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Introduction

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Introduction

This book's argument proceeds in four parts: i) we need a better way to conceive of the manager and a better way to understand the role of moral philosophy in contributing to our notion of the character of the manager (Chapters 1–2); ii) Alasdair MacIntyre's work problematizes the manager as a character while providing a deeper diagnosis of contemporary inadequacies (Chapters 3–8); iii) a humanistic approach is needed, one that retrieves philosophy's task of offering character transforming arguments (Chapters 9–13); iv) the manager as wise steward is proposed as the term of such a process, including the character itself, the virtues and powers central to this character, the social context in local and global perspective, and suggestions for institutionalizing this ideal (Chapters 14–16).

This book is a sustained argument advancing a transformed conception of the character of the manager as a wise steward. One way of entering the book's line of reasoning is to see it as a long answer to a series of questions posed implicitly and inchoately by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. Protesters, first in New York and later in many other cities across the globe, demonstrated to bring attention to CEO greed, corruption, undue influence by corporations on civic life, increasing disparities in wealth, and the lack of accountability for those who played key roles in bringing about the global economic crisis of 2008. I do not mean to claim that the Occupy Wall Street protesters are model citizens in the way they engaged in civic public discourse and shared deliberation. They have been criticized, perhaps with merit, for being an unfocused, leaderless movement driven by a narrow ideology with a willingness to resort to lawbreaking, sometimes even violence, rather than authentically working with others in a civil manner to pursue the truth and the common good.¹ Despite such shortcomings, the protesters point to

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questions that deserve a serious response. What is the societal role of the modern executive? What is the place of the manager in the contemporary social order? Should those responsible for organizing, planning, directing, and executing the activities of organizations be evaluated not only in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, but also in substantive moral terms such as justice and wisdom with regard to advancing the common good?

On the face of it, it is easy to grasp intuitively the sort of managerial character criticized by the Occupy Wall Street protesters: the anonymous, highly compensated office executive, CEO, top-level administrator, or senior manager of a large company whose task involves organizing a firm to accomplish quantifiable short-term results. Such a person typically values efficiency and effectiveness, takes advantage of economies of scale, tends to rely on outsourcing while frequently treating employees as replaceable units, and tends to treat instrumentally various stakeholders: the workers, consumers, those who inhabit a specific geographical area, the natural environment, and the broader society. The manager as office executive appears to be not merely neutral with regard to ethics, but personally fragmented and morally hollow. Focusing on this character gives rise to several questions. Is it possible to manage in a responsible manner, with an eye to efficiently and effectively organizing a group to accomplish a given, quantifiable purpose while comporting oneself in a manner that is honest and just with a concern for the common good? Has the time come to reevaluate the role of the manager? Is there a way to reconceive the manager as a virtuous character, that is, as one whose role is to act as a wise steward? Is it possible for a manager to practice the virtues?

Such questions are philosophical in character. What role can philosophers play in encouraging others to ask these sorts of questions, and in working toward reasoned responses to such an inquiry? The argument of this book is a reply to such questions.

The manager, considered as a type or a social role, is a modern character. During the final decades of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, this new sort of social authority emerged as an important figure in modern life. More than a century ago, writers from various industrialized nations began describing and analyzing this character. The Frenchman Henri Fayol famously developed a general theory of business administration that outlined the functions of the modern manager: planning, organizing, leading, commanding, and controlling. Fayol's theory continues to shape the self-understanding of countless contemporary managers. Frederick Taylor, with his time-and-motion studies of

workers at Bethlehem Steel in the 1890s, exemplified the concerns of the modern manager. In early-20th-century Germany, Max Weber offered a sociological account of the modern manager as office executive.

For many decades, the modern manager exemplified by Taylor and praised by Fayol and Weber, has been the subject of sustained criticism. The complaints of the Occupy Wall Street protestors reprise well-worn objections. CEOs, administrators, executives, and all sorts of management personnel have been frequently accused of corruption, of acting without accountability, of placing profits over people, self-interest over justice, and acting in a manner that destroys the common good. Within these protests and objections, there is a yearning for virtue.

A few words of background might help to further frame the argument I advance in this book.

