Are Practices Self-Governing?
¿Son las prácticas laborales autogobierno?

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Abstract: In this paper I consider the question of self-governing in relation to MacIntyrean practices. It is not uncommon to discover MacIntyrean practices being described as self-governing in at least some sense. However, while there are seemingly valid reasons for why this might be thought the case, in my paper I argue that there is something very different visible in MacIntyre’s writings here. Indeed, what I want to emphasise regarding MacIntyre’s position in relation to the governing of practices is that rather than self-governing, at most MacIntyrean practices are self-directing or self-guiding. Therefore, although for MacIntyre governing of practices is fundamentally important, what I draw attention to is how, on the whole, this governing happens from outside, and that direction and guidance, if and when it does happen, happens in a very specific, internal way aside from governing.


Resumen: En este artículo considero la cuestión del autogobierno en relación con las prácticas MacIntyreanas. No es raro descubrir que las prácticas de MacIntyre se describen como autónomas, al menos en cierto sentido. Sin embargo, si bien existen razones aparentemente válidas por las que podría pensarse así, en mi artículo sostengo que en los escritos de MacIntyre es visible algo muy diferente aquí. De hecho, lo que quiero enfatizar respecto de la posición de MacIntyre en relación con el gobierno de las prácticas es que, en lugar de autogobernarse, en la mayoría de los casos las prácticas de MacIntyre son autodirigidas o autoguiadas. Por lo tanto, aunque para MacIntyre el gobierno de las prácticas es fundamentalmente importante, llamo la atención sobre cómo, en general, este gobierno ocurre desde fuera, mientras que la dirección y guía, si existe, ocurre de una manera interna muy específica, aparte del gobernar.


1 Thanks to ISME 2023 attendees for their helpful comments and critical suggestions upon the presentation of an earlier version of this paper.
The title of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry’s 2023 conference, *The Practice of Governing Institutions*, can be understood in a number of different ways. For example, it may be taken to mean the everyday activity of institutions that govern rather than offer public services per se. It may allude to the practical reality rather than abstract theory of governing, to a MacIntyrean practice of governing institutions itself or to a MacIntyrean practice of governing alone. Any one of these different topics is well-worth exploring. However, in my paper I seek to explore the question of governing as it relates to MacIntyre’s writings through the slightly different but still very related question of the governing of practices themselves and more precisely the question of self-governing as it relates to practices.

It is not uncommon to discover MacIntyrean practices being described as or associated with self-governing in at least some sense. In a University of Oxford report on the impact of AI on the doctor-patient relationship (Council of Europe, 2021: 38), for example, we are told that, “[m]edicine is a moral practice by MacIntyre’s definition because as a profession it self-governs.” In a book entitled *The Good Life of Teaching* (Higgins, 2011: 189), where teaching is regarded as a practice, we are told, similarly, that, “[t]he idea of a faculty has built into it the idea of a self-governing community whose search for unity of purpose across its several departments...creates just the kind of conversational space MacIntyre is after.” In a review of Kelvin Knight’s 2007 *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*, meanwhile, it is explained that, “MacIntyre finally broke with Marxism not because he had abandoned its revolutionary ideal of freeing all citizens to participate in self-governing activity, but because communists themselves had done so.”

However, while there are seemingly valid reasons for why this might thought the case, part of what I wish to draw attention to in my paper is that there is something very different to underscore in MacIntyre’s writings here. In fact, what I want to emphasise regarding MacIntyre’s position vis-à-vis the governing of practices is that practices are not self-governing as such, and if anything, simply self-directing or self-guiding. So while for MacIntyre governing of practices is still absolutely necessary, what I want to highlight is that this governing happens from outside not from within, and that direction and guidance where it happens, happens in a very specific, internal way apart from governing.

To uncover all of this I divide my paper into three main sections. In the first section of the paper I consider what we might regard as external or outside factors in the governing of practices i.e. institutions, nation-states, go-
verments and governing agencies, and MacIntyre’s ideal political community. In the second part of the paper I consider standards of excellence, and traditions, which we might regard as more internal or inside factors in governing of practices. Both sets of considerations I hope to show illustrate the overall point being made in this paper regarding self-governing and self-direction/guidance as it relates to practices. I next consider the very interesting case of natural law, and also the virtues, as it pertains to the governance of practices, and then conclude with consideration of what self-directing/-guiding as opposed to self-governing practices might mean more broadly, especially for any MacIntyrean political theory.

