MacIntyre’s Moral Theory and the Possibility of an Aretaic Ethics of Teaching

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In this paper, I reconstruct Alasdair MacIntyre’s aretaic, practical philosophy, drawing out its implications for professional ethics in general and the practice of teaching in particular. After reviewing the moral theory as a whole, I examine MacIntyre’s notion of internal goods. Defined within the context of practices, such goods give us reason to reject the very idea of applied ethics. Being goods for the practitioner, they suggest that the eudaimonia of the practitioner is central to professional ethics. In this way, MacIntyre’s moral theory helps us recover the untimely question, how does teaching contribute to the flourishing of the teacher?

The question which is perhaps the most important that you could put to me is that of how the concept of a practice must be further developed, if it is to be as philosophically fruitful as I hope it may be (MacIntyre, 1991, p. 71).

What the dominant conception of applied ethics partially conceals from view is a rediscovery of morality as such (MacIntyre, 1984b, p. 512).

But some will find their own way and become, by the standards of the age, unintelligibly happy failures. Some may even become schoolteachers (MacIntyre in MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 3).

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of After Virtue in 1981 (second edition, 1984), MacIntyre shocked the world of moral philosophy with his version of the road not taken. After a damning critique of liberalism and the Enlightenment, MacIntyre unveils his flamboyant solution: return to Aristotle. Those not put off by his apocalyptic history usually find one of his positive claims unpalatable. Indeed, it may be MacIntyre’s special distinction to strike half of his readers as an old-fashioned, universalizing metaphysician (since he defends a version of tradition and teleology) while striking the
other half as a dangerous relativist (since he offers a radically pluralist conception of moral practices). In the rush to debate this or that provocative claim, though, what has remained too obscure is the complex architecture of MacIntyre’s theory as a whole. In what follows, then, my first step will be to offer a careful reconstruction of the basic features of MacIntyre’s aretaic practical philosophy. I will show how MacIntyre posits two closely related moral entities, virtues and goods, which receive a crucial part of their meaning and substance in each of three interdependent moral contexts: that of practices, individual life narratives and moral traditions. Then I will focus in on one element in MacIntyre’s theory: goods at the level of practices. While much has been made of MacIntyre’s account of the moral virtues and of his defence of tradition, the nature and implications of MacIntyre’s concept of internal goods deserve further study. This concept, I will show, itself admits of a complex structure, and I will offer a typology of internal goods building on MacIntyre’s suggestive examples.

My analysis of internal goods is intended not only to clarify MacIntyre’s moral theory, but to bring out its implications for professional ethics. MacIntyre’s work, I suggest, enables us to begin to conceive of a truly aretaic professional ethics. Not only does MacIntyre help us reject the application model that plagues all professional ethics, but his concept of internal goods—which are goods for the practitioner—helps us counter the ascetic ethos that pervades helping professions such as teaching. Whether MacIntyre offers a genuine alternative to liberalism, emotivism or Nietzscheanism I leave it to others to decide. What MacIntyre does offer us, I shall argue, is a way to start thinking about the contribution of practices to the eudaimonia of their practitioners. He may even help us recover that most elusive of questions: how does teaching contribute to the flourishing of the teacher?1

THE ARCHITECTURE OF MACINTYRE’S MORAL THEORY

Let us begin by getting clear on how MacIntyre understands goods, virtues, and their relation. A good is something we judge to be worthwhile to have, achieve, attend to, or participate in. As such goods are what provide us with reasons for acting (see MacIntyre, 1999a, p. 64 and passim). In other words, a good is the telos of an activity; it is that ‘for the sake of which we act’. This also means that MacIntyre will define goods as the ‘characteristic objects of human desire,’ but only if he can add two caveats (1984a, p. 196). First, we desire them because they are good and not the other way around. Second, while the achievement of goods is satisfying, this is not why we pursue them (p. 197). If I paint because it pleases me, then I am pursuing the good of pleasure and not the goods of painting (even though the realisation of such goods happens to be quite enjoyable). Finally, a good is something that we simultaneously value for its own sake while also judging that it ‘contributes to or is partially constitutive of [our overall] well being’ (1999a, p. 64).
Like any Aristotelian, MacIntyre understands the virtues as acquired excellences of persons, as dispositions to act for the good. On one level, then, virtues are instrumental to goods. At the same time, since the virtues are partly constitutive of our well-being they themselves constitute goods. We want to be courageous, for example, because this is part of the fabric of a good life, and not merely because courage will buy us some good. Even though the virtues are eminently useful for achieving the good, one must, paradoxically, deem the virtues intrinsically valuable in order to possess them and thereby derive their usefulness (See, e.g. 1984a, p. 273; 1983b, p. 461). One final point about the virtues: MacIntyre tends to restrict the word virtue to moral excellences of character—dispositions to do the right thing or qualities that help sustain communal projects—and to treat non-moral excellences of persons (e.g. wit) as goods. We will return to this point later.

