

The Manager, the Everyday Plain Person, and the Philosopher

Gregory R. Beabout

Let me begin with a standard caveat that professional philosophers often give when making a presentation: what I am presenting here is part of a book project, so it is a work in progress, drawn from a larger argument. I appreciate comments and suggestions. The book on which I'm working is tentatively titled, *The Character of the Manager: From Bureaucrat to Wise Steward*, and this paper is taken from sections of it.

My central goal in this paper is to suggest a way both to interpret and to extend MacIntyre's philosophical writings. I do so by focusing on three characters: the manager, the everyday plain person, and the philosopher. After describing the character of the manager, I turn to MacIntyre's effort to recast what it means to be a philosopher. I conclude by suggesting that MacIntyre's project leaves an important issue unsettled: How can we re-conceive what it means to be a manager? Time constrains me from providing a detailed answer to this question, but I point in a direction that I think we should pursue to extend MacIntyre's project.

MacIntyre's work has received unusually high praise, and this for several reasons. His prose is accessible and non-technical (in contrast to the jargon-laden style of so many academic philosophers of his generation) while his insights are rich and thoughtful. More significantly, MacIntyre's writings are also controversial, provocative, challenging and compelling; some have called MacIntyre's work "striking" and "stunning."³³ "*Wake up,*"

³³ See the back cover of the Third Edition of *After Virtue*.

he is saying to us. I want to propose that we should engage MacIntyre's work precisely because his writing aims to strike and stun us; he is our gadfly.

At the same time, a strand of MacIntyre's thought moves beyond awakening to upbuilding. He wants to *build up* in his reader those virtues one must possess in order to persist in the quest for understanding and practical wisdom. He hopes to bring about a transformation in his audience. The character development that he wants is a movement from hazy unawareness, through arousal and distress, to a recasting of oneself in terms of the virtues required for human flourishing.

Alasdair MacIntyre's most important accomplishment as an author, it seems to me, is to awaken his readers by sounding an alarm. He is trying to warn us that contemporary culture is in crisis insofar as we lack an ability to engage in rational discourse about questions of human purpose. Beneath the veneer of debates about social and moral issues, whether those arguments occur in the academy or in the wider public realm, MacIntyre insists that there is a deep disorder, an unrecognized disagreement about the meaning of central moral concepts and an inability to move forward in any non-arbitrary manner. This was the topic of MacIntyre's M.A. thesis, and this issue has persisted throughout his publishing career.³⁴ His charge is that the same philosophy that was taught by his teachers and debated by his colleagues – that purposes are non-rational preferences – is embodied in contemporary social life.

In MacIntyre's best-known book, *After Virtue* (1981), he claims that this philosophy of emotivism is embodied in the character of the manager. MacIntyre calls

³⁴ For a summary that helpfully connects the arguments from MacIntyre's early writings to his "After Virtue Project," see Thomas D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*. Ashgate, 2006.

the manager a central figure in “the social drama of the present age.”³⁵ What does this mean? What does MacIntyre mean by calling the manager a *character*? And who is this character?

Throughout his writing, MacIntyre frequently italicizes the word *character*, signaling that he is using the term in a distinctive manner. He is synthesizing several notions, drawing from Max Weber’s sociology of “ideal types” while linking the notion of character as it is used in moral philosophy and dramatic literature. He clarifies his meaning when he says, “I choose the word ‘character’ . . . precisely because of the way it links dramatic and moral associations.”³⁶

Drawing an analogy between contemporary social life and medieval morality plays, MacIntyre claims that the manager is a “stock character.” On the ancient Greek stage, each actor wore a mask that depicted one’s character. From medieval times to contemporary Hollywood films, stories rely on stock characters. For example, the clown and the jester are stock characters immediately recognizable to audiences. In a similar way, MacIntyre assumes that his audience is familiar with the manager as a type. Such characters, according to MacIntyre, “partially define the possibilities of plot and action.”³⁷

The character of the manager is for MacIntyre an abstraction – not a particular person. As a type, this character is the embodiment of a moral philosophy in a social

³⁵ AV, 27.

