

OXFORD

VIRTUE AT WORK

Ethics for Individuals,
Managers, and Organizations

GEOFF MOORE

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and Organizations*

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My second debt is to those scholars who have accompanied me on this journey. Most notable among them is my former colleague and continuing friend Ron Beadle, with whom I have collaborated and deliberated over many years. Others, particularly those involved with the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry, have contributed to my understanding of MacIntyre's work, and within this society and beyond there are now a large number of scholars who have explored MacIntyre's concepts in a wide range of occupations and organizations. Many of these studies appear in this book, and again I hope that my presentation of this work is reasonably accurate. In addition, there are those academics, in the roles of editors and reviewers, who have assisted in honing my work, and to whom I am, almost without exception, extremely grateful.

My third debt is to co-authors who have worked with me on the various empirical studies I have been involved with, and to the organizational members who have been willing to give of their time to these studies. This book is intended for a practitioner audience, and I hope that it repays some of those debts. One manager, who read an academic paper of mine based on a study of his organization, said that his head hurt as a result. It was partly that comment which made me realize that there was a need to explain this approach in a more accessible way; I hope that reading this book does not hurt heads any more than it needs to.

My fourth debt is to David Musson, formerly of Oxford University Press, who heard me make a presentation at a conference and approached me with the question I was, at that moment, asking myself: 'Have you thought of writing a book on the subject?' It was a happy coincidence, and I hope the end product repays the trust David placed in me.

I wrote the early part of this book while on a period of research leave from Durham University, when I was based in the School of Management

at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. I am deeply grateful for the space (literal and metaphorical) which both universities gave me to work on this project.

At a more personal level, various people have helped in the writing of this book. Notable among them have been my two brothers. Andy, a former senior civil servant, read the manuscript and provided very helpful comments from the perspective of just the kind of person I have in mind as the audience. He even said that he enjoyed it (which is pretty high praise from a brother). Nigel, a practising civil engineer, helped me to understand better how architectural practices work. And, more generally, my wife Alison has been a source of continuing support, and has held firmly to the belief that I might just be on to something quite important here. She also possesses and exercises the virtues in abundance, and so has been a practical inspiration in what might otherwise have become a rather intellectual endeavour. It is to her that I dedicate this book.

Geoff Moore

Durham, October 2016

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Introduction

Consider Elaine's story.

Elaine works as a middle manager in a medium-sized company of architects—DesignCo. The main projects which DesignCo works on are office buildings, often in city centres. Sometimes, these are rather utilitarian buildings, fit for purpose but not very inspiring to design, to build, or (so Elaine has discovered) to work in. Occasionally the company wins a bid for a new corporate headquarters, a building which is designed to be a 'statement' which 'says something' to the world around about the scale and ambitions of the client. Here, opulence and functionality go side by side. But many of the projects Elaine works on are somewhere between these two extremes—spaces where 'value for money' is the key.

Elaine trained as an architect, passed all her exams first time, and gained experience in a number of architectural practices before moving to DesignCo. One of the things which marked her out from the very beginning was her creativity; she won the creative design prize in her final year at university for her work, tempered only by the fact that the judges (who included practising architects) thought the design might be rather difficult to build and thus rather expensive. Since then, she has been involved in several of the more glamorous projects the companies for which she has worked have bid for and won, and her ideas about what makes for a 'good' building have, as a consequence, developed and matured. She can design to a brief and stay within the cost parameters she is given. But she still has a creative edge to her work, and often pushes herself and others to come up with better solutions to difficult problems, to design buildings which fit well into their surroundings and enhance them, and to minimize ecological impacts.

Elaine now has a small team of architects working with her which includes a junior architect just out of university as well as some clerical assistants. So she is responsible not only for the management of the parts of the projects which her team is given, but also for managing her team. And that, naturally enough, involves developing those in her team who are architects so that they become better architects, and particularly so in the case of the new recruit who is only just starting out. But, of course, this all takes time, and may not 'pay off' if any of them were to prove to be unteachable or to leave.

