

## **Alasdair MacIntyre, Universities and the Common Good**

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### **Abstract**

Best known as a political philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre is also a critic of the modern university. The paper examines the grounds of MacIntyre's criticism of modern universities; it offers an assessment of the philosophical debate occasioned by MacIntyre's writings on the topic; and it proposes a way of taking this debate forward. The debate is shown to be centred around three objections to MacIntyre's normative idea of the university: that it is overly intellectualist, parochial, and moralizing. The merits of these objections are considered and a different interpretation of the normative core of MacIntyre's conception of the university is presented: realization and promotion of the common good. An analysis is offered of the kinds of common good universities may serve to realize, including practices internal to the institution, education of a public, and flourishing relationships in various social roles. The implications of this neo-Aristotelian analysis of the normative core of universities is also shown to be at odds with some of MacIntyre's explicitly stated views on the role of universities in forming an educated public and educating students for work.

## Introduction

Universities are clearly important institutions of modern societies. They play a key role in the production and transmission of knowledge, the education and self-formation of citizens, the training and accreditation of professions, and on account of the opportunities for employment and consumption they bring, the economic life of many communities.

Universities are also a frequent topic of public and political debate. For decades, a drive for reform has been sweeping through universities across the globe, generating much public discussion about the distinctive character and future of this institution (Connell 2019; Collini 2012, 2017). It is perhaps a reflection of the general neglect of education as a topic within the recently dominant paradigms of political theory that political philosophers have contributed only marginally to these debates and to the growing academic discourse on the fundamental character and purpose of the university.<sup>1</sup> And it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most trenchant critics of the dominant paradigms of political theory should be amongst those philosophers to have significantly intervened in the public and academic debates on universities: Alasdair MacIntyre. Two of the three ground-breaking studies in moral and political theory MacIntyre wrote in the 1980s culminated with reflections on the limits of the 'modern liberal university' and the need for an alternative institutional framework for the version of moral inquiry defended in those books (MacIntyre 1988, pp. 399-403; MacIntyre 1990, pp. 216-236). And in a series of interventions since, MacIntyre has renewed and broadened his criticism of actually existing universities, invoking an alternative 'idea' of the university that can be used to justify and guide genuine reform, or even transformation of the contemporary university into another kind of institution truer to this 'idea' (MacIntyre 2006; 2009a; 2009b; 2013).

Our aim in this paper is to advance the philosophical debate triggered by MacIntyre's writings on universities, and to defend a modified version of the 'idea' of the university MacIntyre mobilizes for the purpose of critique: what we will call a 'critical conception' of the university. We begin, in section 1, by noting some of the key ways in which, according to MacIntyre, universities go wrong. In section 2, we consider MacIntyre's idea of the non-defective or well-functioning university, and in section 3, we discuss the main criticisms MacIntyre's views on this matter have attracted. Three objections to MacIntyre's idea of the university are distinguished: that it is problematically intellectualist, parochial, and moralistic. We argue that while these objections have some force when applied to MacIntyre's explicitly stated views on universities (what we call his 'official view'), they do not penetrate to what we take to be the normative core of MacIntyre's conception of the university: promotion of the common good. In order to see why promotion of the common good provides the normative core of MacIntyre's critical conception of the university, we need to place MacIntyre's explicitly stated views on universities in the larger context of what MacIntyre on various occasions calls his 'revolutionary' Aristotelianism (MacIntyre 2008) and 'neo'-Aristotelianism (MacIntyre 2016). This is what we attempt to do in section 4, where we consider the distinction between individual, public and common goods as it bears on the purpose of universities. The idea of an 'educated public' plays a crucial, but also ambiguous and potentially misleading, role in MacIntyre's argument here, which we attempt to clarify. On our reading, the 'public' is one group whose common good is or ought to be served by a university education; it is as a member of the public that one benefits from this education. But the public is not the only such group; and it is not solely in virtue of membership of this group that the benefits to an individual of a university education contribute to the common good. Other groups include families, schools and workplaces,

such that it becomes part of the purpose of universities – according to this more radical conception – to educate family members, teachers and workers regarding the conditions of their common good. In section 5 we consider what specifically it is about a university education that helps to realize and promote common goods in the performance of various social roles, and we draw attention to a conflict that exists between this view and some of MacIntyre's explicitly stated views on the purpose of universities, especially in relation to public education and education for work.

### **1. MacIntyre's critique of contemporary universities**

The fundamental problem with modern universities, in MacIntyre's view, is that they have become bad at the kind of thing they are meant to excel in. What is it that we should expect a university to do well? At the most general level, rational enquiry, the production and assessment of arguments, the presentation and elaboration of reasons of various kinds. As MacIntyre put it in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry (TRV)*, 'universities are places where conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in the detailed practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated' (1990, p. 222). In turn, such standards of rational justification contribute to the debates of a wider public, which may be better or worse at carrying out such debate (MacIntyre 1987; 1990, pp.14-26, 44-56). But when those standards are 'put to work' in contemporary publics by the 'official spokespersons' of the academic establishment in defense of the university from external attack, the results are rarely more than 'stuttering ineptitudes' (MacIntyre 1990, p. 221). Universities struggle desperately to justify why 'resources and privileges should be allocated to them', and beyond this, why they should continue to exist at all. The poverty of their

arguments reflects a broader failure of function, a failure in the elaboration and evaluation of reasons just where (as far as universities are concerned) it is needed most.<sup>2</sup>

