Educating for the Wisdom of Virtue

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 3rd Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2015.
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Virtue Ethics and Education

The modern philosophical revival of interest in virtue is usually dated to Elizabeth Anscombe's neo-Aristotelian suggestion – in her now famous 1958 paper 'Modern moral philosophy' – that moral philosophers should revisit this topic. However, it is clear that a bewildering range of varieties of virtue ethics have emerged in the wake of that suggestion. Briefly, we have seen developments of broadly *naturalistic* neo-Aristotelian virtue by Geach (1977) and Foot (1978) – variously reworked by such later writers as Dent (1984), Hursthouse (1999), Nussbaum (1988, 1995), Sherman (with Kantian influences) (1989, 1997) and Annas (2011); the ethical realist developments

of McDowell (1997) and others; the utilitarian virtue of Driver (2001); the neo-Humean 'sentimentalist' virtue of Slote (1983, 1992, 2010); the anti-realist or neo-idealist virtue of MacIntyre (1981, 1988, 1992) (apparently owing much to Hegel and Marx); the 'perfectionist' virtue of Hurka (2001) and the pluralistic virtue (owing something to Nietzsche) of Swanton (2003). There has also been some attention to the application of virtue ethics to various fields of practical and professional life (Walker and Ivanhoe) and to its implications for moral education (Carr and Steutel 1999) and the professional practice of teaching and teachers (Dunne and MacIntyre 2003).

That said, despite that the revival of interest in virtue more or less coincided with the post WWII development of analytical philosophy of education in Britain, former British Commonwealth countries and the USA, educational interest in virtue ethics seems to have been slow on the uptake. Moreover, insofar as educational philosophers have shown much interest in the topic, it would seem that the approach to which they have mostly been drawn is the neo-idealist or social constructivist version of Alasdair McIntyre. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that for contemporary philosophers of education – with a few exceptions – virtue ethics has been virtually synonymous with the name of MacIntyre. Given this, the present paper will

begin by considering the virtue ethics of MacIntyre and the uses to which his views have to date been put by educational philosophers. While it will be argued that MacIntyre's work certainly contains educationally promising ideas, his overall social constructivist perspective on virtue is also judged here to be less helpful and to be therefore best avoided. In consequence, the paper will argue – closer the virtue ethical mainstream – that while Aristotelian naturalism offers a better overall understanding of the human significance of virtue, there may be a case for a more realist Socratic or Platonic reading of such naturalism. This case will be made with some reference to the work of John McDowell and Iris Murdoch. However, the paper will conclude with particular appreciation of the educational significance and implications of both Murdoch's and McIntyre's perspectives on the significance of stories for moral understanding.

Educational implications and applications of MacIntyre's virtue ethics

In his three large works of the nineteen eighties and nineties (MacIntyre 1981, 1988, 1992) on which educational philosophers have mainly drawn MacIntyre sought to develop an updated social theoretical conception of virtue ethics that – rejecting Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology' – conceives

virtue and virtues as dispositions required to sustain various human professional and other practices in the historically divergent contexts of 'rival' cultural and moral tradition. Insofar as such rival traditions are historically conditioned perspectives – which is all that moral traditions on this view can be – they are not amenable to rational arbitration from some objectively neutral view from no-where and this conception is therefore inherently anti-realist. That said, MacIntyre has sought to resist charges of moral relativism by arguing – in a strikingly Hegelian way – that differences or conflicts between moral traditions are often resolvable in terms of some higher 'synthesis' of rival views.

Still, it is no less clear that MacIntyre's own practical application of this perspective – in at least two highly influential educational papers – has distinct relativist implications. Thus, in one essay – evidently targeted at a notable modern attempt to develop a liberal conception of common education for mainstream schooling (Macintyre 1987) – MacIntyre argued that such a project is no longer sustainable in the culturally plural conditions of modern societies in which there can be no large agreement about what is educationally worthwhile. However, in another essay more specifically focused on the possibility of moral education (MacIntyre 1999), he has even

more problematically argued that insofar as different social groups are heir to rival moral traditions, it cannot make much sense to try to develop a common school moral education and that there should therefore be a diversity of educational provision concerned to promote different (religiously and otherwise grounded) views of what is morally worthwhile.

