

## Academic Virtues\*

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### Academic Virtues and Social Practices

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, virtues can be defined in terms of social practices. A virtue is an excellence of character required for obtaining the internal goods of a social practice. Social practices are:

“... 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. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquires of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.” (After *Virtue*, 1984, p. 187)

On this view, a social practice is open-ended and self-reflective in the sense that it is part of the practice to seek to improve the practice. What it means to improve the practice on MacIntyre’s account is to be understood normatively. It involves getting better at it, but it also implies extending and at times reconceiving the ends and goods involved in the practice, and so the practice itself. Social practices are not activities with a settled end that one can approach with more or less skill (bricklaying, and so on). They are activities whose ends can develop and change as practitioners reflect upon them and refine and alter them; they are activities with an intrinsic set of standards of excellence which are also objects of reflection within the practice itself and which develop over time. They are social activities, requiring the cooperative, if competitive, participation of many. For these reasons, social practices are necessarily embedded in a tradition. Something does not count as a social practice unless it has emerged over a series of refinements and developments prompted by the reflection of past practitioners. Because they are embedded in tradition, social practices are, by their very nature, conservative. They tend towards rather than away from the social (also political and personal) status quo; participants generally have a bias towards support for tradition on both cognitive and affective grounds. Social practices are enmeshed in networks of other practices that reflect mutually supportive ways of understanding and feeling—that justify, or appear to justify, those practices.

The internal goods of a social practice are goods—principally satisfaction, depth of engagement, esteem—which attend mastery of the practice or the attempt to gain mastery of it. By contrast, external goods are social rewards for success in the practice. They are not unique to the practice and can be substituted one for another. External goods are things

such as status, fame and wealth, but also job security, decent working conditions and comfortable means of living. External goods will also importantly include those goods that are causally related to or supervene upon job security, decent working conditions and comfortable means of living. These include job satisfaction, well-being and happiness (or a better chance at it), enduring and deeper relationships with friends and family, and benefits that may come from a degree of leisure.

Clearly, academic life takes place at the intersection of many social practices. If MacIntyre is right, the role-specific virtues of academic life should be understood in terms of these practices. Academic virtues are those excellences required to obtain the internal goods of the social practices constituting academic life. And the social practices of academic life are sustained, competitive and cooperative attempts to achieve a set of academic goals (e.g. to advance and transmit knowledge, abilities and values) and realize academic forms of excellence. They are also sustained attempts to expand and improve conceptions of these goals and forms of excellence. They emerge out of traditions—for instance the tradition of scientific argument—and must be understood in terms of these traditions.

MacIntyre argues that this preliminary account of virtues in relation to social practices needs to be deepened in two ways: connecting it to the unity of an individual's life on the one hand and to a coherent historical tradition on the other. Virtues are not just any set of traits delivering the internal goods of social practices, but those that serve to make coherent a person's life and her place in an on-going tradition. They are crucial to lending meaning to one's life and its struggles.

This sounds right, but it also appears to miss the need for significant external purposes for social practices. MacIntyre's initial examples of a social practice are revealing. He discusses chess playing and portraiture. The internal goods of both practices are *very* internal: to achieve a kind of elegance of play and depth of analysis in chess; to achieve a revelatory depth in portraiture. But what is the social value of elegant chess play or insightful portraiture? They are, respectively, a kind of game and a form of art. They might be valued for their own sake or for the fact that they are things people do and are deeply invested in. Why, for example, should the public subsidize chess schools? Perhaps no more is needed to answer this question than to observe (if it remains true) that a great many people play chess and are profoundly involved with it. Academic practices are not like this, however. They are not their own reward; they ought not to be valued for their own sake. Not even what is termed "pure basic research" is to be valued for its own sake. In every case, academic practices are to be valued for the sake of their contribution to something outside of the practices themselves. For example, the practice of academic history contributes to our understanding of the past, but that understanding must be involve more than the understanding of academic historians. It must mean something to, be valuable to, the world outside of academic history.

Academic practices emerge from traditions, but their value is not constituted by these traditions. They are not valuable because they are traditional practices. They are valuable for other reasons. But how are these reasons identified? MacIntyre is highly critical of the attempt to reduce the value of a practice to something that can be wholly explained outside the practice's tradition. However, when applying his account of the virtues of social practices to academic practices, it is important to observe the variety of academic practices.

