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ORIGINAL PAPER

"We Ought to Eat in Order to Work, Not Vice Versa": MacIntyre, Practices, and the Best Work for Humankind

Matthew Sinnicks[1]

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Abstract
This paper draws a distinction between 'right MacIntyreans' who are relatively optimistic that MacIntyre's vision of ethics can be realised in capitalist society, and 'left MacIntyreans' who are sceptical about this possibility, and aims to show that the 'left MacIntyrean' position is a promising perspective available to business ethicists. It does so by arguing for a distinction between 'community-focused' practices and 'excellence-focused' practices. The latter concept fulfils the promise of practices to provide us with an understanding of the best work for humankind and highlights the affinities between MacIntyre's concept of a practice and Marx's conception of good work as free, creative activity. The paper concludes with a suggestion that we reflect on the best forms of work so that we can strive to ensure the very best activities, those most consonant with our flourishing, one day become available to all.

Keywords MacIntyre · Marx · Good work

Introduction

While some business ethicists have drawn attention to MacIntyre's radical and egalitarian political thought (e.g. Couch and Bernacchio 2020; Sinnicks 2018a), for the most part applications of MacIntyre's work within the field have sought to show that his key ethical insights can be separated from this aspect of his work. According to MacIntyre, contemporary large-scale politics is barren (1998), corporate modernity is incompatible with moral agency (1979a), the modern economic order incentivises personal injustice (1995), our economic and social order is fundamentally compartmentalised (1999a), and we inhabit an emotivist culture in which ethical discourse is largely an expression of untutored feeling (2007). In light of this he has suggested that the problems of business ethics are insoluble (1982), that management is inherently amoral (2007), and that business ethics courses are a waste of time (2015). In this paper I offer an account of MacIntyre's concept of practices that takes these claims seriously.

To do so, I begin by outlining MacIntyre's concept of practices, its range of applications, and why it has been so appealing to scholars interested in how work contributes to human flourishing. I draw a distinction between 'right MacIntyreans', who are relatively optimistic that MacIntyre's vision of ethics can be realised in capitalist society, and 'left MacIntyreans', who are sceptical about this possibility. I then go on to argue that while many applications of MacIntyre's concept are neutral between forms of work that are genuine practices and work that is 'practice-like', we should prefer a more exacting understanding of practices. The account I offer goes beyond MacIntyre's own discussion of practices by drawing a distinction between 'community-focused' practices and 'excellence-focused' practices. The latter is more ethically promising, and most fulfils the latent potential of the concept of practices to provide us with an understanding of the best work for humankind. The distinction between community-focused and excellence-focused practices pushes us in the direction of Marx's conception of good work as free, creative activity, and this affinity with Marx makes the radical potential of MacIntyre's concept clear: the concept of practices can and should be used to critique the bad work that dominates contemporary employment. I conclude by suggesting that we reflect on the best forms of work not in order to denigrate the workers whose occupations fall short of these high standards, but so that we

✉ Matthew Sinnicks
matthew.sinnicks@york.ac.uk

[1] The York Management School, University of York, Freboys Lane, York YO10 5GD, UK

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can strive to ensure the very best activities, those most consonant with our flourishing, one day become available to all.

Practices and Their Appeal

Practices are the bedrock of MacIntyre's account of ethics, and constitute the initial stage in his definition of a virtue (2007, pp. 186–187). In this section, I outline this concept and how it has been employed in the business ethics literature, before going on to offer my own critical development of it in the following section. According to MacIntyre, a practice is a socially-established, complex and co-operative activity "through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (2007, p. 187). Where this realisation of goods is achieved, the effect is both that practitioners' ability to achieve excellence and their conception of the goods of the practice are extended. When I excel at painting, that is, when I realise its internal goods, I enhance my capacity for excellent artistic creation, and my grasp of what excellent painting is, as well as my personal excellence. This enhancement of the personal excellence of those engaged in a particular practice—the patience and artistic sensitivity of a great painter, for instance—is intimately related to the achievement of excellence in the activity in question—the great paintings the great painter produces. As MacIntyre notes, proper engagement in a practice has "the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (2007, p. 187).

The concept of internal goods, goods which cannot be achieved in any way other than by engaging in the activity in question, and of the achievement of excellence, means that his concept of practices cannot apply to forms of work which do not possess such goods—as most do not—nor to work that is not morally educative in this way. Furthermore, practices are located within a history of practice, and made viable by, supporting communities and traditions. In this way, the excellent products of a practice shape the standards that guide our understanding of the relevant excellent capacities.

Because those with experience of an activity are better qualified to pass judgement on its internal goods, and because experiences are liable to differ, it is possible to dispute any particular list of examples of practices. Nevertheless, MacIntyre himself names football, chess, architecture, farming, physics, chemistry, biology, history, painting, music, sustaining forms of human community, family life (2007, pp. 187–188), cricket (2007, p. 191), exploration of wilderness (2007, p. 275), and commercial fishing (1994a, p. 185; 2016, p. 179) as examples of practices, and gives tic-tac-toe, throwing a ball with skill, bricklaying, planting turnips (2007, p. 187), and business (2008b, p. 279, see also Beadle 2008) as examples of activities that fall short of this special status.