While the claims of both these essays must be unsettling to educational theorists concerned to develop accounts of general education or educated sensibility and common moral education, it may also be noted that the uses to which MacIntyre's ideas have been put by recent self-styled post-foundationalist educational philosophers (see especially Carr 1997, 2006) are hardly less alarming. In this respect, it has been explicitly argued that the values, virtues and standards of conduct endorsed by such professional practitioners as teachers are so thoroughly conditioned by local circumstances and contingencies that they are quite immune to any external objective critique. On this view, insofar as there can be no theoretically grounded or evidence-based standards or criteria by which the conduct of local practices might be judged and/or found wanting only the practitioners of such practices are competent to judge on their appropriateness or efficacy.

To be sure, while it may be questioned whether MacIntyre's virtues ethics is well reflected in such more extreme interpretations or applications there can be little doubt that what has mainly attracted educational philosophers and theorists to his (and similar) views has been its apparently plausible historical or sociological explanation of the genesis of values, virtues and other human attitudes and capacities. Hence, his views resonate well with the general preference of educational theorists – especially those of secular or anti-metaphysical disposition – for social scientific accounts of the normative aspects of human life and association. Still, what has no doubt evaded the notice of contemporary educational philosophers and theorists (with some notable exceptions) – despite occasional honorary references to Anscombe, Nussbaum and other virtue ethicists – is MacIntyre's quite radical departure from the naturalist Aristotelian mainstream of modern virtue ethics. It is to this we shall now turn for the beginnings of a more educationally promising account of the place of virtue and the virtues in the development of a humanly and morally fulfilling life.

Aristotle's naturalistic virtue ethics

On the face of it, the virtue ethics of Macintyre's *After Virtue* and its two major philosophical successors purports to be following in a tradition of Thomist ethics (see Aquinas 1984) owing ultimately to Aristotle – and there can be little doubt that his educational disciples have taken this to be so. It should also be admitted that *After Virtue* is a prime site of significant modern reworking of Aristotelian themes of considerable present importance – to which we shall shortly return. Still, as already noted, MacIntyrean departure from Aristotle is more striking than any apparent continuities. Indeed, the key note is struck in the early pages of *After Virtue* with MacIntyre's explicit rejection of what he refers to as Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology'. What MacIntyre refers by to this phrase is actually a teleological naturalism that requires indispensable reference to rational or other goals and ends for full explanation of the order of human or other natural events. Insofar, such Aristotelian naturalism differs from modern scientific naturalism in refusing any reduction of so-called 'final causes' to efficient causes: so, for example, Aristotle's naturalism would be inhospitable to modern behaviourist or functionalist attempts to account for human agency in terms of ordinary event causation.

Despite his professed theistic leanings, this is what MacIntyre seems unable

to stomach and for which he seeks remedy by appeal – albeit more implicitly than explicitly – to a more social theoretical account of the emergence of human values and virtues redolent of the work of his erstwhile philosophical idols Marx and Hegel. However, the upshot of such resort is a reductive anti-realism or idealism in which any trans-cultural or mind-independent touchstone of moral value disappears from view and moral development or progress turns out to be the outcome of negotiation of the conflicts of rival social and moral perspectives. On this view, indeed, it is not just that there is no obvious objective (perspective-independent) ground upon which the practical wisdom of Aristotelian virtue might go to work, but that – in his work *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* – MacIntyre questions whether there might be any cross-cultural canons of moral rationality by which what is virtuous or otherwise might be determined. It seems that moral traditions are incommensurable and that what counts as a virtue in this tradition may not so count (or even count as a vice) in that one.

All this is clearly at odds with Aristotle. In this regard, one might first note that in line with its overall idealist drift, MacIntyre's ethics seems excessively rationalistic. Thus, MacIntyre seems inclined to identify moral virtues with moral *beliefs* or *values* and to hold that what counts as a virtue

is largely or exclusively dependent upon or determined by what people believe to be valuable in this or that location. But this is far from obvious. For while I may often consider the conduct of those who claim to share my (religious or other) values to be corrupt or vicious, it is no less clear that I can regard the behaviour of those whose beliefs and values are different – or even contradictorily opposed – to mine as courageous, loyal, honest, self-controlled, just of compassionate. Hence, in Aristotelian terms, while virtues are often humanly grounded in or justified by particular moral beliefs, values or perspectives, their status as virtues rests rather less upon such justifications and more upon whether they objectively conduce to the promotion of that *natural* human excellence and flourishing that Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*.