This is as much as we can say about goods and virtues in general, for it is MacIntyre’s innovation to point out that we strive for the good in three different domains where goods and virtues receive their meaning and substance. The first sphere in which human beings encounter the good is in the range of activities MacIntyre calls practices. According to MacIntyre, long-standing, complex human activities that grow out of social life and remain co-operative in execution tend to develop into distinctive ethical worlds. Practices such as architecture, baseball and chemistry do more than produce buildings, pennant races and periodic tables: each discloses a different aspect of human flourishing. MacIntyre considers this the primary moral context because it is only through learning to pursue the good *qua* doctors, dancers and diplomats that we acquire enough moral knowledge to begin reflecting on the good as such. Reflection on the shape of one’s individual life or on the human *telos* is a later, synthetic activity which makes use of the more determinate *teloi*—the philosopher’s quest for wisdom or the pitcher’s ‘perfect game’—that we encounter as members of this or that practice. These are what MacIntyre calls the goods internal to practices.

If virtues are dispositions to act for the good and (at the level of practices) we are confronted with a plurality of goods internal to practices, then we should expect to find a plurality of virtues as well. MacIntyre’s idea is that at the level of practices, the virtues are those dispositions which enable practitioners to co-operate and maintain the integrity of the practice in the face of institutional expediency. In serving these functions within particular practices, the virtues gain further definition and particular inflections. This is not to suggest that MacIntyre is a moral nominalist. When we speak of patience in parenting or pottery, we are talking about the same virtue. On the other hand, we are talking about it at a fairly general and uninformative level. As MacIntyre explains:

Patience is the virtue of waiting attentively without complaint, but not of waiting for anything at all. To treat patience as a virtue presupposes some adequate answer to the question: waiting for what? Within the contexts of practices a partial, though for many purposes adequate answer may be...

What prevents this multiplication of varieties of patience from fracturing the very concept of patience itself is the work done at the second level of valuation, that of the individual life narrative. Ethics is rooted in the practical predicament of each individual who must decide what to do in concrete situations and how to envision his or her life as whole. Thus, while I may have a philosophical impulse to inquire into the good life for human beings as such, the question that is inescapable for each individual is ‘what is my good as a human being?’ (1990, p. 128). Here MacIntyre follows Aristotle, who writes that ‘Human beings . . . should pray that what is unqualifiedly good should be their good, but it is their goods that they should choose’ (1988, p. 125). The work of articulating one’s own good involves ordering and synthesising the plurality of goods and virtues encountered at the level of practices. Here is how MacIntyre describes the relation between the first two levels:

To be excellent at achieving the goods of this or that particular practice is to be good qua member of a fishing crew or qua mother of a family or qua chess player or soccer player. It is to value and make available goods that are worthwhile for their own sake. Yet for each individual there is the question whether it is good for him or her that the goods of this or that particular practice should have this or that place in her or his life (1999a, p. 66).

For even if I learn honesty in painting and courage in wrestling, I will find myself, whenever I am away from the studio and the wrestling mat, having to decide whether a given situation calls for honesty, courage, neither or both. I may also find myself, if for example I am a parent, a potter and a politician, having to synthesise different understandings of patience.