But the problem is not just the defective way in which universities present and justify themselves to outsiders. It also has to do with failings internal to the institution, failings that impact negatively on the people directly involved in the university's core activities, namely the students and lecturers/professors (those who teach and do research). Much of MacIntyre's discussion of the damage done to students and lecturers/professors in the modern university focuses on the deleterious effects of fragmentation and specialization (MacIntyre 1990, p. 220, p. 227; 2006; 2009a, p. 349ff; 2009b, p. 173ff). On the one hand, fragmentation and specialization of the *curriculum* leaves students with an impoverished sense of the overall shape and direction of their university education, and hence of what the *point* of it is. If universities are unable to provide their students with an education whose overall point and purpose is intelligible to them, they are radically defective, in MacIntyre's view, in their distinctive function as institutions of education. The fragmented and specialized curricula of contemporary universities at best leaves it to chance whether the student has an understanding of what their university education was for, and at worst it disposes them to confusion and misunderstanding; for example, by leading them to think that there is no purpose or point to their education over and above the knowledge obtained from particular units of study or the instrumental purposes served by possession of a degree.

Fragmentation and specialization affect university lecturers and professors in a different way. All university professors, and most lecturers in research universities, must establish themselves as experts in a particular discipline or subdiscipline, undergo the appropriate professional training, and maintain their standing by ongoing publication in the

appropriate professional journals. But their training and maintenance of expertise in a particular discipline equips them poorly for understanding the limits of their discipline. This doesn't just discourage them from learning from other disciplines; it also prevents them from seeing the contribution their own discipline makes to enquiry as a whole. This negatively affects their functioning both as teachers and researchers. As teachers, they are unable to make connections between different areas of inquiry or provide the contextualisation needed for students to see the point of their university education. And as researchers, they are apt to lack wisdom, to fail in appreciation of the broader significance of the knowledge they help to produce and the contribution it might make to the life of the larger community (MacIntyre 2006; 2009a, p. 361; 2009b, p. 176).

In MacIntyre's view, fragmentation and specialization aren't just bad for students and lecturers. They are bad for the traditions of enquiry that, according to MacIntyre, help give coherence to university teaching and research programs. They are also bad for the wider society in which these traditions have their place and to which they contribute. And of course, for MacIntyre corrosion of tradition doesn't just occur in universities. The forces of fragmentation, compartmentalization and specialization wreak havoc throughout modern society, and the contemporary university is by no means alone in having to contend with its consequences (MacIntyre 1985; 1998, p. 235 ff; 1999b, p. 321ff; 2016, p. 204ff).

## **2. MacIntyre's 'idea' of a university**

If, as MacIntyre suggests, fragmentation and specialization are the characteristic defects of the contemporary university, then it would seem to follow that reform of the university should take the direction of integration and generalization. And this is how MacIntyre presents it. If the university is to excel in its function, it must first have a distinct idea of

what that function is and how it differs from the function of other institutions. We have seen that, for MacIntyre, the distinctive function of the university is to enact, elaborate and critically assess standards of rational justification, and to educate by initiating students into key practices of rational inquiry. This end is distinct from both 'social utility' and 'professional training' (MacIntyre 2006, p. 14; 2009a, p. 350), ends the pursuit of which, in MacIntyre's view, leads to just the fragmentation and specialization characteristic of the contemporary university. The reformed university should be unified around its proper idea - it should be an integrated 'whole' (MacIntyre 1990, p. 227) - but without thereby succumbing to a narrow, institutionalized specialization. MacIntyre has several suggestions for how to achieve this.

In *TRV*, MacIntyre entertained the idea that it could be achieved by way of traditions competing with each other for the allegiance of rational enquirers. The emphasis there is on conflict and contained disagreement. Rather than bring order to the curriculum through the imposition of a canon of great books, which only hides underlying disagreement about how those books should be read and what can be learned from them, MacIntyre's proposal would bring fundamental disagreement out into the open. The professors/lecturers would be committed partisans of particular traditions, embodying a tradition in the conduct of their enquiries and teaching methods, and advancing the tradition by showing its superiority to rivals that come into conflict with it. The students would learn the meaning of rational inquiry, and become capable of their own judgement about, for example, how to read 'great books', in the course of their exposure to the living and contested claims of rival traditions. But acknowledging the difficulty of attaining unity in this way, MacIntyre also proposed an alternative arrangement (1990, p. 231), whereby universities would be unified by their commitment to a particular tradition's *mode* of contained disagreement (as opposed to a

unity that emerges from a conflict between traditions). A view like this can also be derived from MacIntyre's suggestions that enquiry has the form of a *craft* (1990, p. 51ff). If enquiry does have that form, then it is learned in stages, from novice to apprentice to master. The role of the university, on this conception, is to educate by leading its students through these stages: students enter as novices, progress to apprentices under the instruction of masters in their undergraduate degree, and perhaps subsequently become masters themselves. The unity of the university is then akin to that of a guild. However, it is not specialized like a guild, and this because the craft it excels in is general enough to take many specific forms: rational enquiry in its various manifestations.