DesignCo had been successful in times past and employees, including Elaine, had benefited with salary increases and bonuses. But more recently a downturn in the economy, and a new managing director, have meant that the pressure has increased. Bidding to keep costs within clients' budgets and fees low, in order to win the contract, then designing to try to drive those internal costs even lower and hence maintain not just the business, but also the previous level of profit margins, has become the order of the day.¹ Elaine can almost feel her creative side being squeezed out bit by bit; not only has the atmosphere in the company changed so that it is no longer considered a good thing to come up with innovative designs, but there just doesn't seem to be enough time to do so anyway. Any 'spare' time has to be devoted to reducing DesignCo's costs on the existing designs, not to finding clever solutions to difficult problems. Architecture in general, she reflects, and DesignCo in particular, seem to be becoming more utilitarian—the same old designs fitted into spaces which don't quite 'work' with them.

Occasionally she has a 'run in' with her boss, who seems to have lost the love of architecture he once had (she learned a lot from him when she first arrived at DesignCo); he now seems to be fixated with the 'numbers'. 'What is DesignCo all about?' she asks, only to get a slightly condescending smile in return.

To relate Elaine's story in this way tells us quite a lot about her. We could probably, on the basis of the above account, describe her character quite accurately, although we would obviously need to see her in action at work over an extended period to begin to know who she really is—whether she is generally courteous or clinical, has a sense of humour, whether she forms friendships with others at work or not, and so on. But, of course, this is only part of who Elaine is. She is also a daughter, a wife, mother to three teenage children, a cellist who plays in a local orchestra, an ardent reader of thrillers, quite good-looking, and, somewhat strangely, with a penchant both for white-water rafting and for doing zany deals on eBay.

Consider Elaine's story.

It is worth adding that Elaine, and the other members of her family who we will meet during the course of this book, are fictional characters. But they should be recognizable as typical of people in a modern, industrial, or post-industrial, consumer society. DesignCo is similarly a fictional organization, though also intended to be recognizable as typical of organizations in general.

We still don't know Elaine or DesignCo well, of course, but that will have to do for now. Elaine would have to be a central character in a novel for us to understand her more fully, and this book is not a novel. But even with the

¹ Internal costs for architectural practices can be driven down by using more junior architects and reusing parts of designs from previous projects.

limited account of Elaine and her story which we have so far, and the initial insights into her employer DesignCo, the major themes of this book are evident.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT

First, this book is about organizations. Even for those who do not work in an architect's practice, much of what was described above about DesignCo was probably familiar. There were different kinds of work from the mundane to the exotic; there were good times when the economy was booming and it was possible to be creative and innovative, with budgets which were relatively relaxed; through to difficult times when every penny seemed to get counted, creativity got squashed, and questions about the purpose of the company and, indeed, of the industry began to be raised, at least in Elaine's mind. Was it really about architecture, or about the money, with architecture merely as a means to an end all along?

These are questions which seem to be about rather more than 'Corporate Social Responsibility' as it is often called, or about creating value for different stakeholders, even though we could have described much of the above in stakeholder terms (the shareholders of DesignCo Ltd, senior management, employees, clients, the environment broadly defined, for example), and discussed how they create value for one another and how that value, once created, is shared.² The way Elaine's story was described seemed to have something quite fundamental to do with what we will come to call the 'practice' of architecture, but also about the structural form of the company—DesignCo Ltd—which provides an organizational framework within which the practice of architecture takes place. Clearly, these two—the practice and what we will come to call the 'institution'—are interrelated. You couldn't really have one without the other, or at least not for any length of time. But already in Elaine's mind was a question of priority—which comes first, particularly when the chips are down? And what sort of organization was DesignCo turning into? Is it still (was it ever) a 'good' organization?

