Organisations, character, virtue and the role of professional practices

Geoff Moore

Durham University Business School, UK

Introduction

This chapter will argue that any approach to character and virtue in professional organisations and practices that does not have an adequate conceptual framework for the inter-related individual-organisational-societal levels will fail to be much more than a plea for individuals to be virtuous at work, or for organisations to be in some sense 'good'. The essay will then provide such a conceptual framework based on the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. It will apply this framework by critically considering the role of professional practices both as organisations / institutions in their own right and in relation to other organisations, where professional organisations and practices potentially have the ability to play a positive moderating role.

The need for a conceptual framework for virtue in and of organisations

Virtue is an individual-level concept. That is to say that, at least from Aristotle onwards, the concern of what we would now call virtue ethics has been with the formation of individual character; with such virtues as practical wisdom, justice, courage and temperance which contribute to the make-up of such a character; and with the avoidance of compromising vices. In its neo-Aristotelian form at least, it has thereby been concerned with the formation and moderation of desires; with whether these desires lead to goods and *the* good for the individual; and hence with more general human flourishing (MacIntyre, 2016). Virtue ethics is therefore correctly taken to be a *teleological* understanding of human life.

But, of course, to say this is also to say that virtue ethics is a social and, indeed, even an environmental ethic. It has to do with how we as individuals relate to others, to social situations, to animals and to the natural environment. It is about all of these relationships, if for no other reason than that individual human good cannot be realised except in and through these relationships and in the pursuit and realization of the common good:

> "Each of us generally relies on others in pursuing our own individual goods. And this is even more obviously the case when the goods in question are not individual, but common goods, the goods of family, of political society, of workplace, of sports teams, orchestras, and theatre companies. Such goods we can achieve and enjoy only qua family member, qua citizen, qua participant in the relevant types of activity." (MacIntyre, 2016: 51)

In practice, of course, such social and organisational relationships also impose constraints on both individual agency and action, so that not only is it not always easy to know what one ought to desire if one is to pursue the good in one's life, but it is also quite possible for such desires to be frustrated. Indeed, if we follow institutional theory's understanding of our social lives as lived inside

institutional orders (the market; corporations; professions; family; community; religion and the state, Besharov & Smith, 2014), with such orders imposing their own logics on us (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), we might think that individual agency and actions are constrained to an inordinate degree. However, institutional theory also recognises that such institutional arrangements leave 'space' for individual and collective agency through the contradictions that are inherent in the various logics to which individuals and organisations are subject. That being the case, we might best understand an individual as, "the partially autonomous social actor in a contradictory social world and the active exploiter of social contradictions" (Seo & Creed, 2002: 230).

We will return to institutional theory when we consider the role of professional organisations and practices, but for now the key point from the preceding discussion is the effect of an institutional understanding of the social world on individuals and organisations, and therefore on the exercise of virtue in and, as I shall argue, of organisations. This is to say that any consideration of virtues in business, or in organisations more generally, will need to take account of these wider constraints which are by no means always conducive to virtue. This is also to suggest that we require a conceptual framework for understanding this, one that provides a coherent schema from the individual through to the organisational and societal levels. Lacking this, we are liable to fall back on general and simplistic pleas for individuals to be virtuous at work, and for organisations to be in some sense 'good'.

Let us take, as an example, the Jubilee Centre Law report, *Virtuous Character for the Practice of Law* (Arthur, Kristjansen, Thomas, Holdsworth, Confalonieri & Qiu, 2014). The title is clear; it is about virtuous character, and so focuses on the individual or practitioner level. It gets as close as it ever does to the organisational level when it asks about institutional constraints on virtuous behaviour and it is interesting, if hardly surprising, that the constraints most frequently cited in interviews undertaken with legal practitioners related to "financial and business pressures, and the anxiety that these are impacting on ethics" (ibid.: 18). The report concludes that, "These findings indicate some constraints and anxieties about the maintenance of a virtuous character in the practice of law" (ibid.: 23). The recommendations accordingly observe that:

> "A market society can lead to the commodification of legal services and be destructive of legal ethics. Worse than removing the personal and relational dimension to lawyer-client relations, however, is allowing price, competition and deal-making to be the principal tests of success. This can alter *the character of a profession* … The evidence of this study suggests there is no immediate risk of this occurring in the legal services sector. There is a need to ensure, however, that all its members *and organisations* have a firm commitment to, and a clear understanding of, virtuous practice and that education and training and *organisational and professional cultures* act together to sustain 'good law'." (ibid.: 24, emphases added)