By MacIntyre's own admission, the vision of the well-functioning university, the university true to its vocation, presented in *TRV* had a 'utopian' character (1990, p. 234; 2013, p. 214). But MacIntyre also has some suggestions for how to reform the university 'here, now'.<sup>3</sup> Foremost amongst these is a proposal for a curriculum with three elements: one mathematical and scientific, another social and historical; and a third linguistic, including literary studies broadly conceived. Although MacIntyre doesn't quite put it this way, these elements correspond to different aspects of the human condition – its immersion in nature subject to mathematical and physical laws; its constitution through various forms of social, economic and political relationship; and its expression through many languages and art-forms – and they are unified by the unity of the human condition itself. At the same time, a curriculum unified along these lines would equip students with a basic understanding of 'who we are, here and now', that is, in the specific configuration of 'advanced modernity'. And it would help to address a problem that has become endemic to advanced modernity, namely the lack of an 'educated public' (MacIntyre 1987; 2006, p.14; 2009a, p. 309; MacIntyre and Dunne 2002).<sup>4</sup> Students would emerge from their university

studies with a generalist but not superficial understanding of the human condition and the challenges it faces in advanced modernity, and over time they would help comprise an educated public, or some substitute for it, amongst whom responses to those challenges would be rationally debated.

University teachers would also help to comprise such an educated public, as distinct from a class of experts separated from the public by their specialized knowledge. MacIntyre does not say, of course, that there should be no such experts; his point is that they only belong in a university if they can also contribute to the teaching of a curriculum for generalists. MacIntyre also emphasises that the curriculum for generalists is one from which 'plain persons' can and should benefit (2009a, p. 360). In fact, 'plain persons' stand to benefit more than anyone else, and it is important to MacIntyre that they have access to the education the curriculum provides. MacIntyre thus sees the good served by curriculum reform as extending beyond the student, the lecturer and the institution to the community at large.

### **3. Three sets of objections**

Let us now consider some of the main criticisms MacIntyre's reflections on universities have received. It will help to order our discussion if we label these criticisms as objections, some of them multi-faceted, and briefly discuss the merits of each in turn.

#### *3.1 The 'university-as-debating-society' objection*

First there is the objection, put by Ronald Barnett, that MacIntyre places undue emphasis on the activity of intellectual debate, ignoring various other activities that make up the life of a university and the social functions it serves. Barnett calls this the 'university-as-debating-

society' model (Barnett 2017, p. 83). This objection focuses on the account of the university MacIntyre presented in *TRV*, but Barnett thinks the objection holds of other accounts of the university that philosophers have given, including Habermas (1987), Derrida (2002) and Nussbaum (2016). The problem with each of these accounts is that they focus exclusively on only one aspect of the university: the university as 'a space of critical reason' where 'all points of view can be heard and their rivalries played out fully' (Barnett 2017, p. 84). As Barnett puts it, they treat (and defend) the university as if it were essentially a debating society. While the 'university-as-debating society' model captures one aspect of the university, it is 'insufficient' because it 'lacks an ontological dimension' (Barnett 2017, p. 87). This is fatal for MacIntyre's account because if we seek not just to 'understand' or 'defend' but to 'change' the university, as MacIntyre does, a robustly ontological account of the university is indispensable.

In response to this objection, MacIntyre could reply that the 'disputation' he has in mind as the heart of a university is far from the point-scoring that members of a debating team are engaged in: the antagonists in moral debate as MacIntyre envisages it are committed partisans of ethical standpoints, inquirers with strong but critical allegiances to living traditions. It is true that MacIntyre sees universities as essentially places of rational enquiry, and hence of arguments, but not argument for its own sake. And MacIntyre's conception of the embeddedness of moral inquiry also mitigates the charge that his account of the university lacks an ontological dimension. The teachers and students of the tripartite curriculum MacIntyre recommends should be in no doubt that they and the university they study in are part of a larger physical, biological, social, political and economic reality. MacIntyre has his own Thomist account of the larger reality in which universities are set, one that has not only an ontological but also a theological dimension. MacIntyre's Thomist

ontology and theology may be false or insufficiently justified, but that is a different matter. Barnett's objection is that MacIntyre's account of the university lacks an ontology, but in fact an Aristotelian/Thomist ontology is implicit both in MacIntyre's proposals for the university curriculum and his remarks on the history of universities. The ontology may not be correct or always explicit, but it is not missing.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Barnett is right to insist that invocations of the 'idea' of the university, which always involve intellectual ideals of some kind (Collini 2017), must not be separated from the multi-levelled reality in which universities are actually set if they are to issue in meaningful proposals for reform. Effective reform of the university is never going to be simply a matter of applying norms belonging to the 'idea' of a university, understood as an institution distinctive in its promotion of intellectual ideals.

### *3.2 The 'parochialism' objection*

Ronald Beiner echoes Barnett's criticism when he says that 'the standard by which MacIntyre judges the modern university is the seminary' (Beiner 2013, p. 173). But the reason why this amounts to a criticism is not that this view of the university lacks an ontological dimension, but that it is 'parochial' (2013, p.169). There are two aspects to Beiner's 'parochialism' objection. The first is that MacIntyre has an unacceptably negative view of the value of 'cognitive diversity', which Beiner also takes to be the root of MacIntyre's long-standing hostility to the 'liberal dispensation' (2013, p. 171). For Beiner, it is the characteristic mark of the liberal university, and the liberal society to which it belongs, to promote diversity and positively value differences of opinion. MacIntyre's proposals for reforming the university, by contrast, are all about '*parochializing*' it (Beiner's emphasis), that is, containing disagreement and keeping diversity to a minimum. Beiner links the

aversion to diversity of the pre-liberal university to the exclusions it perpetuated and the prejudices it reinforced, most notably antisemitism, which are acknowledged by MacIntyre but which Beiner intimates are considered insufficiently 'weighty' by him (MacIntyre 1990, p. 224; Beiner, 2013, p. 174). The second aspect concerns the kind of community that MacIntyre sees the university as embodying and promoting. In the liberal view Beiner endorses, political communities can and should be characterised by difference and diversity: 'we are enriched by ... existential diversity', Beiner writes, not 'disabled' by it, as MacIntyre is said to believe (2013, p. 172). Beiner then invokes the modern liberal state as a counter-example and counter-model to MacIntyre's parochialism, since here we have a genuine moral community, 'a community of citizens' (2013, p. 181) which is bound by ethical allegiances as strong as any other kind of community, while also showing great diversity and celebrating that fact.