Second, this book is about management and managers (we will clarify the distinction later). Elaine is a manager, responsible both for the work which her team is required to do, and for managing them as individuals. Doubtless, there will be some kind of management control system in DesignCo, and Elaine will be held to account for completing projects on time, within budget, and to the required quality standards. She will likely be subject to an appraisal system and, as well as the basic criteria just described, she will probably have other

² 'Creating Shared Value' is a common way of describing corporate social responsibility and stakeholder engagement, made (relatively) famous through an article by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2011. We will return to this in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting that it is not without its critics, see Crane, Palazzo, Spence, & Matten (2014).

targets, to do with maintaining her professional qualification, and contributing to the company in ways which do not seem to be directly connected to the job (organizational citizenship behaviour, or OCB, as it is sometimes known). There may also be a target to do with the development of the staff in her team, and particularly of more junior colleagues such as the new architect they have just recruited. She herself has been the beneficiary of that kind of professional development in the past, including from the person who is now her boss and, even if DesignCo does not require it, she would perhaps feel obliged to offer her time and expertise to induct the new recruit not only into the organization, but also into the much broader practice of architecture itself.

Consequently, Elaine seems to have to divide her time between the practice of architecture (making sure the team's designs meet best practice and including her own continued engagement as a professional architect in her own right), the management of that activity (budgets, critical path analyses, and so on), and the management and development of the other members of her team. As with the organization itself, one can foresee tensions between these activities—when time always seems to be tight, does she take time with the new recruit or get those spreadsheets to her boss? What does it mean to be a 'good' manager?

Finally, this book is about individuals and, most particularly, about their working lives in organizations. Elaine was initially educated by an organization—the university she attended. She worked for several more organizations as an employee before joining DesignCo. While the sort of person Elaine is—in particular her creative talent—has had an impact upon her work, the organizations she has worked for have also been influential in creating the person she has, so far, become. Perhaps her natural flair wouldn't have lent itself to designing to a brief, or to keeping projects on time and within budget. But she has learned those things, probably to the point where they are now second nature to her.

But the organizations which have employed her have been important in another way. They have provided the salary which allowed Elaine initially to leave the parental home and provide for herself, and later to contribute to the family income. As well as the functional aspects of life—house, food, car, and so on—the money allows her and the family to do other things, in her case to play the cello and go white-water rafting, for example.

In constructing a narrative (the story of Elaine's life), and in understanding who she has become (her character), organizations have played an important part. An interesting question related to this would be whether she is the same person at work as she is at home (and as she is when the raft is plunging through the rapids). Another interesting question would be whether she has pursued the same kind of projects and ambitions throughout her life, and her commitment to these. Finally, just as we did with DesignCo when asking whether it was a 'good' organization, and when we asked what it means to be a 'good' manager, we might want to ask what it means to be a 'good' person and whether Elaine could be described in that way.

Elaine's story has been told in a way which has deliberately introduced us to what is known as virtue ethics. Later, we will go into this in more detail, but already we can discern some key themes. Ethics in general might be described as being about discerning how we should live and what it means to live a good life. Virtue ethics does this from a character-based perspective, which also necessarily means that it is narrative-based—it involves telling stories about activities and relationships. In the above account, this is most obvious in relation to Elaine herself—what sort of person is she and how has her character developed through the various practices (notably architecture and family) which have shaped her? In more technical language, which virtues does she possess and exercise, and which vices is she subject to? What does it mean to be a good person?

But, so I and others have argued,³ this virtue-based approach can be extended and applied not just to individuals but also to particular roles. In particular, and of most interest to us, it can be applied to the role of managers. So we can ask what it means to be a good manager and derive some general characteristics which would help us to identify what it might mean to undertake this role well.

More controversially, perhaps, this same way of thinking has also been applied to organizations. Obviously, organizations are different from individuals and individuals-as-managers. In technical language they are ontologically differentiated, which is to say their very nature or essence is different. But, so it has been argued, we might helpfully be able to think about organizations in the same way—in other words, to describe organizations in terms of the virtues and vices which they possess, and to summarize this in terms of the character of the organization, just as we can summarize the virtues and vices which an individual possesses in terms of their character. This way of thinking would lead us to ask what it means to be a good organization.