In this light, while it cannot be denied that moral virtues are invariably influenced or shaped by local perspectives, values or beliefs, it does not follow that they are identical with or reducible to such perspectives: indeed, the language of virtue seems to provide something like a universal or cross-cultural discourse of moral evaluation by which we might indeed characterize whole cultures or ways of life as unjust, dishonest, lazy, cruel or corrupt (for points along these lines, see Nussbaum 1988, Carr 1996).

Indeed, this point about the universal character of virtues could hardly have been better made than by the very first generation of modern neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist revivalists who precisely argued (against prescriptivists and other non-cognitivists) that moral goodness in general and the goodness of virtue in particular is no less a natural property than size or the colour of hair (Geach 1977; Foot 1978). By this, of course, they meant not that moral virtues did not require training or cultivation, but rather that our judgements of goodness or human virtue are in principle no less objective than those by which we describe other features of the natural world.

In sum, while MacIntyre is evidently anti-realist in his metaphysics and epistemology and constructivist in his moral philosophy, Aristotle is no less clearly both a realist in his natural philosophy and an ethical or moral naturalist. In this regard, while the latter departs from his great teacher Plato in distinguishing moral from theoretical enquiry as a form of practical reflection or deliberation – a distinction that Anscombe has called 'one of Aristotle's best discoveries' (Anscombe 1959) – he nevertheless holds that such deliberation is properly guided by considerations about what naturally conduces to human harm or benefit rather than by local custom or personal

predilection. Indeed, while post-war revival of interest in Aristotelian practical reason – again prompted by Anscombe – was mostly focused on clarification of procedural reasoning in general and often less concerned with its role in moral deliberation or virtue as such, it is evident that the practical reflections of artisans or craftsmen would generally need to be informed by the evidence-based knowledge of 'theoretical' enquiry in order to be practically effective. However, as Peter Geach has argued against ascriptivist and other non-naturalist accounts of moral good, there could surely be no valid moral inference in which some allegedly special non-natural use of the term 'good' departed radically from its regular sense in the non-moral contexts of descriptive discourse (Geach 1972).

That said, it is also clear that while Aristotle did not significantly distinguish the inferential form of moral wisdom or deliberation (*phronesis*) from that of technical or productive reasoning (*techne*), he does clearly distinguish these in terms of their content and ends. In these terms, while technical reasoning is evidently concerned to effect changes in the world via the development of skills or the production of various goods or services, the primary purpose of moral wisdom or reflection – notwithstanding any benefits that the virtuous will no doubt seek to secure in the world – is the cultivation of moral virtue

for its own sake. Moral virtues are constitutive of personhood in a way that skills are not. As Aristotle himself strikingly puts it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whereas someone who has developed a particular skill – of, say, craft or musicianship – may subsequently choose whether or not to exercise it, it is not likewise open to the agent who has cultivated honesty, justice, self-control, courage or compassion via the proper exercise of *phronesis* or practical wisdom to choose whether or not to exercise such virtues. Any genuine moral virtues must be part of us in a way that skills or not.

This point is of some consequence for latter day virtue ethical developments insofar as excessive emphasis on the functionalist aspects of Aristotle's moral theory has arguably led to more utilitarian accounts of the value of virtuous character as largely instrumental to the production of socially or other beneficial outcomes (for example, Driver 2001, Besser-Jones 2014). To be sure, it is also likely that such interpretations have been much encouraged by prominent features of Aristotle's philosophical psychology and ethics. First, as already noticed, what MacIntyre has called Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology' and we have referred to as teleological naturalism has no doubt encouraged the view that Aristotle's conception of virtue is functionalist in the scientifically reductive sense of modern philosophical

psychologies of this description. Perhaps more significantly, however, one of the oft noticed passages in *Nicomachean Ethics* is that in which Aristotle himself compares the early practical stages of virtue cultivation to the acquisition of skills of building and musical performance (Aristotle, book 2, part 1, pp 28-29).