I. DEFINITIONS

I begin, however with some very brief and hopefully fairly uncontroversial definitions. As we know, 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, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007: 187).

By self-governing, I refer primarily to Bird (2000)². Bird (2000: 563-564) defines a self-governing community or organisation as where “actions taken or controls imposed by governing institutions” derive from inside or “within that community or organization”. Self-governing here might therefore be defined as self-rule or indeed internal governing. Bird (2000: 564) sees three distinct ways that actions or controls might emanate from within a self-governing community or similar. Such actions or controls can, firstly, originate institutionally i.e. via “the apparatus of government and administration… operated exclusively by officials and participants drawn from within, and authorized by, the citizen body, not by outsiders”. Self-government can be, also, according to Bird (2000: 564), via the General Will i.e. “public decisions…understood by members of the collectivity as reflecting, expres-

² There is an important question about how self-governing and self-governance relate or indeed conflate, but this is not something to be explored here.
sing, or revealing a will that is authentically their own,” and, importantly, where there is, “social consensus on procedures for determining or verifying the content of this will”. One further and final sense by which self-government is possible is, Bird (2000: 564) explains, via the common good, “[t]he idea that officials take the whole community’s welfare (the “public interest”) to be the main object of public action, and they appeal to a plausible account of this common good as the grounds for public action”.

According to Bird (2000), there are then three different ways of understanding self-governing. The first, institutionally, means no outside governance or indeed outsiders involved in governance and its agencies. With this sense of self-governing, the people who participate and control the features and activities of government are also those overseen or controlled by them. There are therefore no external government agencies, activities, resources or such like, according to Bird’s first definition of self-government. The second way of understanding self-government proposed by Bird (2000), General Will, means decisions based on and furthering this will in ways agreed consensually. The third approach to self-government offered by Bird (2000), Common Good/Public Interest, means government decisions being based on this Good (although not specifying how this might take place). There are other interpretations of self-government in the literature, see, for example, Przeworski (2009), but Bird’s taxonomy provides enough of a resource with which to come to a firm conclusion regarding the self-governing or not of practices.

Despite writings on self-governing, such as Bird (2000), and while not uncommon to read that MacIntyrean practices are “self-governing”, there is a lack of detailed discussion regarding what this might mean where this description is found. This is a pity as it raises a number of interesting issues, not least whether practices are indeed self-governing or not, a question which in this paper I hope to address. In fact, while not uncommon, the view that practices are self-governing is I will argue in this paper not on the whole endorsed by what we find in MacIntyre’s writings3. Indeed, rather than ‘governing’, what MacIntyre typically uses instead are terms such as ‘direct’ (1988: 31; 2016: 173, 174, 175), ‘guide’ (2016: 50), or at times ‘informed’ (1990: 64) to capture what happens regarding the running or orchestration of a practice.

3 Cfr.: “It is from within the practice of painting in each case that shared standards are discovered which enable transcultural judgments of sameness and difference to be made, both about works of art and about the standards governing artistic practice and aesthetic evaluation” (MacIntyre, 1992: 20).
Merely in terms of language adopted at least, we might then conclude that MacIntyrean practices are self-directing or self-guiding rather than self-governing. To be a genuine practice in this sense, in other words, any shared human activity must therefore be practitioner-led, -directed, or -guided, but crucially not practitioner-governed. I also wish to emphasise in this paper, however, how this difference between self-governing and self-directing or -guiding, and the apparent emphasis on the latter in MacIntyre’s writings regarding practices is in fact indicative of a much more substantial argument in his writings, which the labelling of practices as self-governing in the literature and elsewhere acts to deflect from. I want to challenge any assumption that these terms, self-governing and self-directing/guiding, are interchangeable as they seem taken to be, as it appears to me at least that their difference tells us something very significant about MacIntyre’s thinking that needs underlining rather than eliding. If nothing else, I also want to argue this distinction and emphasis on self-direction rather than governing needs restating and highlighting so that his valuable concept of practice is not conflated with other similar popular but more limited concepts such as ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