Why, then, is a book such as this needed, given that there are any number of books which purport to explain how to run successful organizations, how to be a great leader or manager, how to run one's life better, and so on? The answer lies deep, and we will come back to it over the next few chapters. But for now suffice it to say that this approach—to do with virtue at work—is philosophically grounded in a major tradition in ethics, has been worked out in numerous academic papers, has been applied to different kinds of organizations and different types of practice, and has already been the subject of other books (though rather different to this one).⁴ And those of us who have been working in this area over many years think it really does have

³ For those who might be interested, references to the academic work which underpins the arguments in this book will be given at the appropriate points.

⁴ See, for example, Beabout (2013), Hartman (2013), and Morrell (2012). The first of these is closest to the approach adopted here and will be referred to particularly in Chapter 6. The other two take a more general Aristotelian rather than MacIntyrean approach.

something different and important to say to individuals, to managers, and to organizations.⁵

But the detailed analysis of this way of thinking about individuals, managers, and organizations is to be found only in academic articles published in respectable academic journals, or in books by respectable publishers. This is important because it provides some guarantee of the rigour of this approach, since each of these articles and books will have been peer reviewed to exacting standards by other academics who are experts in the field. (This is to say, in the technical language which we will explore in later chapters, that the practice of research and scholarship has its own standards of excellence to which these articles and books adhere.) But therein lie two problems; these articles are inaccessible in both senses of the word. First, without access to a good university library, and to a mechanism which would allow one to explore these articles and books as a collection over against all the other topics which one might be interested in, it would be impossible to even find this material. But second, even with such access, these articles and books might well remain inaccessible in the sense that, having read them all, the reader may be none the wiser. The technical language in which they are written, while not completely impenetrable, is not necessarily easy to grasp.

So, the purpose of this book is to make this approach to virtue at work, or virtue ethics for individuals, managers, and organizations, accessible. Although we will need to explore quite detailed philosophical concepts, the intention is to make these understandable to those we might call 'everyday persons'.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

Who, then, is this book written for? As just indicated, it is for individuals, managers, and organizations. But it is likely to be of interest mainly to those who are engaged in management at whatever level—from the most junior supervisory level to the most senior, from those who are just setting out on a managerial career to those who have been leaders of major organizations for many years.

But let us take this to a rather deeper level. The philosopher with whom we will engage in this book is Alasdair MacIntyre. He has been a key contributor

⁵ One of the most important academics working in this area is Ron Beadle. I draw on our joint work at various points, his work in relation to meaningful work in Chapter 5, and his work on circuses in Chapter 9. In 2013, he entitled his professorial inaugural lecture: 'Virtue at Work: What everyone should learn from the Circus'. That this book is also entitled 'Virtue at Work' is coincidental.

to the relatively recent rehabilitation and development of virtue ethics, and it will be his approach, and its application in organizations, which we will be exploring. In relation to who both MacIntyre and this book seek to engage with, MacIntyre speaks of 'everyday plain persons', not in a derogatory sense, but to distinguish them from two kinds of philosophers (more of which below). So 'plain' refers to the fact that they are not professional philosophers, rather than to any other attribute which they may or may not have. 'Everyday persons' simply means that these are individuals with a life in what we often term 'the real world', but it also carries with it ideas from virtue ethics which we have already begun to explore—that they engage in various practices (such as architecture and family life), pursue excellence in them by employing and cultivating virtues along the way, and in such a way that their character is developed so that they may find themselves engaged in a quest to understand the deeper questions of life.⁶

This does not mean, however, that they *necessarily* engage in such a quest. They may find themselves in an unreflective mode for lengthy periods of time, in effect living without questioning the prevailing customs and culture of the society, communities, and organizations of which they are a part. But then they may find themselves challenged by particular circumstances—redundancy, a scandal perhaps leading to the failure or near failure of their organization, the near closure of their bank and an associated financial and economic crisis, questions over global ecological sustainability, or, at a more personal level, the death of a close relative or friend, their own morbidity or mortality, the breakdown of a close relationship—which forces a rethink.⁷ At this point, everyday plain persons become philosophers, and while MacIntyre is sceptical both about our own society's ability to provide for systematic reasoned debate, and of philosophy's ability to help with this, nonetheless he wishes to encourage everyday plain persons on this quest. As he says, 'philosophy is a matter of concern for plain persons before it is a matter of concern for professional philosophers'.⁸

