Book Review – *Kenneth Barnes*

Virtue at Work:

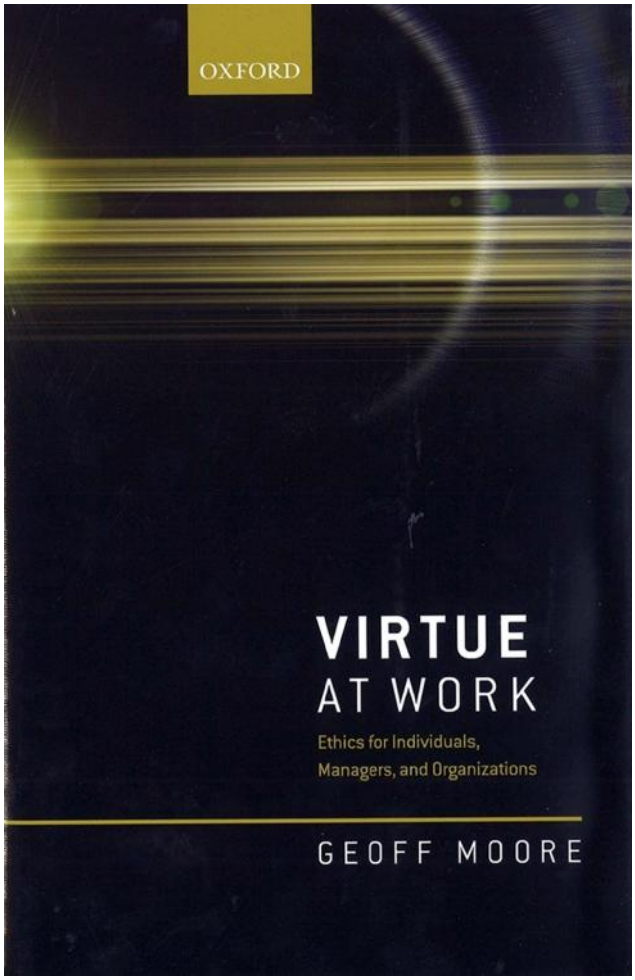
Ethics for individuals, managers and organizations

By Geoff Moore

Oxford University Press, 2017, 218pp, Hardcover £22.00, ISBN 978-0-19-879344-1.

Geoff Moore, who is a Professor at Durham University Business School, has written an important and interesting book on the application of MacIntyrean ethics to the individual, managerial and organisational exercise of virtue in the workplace. It is important because the worlds of work and economics need an ethical framework beyond the pervasive ethical egoism of the Milton Friedman doctrine and the rigid utilitarianism of both corporate social responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder theory. It is interesting because he has produced a book that is both intellectually stimulating to academics and eminently accessible to everyday practitioners, a worthy accomplishment in and of itself. In it, he pays dutiful homage to his self-proclaimed "inspiration", Scottish moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and uses the latter's seminal work *After Virtue* (1981) as the book's "philosophical foundation". However, he goes further than MacIntyre in a genuine desire to reach a non-academic audience, and unlike the great man himself, takes a much more pragmatic view of economic systems, capitalism in particular.

Working as he does in a business school, with a special interest in marketing, Professor Moore seems to have adopted the well-worn maxim of "tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you've told them", as this book seems at times to work in a spiral motion. That said, he gets his points across well and effectively communicates complicated, even convoluted arguments from MacIntyre and others. The reader's journey may not be a straight one, but it is a clear one that reaches its stated goal of working out the practical implications of MacIntyre's virtue ethics, specifically as they pertain to work and economics.



As a literary device, Moore curiously begins the book with a parable (of sorts) about a fictitious woman named Elaine, who works for an architectural practice called DesignCo. Elaine is faced with a series of ethical dilemmas that Moore uses to unpack various elements of MacIntyre's framework. While some readers may find the character's situations to be contrived and even elementary at times, others will actually find them to be both authentic and useful (myself included). As with most people working in organizations that are under extreme financial pressure, Elaine is regularly asked to find ways to "economize", even at the expense of her professional and/or artistic sensibilities. This tension between her desire for *internal goods* (excellence, fulfilment, intrinsic values) and the organization's need for *external goods* (remuneration, achievement, extrinsic values) proves to be at the heart of the MacIntyrean dilemma.

The book is laid out quite simply. Part One deals with "organizations and virtue ethics"; Part Two with the "implications (of the MacIntyrean

framework) for individuals, managers and organizations"; and Part Three, entitled "organizational virtue ethics in practice", includes one chapter dedicated solely to business environments, and another dedicated to the non-profit sector. Finally, Moore tells us what he's told us in his conclusions, including a somewhat predictable (but reasonable) epilogue to his parable about Elaine and DesignCo.

