

Once More On Re-Conceiving Management as a Domain- Relative Practice: A Response to Sinnicks

Gregory R. Beabout¹

A RESPONSE TO Matthew Sinnicks (2014), “Master of One’s Domain Is Not the Essence of Management,” *Bus Ethics J Rev* 2(2):8–14, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2014.02.02>

ABSTRACT

Matthew Sinnicks has attempted to cast doubt on my efforts to extend MacIntyre’s virtue ethics with regard to re-conceiving management as a domain-relative practice. However, rather than weakening my argument, his objections provide an opportunity to clarify a key distinction, address several misunderstandings, respond to criticisms, rectify misrepresentations, and show again that MacIntyre’s virtue ethics provides a fertile framework for re-casting issues of management and business ethics, including a transformed understanding of management as a domain-relative practice.

IN TWO RECENT articles, Matthew Sinnicks attempts to cast doubt on my efforts to extend MacIntyre’s virtue ethics with regard to re-conceiving management as a domain-relative practice. The first of these,

¹ Saint Louis University. Email: beabout@slu.edu

“Mastery of One’s Domain is not the Essence of Management,” is a commentary in this Journal (Sinnicks 2014a) in which Sinnicks raises three criticisms of my essay, “Management as a Domain-Relative Practice the Requires and Develops Practical Wisdom” (Beabout 2012). The other, “Practices, Governance, and Politics: Applying MacIntyre’s Ethics to Business” (Sinnicks 2014b), is a more wide-ranging article which repeats several of the same criticisms while raising objections to Moore and others who seek to gain positive insights from MacIntyre for business ethics (Moore 2002, 2012; Beadle and Knight 2012). In his criticisms, Sinnicks misrepresents my work and draws an unwarranted conclusion. My purpose in this response is to clarify a key distinction, address several misunderstandings, respond to criticisms of my work, rectify misrepresentations, and show that Sinnicks’ central conclusion is not warranted.

1

Sinnicks disregards a crucial distinction I make between two different sorts of managers. By way of clarification, let me summarize an important feature of my argument: I join with MacIntyre in criticizing one way of understanding management while proposing that MacIntyre’s framework, especially the practice–institution distinction highlighted by Moore, provides the seeds for an alternative model of management. Accordingly, my interpretation of MacIntyre on management follows Moore’s emphasis on MacIntyre’s practice–institution distinction (Moore 2002), thus complementing Moore’s work, as well as that of Beadle and Knight (2012), in extending MacIntyre’s virtue ethics to re-conceive a positive proposal for organizing workplaces. Donncha Kavanagh (2013: 111–112) has entered the same discussion, calling for a “phronetic paradigm for organizational inquiry.”

This distinction between two different sorts of managers (and two approaches to management) is explained and examined in much greater detail in my recent book, *The Character of the Manager: From Office Executive to Wise Steward*, where I offer an extended argument for “a transformation in the character of the manager, from office executive to wise steward” (Beabout 2013: 8).

One managerial attitude, the Weberian bureaucratic manager, is the sort MacIntyre criticizes (Beabout 2012: 405, 406, 417; MacIntyre 2007: 26–27, 30–32, 74–78, 85–87). While the manager as bureaucrat

was praised by Max Weber a century ago, MacIntyre famously raises objections to this character,

charging that such a manager is a manipulator and a sham expert who is detached from concrete social practices while living a fragmented life, cultivating consumptive acquisitiveness and destroying local communities of virtue” (Beabout 2012: 406).

As I put it, “I agree with MacIntyre's criticisms of the bureaucratic manager” (Beabout 2012: 417).

The bureaucratic manager stands in contrast with “an alternative way to conceive of the manager” (Beabout 2012: 417). On this alternative approach, a manager learns to be motivated not simply by the external goods of success, but also and more importantly by the “standards of excellence internal to the activities of managing” (Beabout 2012: 417). Following the empirical studies of Whetstone (2003), I suggested that features of this alternative conception of managerial activity may be found, perhaps unwittingly, in the actions, language, and judgments of “many flesh-and-blood managers” (Beabout 2012: 417–418). This approach to management involves using virtue language to describe and develop traits of character and intellect, especially the virtue of practical wisdom, which are integral to the pursuit of excellence in the activities of the manager.