MacIntyre (2013) has replied to Beiner's commentary so there is no need for us to reconstruct how he might respond. But in his reply MacIntyre only partially addresses the parochialism objection. In relation to the first aspect of the objection, MacIntyre points out, fairly, that both the university as he envisaged it in *TRV*, and in his own philosophical view, cognitive diversity in the sense of entertaining, listening to and taking seriously a range of opinions and perspectives, is important for advancing knowledge and enriching human understanding. This is true of the natural sciences as well as the arts and humanities, but it is particularly true of the latter, the study and practice of which are crucial for developing powers of *imagination*. It is worth emphasizing, in view of the first aspect of Beiner's parochialism objection, the importance MacIntyre accords to the imagination in a flourishing human life, not just a university education (MacIntyre 2006, p. 11; 2016, p.7). It has this importance precisely on account of it presenting things otherwise than they happen

to be, and in multiple ways. A diminished imagination is just as damaging to human life as a diminished capacity for calculation is – indeed more so, MacIntyre suggests (2009a; p. 362) – and what an expansive imagination provides is a grasp of an ever-wider range of possibilities. An education aimed at cultivating the imagination – such as the one MacIntyre proposes – is thus the opposite of a parochial education. MacIntyre could have turned the table here and retorted that it is the modern liberal university that has become parochial in the most egregious sense, in failing to take seriously alternatives to the modern liberal order and in its supine compliance with the political status quo. He could have said that the modern liberal university may not be guilty of the same sins as its pre-liberal predecessor – 'weighty' as they undoubtedly were (2013, p. 214) – but it is not as if the modern liberal university can claim innocence. MacIntyre does not pick up on this point, and he does not respond directly to the second aspect of Beiner's parochialism objection to which this point leads. In relation to this aspect, MacIntyre could consistently have said that the communities of enquiry and learning he envisaged as the rightful successors to the liberal university would also include many kinds of people, 'plain persons' of all sorts and with a wide range of 'identities', social positions, occupational roles, and so forth. And he could have contested, as he has elsewhere, that while modern liberal societies are not incapable of accommodating genuine moral communities, such communities exist in spite of, and in persistent conflict with, the dominant structures of modern society, most notably the capitalist market and state bureaucracy (MacIntyre 1998; 2016).

Thus, while Beiner's parochialism objection is not as damaging to MacIntyre's view of the university as it might initially seem, MacIntyre's actual reply to it leaves out something important, and this may reflect a broader lacuna in his 'official' conception of the university, the conception conveyed in his writings on universities. As we just noted,

MacIntyre could have turned the table on Beiner's intimation that he does not take the injustices of the pre-modern university seriously enough by retorting that the modern university is itself complicit in injustice and *for that reason* is in need of reform. It would have been consistent with his position to argue that the role of universities in realizing and promoting common goods (in a sense to be clarified in the next section) makes them vulnerable to injustice both in the distribution of the relevant common good (who is included and who excluded) and in the subordination of the common to the individual good. Yet MacIntyre does not take the opportunity to make that point, and indeed (as far as we can tell) he has not made it in any of his writings on the university. If MacIntyre is in agreement with Beiner that the transition from the pre-liberal to the liberal university was justified by the abolition of unjust exclusions and privileges that pre-modern universities were responsible for or imbricated in – if they agree on the 'weightiness' of that kind of consideration – then the case for transition from the liberal to the post-liberal university should also be presentable in those terms. But MacIntyre's explicit justifications of university reform – what we are calling his 'official' position – makes no explicit reference to just provision of and access to a common good: the reforms are focussed, as we have seen, on integration of the curriculum. This links back to Barnett's objection, for it is this focus that gives MacIntyre's view an 'intellectualist' appearance.

### *3.3. The 'moralism' objection*

A third set of objections to MacIntyre's conception of the university is presented by James Bernard Murphy. Murphy argues that MacIntyre's thinking on universities and education more generally suffers from a 'resolute moralism' (Murphy 2013, p. 191). There are two main facets to the 'moralism' objection. First, there is the priority MacIntyre accords to the

practical over the intellectual virtues when describing the purpose of a university education. Although MacIntyre sees himself as retrieving Newman's conception of the university, Murphy claims that MacIntyre misses Newman's central point: that the provenance of universities is the 'life of the mind' *as distinct from* practical life. Whereas Newman saw the university as essentially concerned with 'intellectual' virtues and values – such as knowledge, the pursuit of truth, and 'the sheer delight of understanding' – MacIntyre pays scant attention to them and 'looks to the university primarily for the cultivation of practical wisdom' (Murphy 2013, p. 192). This neglect of the life of the mind and overriding concern with the practical and hence moral life is the first facet of Murphy's 'moralism' objection.

The second is that MacIntyre sees it as the function of the university (and schools more generally) to 'inculcate' the moral virtues (Murphy 2013, p. 198), as if it were through moral instruction in schools and universities that people learn to be good, acquire the moral virtues, and when things go wrong, learn to be bad. According to Murphy, the significance MacIntyre attaches to fragmentation, compartmentalization and specialization – the main ways in which, according to MacIntyre, things do go wrong in schools and universities – betrays a moralistic misunderstanding of those institutions: it is on account of compartmentalization and specialization, MacIntyre thinks, that universities are responsible for evil in the world, and their reform is thus a matter of high moral priority. This is a mistaken view of universities, Murphy argues, not only because it exaggerates the power of educational institutions to promote moral virtue or avert moral vice, but also because compartmentalization and specialization are a 'universal feature of the human condition' and not, as MacIntyre sees them, 'a fundamental pathology of modern life' (Murphy 2013, p. 197).