II. EXTERNAL ELEMENTS

The first and perhaps most obvious reason why practices are seemingly not self-governing is what MacIntyre writes about institutions. As we are told in *After Virtue*, for example, institutions, “universities and hospitals” (2007: 194), and so forth, concern themselves with external goods, money, material goods, power, status, and their distribution, and crucially goods which practices cannot provide themselves. Institutions sustain and bear practices and they also corrupt them (MacIntyre, 2007:194), moreover, but which a disposition to the virtues - more on the virtues below - helps practitioners to resist. We might wonder, as Pocock (2003), whether institutions and practices are distinct in material terms or rather in mindset, but it is clear that MacIntyre writes of institutions as being in some way external to but also governing of practices. The example of institutions therefore strongly suggests that practices are at least in this case not self-governing.

Another seemingly convincing reason alongside institutions why practices according to MacIntyre’s writings ought not to be thought self-governing is his text on government itself, and, more specifically, his text on what governments provide. For instance, MacIntyre (2016: 125) writes that histori-
cally governments, that is, government as in the nation-state or rather “the various agencies of government that collectively compose it” (MacIntyre, 1999: 131), have provided a range of public goods such as military and naval security, building and maintenance of roads, a public system of education, welfare agencies, child and social care, central banks, higher education, and supervision and regulation of various forms of transport and communication. MacIntyre also identifies law and order as one of those public goods provided by governments, and writes approvingly of various examples of laws as public goods, such as the Disabilities Act in the US (1999: 133).

While he is keen to distinguish superior, common goods to public goods, MacIntyre readily admits to both the necessity and importance of public goods (1999: 132). For example, MacIntyre emphasises the importance of the good of public security (1999: 132), and, in particular, serving in the military, and the importance of providing essential public services such as policing and firefighting. Most crucially for my argument MacIntyre, however, also recognises that public goods can only be provided by the state. As he concedes (1999: 142), “there are numerous crucial needs of local communities that can only be met by making use of state resources and invoking the interventions of state agencies.” In other words, he argues that practices cannot exist without institutions and neither it would appear can they exist without government agencies and the public goods and services they provide.

In line with this, take also what MacIntyre writes about family in Dependent Rational Animals, a shared activity he identifies as a practice (2007: 188), but which he later writes lack “self-sufficiency” (1999: 134). While they are “key and indispensable constituents of local community” (MacIntyre, 1999: 135), families, he explains, are reliant on the sustenance provided by their environment, the associations and institutions of their milieu (1999: 134). MacIntyre therefore recognises explicitly that at least some practices are not self-reliant, and not self-reliant because of the support external elements provide. Even if not stated as such, it is not unreasonable I would argue to assume, furthermore, this same denial of self-reliance, and so of self-government, applies to all other cases of practice.

So far, therefore, and in relation to institutions and government agencies/nation-states, I have tried to highlight in MacIntyre’s writings text that suggests he does not regards practices as self-governing, at least in the first Institutional sense of self-governing described by Bird (2000). These writings tell us that institutions and governments supply practices with fundamental
resources, external and public goods, without which practices could not survive let alone flourish, and so in effect tells us practices are not self-governing.

One further ‘external’ reason why I argue that MacIntyre is of the view that practices are not self-governing is the local community that practices alongside institutions and political associations ideally comprise (MacIntyre, 1999: 134). These ideal local communities are, for instance, founded on networks of giving and receiving, informed by virtues of just generosity and shared deliberation (MacIntyre, 1999: 142). Yet, he concedes, deliberations in these more ideal communities will not be perfect, with mistakes made and limitations placed upon them (MacIntyre, 1999: 144). We might, therefore, expect that where the conditions for such communities are not ideal, outside intervention in some form to govern its practices is called for as limitations in deliberation will seemingly require some form of intervention or oversight.

