

Virtue and Utopia

Review of Benjamin Franks' 'Anarchism and the Virtues', in *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

In his elaboration of 'practical anarchism' (i.e., 'ethical anarchism'), Franks draws extensively on the virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre, especially as set out in *After Virtue* (1981), and proposes that:

anarchism ... and its distinguishing characteristic of adherence to *prefigurative* tactics ... is best considered as a social virtue theory compatible with the format developed by MacIntyre. (p. 156)

I am not an anarchist, but I am interested in the prospects for a united and effective Left, and I think Franks' proposal to found anti-capitalist politics on virtue ethics has much to offer.

Franks accepts MacIntyre's concept of 'practices' which is somewhat like what I call 'collaborative projects'. In particular:

like MacIntyre, they [anarchists] view the social world as being constructed out of intersecting social practices. (Franks, p. 141)

MacIntyre defines a 'practice' as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity. (1981, 175)

and he goes on to give examples: games like chess or football, professions such as architecture, enquiries such as physics, chemistry or history, arts such as painting and music, and the creation and sustaining of households, cities and nations. All practices are aimed at the achievement of some good. The concept of 'collaborative project' that I rely on broadens this concept of 'practice' by seeing on-going practices of this kind as one phase in the life-cycle of projects, which also include social movements and institutions.

In line with MacIntyre, Franks defines a virtue as:

an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices. (p. 178)

So virtue is *relative* to the practice in which it is realised. No human quality is *absolutely* virtuous, at least for the foreseeable future.

Practices, as MacIntyre sees it, are components of a *tradition*. A tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute a tradition" (p. 207).

Internal Goods

Participants in a practice are striving for some *good* which is intrinsic to that practice. They may be motivated to do so, however, by *external* goods. The distinction between goods internal to a practice

and goods external to the practice is crucial. The successful solution of a difficult problem in medical science is an example of an internal good, and the scientist achieving it will feel good about it, whilst winning the Nobel Prize is an external good. In both cases, the participant may experience pleasure, but only in the case of the internal good does the community (or at least the tradition) as a whole benefit. Practices arise in response to some problem (or opportunity) with the formation of a concept of the problematic situation, the realisation of which is the end at which the practice aims. This concept undergoes development as people learn from the experience of trying to realise it. The enjoyment (and fame) arising from the successful practice of medicine (which is the well-being of patients), for example, is not the end at which medicine aims. Rather this enjoyment *supervenes* upon the successful activity (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 184), that is, it is a by-product of pursuing the good of the practice. The good at which the practice is directed is definitive of the practice even though both the practice and its aim change over time, the practice maintains a narrative unity constituted by continuous collaboration as it undergoes historical development and both its ends and its means change.

What about if the project concerned is to bring about radical social change of some kind, rather than simply the perfection of the practice itself? This is problematic because the aim – abolition of capitalism – is, by its nature, *remote*. Pursuit of radical change is not the same as sustaining and maintaining a community or tradition and incrementally improving it, which is the kind of practice that MacIntyre seems to have in mind. Pursuing the overthrow of the existing social orders is not the same kind of practice as improving life under capitalism.

For an action within a practice of radical social change to be judged successful presupposes a *social theory* by means of which the contribution an action would make to the achievement of that end, if successful, may be assessed as an ‘internal good’ which the participants are striving for. We are not going to witness in our own lifetime the overthrow of capitalism as the outcome of our action, but some step in that direction would mark the success of an action, and social change activities are always aiming at some step of that kind. How is such a step to be evaluated though? A social change activity which is *not* aimed at taking some small step towards achieving the ideal which motivates it, may be a game or a fantasy of some kind, but it is not social change activism. It is the argument about what is or is not a step towards socialism which constitutes the tradition to which anarchists and socialists belong. Franks’ answer to this problem is the notion of *prefiguration*. I will return to this later.

MacIntyre distinguished between institutions and practices. Institutions, he says, concern themselves with external goods so as to sustain themselves and the practices of which they are the bearers – good performances are rewarded, and wages are paid for full-time commitment and apprentices are given formal training by old hands. Education systems based on testing regimes are an example of how institutions can undermine the very virtues they set out to sustain. “For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions ... institutions and practices form a single causal order in which which the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution ...without the virtues ... practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions” (*op. cit.*, p. 181).