It is worth noting that Murphy's moralism objection runs counter to the two previously considered objections. Whereas the 'university-as-debating-society' objection was directed against MacIntyre's overly intellectualist conception of the university, the first facet of the moralism objection criticizes MacIntyre's conception for downplaying the importance of intellectual virtues and values. And whereas the 'parochialist' objection was partly directed against MacIntyre's downplaying of the larger liberal political community in which universities are set, the second facet of the moralism objection criticizes MacIntyre's conception for being too distant and abstracted from local, pre-institutional and pre-political contexts of learning. That MacIntyre's position could attract such opposed criticisms perhaps suggests underlying ambiguities in it, and in his reply to Murphy, MacIntyre concedes that his general philosophical commitments around education need further clarification and support (MacIntyre 2013, p. 208). We will comment on this further below. In specific reference to Murphy's criticisms of his conception of the university, MacIntyre denies that his account has no or insufficient place for goods of the intellect such as the pursuit of truth and the advancement of knowledge – something he is surely entitled to do, even if Murphy's claim is correct that MacIntyre does not give the intellectual values the same high place in his conception of the university as Newman did. This helps to mitigate the first aspect of the moralism objection. In regard to the second facet, MacIntyre accepts that some specialization is necessary for advances in particular fields of enquiry, but not to the extent that the roles of teaching and researching must be compartmentalized and separated, as is increasingly the case in contemporary universities. That form of compartmentalization, MacIntyre insists, is harmful for both the educator and the educated at a university and beyond.

In general usage, the terms 'moralism' and 'moralize' signify attempts at bestowing moral *purport* on something that is not really moral at all. It is to make a moral issue of something that is properly understood in different terms, say natural scientific ones. It is in just this sense that Murphy takes MacIntyre to be guilty of moralism, because in his view MacIntyre regards what are properly understood as facts or laws of nature – such as efficiency gains made through the division and specialization of labour and the human psychological tendency to compartmentalize – as matters on which human beings have some moral choice. MacIntyre thinks this naturalization of compartmentalization and specialization should be resisted. There are philosophical grounds to resist it, such as its questionable (and arguably ethnocentric) empirical basis. But there are also political grounds for resistance, in the sense that compartmentalization and specialization are matters that have been, are, and in all likelihood will continue to be shaped by political struggle. MacIntyre urges that we take inspiration from successful struggles against these features of modern life in thinking about how to reform the university.

But once the stakes of university reform are raised in this way, it appears misplaced to focus primarily on the kind of curriculum a university should teach and the relation of research to such a curriculum. It would make more sense to frame the question of university reform in overtly political terms, so long as we retain a broadly Aristotelian concept of the political, as tied to the virtues and collective flourishing. This would make the realization and promotion of common goods central to any program of university reform. If that is what the stakes of university reform fundamentally are, then far from being 'moralistic', MacIntyre's 'official' stance on universities is not moral *enough*. The official stance deals only marginally and indirectly with the university as a source of common goods and consequently the virtues, whereas on the view we are urging, the one MacIntyre himself ought to endorse, it

is this feature that gets to the normative heart of MacIntyre's critical conception of the university.

#### **4. The university as a source of individual, public and common goods**

The point we have reached so far is this. We began by noting that MacIntyre is alert to the social and political significance of universities, and of the need for reform of the university such as it has become in 'advanced modernity'. We saw that MacIntyre's critique of the modern university focuses on its inarticulacy about the ends of education and research, which manifests itself in ever more fragmented curricula and a damaging compartmentalization of roles. Because of this, universities now largely fail in their function as institutions of education and rational inquiry. MacIntyre's solution for this failure is to unify the curriculum around an idea of human flourishing, to mitigate the deleterious effects of specialization that inevitably arises as knowledge develops, and to integrate the various compartmentalized roles (for example between teacher and researcher, expert and plain person, and between different kinds of expertise). As several critics have noted, however, this focus on the curriculum gives MacIntyre's proposals a one-sided appearance: from one point of view the proposals look narrowly concerned with intellectual matters, as if universities were just debating societies writ-large; from another they look too concerned with maintaining harmony and controlling difference of opinion, making them parochial; and from another they look moralistic, concerned too much with making people virtuous instead of freeing up 'the life of mind'. We saw that while each of these criticisms has some force in relation to MacIntyre's official view – the view explicitly presented in his writings on universities – they do not necessarily defeat a MacIntyrean critical conception of the university, since there are other aspects of MacIntyre's thought that can help parry these

objections, and the objections themselves do not penetrate to the normative core of MacIntyre's thinking about universities. However, in order to see what the normative core of MacIntyre's thinking about universities is, we need to understand the university as an actual or potential locus of various kinds of good. More specifically, from a MacIntyrean perspective, we need to conceive the university as a place where the realization or frustration of common goods is at stake. We shall distinguish three levels at which universities might realize or frustrate common goods. But first, let us briefly clarify the distinction between individual, public and common goods on which MacIntyre's concept of the common good rests.