But even under ideal conditions, MacIntyre’s idea of a wider community comprised of practices and other entities pursuing the common good, in pursuing the common good will, it would seem, still intervene and interfere in people’s lives, including it would seem in their practices. Under ideal circumstances it may be that as MacIntyre writes “the distribution of goods by government...reflects a common mind arrived at through widespread shared deliberation governed my norms of rational enquiry” (1999: 31), but even in this society with structures in place to realise the common good (1999: 130), and where decisions about individual and common goods are made in a community network of giving and receiving, the demand for public goods and their provision would given what he writes appear at times to require very tight controls on members of an ideal community. Under ideal conditions in local communities, incomes, for example, will need to be redistributed, labour mobility will have to be restricted and dangerous and tedious jobs allocated (MacIntyre, 1999: 145). All of this would seemingly require outside intervention of some kind and quite formidable intervention given what is being asked of community members in terms of freedom of movement and civic duty. Again, this would at the very least appear to go against the first Institutional sense of self-government Bird (2000) offers for there is an element of outside assistance that this sense of self-government rules out.

However, what he writes about local communities, especially given his use of “common good” in this and other passages from Dependent Rational Animals (1999) does suggest at first sight at least that he might well be drawing on a sense of government, and indeed self-government, close if not equal to
Bird’s third Common Good definition. If we recall this is self-government where government actions are based on the public interest (Bird, 2000: 564).

Were we to accept this assumption regarding Bird’s third Common Good sense of self-government, this would therefore appear to rule out the second General Will definition offered by Bird (2000) as being in any way equal to MacIntyre’s thinking vis-à-vis government and practices. If we recall, this was where government pursued the will of the people and did so by means consensually agreed. This rejection appears especially so if what is meant by the consensus required to legitimise how General Will decisions are reached is an aggregation or balance of or compromise over interests. As is well-documented, MacIntyre very explicitly writes that this kind of approach is not what is meant by his understanding of common good:

Note that on this account the good of the individual is not subordinated to the good of the community nor vice versa. The individual in order not just to pursue, but even to define her or his good in concrete terms has first to recognize the goods of the community as goods that she or he must make her own. The common good cannot therefore be understood as a summing of individual goods, as constructed out of them. At the same time although the pursuit of the common good of the community is, for all those capable of contributing to it, an essential ingredient of their individual good, the good of each particular individual is more than the common good. (MacIntyre, 1999: 109).

Most crucially for the purposes of this paper, while there is good reason to assume MacIntyre’s approach to self-governing is closest to Bird’s third Common Good definition, it is important to recognise that as regards to practices specifically it is not absolutely clear from MacIntyre’s writings whether what he writes about shared deliberation in pursuit of the common good applies to practices or simply to the community. In addition, it may well be that he sees shared deliberation informing the internal politics of a practice, but equally he writes approvingly of the master-apprenticeship model of learning, for example, and of novice ‘subordination’ to practitioners and to the standards of excellence characterising a practice (2007: 191), none of which can uncontroversially be associated with open and informed deliberation. Indeed, there are practices he writes of, the family, for example, where shared deliberation among participants appears much less suited even impossible (MacIntyre, 1999).
So, while it is in my mind possible to argue that self-governing in the sense of Bird’s Common Good definition is most reminiscent of what MacIntyre writes about government, it is not clear whether this is what MacIntyre hopes for practices. In fact, it could be argued that in some cases at least shared deliberation is the opposite of what he envisions for practices and for our development within them.

We have now reached the mid-point of my paper, where I have been emphasising how we should have some doubts as to whether practices are self-governing in MacIntyrean terms. So far to support my argument I have considered the examples of institutions, government, and his ideal political community. While telling us much about MacIntyre’s approach to government, these three different cases appear equally to varying degrees to show that as regards to self-government as described by Bird (2000) practices are not self-governing, whether this be Institutionally, by General Will, or for the Common Good.