In other words, the organisational conditions that give rise to anxieties and concerns are recognised, but then played down: these are not a problem apparently, at least for now. However, if these conditions were to become a problem, the answer would seem to be not just at the level of individual virtue, but also about the character of the professional practice, and about professional organisations and cultures. But apart from *recognising* this, the report is silent on what these organisational and supra-organisational responses might be, and how these might affect professional practices at the organisational and cultural levels. There is, in other words, no deeper

recognition of a dimension of virtue extending beyond the individual, or of the need for a conceptual framework that might contain this. It is this that I am here concerned to explore, since – as acknowledged in the Law report – the organisational and societal levels of professional virtue are at least significant and possibly decisive for the development of individual virtue.

To counter this rather individualistic approach to professional virtue, I propose to offer a perspective that does allow us to relate the individual, organisational, and societal levels of professional conduct and which draws upon the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* – though now considerably developed from his original writing on these issues. This will, among other things, enable us to appreciate what it might mean for an organisation to be virtuous, and hence what might be meant by 'organisational character'. In terms of this perspective, we will also be able to consider the role of professional practices as both organisations / institutions in their own right, and as they relate to other organisations.

MacIntyre's conceptual framework

Before considering the framework which MacIntyre offers, one might ask: "Why MacIntyre?" This is pertinent given that MacIntyre is well known for his critical comments on 'modernity' in general, capitalism in particular (at least in its Anglo-American form: see, for example, MacIntyre, 2015; for a critique Dobson, 2009) and the role of professional managers within the institutions of "liberal individualist modernity" as he terms it (MacIntyre, 2007: 195).

The answer is in part that the framework provided by MacIntyre gives us the conceptual clarity and terminology that we require to link the individual, organisational and societal levels of professional virtue and practice in a coherent way. A stronger claim is that this is the *only* such framework for this purpose: that no other writer on the virtues provides us with the resources that we require for this task. Another part of the answer is that this framework has been 'tested', not in the positivist sense of formulating hypotheses and empirically testing them, but in that it has been applied in both theory and practice to a wide range of organisations and occupations. For example, we have studies of the circus (Beadle, 2013), the health service (Beadle & Moore, 2011; Kempster, Jackson & Conroy, 2011), retailing (Moore, 2012), manufacturing (Breen, 2012; Fernando & Moore, 2015), surgery (Hall, 2011), churches (Moore & Grandy, 2017), banking (Robson, 2015; van de Ven, 2011), nursing (Sellman, 2000), accounting (West, 2016) and human resource management (Wilcox, 2012).[i] This gives some measure of confidence that MacIntyre's framework 'works' in practice.

What, then, is the framework which MacIntyre offers? This is shown in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. In outline, virtues mainly find their place in what MacIntyre terms 'practices', and the exercise of virtues leads to the achievement of what he terms the 'internal goods' of such practices. Practices are:

> "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity ..." (MacIntyre, 2007: 187)

However, if they are to endure for any length of time, practices also need to be sustained by institutions. Institutions are the "social bearers" (MacIntyre, 2007: 195) of practices but, in contrast to practices and their focus on internal goods:

> "Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards." (MacIntyre, 2007: 194)

On this understanding, organisations can be characterised as 'practice-institution combinations'. But this characterisation immediately points to an inherent tension in MacIntyre's sociology of organisations, a tension between practices and institutions, and between the generation and prioritisation of internal versus external goods, which is fundamental to virtuous organisational life.

Before exploring this analysis in more depth, it is at this point worth referring back to the earlier discussion of institutional theory to note that MacIntyre's use of the term 'institution' differs in some respects from its usage there.[ii] Institutions in institutional theory are supra-organisational mechanisms, providing what are sometime referred to as the 'rules of the game', whereas MacIntyre uses the term mainly in an organisational sense: "Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions" (MacIntyre, 2007: 194). Despite this, it is worth noting that both practices and institutions are not, on MacIntyre's understanding, confined to any particular form of organisation. Medicine, to take one of MacIntyre's examples, is practised by local surgeries, pharmacies, hospitals, university departments, commercial pharmaceutical companies, and charitable research organisations, and is supported by commercial manufacturers of surgical and more general medical equipment. To be involved in medical practice within one of these organisations is therefore to be linked to a much broader understanding of the practice of medicine. And similarly, the institutions that 'house' such practice are also linked together – including in some cases, as we shall discuss later, the professional bodies which form part of the practice's institutional environment.