MacIntyre describes an individual good as a good for an individual '*qua* individual' (2016, p. 134) and as a good for 'individuals-as-such' (1998, p. 242). By '*qua* individual' or 'individual-as-such', he means someone or something understood in abstraction from their relationships. From a first-person perspective, my individual good is something that is good for me, period. In being good for me, it may or may not be good for someone else. If it is good for another as well as myself, that is a contingent feature of it as one of my individual goods. Individual goods can thus be specified without making reference to others with whom the individual is in relationship, though those others may happen to benefit from the individual's good, as individuals themselves. Put another way, an individual good contributes to the flourishing of the individual, but without necessarily contributing to the flourishing of anything larger than the individual. Clearly, universities are sources of many goods of this kind. If I am a student, it is good for me that I develop my skills, acquire training that will equip me for work, develop my intellectual capacities, make friends and widen my social life. If I am a teacher or researcher, it is good for me that I have decent working conditions, enjoy the respect and possibly admiration of my colleagues, am able to

pursue my own intellectual interests and so on. Skill acquisition, intellectual development, social mobility, 'job-readiness', professional standing and freedom of inquiry are examples of individual goods that universities can be better or worse at providing for their individual students, teachers and researchers.

It often happens that goods enjoyed by individuals *qua* individuals nonetheless require cooperative action for their provision. In this case the goods come into being through some common or collective endeavour or commitment, and enjoyment of them is shared by the individual members of a group or population. From the first-person perspective, this is a good for me that is also a good for a her, him, them, or it; a good that becomes available to me as an individual *amongst* individuals. MacIntyre calls such goods 'public' goods (2016, p. 168). Roads, sewage systems, and armies are classic examples of such public goods, but MacIntyre also mentions schools and, at various times and places, 'the provision of higher education'. Universities can be considered to serve the public good insofar as the individual goods they make available are shared amongst the individual members of a population. They can be considered a locus of public goods insofar as goods like skill-acquisition, intellectual development, and freedom of inquiry, which a university makes available to individuals, also benefit a population considered as an aggregate of individuals.

According to this conception of the public good, public goods are a type of individual good: they benefit individuals *qua* individuals, but they are provided and administered collectively or 'publicly'. They are not a type of common good. This is because common goods, in the strict sense, are not only provided by cooperative action, but enjoyed by individuals whose good is constituted (in part) by their participation in that action. This means that a common good is never just a good 'for me'; it is also good for an 'us'. The

character of a common good escapes the purview of the first-person singular perspective: it reveals itself to an 'I' only insofar as the I belongs to a 'we'. Common goods are both revealed and enjoyed in the course of participating in a relationship with another and engaging in cooperative activity. They still contribute to the flourishing of individuals, but not in abstraction from their identity as constituted through their social relationships and roles within them.

What then are the common goods that universities at their best realize or promote? First, there are those goods that are internal to the 'practices' conducted within universities. At least some of the research that takes place in universities has the character of a 'practice' as MacIntyre conceives it, indeed scientific enquiry and the humanistic disciplines are paradigm cases of practices in his view (MacIntyre 1985, p. 187). Participation in these practices involves cooperative activity that yields goods that can only be enjoyed through that activity, not just individually but qua participant. Whether teaching should count as a practice is a moot point: MacIntyre has denied that it is but others have argued forcefully that teaching meets MacIntyre's criteria of a practice and certainly has internal as well as external goods (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002). Insofar as university teaching serves to initiate students into traditions of enquiry, as we have already seen it does (or ought to do) in MacIntyre's view, this also suggests that common goods are realized through teaching. We saw earlier that craft apprenticeship provides MacIntyre with a model for how learning takes place within a university, and crafts are also paradigm cases of practices (MacIntyre 1988, p. 30).

So at one level there are common goods that are the internal goods of the practices located in universities. But there is a second level at which universities may realize and promote the common good, which we have seen plays a key role in MacIntyre's thinking on

universities. This is the role universities play in the formation of an educated public. An educated public, in MacIntyre's conception, contributes to the culture and politics of a society by actively and habitually participating in the society's cultural and political debates (MacIntyre 1987; 1990 p. 216ff). The members of an educated public do not take part in these debates as a scientific researcher, for example, takes part in the specialized scientific debates within a university; and they will not be mere passive witnesses to those debates, however interesting they might find them. An educated public can thus be contrasted with an elite of experts on the one hand, and on the other a body of individuals whose relation to culture and politics is routinely that of a spectator or consumer, whatever their educational qualifications are. Members of an educated public come from all walks of life – they occupy a variety of social roles – and they have a developed capacity to 'think for themselves', independently of their particular role or occupation, in relation to matters that affect them generally as members of society (MacIntyre 1987, p. 24).

Under this description, an educated public looks like a modern version of the citizenry of an Aristotelian polis. And this resemblance is reinforced when one considers the criteria a body of individuals must meet to constitute an educated public in MacIntyre's sense. MacIntyre states that an educated public must have shared 'standards by appeal to which the success or failure of any particular thesis or argument is to be judged'; it must be 'informed by the widespread reading of a common body of texts'; and have 'a widespread shared philosophical education' (1987, p. 19, 22). MacIntyre is aware that by these criteria, educated publics will be hard to find in the modern world. But the conflict between the conditions of existence of an educated public and the conditions of modernity is precisely to MacIntyre's point. Indeed, he goes as far as to claim, in the essay from which we just been quoting, that educated publics are now impossible, even though it remains a goal of the

educational system (including universities) to produce such publics (1987, p.17; 1990 pp. 217-18).