³⁶ AV, 27.

³⁷ AV, 27.

role. He writes, “Characters are the masks worn by moral philosophies.”³⁸ Philosophies enter social life in various ways. The most direct way, of course, is through lectures, books, sermons, and conversations. Less directly, moral and metaphysical ideas can enter social life through literature and the arts. MacIntyre is encouraging us to look beyond formal arguments to notice other ways that a philosophy can be embodied and transmitted into social life. He draws a connection between a philosophy as it is presented in a literary character and its analogue: the embodiment of a philosophy in a social role. In this sense, a character is a type in the life of a society who embodies, perhaps implicitly, a moral philosophy. For the one who inhabits the role, the character acts to guide, structure, and constrain action. For others who encounter this character, it is crucial to be able to recognize and interpret the intentions of such characters. Those who encounter the character define themselves in part by the way of response.³⁹

So, what is this type – the manager? Who is this character? Let’s listen to a brief passage from a British newspaper article written during World War II about Albert Speer. Speer was Hitler’s Minister for armaments and war production and the so-called architect of the Third Reich. Speer is described as

very much the successful average man, well-dressed, civil, noncorrupt, very middle class in his style of life, with a wife and six children. Much less than any of the other German leaders does he stand for anything particularly German or particularly Nazi. He rather symbolises a type which is becoming increasingly important in all belligerent countries: the pure technician, the classless bright

³⁸ AV, 28.

³⁹ AV, 27 ff.

young man without background, with no other original aim than to make his way in the world and no other means than his technical and managerial ability. It is the lack of psychological and spiritual ballast, and the ease with which he handles the terrifying technical and organizational machinery of our age, which makes this type go extremely far nowadays . . . This is their age; the Hitlers, the Himmlers we may get rid of, but the Speers, whatever happens to this particular special man, will long be with us.⁴⁰

Alas, we don't need to look far to find such characters today. They abound in the sub-prime lending meltdown, the leveraged buyout destroyers of Wall Street that have been dubbed the "Barbarians at the Gate,"⁴¹ or a few years ago with the "Smartest Guys in the Room" at Enron.⁴² Even Bernard Madoff, the Wall Street veteran who is alleged to have perpetrated one of the largest frauds in the history of the financial world, is described by those who knew him as an ordinary, friendly person. Madoff's neighbors describe him as presenting an outward persona that masked his vices. "He appeared down-to-earth friendly and always greeted everyone by their first name."⁴³ But Madoff seems, from what I can tell, to be quite consciously corrupt. The manager that MacIntyre is describing is more like someone who worked for Madoff without asking questions. The

⁴⁰ Cited by Geoff Moore, "Re-Imagining the Morality of Management: A Modern Virtue Ethics Approach," *Business Ethics Quarterly* (2008). Moore is citing Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*. Duke University Press, 2001, p. 214, and Hauerwas is citing an April, 1944 article from *The Observer*.

⁴¹ Bryan Burrough and John Helyar, *Barbarians at the Gate: The Fall of RJR Nabisco*. HarperCollins, 1990.

⁴² Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*. Portfolio, 2004.

⁴³ Robert Frank, et. al. "Fund Fraud Hits Big Names," *The Wall Street Journal*. December 13, 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122914169719104017.html>

business world seems to provide a steady stream of these morally hollow, profit-driven characters.

