a dialogue across traditions about the virtues and obligations demanded by our shared human nature. This avenue many not be as fruitful as we hope however. It must be admitted that each tradition may consider distinctive aspects of human nature as essential and others peripheral. In this case, each tradition still offers a distinct narrative that must be judged against others.

A more promising approach is already implicit in *After Virtue* and developed further in his later works. As mentioned above, beyond the virtues that are constitutive of a given practice, MacIntyre affirms a secondary set of virtues: those that are needed for a tradition to adapt and develop over time. These virtues of 'conversational justice' help a moral tradition acknowledge and engage the challenges that are raised within the community and by those of a rival tradition.[15] In this sense, MacIntyre offers a set of democratic virtues that are very similar to those endorsed by Dewey. Both would endorse a model of education which helps the student to cultivate the skills and virtues of what MacIntyre terms an 'independent practical reasonser.'[16] Moreover, against MacIntyre's earlier dismissal of the belief in human rights as "one with belief in witches and unicorns,"[17] and given our nature and what is required for human flourishing, MacIntyre now affirms the necessity of certain liberties and the security of primary goods as essential to our participation in this moral discourse. When we are deprived for the freedom of expression or access to critical education, we lack the resources necessary to contribute to this civic conversation.

This emphasis on the skills and virtues necessary to participate in a shared conversation concerning the good life in community brings Dewey and MacIntyre together around a shared set of common interests. Yet, it must be acknowledge that the two authors may also share a common set of shortcomings. One of the most substantial critiques that both authors face is from the perspective of critical pedagogies rooted in the thought of Paulo Freire.[18] In short, neither fully address the reality of marginalized and excluded voices in a meaningful way. Dewey, for example, upholds the American experiment as diverse populations coming together is shared conversation. He does not consider, however, those who through colonialization or globalization are forced into political discourses and economic relationships that they neither chose nor benefit from. Similarly, MacIntyre is largely content to identify the operations of power and coercion with little discussion on how they may be overcome. Freire places the struggle for liberation and justice at the center of his pedagogical program, with far ranging consequences. In practice, this has shifted the emphasis to conscientization and helping the disempowered to find their voice. Though Freire speaks of a similar desire for the cultivation of the democratic skills and habits that are sorely needed by those on the margins,[19] his shift in perspective is a necessary corrective.

The challenges and opportunities that MacIntyre and Dewey identify are crucial to public and religious efforts toward educating agents of change in society. Denying the role of moral traditions in public discourse only creates the possibility for these visions emerging in more

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[15] Ibid., 111.

[16] Ibid., 74.

[17] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 69.

[18] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000).

[19] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

nefarious ways. The public is far better served when individuals and communities are able to investigate, articulate, and defend their moral horizons clearly.

Though religious institutions stand within a distinctive moral tradition and vision of the good, they are also committed to engaging in a common civil discourse. In most religiously affiliated colleges and a growing number of high schools, a single faith background is neither expected nor desired from the students.   The challenge of honoring commitments to both the tradition and broader public is not easily resolved. One tempting solution would be to settle for the cultivation of MacIntyre's secondary set of virtues – those which would aid any tradition in articulating and adapting its vision of the good life. Though MacIntyre and Dewey would agree that these skills are essential regardless of tradition, they neglect the full richness of a moral tradition. Moreover, the truth is that many today have not been raised in any moral tradition with an explicit, thick vision of the common good. Critical skills may help to interpret the social challenges, but offer little solid footing from which to stand. Thus many today know what they are against, but are not certain what they are for.

A second approach would be to bring visions of the good life directly into the conversation. Without enforcing or imposing a view on others, religious institutions can sustain what they admit is a particular *telos*. These traditions carry a clear theological vision of our supernatural end, but also sustain a vision of the common good which should be advanced in temporal society. Implicit in this view of our life together is an anthropology and set of principles and virtues. This approach sustains a clear vision for society without attempting to impose it on others. However, it also goes beyond merely theoretical presentation. Between objectives studying a tradition and proselytization, there is a range of ways in which it is possible to learn from the tradition. Faith communities sustain visions of the dignity and rights of human persons that resonate deeply with even the most secular of worldviews. By bringing this moral vision directly into the discussion, students have the opportunity to engage a tradition and consider where they differ. They are given one potential language with which to make sense of their moral impulses and instinct. Students need not accept or adhere to a particular faith tradition, but may at least know where they stand relative to it.

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