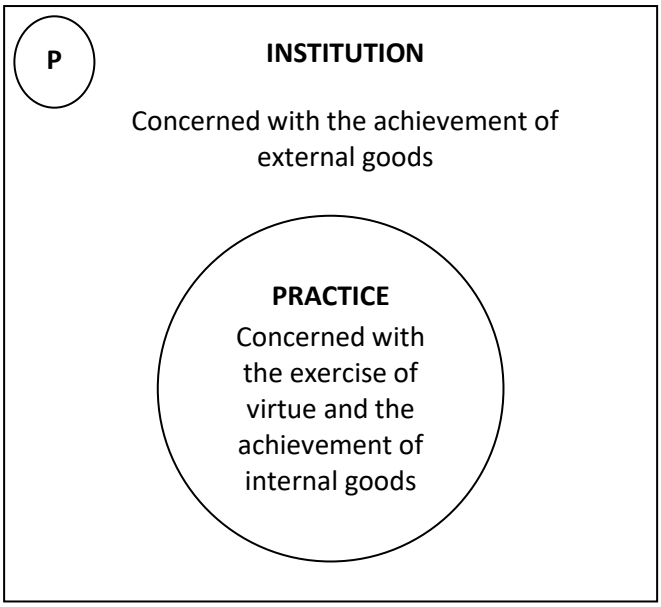

Figure 1 An organisation as a practice-institution combination (see Moore & Beadle, 2006)

To return to MacIntyre's framework, internal goods concern the excellence of the products that the organisation produces or of the services it provides, together with the 'perfection' of the individual practitioners of the practice (MacIntyre, 1994; 2007). With regard to medicine, for example, the internal goods would concern the health and well-being of patients, together with the 'perfection' of practitioners such as doctors and nurses. MacIntyre does indeed say that "the craftsperson is perfected through and in her or his activity" (1994: 284), thus using 'perfected' without qualification. But we might more naturally think of this in terms of the development of the moral qualities and skills and the flourishing of medical practitioners. In contrast to internal goods, which we might characterise as being to do with the pursuit of *excellence*, external goods might include survival, reputation, power, profit or, more generally material *success*. It is these that, as we have seen, are often the priorities of the institution.

MacIntyre's definition of practices extends to a wide range of activities. We have already seen that he considers chess, physics and medicine to be practices, and he argues more generally that "arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept" (2007: 188). In this light, it has been argued (Moore, 2002, 2005, 2012; Moore & Beadle, 2006), largely in contradiction of MacIntyre's own position on capitalism and the prioritisation of external over internal goods which it embodies (1994; 2007), that it is legitimate to apply what MacIntyre says of "productive crafts" (1994: 284) to organisations in general and to business organisations in particular (as have some of the studies mentioned above). The general requirement is only that at the core of any organisation there is a genuine practice such as chess, physics and medicine, or – as with some of the examples given above – retailing or manufacturing. In such cases, the specific requirement is that the particular internal goods of the practice contribute to the common good of the community.

This, however, does not mean that all organisations necessarily house practices. Indeed, it has been argued (Moore, 2017), on the basis of two studies of banking referred to above (Robson, 2015; van de Ven, 2011), that while 'traditional' banking might well have been a practice, 'new' banking is not. As MacIntyre himself says, "the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution … the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution" (2007: 194). Thus, the unbridled pursuit of external goods may override the pursuit of internal goods and destroy the practice – though it is worth noting that unless the institution does at least sustain the core practice that it houses, the organisation itself may not survive. On this understanding, it is at least possible that new banking may still contain the traces of the original practice, although it might require significant reformation to return to being a practice with genuine internal goods directed to the good of clients and the common good.