MacIntyre draws from Max Weber's account⁴⁴ of the manager: an office executive, a career professional, appointed on the basis of certifiable qualifications and compensated accordingly, charged with managing a specific, limited area to accomplish a given purpose according to written policies and rules and applying those in an impersonal manner within a hierarchical structure while being subject to a hierarchical chain. In the capitalist system, the manager's given purpose is typically to increase profits, although the very same character could inhabit a government bureaucracy or a leadership role in a non-profit institution with a given goal of bringing about some measurable specified end. In any case, the manager's task is to organize a social group to accomplish a given end efficiently and effectively. As such, the manager that MacIntyre describes is an embodiment of the philosophy of emotivism, the notion that ends or purposes are preferences not subject to rational evaluation. The manager, understood this way, is an amoral character entirely unconcerned with and, in certain ways, unable to embody the virtues. The bureaucratic manager has no rational way to evaluate the purposes being pursued. Indeed, because of the denial that purposes are subject to rational evaluation, the danger is stronger. Without any rational way to guide organizational effectiveness, the manager's expertise is a perilous weapon. MacIntyre describes this character both to help his reader recognize the worthlessness and barbarism of the manager and to hold up a mirror. By reflecting on the emptiness of this character, MacIntyre hopes that his

⁴⁴ See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Free Press, 1947, especially 324ff.

reader will be inclined to turn away from the fragmentation and self-alienation of this form of life.

As MacIntyre's authorship unfolded, especially during the 1990s and this decade, he extended his criticism beyond the manager to focus on the "professional with expertise." As he once put it, "Ours is a culture dominated by experts, experts who profess to assist the rest of us, but who often instead make us their victims."⁴⁵ This tendency applies not only to managers, but also perhaps to professional philosophers, especially with regard to the tendency to turn questions about the good and the nature of things into intellectual puzzles formulated in a specialized technical jargon and disconnected from concrete human existence. Whether one's arena is corporate effectiveness (as with the manager) or philosophical problem-solving (as with the professional philosopher) each specialist claims expertise based on effective problem-solving-ability drawn from skilled analysis. The expert's analytic method, relative to each field, involves breaking things down to fix manageable problems.

In this process, one "problem" inevitably remains unaddressed: does human life have any integrated meaning or deeper purpose? Contemporary culture, that is, the culture of endless specialists, leaves us without any rational way to evaluate the various attempts to provide such a synthesis. Every effort to discern an integrated understanding about what makes for a good human life is reduced to individual preferences. Each

⁴⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Theories of Natural Law in the Culture of Advanced Modernity," in *Common Truths: New Perspectives on Natural Law*. Edited by Edward B. McLean. ISI Books, 2000.

proposal about how to live well seems stymied by a complaint analogous to that of the smart-mouthed adolescent: “That’s just your opinion.”

Modern culture seems to offer enlightenment and freedom’s sweet fragrance. Progress promises liberation – through education from the constraints of ignorance, by democracy from the strictures of class, by technology from the drudgery of labor, etc. But modernity’s promise, that each can “live however one sees fit,” turns out to be a Faustian bargain. The result is thousands of specialists offering to satisfy every conceivable consumer need. The promise of a culture of enlightenment devolves into a culture of consumption. Experts become particularly adept at marketing products and services that promise to soothe one’s endless malaise; those experts rely on the cultivation of an ever-growing sense of dissatisfaction with life and an increased sense of need for the services of more experts. The modern self (detached, criterionless, disengaged) appears calm and neutral, but is ultimately left without rational resources for evaluating whether one particular way of life is better than another.

MacIntyre famously concludes *After Virtue* by proposing that we should take up a politics of local resistance. He calls for a new, perhaps very different, St. Benedict, that is, one who will help form small-scale communities where the tradition of the virtues might be sustained.

After awakening his reader to the profound contradictions within contemporary culture, MacIntyre’s his next move is to propose that his reader imaginatively take up the role of the everyday plain person. MacIntyre wants to move his reader beyond this moment of unmasked awakening to a state where one is disposed to pursue answers, in

conversation with others, about matters of deep purpose: How shall we live? What makes for a good life? How can we shape the communities of which we are members to help make them humane and civil?

