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MACINTYRE’S THEORY OF VIRTUE

An Ethics-for-Citizenship Education?

A THEORY OF VIRTUE

MacIntyre begins his book *After Virtue* with a suggestive picture of what can happen when natural scientists suffer a catastrophe. He argues that moral language ‘is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world’ (1984, p. 2). He also argues that we nowadays only have fragments of moral conceptual schemes and that we have ‘lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality’ (p. 2).

MacIntyre invites us to imagine that natural science has been blamed for causing a series of serious disasters in our environment. Because of this, people lynch, imprison and execute scientists, and destroy both their instruments and their books. Science teaching is also abolished. But later on some people start to revive science as a valuable contribution to life by collecting the remaining fragments. The grave problem is that there are only pieces of theories, parts of books and articles left, without their proper practices and context, and what is left is now being taught in schools. Teachers and students are therefore left with learning procedures that mostly mean memorising terms and fragmentised procedures without comprehending either the purpose or consequences or any proper understanding indeed of science at all.

MacIntyre concedes that people do not always behave like this. He argues that people have the capacity to handle epistemological crises in a more virtuous way than he portrays. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre signifies a three-stage development in an epistemological crisis (1988, p. 362). First, there are too many problems which the current theories cannot solve. Secondly, there is a need to solve and explain the problems facing people. Thirdly, any new theory needs to solve and explain the new problems and explain the old ones.

He shows in both works that there are different conceptions of moral concepts such as virtue and justice; and that there is a ‘diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality …’ (1988, p. 9). MacIntyre also shows that Western tradition embraces diverse conceptions, and not unitary conceptions of the concepts of virtue, justice and rationality. He argues too that there can be no solitary, single, unitary, substantive conception of these concepts, and he puts forward a theory of virtue which concedes that there is no unitary substantive conception of, for example, virtue.

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MacIntyre argues that this concept requires three universal conditions that have to develop in a logical order, namely practice, narrative and tradition. Without these conditions, common to all actual conceptions of virtue such as Homer’s, Aristotle’s, the New Testament’s and Aquinas’, there could be no comprehensive understanding of the concept as such. These conditions are universal and substantive, according to him. He argues that every morally coherent conception of virtue has to involve a substantive account of these concepts in order to be comprehensible at all.

By virtue MacIntyre means:

… an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods. (1984, p. 191)

A virtue can be a disposition such as courage, honesty, justice or sincerity and can only be understood in human conjoint action in terms of practices.

To find out what, for example, honesty in communal life is, we have to observe what kind of practice is exercised and why that practice is counted a virtue. Any quality within a practice which is essential for achieving or sustaining practices of different kinds is a virtue, according to MacIntyre. Virtues function as a kind of glue binding people together in every practice by being, or functioning as, an overall good. Through exercising them, people find themselves involved in teleological action, that is, action inheriting an internal good achievable only through exercising them.

**Practice**

As mentioned earlier, virtues require practices, but virtues are in no way completely comprehensible in terms of practices (1984, p. 187). An account of them requires at least two more conditions, namely, narrative order and tradition. I will begin with practice, by which MacIntyre means:

… 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. (1984, p. 187)

He gives a few examples of what is considered to be a practice, such as football, architecture, farming, chess; but not throwing a ball or bricklaying. A practice is defined as involving at least two people regularly doing activities in agreement with rules and in which there is some kind of action involving, for example, training and an accord between people’s judgements and definitions of these judgements. People have to agree on the procedures needed for achieving the