My argument, both in my book and in the article referenced by Sinnicks, rests on this distinction between two approaches to management: the dispositions and attitudes of the command-and-control bureaucratic manager are distinct from the alternative model in which the manager is conceived of as a “wise steward.” Sinnicks advances criticisms of my work that rest on an equivocal confusion between these two. He accuses me of making “pronouncements about management as a whole” (Sinnicks 2014a: 10). In doing so, Sinnicks ignores or fails to recognize the distinction I have drawn.

2

Sinnicks divides his criticisms of my work into three sections. First, he argues that because it is possible to participate in a practice in a “partial” manner in which one is an audience member who is not fully engaged as a participant in the practice, “we have no need to invoke domain-relativity to explain management” (Sinnicks 2014a: 10). There are two problems with this inference. First, Sinnicks assumes in

this criticism that it is my goal to “explain management.” It is not. Instead, as I clarified above, my argument is that MacIntyre’s criticisms of the Weberian bureaucratic manager along with the practice–institution distinction points to our need for a transformed conception of the character of the manager. The alternative approach involves learning to be motivated by standards of excellence internal to one’s managerial activities and attentive to the goods internal to the core practices relative to one’s domain; accordingly, I compared managing-with-excellence to coaching-with-excellence and teaching-with-excellence. Taking cues from MacIntyre’s interview with Joseph Dunne on the question of whether teaching is a practice (Beabout 2012: 413–414), I proposed that just as Dunne is right to suggest that teaching is a domain-relative practice, “it is helpful to conceive of management” as a domain-relative practice (Beabout 2012: 405).

Sinnicks further asserts that the notion of “domain-relativity” is superfluous because it is possible to participate in a practice with a range of participative engagement. This is a *non sequitur*. The notion of domain-relativity is not superfluous, as shown by an example that Sinnicks uses. He invites us to consider a manager of a firm of architects; the manager loves great architecture and is “motivated by the desire to institutionally sustain the practice of architecture” (Sinnicks 2014a: 10). As a lover of architecture, this manager is a participant in the practice of architecture, but as a manager of a firm, this person is a participant in a certain sort of managerial practice. This example helps make my point: in order to re-conceive management in non-Weberian terms, it is helpful to conceive of management as a domain-relative practice, where the activities of organizing, planning, and leading are relative to sustaining and advancing the excellences of the core practice housed in the institution.

3

In his section titled “Absence of Domain-Relativity in Management,” Sinnicks (2014a: 11) states that it “tells against Beabout’s account that managers changing from one industry to another occurs as frequently as it does.” I have two objections here. First, I question whether it is empirically accurate to assert that managers change industries “frequently.” Further, Sinnicks’ claim that there is an “absence of domain-relativity in management” (Sinnicks 2014a: 11) is overstated; despite a tendency to theorize about management as if it involves domain-

neutral detachment, flesh-and-blood managers often have experience or familiarity with their domain. Also, while some managers and CEOs move from one industry to another in which they have little experience, it does not follow that such moves are desirable.

4

In his final section, Sinnicks advances several specific criticisms of my work. Some of this material appears also in his recent article in *Business Ethics Quarterly* (2014b: 234–235). Once we clear away his several misrepresentations of my statements, it appears that Sinnicks and I agree on important matters with regard to his central point here; any apparent disagreements in this section between Sinnicks and me turn out to be inconsequential quibbles.

Sinnicks begins the final section by pointing to my claim that MacIntyre “has done little to develop an account of practical wisdom as a virtue helpful for those charged with managing institutions that house social practices” (Sinnicks 2014a: 12; Beabout 2012: 419). However, Sinnicks has left out an important point of context; I explicitly made this statement with reference to *After Virtue*, where MacIntyre emphasizes the virtues of courage, truthfulness and justice. *After Virtue* does not provide a detailed treatment of practical wisdom. Further, I noted that in some of MacIntyre’s writings that followed *After Virtue*, practical wisdom emerges as an important virtue (Beabout 2012: 419), but even in those writings, MacIntyre has done little to apply his account of practical wisdom to a non-Weberian managerial role.