Before moving on, there is one other part of the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 that has not yet been commented on. This is the smaller circle containing a "P" in the top left hand corner. This reflects MacIntyre's observation:

> "Yet if institutions do have corrupting power, the making and sustaining of forms of human community – *and therefore of institutions* – itself has all the characteristics of a practice, and moreover of a practice which stands in a peculiarly close relationship to the exercise of the virtues …" (2007: 194-5, emphasis added)

This, therefore, is a way of both locating and describing management within MacIntyre's framework. It implies that there is another, albeit secondary, practice of institution-making in organisations, and that those who engage in this – managers in general – have the opportunity to exercise the virtues of this practice and thereby achieve the internal goods available from it (Moore, 2008). Further, on this understanding, management has been characterised as a "domain-relative practice" (Beabout, 2012) containing both generic aspects pertaining to governance of the institution, and specific aspects related to the particular core practice at the heart of the organisation. Such management demands "experiential knowledge of particulars" (ibid.: 424) and in this sense, management is never an abstract activity but always the management *of something*.

In light of this, we are in a position to consider the features of a virtuous organisation, features that responsible senior managers might be expected to nurture and promote. Firstly, a virtuous organisation should *have a good purpose* – which, as we have seen, may be characterised by reference to the internal goods of the practice (the excellence of the product or service and/or the 'perfection' of practitioners) that contribute to the common good of the community. Secondly, the organisation needs to appreciate that, "it is founded on and has as its most important function *the sustenance of the particular practice that it houses*" (Moore & Beadle, 2006: 366), and that this involves striving for excellence in this core practice. Finally, however, the institution would also *pursue external goods* insofar as these are required to sustain and develop the core practice, but not as ends in themselves.

This final feature perhaps requires further explanation concerning the relationship between internal and external goods. We have already seen that the simultaneous pursuit of both of these types of goods constitutes an inherent tension in organisations. Indeed, it is the unbridled pursuit of external goods in the societies of modernity that has consistently exercised MacIntyre: "it is ... always possible for a particular individual or social group *systematically to subordinate goods of the one kind to goods of the other*" (1988: 35, emphasis added). Nonetheless, external goods are, of course, still goods, and it has been argued that there is an "*essential but complex circularity between internal and external goods*" (Moore, 2012: 380, emphasis in original), such that the internal goods of a practice lead to the production of external goods that are in turn needed to support and develop practices.

To this extent, the *ordering* of internal and external goods may be complex in at least some practices. For whilst internal goods should be given priority – since it is these which give purpose to human activities – insofar as this requires the pursuit of external goods, there may need to be an appropriate *balancing* of the pursuit of both. This, of course, requires organisational practitioners in the core practice and at managerial levels to judge and act when the pursuit of these different sorts of goods has become disordered or unbalanced.

By characterising organisations in this way, however, an important conceptual point has been made. This is that it is possible to talk, even if only by way of metaphor (Moore, 2017), of organisational-level virtue (and vice), and therefore of organisational (and potentially professional) character. Drawing on the shorthand of 'excellence' and 'success' to capture the aims of practices / internal goods on the one hand and institutions / external goods on the other, organisational character has been defined as:

> "the summary of characteristics that develop over time in response to an organisation's challenges, opportunities and its own pursuit of virtue. An organisation can be characterised by the extent to which it possesses and exercises moral virtues (and lacks the associated vices) and by the extent to which it draws on the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom in its pursuit of a good purpose, and to enable the correct ordering and balance in its pursuit of excellence and success." (Moore, 2015: 109-10)[iii]

This, then, completes the description of MacIntyre's conceptual framework, at least to the extent required for present purposes. However, it is worth emphasising that this provides a coherent schema from the individual through to the organisational and societal levels. It is a framework that links individuals as practitioners to their cooperative work with others inside practices; practice-institution combinations form the organisational level; and the contribution to the common good provides the link to the societal level. With this, we have what we need conceptually to critically examine the role of professional organisations and practices.

Understanding professional organisations and practices

Before applying MacIntyre's framework, however, it is necessary to paint a partially historical and largely sociological account of professions and those occupations that have aspired to 'professional' status. If, as Scott (2008) claims, it is the set of professionals, broadly characterised, who supply the choreography to which the rest of us, as individuals and organisations, dance, then such professionals occupy a distinctive and hegemonic role in society. However, historically, a functionalist understanding of professions (Scott, 2008; Muzio, Brock & Suddaby, 2013), according to which they occupied a privileged position, inculcating deference (Carter, Spence & Muzio, 2015; Saks, 2016) but in exchange for a public-service orientation, would seem only to have lasted from the 1930s to the 1960s (Scott, 2008).