Let's focus for a moment on the character of the "everyday plain person". This character is "plain" in the sense that he or she is not a professional philosopher and not someone who has studied academic philosophy. This character is an "everyday person" in the sense that he or she is an individual with an everyday life who is engaged in concrete social practices with internal excellences, the pursuit of which promotes the cultivation of the virtues, allowing the possessor to take up the quest for life's deeper questions.⁴⁶

Everyday plain persons may live without sensing a desire to reflect on questions of purpose and meaning. In this mode, which may extend for long periods, plain persons may seem unreflective and not philosophical. While existing in this unreflective state, the plain person unwittingly presumes the philosophical views embedded in the customs and culture in which one has been raised, perhaps in a fragmentary manner filled with unnoticed inconsistencies. In that context, the plain person may be confronted by a crisis that provokes deep questions. As MacIntyre writes,

Someone who has believed the he was highly valued by his employers and colleagues is suddenly fired; someone proposed for membership of a club whose members were all, so he believed, close friends is blackballed. Or someone falls

⁴⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66:1 (Winter 1992) 3-7.

in love and needs to know what the loved one *really* feels; someone falls out of love and needs to know how he or she can possibly have been so mistaken in the other.⁴⁷

Confronted by such a crisis of meaning, the plain person finds himself or herself asking philosophical questions. Is it possible to distinguish appearance from reality? Can we know the thoughts and inner life of another? Can we reliably predict the future based on generalizations from the past? Faced with these sorts of questions, the plain person finds himself or herself on a quest. To take up that quest with seriousness, MacIntyre proposes that the plain person will need to withstand the temptation to dismiss that search as non-rational, thereby learning to use practical reason with others to uncover the order implicit yet actually present in the world while calling into question the norms espoused by one's contemporaries.

MacIntyre further suggests that taking up this quest will be particularly difficult for plain persons situated in the contemporary culture of advanced capitalism influenced by the enlightenment liberalism of modern Western society, and this for two reasons. On the one hand, we lack an institutional arena in which plain persons "are able to engage together in systematic reasoned debate designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind."⁴⁸ On the other hand, if the plain person turns to philosophy – which might appear to be the discipline best suited to take up questions of deep purpose – one

⁴⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 60:4 (October 1977) 453. This important essay has been republished in various collections.

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, "Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered," in *Ethics and Politics*, Cambridge, 2006, 185.

regrettably finds too often a deep split between what philosophers say (in their professional articles or in the seminar room) compared to what those same philosophers do as flesh-and-blood persons. Indeed, MacIntyre advances this not only as an indictment, but also as a confession of some of his own past shortcomings.⁴⁹

MacIntyre wants his reader to take up the role of the everyday plain person who has become awakened to the importance of pursuing a quest for understanding. His strategy, then, is to *awaken* his reader to a profound inadequacy in the culture of consumption and the ethos of expertise, and then to *build up* in his reader those virtues that plain persons must possess in order to persist in the quest for understanding and practical wisdom.

Along the way, MacIntyre offers both an indictment of contemporary professionalized philosophy and a proposal for a way to re-conceive of what it means 1) individually to be a philosopher, and 2) communally to be a university. This theme,

⁴⁹ During his interview with Giovanna Borradori, when asked about his life prior to the publication of *After Virtue* and his apparent existential inquietude, he stated, “When I look back on my asserted beliefs during that period, I see my thinking as having been a clumsily patched together collection of fragments.” Giovanna Borradori, in *The American Philosopher*, 142. This interview is included in *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight, Notre Dame, 1998. In a personal conversation with Daniel McGlynn, (a neighbor of mine who was enrolled in one of MacIntyre’s classes at the University of Notre Dame in the fall 2008 semester), I was told that Professor MacIntyre actively encouraged his students to challenge his positions. MacIntyre aimed to impress upon his students that he had benefited in the past from such challenges by students and colleagues, and that he had changed his position when he became convinced of shortcomings in previously held views. (Personal conversation with Daniel McGlynn, March 22, 2009.)

which is the focus of the final chapter of his 1989 Gifford Lectures⁵⁰, is central to MacIntyre's two most recent books.

In his 2006 book, *Edith Stein*, MacIntyre forges a new genre of philosophical writing that moves beyond both biography and the history of philosophy to explore the relationship between attitudes expressed in a philosopher's writing compared to the philosopher's life. What emerges from MacIntyre's text is an investigation of what it means to live a philosophical life. MacIntyre wants to dispose his reader to see that Stein's life, her flesh-and-blood existence, is far more philosophical than that of her better-known contemporaries, such as Martin Heidegger.