So, this book is written for the everyday plain person. If, as a reader, you are entirely happy with the way the world is, including your experience of organizations as an employee or manager, then this book is not for you. If, on the other hand, you have even the slightest hesitation when reflecting on life, management, or organizations, and wonder if things could possibly be both clearer and, perhaps, better, and are willing to engage with what might

⁶ MacIntyre (1992: 3–8).

⁷ MacIntyre (1977) refers to these as 'epistemological crises' meaning that they ask fundamental questions about the nature of life, and how we can be sure of what we think we know about it.

⁸ MacIntyre (2006: 180).

just turn out to be some of the most comprehensible and practical philosophy you have ever come across... read on.

INTRODUCING ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

Since we will be using Alasdair MacIntyre's ideas as a basis for this book, it is appropriate to give some background to him as a person. Born in 1929 in Glasgow, Scotland, MacIntyre was educated and began his academic career in the UK. In 1970 he moved to the USA and has held academic appointments at a number of universities there, latterly at the University of Notre Dame where he remains, since his retirement in 2010, as a Senior Distinguished Research Fellow in the Center for Ethics and Culture, as well as holding a position as Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Aristotelian Studies in Ethics and Politics at London Metropolitan University.

Politically, the early MacIntyre was a paid-up Marxist, but the experience of what Marxism turned into when put into practice led to him rejecting it as a political project while remaining loyal to many of its tenets as a political philosophy. Thus, he remains a staunch critic of what he regards as the 'modernity' of advanced capitalism, and of modern liberal individualism, influenced as it is by the liberalism of the Enlightenment.⁹ In the early 1980s he converted to Roman Catholicism and while the influence of this tends not to be evident in much of his writings (and not in those writings which are most relevant to this book, particularly *After Virtue*), he does his work against that background.

Philosophically, MacIntyre would be principally positioned as a neo-Aristotelian, that is someone who draws from but has developed Aristotle's ideas. As noted above, and following from his neo-Aristotelianism, he is known as a virtue ethicist (even though he would dispute the title), and the book which both fed the developing interest in the rehabilitation of virtue ethics and made his own name was entitled *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Originally published in 1981, it is now in its third edition,¹⁰ and has been called 'one of the most influential works of moral philosophy of the late twentieth century'.¹¹ As its name suggests, it is what might be termed a work of 'meta-ethics', that is an argument about and justification for a particular way of 'doing' ethics, and one which, he argued, became fragmented and lost

⁹ See, for example, a recent contribution about investment advising and, as he terms it, the 'irrelevance of ethics'—MacIntyre (2015).

¹⁰ MacIntyre (2007); it is this edition which we will be referring to.

¹¹ See, for this point specifically and for a more general introduction to Alasdair MacIntyre, the biography provided by Christopher Lutz in the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy available at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mac-over/>, accessed 14 September 2016.

as the ethics of the Enlightenment period (principally Kantianism and Utilitarianism) took hold. Probably his most accessible book, and one which develops and makes concrete the ideas expounded in *After Virtue*, is *Dependent Rational Animals*.¹² However, it is *After Virtue* which we will be principally drawing from here.