Practices require the support of institutions, according to MacIntyre. While practices themselves are concerned with internal goods, institutions pursue external goods—power, money, prestige—that are required for the practice to survive: football needs clubs and associations, fields of scholarly inquiry need universities, etc. When in good order, institutions facilitate the practices they house, but they are always in danger of coming to dominate the practice instead. Where this corrupting domination occurs, the external goods can come to be regarded as ends in themselves, and the internal goods of practices become subordinated to these external goods and their pursuit. Hence, balancing the institutional needs with those of the goods of the practice is challenging and important (see Beadle and Moore 2011).

MacIntyre's work has had a notable influence in business ethics (Ferrero and Sison 2014; Beadle 2017b). While his work has proven applicable to many business ethics topics beyond the practices-institutions framework, such as corporate governance (Moore 2012; Bernacchio 2015), regulation (Sinnicks 2014), interorganisational networks (Bernacchio 2018b), corporate philanthropy (Nicholson et al. 2019), employee rights (Bernacchio 2020), and so on, it is the practices-institutions framework that dominates such applications. This vein of research draws especially on seminal work by Moore (2002, 2005a, b), Moore and Beadle (2006), and Beadle and Moore (2006). It has been utilised by cross-cultural studies (e.g. Fernando and Moore 2015; Chu and Moore 2019) and applied to a variety of activities such as management (Beabout 2012), public relations (Leeper and Leeper 2001), accounting (West 2018), investment advising (Wyma 2015), academia in the context of new public management (Pianezzi et al. 2019), ethical consumption (Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2014), and many others.

These contributions within the business and management literature largely fall under the heading of what I call 'right MacIntyrean' research. This distinction is inspired by that between 'right' Hegelians, who believed that the Prussian state was an embodiment of reason, and 'left' Hegelians, who found in Hegel's work grounds for a radical critique of that state. The matter is more complicated that this distinction suggests (see Pinkard (2002, pp. 309–316) for a discussion). However, the key point is that so-called right MacIntyreans regard something closely approximating MacIntyre's ethical vision as being compatible with contemporary capitalist society, and an engagement with practices largely available within the contemporary workplace. In this way, they aim to offer an affirmative and reconstructive account of good work in capitalist society, and this contrasts with the 'left MacIntyrean' position, which aims to offer a broadly

critical account of such work. This 'right MacIntyrean' orientation is also present in a growing literature on finance that draws on MacIntyre (see Rocchi and Thunder 2019; Roncella and Ferrero 2020; Sison et al. 2019; Rocchi et al. 2020; as well as the somewhat less optimistic Robson 2015), and contrasts with a 'left MacIntyrean' orientation, which I intend to develop in this paper. The 'left MacIntyrean' position would emphasise MacIntyre's critique of capitalism and his largely sympathetic treatment of Marxism, and sees in his concept of a practice grounds for a critique of contemporary work, one that motivates a radical opposition to capitalist society, rather than grounds for an articulation and affirmation of its good features. This is intended as a broad distinction. There are, no doubt, innumerable shades of grey in the political commitments of scholars who have drawn on MacIntyre's work, and it is also worth noting that 'right MacIntyreans' are not necessarily on the absolute right of the political spectrum: most centre-left political parties in the Western world proceed as though human flourishing and good work are readily available under capitalism. The term 'right MacIntyrean' thus connotes a position which can be defined negatively, as rejecting the radical element of MacIntyre's politics. 'Left MacIntyreans' are those who regard practice engagement as being systematically marginalised by capitalist society, and 'right MacIntyreans' are those who would deny that this is so.

MacIntyre's concept of a practice has been described as providing us with a convincing account of the best work (Muirhead 2004; Keat 2008), in part because it seems to marry subjective enjoyment and objective goodness. Mei (2019) notes that many accounts of meaningful work fail to properly address the question of what makes work meaningful and why, but Beadle and Knight's MacIntyrean account of meaningful work understands "work as meaningful to the extent that both products and practitioners are judged by internal standards of excellence" (2012, p. 438). Virtues are obviously meaningful, so to locate the meaning of work partly in its capacity to morally educate, a concept discussed in the context of MacIntyre's work by Sinnicks (2019), is to meet Mei's worry[1]. Because of this, MacIntyre's concept of a practice is well-suited to illuminating discussions of meaningful work (for instance Beadle 2017c, 2019; Breen 2007, 2016).

The concept of a practice admits of gradations. Leading commentators on MacIntyre often refer to work that is 'practice-like', e.g. Beadle and Knight (2012, p. 439), Moore (2017, p. 145), and Keat (2008, p. 83). This suggests that there is a scale that runs from paradigmatic practices, to less paradigmatic practices, to merely 'practice-like' activities. Applications of MacIntyre's concept in the business ethics literature have typically focused on less paradigmatic practices as well as 'practice-like' forms of work. Indeed, such applications often take the form of attempting to persuade the reader that some ostensibly pedestrian activity actually answers to MacIntyre's seemingly exclusive description of a practice, despite appearances to the contrary. No-one worries about whether painting, poetry, or philosophy constitutes a practice in MacIntyre's sense because such activities obviously possess the internal goods, social nature, scope for excellence, and so on, required for such a status. While a study of the goods of painting may be worthwhile, an argument designed to show that painting *possesses* internal goods would strike us as being uninformative.

