Study questions

1. How does Aristotle argue that there is a single "chief good" that is the end of the things we do?
2. What discipline studies this good, and why?
3. On what grounds does Aristotle claim this chief good can be identified neither with pleasure nor honor? Who makes these identifications false?
4. How does Aristotle use the "function of man" to illustrate how happiness is the chief good of humans? How does he define happiness?
5. What are the differences between moral and intellectual virtue? Why do education and character formation play an important role in the development of moral virtue?
6. Aristotle claims that three things are found in the soul: passions, faculties, and states of character. Briefly describe each of these. On what grounds does he claim that virtue is neither a faculty nor a passion, but only a state of character? How does he describe this state of character?
7. Give examples of how virtue aims at an intermediate between excess and deficiency. What are some actions that do not admit of an intermediate?
8. What is choice? How is it distinct from wish? How does it relate to ends and means? How is it related to virtue and vice?
9. Why does Aristotle consider contemplation the highest virtue? What unique reward does this virtue bestow on its possessor?

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from William David Ross's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925). For recent assessments of Aristotle's approach, see W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Meridian, 1959); Terence Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Amiele Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); J. O. Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: Blackwell, 1988); and Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Related readings in this anthology include MacIntyre and Slote (who defend virtue ethics) and Hume, Kant, Mill, and Frankena (who criticize some important features of Aristotelian ethics).

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

Virtue Ethics

Alasdair MacIntyre, a Scottish philosopher born in 1929, is a major exponent of virtue ethics. Critical of the predominant act-centered approach to ethics, MacIntyre turns to an Aristotelian person-centered approach that stresses character and social identity.

MacIntyre lays out a theory of virtue consistent with this person-centered approach. Virtues, on his initial definition, are habits or dispositions that we develop to sustain social practices in which we participate. Later he brings in the good. The goal of the ethical actor is not just to do one's duty or maximize utility or contribute to social practices, but to seek excellence understood, ultimately, in terms of the good.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether MacIntyre's theory of virtue recognizes the importance of individual actions, rights, and duties. Does it provide an adequate guide to action?

The modern self

The modern self, the self I have called emotivist, lacks rational criteria for evaluation. Everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted. Whatever evaluative allegiances the emotivist self may profess are expressions of attitudes, preferences and choices. Inner conflicts are the confrontation of one contingent arbitrariness by another. It is a self with no given continuities.

The self thus conceived, utterly distinct from its social embodiments and lacking any rational history of its own, may seem to have a certain abstract character. The abstract quality arises from the contrast, indeed the loss, that comes into view if we compare the emotivist self with its historical predecessors. The emotivist self has suffered a deprivation, a stripping away of qualities. The self is thought of as lacking any social identity, because the social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available; the self is thought of as criterionless, because the *telos* [goal] in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible. What kind of identity and what kind of *telos* were they?

In traditional societies it is through social groups that the individual identifies himself or herself. I am brother and grandson, member of this household, that village. These characteristics are part of my substance, defining partially my duties. Individuals inherit a particular space within interlocking social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast. To know oneself as such a social person is to find oneself placed at a certain point on a journey with set goals; to move through life is to make progress – or to fail to make progress – toward a given end.

The peculiarly modern self, the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm lost its traditional social identity and view of human life as ordered to a given end. This transformation of the self could not have occurred if the forms of moral discourse had not also been transformed at the same time. Indeed it is wrong to separate the history of the self from the history of the language through which roles are given expression. What we discover is a single history.

In the next few chapters, MacIntyre analyzes various moral traditions, including those of ancient Greece (as expressed in Homer and Aristotle), Christianity (as expressed in the Bible and medieval thinkers), and England and America (as expressed in Jane Austen and Benjamin Franklin). He stresses the diversity of the different approaches to virtue.

The core concept of virtue

Are we able to disentangle from these rival and various claims a core concept of the virtues? I am going to argue that we can.

A virtue requires some prior account of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be explained. So in Homer the concept of a virtue is secondary to that of a *social role,* in Aristotle it is secondary to *the good life for man* and in Franklin it is secondary to utility. The account I am to give provides in a similar way the background against which the concept of a virtue has to be made intelligible.

There are three stages which have to be identified, if the core conception of a virtue is to be understood. The first stage requires an account of what I call a practice, the second an account of the narrative order of a human life and the third an account of a moral tradition.

Practices and internal goods

By a "practice" I mean any coherent and complex form of 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. 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 inquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music. Thus the range of practices is wide: arts, sciences, games, politics, family life, all fall under the concept. But the precise range of practices is not of the first importance. Instead let me explain some of the key terms involved in my definition, beginning with the notion of goods internal to a practice.