As noted above, MacIntyre has long held a sceptical view of his own profession of philosophy. He has, for example, distinguished between two different kinds of philosophers—those which we might call ‘philosophers as technical specialists’ and those who are ‘philosophers as seekers of understanding’.¹³ Unsurprisingly, he is critical of the first, arguing that they engage in philosophy almost as a diversion from the problems of real life. Philosophers as seekers of understanding, however, are ‘engaged by questions about the ends of life’, conceive of their work as ‘contributing to an ongoing philosophical conversation’ recognizing that ‘the end of the conversation and the good of those who participate in it is truth and the nature of truth, of good, of rational justification, and of meaning’.¹⁴ MacIntyre is firmly in this latter camp, seeing philosophy as having to grapple with everyday problems for everyday plain persons. A summary of MacIntyre’s ‘project’ is that his ‘Aristotelian philosophy investigates the conditions that support free and deliberate human action in order to propose a path to the liberation of the human agent through participation in the life of a political community that seeks its common goods through the shared deliberation and action of its members’.¹⁵ We will come back to a number of the terms in this summary in later chapters.

It is notable that while MacIntyre maintains the respect of his own academic community,¹⁶ he is widely read outside of philosophy—in sociology, politics, theology, organization studies, and business ethics, for example. In 2007 an academic society was formed specifically to pursue and promote MacIntyre’s work,¹⁷ and he continues to engage with both proponents and critics of his work. Indeed, he remains committed to the urgency of the task, as he sees it, of

¹² *Dependent Rational Animals*—MacIntyre (1999a). If the reader is tempted to explore MacIntyre in the original, this is probably the best book to read. On the other hand, *After Virtue* is his classic and most well-known book, and in educated circles one is much more likely to meet people who have read *After Virtue* than *Dependent Rational Animals*.

¹³ This is Beabout’s terminology, see Beabout (2013: 140).

¹⁴ MacIntyre (2006: 130–1), see also Beabout (2013: 139–43) for an extended discussion.

¹⁵ Christopher Lutz, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, available at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mac-over/>; accessed 14 September 2016, drawing from *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chapter 8.

¹⁶ For example, MacIntyre is a former President of the American Philosophical Society, has given the prestigious Gifford Lectures in the University of Edinburgh published as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (1990), and was awarded the Aquinas Medal by the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 2010.

¹⁷ See <http://www.macintyreanquiry.org>, accessed 14 September 2016.

revolutionizing ethical and political theory in the modern era. He is, as might be evident from this description, quite a character.

HOW IS THIS BOOK STRUCTURED?

This book is in three parts. Part I (Organizations and Virtue Ethics) has three chapters which lay out the groundwork of the approach. Chapter 2 (Organizations and Ethics) explores the ubiquity of organizations in our present social order, offers a definition of a formal organization, and considers the reasons organizations exist. It then turns to explore how we typically think about organizations (the metaphor approach), before summarizing and critiquing current approaches to organizational ethics.

Chapter 3 (Virtue Ethics and Organizational Ethics) offers an account of ethics which explains and contextualizes the virtues approach at the individual and social levels, as well as exploring two criticisms of this approach. It includes a discussion about 'reasons for action', that is how as individuals we should be able to offer justifications for our actions because they contribute to our own purpose or *telos*. The chapter then explains how we might legitimately extend this way of thinking about ethics to the organizational level, covering the idea of organizational-level *telos* and including a discussion of the question of organizational moral agency.

Chapter 4 (A MacIntyrean Approach to Organizations and Organizational Ethics) is a key chapter which both completes Part I and leads into Parts II and III. It introduces MacIntyre's concepts of practices and institutions, and internal and external goods, showing how these give a novel but powerful way of thinking about organizations as 'practice-institution combinations', and which helps us to see organizations as essentially moral spaces. It also introduces the virtuous organizational mapping as a way of analysing organizations, identifying potential problems ahead of time, and so potentially leading to change in organizations.

Part II (Implications for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations) also has three chapters which focus respectively on the implications of the approach laid out in Part I for individuals, managers, and organizations. Chapter 5 (Implications for Individuals) works through what the virtue ethics approach outlined in Part I might mean both in general at an individual level, and for individuals when working in organizations. It explores the notion of human lives as narratives, and human beings as on a narrative quest towards their own *telos*. It then asks what all of this might mean for our working lives, and hence what we might expect to put into, and get out of, organizations. It thereby links to and explores the notion of meaningful work.