This variation in degree to which a form of work can be 'practice-like' means that, despite the richness and power of the concept, some forms of practice-based work may still be compatible with bad work. Where work is tedious, fatiguing, or alienating, seeking 'practice-like' work, is a worthy aspiration. Nevertheless, there remains something unsatisfying about the prospect of making 'practice-like' work our central focus because to do so would be to risk acquiescing too readily to a social arrangement in which genuine practices are relatively marginalised.

In his most recent major work, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016), MacIntyre seems to reiterate his commitment to radical politics. He argues that avarice is "a duty" (2016, p. 127) in contemporary capitalist society, that Marx's account of surplus value is key to understanding capitalist exploitation (ibid, p. 96), and that trade unions willing to engage in "militant strike action" (ibid, p. 107) are required for even elementary justice under capitalism. Nevertheless, in this work he also refers to the work of management theorist W. Edwards Deming with approval (something keenly noted by business ethicists' reviews of this work—see Beadle 2017a; Bernacchio 2018a; Sinnicks 2018b) and seems more inclined to regard the contemporary workplace as a potential site of ethical engagement and fellowship, so there is scope to suggest that 'right MacIntyrean' applications are broadly in line with some of MacIntyre's own sympathies. Indeed, while I go on to highlight the affinities between MacIntyre's and Marx's conceptions of good work below, MacIntyre offers some telling criticisms of orthodox Marxism in *After Virtue* (2007) and elsewhere (see Blackledge 2014 and Gregson 2019 for commentary on these criticisms). However, my aim is not to attempt to prove which position is best supported by MacIntyre's writings, it is to show that my own development of the more radical strand of MacIntyre's work can contribute to the conversation in business ethics, especially regarding the ethical quality of work.

Attempts to apply MacIntyre to the study of work and organisations draw in particular on his concept of practices—good, intrinsically rewarding, and morally educative

[1] Though of course there may be other ways to do so, with Mei's own 'perlocutionary' perspective being one such example.

activities—and the institutions which house those practices. Despite its widespread use, Couch and Bernacchio note that "the practice-institution framework may function to marginalize class conflict" (2020, p. 640). This is a persuasive point, and draws attention to the fact that there are factors beyond practices that are relevant to justice in the workplace. However, Couch and Bernacchio also acknowledge that this practice-institution framework "represents the most plausible way of applying MacIntyre's thought to business organizations" (2020, p. 634), and in what follows, I aim to complement their intervention by focusing on the potentially radical nature of practices in order to demonstrate that doing so can guide our thoughts about good work in a way compatible with a more radical political orientation.

Recent discussions of automation, such as those provided by Ford (2015), Susskind and Susskind (2015), and Danaher (2019), allow us to at least *imagine* a future in which the elimination of tedious and fatiguing work is a possibility. Even if we are sceptical about its realisability, this prospect means we can sensibly ask which activities we would want to devote ourselves to if such a possibility came to pass. At the very least it seems worth reflecting on what our aspirations for work ought to be. Therefore, in the following section, I explore an apparent tension in forms of practice-based work in detail, and suggest there is an inconsistency in the role community plays in MacIntyre's concept of a practice that allows us to distinguish between community-focused practices and excellence-focused practices.

Community-Focused and Excellence-Focused Practices

'Right MacIntyrean' work often seeks to draw attention to the 'core practice' of organisations in a way that suggests all, or almost all, organisations house practices, for example Moore (2012, p. 309) and Tsoukas (2018, p. 331). This notion is antithetical to the 'left MacIntyrean' understanding of contemporary work that I develop here. While on a suitably broad interpretation all work is 'practice-*like*', to adopt this concept as a central tool in the ethical evaluation of work risks diluting the concept of a practice to such a degree that, so conceived, it becomes unable to play the role MacIntyre ascribes to it, i.e. that of teaching us "how our desires and feelings must be disciplined and transformed" (2013, p. 27). After all, tic-tac-toe, a non-practice, lacks the complexity and sophistication of chess, a practice, but it nevertheless does possess some 'practice-like' features. It may allow for a certain degree of competitive intensity and perhaps a limited degree of strategic thought, at least during the early stages of engagement before each match becomes a predictable draw. It may also allow for a certain sense of community with other participants, a central feature of MacIntyre's concept of practices and one to which I return below. Thus, the merest requirements for a form of work to qualify as 'practice-like' are so undemanding as to the undermine the worth of the concept.

