

A Brief Response to Professor Rohrer's Commentary

Gregory R. Beabout

I'd like to thank Professor Rohrer for his comments and for this opportunity to say a bit more in response.

Professor Rohrer raises this concern: isn't there a significant disanalogy between MacIntyre's effort to reclaim what it means to be a philosopher and my proposal to reconceive the character of the manager? Rather than stating that MacIntyre is "reconceiving" what it means to be a philosopher, isn't it more accurate to state that MacIntyre is "actually reclaiming what it meant to be a philosopher in the classical and medieval tradition, a tradition that has been largely abandoned by contemporary philosophers"? In contrast to this, when it comes to the character of the manager, it seems there is nothing to reclaim. Isn't the character of the manager thoroughly "informed by and embedded in the larger development of advanced capitalism," and this to such a degree that there is nothing "genuinely virtuous to reclaim"?

The task of my book has me responding to this challenge, and it takes me many chapters to do so. My response here certainly will be too brief, but I hope I can point to the direction of my response.

My central strategy relies on retrieving two ancient characters: the person of practical wisdom and the steward. Hence, the subtitle of my book is "*From Bureaucrat to Wise Steward*." Thus, an important part of my task involves retrieving the ancient character of the *phronimos*, i.e., the person of practical wisdom, especially from

Aristotle's philosophy, and another part involves retrieving the biblical notion of the steward. The *phronimos* is a person with experience and maturity who knows how to deliberate well, recognize when more information is needed, make good judgments, and carry out good decisions. The steward is one who has the privilege and responsibility of caring for the goods and property of another. Of course, I am not alone in calling attention to these ancient characters; there are many contemporary thinkers aiming to retrieve insights from Aristotle about *phronesis* and insights from the biblical tradition about stewardship. Part of my task involves bringing these to bear upon the character of the manager, and then considering how such a reconceived notion of the manager might be institutionalized, for example, in business education.

Professor Rohrer comments that MacIntyre has thrown serious doubts on whether business is a practice with goods internal to it. Isn't business simply aimed at an external good, such as profit maximization? I would like to note that this question, which arises out of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, has inspired significant debate in the scholarly literature.⁵⁷ Without retracing this discussion, I would like to indicate three ways that moral philosophers might promote thoughtful reflection in this regard: 1) by helping call

⁵⁷ Kathryn Balstad Brewer, "Management as a Practice: A Response to Alasdair MacIntyre," *Journal of Business Ethics* June 1997 (16:8) p. 825. Paul du Gay, "Alasdair MacIntyre and the Christian Genealogy of Management Critique." *Cultural Values* 2:4 (1998) 421-44; Geoff Moore, "On the Implications of the Practice-Institution Distinction: MacIntyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 12:1 (2002) 19-32; Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore, "MacIntyre on Virtue and Organization," *Organization Studies* 27:3 (2006) 323-40; Laura Nash, "Whose Character? A Response to Mangham's 'MacIntyre and the Manager'" *Organization* 2 (1995) 226-232. Dobson, J.: 1996, 'The Feminist Firm: a Comment', *Business Ethics Quarterly*, (6:2) pp.227-232 (sparking debate); A.C. Wicks, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 1996 (6:4) pp. 523-532, (responding to Dobson); Dobson, J.: 1997, 'MacIntyre's position on business: a response to Wicks', *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 7(4), pp.125-132; A.C. Wicks, "On MacIntyre, Modernity and the Virtues: A Response to Dobson," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 1997 (7:4) 133-135. Also see volume 7:1 (2008) of the journal *Philosophy of Management*, which is devoted to the topic, "MacIntyre, Empirics and Organisation."

attention to the activities and functions that constitute and are integral to managing, and then considering what constitutes excellence in those activities and functions; 2) by drawing out the traits that one is required to acquire in order to excel in those activities and functions, and 3) by helping managers ask whether those traits are qualities of character that make for an excellent human life.

Professor Rohrer also comments that the reconceived notion of the manager that I intimate might emerge from “monastic orders” and “cooperatives.” These certainly strike me as good starting points. It seems to me that it would be good if those who were charged with managing would look to excellent instances of such communities to learn how to plan, lead, organize, monitor, correct, and celebrate.

My project could be described as a work of “creative retrieval.” In other words, while agreeing with much of MacIntyre’s criticism of the manager, I am suggesting that the best way forward involves creatively retrieving elements from the past that have been pushed aside. The manager as bureaucrat is very much the product, not just of industrialization and capitalism, but also of print culture, especially as it reached its peak at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. To what extent is the culture of the “bureau,” that is, the office or the desk, reaching a saturation point during the rapid shift that is occurring from print culture to electronic digitalization? When social authority based on the bureaucratic manager is pushed to the limits of its potential, what might it reverse into? The information age, with its more highly educated workforce, decentralized decision-making, continuous re-structuring, deeper awareness of the quest for work that is worthwhile, and increased desire to balance employment

with other parts of a meaningful human life, provides an opportunity for transforming the character of the manager, from bureaucrat toward wise steward.