Alasdair MacIntyre – an appreciation

***Geoff Moore** reviews the life and work of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose championing of virtue encourages the pursuit of excellence in business practices.*

The celebrated moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre passed away in May at the age of 96. Why might that be of interest to readers of *FiBQ*, many of whom, I would guess, have never heard of him?

More particularly, why so, given that he once rejected the field of business ethics for the same reasons he rejected astrology, as he once put it? And even more particularly, why so, given his excoriating critique of managers in his most well-known book *After Virtue*,[1] where he argued that managers were merely more or less efficient achievers of pre-defined aims, without any particular expertise to call on, and so reliant on manipulation to achieve those ends?

MacIntyre was born in Glasgow, was educated in England, and began teaching and publishing at the University of Manchester when he was just 22 years old. He taught at a variety of universities (including Leeds, Oxford and, in the USA, Boston, Vanderbilt, Yale and Duke) before settling as a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, USA. Over the course of a career that spanned 70 years, he authored more than 20 books and 200 scholarly papers. But one of the most significant aspects of his work is the influence it has had on an extraordinarily wide range of disciplines. In a recent book, *Learning from MacIntyre*,[2] in addition to philosophy itself, there are contributions from theology, sociology, education, law and therapy – as well as business ethics.

His theological and political positions varied. He once considered becoming a Presbyterian minister, later became Anglican, then became an atheist (although, so he claimed, a Roman Catholic atheist since only the Catholics worshipped a God worth denying). But influenced by the writings of Thomas Aquinas, MacIntyre converted to Roman Catholicism aged 55. He believed nature and grace were mutually enriching, yet his case for virtue could be made on secular grounds, available to those without theological convictions. Politically, he was once a paid-up Marxist, and, combining these interests, wrote *Marxism & Christianity*.[3] While he formally abandoned his political association, he never abandoned a Marxist critique of a capitalist social and economic order.

But it was Aristotle and Aquinas who came to be the most important influences on him, and he regarded himself as someone who synthesised, interpreted and applied their work.

All that said, it still leaves the 'so what?' question hanging. Part of the answer to that, and the relevance of MacIntyre's work to business and business ethics, stems from the critique of 'modernity' (as he referred to our current era) which he offered. Through the 20th and early 21st centuries, he stood as a critic of modernity's deepest conceits and a defender of traditions that most others had long since abandoned.

From a business ethics perspective, as the field developed from the 1980s onwards,[4] the main ideas that emerged – shareholder theory, stakeholder

theory, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and, more recently that peculiar combination of adjectives and noun Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) – all drew on key Enlightenment philosophies / philosophers. Thus, Kantian ethics, utilitarian ethics (Mill, Bentham), rights and justice (Rawls) came to dominate the field, even if those who practised in business or consulting were unaware of it.

But the practical applications of these philosophies didn't actually seem to make much difference in practice. MacIntyre argued that this was because the Enlightenment 'project', as he called it, had not only failed but *had* to fail. And so MacIntyre took us back to a more ancient philosophy – usually referred to as virtue ethics, although MacIntyre himself disliked the term. He was 'after virtue' in both senses – drawing on something that had gone before, but also in pursuit of it and what it might mean for us today. And that was what attracted academic business ethicists like me. We were attracted not only to his critique, but also to what he offered as a way forward.

Virtues are deep-seated dispositions to act and to feel in particular ways. They are fundamental to our character – to who we are, to who we have and might become. The four 'cardinal' (hinge) virtues are courage, justice, self-control and practical wisdom; the three 'theological' virtues from 1 Corinthians 13, faith, hope and love. These seven virtues feature prominently in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas. But MacIntyre would add further to these: integrity (being the same person across and in all the different aspects of our lives), and constancy (being the same person, pursuing the same projects and purposes over time), as well as virtues like truthfulness.

A fundamental element of the virtues approach is that in our lives we are engaged in a narrative quest (a storied exploration) in which we pursue projects and purposes towards certain 'ends', both proximate and ultimate. This, of course, ties in with a Christian understanding of vocation, and of God having purposes (if not exactly plans) for our lives.

What MacIntyre added to this was that we live our lives, and pursue our projects and purposes and ends, and develop and exercise the virtues, in what he called 'practices'. Family life is an obvious example of a practice, but so too are football, architecture, physics, chemistry, biology, the work of the historian, painting and music.[5]

MacIntyre occasionally referred to business, although it is not entirely clear whether he thought business activities might be practices. He did, however, refer to 'productive crafts' of which fishing was a prime example.[6]

In addition to, and associated with, practices, the conceptual framework MacIntyre developed included 'institutions'. And he illustrated the difference with a number of examples: 'Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions'.[7]

It was this, in particular, that led those of us working in business ethics (Ron Beadle, Alejo Sison, Miguel Alzola to name just a few) to apply his work to business – though always making the claim that the framework was generic and so could be applied to organisations of all kinds. Thus, organisations could be re-described as *practice-institution combinations*, within which practitioners could develop and exercise the virtues in pursuit of their ends.

Those same organisations could also develop and exercise what might be called 'corporate virtues' in pursuit of their ends. And, in pursuit of such ends, it was always the practice, and the pursuit of excellence in the practice, leading to what MacIntyre called the 'internal goods' of the practice, which were to be prioritised over the institution and its pursuit of what MacIntyre called 'external goods'. When a practice becomes dominated by external goods – money, prestige, efficiency – it loses its soul. When its participants cease to pursue the internal goods of excellence, truth, and integrity, it collapses from within.

In the process, we rehabilitated managers, identifying them as practitioners at the institutional level who could similarly develop and exercise their own virtues in search of the goal of a virtuous organisation.[8]

By applying MacIntyre's framework in this way, we saw something in it at the organisational level that perhaps MacIntyre himself had not foreseen. But more than that, we had a framework that could be applied to organisations of all kinds, and with a completely different set of concepts and vocabulary from those which had become dominant in business / organisational ethics. And we had a framework, so we argued, that is both philosophically robust and practically relevant. Unlike, CSR, ESG and stakeholder theory, it is a framework which is much harder for businesses and other organisations to capture and turn to their own ends.

Some of us, therefore, are indebted to MacIntyre for the intellectual tools he gave us, and the lines of research, both theoretical and empirical, which these opened up. And we can begin to pay off that debt only by promoting these ideas with the hope that they may become mainstream.

But, on a broader scale, to read MacIntyre only for his arguments is to miss the deeper meaning of his thought: a call to moral seriousness in an age of bureaucratic cynicism and emotive shouting. He never stopped asking what kind of life was worth living, and whether our institutions still knew how to cultivate such a life.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A study in moral theory*, Duckworth, 1981 (3rd edition 2007).
2. Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore (Eds.), *Learning from MacIntyre*, Pickwick Publications, 2020.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism & Christianity*, Duckworth, 1968 (2nd edition 1995).
4. The first academic journal specifically devoted to business ethics, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, published its first issue in 1991.
5. *After Virtue*, p.187.
6. Alasdair MacIntyre, 'A partial response to my critics', in J. Horton and S. Mendus (Eds.), *After MacIntyre*, Cambridge Polity Press, 1994, pp.283-304.
7. *After Virtue*, p.194.
8. For a full exploration of MacIntyre's framework, written specifically for managers rather than academics, and with many practical examples and illustrations, see Geoff Moore, *Virtue at Work. Ethics for Individuals, Managers and Organizations*, Oxford University Press, 2017. See also, FiBQ 19:3 for a review,

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