If educated publics are no longer possible, it would be absurd to propose reforms designed to nurture them or bring them about. That is why, on those occasions when MacIntyre insists on the impossibility of modern educated publics, he is consistent in disavowing any proposal for reform. But on other occasions – including, as we have seen, his recent writings on universities – MacIntyre clearly does make a case for university reform, and he does so by arguing for its role either in creating and sustaining an educated public, or compensating for its absence (MacIntyre 2006; 1990 p. 222). This is surely a more reasonable position, for several reasons. First, educated publics, even by MacIntyre's own criteria, are not all or nothing affairs. Educated publics can be more or less 'educated' and more or less 'public': they can have overlapping sets of shared background assumptions and sources of cultural authority, for example, and variable levels of participation in public debate. Second, it may be that we should reconsider what it means to be an educated public in light of changing historical circumstances. We might then be able to identify conditions that are more or less propitious for a flourishing educated public by reference to broader criteria. Third, as MacIntyre himself urges, the *need* for an educated public still exists, perhaps more so than ever. It matters greatly that individual 'plain persons' are able to think for themselves and engage in meaningful debate on questions concerning the common good, and not be a passive audience to interpretations of the 'public good' presented to them by powerful cultural and political elites (MacIntyre 2009a, p. 360).

Educated publics realize common goods by deliberating about the common good of the society of which they are members. The good at stake for members of an educated public is not their good *qua* individuals, but their good *qua* members of the public. A

university education, by enabling individuals to do well as members of an educated public, promotes the common good at this level, in addition to the level of practices. But there is now a third level at which the university should be considered a source of common goods. For it is not just in their role as members of the public that individuals stand to benefit from a university education; it is not just their relationship to other *citizens* that a university education can help shape. Most notably, there are also the relationships individuals have as friends, family members, and workers. If a university education, at its best, realizes common goods by enabling individuals to flourish as members of an educated public, it should also help to realize common goods that individuals share as family members and members of workplaces. In other words, a university education (and perhaps also its research), should serve to make better families and workplaces, better as measured by the common goods available in them.

MacIntyre comes close to making this point in his essay on Newman. Here MacIntyre praises Newman for his insight that the capacity for judgement developed through a university education finds expression in acting 'as a friend, as a companion, as a citizen', 'in domestic life and in the pursuits of leisure', as well as skilled work (2009a p. 359). Though it is the individual whose capacity for judgement is developed, it is the family, friendships, and workplaces of which the individual is a member that are the primary beneficiaries of the development of this capacity. Of course, they are not beneficiaries at the expense of the individual: their good is realized in and through the good of the individuals who make them up. But if this is the case, there is something misleading about MacIntyre's oft-stated insistence that it is *not* the purpose of universities to provide preparation for work or vocational training (2006, p. 14; 2009b, p. 174). What, more accurately, it is *not* the purpose of universities to do, on MacIntyre's conception, is to promote the good of the individual

*qua* individual at work, to prepare the individual for a career in which the individual *qua* individual benefits. But insofar as common goods are available in work, then it should indeed be part of the purpose of a university to educate the student for such work, just as it is part of the purpose of a university to realize the internal goods of practices and the good of an educated public.

It is at this point that MacIntyre's conception of the university assumes not just an 'Aristotelian' but also a 'revolutionary' character. This is partly because reform of universities, and education more broadly, so that they were better able to fulfil their purpose of promoting the common good, would require a 'massive reallocation of resources' (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 5). More fundamentally, a society in which that purpose was properly realized would be one in which individuals in all walks of life would belong to an educated public and do work in which their individual capacity for judgement could be exercised for the common good. But 'a society in which fishing crews and farmers and auto mechanics and construction workers were able to think about their lives critically and constructively in the light afforded by this education' – the kind afforded by a MacIntyrean university – 'would be on the verge of revolution' (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, p. 15). Implicit in the case for university reform, properly understood, is thus a demand for the transformation of society.

## **5. Common goods, common minds and the virtues of inquiry**

We have been arguing that the Aristotelian notion of the common good provides the normative core of MacIntyre's conception of the university. We just saw that there is a utopian aspect to this conception, since satisfaction of the normative core of the university would seem to require a revolutionary transformation of society. But as we have seen,

MacIntyre's writings on the university are also concerned with how universities fare 'here, now'; with what might be done presently to make them fare better. They fare better when they function in accord with their normative core. But as we also saw in the first two sections of the paper, the distinctive function of universities, in MacIntyre's view, is to realize excellences of rational inquiry. So, while the normative core of the university is to realize and promote common goods, it is by realizing and promoting these goods in the *form of rational inquiry* that universities can properly be said to excel. University reform is thus properly conceived as a matter of promoting common goods through changes to the ways in which rational inquiry is conducted in universities, in teaching and learning as well as research. This brings us back then to the question of curriculum reform. We can now reformulate that question as follows: How might the goings on in universities, including their curricula, be conducted so as better to realize and promote common goods? How might the development of powers of rational inquiry for which universities are responsible contribute to the realization of common goods, as distinct from individual or public goods?