But much of this is misleading. With regard to the second of these points, we have already noticed that Aristotle himself – also in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – no less emphasises the limitations of the skill analogy of virtue acquisition: not only is it that agents need to move beyond the practice of virtuous conduct to the reflection of *phronesis* in order to count as fully virtuous, but that the reflections and deliberations of *phronimos* are not concerned only – or even necessarily – with the practical deliverances of virtue. So, for one thing, while Aristotle's moral theory focuses on the development of virtuous character insofar as such character is required for the finely contextualized moral judgments of *phronesis*, such character is to be valued not only for this but for its intrinsic worth. However, similar reflections on the second point also has much bearing on the first, insofar as while the particular moral judgements of *phronesis* are evidently grounded at the most basic theoretical level in the natural facts and circumstances of

human biology, one nevertheless cannot expect the fine and highly contextualized grain of such judgements to be expressible in the general causal laws of scientific psychology. This raises a large question of what the epistemic basis for moral judgement on the rough ground of *phronesis* or practical wisdom might be.

Clearly, Aristotle regards the practical deliberations of both moral and productive reasoning as exercises of intellectual virtue. On the other hand, he distinguishes both from truth seeking or epistemic virtues insofar as the latter are concerned with the discernment of necessities – of things that cannot be otherwise – whereas practical deliberations can only be about what is contingent or liable to change: as he says, there can be no deliberation about what is changeless. Still, leaving aside Aristotle's antiquated view of the legitimate objects of knowledge, he evidently does regard practical deliberations as related to or dependent upon truth: as already noted, the craftsman relies on evidence of how things are to produce satisfactory or durable goods and the deliberations of *phronimos* are concerned to cultivate states of character that are in some objective sense right or good. Aristotle also provides a rule or standard for such character in the doctrine of the mean. A morally right or virtuous character is one in

which the non-rational aspects of human nature are properly ordered for the avoidance of inappropriate excess or deficit of appetites, feelings and passions.

The story here is familiar: those with the virtue of courage are able to deliberate to the avoidance of too much fear (cowardice) and too little (recklessness); those with temperance to the avoidance of too much appetite (gluttony) and too little (self-denial); those with generosity to the avoidance of too much giving (prodigality) and too little (stinginess); and so on. But in view of what considerations might one decide or determine what is precisely right or just? On many latter day interpretations of Aristotelian practical wisdom, it seems held that there simply *is* no general rule and that all is down to personal judgement in the particular circumstances. But insofar as agents are liable to differ in their personal interpretations of what is too much fear or appetite in the same circumstances, it is not clear any such advice helps much. Again, any suggestion that the agent might be guided by what is locally approved or expected is clearly open to the objection that what is often locally approved, expected or required may be far from courageous, temperate or just.

Moreover, the idea that judgements about what is courageous, temperate or just are determined by the circumstances would also appear to encourage a rather piecemeal view of virtuous character as a repertoire or collection of disparate occasion-specific dispositions. In turn, this may reinforce the previously noted skill conception of virtues, whereby becoming virtuous looks like training oneself in separate and distinct dispositions for different circumstances or occasions of moral need. To be sure, such a conception may also be reinforced by the observation – contrary to the ancient Greek idea of the unity of the virtues – that individual moral agents are generally rich mixtures of virtue and vice: precisely, that it is common to discover that those who are courageous are not notably just or fair; that those who are kind or compassionate may also be intemperate or lustful; that those who are honest may not be generous; and so on. In this regard, what is to be made of the idea that the deliberations of *phronesis* are answerable to some epistemically well-grounded view of what is morally right or good.

Towards virtue holism

Still, in a very important passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (book 6, section 5, first sentence) Aristotle makes clear enough that he does not take

any such fragmentary or piecemeal view of the nature and exercise of virtue. At this point, he precisely says that it is the mark of the virtuous agent that his practical deliberations are informed by considerations of what conduces to a good or flourishing human life *as a whole*, rather than merely focused on the resolution of this or that particular moral problem. The trouble is that he seems elsewhere unhelpfully silent on the question of from whence the would-be virtuous agent might derive this larger vision of the virtuous life. Precisely, one wants to ask, if such larger vision is open to intellectual discernment in the manner of the necessary truths of Aristotelian knowledge – or even the evidential truths of empirical knowledge – why cannot agents access and act on it? Indeed, if the lack of such vision is Socratic ignorance of such general moral truth, by what rational means of methods might we be enabled to discover it and to replace such ignorance with knowledge?