Of course, 'right MacIntyreans' would argue that most organisations house forms of work that are *meaningfully* akin to practices, and that there is still a distinction to be drawn between 'practice-like' work and work that is so humdrum that it cannot measure up to this standard. However, even if we concede these points, not all goods are equal. Indeed, some goods, the goods of tic-tac-toe included, are so thin that they are pretty obviously not worth people devoting their lives to, even though some activities are even less appealing. Because of this, such activities are thus less worth deliberately pursuing or making central to one's life narrative than are richer activities. The finitude of human experience means that any list of examples will be controversial, but nevertheless, the very intelligibility of an attempt to distinguish between practices and non-practices, and thus also to claim the status of 'practice-like' for certain activities, is supportive of this basic point, i.e. that we have a shared understanding that some goods and some activities are more valuable than others.

There remains scope, therefore, for the 'left MacIntyrean' position to provide reminders about what our aspirations for work ought to be. MacIntyre claims that we "ought to eat in order to work, not vice versa. The classical expression of this view is Aristotle's, but all artists, most professors and some socialists believe it too" (1979b, p. 44). On this view, work should, as far as is possible, be something that expresses what is best in us, rather than simply providing us with a means to survive, or even a meagre engagement in an activity that just about qualifies as 'practice-like'. While MacIntyre also notes that "[o]nly sentimentalists believe that work ought or can be always interesting" (ibid), by examining his concept of a practice in more detail, we find a platform for a more ambitious conception of good work than we find in most applications of that concept.

While it simply seems worthwhile to reflect on the nature of the best forms of work, this task also fits neatly with MacIntyre's original purpose of providing a bedrock for his account of ethics. This account of ethics is ultimately concerned with what MacIntyre refers to as "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-telos", which contrasts with "a certain view of untutored-human-nature-as-it-is" (2007, p. 119). According to this perspective, the purpose of ethics "is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end" (ibid). The concept of practice plays a key part in MacIntyre's account of how this progression can be achieved, along with an account of the narrative unity of human life (2007), traditions of enquiry (1988), and an account of our metaphysical biology (1999b). These considerations provide a rationale for a more demanding and aspirational use of the

concept of practices, as activities that play a central role in our quest to avoid the moral barrenness of the present order, and to realise our nature as, *inter alia*, rational and creative beings capable of excellence.

However, it is not that 'right MacIntyreans' have simply been too generous in their application of the concept of a practice. Instead I suggest that MacIntyre's own formulation of the concept runs together two distinct forms of practice. These forms are 'community-focused practices', in which the communal elements far outweigh the importance of the particular activity which is the ostensible focus of the community, and 'excellence-focused practices', in which the contours and nuances of the activity itself are of central importance. On this reading, community-focused practices align with the Aristotelian sense of politics as making and sustaining human forms of community. As a result of this distinction, I argue that MacIntyre's own account is insufficiently aspirational about the best work for humankind. Once this distinction is drawn, and its consequences outlined, it reveals a richer conception of the best kinds of work.

Let us return to MacIntyre's own examples of practices: football, chess, architecture, farming, physics, chemistry, biology, history, painting, music, sustaining forms of human community, family life, cricket, exploration of wilderness, and commercial fishing. While these examples make it clear that the scope of practices is wide, there is some clustering within the examples, e.g. sports and games, fields of scholarly inquiry, arts, and practical or productive activities. Each of these clusters has their own distinctive features, but it is this last cluster, productive activities, that stands out as being especially distinct, a point noted by Miller (1994) and Hager (2011), amongst others.

When we reflect on the goods of various sports, fields of scholarly inquiry, and arts, we may be aware of the degree to which such activities are supported by their relevant communities of practice—athletes need coaches, teammates, and competitors; scholars need teachers, students, and interlocutors; artists need inspirations and audiences.[2] Nevertheless, the various activities involved seem to stand apart from those communities in certain ways.[3] Even if the supporting community is necessary to sustain the activity, engaging in the activity itself seems sufficient for it to be worthwhile. By contrast, productive activities such as fishing seem to attain this status only in virtue of the communal relationships they involve, and not due to the nature of the activity itself. When discussing the example of fishing, MacIntyre emphasises "the goods of the common life of such a crew" (1994a, p. 185), and indeed the fishing village as a whole. The goods of commercial fishing interconnect with "three related common goods, those of family, crew, and local community" (2016, p. 179). Whereas they seem to be required in the case of fishing, when we reflect on the imagination and sensitivity of the painter, for instance, this sort of appeal seems to be unnecessary for us to understand what is good and choice-worthy about the activity of painting.

Where an appeal to the life of the local community is required to explain what is valuable about a form of work, this is a sign that it is intrinsically undesirable, or at the very least that it lacks the special appeal of arts, games, and fields of scholarly inquiry. Such community seems to be available even where the activity in question is tiresome and uninspiring. Indeed, this appeal to the wider community seems to undermine MacIntyre's exclusion of non-practices entirely. Consider the examples of turnip-planting and fishing. The former is a definitive example of a *non-practice* (see MacIntyre 2007, p. 187) and the latter is a definitive example of a *practice,* according to MacIntyre (1994a, p. 185; 2016, p. 179). However, a colony of turnip-planters could enjoy the sense of community available to those engaged in fishing, including both the fishing crew and the fishing village. Turnip-planting, under the right circumstances, could easily interconnect with the goods of family, immediate workmates, and local community.