Some academic disciplines have very little to recommend them outside of their extrinsic uses. Engineering and medicine for example, would not be worth doing if they didn't promise improvements in the lives of people. And these improvements are wholly explicable outside the academic specialties of engineering and medicine. That it is (generally) good that a person lives longer and in more robust health is not a value that emerged out of time-honored reflection within the social practice of medicine. It is something we can describe independently of that tradition and value independently of that tradition. Similarly, that a building withstands a moderate earthquake is not something that can be appreciated only within the field of structural engineering. Call these kinds of academic endeavor, instrumental academic practices. The key difference between these practices and others is that they have a social value which is easy to keep track of because it is wholly explicable outside of the practice itself and its tradition. What counts as success in the practice, why it counts as success, and why it is a worthy success can be cashed out in terms extrinsic to the practice.

Not all academic practices are instrumental in this sense. Consider history. It will not suffice to say of an historian that their academic practice aims at an understanding of the past. What counts as understanding the past is itself an object of historical—or historiographical—reflection. The goals of the practice of history are not fully explicable outside of the tradition of history (and related traditions such as philosophy). This is not to deny the social value and importance of history. It is not to say that history is a self-involved affair, which only historians are likely to value. Understanding the past is a necessary task. But what counts as success in history and why it is a worthy success is not something that can be fully appreciated outside of the tradition of historical practice. Non-instrumental academic practices have social value which is only fully explicable within the practices themselves. But this is still a social value. Academic traditions do not constitute the value of academic disciplines. The practices of academics are not self-warranting; they are about something other than themselves and valuable for reasons other than the fact that communities of academics are deeply engaged in them. They are not like chess-playing. But we need to understand an academic tradition in order to fully understand the social value of the corresponding non-instrumental academic practice.

The distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental academic practice does not line up neatly with academic disciplines. Engineering and medicine have to grapple at times with non-instrumental problems: how to reconceive the nature of health, disease, aging, and death, for example; how to understand the responsibility of engineers when faced with complex social and ethical challenges. Nonetheless, many academic disciplines, and not only in the humanities (history, philosophy, literature) are non-instrumental in the core of their practice. All social sciences incorporate non-instrumental standards of success to one degree or another, including economics, sociology, anthropology; including such apparently applied subjects as social work, clinical psychology and urban planning. Clinical psychology, for example, is not simply in the business of advancing mental health; it is in the business of defining and understanding mental health. To see that something counts as a real advance in clinical psychology—an advance of real value—it won't do to simply ask whether it is making people happier or improving mental health. One must engage with the tradition of psychological and philosophical attempts to understand what makes a person's mental life better and healthier. One must judge the value and success of the practice within the practice, or from a perspective that sufficiently understands the point of the practice, rather

than externally. Humanities and creative disciplines—philosophy, classics, history, musicology, theatre studies, and so on—are dominantly non-instrumental. We would argue that pure sciences are also, to a large degree, non-instrumental in this sense. Standards of success of scientific argument are not fully explicable outside of the tradition of scientific argument. The history of science is, to a large extent, the history of developing ways of doing science, formulating standards scientific argument, evolving varieties of scientific explanation. It is in large measure a history of the refinement of ideas of the point of doing science in relation to method.

Of course we can say something about the value of academic traditions without becoming immersed in the traditions. Both instrumental and non-instrumental academic practices are of fundamental, ineliminable, social importance. They are none of them like chess-playing (or should not be) and we can formulate general stories about why this is so. We don't value history, for example, because people happen to like reading about it. We value history because we are sense-making creatures and the task of understanding our past is a necessary one. Academic history is the struggle to do this well and also to reflectively develop an understanding of what it is to do it well—of seeking to better understand and improve the practice.

The virtues of instrumental and non-instrumental academic practice overlap but are importantly distinct. In the next section we describe the key academic virtues and the differences between the virtues of instrumental and non-instrumental academic practice.

### Virtues of the Academy

Academics perform two kinds of roles: educative roles and discipline specific roles. Instrumental academic practice adds to this a third role: application, i.e. the application of disciplinary knowledge to practical problems. Disciplinary roles are those focused on the search for understanding that is central to academic practice. Educative roles are focused on the relationship between those within a discipline and those outside of it who are interested, who want to know something about it— including those few seeking to professionally enter it. At its heart are the communication of understanding and the development of expertise.

Given this variety of roles and the social practices in which they are embedded—academics must multi-task—how are we to understand the central virtues of the academic? The virtues cluster around the three kinds of academic roles mentioned above. There are the virtues of education; the virtues of disciplinarity; and the virtues of application. Let us first describe the more straightforward of these: the virtues of application. The key virtues of application are commitment to goods external to the academy; attentiveness to the needs of a community. These are both general (e.g. a more just society) and specific (e.g. the community of parents of children with an autism spectrum disorder). Deploying the virtues of application requires sensitivity to the demands of a community, its vulnerability and expectations, and things of this kind.