While I have been the owner, co-owner, and operator of several successful small businesses, I write as a moral philosopher. I acknowledge that my own experience as a manager is rather limited. In a successful entrepreneurial venture as the co-owner of a limited liability corporation, I was the business manager and publisher of a regional magazine. In that role, I was responsible for helping to develop a business plan and a budget. I was accountable for meeting a payroll, hiring and firing personnel, organizing and communicating plans to the members of the organization, structuring schedules, motivating others to accomplish their tasks, overseeing their progress, encouraging their development, negotiating agreements, and establishing networks of communication within the organization as well as with suppliers and customers. I learned what all business managers discover: managing is a constant balancing act. As a business manager, I learned first hand about finances and accounting, marketing and sales, entrepreneurship and economics, and the concrete responsibilities that go with managing a small business.

With that said, this book is written primarily in the voice of a moral philosopher. Since the 1980s, I have been a philosopher at a university. My teaching and research has engaged both the history of philosophy and contemporary questions of applied and professional ethics, especially business ethics. The argument of this book arises, in part, out of several dissatisfactions with my own previous efforts as a philosopher concerned with business ethics. Increasingly, I have come to think that substantive questions about management require a response that is framed in terms of the development of character and the cultivation of the virtues in human persons. Is it possible to be a manager while practicing the virtues? How does the account of the virtues and

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the description of the character of the manager developed by Alasdair MacIntyre complicate this question?

MacIntyre, perhaps more than any thinker in our day, has helped shift the focus in ethics away from a debate about competing moral principles such as utility or duty toward concern for virtues, habits of character, and the traits that make for a good life. In MacIntyre's virtue ethics, the manager emerges as a central *character* in the social drama of the present age. As I detail in the body of the book, MacIntyre envisions the manager as an amoral character entirely unconcerned with and unable to embody the virtues. "Once the executive is at work," writes MacIntyre, "the aims of the corporation must be taken as given."² Considered this way, the executive is a technician in pursuit of efficiency. MacIntyre aims to warn his readers that this character is dangerous. As we heed MacIntyre's warnings, we become awakened to the moral emptiness of the manager as office executive, and to deep contradictions within this sort of character.

Despite MacIntyre's criticisms of the contemporary manager, his argument has not gone far enough. On a few occasions, MacIntyre has hinted that we need a new sort of manager, but with regard to the work of filling out and building up a transformed conception of the manager, MacIntyre has done woefully little. To take up that task, this book proposes a way to reconceive both the activity of managing and the excellences needed to manage well. Retrieving two ancient characters, the "steward" and the "person of practical wisdom," this book is an argument for how moral philosophy might help bring about a transformed conception of the character of the manager.

While MacIntyre has been a prolific writer, he has not published any books on business ethics. As Ron Beadle put it, "MacIntyre is not a management thinker, and has written little about management or business."³ MacIntyre has not focused on business ethics; in fact, he has been critical of contemporary applied ethics.⁴ When asked why he declined an invitation to address a conference on business ethics, MacIntyre reportedly explained that he refused for the same reason that he "wouldn't attend a conference on astrology."⁵ Despite this sort of dismissive attitude, there has developed in recent years a steady conversation within the business ethics literature engaging MacIntyre's work, and this has given rise to a variety of questions.⁶ Some have debated the precise object of MacIntyre's criticism: Is it the manager that MacIntyre opposes or is his criticism aimed at modernity, enlightenment liberalism, and contemporary emotivism, with the manager serving as a mere symptom of a deeper problem?⁷ Others have questioned whether

MacIntyre's account of the manager is based "on broad generalizations"⁸ with too little empirical data.⁹ So, I am extending a conversation that has been ongoing within the scholarly literature of business ethics and organizational studies.

Many of the writers who draw from MacIntyre's virtue ethics to discuss moral questions with regard to management are scholars who hold academic positions in business schools. Geoff Moore of Durham Business School in Britain has been a leading voice among those who think that, despite MacIntyre's criticisms of the manager and the market economy, "a MacIntyrean virtue ethics approach provides both a better diagnosis and also a better prescription."¹⁰ In a series of articles, Moore has brought into focus the grammar and framework of MacIntyre's virtue ethics as these might be applied to business organizations, focusing on "practices and institutions, internal and external goods, and the place of the virtues within them."¹¹