Perhaps members of the colony of turnip-planters need not rely on the virtues of others to the degree that members of the fishing crew do. The inherent dangers of working at sea mean that fishing crews depend on the bravery of other members, for instance. However, we can tweak the example so that it refers specifically to turnip-planters in a region prone to earthquake or famine, or where the turnip-planters are in danger of predation by wild animals. Increasing the risks involved in turnip-planting in this way may well make individual planters more reliant on the courage, steadfastness, and solidarity of their co-workers, but it would not elevate the activity of turnip-planting.

To put it another way, if removing health and safety regulations can make a form of work more 'practice-like', because it requires a greater degree of courage or of reliance on the courage of others, then practice begins to seem less useful a concept with which to explore the nature of good work.

Of course, even turnip-planters who live in a less dangerous region may still require their co-workers and neighbours to possess the virtues, in order to facilitate their shared endeavour and shared life together. However, in this case the turnip-planters would be engaged in the Aristotelian practice of politics, which seems to capture most of what is valuable—good, intrinsically rewarding, and morally

[2] These domains are not so neatly separated in real life, of course. Artists have teachers and students, scholars have competitors, and so on.

[3] Perhaps most notably in the case of the arts. 'Outsider art', as well as the possibility of the self-taught artist, suggest that great art could be possible even if isolation from a wider community, though dialogue with historical precedent is often important.

educative—about the life of the fishing crew and the fishing village. So, it seems there is nothing about the activity of fishing that distinguishes it from a clear and definitive example of a non-practice such as turnip-planting. If there is anything we want from an account of good work, then it is an ability to distinguish work that is ennobling and intrinsically rewarding from work that is not. Therefore, my distinction between excellence-focused and community-focused practices seems to be required if the broader concept is to be able to do this. All artists, most professors, and some socialists may eat in order to work, as MacIntyre claims, but one imagines that relatively few members of fishing crews do. In this regard fishing crews and turnip-planters are alike.

What these observations show is that excellence-focused practices, as I have called them, are qualitatively different from community-focused practices, and a superior and preferable form of practice, other things being equal. Thus, in our reflections on the forms of work we hold to be most worthy of our aspirations, we should prioritise excellence-focused practices, even if the realities of having to make a living in capitalist society make such aspirations difficult to realise. MacIntyre's concept, which at first sight may appear to be excessively exclusive, ruling out perhaps a variety of activities 'right MacIntyreans' have sought to defend, is in fact insufficiently so. While both excellence-focused and community-focused practices, as I have characterised them, are practices in MacIntyre's sense, the former are more consonant with our aspirations regarding what work might be at its best, i.e. something we would eat in order to partake in.

This argument does not entail that anyone whose life is shaped by an engagement in a community-focused practice should be agitating for a career change—their life narrative may mean that the community-focused practice in question really is the best life for the person in question. My aim is to offer an analytical framework that might help to guide our reflections on the best forms of work, not to denigrate any number of well-lived lives. Furthermore, it is important to note that my distinction is based on the focus of the two kinds of activity, and does not imply that excellence and community are mutually exclusive. Indeed, both kinds of practice are sites of community and of excellence, and must be if they are to genuinely constitute practices. Community-focused practices can give rise to excellence, and excellence-focused practices require, and in their development give rise to, communities. But even here, there is a telling difference. Community-focused practices require participants to develop and display a variety of excellences if they are to survive, as to sustain a community is to participate in the *practice* of politics in the Aristotelian sense, and thus will always require excellent qualities such as good-judgement, courage, solidarity, justice, and so on. Without such excellence, community-focused practices will always be vulnerable and liable to be undermined by various threats, including both institutional acquisitiveness and institutional inefficiency.

Similarly, excellence-focused practices still require the supporting network of practitioners, and the example of historical precedents in order to allow for the systematic extension of goods and conceptions of goods required for practice status. This is essential for our flourishing, and indeed there can be no refinement of our virtuous capacities in excellence-focused practices without a supporting network of community membership that provides an initial and continuing moral education. Hence the need for virtues of acknowledged dependence (MacIntyre 1999b; Hannis 2015), which are pre-requisites of our development as independent rational agents, i.e. the sorts of agents capable of engaging in excellence-focused practices. However, excellence-focused practices also give rise to communities of practice in virtue of the allure of the activity, and their eventual social establishment arises from this appeal. Excellence-focused practices are thus more appealing due to the depth of connection between the goods of the practice and the good per se, and they are also more enduring in an important sense. The appeal of the activities at the heart of excellence-focused practices ensures they can survive a variety of challenges more easily than particular community-focused practices. Paradigmatic examples of excellence-focused practices such as physics and philosophy endure, even when a putative community-focused practice such as coal mining declines. Physics and philosophy would likely survive as human activities in an era of automation, but coal mining would not. However, even though I aim to highlight the differences between these concepts, this important overlap ensures that both remain intrinsically valuable and perfective of participants.