On the other hand, it would seem the whole point of the Aristotelian distinction between the practical deliberation of moral wisdom and the truth seeking reason of epistemic enquiry that there can be no such foundational account of moral vision whereby knowledge is derivable from something like (say) the generalization of particulars. Rather, while there clearly are broad parameters for virtuous judgement – as expressed in the doctrine of

the mean – the outstanding difficulty is that of how to interpret experience, or the particular circumstances in which moral agency seems to be called for, as occasions for the exercise of this rather than that virtue (where virtues, as so often, compete for precedence) or for the properly measured expression of this rather than appetite or passion. Why do we always seem to get it so wrong and what might help us to get things right? In this regard, the doctrine of the mean as a general calculus of the right measure of affect or appetite in the face of this or that particular need for virtuous agency may seem to fail us when it is most required.

In a classic essay of modern virtue ethics, John McDowell (1999) appears to address just this problem of the broader epistemic basis of Aristotelian practical deliberation: precisely, of how we might make sense of Aristotle's suggestion – for it seems little more than that – that the actions of the virtuous are not merely addressed to matters of piecemeal local concern but inspired by some larger vision of moral flourishing. Briefly, McDowell – in some contrast with other latter day virtue ethicists who emphasize disposition or skill aspects of virtue – appears to conceive virtue as, or as rooted in, a form of *perception*: to be virtuous is to see the world, oneself and one's relations with others in the right rather than the wrong way. In

this respect, while it seems that McDowell is still inclined to an overall Aristotelian view of virtue, his account also tends to a moral realism evidently closer to a Platonic or Socratic conception of virtue. On this view, vices or failures of virtue are not so much failures to act in the right or required way but failures to see clearly. But what kind of failures are these and how do they come about?

McDowell's own account of such misperception takes off from Aristotle's not entirely satisfactory exploration of incontinence in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. His discussion focuses primarily upon Aristotle's view that less than virtuous agents – such as the incontinent and incontinent – go wrong insofar as their moral perspective is clouded by certain false desires or importunate appetites that deflect them from the right course of action: the less than virtuous may at some level know what it is right and good to do, but they are like the drunken whose vision is blurred or distorted by inebriation. Still, while there may be something in this that does resonate with our ordinary view of moral fault, there are clearly philosophical difficulties with it as an account of the difference between the virtuous and the non-virtuous or less than virtuous – and perhaps all turn on the question of our moral responsibility for such misperception as epistemic failure. On

the one hand, if we follow Socrates in regarding such misperception as simple ignorance, it is not clear how we might be held responsible for it: on the other hand, to hold us responsible for such misperception seems to suppose that we could have known – or actually did know – that from which the clouds of false desire obscured our sight. On this view, to be responsible for moral misperception or wrongdoing, it seems that an agent would have to have both known and not known what was morally appropriate. But how could this be?

In this regard, however, both Aristotle and McDowell appear drawn to a position that moves beyond Socrates in a more Platonic direction. Insofar, a passage of later Plato from the *Laws* seems worth quoting at length:

> ‘But of all faults of the soul the gravest is one which is inborn in most men, one which all excuse in themselves and none therefore attempts to avoid - that conveyed in the maxim that 'everyone is naturally his own friend' and that it is only right and proper that he should be so, whereas, in truth, this same violent attachment to self is the constant source of all manner of misdeeds in every one of us. The eye of love is blind where the beloved is concerned and so a man proves a bad judge of right, good,

> honour, in the conceit that more regard is due to his personality than to the real fact, whereas a man who means to be great must care neither for self nor for its belongings, but for justice, whether exhibited in his own conduct or rather in that of another. From this same fault springs also that universal conviction that one's own folly is wisdom, with its consequences that we fancy we know everything when we know as good as nothing, refuse to allow others to manage businesses we do not understand, and fall into inevitable errors in transacting it for ourselves. Every man then must eschew self-love and follow ever in the steps of his better, undeterred by any shame for his ease.' (Plato 1961, book 5, 731d – 732a, p. 1318)

