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# VIRTUE ETHICS, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, AND TELOS

Rev. Dr. Thomas Dexter Lynch  
Department of Public Administration  
Louisiana State University

## Abstract

*Aristotle developed virtue ethics as normative ethical theory and it remained influential for centuries but lost favor in the modernist and post-modernist era of today. One reason for that falling out of favor was the philosophic argument that disagreed with Aristotle's telos (meaning end purpose) that is a critical foundation concept in his theory. The modern counter argument challenges that critical assumption of virtue ethics by saying that there is no proof of an end purpose for humans.*

*Agreeing with George Frederickson, this article argues a profession, such as public administration, does have a telos and thus disagrees with contemporary arguments that virtue ethics is logical foolishness at least when used in the context of a profession. This article builds on the contemporary work of Alastyre MacIntyre and his concept that every "practice" has an aim or end purpose. Thus, for public administration, virtue ethics is relevant because its professional purpose is the benevolent pursuit of the public interest. Those in public administration can and should use and develop virtues such as justice, courage, and truthfulness to help them counter the common institutional temptations that drive lesser ethical people to seek wealth, fame, and power instead of advancing the public interest.*

## **Introduction**

Virtue Ethics is properly associated with Aristotle (284 – 322 BCE) but in our times it is also properly associated with Alastyre MacIntyre, who currently is a Senior Research Professor at the University of Norte Dame. For many centuries, it was the primary approach to ethics; but with the influence of modernism and post modernism in the twentieth century, virtue ethics fell out of favor. One of the corner stones of virtue ethics is the concept of *telos* (end purpose), which this article explores in the context of the professional practice of public administration.

The organization of this article is divided into several parts. After this brief introduction, the next section presents a description of Aristotle's virtue ethics with an explanation of the importance of *telos* in virtue ethics. Next, the article examines the modernism and post modernism critique of ethics and then the direct challenge to *telos* itself. The article then addresses MacIntyre's concept of practice. Next, the article explains the interrelationship of practice and profession. And finally, some conclusions are offered.

Essentially, this article argues that MacIntyre's philosophic contribution to virtue ethics means that virtue ethics is again quite relevant to professions such as public administration. This relevance is applicable to those who not only reject the extremes of modernism and post modernism but also even to those who embrace them.

## **Aristotle**

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle approached ethics with a keen awareness of the then and now popular philosophical reasoning of hedonism and the thinking of

both his teacher Plato and Plato's teacher Socrates. To Aristotle, ethics was not merely the study and practices of right and wrong behavior but it was also living the *good life*. He dismissed and opposed hedonism by taking the perspective that the *good life* was more than merely living a life of maximizing pleasure. He believed life and indeed the meaning of life has a purpose beyond pleasure maximizing as understood by the hedonists.

He saw everything in terms of causes: material, efficient, formal, and final. Material causes are the elements out of which a person or persons create an object. For example, with a bronze statue, the material cause is the bronze itself. The efficient cause is the means by which someone creates the object. In the bronze statue example, it is the creative mind and skilled hands of the sculptor that is the efficient cause. The formal cause is the expression of what it is. For the statue, it is in particular the sculptor's but also the viewers' idea of the completed statute. The final cause is the end for which it was created. Thus, the final cause is the final end, purpose, teleology, or *telos*. In some cases the formal cause and the final cause are the same or about the same. The *telos* is the full perfection of the object itself in terms of the ideal for which it was created. Thus, the final cause is internal to the very nature of the object itself and it is not something subjectively the artist or anyone imposes on it.