In MacIntyre’s third and broadest domain, we inquire into the good qua human beings and the virtues are understood as those ‘qualities the exercise of which leads to the human telos’ (1984a, p. 184). Such inquiry is bound by the moral horizons of a tradition. Within the ethos of a culture and age, one finds a hierarchy of fundamental goods guiding its sense of what is worth striving for in human life. Likewise, the meanings of virtue terms will vary across traditions. Temperance, for example, meant something quite different in the Christian tradition than what it had meant to the Ancient Greeks. Indeed, what counts as a virtue in one tradition may count as a vice in another tradition and vice versa. Here MacIntyre offers the example of the Greek virtue megalopsuchia (magnanimity, great souledness) and the Christian virtue of humility (p. 182).

Though there may be tensions between the meanings of moral terms across the three levels of valuation, MacIntyre’s three moral domains are ultimately complementary, indeed interdependent. In fact, we can detect both an upward and a downward dependence among the three levels. What I am calling the upward dependence can be seen as one moves from the
level of practices, where goods and virtues are specific and multifarious, through the level of the individual, where some work of synthesis and hierarchisation is already necessary, to the level of the community where fewer, more general goods and virtues are endorsed by all. Here is how MacIntyre describes this upward dependence:

Individuals characteristically find themselves participating in a number of types of activity, each with its own set of goods. When therefore they seriously ask themselves the question ‘what is my good?’ one of their concerns in answering it must be to become able to put in order the various goods which they acknowledge, finding for each its due place in relation both to other such goods and to their own overall good. And this they can only succeed in doing in company with those others who participate with them and with each other in various practices, and who also participate with them in the common life of their whole community (1994, p. 288).

Here MacIntyre describes his three levels as interdependent, each nested within the next as one moves upward in generality. The goods of practices need to be evaluated, synthesised and ranked by individuals, and this work is constrained and guided by communal norms. If the good were only disclosed at the level of practices, we would encounter a relativity of parochial goods and a ‘certain subversive arbitrariness [would] invade the moral life’ (MacIntyre, 1984a, p. 203). This potential incommensurability is checked at the second level where individuals order competing goods, and the parochialism of the first two levels is corrected at the third level where ethical reflection involves our communal projects. ‘For every society’, MacIntyre remarks, ‘there is the question of whether it is good for that society that the goods of this or that particular practice should have this or that place in its common life’ (1999a, p. 66).

There is also a downward dependence built into MacIntyre’s scheme. Individual and communal ethical reflection depend on the existence of practices in three ways. First, communities rely directly on practices such as parenting, teaching and city planning to pursue their communal goods (1994, p. 288; cf. 1984a, pp. 187–188). Second, according to MacIntyre, these overarching goods are themselves ‘integrative of and partly structured in terms of the goods internal to particular practices, and never to be understood as wholly independent of them’ (1994, p. 288). Third, MacIntyre points out, ‘the work of integrating those [internal] goods into individual and communal lives itself has the structure of a practice’ (ibid.).

It is worth elaborating on the second of these points. While it is only in light of our deep traditionary commitments that we are able to decide what place the good of a particular practice is to be accorded in our overall conception of the good life, it is practices which generate ‘new ends and new conceptions of ends’ (MacIntyre, 1984a, p. 273). MacIntyre describes practices as ‘precisely those ongoing modes of activity within which new ends emerge, are revised, are lost from sight, are rediscovered . . . while
new sets of means have to be devised and re devised accordingly’ (1984c, p. 36). Without the original discovery of goods within the many practices, there would be literally nothing for individual and communal ethical reflection to work with.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that such reflection relies on the constant rediscovery of these goods in their spark and substance. Ethical ideals that speak to everyone regardless of their location in and across some variety of local practices are likely to be banal. ‘Concepts’, MacIntyre writes, ‘are embodied and draw their lives from forms of social practice’ (1991, p. 69). Practices feed our moral imagination giving us new ideas about what is worth striving for and re-embodying, re-vivifying longstanding ideals. In other words, if the upward dependence is driven by a need for coherence in our moral vocabulary, the downward dependence is driven by the constant need for innovation in and reinvigoration of our ethical language.

I think this helps us understand the last part of MacIntyre’s famous definition of a practice in *After Virtue*:

> By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to practices 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* (1984a, p. 187; emphasis added).