Of course, practices may very well have mission statements, rules and regulations, charters, codes of conducts, acts of association, bylaws, and other elements. These can be seen as adding specifics to the structure and activities of a practice, and providing guidance and ambition, and these will very possibly be self-determined even if modelled on instances from elsewhere. MacIntyre (2007) writes about practices, chess, for instance, that commonly have more or less explicit rules and regulations for play and association. However, while there is perhaps a degree of self-governance here, I would also argue that this is self-governing in at best a weak sense, as fundamentally the laws and institutions of wider society can typically revise or overturn such elements if so desired, and so revisions imposed externally by others. What we are seeing is self-governing of practices in any of the three senses described by Bird (2000) – Institutionally, General Will, or Common Good – and none of these three definitions appear to fit neatly with this weaker sense of self-governing recognisable in what MacIntyre writes about practices. It is perhaps only in the case of internally devised and established organisational rules and regulations that there is very possibly a degree of self-governing of practices, but even so this is at most only in a weak and limited sense. Even if this is conceded, self-government of this kind can be and is overridden by external authorities if and when required.
III. INTERNAL ELEMENTS

There are though other more seemingly internal elements in the life of practices, standards of excellence, traditions, natural law, the virtues, to consider. Are these not signs of self-governing we might wonder, or as I will underline, are these not examples of where practices are at most self-directing or guiding rather than self-governing?

Take standards of excellence, for example, which must be accepted if excellence is to be pursued (MacIntyre, 2007: 190). These standards “define the practice” as the music of famed composers or the understanding of star baseball players (MacIntyre, 2007: 190), for instance, does.

Standards of excellence are not externally imposed (2016: 171), and engaged with and improved upon from within albeit not necessarily explicitly or consciously. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to see standards of excellence as governing what practitioners do, being deliberated over and worked upon by practitioners over time, all of this being decided upon internally, and so in effect an example of where practices are indeed self-governing.

While we might have some sympathy with a response such as this, the character of standards of excellence should however be seen to suggest something quite different. This is because standards of excellence are not fixed but fluid and the expectation, in fact the necessity, of being involved in a practice is that such standards are adopted but, importantly, also moved beyond. As MacIntyre (2007: 189) writes about excellence, and so its standards, they must be understood in a historical sense and that crucially, “[t]he sequences of development find their point and purpose in a progress towards and beyond a variety of types and modes of excellence”. So “when Turner transformed the seascape in painting or W. G. Grace advanced the art of batting in cricket” (MacIntyre, 2007: 191), for example, they were overturning convention to surpass what had come before. The same in athletics with the Fosbury Flop or the music of The Beatles, for instance, where excellence was being pushed forward, new standards were being set, and in a way that overturned customary understanding of excellence.

Contrast this understanding of the standards by which we demonstrate, judge, and pursue excellence in our practices, with the formalised and explicit laws, rules and regulations of everyday life we conform to in our interaction with others and that typically characterise governing or government activities. It is an unusual kind of governing that allows laws, rules, or regulations enacted by government and its agencies or by community groups to be overtur-
ned and replaced like MacIntyrean standards of excellence are. Typically, bre-
aking or challenging the laws of a nation-state would lead to trouble with the
police and law courts and violating their rules and regulations would in the
case of practices lead to at least some form of disciplinary procedure. In the
case of breaking the law, it may be seen as revolutionary even terroristic to do
so. Of course, it may be just to break the law or challenge the rules or proce-
dures of a practice but, fundamentally, laws or regulations unlike standards of
excellence do not have the fundamental necessity to be surpassed or superse-
ded written into them.

The same kind of internal logic of unconditional innovation characteris-
tic of standards of excellence also applies to the traditions, “histories” (Ma-
cIntyre, 2007: 221), that practices embody. As MacIntyre explains, “at any gi-
gen moment what a practice is depends on a mode of understanding it which
has been transmitted often through many generations” (2007: 221). These tra-
donuts are to be assimilated and their authority respected, but crucially for
my argument these traditions are also to be extended and surpassed (Ma-
cIntyre, 2007: 194), and so again not an example it would appear of where
practices are self-governing.