Clearly, the main Platonic departure from Socrates here lies not so much in any denial that virtue is knowledge but in the claim that vice or moral failure is not merely ignorance: Plato's concern is not simply to endorse the point that human moral vision is frequently clouded or obscured but actually to pinpoint the precise source and cause of such obfuscation. Precisely, the source is an undue attachment to self or an egoism that often ensures that our conduct is self-serving. On this view, our moral failure or misperception cannot be laid entirely at the door of ignorance as lack of knowledge since it

involves a kind of *refusal* to recognize what is right or just that is often quite willful: in short, moral misperception seems to be a form of egotistical self-deceit. While this suggestion raises vexed problems about the logical coherence and/or psychological possibility of self-deception that have much perplexed philosophers down the years, it nevertheless resonates with the common human experience of such emotions as remorse where people have in the past done things that they now regret, that they believe they did not at the time know better than to do and yet for which they now hold themselves responsible on the grounds that they *could* or *should* have known better. The common refrain of such remorse is: how could I have been so self-centred or selfish? Moreover, while some of our moral failures may be due as much to over-attachment to others as to selfishness as such, it is likely that even our attachments are often misplaced or infected by vanity and self-interest – so that the general Platonic location of error in egotistical misperception would seem to hit the mark for much of the time.

While this short discussion cannot greatly hope to resolve such time-honoured philosophical puzzles about human knowledge of what is morally right, it is at least worth suggesting that the Platonic conception of moral error as a kind of willful misperception might be somewhat illuminated from

the perspective of Aristotelian naturalism. In what sense, then, might someone be judged to *know* – at least in the heart – what is morally right and yet do the wrong thing by failing to perceive correctly what is right? From the perspective of Aristotelian naturalism, it is arguable that the overall shape and outline of moral life is already given and observable in the deep grammar of any human moral discourse: that is to say, not in the variability of beliefs and values of *particular* human languages, but in the essential moral form or structure that any human language would need to exhibit to be a recognizable expression of any appreciably human form of life. For while the lives of particular human agents will have been shaped or guided by the beliefs and values of the particular societies and cultures into which they have been born, it is surely no less clear that the moral discourses of such diverse societies and cultures, have largely common form as narratives of human striving to achieve what is perceived as good and just in opposition to what is evil and unjust. This is surely why, as modern readers, we have little trouble understanding the moral character and import of narratives as remote from us in time and cultural space as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Mahabharata*.

Indeed, it just such fundamental logical contours of such any and all life and

discourse that Aristotle attempts to map in his account of virtue via the doctrine of the mean. Becoming moral agents is, irrespective of our particular social or cultural origins – for what societies and cultures could hold otherwise – a matter of the acquisition such qualities of character as honesty, prudence, courage, temperance, justice and compassion that serve to counter various forms of human weakness to the end of a decent and flourishing life. Moreover, insofar as any and all social and cultural narratives worth calling moral are concerned to explore the respects in which human agents are variably successful in achieving such moral or virtuous ends, the stories to which all human agents are likely to have been exposed from their earliest years onwards will have pointed them towards the development of such virtues in view of some, albeit better or worse, view of human flourishing. In this regard, there is clearly a *sense* in which we have all come to know what is good – which is also arguably the same as the sense in which we may later come to say, having done what was bad, that we could or should have known better. However, given that Aristotelian virtues are also defined in terms of opposition or resistance to appetites, desires and interests – of often more immediately pleasurable or gratifying kinds – that run counter to virtue, what may seem to be in more formal virtue ethical terms as plain as the nose on one's face, may also be something one not only cannot see, but does not at the time *want* to see.

Educating moral sense and vision

So, in what direction might freedom from the Platonic cave of egotistical vanity and delusion – to the end of seeing by the light of moral day what is nevertheless under our ethical noses – be sought? The solutions proposed by Socrates and Plato seem to have been to seek such liberation through the more abstract forms of reasoning – essentially of philosophical or conceptual analysis – of Socratic *elenchus* and Platonic dialectic. However, apart from the difficulty that such higher Platonic philosophizing is judged by Plato to be unfit for the great unwashed majority, any such proposal seems open to the Aristotelian objection that the kind of deliberation required for moral deliberation and understanding does not take the form of such abstract Platonic theorizing. In this regard, McDowell, with explicit reference to the neo-Platonism of Iris Murdoch, concludes his discussion by pointing the moral realism of Socrates and Plato – basically the idea that the less than virtuous fall short by virtue of failure to perceive the world morally aright – in what may seem to be an otherwise rather un-Platonic direction.