To Aristotle, life itself, for each person, has a final purpose, which is in the very nature of the person and it is not something the person subjectively assigns or anyone imposes on the person. The *good life* for each person is about moving toward that perfection. Aristotle saw the essence of a person being his or her human soul, which has both an irrational and rational element involving three tiers. Humans share with animals an irrational element that he

called its “vegetative faculty” and is associated with nutrition and growth. This is his first tier. The second tier is the “appetitive faculty,” which gives us joy, grief, hope, and fear. These emotions and desires are a mixture of irrational and rational with the irrational being pure animal behavior and the rational being desire that we control with the help of reason. The third tier is the “rational calculative,” which is the focus of morality that permits the moral virtue that controls our desires with contemplative reason and logic. The mastery of such reasoning is “intellectual virtue” (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

## **Modernism and Post Modernism**

Modernism greatly influenced Western culture with its focus on doubt arising out of Rene Descartes (159-1650) famous statement: “Cogito ergo sum.” It means I think (doubt), therefore I am. In other words the only thing that anyone can maintain for certain is their own existence and nothing else. With this logic, modernists subject everything to doubt and demand the most careful inquiry possible to create what they accept as knowledge in the form of theory that always remains subject to challenge. This extremely careful methodological approach is the hallmark of modern science and is essentially the so-called *scientific method* that has brought so much progress to humankind. Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857) created a version of modernism called *positivism* or *empiricism* by building not only on Descartes but also Frances Bacon (1561 - 1626), Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679), and John Locke (1632 -1704).

The modern empiricist accepts experience instead of logical reasoning per se as the source of knowledge. In particular, British Empiricists argued that a community of

scholars or even one scholar must base all knowledge or truth from experience such as observations rather than from logical techniques. In the early and middle twentieth century, Bertrand Russell (1872 - 1970) argued that only assertions affirmed by the rigorous methodology of science were and should be considered knowledge. Thus, all value judgments including ethics, goodness, beauty, truth, and morality cannot be considered knowledge but are merely emotions and consequently not verifiable. Clearly, this very strong and influential argument significantly dismissed ethics in general and virtue ethics specifically.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) helped develop *post modernism*. He argued our individual and group values place us within logical sets of beliefs called paradigms. One can logically exist and argue right and wrong within a paradigm with its specific values, but one cannot logically argue values across paradigms. You cannot say another person is wrong if they adhere to a different set of beliefs and values. Thus, only moral relativism is possible and theorizing about a universal right conduct and *good life* is logically impossible (Fox and Miller, 1993). His very influential argument dismisses universal approaches to ethics such as virtue ethics (Sahakian and Sahakian, 1993).

### **Critique of Virtue Ethics**

One way to argue that Aristotle is wrong is merely to disagree that a person has a final purpose and there is no purpose or meaning to life. With that logic, life just is and nothing more. There is no soul and no human essence that can be perfected. Because there is no final cause, it is not internal to the very nature of humankind; and to the extent that such values are assigned, they are subjectively

assigned by the person or imposed by others on the person (Zinaich, 2006).

This counter argument simply disagrees with the underlying assumption of Aristotle's argument. For much of human history, such an argument was difficult to make because most of society believed that God existed and most concurred that somehow God had created a life for humankind that had some sort of deeper meaning or *telos*. As the twentieth century became increasingly secular due in part to the influence of modernism and post modernism, human progress was less associated with the notion of God and the logical certainty of a human *telos*. Thus, this counter argument of saying there is not purpose to life becomes more socially acceptable in the intellectual community and therefore carries significantly more weight in the early twenty first century.

Teleology assumes that the universe has a design and purpose. A correct treatment of Aristotle must emphasize that he used teleology but he also was highly critical of the use of teleology by his predecessor and would probably disagree with many that came after him. For example, he did not advocate a teleology that fit the creation, design, and providence that is central to Christian, Muslim, and even Platonic thought. His was not a mechanistic world picture (Johnson, 2002).

Nevertheless, his views were teleological and therefore subject to critiques that argue there is no end purpose to life or humans. One can see teleology in Aristotle's concept of nature where he notes that end of a thing is also its function. For example plants and animals have natural existents. An acorn has an inherent tendency to grow into an oak tree thus the tree exists not by chance or craft but rather by nature. In Eudemian Ethics,

Nicomachean Ethics and Politics, Aristotle argued that humans also have a natural function. For example, part of human nature is that they are political and adaptive for life in the city-state. Thus, for Aristotle political naturalism is a foundation of his political philosophy (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2004).