MacIntyre's running of excellence-focused and community-focused practices together may be the result of a laudable recognition on his part of the dignity of workers, and a resulting desire to grant their work a central place in an account of the good life. However, to draw the distinction between excellence-focused and community-focused practices, and to recognise the former as being preferable is the result of a desire to imagine a world in which the very best kinds of activity are available to all. To recognise that excellence-focused practitioners necessarily have the opportunity to participate in a community, indeed they could hardly do otherwise, as well as the activity in question (i.e. painting, music) ensures that excellence-focused practices are necessarily multifaceted. Those engaged in such practices are typically engaged both in the excellent activity in question as well as the Aristotelian practice of politics. Community-focused practitioners, by contrast, have Aristotelian politics as their primary practice, and the activity the community focuses on—fishing, turnip-planting, coal

mining, or whatever—is only a practice in the sense that it is a particular instantiation or focus of that practice of politics.

This argument extends beyond MacIntyrean understandings of community. Community can be understood in two ways. MacIntyre's Aristotelian account is relatively focused and rich and applies to communities in which members share values in some meaningful way, in which there is a degree of personal familiarity, or engagement in a particular shared project. There is also the broader and thinner sense in which the liberal democratic polity is a community, a sense compatible with the work of liberal thinkers such as Dworkin (1986) and others. Bellah et al.'s (2007) account of work as a calling brings social contribution into contact with, predominantly, this latter sense of community. On this account, good work "links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all… The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world. Work in the sense of calling can never be merely private" (Bellah et al. 2007, p. 66). The distinction I have drawn between community-focused and excellence-focused practices is also well-placed to account for where this model falls short.

Indeed, while there is a rich ethical core to the concept of social contribution, it is still compatible with arduous, unpleasant, undesirable, and perhaps even plainly bad work. Someone might contribute to their community by, and derive a great deal of satisfaction from, participating in a litter-pick in the local park. However, this contribution to the common good, which links the individual to the public world, hardly suggests that litter-picking is an activity we would want to hold up as a form of work to which we should aspire. Of course, our intuitions about what elevates an activity are bound up with our understanding of what is possible. A community litter-pick of the local park strikes us as being noble because it is good to beautify a public space, to protect wildlife, and so on, and because there is no readily available easier method of achieving these ends. A community drive to carry blocks of stone by hand from a quarry many miles away in order to build a new cathedral would strike us as being perverse precisely because there are easier methods of transportation available. What once may have been an admirable act of devotion, i.e. when those methods of transportation were unavailable, would now be an absurd act of self-harm. When reflecting on the best forms of work, the litter-pick has the same status as carrying blocks of stone by hand. Contributing to the community remains a valuable good, but we can be more selective about the form that contribution can take when trying to account for the best work.

This point also applies to any number of intrinsically undesirable but nevertheless worthy and dignified jobs. Hamilton et al. (2019) outline how focusing on the social contribution of their work allows refuse collectors to reframe their stigmatised work as being of value. In such cases this reframing serves to bind the workers to the broader community which they are, at the same time, partially alienated from in virtue of the stigmatisation that arises from physically dirty work. We would do well to remember how important a social contribution is made by any number of dirty, dangerous, and unpleasant occupations, but dirty, dangerous, and unpleasant they remain. Furthermore, we can readily imagine morally corrupting jobs making a social contribution—a torturer might help to secure conviction of a heinous criminal, an assassin might eliminate the leader of a rogue state and thereby contribute to political stability, for instance—without wishing to hold these up as choiceworthy occupations. It may be that only sentimentalists think work can be always interesting—or good, intrinsically rewarding, and morally educative—but it is reasonable to wish it were so[4], and to refuse to let this unhappy realisation shape our conception of which forms of work we should aspire to. Having argued that there is an important distinction between community-focused and excellence-focused practices, in the following section I elaborate on the 'left MacIntyrean' approach by tracing its links with Marx's reflections on good work.

Marx and Macintyre on Good Work

Much of MacIntyre's early work constitutes an engagement with Marxism (see Blackledge and Davidson 2008), but he came to regard Marxism as seriously inadequate, in part because Marx turned away from philosophy prematurely (MacIntyre 1994b; Knight 2000), and some commentators have stressed the dissimilarities between MacIntyre and Marx (Burns 2011; Callinicos 2011). Nevertheless, affinities remain, even if, as Groff (2012) argues, MacIntyre does not avail himself of Marx's insights as often as he might. In this section, I draw out some shared concerns which unite MacIntyre's and Marx's conceptions of good work, with the aim of elaborating on the shape a 'left MacIntyrean' approach to business ethics might take[5].

Marx's work has, perhaps unsurprisingly, generated relatively few contributions to the business ethics literature (see Corlett 1998; Kerlin 1998; Shaw 2009 for examples). It thus stands in contrast to MacIntyre, whose work has, as I noted above, been very widely cited and highly influential

[4] The anti-work tradition would suggest that it is reasonable to wish we did not have to work at all. See Gorz (1985), Frayne (2015), and Fleming (2015) for examples of work in this tradition.