This conception was followed by a conflictual understanding, which argued that the functionalist account amounted to nothing more than "apologies for entrenched monopoly power" (Scott, 2008: 220). The focus thus shifted "from clients' to providers' interests and from technical or knowledge-based claims to political explanations" (ibid.: 220). Professions on this account encouraged "exclusionary social closure" (Saks, 2016: 179) on behalf of certain professional groups.

Latterly, however, an institutional model of profession and professional practice has come to the fore (Scott, 2008, see also Muzio et al., 2013; Saks, 2016), which, while not dismissing the conflictual elements in earlier analyses, seeks to offer a more "social constructionist conception of the role of professions" (Scott, 2008: 221). This has been characterised as:

> "a view that permits us to argue that the knowledge claims advanced by professionals can be both somewhat arbitrary and sincerely advanced, that professional jurisdictions can be contested and changing without being a simple matter of political clout, and that in many circumstances the advancement of professional interests is not inconsistent with attention to client welfare." (Scott, 2008: 221)

Characteristically, and certainly within the functionalist conception, professions have been understood as embodying several distinct, albeit inter-related, elements: altruism or related public

interest responsibilities; autonomy and self-regulation; authority over clients based on a systematic and specialist body of knowledge into which professional practitioners are inducted; a distinctive occupational culture often including a professional code of ethics; and recognition not only by the community but also the state (Lail, MacGregor, Marcum & Stuebs, 2017; Wilson, Hewitt & Thomas, 2010). In addition to this, via the educational qualifications for entry (Wilson et al., 2010), professions have been understood as controlling access and thereby limiting the supply of labour (Saks, 2016).

That said, not all occupations have been able to attain the same status, and so a spectrum emerges from classic or "'strong' professionals (medical doctors, lawyers, and the like) to 'weaker' semi- and welfare state professionals like social workers" (Noordegraaf, 2011: 1352). "Managerial professionals" (managers, controllers or consultants) as they tend to be termed (ibid.: 1352) are, at best, classified towards the weaker end of this spectrum, with management clearly not considered a 'profession' in the classical sense, given that it has no fully accepted body of knowledge (Wilson et al., 2010), limited ability to control entry standards, and similarly limited state recognition. Indeed, Wilson et al. (2010: 330) contend that by the late 20th century, accountants, rather than managers, were recognised as the "priesthood of industry" (citing Matthews, Anderson & Edwards, 1998), so that senior managers merely mimicked the language of accountants in an attempt to bolster their own position, while simultaneously joining forces with accountants "in a partnership aimed at reinforcing the power of capital over all other factors of production" (Wilson et al., 2010: 331).

Nor is this, which one might refer to as the 'marketization' of the professions, unique to accountancy and the not-quite-and-never-will-be 'profession' of management. Associated with the institutional model of professions has been the move of many professional practitioners to work in organisations other than those established by their professions. The most obvious of these are those professional service organisations that employ lawyers, accountants, marketers and architects. There has therefore been "a shift of professional work to organisational settings and with the rise of the professional service firm as a key locus and vector of professionalization" (Muzio et al., 2013: 701). Indeed, it has been argued that new forms of professionalism ("management consultants, project managers, HRM specialists or executive search practitioners", ibid.: 703), have emerged from such organisational settings.

Such new organisational arrangements have arisen partly in response to "a new type of client: the collective or corporate actor" (Scott, 2008: 231). These new organisational and institutional arrangements have affected not just more commercially-oriented occupations but also the more traditional professions of medicine and law, providing impetus for them "to become organised into group practices, or medical organisations, or law firms" (ibid.: 231). While this has been seen by some as an attack on professionalism itself (Noordegraaf, 2011), a more general response has been that professional service firms "are increasingly adopting both the logic and structures of business corporations. Professional identities are increasingly framed around logics of efficiency and commerce which have displaced traditional logics of ethics and public service" (Muzio et al., 2013: 700-1, incorporated references removed).

A further response has been, rather predictably, contestation *within* professions, with professional service firms responding "to different logics and understandings of professionalism from the professional associations that represent and regulate them" (Muzio et al., 2013: 711). Furthermore,

diverse professional organisations and practitioners have been implicated in cases of misconduct and malpractice: “the raft of scandals and corporate collapses in recent years were only possible thanks to the acquiescence, if not complicity, of a number or professions including accountants [and] lawyers” (Carter et al., 2015: 1208). This has given rise to concerns that “the very notion of professionalism [may be] redundant”, constituting “nothing more than an ideological land-grab advanced by interest groups whose concern for society has only ever been tenuous at best” (ibid.: 1209).