The larger socio-moral traditions of an age, and their ideal characters,
bureaucratic-individualism and the manager today, for example, and traditions
which MacIntyre identifies as crucial to human development and self-unders-
tanding, are also not to be slavishly followed. Rather they like the histories of
practices and standards of excellence are also to be put to the test, if possible
improved upon and in the more extreme cases discarded completely. Indeed,
socio-moral traditions, “when vital, embody continuities of conflict,” he wri-
tes, “transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had
hitherto been reasoned in that tradition” (MacIntyre, 2007: 222). This internal
logic of competition is why he refers to a healthy, “living” tradition as, “an
historically extended, socially embodied argument” (MacIntyre, 2007: 222).
Only sacrosanct, “dead” traditions, of the kind associated with Edmund Bur-
ke’s understanding of tradition, are beyond reproach and fixed (MacIntyre,
2007: 222).

When it comes to standards of excellence, or traditions for that matter,
the normal, indeed, necessary expectation according to MacIntyre’s writing
appears to be therefore that they develop and change as part of the natural
way of things. This is starkly different to laws and regulation, and seemingly
other typical instruments of governing, such as government agencies, which,
typically, are not by default or by necessity contested or overhauled. This is a
further reason why based on MacIntyre’s writings I argue we should not regard practices as self-governing, and in the case of standards and ends of excellence specifically, instead regard practices as self-directing at best, i.e. as pursuing common ends at a point in time only practitioners decide upon.

IV. NATURAL LAW & THE VIRTUES

There is another key theme in MacIntyre’s writings related to this, natural law, which is more of a challenge regarding defence of my argument that MacIntyrean practices are not self-governing, at least self-governing in a strong and substantial sense. Natural law is crucial to his overall philosophy and, more specifically, to his concept of practices. No practice can pursue its internal end of excellence without the precepts of natural law (2016: 89), not least the precepts calling on us to abide by the virtues, which discourage using fraud or force in an argument (MacIntyre, 2016: 178), and so which act to ensure shared deliberation is possible (MacIntyre, 1999: 111).

The precepts of natural law are ultimately the dictates of reason originating in God, “without conformity to which human beings cannot achieve their common good” (MacIntyre 1999: 111). Yet the question is for the purposes of this paper where natural law and its precepts stand as regards the self-govern-ment of practices. For example, is the natural law internally derived from within a practice, fixed, and obligatory for all to follow? Is natural law rather something more akin to an institution or nation state, externally imposed, or like a standard of excellence or tradition, internally revealed but inherently and necessarily fluid and progressible?

The question of how natural law interplays with us is by no means a straightforward one. Thomistic natural law as set out in the *Summa Theologiae* is typically described as internal in its relationship with each individual. That is, it is not commonly regarded as imposed on us from outside per se. Rather the natural law and its precepts are regarded as being evident implicitly in our everyday lives, and knowable, revealed or uncovered by us through practical reasoning and reflection. In addition, while it is not derived through forms of democratic association and consultation per se, the natural law and its precepts are presented as guidelines that any reasonable person would subscribe to.

Natural law is then potentially an example of a concept in MacIntyre’s writings that governs us, does so through our own volition or endorsement in
that we can adopt or recognise it if we so wish, and unlike standards of excellence, for instance, is fixed and absolute. That is to say, the natural law is potentially a means by which a practice might be thought self-governing in a strong and substantial sense.

Despite this I would, however, argue that natural law does not provide enough of a resource to demonstrate that MacIntyre regards practices as self-governing and we can draw on MacIntyre’s later writings to illustrate why. MacIntyre (2009) recognises that there are “intractable disputes”, disagreements, about natural law. This is significant because it leads to some not only rejecting some of its precepts but rejecting the idea of natural law completely. Kantians, utilitarians, and Thomists, in particular, are all in disagreement about natural law and without any prospect seemingly of bridging the divide.

For MacIntyre (2009), failure in practical rationality leads to this failure to agree so it follows that if these failures of practical rationality were corrected there would be agreement, not least agreement that Thomistic natural law and its precepts are superior, or so MacIntyre contends. Yet if there is this disagreement, a key question is which approach to the natural law if any is being adhered to by a member of a practice, and if more than one, a further question is how if at all these different natural law approaches can be reconciled. More importantly, the question this then raises relevant to the focus on self-government of practices in this paper is whether different members of a practice can follow different, possibly oppositional natural law approaches and a practice be truly self-governing.