[5] De George (1989) makes a distinction between 'ethics in business'—i.e. ethics within the exchange transaction-focused domain of business—from 'business ethics'—i.e. the broader field of intellectual enquiry that includes questions about the ethical quality of work, the justness of markets, etc. Here I appeal to the latter concept.

in business ethics, perhaps surprisingly given his hostility to corporate modernity. However, the most ethically aspirational elements of MacIntyre's reflections on work have important similarities with Marx's thought. As a result, there is scope for a 'left MacIntyrean' approach to business ethics which would see the concept of excellence-focused practices as a tool which can be used to critique much contemporary work, guide our conception of the best work for humankind, and motivate a closer engagement with Marx's work by business ethicists who draw on MacIntyre's work.

Indeed, the analysis of practices I have offered can be used both positively and negatively. The negative use emphasises the fact that the concept of a practice can ground a critique of contemporary work akin to Marx's account of alienated labour. From this perspective, practices are relatively marginalised in our society, and most people have a "treadmill of a job" (MacIntyre 2015, p. 18) which merely enables them to satisfy "the need to maintain [their] physical existence" (Marx 1994, p. 75). The positive use emphasises the similarities between MacIntyre's concept of a practice and Marx's conception of good work as free, creative activity.

To emphasise the importance of excellence-focused practices may seem excessively optimistic, utopian even. Marx opposed utopianism, and mocked those who would write recipes for "the cook-shops of the future" (1976, p. 99), and yet was willing to offer some comments on the likely nature of unalienated labour. Likewise, MacIntyre chides what he calls "utopianisms of the future" for being "misleading and corrupting" (2008a, p. 7), although he regards "utopianism of the present" (ibid) as a valuable part of political and philosophical thought. Utopianisms of the present, according to MacIntyre, refuse to sacrifice the present in pursuit of some dreamt up future utopia, but recognise the range of possibilities open to us (2008a, p. 5), even if they do "involve a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism" (MacIntyre 1999b, p. 145). It is this kind of utopianism that motivates the 'left MacIntyrean' emphasis on the very best forms of practice. Such a perspective refuses to take contemporary work as an ethically substantive baseline, as doing so would then lead us to be impressed by even minor and trivial improvements. It holds, rather, that we should aim to make work—so central a feature of all of our lives—as good as it could be.

A more substantive similarity between Marx and MacIntyre is their shared Aristotelianism. For Aristotle, human action ultimately aims at a vision of flourishing, which is the bar against which all aspects of social life are to be assessed. MacIntyre (2007) explicitly attempts to develop an account of virtues that continues the Aristotelian tradition, and, in contrast to Aristotle's own political conservatism, refers to his position as revolutionary Aristotelianism (2008a)[6]. Marx's commitment to Aristotelianism is perhaps somewhat less visible, but has been documented expertly by Meikle (1985) and Pike (1999), and underpins his conception of ethics. Blackledge (2012) also explores some of the ethical commitments that unite Aristotle, Marx, and MacIntyre. Of these shared commitments, the most important to my present concerns is their reflections on work. The central distinction in Aristotle's discussion of work is that between *praxis*, i.e. intrinsically motivated activity, and *poesis*, which refers to productive activity and captures a sense of instrumentally motivated activity more generally (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b1-5). Aristotle himself employed this distinction in a fashion that now strikes us as being unduly dismissive of the worth of the ordinary worker, whose labour he regarded as inimical to virtue (*Politics* 1328b39–1329a2), but as a way of characterising the sort of activities we would wish for everyone to enjoy were tedious labour unnecessary, then it captures something important. While this distinction is not identical to that between 'excellence-focused' and 'community-focused' practices, the affinity is clear.

The ethically developmental aspect of practices, as of *praxis*, has an affinity with Marx's vision of work that facilitates the "all round development of the individual" (1978a, p. 531). Marx and Engels claim that this all-round development of individuals requires work that constitutes "free manifestations of their lives" (1970, p. 117), and thus the sort of work that we would wish to retain if freed from burdensome toil. Taken literally, 'all round' development—the development of all of one's abilities—may be an unrealistic aim, and perhaps even an undesirable one given its connotations of dilettantism. Indeed, it may well be impossible given that some abilities limit others: I cannot become a champion bodybuilder and a champion marathon runner. Nevertheless, the freedom to develop our powers is important, but like MacIntyre, Marx is not neutral between which powers are most worth cultivating.