Elsewhere (2014), I have argued that collaborative projects (practices) rather than individuals or groups should be taken as the units of analysis for social theory, and that institutions be seen simply as part of the *life cycle* of projects. Given the antipathy anarchists tend to manifest towards institutions, MacIntyre’s claim that they are necessary to sustain practices is an issue which Franks could address. (Activists often see the institutionalisation of their demand as a failure, as it corresponds to the demobilisation of the social movement. See my review of Andrew Jamison, Blunden, 2012.). As Franks would surely agree, we need institutions which sustain virtues without undermining them at the same time by rewarding performance, and aren’t they exactly the kind of

institutions we aspire to create? But what kind of institutions? Without institutionalisation, how are the practices to be sustained and the virtues fostered and maintained?

In the early days of working class organisation, breaches of union discipline were punished with fines. Gradually, over a period of 100 years, these sanctions faded away as the norms of unionism were internalised by workers and new generations were raised in the necessary virtues. No-one would argue that these fines exercised a 'corrupting power', but the point is that the virtue of solidarity took a protracted period of time to become instilled in the broad mass of the working class and where unions are still strong, is maintained this day by means of other sanctions. *How* this virtue became instilled and maintained in masses of people is a question of great interest.

So where does anarchism, and 'practical anarchism' in particular, fit into this scheme? The various currents of activity which co-existed in the First International and later manifested themselves in the various currents of anarchism and socialism constitute a single tradition, and accordingly have been engaged in arguments about the nature and means of achieving socialism for the past 160 years and more. Anarchism and Communism emerged as separate currents only in the early 1870s. Each of the various currents are *practices*, and it is the continual interaction *between* and immanent self-critique *within* these practices, all part of the same anti-capitalist tradition, which not only makes collaboration possible, but brings about change and development within each of these practices. As the movement experiences its failures and successes, the vision of the ends being pursued changes, as does the conception of appropriate means.

Problems with MacIntyre's virtue ethics

Modelling an anti-capitalist project on MacIntyre's virtue ethics cannot ignore the fact that MacIntyre himself regarded modernity *in toto* as an unmitigated disaster and the conclusion he drew for himself was a return to the Catholic Church and obedience to its tradition. No wonder that MacIntyre did not turn his mind to the anti-capitalist project at this time. James Laidlaw (2013) has made a sharp critique of MacIntyre, but I think that Franks' selective appropriation of the MacIntyre of *After Virtue* is not affected by the problems which Laidlaw identifies and even Laidlaw can see a "vague anarcho-syndicalist utopianism" in *After Virtue*. There is no need to accept MacIntyre's analysis of the failure of the Enlightenment project in order to adopt the idea of a world made up of practices and traditions of practice sustained by virtues oriented to the furtherance of goods internal to practices. This is the feature of MacIntyre's virtue ethics which makes it attractive for those of us engaged in social change activism.

Franks sees two challenges to the adoption of MacIntyre's virtue ethics: (1) "MacIntyre's view that the virtues require a consistent adherence to strict social regulation," and (2) "the biologically determined teleology that is the basis for MacIntyre's description of Aristotle's account of the virtues" (p. 151).

(1) he finds to be not problematic on the basis that the tradition of which anarchists belong supports strong social norms, but simply opposes their enforcement by a state or by capital. Whatever MacIntyre's view, it is now at least widely accepted that civil disobedience is a major contributor to social progress – Rawls (1993) and Heller (1987) who are deontologists, both affirm this, and civil disobedience is an exceptionally important arena for the development of virtues. There could be no justification for "consistent adherence to strict social regulation" as a criterion of virtue, in our times at least.

(2) turns out not to be a problem either. A virtue is that which promotes the achievement of the goods which constitute the defining telos of the practice and MacIntyre says that the definition of virtues "does not entail or imply that practices as actually carried through at particular times and

places do not stand in need of moral criticism” (*op. cit.*, p. 187). Indeed it is by means of the moral criticisms which take place through the interaction between practices within a tradition, “as components of a shared unifying narrative,” (p. 155) that practices are “judged.” Every practice has a telos, by definition (an aimless practice is a contradiction in terms), but a telos which is forever under revision. There is no requirement in virtue ethics, however, for ‘essentialism’ or an ‘unchanging human nature’, something which Franks seems unduly concerned about. The virtue of the practice is guaranteed only by reference to the tradition of which it is a part, ultimately, according to Aristotle, on the basis that “the good life for man is spent seeking the good life for man” (*op. cit.*, p. 204).