Moreover, for MacIntyre collective enquiry in pursuit of the common good requires “canons of rationality”, preconditions for shared enquiry, which Thomistic natural law and its precepts provide. This suggests that at best only Thomists, or those recognising Thomist natural law doctrine or similar, can be regarded as self-governing in relation to practices were these preconditions somehow self-governing too. As he argues those without virtue benefit from those that are virtuous in a practice (MacIntyre, 2007: 193), in a similar way we might argue that other participants benefit from the natural law beliefs of participants in a practice, and so possibly experience self-governing almost by accident, but if so, this seemingly accidental sense of self-government does

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4 “The precepts of the natural law are those precepts of reason conformity to which is necessary if we and others are to be able to deliberate together as rational agents and to achieve our common goods as family members, as members of political societies, and the like”, he writes (2016: 89).
not feel wholly right or satisfactory. If self-government is written into or wished for in relation to practices, then it should be there fundamentally and explicitly, not as a lucky by-product.

Putting this to one side, a potentially more persuasive reason for rejecting natural law as an example whereby practices can be regarded self-governing is the question of exactly who or what natural law applies to. While it does not appear to apply to individuals atomistically, equally natural law is not seemingly applied to entities such as practices alone per se. There is no natural law specifically for practices in the same way there is no natural law specifically for other kinds of organisations, in other words. There is simply one universally applicable Thomistic natural law, not Thomistic natural laws plural. So, if practices as regards to natural law are self-governing, then this is only in a very qualified sense. The most we might say is that practices are self-governing in the sense of their members as members of a larger community being subject to natural law and its precepts, but not self-governing in terms of a distinct practice.

What, though, about the virtues, lastly, discussion of which has been postponed until now. MacIntyre (2007) writes that practices are informed and sustained by, and cultivating of the virtues. The virtues are crucial because without them realisation of internal goods and pursuit of excellence cannot be achieved. Moreover, in contrast to the natural law, for instance, the virtues are inflected to some extent by the specific practices they operate under. “To treat patience as a virtue”, MacIntyre (2007: 202) writes, for example

presupposes some adequate answer to the question: waiting for what? Within the context of practices a partial, although for many purposes adequate, answer can be given: the patience of a craftsman with refractory material, of a teacher with a slow pupil, of a politician in negotiations, are all species of patience.

That said, the fact that the virtues are in part characterised by the practices they inform does not, however, mean, for example, that the virtue of honesty according to one practice is wholly different to another. Different instances or refractions of the same virtues, such as honesty or patience, share family resemblances at the very least. More importantly, as with standards of excellence, traditions, and the natural law, we can choose to adopt the virtues or not. We may well be disposed to them, but at the same time because people are not always so disposed, we need the practices in order to discover
them⁵. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of my overall argument, because we are not always disposed to the virtues, we need institutions and a community that encourages their cultivation (MacIntyre, 2007: 194-195). So, in other words, with the virtues we see again that practices alone are unable to create the conditions for their own existence.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, then, the intention of this paper has been to counter the view that MacIntyran practices are self-governing, that instead there is good reason according to MacIntyre’s writings to see practices as governed externally, and if autonomous in any way, at best self-directing or guiding. This is I feel very important to underscore. One reason why I believe it important to highlight this apparent distinction and nuance in his writings regarding the governance of practices is of particular relevance to any potential MacIntyran political theory. This is because I would argue that if practices are understood to be self-directing or guiding rather than self-governing, then they are more likely to be evaluated on these grounds. It seems to me that were this to happen, practices would more likely be judged on their ability to encourage the self-guided pursuit of internal ends of excellence, and so too would the institutions, government agencies and so forth that claim to support them. There is indeed I would argue a very real danger that by understanding practices as self-governing, focus shifts to the elements necessary for good governance and sight of what practices are really for, the pursuit of excellence and fostering human flourishing through shared deliberation and the virtues, lost. To focus on self-governing is to me back to front in other words and the question we should in fact be asking is not what self-governing practices require but rather given the end of excellence and its pursuit, what does this realisation require?