To Aristotle, anything that inhibits the fulfillment of the complete attainment of the *telos* is bad or at least dysfunctional. To him, nature operates for the sake of an end and end by definition is good. For example, sleeping is natural, necessary, and beneficial. For human beings the ultimate good or happiness consists in perfection of the full attainment of the human natural function, which is the full realization of the soul through reason. He recognized that his notion of the ideal is generally impossible to realize and his fall back position was to argue for the attainment of the ideal as much as possible. To Aristotle, the good was objective and independent of human wishes but it was also relative to the organism's natural end (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2004).

## **MacIntyre and the Concept of Practice**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the hedonism of utilitarianism was the dominant ethical norm but certainly Kantian views were also highly influential. Modernists argued that Aristotle's virtue ethics was foolishness because of its none empirical qualities. Post modernists such as G. E. Moore (1873 – 1958) in his Principia Ethica took an emotive approach to ethics and claimed that moral precepts were mere preferences of an individual's emotions rather than an absolute value that existed separate from the individual. Thus ethics and morals became individuated and relativistic. There was no common ground for moral

reference involving meaningful dialogue. To MacIntyre (1984) the intellectual community lost its theoretical and practical notions of morality and his solution was to return to virtue ethics.

MacIntyre argues that the failure of the emotive approach to ethics with its attack on virtue ethics is separating the individual's experience from his or her social and historical community. To do so is nonsensical and the result is the nonsense of 20<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophical dialogue that exists without communication among the parties in the moral debate. There is no established way of deciding among moral claims and thus moral debate is left as necessarily interminable. Essentially, those in a moral debate merely argue intuitively and their justifications are hinged on their adopted moral system which has no grounding beyond preference. A rational debate is impossible (McKay, 2004).

Like Aristotle, MacIntyre (1984: p.50) wants to define "good" in such a way that reason can be used to determine its existence. In other words, he wants a teleology that is similar to Aristotle and wants a "good" that someone can define without reference to a preferential concept that is only emotive in character. He wants acting morally to be a matter of rational pursuit predicated upon factual determinations. Good must be functionally defined.

MacIntyre (1984: p. 50) achieves his purpose by noting the functionality of a watch and a farmer. He notes that the concept of a watch cannot be defined independently of the concept of a "good" watch. In parallel, the concept of a farmer cannot be defined independently of the concept of a "good" farmer. In other words, like Aristotle, functionality is the key to moral reasoning according to MacIntyre. Teleology again becomes the basis



for introducing rationality into the moral debate but for MacIntyre this type of reasoning is only possible because of the contextual nature of good in society.

For MacIntyre (1984: p. 150), every practice has an aim, an end purpose, or what we call a *telos*. When people engage in a practice, then rationality can inform them of what is good and bad behavior. Thus, by its very nature, a practice has an end purpose and those so engaged have a *telos*. Correspondingly, one can use rational thought to define virtues that better enable a person to achieve what Aristotle called *eudaimonia* and failing to apply those virtues frustrates the *telos* of the practice. Acting virtuously is to act from an inclination formed by the cultivation of virtues and thus there is a very central rational component in virtuous behavior. Virtuous behavior is a continual series of choices often established with a rational selection of traits that further the likelihood that the *telos* will be achieved. Practice is key to MacIntyre's version of virtue ethics.

He defines practice as follows:

“By a practice I'm going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to the form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and practically definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and the human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 1984: p. 187).

The key to his definition is the notion of internal goods. He illustrates the concept with an example from the game of chess. Although the end result of the game might

appear to be defeating the opponent, the true end purpose is mastering the moves, strategies and intricacies of the game. If one cheats to win and achieves a win, the player only denies him or herself the true benefit of engagement in the game.

MacIntyre notes: “A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them” (1984: p. 190). To apply ethics and be moral requires virtues and existing without them means that the individual’s “good” cannot be achieved. MacIntyre defines virtue as, “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enables us to achieve those goods which are internal to practice and the lack which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (MacIntyre, 1984: p. 191).

