Virtue Ethics and the Challenge of Relativity

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One of the most interesting attempts in recent times to revive a theory of the virtues has been carried out by Alasdair MacIntyre in his provocative work, *After Virtue*. In this work MacIntyre offers an extremely persuasive critique of the state of contemporary moral philosophy and an impassioned argument in favor of the return to a more classical approach to ethics with an emphasis on the virtues.

MacIntyre begins his account by describing human life as a "narrative quest." This quest, he maintains, represents a search for self-fulfillment—that is, for our own good as human beings—and it is the virtues that support us in this quest. Our understanding of the virtues, however, is not shaped by ourselves but by the particular tradition to which we belong. Thus MacIntyre points out that in Homeric culture, in which the paradigm of excellence was the warrior, the virtue of courage would be paramount, while in Aristotle's own time the paradigm was the Athenian gentleman, and, therefore, the virtue prudence would take priority. He goes on to demonstrate that the specific virtues that were considered important in first century Christian circles, in Jane Austen's England, and Benjamin Franklin's America likewise prove to be fairly distinct from one another. Each tradition, according to MacIntyre, will have its own catalogue of the virtues and these catalogues will often be in conflict with one another:

> Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, the New Testament and medieval thinkers differ from each other in too many ways. They offer us different and incompatible lists of the virtues; they give a different rank order of importance to different virtues; and they have different and incompatible theories of the virtues. If we were to consider later Western writers on the virtues, the list of divergences and incompatibilities would be enlarged still further; and if we extended our inquiry to Japanese, say, or American Indian cultures, the difference would become greater still. It would be all too easy to conclude that there were a number of rival and alternative conceptions of the virtues, but, even within the traditions which I have been delineating, no single core conception.[1]

MacIntyre's conclusion is that there are no universal set of virtues that can be applied to all people at all times. Each culture or tradition's set of virtues will be unique to that tradition, and fully understandable only from within that particular tradition.

This understanding of the nature of the virtues has also been taken up by Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas. In his work, *A Community of Character*, Hauerwas argues that all moral traditions are context bound. They are intelligible, he says, only within the

framework of a particular community that has been shaped by foundational narratives and continues to display them. Thus the Enlightenment project of trying to develop a universal morality, Hauerwas says, was doomed to fail precisely because it did not recognize that all morality must be relative to a particular community and its tradition:

> No ethic can be freed from its narrative, and thus communal, context. To the extent that practical reason seeks to avoid its inherent historical character, it relinquished any power to enable us to order our lives in accordance with our true ends. We thus become alienated from ourselves, we lose the ability to locate the history of which we are a part.[2]

Hauerwas' belief that all morality is essentially context-bound applies to Christian ethics as well. Christian morality, he argues, must always proceed within the particular frame of reference set by the Christian story.   Its basic "truthfulness" has nothing to do with conveying some common morality that underlies the differences between people, but rather can be evaluated only in terms of the way of life it fosters.[3]

The analysis of the virtues developed by both MacIntyre and Hauerwas points to a significant problem that must be addressed before we can continue any further. Both authors suggest that any attempt to develop an ethics of virtue would necessitate an acceptance of cultural relativism, and that the terms "virtue" and "universal" must be understood to be mutually incompatible.   This sort of tradition- or context-bound account of the virtues has consequently been criticized by those who are looking for a more universal ethic that can transcend cultural boundaries. Martha Nussbaum, summing up these objections, writes,

> For this reason it is easy for those who are interested in supporting the rational criticisms of local traditions and in articulating an idea of ethical progress to feel that the ethics of virtue can give them little help. If the position of women, as established by local traditions in many parts of the world, is to be improved, if the traditions of slave holding and racial inequality, if religious intolerance, if aggressive and warlike conceptions of manliness, if unequal norms of material distribution are to be criticized in the name of practice reason, this criticizing (one might easily suppose) will have to be done from a Kantian or Utilitarian viewpoint, not through an Aristotelian approach.[4]

James Gustafson goes even further when he accuses Hauerwas—and by implication MacIntyre—of adopting an anti-rational and sectarian approach to ethics that ultimately forfeits any relevance beyond the particular tradition of the moral theorist.[5]

In an effort to respond to some of these objections, attempts have been made in recent times to demonstrate the universality of certain virtues. Jean Porter, for example, argues that there are certain virtues, such as practical wisdom, courage and temperance, that are "perennial" and which would be recognized as virtues in every culture. "They are perennials," she writes, "because they are integrally related to the human capacity to sustain a course of action, based on overarching principles, ideas, plans or goals."[6]   Similarly, Martha Nussbaum attempts to refute the claim that Aristotelian virtues are essentially relativistic. She argues rather that Aristotle presents a single objective account of the human good, which is derived, not from a local tradition, but from something shared in common

by all human beings. That which we all share in common are "spheres of experience" that are perfected by virtue. She selects eleven spheres from Aristotle and says that each of these spheres is essential for human living. Nussbuam thus argues that Aristotle's account of the virtues actually transcends cultural boundaries.[7]

But is it in fact true that specific virtues, such as courage, generosity or temperance, which seem to be valued in all cultures, have the same meaning in each of these cultures? For example, Porter maintains that courage is a perennial virtue, but the understanding of what courage is would dramatically differ depending on the particular tradition we were discussing. Thus Aristotle's understanding of courage related only to the experience of facing immanent death, most notably in battle. For an early Christian courage specifically had to do with maintaining one's religious convictions in the face of persecution. And in contemporary American society where the threat of death in battle or persecution is minimal, it might have more to do with maintaining one's convictions in the face of cultural pressures. Similarly, although Porter claims that temperance is a perennial virtue, what it means to be temperate in relation to bodily pleasures would also vary dramatically. For Aristotle being temperate would mean that one is able to appreciate and enjoy in a moderate way all the pleasures of the body; for an early Christian it might mean abstaining completely from some pleasures (alcohol and sex for example) and radically restricting others (sleep or food); and for a contemporary American it might mean little more than not being completely addicted to these pleasures—if that.

The same criticism applies to Nussbaum's attempt to demonstrate that Aristotle's virtues are universal because they relate to certain common spheres of experience. Even if we agreed that human beings do in fact share common spheres of experience, what it means to act well within these spheres—in other words, what virtuous behavior is—would still seem to vary dramatically from culture to culture. Subsequently when Nussbaum argues "that everyone makes some choices and acts somehow or other in these spheres,"[8] the matter of dispute lies precisely in the "somehow."

If MacIntyre and Hauerwas are indeed correct in maintaining that the virtues are relative to particular traditions, this would seem to prevent us from establishing an ethics of virtue that is truly object. For, once we begin to argue that our conceptions of what virtuous behavior is or is not are culturally relative, it is only a short leap to arguing that they are in fact individually relative. As one author points out, there are potentially as many different conceptions of virtue as there are people on the planet.[9] In a liberal society, where there might not necessarily be one overriding narrative that binds a community together, why should we not say that the individual can only determine for themselves what is virtuous in a given situation?

NOTES

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press) 181.

2. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 28.

3. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

4. Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest*

Studies in Philosophy 13 (1988): 33.

    5. James Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985): 92.

    6. Jean Porter, "Perennial and Timely Virtues: Practical Wisdom, Courage and Temperance," *Changing Values and Virtues*. Ed. Dietmar Mieth and Jacques Pohier (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1987) 61.

    7. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues," 36.

    8. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues," 36.

    9. James F. Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtue," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 712-713.