Consider a child whom I teach to play chess, although the child has no desire to learn. If the child will play chess with me once a week I will give the child 50¢ worth of candy; if the child wins, the child will receive an extra 50¢ worth of candy. Thus motivated, the child plays to win. So long as it is the candy alone which provides the child with a reason for playing chess, the child has every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully. But, we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself.

There are thus two kinds of good to be gained by playing chess. On the one hand there are goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing – in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults prestige, status and money. There are always alternative ways for achieving such goods. On the other hand there are goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent as judges of internal goods.

External goods are always some individual's possession. Moreover, the more someone has of them, the less there is for other people. This is sometimes necessarily the case, as with power and fame, and sometimes the case by contingent circumstance as with money. External goods are therefore objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are a good for the whole community who participate in the practice.

A practice involves standards of excellence. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards. It is to subject my own attitudes,

choices and tastes to the standards which partially define the practice. Practices have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. The standards are not immune from criticism, but we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting their authority. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch. In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment.

Virtues promote a practice's internal goods

We are now in a position to formulate a tentative definition of a virtue: *A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.*

There are three ways in which my account is Aristotelian. First it requires for its completion those concepts which Aristotle's account requires: voluntariness, the distinction between intellectual virtues and virtues of character, the relationship to natural abilities and to passions and practical reasoning. On these topics something like Aristotle's view has to be defended, if my account is to be plausible.

Secondly my account can accommodate an Aristotelian view of pleasure. Consider how to reply to someone who, having considered my account of the differences between goods internal to and goods external to a practice, inquired into which class does pleasure fall? The answer is, "Some types of pleasure into one, some into the other."

Thirdly my account links evaluation and explanation in an Aristotelian way. To identify actions as manifesting a virtue is never only to evaluate; it is also to take the first step towards explaining why those actions rather than others were performed. Hence the fate of a city or an individual can be explained by citing the injustice of a tyrant or the courage of its defenders. Indeed without allusion to the place that justice and injustice, courage and cowardice play in human life very little will be genuinely explicable.

Evil practices

I have defined the virtues partly in terms of their place in practices. But some practices are evil. It has been suggested that torture and sado-masochistic sexual activities might be examples. But how can a disposition be a virtue if it is sustains evil practices?

I allow that there *may* be practices which *are* evil. I am far from convinced that there are, and I do not in fact believe that either torture or sado-masochistic sexuality answer to the description of a practice. But I do not want to rest my case on this, since many types of practice may on occasions be productive of evil. For practices include the arts, the sciences and certain types of game. And any of these may be a source of evil: the desire to excel and to win can corrupt, a man may be so engrossed by his painting that he neglects his family.

It is not the case that my account entails *either* that we ought to condone such evils *or* that whatever flows from a virtue is right. Courage sometimes sustains injustice, and loyalty has been known to strengthen a murderous aggressor.

That the virtues are defined, not in terms of good practices, but of practices, does not imply that practices never need moral criticism. And the resources for such criticism are not lacking. There is no inconsistency in appealing to a virtue to criticize a practice.

Identifying actions

We identify a particular action by invoking two kinds of context. We place the agent's intentions with reference to their role in his or her history; and we also place them with reference to their role in the history of the settings to which they belong. In doing this, we ourselves write a further part of these histories. Narrative history turns out to be the essential genre for the characterization of human actions.

The standpoint presupposed by the argument so far is different from that of those analytical philosophers who make central the notion of "a" human action. A course of human events is then seen as a complex sequence of individual actions, and a natural question is: How do we individuate human actions? Now there are contexts in which such notions are at home. In the recipes of a cookery book actions are individuated in the way some analytical philosophers have supposed. "Take six eggs. Then break them into a bowl. Add flour, salt, sugar, etc." But each element is intelligible as an action only as a-possible-element-in-a-sequence. Moreover even such a sequence requires a context to be intelligible. The concept of an intelligible action is more fundamental than that of an action as such.

Narratives

In understanding what someone is doing we place a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals and of

the settings in which they act. Action has a basically historical character. We all live out narratives in our lives and understand our lives in terms of narratives.

At any given point in a dramatic narrative we do not know what will happen next. Unpredictability is required by the narrative structure of human life, and the generalizations which social scientists discover provide an understanding of human life compatible with that structure. This unpredictability coexists with a second characteristic of lived narratives, a teleological character. We live our lives in the light of a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us. There is no present which is not informed by some image of the future which presents itself in the form of goals – towards which we are either moving or failing to move. Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives.