So what is the link between virtue and practice? Virtues sustain a practice. They give individuals “internal goods” and thus serve as a motivation to overcome dangers, temptations and distractions so common in life. Internal goods are intangible positive feelings about the self whereas external goods are tangible benefits resulting from honor, money, power. Virtues sustain the person’s activity in practice and encourage the person to move toward the fundamental end purpose of that practice. Virtues are a means but they also become the ultimate end as they define the character or inner-self of the person, who is engaged in his or her practice (MacIntyre, 1984: p. 219).

MacIntyre takes the notion of teleology from Aristotle and redefines it as a social teleology (McKay, 2004). Confronting modernism and post modernism, MacIntyre makes Aristotle relevant again by stressing the

social contextual nature of human existence. Morality again is brought back into the realm of the rational and moral debate is coherent again. Virtue ethics is important, once more.

### **Practice and Professionalism**

This author argues that the notion of “practice” includes the concept of what is commonly called a profession. To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship with a community of contemporary practitioners, but also with those who preceded you and those who will follow you in that practice. The contemporary community of public administration, as in any other practice, is in a particularly salient relationship to those earlier practitioners who extended the reach and worth of the practice to its present point of evolution. Practices are **not** institutions, which are necessarily concerned with external goods. Nevertheless, institutions are critical to practice as they sustain them and characteristically form a single casual order. For example, a doctor often works in the context of a hospital and a public servant works in the context of a government agency. In addition, the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the realities of institutions; but the virtuous practice provides a counter to such realities as the corrupting power of institutions and the tendency to overwhelm the government processes with ever more complex Kantian rules and regulations.

In the Kantian and utilitarian contemporary worldview, a profession, such as public administration, is simply a social arena in which each individual in the profession pursues his or her own self-chosen concept of

the *good life*. Political institutions exist to provide order that makes self-determination possible. In this contemporary view, government should promote law-abidingness, but the legislative function should not inculcate any one moral view.

In contrast, the virtue ethics worldview not only requires the exercise of virtues but it also encourages the development of moral and ethical judgment in its members. Each professional should look to its professional community to define their professional *telos*. In this view, political institutions should exist to help each professional self-actualize. The legislative function of government should not be used to create a particular moral view but rather to foster an environment that facilitates continuing moral development and an improved moral judgment within the profession and the nation's people.

Of importance in Aristotle's modified reasoning by MacIntyre is that a "practice" is a means that members of the profession associate and that association includes common standards of excellence. In other words, a practice such as public administration involves standards of excellence, often obedience to rules and being influenced by virtues, and the achievement of goods and services. In addition, as noted by Alasdair MacIntyre, there are internal and external goods that result from the practice. With external goods that characteristically results from competition, there are losers and winners as some gain or lose more than others in what the profession does and does not produce in the various institutions in which they serve. With internal goods, the achievement is a good for the whole institution, the professional community, and the individual professional's inner-self. There are no losers if the professionals produce internal goods.

Alasdair MacIntyre defines *virtue* as an acquired human quality that tends to enable us to achieve internal goods. This is important to public administration as every practice requires a certain kind of relationship among those who participate in it. As public administrators perform their practice, they engage in a shared purpose and shared sense of their standards of excellence. Both influence their professionalism.

In our contemporary world, one can easily ignore, assume, or say that the *telos* of public administration does not exist and maybe even that it should not exist. The cynic can argue that public administration is just a job or at best a means merely to advance a person's power and fortune. Certainly, this is a common hedonistic worldview but a more positive person can also argue that being a professional in public administration is uniquely important and maybe more important than many other jobs. Certainly, many private sector jobs in society are useful to society, but public sector jobs have a concern for the public interest and they place a value on teaching a child to read, protecting a neighborhood from crime, treating a patient for an illness, and rescuing lives from a blazing building. By its very nature, public administration implicitly involves higher values that transform a society into a civilization.

Public administration is about internal goods, as achievement in the profession itself is a good for everyone in society. If the institution of government hires the correct employees and trains them correctly for their jobs, then the work of government is preformed at a higher level of proficiency and taxpayers get more for their "investment" in civilization that we call taxes. If those public servants manage the budget correctly, the allocated resources provide the public with services that maximize the social and economic outcome for the betterment of the whole

community. Unlike institutional decisions that have winners and losers, public administration's internal goods create only winners for the professional and the larger community.

