This semester I taught a course on professional ethics, and had my students read Gregory Beabout’s recent book, *The Character of the Manager: From Office Executive to Wise Steward* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). The book can be summarized as a sustained argument for a transformation of our social and corporate conception of the role of the manager from that of facilitator of institutional efficiency and profit, to that of wise steward. This argument is divided into four parts. The first part (chapters 1–2) makes the case that our present conception of the manager’s role is ethically deficient in crucial ways. Beabout begins his argument by examining the moral critiques implicit in the questions and objections raised by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. He compares the stated goals and motivations of business students to those of pre-medical students, noting stark differences in the students’ perceptions of their respective future roles in relation to the common good. He draws out implicit relations between the common conception of the role of the manager and the character and motivations of persons involved in highly publicized business and financial scandals. All this, argues Beabout, indicates a disorder in our shared conception of what a manager is supposed to be. Part of the blame, claims Beabout, lies in the current state of the humanities and the way professional moral philosophy is typically practiced. Beabout adopts a philosophical approach taken from Socrates, according to which the purpose of moral inquiry is not merely to understand the rules of the activity in question, but to transcend them by situating them within a broader context that allows us to evaluate them in a different light.

The second part (chapters 3–8) of the book is a careful explanation and examination of Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of the character of the manager. MacIntyre has “stung the contemporary world,” writes Beabout, by identifying “the bureaucratic manager as the antihero of our age,” perhaps even “the key villain in . . . the drama of contemporary social life” (36). Beabout situates MacIntyre’s critique in relation to the historical and intellectual context of the rise of the managerial role in modern industrialism and MacIntyre’s own Marxist period earlier in his life. The character of the manager, according to MacIntyre, represents the social embodiment of contemporary emotivism in which rationality is aimed at efficiently achieving given goals, not evaluating the given ends themselves. This character is disengaged from social practices and their relation to internal goods, institutions, and traditions. In this way the character of the manager...
is fragmented, self-alienated, and morally hollow, blindly pursuing market opportunities that destroy “small-scale communities of virtue” (109).

In light of this critique, the third part (chapters 9–13) of the book is aimed at showing that business education needs to be infused with the humanities, and especially a moral philosophy ordered to character formation in the virtues. According to Beabout, MacIntyre has offered a helpful critique of the character of the manager, but offered little with respect to laying out a positive alternative to this role and how to attain it. Beabout takes up where MacIntyre leaves off, not suggesting that we eliminate the managerial role, but instead proposing a way of transforming our conception of the manager, and thereby transforming our educational goal in preparing students to become managers. Business ethics in its present form, claims Beabout, “gives almost no consideration to questions of character” (112). Here Beabout explores the role of narrative and friendship in character transformation. Moral philosophy can provide this sort of education only if academic philosophy too does not restrict itself to the development of narrow technical specialists, but also nurtures generalists who are “seekers of understanding” and capable of answering the moral questions raised by “plain persons.” Preparing students to become wise stewards requires a moral philosophy aimed at attaining and imparting practical wisdom. Beabout draws from Kierkegaard, Plato, and Aristotle to explore available resources located in the broader philosophical tradition regarding the nature of character-transforming arguments and the personal and pedagogical implications and requirements of the persons presenting and receiving such arguments.

The fourth and last part (chapters 14–16) of the book is an examination of the wise steward as the proposed alternative to the bureaucratic manager. Here Beabout weaves together MacIntyre’s insight regarding the internal goods of practices, and traditional resources concerning the meaning of practical wisdom and stewardship, to provide the reader with a positive ideal and exemplar in place of the character of the manager. In my opinion these are the best chapters of the book, and provoked the most discussion and raised the most questions among my students. Beabout provides us here with a sketch of the character, dispositions, and habits of the wise steward, and the various ways this character differs from that of the manager. Using MacIntyre’s insight concerning practices, Beabout contrasts the conception of management as domain-neutral with the conception of management as domain-relative, this latter conception involving the perspective of one who understands and appreciates the goods internal to the practice, and the history of the tradition in which the practice is situated and sustained. The wise steward has entered the practice and
thus possesses the virtues necessary to achieve the goods internal to the practice, and to guide others in entering the practice and achieving these internal goods communally. “The virtue of practical wisdom, as practiced by the manager as wise steward,” writes Beabout, “involves the ability to craft morally excellent responses to, or in anticipation of challenging particularities while evaluating in an excellent manner the ends that one is pursuing in order to judge with others whether they are worthwhile and conducive to a good human life, both for oneself and for others” (210).

This book is a much-needed application of virtue ethics to the managerial role. As such, it does not attempt to teach business ethics within the confines of that role as presently conceived, but calls into question the teleological constrictions of that conception, and provides a constructive account of an ethical alternative to our presumed conception of the role itself. One weakness of the book is what it intentionally does not do, and that is explore significantly the relation between the contemporary conception of the manager and our present economic and legal system. Toward the end of the book Beabout briefly considers this objection to his proposal, namely, that the present economic and corporate structure stipulates and requires precisely the managerial character MacIntyre condemns. Beabout responds by suggesting that the situation is more complicated, and that if there are such institutions, “it may be most prudent not to participate in such institutions” (214). That may be true, but it is not a satisfying answer or solution to what may be a deeper, structural problem. Nor is it clear whether, given the contemporary economic structure, all the tasks that contemporary managers oversee satisfy the criteria for being what MacIntyre calls a practice and can be related to as such by a wise steward. On the whole, however, the book offers a valuable argument that picks up where MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the managerial character leaves off, and sketches a way forward with a positive, constructive proposal informed by the wealth of the virtue tradition.

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