A critical but positive approach to professional organisations and practices: employing MacIntyre’s framework

While the above analysis may very well not apply in full to all professional organisations and practices, it might reasonably be argued to represent a general tendency that they all share, and which seems to reflect the tensions inherent in MacIntyre’s framework. Originally, perhaps, genuine concern for the internal goods of practices – the excellence of the products or services and the ‘perfection’ of practitioners in the process – were pursued by most traditional professions because of the contribution to the common good this enabled; and society responded by according them privileged status both to encourage the pursuit of excellence in these practices and for the consequent contribution to the common good.

But such practices could not survive without institutionalisation, and institutions are necessarily concerned with the acquisition of external goods. Thus, the tensions characteristic of practice-institution combinations emerged and, in societies which came systematically to subordinate internal to external goods, exploitation of the privileged status which classical professions had gained became possible. Other occupations (management, for example) have sought professional status lured by the external goods thereby attainable.

Law, as noted earlier, may not yet provide an example of this process, although even here concerns were expressed. The commercialization of accounting, however, is arguably a professional practice which does provide an example of this process, even to the extent that it has been suggested it is in servitude to capital (West, 2016). Working within a MacIntyrean frame, West (2016: 12) continues:

> “it is noticeable that outside the realm of academia, there is, in fact, little debate on the goods and purpose of accounting . . . [and this is] to point out that without such debate within the actual practices and institutions of accounting, the tradition of accounting is, according to MacIntyre’s scheme, in a state of decay.”

But this also points to the way in which MacIntyre’s framework might be used towards the formulation of a more positive future. The concern here has been aired already: that unless the institution sustains pursuit of the internal goods of the practice at its core it is liable to decay from within. The general concern is therefore that of how professional practices may resist the corrupting power of the organisations or institutions in which they are embedded. Three further studies, also working within a MacIntyrean framework, offer suggestions in this regard.

In relation to both surgery (Hall, 2011) and nursing (Sellman, 2000), considerable emphasis is placed on the commitments characteristic of such practices. Such commitments are ultimately to the

flourishing of patients, to the professional standards of service to others, to fellow practitioners, and to the organisations / institutions that sustain them. It is clear from these studies that, *when (and only when) surgery and nursing are in good order*, such commitments to the internal goods of the practice will take priority over any pursuit of external goods.

A study of human resource practitioners in a commercial environment (Wilcox, 2012) confirms this understanding by demonstrating the need for managers to resist organisational pressures related, in this case, to unwarranted reductions in staffing numbers introduced by a new CEO. But, significantly, the professional membership and commitment of such personnel and recognition of associated moral responsibilities for the "just treatment of employees" (ibid.: 88), seems to have been a factor in resisting such trends.

What such studies in the light of MacIntyrean analysis indicate is a need – but also the potential – for professional practices, where they are disordered, to return to the internal goods at their core; indeed, to become (again) practices in the MacIntyrean sense. Like other organisations, those that sustain professional practices need to prioritise the pursuit of internal over external goods – while ensuring some balance between the occupational need for both – if they are to be virtuous. To achieve this, they will need an organisational / professional character as outlined above, and hence will require organisational virtues and the avoidance of organisational vices similarly outlined. Given this, these professional organisations and practices would have the potential, in relation to those professional service and other organisations where professionals work, to play a positive moderating role. This would enable a similar pursuit of internal over external goods within these organisations, offering resources to practitioners to enable them to prioritise their practices and to resist the corrupting power of their own institutions, and with a paramount concern for the common good.

Conclusion

I have argued that in order to make sense of virtuous professional organisations and practices we need a conceptual framework that integrates the individual, organisational / institutional and societal levels of occupational function, and that MacIntyre's work offers us just such a framework. In light of the analysis above, we may conclude that MacIntyre's framework offers a philosophically justifiable but also practically useful means by which contemporary professional occupations might once again find their true purpose in pursuit of the internal goods of their practices, and so resist the corrupting pressures of modern commercialization.

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[i] See Moore (2017), Chapters 8 and 9, for a discussion of these and other examples.

[ii] For a discussion of the relationship between institutional theory and MacIntyre's work, see Moore & Grandy (2017).

[iii] In the original this referred to 'corporations'. Another change, reinforcing the notion of balance between the pursuit of excellence and success, has also been made.