## **Conclusion**

Public administration must always exist in the context of public institutions with their strong tendency to permit and even encourage corruptions or other immoral behavior. Thus, public administrators must learn and re-learn to exercise virtues in the context of governmental institutions regardless of their circumstances if corruption and other immoral behavior are to be kept to a minimum. The retention and enhancement of integrity depends on sustaining but often of improving institutions. Immoral behavior in government institutions is due to vices that the exercise of virtue can curb. Unfortunately, institutions often foster and even encourage the eroding of virtues within public administrators. Thus, reformers must reinforce the development of virtues within public administration by addressing both the individuals and the institutions.

Virtue ethics influences external and internal goods differently. Virtue ethics essentially create internal goods, but they can and sometimes do hinder external goods. The latter are objects of human desire that are almost always in dispute within a group of any size and even dispute sometimes within a single person. In a materialistic culture, individuals place extreme value on achieving riches, fame, and power. In such an environment, virtues such as justice within public administration can hinder achieving external goods for many private interest groups. In such circumstance, political rulers and others would punish public administrators for acting with virtue. However,

because virtue ethics also has internal goods, internal rewards exist, which no one can take away from the professional public administrator. In contrast with utilitarianism, there are no internal goods as that normative theory does not accommodate the distinction between internal and external goods. Thus, the sense of reward is impossible for the utilitarian when the institutional pressures for riches, fame, and power overwhelm virtues such as justice, courage, and truthfulness.

Virtue ethics requires a practice context that has a *telos* or quest. For public administration, that *telos* or quest is the benevolent pursuit of the public interest as explained by George Frederickson. The quest provides the profession of public administration with an understanding of what is the “good.” It gives focus and purpose to the practice but it also gives focus to which virtues are most important in any given circumstance. It enables professionals to order other goods and extend individual and collective understanding of the purpose and context of the virtues. It permits a conception of the good that enables professionals to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life. Such a quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought but also an ever expanding self-knowledge (Frederickson, 1997).

Both modernism and post modernism greatly contributed to the dismissal of ethics as a meaningful area of inquiry by scholars. However, the argument by MacIntyre should encourage modernist to reconsider their position as they can empirically survey professionals, as to how they self identify with the *telos* of their profession. Thus, modernists do have an empirical subject or focus of inquiry and their rigorous methodology is applicable to virtue ethics.

In addition, MacIntyre's argument should change the conclusions of the post modernists who believe that one can only argue ethical and moral matters within a paradigm and not across paradigms. One need only realize that a profession with a *telos* such as public administration does have one paradigm and the arguments about virtue ethics can be done within that paradigm. Thus, post modernism reasoning does permit the use of virtue ethics, as explained by MacIntyre.

Virtue ethics is coming back into favor but the subject should not be studied without a deeper appreciation of philosophy, particularly the works of Aristotle and MacIntyre. Is there a *telos* or end purpose? Limiting our consideration to just a profession such as public administration, one can empirically demonstrate that the leading thinkers in the field believe there is an end purpose to a profession. Certainly, an empirical study can demonstrate that a consensus exists on the end purpose of what most in a profession consider as their *telos*. Thus, if an agreed upon end purpose to a profession exists, then MacIntyre helps us realize that virtue ethics is quite defensible and can help us in our rational debates over moral problems as they relate to professionalism.

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## **Biographical Sketch**

Dr. Thomas Dexter Lynch is a Professor of Public Administration at Louisiana State University. He received his PhD in 1974 from Rockefeller College, State University of New York at Albany. He was ordained as an Interfaith Minister in 2003 at the New Seminary of New York City. He has written about 10 books of which two have been reprinted and also published in Chinese. His most known book is *Public Budgeting in American*, which is in 5<sup>th</sup> edition and been in circulation for about twenty five years. In addition he has written more than 80 articles and chapters primarily in the area of ethics, public budgeting, organization theory, and web based education. He is most known for developing and showing the application of the system model in both budgeting and ethics. Dr. Lynch may be reached by email at [tlynch@lsu.edu](mailto:tlynch@lsu.edu).