Set in the context of their knowledge, the key virtues of the educator are generosity, communicativeness, empathy, patience, and (importantly) humility. As with virtues

generally, there are questions, both theoretical and practical, about how these relate, their compatibility, and whether it is even possible for a person to exhibit all of them. An excellent teacher—a teacher well-placed to achieve the internal goods of the teaching profession—exhibits a generous directedness towards the needs of students: a capacity to see what students need and an eagerness to deliver it. They are student-orientated. Depending on the students, this is not always straightforward or easy.

The excellent teacher has the empathic, analytic and imaginative capacity to enter into the mental world of the student and appreciate what students don't understand and why they don't understand it, appreciate what will grip them and what will not, and so on. An excellent teacher has the motivation and capacity to communicate what is important to students—which is not identical to what students may think important, let alone be entertained by.

An excellent teacher is articulate. They are patient and, though more knowledgeable in certain areas, they do not fall for the mistake of thinking themselves better than their students, or indeed of others in general. Arrogance is a central occupational hazard of the teacher (though teachers are not alone in their susceptibility to that particular vice). Because teachers spend so much of their time with those who understand less than they do and have accomplished less than they have—mostly because they are young—they may come to overvalue their own understanding and accomplishment. Thus the importance of humility.

These are all obvious virtues of the teacher. But the picture misses something vital. Academic teachers are not all-purpose instructors. They are educating within disciplinary practice. Excellence here requires deep engagement with that practice. Depth of expertise and disciplinary commitment are integral to excellence of education within the practice. Thus the virtues of the teacher *simpliciter* do not suffice for the excellence of the academic teacher. The virtues of an academic teacher are disciplinary as well as educative and both require knowledge and expertise.

There is a long-standing and very confused debate within higher education about the connection between research and teaching. Must teachers in higher education be active researchers as well as teachers? What does research activity add to teaching? How does it translate into effective teaching practice? It is hard, for example, to see how long hours spent in a lab working on a highly specialized research question will help with general undergraduate teaching. Maybe research activity, with its tendency to become obsessive, distracts from or distorts teaching. Nevertheless, the debate is confused because it makes one aspect of disciplinarity—research: the piling on of new knowledge—stand for all the others. What are critical for excellence in academic teaching are the virtues of disciplinarity, things that create a depth of expertise and engagement with the discipline. Research activity is but one way of exemplifying the virtues of disciplinarity. There are situations in which active research participation seems to be the only exemplification of the virtues of disciplinarity available: to be a true microbiologist, for example, one might have to do microbiological research, not merely read about it. There are other circumstances, however, in which the virtues of disciplinarity can be exemplified by additional and other means. Genuine scholarship includes deep attentiveness to the work of others. It fits poorly within contemporary managerial pictures of research activity because it is not clear how it

establishes new knowledge, nor are the financial rewards for scholarship, if any, generally readily apparent. But scholarly depth is the core excellence of many academic disciplines. Knowing and understanding; reading deeply, comprehensively: these are integral to the preservation of a disciplinary tradition. They are so much more than, and often so much more important than, than the piling on of new knowledge. In many humanities disciplines, such as philosophy, the distinction between research and scholarship is an artificial one—and so too is any alleged deep division between research, scholarship and teaching. Scholarly attentiveness to philosophical argument just is a kind of philosophical argument and bringing such arguments (reasoned points of view) to the classroom, not only in philosophy, is a good part of what teaching involves.

The virtues of disciplinarity are therefore central to an understanding of academic life: its practice, and what is valuable and excellent in it. But what are they? Of course, there is no simple answer to this question because there are so many social practices constitutive of academic practice. However, we wish to point to a core set of virtues and a distinction between them. The most important virtue of disciplinarity is intellectual integrity. It is no easy thing to set out what exactly intellectual integrity is. It involves an unpreparedness to fake, dissemble or distort one's work or the work of others. But intellectual work involves a division of intellectual labor so that it need not be a vice to pursue a line of inquiry with exaggerated confidence. Progress is often the work of many over-confident, risk-taking thinkers, corralled in critical competition. Intellectual integrity therefore lies at a mean between a number of excesses. Too much confidence and intellectual courage and one becomes impervious to one's errors. Too little and one becomes shallow and unoriginal. Too much forensic self-criticism and one becomes hamstrung; too little and one becomes delusional. Too much openness about the progress of one's work and one is at the mercy of an unforgiving community; too little and one is drawn into a world of fakery. Imagine a scientist running experiments that prove initially disappointing. Should she rush into print to put her favored theory to the sword? Should she run the experiments until she gets the result she is looking for and then stop? Both approaches are incompatible with intellectual integrity. The first is insufficiently committed; the second moves from commitment to over-commitment and (perhaps unconscious) fakery.