This last phrase is an ambiguous one since it seems to refer to two different types of systematic extension or ethical progress at the same time. The first is the familiar MacIntyrean point that a certain kind of progress in practices is definitive of practices as such. To excel, he argues, is always both to achieve what current standards dictate as excellent and to go beyond existing standards. To excel is to show how our existing standards could be improved in light of the ideal ‘of fully perfected work’ (1990, p. 66). According to MacIntyre, this means that we understand the excellence of practices historically, as ‘sequences of . . . progress toward and beyond a variety of types and modes of excellence’ (1984a, p. 189). Thus to be an excellent architect is both to design excellent buildings according to current standards of excellence and to help the community break through the crust—to adapt a phrase of Dewey’s—of current architectural conventions.

So far, so good, but this seems to be at most part of what MacIntyre means when he defines practices as activities which lead to the result ‘that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.’ Our architect has (by building well and questioning how current conceptions of the perfect building relate to a truly perfect building) so far extended only the ability of architects to strive to create the perfect building. Notice though that MacIntyre speaks of ‘human powers’ and ‘human conceptions’, not those
of practitioners. We can understand this word ‘human’ if we connect it with MacIntyre’s statement noted earlier that practices are where ends are ‘discovered and rediscovered’ (1984a, p. 273). A true practice, then, is not only a world in itself but communicates with the rest of society. It has the power to teach all of us something new about what is worth striving for and about the forms of excellence.

This suggests that when an outstanding practitioner—Mohammed Ali, for example—becomes a cultural hero two things are going on. It is not only that we contemplate Ali as an example of greatness in boxing, but that we have begun to learn from greatness in boxing something new about greatness in general. We extend, concretise and re-animate our notions of human flourishing. For MacIntyre, goods and virtues receive their primary definition in practices (1984a, p. 187). Without the generativity of practices, we would inhabit a shrunken and gray moral universe with only a handful of known things worth striving for and these being not palpable purposes but prosaic ideals. Practice, MacIntyre teaches us, is the poetry of the moral life.

A CLOSER LOOK AT INTERNAL GOODS

So far I have been working with an overly simplified conception of internal goods. In MacIntyre’s examples, if not always in his explicit formulations, the concept of internal goods turns out to be quite variegated, with different types and sub-types. I have been equating internal goods with the *teloi* of practices, and this is certainly part of what MacIntyre means. Inside each practice is a distinctive vision of what it is worthwhile to achieve. ‘Every craft’, MacIntyre writes, ‘is informed by some conception of a finally perfected work which serves as the shared *telos* of that craft’ (1990, p. 64). These standards of excellence particular to practices are embodied in rich, idiosyncratic evaluative languages, for which two critics have coined the helpful term ‘evaluative teleology’ (Frazer and Lacey, 1994, p. 269).

Each practice, then, has its own way of talking about better and worse and its own way of picturing best. It is important to see that this evaluative teleology is closely tied to but not reducible to the more literal aims that structure the practice. A fishing crew, to use MacIntyre’s favourite example, aims at catching fish, but that for the sake of which the crew members act is ‘never only to catch fish’, but ‘to do so in a manner consonant with the excellences of the craft’ (1994, p. 284). When I head down the seafood aisle of the supermarket with the aim of getting fish, this activity hardly puts me in touch with the goods internal to the practice of fishing. This distinction, by the way, applies not only to productive practices. An archer aims at the bull’s-eye, and without this aim the practice of archery would not have its characteristic structure. Still, the *telos* of archery is not the bull’s-eye itself, but some set of ideals including accuracy. Here is how MacIntyre makes this distinction in response to a critic:
The goods internal to practices . . . are not the ends pursued by particular individuals on particular occasions, but the excellence specific to those particular types of practice which individuals achieve or move towards in the course of pursuing particular goals on particular occasions (1984a, p. 274).