The answer must have something to do with how a university education can develop an individual's capacity to form their *own* mind by way of participating in the formation of a *common* mind.<sup>6</sup> We have seen that a common good is an individual good that is also the good of a 'we', the shared good of those who act as a 'we' and are members of a 'we'. The good is realized in and through participation in cooperative activity with others. The activity in which common goods are realized need not be deliberative or reflective intellectual activity; and the development of the powers required for realizing those goods need not involve the exercise of deliberative or reflective intellectual capacities. But in the case of universities, rational inquiry *is* the activity in and through which goods are sought, and it is by developing their powers of rational deliberation and reflection that students come to

realize these goods. It is a commonplace to regard the purpose of a university curriculum as that of developing the capacities of individual students to think for themselves, to think 'critically', to make up their own mind (Collini 2017). This, to be sure, is an individual good that curricular activity can help to secure. But it only becomes a common good if, in the course of learning how 'to think for themselves' and 'to make up their own mind', students (and teachers) also learn how to think with others and make up a common mind. Note that the point here is not just that the common goods of rational enquiry presuppose the existence of common minds; it is also that we only come to realize the common goods of enquiry by taking part in a shared activity: rational deliberation and reflection with others. The development, through active exercise, of capacities for *this* activity should therefore be an organizing principle of the university curriculum.

For an Aristotelian, the development of a capacity is never a matter of acquiring knowledge of a general rule that can be subsequently applied on one-off bases to particular circumstances as they arrive. Rather, it is a matter of acquiring habits of action. The acquired habits of excellence in action are the virtues. To say that it is the goal of a university curriculum to develop the intellectual capacities of each individual student is thus close to saying that it is the goal of the curriculum to develop the intellectual virtues of each student as an individual. But to say, as we have just done, that the goal of a university curriculum is to enable each individual student to excel in their contribution to a common mind, is to bring a different set of virtues into the picture. These virtues concern not the good of the individual qua individual but the shared good of individuals engaged in concerted intellectual enquiry. Given our Aristotelian premises, they are virtues acquired in the process of engaging in that activity of shared enquiry.

It strikes us as anomalous that MacIntyre does not give any emphasis to, and barely even mentions, the virtues of shared rational enquiry in his writings on university reform. As we saw earlier, he presents the main failings of the contemporary university in terms of fragmentation and specialization of the curriculum, and his proposed remedies are to make the curriculum more integrated and generalist. These proposals *themselves*, we are arguing, have their normative basis in the realization and promotion of the common good. An integrated curriculum, along the lines MacIntyre suggests, provides students with a shared set of references and standards of justification that enable them to form common minds and thereby common goods. A generalist curriculum, by avoiding the exclusions and narrowness of specialization, has a similar effect. An integrated, generalist curriculum thus makes sense if the goal is to develop the capacity of individual students to take part in the formation of a common mind, a shared understanding, and thereby realization of a common good.

But acquisition of the habit of reaching a shared understanding, or as we have been saying contributing well to the formation of a common mind, is unlikely to be secured just by the content of the curriculum. The *manner*, and not just the matter, of the learning must be taken into account. It is by learning in a certain way that students acquire the habits of excellence in the practice of rational enquiry, which in the view we have presented, implies excellence in contribution to a common mind. This is a chief way in which one common good at stake in universities, the good of student *qua* student, is realized. It is realized not by abstracting from relationship with other students, but by fully engaging in that relationship, for example by listening to their views, attending to and engaging with them, giving them a fair and respectful hearing, speaking truthfully and honestly, and so on. The realization and promotion of such 'epistemic virtues' (Anderson 2012) in the conduct of the

curriculum is thus a chief way in which universities can realize and promote the common good, in addition to the integration and generalization of the content of the curriculum.

## **6. Conclusion**

We have argued that in order to grasp the underlying normative significance of MacIntyre's criticisms of contemporary universities and his proposals for university reform, we need to interpret them as concerned with the realization and promotion of the common good. This is not immediately evident from his writings on universities, which deal for the most part with problems arising from fragmentation, compartmentalization and specialization of university teaching and research, and barely mention the common good at all. But considered in conjunction with MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism, his 'idea' of the university assumes the shape of a critical conception of the university whose normative core is the common good. We argued that the common goods which universities at their best serve to realize and promote include, but are not confined to, the goings on within universities, the 'practices' they institutionalize. They stretch beyond that to the formation of an educated public – though not quite in the sense MacIntyre himself has given to that idea – and to the common goods made available through a range of social relationships that depend on the formation and sustenance of a common mind. Crucially, this includes workplace relationships, which makes a university education relevant for work in a way that MacIntyre himself, in our view mistakenly, often denies. Rediscovery of the common good that a university education at its best would make available might awaken us to possibilities for realizing the common good in work and other social roles.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> On the neglect of education as a topic within the predominant liberal and rational-choice paradigms of political philosophy see Honneth (2015). On the contribution of philosophers to academic debates on the character and purpose of the university see Barnett (2017).

<sup>2</sup> The latter clause is important. MacIntyre doesn't deny that universities excel in the elaboration of reasons in particular disciplines or specialized fields of research (2009b, p.174), and he has said that universities already 'possess the intellectual resources to bring about the kind of change that I propose' (2006, p.14). What universities generally lack, in MacIntyre's view, is articulacy (and in that sense rationality) about the overall good served by those resources.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre's proposals for reform 'here, now' are often targeted at American Catholic universities (2006, 2009b). But his proposals are guided by an 'idea' of the university that is normative for all universities, not just Catholic ones.

<sup>4</sup> We take a closer look at MacIntyre's idea of an educated public and how it relates to his thinking on universities in section 4 below.

<sup>5</sup> Barnett himself draws on a Deleuzian ontology to frame his account of the university. While it is *arguable* that a Deleuzian ontology of the university is superior to a MacIntyrian one, the argument would have to be made, and made in a manner that shows the inadequacy of MacIntyre's arguments for the superiority of 'tradition' over 'genealogy' presented in *TRV*.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre (1999, p. 129 and p. 133) discusses the idea of a common mind in relation to the common good, but without considering it in the context of a university education as we are doing here.

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