In his most recent book, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, which was published just a few months ago, MacIntyre criticizes both the modern research university and a widespread understanding of professional philosophy. At the modern research university, each academic discipline is treated as "autonomous and self-defining."⁵¹ "In order to excel in any one particular discipline, one need in general know little or nothing about any of the others."⁵² Prestige and influence at such universities most often attach to intensely and narrowly specialized research and scholarship, so in this context, it is imprudent to expend time learning a discipline other than one's own. The same is true of the discipline of philosophy, at least according to a widely held contemporary attitude. For example, Scott Soames has written that contemporary philosophy "has become an

⁵⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1989. The final chapter is titled, "Reconceiving the University as an Institution and the Lecture as a Genre."

⁵¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2009. 15.

⁵² *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 16.

aggregate of related, but semi-independent investigations, very much like other academic disciplines.”⁵³ As such, philosophy is “done by specialists primarily for other specialists.”⁵⁴

The rest of MacIntyre’s recent book aims to offer an alternative by re-conceiving what it means to be a philosopher. Such a philosopher is not a specialist with an expertise in a narrow sub-discipline. Rather, the activity of such a philosopher is to cultivate a set of dispositions that allow one to address the philosophical questions faced by everyday plain persons. To excel in this practice, one must learn not only how to analyze arguments, but also how to understand, describe and evaluate the history of the debates that are integral to philosophy and which have been sustained through multiple generations. Further, philosophers need to recall that, although it is altogether appropriate for their work to become rigorous and for their discipline to develop a technical vocabulary, their enquiries “begin from and extend the enquiries of plain persons.”⁵⁵ Philosophers should, according to MacIntyre’s reconceived notion of what it means to be a philosopher, engage in their activities “for the common good” and while taking “the trouble to engage in sustained conversation with plain persons, so as not to lose sight of the relationship between their enquiries, no matter how sophisticated, and the questions initially posed by plain persons.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Soames, Soctt. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton University Press, 2003, 2:463. Quoted by MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities*. 17-18.

⁵⁴ Soames, 2:463.

⁵⁵ *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 10.

⁵⁶ *God, Philosophy, Universities*, 11.

I recognize that my description of MacIntyre's "reconception" of the philosopher is quite compressed. Despite this, let me conclude by pointing to a project that MacIntyre has left unfinished.

Returning to the character of the manager, suppose we grant MacIntyre his criticisms of the bureaucratic manager, and suppose we follow his advice to take up a politics of local resistance. Further, suppose we find a new Benedict, and having retreated into small-scale communities, we are able to sustain the tradition of the virtues. In that situation, could we live without managers? It seems to me that the answer is "no". After all, even small-scale communities need someone to plan, lead, organize, monitor and correct the activities of those in the community.

I am willing to grant that small-scale communities are crucial as seedbeds of virtue and that a politics of local resistance is needed to withstand some of the destructive tendencies of global capitalism and the culture of consumption. However, it strikes me as unrealistic to think that such communities can exist without someone to organize (or manage) their activities. Further, it seems unrealistic and unhelpful to pursue a form of life purged of all large-scale projects. Entirely withdrawing into local communities seems to neglect crucial features of our humanity, especially our global interconnectedness and solidarity. For these reasons, I propose that we stand in need of a transformed conception of the manager, not as one who exercises bureaucratic rationality solely to effectively and efficiently accomplish a given end, but as one who cultivates the virtue of practical wisdom, including the ability to use reason to evaluate purposes by engaging in civic discourse while considering whether certain purposes are conducive to

a good life, and as one who conceives of one's task in terms of stewardship, that is, as one charged with caring for the goods of another or of the community. Hence, it seems to me that, for those of us who want to extend MacIntyre's project, one worthwhile way of doing so involves exploring what it would mean to re-conceive of the manager as a "wise steward."