Concern with organizational virtue in corporations might seem out of place to those familiar with Joel Bakan's popular book, *The Corporation*, or the documentary film with the same title.¹² The tone of Bakan's work is signaled in his subtitle: "The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power." Bakan focuses on the corporation as a legal person, that is, as a person designed by law to be concerned only with increasing shareholder value. Such corporations compel executives "to prioritize the interests of their companies and shareholders above all others and forbids them from being socially responsible."¹³ Bakan is comparatively less focused on managers and executives as individual human persons. Such individuals tend to compartmentalize their lives. They live as decent people who function quite normally outside the corporation, with warm and loving relationships with family and friends, by drawing a very sharp distinction between work and home, between "the contradictory moral demands of their corporate and noncorporate lives."¹⁴

Bakan's criticisms are directed almost entirely at the corporation rather than individual human persons who make up and work as management executives. Bakan uses the language of "traits" to describe the "corporation's institutional character."¹⁵ Corporations, according to Bakan, are pathological and psychopathic in their persistent pursuit of profits; because the corporation has no conscience, it is a legal person that relates to other persons in a manner that is superficial, manipulative, grandiose, asocial, lacking in empathy and accountability, and unable to feel remorse.¹⁶ The collapse of Enron, according to Bakan, "can be traced to characteristics common to all corporations: obsession with profits and share prices, greed, lack of concern for others, and a

penchant for breaking legal rules. These traits are, in turn, rooted in institutional culture, the corporation's, that valorizes self-interest and invalidates moral concern."¹⁷ In the final analysis, Bakan advances a moral indictment against the corporation as a legal person; his book and documentary film are directed against "the corporation's flawed institutional character."¹⁸

Part of what is dissatisfying about Bakan's analysis and evaluation is that his proposed solution, increased government regulations, seems tired and unlikely to provide an adequate response.¹⁹ A more helpful way forward involves encouraging both individual and organizational reform that shapes our lives, our institutions, and our cultures in a manner that builds up those qualities of character that make for a good human life.

Thomas Wright and Jerry Goodstein, in their survey of the recent literature, boldly state their conclusion in the title of their essay, "Character is not 'Dead' in Management Research."²⁰ Wright and Goodstein provide a broad overview of "character across time and culture," from antiquity to the early 20th century; after the 1950s, "decades passed without serious consideration of the topic of organizational character or virtue in the social sciences literature, and it was left to business ethics scholars to draw attention to the importance and relevance of the topic of character and virtue for business organizations."²¹ Their review of the revival of virtue ethics distinguishes between two perspectives: individual and organizational.

One strand of the renewed focus on character draws from the stimulus of the positive psychology movement under the umbrella of "Positive Organizational Scholarship."²² To date, this approach has not produced a single, unified theory. Instead it has involved a range of studies, some empirical and others more conceptual, aiming to understand organizations in terms of happiness, excellence, thriving, flourishing, abundance, resilience, virtuousness, and similar themes.

Another rather significant strand includes Geoff Moore, Ron Beadle, and the other MacIntyreans who have drawn from MacIntyre's virtue ethics, extending his project into management, institutions, and questions of organizational virtue. My approach is related to but slightly different from an organizational virtue ethics perspective that focuses on institutionalizing organizational features such as a just purpose, an organizational structure that balances power among constituencies, the development of processes that promote critical dialogue and questions, and a culture that promotes virtue. I see the argument that I advance as complementing that of the organizational virtue ethicists even as it differs from it in subtle ways. In my own view, while social practices and

institutions are crucial both for cultivating good dispositions and for the formation of character, virtues, properly speaking, are qualities of living persons, not institutions, organizations, or legal persons. My goal is a transformation in character, especially in the character of individual human persons. In contrast, I would characterize the goal of Moore and Beadle as the transformation of institutions. With that said, my sense is that all of us would agree that both individual and organizational transformation are needed and interconnected.

The argument of the book proceeds in four parts. First, we need a better way to conceive of the manager and a better way to understand the role of moral philosophy in contributing to our notion of the character of the manager (Chapters 1–2). Next, I examine in detail how Alasdair MacIntyre's work problematizes the manager as a character while providing a deeper diagnosis of contemporary inadequacies (Chapters 3–8). Then, I show that a business humanities approach is needed; I explain and employ such an approach, retrieving an older, deeper conception of the role of philosophy in the process of character transformation. MacIntyre's work provides a beginning; additional insights are drawn from virtue ethics, including the writings of Kierkegaard and the ancient Greeks (Chapters 9–13). Finally, the manager as wise steward is proposed as the term of such a process, including the character itself, the virtues and powers central to this character, the social context in local and global perspective, and suggestions for institutionalizing this ideal (Chapters 14–16).