In addition, if we assume MacIntyre’s approach to self-government is closest to Bird’s third Common Good definition, then this would also appear to mean MacIntyre is at best agnostic towards particular forms of self-government, including democratic forms of self-government. With the Common Good approach to self-government Bird (2000) describes it is not stipulated how actions and controls based on the common good are to be reached. How

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⁵ As he writes, “it is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues” (MacIntyre, 2007: 194-195).
the Common Good is realised and furthered is left open, therefore; this could be achieved democratically but equally it may not. This would appear unlike Bird’s second General Will definition of self-government, for instance, where at the very least there ought to be consensus as to how General Will actions and agreement should be reached. That is to say, it appears that what matters at most in MacIntyre’s writings on an ideal community at least is that deliberations are shared, not the form of government per se, self-determined or not. In other words, MacIntyre would seem to be no champion of the democratic when it comes to practices (or indeed government more generally).

I would also argue that any MacIntyrean political theory given the argument of this paper should for the sake of consistency advocate big rather than small government (Cfr. Young, 2022). Practices need a great deal of support if they are to serve excellence and human flourishing and so a variety of government, or non-governmental agencies, are required. Were this not the case, and were MacIntyre’s writings interpreted as advocating a small or limited government political theory, I wonder whether practices would be supported sufficiently if at all. I also wonder whether this ‘small-government MacIntyre’ would not then be placed alongside libertarians and the political Right. A very strange position for an avowed Marxist to find himself in.

Also, self-governing is highlighted as a key component of ‘communities of practice’, a related concept coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). While there are commonalities between these rival concepts of practice, one area where the ‘communities of practice’ concept can be said to differ to MacIntyre’s is the demand in his work that practitioners take an ethical not simply pragmatic, ‘work-in-progress’ standpoint vis-à-vis the incoherence of modern life. If my argument stands regarding practices not being self-governing, this distinction appears to be a further key contrast between MacIntyrean practice and ‘community of practice’ given that the latter are by its creator labelled as “self-governing”.

Lastly, while it may frustrate some to hear that there is in my opinion good reason to view practices not as self-governing as such but rather at best self-defining or self-guiding instead, it is perhaps also the case that were it pos-

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6 “Communities of practice are complex social structures, whose voluntary and self-governing nature makes them quite sensitive to subtle dynamics” (Wenger-Trayner.com) https://www.wenger-trayner.com/key-success-factors/. It is worth noting also perhaps that if communities of practice are indeed self-governing and not simply self-directing then this would seem to suggest a far more politically radical and demanding concept of practice than MacIntyre’s.
sible, MacIntyre would likely prefer that practices were self-governing. Con-
sider how he commends shared activities, such as trawler fishing (MacIntyre,
1994), which aim at excellence even when profits are insufficient. In the short-
term at least MacIntyre argues this is better than sacrificing the pursuit of ex-
cellence and common goods for quick and easy money limited to a few. I want
to argue that this well-known example of a practice is indication more bro-
dly of how MacIntyre would view practices and their governance in an ideal
world. Yet, equally, he is of course also very acutely aware of the realities of
modern life and politics and I think this is why he appears inclined to call ins-
tead for a well-resourced and supportive political system, such as organisa-
tions providing public goods, and why in part I would argue he does not call
for self-governing practices per se.

The need for external governance is also seemingly at play incidentally in
the reasoning he offers for why he does not self-identify as a communitarian:

the communitarian mistake is to attempt to infuse the politics of the state
with the values and modes of participation in local community…absent
the virtues of just generosity and of shared deliberation, local communi-
ties are always open to corruption by narrowness, by complacency, by
prejudice against outsiders and by a whole range of other deformities, in-
cluding those that arise from a cult of local community. (MacIntyre,
1999: 142)

So, in short, in this paper I have presented what I see as pretty strong evi-
dence for seeing MacIntyre’s overall position being against practices as self-
governing. Although not self-governing, as regards to excellence, natural law,
the virtues, and common ends, practices are I would also argue most definitely
self-directing or -guiding, however. Ultimately, I would say this acknowled-
gement of the importance of external factors is primarily because according
to MacIntyre practices cannot serve the end of excellence under modern li-
beral capitalism alone and so require support. Whether under ideal conditions
he would hold the same view against the possibility of self-governing practi-
ces is an interesting question and I am inclined to think he would not.
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RECENSIONES