The account of practical wisdom that I develop draws from Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, and multiple contemporary writers (2012: 419–427). Sinnicks suggests that MacIntyre’s writings on practical wisdom as a virtue integral to institutionally sustaining political communities provides resources for re-thinking the virtues needed for institutional and organizational leadership; in doing so, Sinnicks seems to be complementing my argument, not criticizing it.

I could raise several quibbles about passages in which Sinnicks seems to have misunderstood or misrepresented my claims. Setting these aside, the central point advanced by Sinnicks in the final section is that more might be done to develop and deepen in the leaders of organizations the virtue of practical wisdom; Sinnicks proposes that

MacIntyre's other writings, including his understanding of politics, is a helpful resource. Here, it seems that Sinnicks and I have a shared goal. The desire to deepen our appreciation of the place of practical wisdom in excellent management and to develop a transformed conception of the character of the manager lies at the core of my paper (Beabout 2012). Once the misrepresentations are cleared away, it becomes evident that we are in agreement with regard to his final section.

5

Sinnicks states that the goal of his piece is to cast doubt on my attempt to build on MacIntyre's virtue ethics as a resource for management (Sinnicks 2014a: 8). In a similar way, he states in his recent article in *Business Ethics Quarterly* that "attempts to apply Alasdair MacIntyre's positive moral theory to business ethics are problematic" (Sinnicks 2014b: 229). In both cases, the conclusion that Sinnicks draws is unwarranted. Sinnicks' criticisms of my article do not stand up to critical scrutiny. He has missed the key distinction I draw between two types of managers. His other criticisms are based on misrepresentations, misattributions, and misunderstandings. His objections and criticisms, rather than casting doubt on my thesis, are an occasion to clarify and support the growing recognition that virtue ethics provides a fertile framework for re-casting issues of management and business ethics. MacIntyre's work remains a fruitful resource for a transformed understanding of management as a domain-relative practice.

Received 27 June 2014 / Posted 8 September 2014

REFERENCES

- Beabout, G. 2013. *The Character of the Manager: From Office Executive to Wise Steward*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, <http://doi.org/10.1057/9781137304063>
- Beabout, G. 2012. "Management as a Domain-Relative Practice that Requires and Develops Practical Wisdom." *Bus Ethics Q* 22(2): 405–432, <http://doi.org/10.5840/beq201222214>
- Beadle, R., and K. Knight. 2012. "Virtue and Meaningful Work," *Bus Ethics Q* 22(2): 433–450, <http://doi.org/10.5840/beq201222219>
- Kavanagh, D. 2013. "Problematizing Practice: MacIntyre and Management," *Organization* 20(1): 103–115, <http://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412460994>

- MacIntyre, A. 2007. *After Virtue*. 3e. London: Duckworth.
- Moore, G. 2012. "The Virtue of Governance, the Governance of Virtue," *Bus Ethics Q* 22(2): 293–318, <http://doi.org/10.5840/beq201222221>
- Moore, G. 2002. "On the Implications of the Practice-Institution Distinction: MacIntyre and the Application of Modern Virtue Ethics to Business." *Bus Ethics Q* 12(1): 19–32, <http://doi.org/10.2307/3857646>
- Sinnicks, M. 2014a. "Mastery of One's Domain is Not the Essence of Management." *Bus Ethics J Rev* 2(2): 8–14, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2014.02.02>
- Sinnicks, M. 2014b. "Practices, Governance, and Politics: Applying MacIntyre's Ethics to Business" *Bus Ethics Q* Online First (May), <http://doi.org/10.5840/beq20145299>
- Whetstone, T. 2003. "The Language of Managerial Excellence: Virtues as Understood and Applied," *J Bus Ethics* 44(4): 343–357, <http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023640401539>