Marx claims that we are free only when engaged in free labour (1973, p. 661)—or as he sometimes puts it "really free" labour (ibid.)—but sees work as central to our nature as creative and productive beings (see Marx 1994, pp. 71–78). This foundational position means work occupies a role in Marx's thought that parallels the role of practices in MacIntyre's. Marx's vision of unalienated labour prioritises the model of the artist, and indeed Marx conceives of good work "on a continuum with free artistic creation" (Sayers 2011, p. 23). Where work most fully contributes to this development, it ceases to be something spurned, and indeed can be seen as "life's prime want" (Marx 1978a, p. 531). From this

[6] Note that a revolutionary perspective is hardly necessary if the optimism characteristic of the 'right MacIntyrean' position is correct.

perspective, "in truly human work, the individual experiences self affirmation, a true sense of concrete individuality, a sense of creative self expression, and a sense of personal empowerment" (Granter 2009, p. 55). All artists, most professors, and some socialists may feel this way in contemporary society, but in a better world this orientation to work would be more widespread precisely because the best forms of work would themselves also be more widely available. Marx's claim here clearly foreshadows MacIntyre's notion that, ideally, we would eat in order to work, and indeed finds support in the analysis of excellence-focused practices I offered above.

Marx also notes that, unlike other animals, humankind produces, i.e. works, even "when free of physical need and in fact truly produces only when free of such need… The animal fashions things only in accord with the standard and need of its species, whereas… man fashions things also in accord with the law of beauty" (1994, p. 76), even if work under current conditions sometimes blinds us to this law, as Marx says of the mineral dealer who can no longer appreciate the beauty of the minerals (1978b, p. 89). This thought corresponds to MacIntyre's claim that, while practices require institutional support in order to survive, these institutions can corrupt practices by leading to an undue focus on the pursuit of external goods like money, power, and status. One imagines that merely 'practice-like' activities are especially prone to such corruption, given that their internal goods are less impressive, and thus less likely to remain compelling in the face of the commercial and institutional pressures that dominate the contemporary workplace.

In *Capital: Volume 3*, Marx argues that "the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production" (1981, p. 807). This passage is often taken to imply that Marx moved away from his youthful optimism about the nature work might take in a future society, and again like MacIntyre, felt that tiring and tedious work was an ineliminable feature of human social life. But whether or not genuinely good, i.e. free, creative, and excellence-focused, work *can* be available to all, it is entirely possible to believe that free and creative activity is the ideal form of work. As Veltman notes, "the limitedness of meaningful work is not a reason to reject the normative claim that meaningful work is integral in well-being, nor is it a reason against working to transform social and political institutions so as to increase opportunities for meaningful work" (2015, p. 728). We can make a similar claim for excellence-focused practices, which raise the bar beyond both merely meaningful and practice-like forms of work.

Excellence-focused practices as an ideal make visible the ethically impoverished state of work in capitalist society. However, this ideal is not bound up with a misguided utopianism, it is already present in our social arrangements. After all, excellence-focused activities play a part, even if only a small part, in most of our lives. The arts, games, sciences, and the asking of philosophical questions—the broad categories under which most excellence-focused practices fall—are seen as an essential part of the education of children and young adults, and yet interest in many of these practices is often regarded as, at best, a curious eccentricity in adult life (as noted by MacIntyre 2006). The underlying principle seems to be that it is important for us to engage in these activities up until such time as we enter the workplace. It would be odd, however, if the good of the adult were so radically distinct from that of the child or the young adult that so abrupt a shift in focus were amenable to human flourishing, though the quest to make all education as relevant as possible to the contemporary workplace means that the number of opportunities we each have to engage in excellence-focused practices recedes further. The 'left MacIntyrean' perspective I have sought to develop in this paper would thus encourage us to take the judgements about what constitutes a worthwhile activity in our formative years into the workplace, in which we, of course, continue to be formed long after our formal education is complete. Being able to transcend the narrowly proscribed role morality of the contemporary workplace is essential to human flourishing. As MacIntyre says "a plain person who begins to understand her or his life as an uneven progress towards the achievement of her or his good is thus to some significant extent transformed into a moral philosopher" (1992, p. 4), a transformation which may be aided by the systematic extension of our conceptions of the ends and goods of the very best activities.

Conclusion

By distinguishing between excellence-focused and community-focused practices we can keep the very best forms of work in view. To understand practices in this way allows us to see how a 'left MacIntyrean' perspective can contribute to conversations about good work, and can ground a critique of work as it currently exists in capitalist modernity, as well as why Marx's reflections on work are worth engaging with, even though necessity and mundane considerations are still very much to the fore. Good work, much less the best work, is not available to all. Drudgery might be all but ineliminable from social life, but such an admission does not entail that our reflections and aspirations, both as individuals and as a society, should not be steered by this modestly utopian vision. Aristotle's dismissal of ordinary workers, including those engaged in community-focused practices such as farming, is an unwarranted and unpalatable aspect of his ethical thought, and yet a recognition that some forms of

work—excellence-focused practices—are superior gives us a reason to aim to ensure that such work is one day widespread and, if possible, available to all. This allows us to avoid Aristotle's own unattractive and unjustified elitism about human flourishing, which he held was restricted to well-born and wealthy gentlemen, even if the thought that freedom from tedious labour is required for flourishing animates the present discussion. Aristotle himself was unable to entertain the notion that we might want to ensure that everyone is free from irksome toil, and instead able to participate in what I have termed excellence-focused practices. We can be against Aristotle's elitism, while at the same time hoping for a future in which everyone has the opportunity to participate in the very best activities. In other words, we want an elitism about practice, not about people.

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