Notoriously, in the *Republic*, Plato argues that while ordinary empirical perception is of little use for apprehending reality in general and moral reality in particular, the imaginative fictions of creative artists are yet more useless: whereas what is perceived via the senses is inevitably a mere copy of anything to be discerned via intellectual comprehension, the fictions of poets are mere copies of what are already copies. However, perhaps one of the few major thinkers of recent times to have drawn explicitly on Plato's ideas is the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. Like McDowell, Murdoch is drawn to a Platonic moral realism whereby moral failure or error is essentially rooted in a kind of misperception: moreover, her frequently quoted statement that 'in the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego' is surely as close to the above quotation from Plato's *Laws* as it is possible to get. That said, it is no less clear that Murdoch seriously departs from Plato's view of the moral value of literature and the arts. Indeed, in the *Sovereignty of the Good* (1970) A *Guide to the Metaphysics of Morals* (2003) and other works, she effectively reverses Plato's verdict by arguing that whereas literature can offer great insight into our moral nature, philosophical (or formal ethical) deliberation is of little or no use for this end. In this vein, Murdoch's own prolific fictional output (which is, in the present view, of rather greater ethical than literary merit) is evidently entirely devoted to exploring the moral complexities of human character and association.

Interestingly, however, having begun this essay by arguing that Alasdair MacIntyre's neo-idealist brand of virtue ethics has often been an unhelpful and misleading guide for educational philosophy – before proceeding via McDowell and Murdoch to argue for some moral realist modification of Aristotelian ethical naturalism in a more Platonic direction that promises a large (albeit un-Platonic) educational role for poetry and other arts in liberating moral vision from the cave of egotistical vanity and delusion – the wheel of this paper is set to come full circle with due recognition of the place that a more faithfully Aristotelian MacIntyre also clearly gives to the moral educational value and importance of literature. For, in *After Virtue*, he explicitly argues – in a way that chimes well with Murdoch's Platonic repudiation of Plato on the arts – that the very form of practical moral wisdom, is narratival: precisely, that our basic understanding of ourselves and others is that of characters in stories whose lives are concerned with the pursuit of goals and purposes that are more or less morally commendable. From this viewpoint, it is not just the remote abstractions of Platonic theorizing that are less than helpful in understanding ourselves and our lives but also those modern natural scientific evolutionary and other discourses that seek to understand human nature via the deterministic laws of efficient cause.

As Murdoch, MacIntyre and others have correctly discerned, human understanding of moral agency, of the moral visions that inspire such agency and of the moral or other characters that are formed under the influence of such visions are quite irreducible to such deterministic explanation. Rather, such visions are hardly expressible other than in terms of the great cultural, religious and imaginative narratives by which human agents have ever sought to explore the possibilities of human flourishing and the forms of human character that either do or do not conduce to flourishing. Moreover, as already hinted, it is arguably in just this respect that MacIntyre is at his most Aristotelian, insofar as the value of tragic poetry for understanding the potential for good or ill of human character is also clearly appreciated in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Aristotle 1941b). To be sure, while latter day virtue ethicists have often fallen over themselves to proclaim that Aristotle's ethics is naturalistic, it should not be forgotten that his ethics is grounded in a teleological naturalism in which moral life is the more or less wise pursuit of goals and purposes that inevitably resist reduction to the causal determination of natural scientific explanation. But what we need here to bear in mind is that the pursuit of moral goals is no less a matter of seeing *correctly*: we accomplish little of moral value unless we see in the light of moral day rather than through the fog of vanity and self-regard. In this

respect, Murdoch has perhaps more than any other modern writer recognized the profound truth of Plato's myth of the cave and argued persuasively – in an albeit un-Platonic way – for the moral educational uses of literature as an effective escape route from the cave's delusions. Still, from this viewpoint, it may be that the best route to a truly illuminating virtue ethics for moral education lies not in some choice between Aristotelian moral naturalism and Platonic moral realism, but in some reconciliation of the profound insights of both these perspectives.

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