Having distinguished the literal aim from the telos of a practice, we now confront a second complication. Typically, MacIntyre speaks of internal goods as something ‘realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence’ definitive of a practice (1984a, p. 187). In other words, internal goods cannot be the same as the standards of excellence. This ambiguity is resolved by making a distinction between ideals conceived and excellence achieved (1990, p. 62). The telos of a practice, the vision of the fully perfected work, recedes like the horizon as we approach it; by definition it outstrips our ability to realise it. (Even though the telos is revised as the practice evolves, each form of the telos serves as a horizon for actions within the practice, just as sailors may choose to set course by a different star without having reached the first star or expecting to reach the second.) But it is in light of that telos that we can name the kind and degree of actual achievements made by outstanding if fallible practitioners. Internal goods are not the distant points on the horizon but the journeys toward the good. For MacIntyre, internal goods are something ‘realized’ by practitioners, constituting part of what makes the practice a ‘rewarding reality’ for its practitioners (1994, p. 286).

So each practice has literal aims which structure the activity and a vision of complete excellence which gives practitioners reasons for acting. Though this vision is itself unrealisable, it makes it possible for practitioners to realise some modicum of excellence in the form of finite achievements.6 We may define internal goods, then, as realisation of some amount of the excellence definitive of a particular practice. Using this as a general definition, we can go further by attending to MacIntyre’s examples in which we find a variety of types and sub-types of achieved excellence. First, we can divide realised excellence into two types, that realised in the work or performance itself—*Mrs Dalloway* or the Ali-Fraser fight in Kinshasa—and those realised in the practitioner. Here as elsewhere MacIntyre draws on Aristotle who not only holds that ‘every good is the *ergon* of a *techne*’, but that ‘what a *techne* produces in those who practise it is some particular capacity, a capacity to be achieved’ (1990, p. 61).7 In learning how to transform material into something excellent, the practitioner must also transform herself. The practitioner’s self is the second *ergon*, if you will, of any practice. MacIntyre explains that apprentices to practices have to overcome ‘inadequacies of desire, taste, habit, and judgment’ (p. 62). To overcome such limitations—to become the kind of person who is excellent at doing, seeing, feeling, or figuring something out—is good. The goods of dance, for example, would seem to include the attainment of (dance-specific forms of) poise, power, precision and grace. Thus, one variety of internal good located in the practitioner is excellences of character.8
In MacIntyre’s discussion of portrait painting in *After Virtue* we find another variety. After triangulating the *telos* of portrait painting between two dicta—Wittgenstein’s ‘the face is the best picture of the human soul’ and Orwell’s ‘at fifty, everyone has the face he deserves’—MacIntyre tells us that in striving to achieve this *telos* ‘at least two different kinds of goods internal to the painting of human faces and bodies are achieved’ (1984a, p. 189). The first is ‘the excellence of the products, both the excellence in performance by the painters and that of each portrait’ (p. 189). The second ‘is the good of a certain kind of life,’ ‘it is the painter’s living out of a greater or lesser part of his or her life as a painter’ (p. 190). Here MacIntyre contrasts the excellence of the product not with the cultivation of personal qualities and capacities, but with the good of what we might call a ‘biographical genre.’ The idea is that, while Warhol is not Whistler, and Picasso not Pollock, there is something that it means to live as a painter. Painting offers its practitioners resources for shaping their lives. The painterly life is like a genre and just as writers may say something new and distinctive within, say, the short-story form, so too may an individual painter write their own life narrative within the genre of the painterly life.

In addition to excellences of character and the good of a biographical genre, MacIntyre occasionally evokes a third sub-type of goods internal to practices located in practitioners. This is what we might call a moral phenomenology. Each practice structures the experience of its practitioners in distinctive ways. Practices afford their practitioners distinctive modes of being, in which practitioners deem it good to participate. Moral phenomenology, then, concerns what it is like to be engaged in the practice. When MacIntyre discusses the goods internal to chess, for example, he speaks of ‘the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytic skill, strategic imagination, and competitive intensity’ (p. 188). While the first two items in MacIntyre’s list probably fall into the category of excellences of character, the third points toward what I am calling moral phenomenology.

I recognise that MacIntyre might not approve of this way of putting things. He might insist that there are only two things here, the achievement of excellence, including the chess player being able to be intense to the right degree and in the right way, and the pleasure which supervenes upon such achievements. In my view, this leaves the concept of pleasure doing too much work. MacIntyre himself acknowledges that it is not pleasure in general that one experiences when one makes something excellent or reveals an excellent character but a specific ‘kind of enjoyment that supervenes upon such excellence’ (1984a, p. 274). What I am calling moral phenomenology is both more and less than pleasure. It is more than pleasure in that it is participation in a particular state of being that one deems worthwhile. It is less than pleasure because what I am calling moral phenomenology may very well be pleasurable, painful, both or neither.