Those unfamiliar with MacIntyre's work or with meta-ethics in general, will find Moore's basic exploration of *telos* (purpose) (p.38) and *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) (p.39) quite helpful, as well as his section on the "seven components of virtue ethics" (p.44). However, it is at the end of Part One and Chapter Four in particular, that the genius of MacIntyre comes to the fore, as readers are introduced to his definitions of internal goods, external goods and their relationship to the "common good" (pp.55-60). Moore skillfully describes MacIntyre's distinction between "practices" (that seek internal goods) and "institutions" (that seek external goods), their intimate relationship to each other, and how together they form a single causal order, capable of creating either synergy for the common good, and/or moral "tension" that must be resolved (pp.60-65). Lastly he discusses the nature of organizations as "practice-institution combinations" whose purposes may be mapped in order to determine whether they are indeed "virtuous" organizations, worthy of the moniker, or "vicious" organizations, whose very existence must be called into question (pp.66-74).

In Part Two, Moore relates the principles elucidated in the previous section to the roles and responsibilities of managers and individuals working in organizations. He takes a very high view of work and espouses the notion that virtuous organizations and the people who work in them have a responsibility to seek both human flourishing and "moral development" (p.85). Oddly, he insists that these concerns are part of an individual's and/or an organization's *telos* and avoids altogether the notion of *deontology*, which in this reader's view would have added significantly to the argument in favour of virtue ethics. That omission notwithstanding, Moore successfully navigates the waters of "meaningful" work and makes a strong case for the proper ordering of our desires, including a case for "calling", which "entails an *intrinsic* motivation" for work, over and against the more "extrinsic" motivations of a mere job or career (pp.88-89).

Sadly, he affirms the previous work of Hackman and Oldham (1975) in the suggestion that some work is "subjectively meaningless" by "design" (p.92), revealing another of the book's omissions, namely an exploration of the *ontology* of work[1]. That said Moore does an excellent job in critiquing MacIntyre's rather arcane view of management and managers. Using the aforementioned Elaine as an archtype, he questions the presupposition that managers are "manipulative" by nature (p.101) and posits a more enlightened view of managers as potential moral agents capable of bringing integrity into the workplace. This, Moore notes, has implications for management itself to be viewed as a practice, and he supports his theory by identifying seven characteristics of "virtuous managers", whose concerns are not merely an organization's predetermined (external) ends but the overall *good purpose* of an organization, particularly as it contribute(s) to the common good (pp.103-116).

From this point on in Part Two, Moore explores the implications of virtue ethics as they pertain to how organizations behave. Not surprisingly, he notes that virtuous organizations hire virtuous individuals who themselves become virtuous managers. He pays particular attention to the so-called "cardinal virtues" of prudence, justice, courage and temperance, and considers their potential for positively impacting corporate governance. Unfortunately, he doesn't give any consideration to the equally important theological virtues of faith, hope and love. While people of faith may refer to them as "theological", that designation is merely a reflection of their divine origins, not their religious exclusivity. In fact, faith, hope and love are as universal as any other virtues, and they are sadly missing from contemporary economic discourse. Finally, he highlights eight "parameters" for "crowding-in" (a curious term) virtue at the organizational level (pp.118-137), setting the stage for Part Three and an exploration of organizational virtue ethics in practice.

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In this final section, Moore sets out in search of virtuous organizations, both those in the for-profit sector and those in the not-for-profit sector. Drawing upon his previous mapping strategy, he quickly demonstrates that few, if any, organizations are purely virtuous or purely vicious. What he does highlight however, is the simple fact that some organizations are more "conducive" to virtue than

Some sectors (such as the financial sector) are deeply in need of "redemption"

Photo: wikimedia

others (pp.159-165) and that some sectors (such as the financial sector) are deeply in need of "redemption" (p.146).

In his conclusions, Moore harkens back to the notion of "narrative quest" (p.190), i.e. the prism through which we view the history of our lives, intent on deriving meaning and purpose. He rightfully acknowledges the competing interests and influences that shape our understanding of ethics and how those forces work at the individual, managerial and organizational level. Citing none other than Socrates, he challenges his readers to live examined lives in the workplace and to be good people (191) in whatever sector they may find themselves.

He finishes the book where he started, with Elaine having to decide whether to stay with her current employer, where the tension between internal and external goods has become nearly unbearable for her, or join a new firm whose *raison d'être* resonates more with her own sense of purpose. The choice is fraught with problems, not least of which are financial, but in the end she chooses well and readers are left with the distinct impression that there is indeed a place for "virtue at work", even if the resolution to our ethical dilemmas aren't likely to be as cut and dried as Elaine's.

This is a book worth reading and owning, and no doubt a book that I will use in my own business ethics classes going forward. The question is: will practitioners take the time to read it? One can only hope they will, as its message is both timely and essential, and Moore has done a very good job in distilling complex theories into intelligible, practicable ideas. Alasdair Macintyre would no doubt approve.

1 The reviewer's view on this subject is driven by a Pauline view of "work as worship" (Rom. 12:1; Col. 3:17, etc.) that is perhaps best summed up in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well…' No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."

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