A significant part of the argument of the book might be characterized as an effort to engage in a creative retrieval. I borrow this notion not only from Martin Heidegger, but more especially from Marshall McLuhan, who encouraged his readers to investigate the ways in which advances in human technology involve a subtle interplay between retrieval and reversal as figure and ground. McLuhan proposed a series of probes as "a means of focusing awareness of hidden or unobserved qualities in our culture and it is technologies, they act phenomenologically...to get at hidden properties, or concealed effects, of language and technology alike."²³ Whether it is a poem, a new form of communication technology, or a new way of organizing work, McLuhan proposed that understanding could be deepened by asking what a new development extends, pushes aside, retrieves, and reverses. For example, automobiles extend transportation, push aside horses, retrieve a sense of adventure, and when pushed to an extreme in urban sprawl, congestion and pollution, automobile culture reverses into a creative retrieval involving renewed interest in walking, jogging, bicycling, urban nature preserves, and a fascination with localism. McLuhan famously coined the phrase,

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the “global village” because he thought that electronic communication had the effect of moving beyond urbanized mass culture to retrieve a transformed sense of the village.

The argument of the book involves two such retrievals. Part of the book’s purpose is to draw attention to the way that MacIntyre has called for a transformation in the character of the philosopher by drawing out our need for a creative retrieval of the sense that philosophy is a pursuit of understanding that serves the common good. The now standard approach to business ethics as a debate between utilitarianism and duty ethics has reached, it seems to me, a stalemated saturation point. The argument of this book is a proposal for a way forward that involves reconceiving the project of philosophers engaging questions of management and business administration, that is, a call to move forward by way of a creative retrieval.

In addition to arguing for a transformation in our understanding of the practice of philosophy, the book is primarily an argument for a transformation in the character of the manager, from office executive to wise steward. The philosopher Laurence Rohrer has raised an important objection to my argument. Rohrer notes that MacIntyre is able to reconceive what it means to a philosopher “only because he can reach back into the previous tradition, which was in a comparatively better working order. In this tradition, the role of the philosopher, his virtues, were connected to a genuine practice, aimed at the human good.”²⁴ However, with regard to the manager, Professor Rohrer wonders whether there is anything to reclaim. Isn’t the character of the manager thoroughly informed by and embedded in the larger development of advanced capitalism, and this to such a degree that there is nothing genuinely virtuous to reclaim? Aren’t we just stuck in a world with amoral office executives?

In response, I propose a transformation in the character of the manager that relies on retrieving two ancient characters: the person of practical wisdom and the steward. The *phronimos*, the person of practical wisdom, is a person with experience and maturity who knows how to deliberate well, recognize when more information is needed, make good judgments, and carry out good decisions in service of the common good. The steward is one who has the privilege and responsibility of caring for the goods and property of another. I am suggesting that the best way forward involves creatively retrieving elements from the past that have been pushed aside. The manager as office executive is very much the product, not just of industrialization and capitalism, but also of print culture, especially as it reached its peak at the end of the 19th

century and the first decades of the 20th century. To what extent is the culture of the “bureau,” that is, the office or the desk, reaching a saturation point during the rapid shift that is occurring from print culture to electronic digitalization? When social authority based on the manager as office executive is pushed to the limits of its potential, what might it reverse into?

The possibility of a transformation in the character of the manager seems to be accelerated by features of the information age. The manager as office executive seems tied to a passing era: industrialization, the manufacturing economy, and the culture of writing on paper – especially written policies and the authority of the office so characteristic of the *ethos* of the 19th and 20th centuries. The information age, with its more highly educated workforce, decentralized decision-making, digital and electronic technologies as complements to oral and written communication, deeper awareness of the quest for work that is worthwhile, and increased desire to balance employment with other parts of a meaningful human life, might provide an opportunity for transforming the character of the manager, from office executive toward wise steward.

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