Intellectual integrity is a regulatory virtue. That is, it does its work in the regulation of one's behaviors, commitments and attitudes. The other key virtues of disciplinarity are motivational; they define what one should aspire to and respect. Consider two important academic virtues of this kind. The first is intellectual passion: a recognition, love and valuing of the goals of one's inquiries. Intellectual passion generally treats knowledge as a good in itself, as an object worthy of one's struggle. It sees academic practice as worthwhile. The second is respect for the tradition of one's discipline and the standards of excellence, the establishment of goals, and the design of internal goods that are integral to it. Again, these two virtues lie at a mean between various excesses. Excessive love of the goals of one's inquiry can lead to fetishistic scholarship. In philosophy, for example, it can lead to an over-identification with a philosopher one studies: a kind of transference relation can develop in which one acts more as proselytizer of another's work than philosopher in one's own right. On the other hand, disdain for the subject of one's intellectual work can be intellectually debilitating. Uncritical respect for one's tradition is also problematic. It can lead to reflex conservatism, unobservant of ways things can be better. Disdain for one's tradition, on the

other hand, leaves one bereft of the standards of excellence and conceptions of the goals of inquiry that anchor worthwhile intellectual work.

The motivational virtues of disciplinarity we have just described lie at the core of non-instrumental academic practice. But they are not at the core of instrumental academic practice. Instrumental academics needn't have much intellectual passion in order to achieve all the excellence required of them. Of course they could have it and very often do; our point is simply that they needn't have it in order to secure the internal goods of their practice. The motivational virtues of application—for example, dedication to the improvement of others' lives—may suffice for the internal rewards of instrumental academic practice. Intellectual passion can help drive success in instrumental fields of academic work, but this doesn't make it a virtue of such work. A virtue, on the view we are presupposing, is a trait necessary for obtaining the internal rewards of a practice. In the case of instrumental academic work, these rewards are satisfactions gained from doing something that makes, or promises to make, a difference in others' lives: a difference those who benefit from them may appreciate on their own terms. Because the goals of instrumental academic practice are set extrinsically to that practice, intellectual passion and reflective, respect-grounded engagement with intellectual tradition are not central features of the practice. It is not part of instrumental academic practice to seek to understand, and refine one's understanding of, the conditions of excellence of the practice. The point of one's activities are generally obvious and not fundamentally at issue.

To illustrate this difference between instrumental and non-instrumental academic virtues, compare the virtues of a medical researcher to those of an historian. Say that we learn of an immunologist driven to develop an effective treatment for lupus, but also learn that she has no great intellectual passion for understanding the human immune system *per se*. She has a purely practical interest in its intricacies and vagaries. She wants to know enough to find a treatment and only gains satisfaction from advancing towards a treatment for lupus, a condition in which the immune system malfunctions. She gains this satisfaction, not because she has solved a particularly challenging intellectual problem or come to understand something interesting about the progress of the disease, but because she can see how much people suffer from lupus, how truly awful the disease is. She generally finds immunology conferences boring, except on the odd occasion when a vital clue seems in the offing. She trawls through such work looking for clues like a bored but diligent detective. It seems decadent to her when colleagues get wrapped up in the thrill of research as if for its own sake. It seems to her that colleagues driven by an intellectual passion for understanding lupus are ill-motivated and missing the bigger picture. The immunologist is not missing an academic virtue relevant to her. Why should she form an intellectual love of the object of her inquiry? She has other fish to fry. Compare this with a medievalist, studying the development of monastic practices in the middle ages. He need not love monasteries of course. Indeed, he may detest them. But the medievalist should be motivated by an intellectual love of the understanding he pursues. He must, if he is to obtain the internal goods of his practice, care deeply about the task of understanding, for example, why monasteries flourished or floundered and what effect they had on the larger medieval society. If he loses this passion, he must find another thing to study. The medievalist is not decadent or self-indulgent and the immunologist is not intellectually barren. They are in different businesses.

Much the same argument can be made about the other key motivational virtue of non-instrumental academic practice: respect for a tradition of inquiry. The immunologist is not in the business of contributing to an on-going tradition of medical research; she uses the outputs of this tradition like a tool. Reflecting on its *bona fides* is not a central feature of her practice, and so is not a source of internal reward for her.

To sum up: the most important disciplinary academic virtues depend on whether one's academic practice is instrumental or non-instrumental. The key regulative virtue in both cases is intellectual integrity, but motivational virtues vary decisively. The key motivational virtues of instrumental academic practice are the virtues of application. The key motivational virtues of non-instrumental academic practice are intellectual passion and respect for intellectual tradition. Each of these kinds of virtue lies at the core of teaching practice in higher education, alongside the key virtues of the teacher: generosity, communicativeness, empathy, patience, and humility.

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