Man is a story-telling animal. I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what stories do I find myself a part?" We enter society with roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to understand how others respond to us. It is through stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, and eldest sons who waste their inheritance, that children learn what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to understand any society except through the stock of stories which constitute its dramatic resources. The telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.

Narratives and self-understanding

What the narrative concept of selfhood requires is twofold. On the one hand, I am the *subject* of a history that is my own, that has its own peculiar meaning. When someone complains that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*. Hence the point of doing one thing rather than another seems to have been lost.

To be the subject of a narrative is to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life. It is to be open to being asked to give an account of what one did or what happened to one. Personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires. Without such unity there would not be subjects of whom stories could be told.

The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative: I am not only accountable, I can always ask others for an account. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Moreover this asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in narratives. Asking what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account and my account, these are essential constituents of narratives. Without accountability narratives would lack that continuity required to make them and the actions that constitute them intelligible.

The good

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? Its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask "What is the good for man?" is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. It is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. A quest for what?

Without some conception of the final *telos* there could not be any beginning to a quest. Some conception of the good for man is required. Whence is such a conception to be drawn? Precisely from those questions which led us to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in practices. It is in looking for a conception of *the* good which will order other goods, a conception of *the* good which will extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, that we initially define the quest for the good. But secondly the quest is not a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest that the goal is finally to be understood.

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which also sustain us in the quest for the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the households and communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical inquiry about the good.

Study questions

1 What criticism of the modern or emotivist self does MacIntyre offer? Do you agree with his criticism? Why or why not?

2. How does MacIntyre define a practice? What are some examples of practices? Can a practice be evil?
3. What is the difference between an external and an internal good? Give an example of each.
4. How does MacIntyre view standards of excellence?
5. What is his definition of virtue? How is it similar to Aristotle's conception?
6. What is his criticism of how some analytic philosophers identify or individuate actions? What is his alternative?
7. What two core characteristics are narratives claimed to have? Might there be others?
8. MacIntyre claims that the unity of a life is the unity of a narrative quest. How does he appeal to a transcendent good to make this claim? How could a skeptic criticize MacIntyre's claim?

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Chapters 3, 14, and 15. His other ethical writings include *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). For a good analysis of *After Virtue*, see W. K. Frankena's "MacIntyre and Modern Morality," *Ethics* 93 (1982–3): 579–87. For further readings on virtue theory, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, particularly books I–VI; Anthony Kenny's *Aristotelian Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1978); Peter Geach's *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) briefly talks about virtue in Chapter 11 (Section 11.6).

Related readings in this anthology include Aristotle and Slote (who defend virtue ethics); Kant, Mill, and Ross (who discuss whether virtue is good in itself); and Ayer, Hume, and Nietzsche (who make some references to virtues). Most of the readings in this anthology take an act-centered approach to ethics.

MICHAEL SLOTE

Rudiments of Virtue Ethics

Michael Slote, an American philosopher born in 1941, has done much to revive interest in virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists often criticize other approaches as too rationalistic, for wrongly assuming that all duties reduce to a single rule, or for not appreciating the moral value of self-interest. In contrast, virtue ethics emphasizes the role that diverse habits and dispositions play in moral decisions and it recognizes the value of both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues.

Virtue ethicists prefer to describe moral acts not in deontic terms (like "right" or "obligatory") that refer only to acts, but in aretaic terms (like "admirable" and "excellent") that apply equally to the act and to the person performing the act. While Slote defends virtue ethics, he does not argue that it is complete or that it provides specific action-guiding principles. He leaves open the possibility that insights of virtue theory can be incorporated into other systems of morality.

As you read this section, ask yourself whether Slote's claims about "our ordinary sense of what is admirable" fit how you evaluate actions. Is the incompleteness of virtue ethics a strength or a weakness?

Distinctive features of virtue ethics

Virtue ethics is commonly regarded as involving two distinctive or essential elements. A virtue ethics in the fullest sense must treat aretaic notions (like "good" or "excellent") rather than deontic notions (like "morally wrong," "ought," "right," and "obligation") as primary, and it must put a greater emphasis on the ethical assessment of agents and their motives and character traits than on the evaluation of acts and choices. If we understand the notion in this rough manner, then much of ancient ethics – Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics, for example – constitute forms of virtue ethics. However, these instances of virtue ethics are less radically different from familiar deontology and utilitarianism than some advocates of a virtues approach may have hoped for.

Thus although Aristotle and I both make consideration of the virtues and of virtuous or admirable individuals central to our ethical views, neither of us