Let us consider an example. When the chef yells at the waiters to get the hot food out while it’s hot, he usually experiences pleasure along with his annoyance. When he sees plates coming back to the kitchen with
unfinished food on them, his curiosity about how anyone could stop midway through his lobster ravioli is laced with displeasure. When his vendor arrives with wonderfully fresh spring garlic, his dreaming up of a new soup is pleasurable; when he burns his hand (in the one spot with nerves left), he feels pain. In other words, pleasure and pain are somewhat beside the point. The whole sequence—garlic, burn, ‘hot food’, uneaten ravioli—as experienced is the very substance of being a chef. To participate in this mode of being with its haggling, economising, crafting, haranguing, risk-taking and pressure cooking is deemed good by those who know it from the inside out. The distinctive moral phenomenology of a practice offers its practitioners an insight into how it is excellent to be in the world by teaching us how to be in a particular world.

Thus, we have identified a range of internal goods located in the practitioner: moral phenomenology, excellences of character and biographical genre. We could understand this as a spectrum from excellences experienced more synchronically to those experienced more diachronically. A practice structures events in which it is worthy to participate and which are attended by a distinctive kind of satisfaction. This excellence is available only while events are still unfolding in a present. Excellences of character are less ephemeral and more diachronic. Acquired over time and ready to be called on when situations in the future both in and out of the scene of practice demand it, they exist as stable dispositions and capacities in any present. Finally the biographical genre exists only insofar as it is diachronic. It is a flexible narrative structure for linking our past, present and future in meaningful ways.

We can observe one other thing about this spectrum. The goods at the synchronic end may be more internal than those at the other end. Thus, moral phenomenology would seem to be the most difficult to put into words, to convey to someone outside of the practice. It is the most likely to evoke a ‘you have to be there’. Someone who wants to convey to you the goodness of a good cast in fishing is likely to be all gestures and sounds, and eventually to just take you to the lake. Excellences of character, on the other hand, seem to be more communicable. There will still be a lot of ‘he moves . . . well, like a dancer’, or ‘she thinks like an architect’. At the same time, excellences of character, like the moral virtues, do seem to get grouped and generalised. The power of a mathematical proof and of a home-run hitter are different but the word ‘power’ at least begins to convey something of each idiosyncratic excellence. It may be that biographical genre is the least esoteric of internal goods. The painter, the chess player, the nurse—these are part of our cultural stock of characters. The biographical genre is inherently communicative, suggesting the story of a kind of human life. This may make it easier for outsiders to grasp, even if at some level only a gardener knows what it is like to lead the gardening life.

TOWARDS AN ARETAIC ETHICS OF TEACHING

The argument so far suggests that practices offer distinctive goods of at least four types: an outstanding work or performance which the
practitioner appreciates; a rich moral phenomenology which the practitioner experiences; an excellence of character which the practitioner displays; and a biographical genre through which a practitioner shapes a meaningful life. In contrast to Plato’s utopia, where we emerge from the cave of culture to behold the good itself, MacIntyre’s view is that we learn substantive if partial intimations of the good inside the various human practices. This primary, multifarious ethical education is where we find the raw resources, as it were, for answering the basic ethical questions: What kind of person is most admirable and who should I become? What is worth striving for and what should be my projects? What makes life excellent, meaningful or rich and how should I give shape to my life as a whole?

One of the most striking implications of this aretaic, practical philosophy—and in particular this notion of internal goods—is that it requires a fundamental rethinking of professional ethics. MacIntyre helps us to see that most work in professional ethics would be better described as applied morality, as a working out of principles of professional conduct and an investigation of moral dilemmas in practice. In such work, the good—and this is especially true in the helping professions—is typically understood to be the good of the client, or of society at large. If we read MacIntyre simply as a late champion of the moral virtues, then his theory will not be hard to assimilate to this conception of professional ethics. Rather than outline principles with the deontologists or consequences with the utilitarians, MacIntyre simply reminds us of a third way, the virtues, of ensuring that professionals do the right thing by others. Such a reading of MacIntyre, however, involves two serious distortions.

First, the very idea of application runs counter to MacIntyre’s fundamental insight about practices. For MacIntyre, practices are not simply local sites where general dispositions may come in handy, they are themselves moral sources. They are sites, perhaps the key sites, of our moral education. For MacIntyre, we learn the point and substance of the virtues within particular practices. Thus, even if MacIntyre’s theory only dealt with the moral virtues, it would run counter to the spirit of applied moral philosophy since MacIntyre turns the very idea of application on its head (cf. 1984b, p. 512).

So MacIntyre’s practical ethics cannot be reduced to applied morality, but neither can it be reduced to applied morality. In other words, a second distortion arises if we focus only on MacIntyre’s theory of the moral virtues to the neglect of his conception of internal goods. Ethics includes more than inquiry into right action in moments of decision and it deals with more than our duties to others (cf. 1984b, pp. 498–500). A truly aretaic professional ethics is concerned with professional practices as sites where practitioners not only do good, but where they encounter the good. MacIntyre reveals how practical endeavours, including the exercise of the virtues, contribute to the eudaimonia of practitioners. Internal goods, as we have seen, are goods for the practitioners.

This means that a genuinely aretaic ethics of teaching would connect the question ‘why teach?’ with the question ‘how should I live?’.
strive to understand the place of the practice of teaching in the teacher’s quest to flourish. If this sounds funny to our ears, it may be because teaching and the other helping professions are wedded to an altruism so severe that it borders on asceticism. Through the concept of internal goods, however, we can begin to articulate why teachers teach without our answer collapsing into one of two extremes: base self-interest or self-sacrifice in the name of others. In the space remaining, I would like to sketch some directions for future research in the ethics of teaching using the typology of internal goods developed above: moral phenomenology, excellences of character and biographical genre.

One starting point for inquiry into the moral phenomenology of teaching is Philip Jackson’s famous observation that teachers make over 200 decisions per hour. If Donald Schön is right, all practices require ‘reflection in action’, but teaching takes the demand for improvisation to new levels. It is in large part this radical unpredictability of teaching which shapes its phenomenology. It does not seem to matter how many times one has taught. Each time one begins a class, there is that unique blend of excitement and dread caused by the unpredictability of what will unfold. Perhaps this explains the fetishisation of the lesson plan: we want to deny just how much is unplanned.

To the objection that all too many classes are boring and predictable, I would respond in two ways. First, we must remember MacIntyre’s distinction between practices and institutions. Schooling and teaching are at best overlapping sets. The institution of the school sustains the practice of teaching in some ways and in some places, but it also constrains teaching in many other instances. The boring class may tell us less about teaching and more about the purposes animating the institution of schooling beyond the support of teaching. A second response, informed by psychoanalytic thought, would be to interpret at least some pedagogical boredom precisely as a defence, as a means of dampening a situation that seems too volatile.

Here, let me just mention one excellence of character, closely related to the central virtue of phronesis, that takes on particular meanings and a particular importance in the practice of teaching. Taking our cue from Iris Murdoch, and from the application of Murdoch’s work to teaching by Margret Buchmann, we can characterise one of the goods internal to teaching as a special mode of perception. Teaching, it would seem, involves the attempt constantly to see one’s students for who they are while also cultivating a vision of their best selves. Buchmann gives the example of a teacher whose initial perception of a student as ‘overfamiliar and moody,’ as ‘tiresomely adolescent,’ develops such that she learns both to see him more accurately and more generously (1989, p. 54). As Murdoch taught us, such progress in how we perceive people is one of the hallmarks of the moral life (1970, p. 16ff). Teachers have a special responsibility and a constant occasion to develop themselves in this way.

On the topic of biographical genre, teaching presents a special difficulty. It is not that there is no definitive shape to the character of the teacher in the popular imagination, but rather that there are two such stock
characters, neither of them inhabitable by real people. Never known for its subtlety, Hollywood seems particularly black and white when it comes to its portrayals of teachers, who appear either as complete saints or total scoundrels. For every film that takes aim at teachers, portraying them as petty dictators of their classroom worlds with no life outside of school, there is a movie portraying a teacher as heroic beyond all proportion and martyred for the cause. Though Muriel Spark’s Jean Brodie, to consider a literary example, is usually read as the former kind of teacher, I take the *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* to be putting the question before us: is it possible to be a prime example of a teacher and a person in your prime at the same time? Our difficulty in imagining this combination, of picturing a teacher who is virtuous and human, may reflect a broader problem in modern moral thinking. The question of motivation in the helping professions seems to highlight the modern (Western) proclivity to make sharp distinctions between altruism and self-interest, and between duty and inclination.

In conclusion, MacIntyre’s moral theory, rich in many respects, is particularly helpful for rethinking the nature of professional ethics and opening lines of inquiry into teacher motivation and identity. Investigation of the goods internal to teaching may lead us to understand how teaching is not merely a form of service but a pursuit of the teacher’s own flourishing. Inside each practice are singular resources for answering what MacIntyre calls ‘that most fundamental of questions, ‘What sort of person am I to become?’’’ (1982, p. 292).

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**NOTES**

1. In this paper, I will assume that teaching counts as a practice in MacIntyre’s sense, even though MacIntyre himself has recently questioned this assumption (see MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, pp. 5–9). Noting that teaching is an important part of every practice—since every practice must see to the initiation and apprenticeship of new practitioners—MacIntyre denies that teaching is a practice in its own right. From the indisputable fact that a teacher is always a teacher of something, MacIntyre concludes that ‘teaching does not have its own goods’ (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 7). The goods of teaching, he suggests, are the goods of mathematics, music, or whatever practice is taught. For now, I will leave it to others to contest this claim. In my view, Dunne’s initial retort already goes a long way towards showing how the concept of practice ‘might very comfortably include teaching in its denotative range’ (Dunne in MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 7).

In future work, I plan to explore the possibility that teaching, like moral philosophy, constitutes a meta-practice or, to use MacIntyre’s Aristotelian term, a ‘master-craft’ (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 61). Just as moral philosophy has its own goods and slant on the virtues even as it strives toward the *telos* of a full and truthful understanding of the range and hierarchy of human goods, so teaching is a particular practice whose subject matter is other practices and the goods internal to them.
Teaching, then, would be the activity of helping students enter practices, make transitions between them and articulate the aspects of human flourishing disclosed within them. The practice of teaching would deal with the movement back and forth between MacIntyre’s first and second levels of valuation, helping students mediate the ethical plurality of practices and craft their individual life narrative. (On this topic, I have benefited from Brian Hughes’ unpublished work on MacIntyre. The ideas of entering and transitioning are his.)

2. Though lengthy, the translation of *telos* as ‘that for the sake of which’ is much less misleading than end, aim, goal, or purpose. MacIntyre uses this phrase frequently and it is the preferred translation of several scholars including Jonathan Lear. (See Lear, 1988, p. 35)

3. In his later work, MacIntyre uses the term ‘craft’ interchangeably with ‘practice.’

4. This is MacIntyre’s translation of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129b4–6.

5. Perhaps this marks an entry point for thinking of teaching as a practice.

6. See the *Cogito* interview for one of MacIntyre’s less ambiguous statements of these related features of a practice. There, MacIntyre speaks of how ‘standards of success and failure are set by shared goals’ and make possible the realization of internal goods (1991, pp. 71–22).

7. The first quote is MacIntyre’s translation of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 1152b 19; the second is his gloss of *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 1153a 15.

8. Earlier, I mentioned that MacIntyre considers the non-moral excellences of character goods rather than virtues. Incidentally, I do not follow MacIntyre in calling all non-moral virtues ‘intellectual,’ since this entails needless distinctions between thought and feeling, mind and body.

9. My thanks to the ‘Ad Hoc MacIntyre Seminar’—Laura Desisto, Brian Hughes, Terri Wilson and, especially, Dan Kramarski—who read MacIntyre with me and offered me encouragement, insight and an invaluable chance to work out some of these ideas in dialogue. Thanks as well to Eli Moore for his usual high-quality research assistance, this time on a tight schedule. As always, I want to thank Jennifer Burns for her constant interest in my work, her insight as a reader and her help as an editor.