I agree with Franks’ turn to *virtue* ethics and his rejection of the supposed two alternative theories of ethics, viz., Consequentialism and Deontology. However, the dispute is over which criterion should be the *final arbiter* of right and wrong and whether the right thing to do can really *ever* be decided either by reference to an abstract rule or to consequences.

Consequentialism and Deontology

According to *Consequentialism*, the rightness of an act must be judged according to its consequences. There are two difficulties with this: (1) at the time of acting you do not know what could be the consequences of your action beyond the proximate outcome, if at all, and (2) how are all the myriad of outcomes, good and bad to be aggregated and summarily evaluated? The most established version of Consequentialism, Utilitarianism, answers that the total utility (usually interpreted in economic terms) summed across all affected persons ought to be maximised. Apart from the implausibility of this calculation, it leads to well-known perverse and unjust outcomes.

However, the rejection of Consequentialism does not mean that a person should be indifferent to the consequences of their action, as Franks seems to be suggesting when he says, with reference to prefigurative methods: “the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially.” On the contrary, a person is morally responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their action and in the case of reckless action, even unforeseeable consequences. An aimless action, that is, an action indifferent to its consequences, is not only madness, it is a contradiction in terms.

According to *Deontology*, the rightness of an action must be judged by its conformity to a set of rules of the form “Thou shalt ...” Foremost amongst these rules is the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have done unto you,” and in modern Communicative Ethics (Habermas 1984, 1987), decisions about how to act must be made according to rules governing how *collective* decisions are made: consulting all those affected, benefiting the most disadvantaged, eschewing domineering or exclusionary speech, etc.

The rejection of Deontology does not mean that there are no rules and norms which people ought to have a mind to in deciding how to act. On the contrary, the rules just mentioned by way of illustration most certainly should be attended to in deciding how to act. But *which* rule should one obey when two or more rules are in conflict, and mandate different actions? That is the question.

Virtue Ethics

The point is that reflecting against abstract and implausible criteria while carrying out elaborate hypothetical calculations is just not how people actually make decisions. This is not surprising because it would be actually impossible to make decisions in that way and attempts to do so invariably lead to perverse outcomes. It is when two or more rules conflict and we are called upon to decide *which* rule to prioritise or find a creative *via media* that ethics comes into play, and neither consequentialism nor deontology can help us when facing these kind of quandaries. The richness of

the vocabulary for virtues and vices – prudence, courage, self-respect, humility, intelligence, intuition, firmness, kindness, fairness, empathy, flexibility, consistency, versus carelessness, cowardice, hubris, insensitivity, ... – evidences the complexity of the process of determining one's course of action in difficult situations and the depth of personal character that is called upon to act wisely. For correct decisions we must rely upon the judgment of a person in command of the relevant virtues and in possession of all the facts. This is why courts have judges and juries and do not simply appoint a clerk to look up the relevant legal provision and read off the verdict. It always requires *judgment*, and the virtues needed to make a good judgment and carry it through can only be acquired through a moral education in the relevant tradition. Aristotle called the wisdom entailed in knowing how to act in the face of complex and conflicting imperatives *phronesis*.

In exercising phronesis, a judge, for example, takes into account foreseeable consequences and the possible unforeseeable consequences of their decision, and attends to rules of conduct which ensure justice and fairness in acting. Judges are subject to a protracted education and training in the practice of the law in order to instil the appropriate virtues and develop the capacity for phronesis. *There is no rulebook* for this. But in every case, this judgment entails an indefinitely complex balancing which can never be definitively resolved by rules or a utilitarian calculus. It is the tradition of which the practice is a part and the self-concept of that practice which provides the resources for the exercise of phronesis, the various rules of conduct, concepts and narratives (precedents) which the judge can call upon in determining what to do. And there is no abstract set of procedural rules or decision guidelines which can substitute for the exercise of phronesis by virtuous actors, determining their action as participants along with others in the relevant practice.

It is virtue ethics therefore that offers a *realistic study* of the exercise of phronesis, but virtue ethics does not exclude the need for deontological and consequential considerations, but on the contrary attends realistically to their application. We still need to evaluate our actions in the light of their foreseeable consequences and we need to have norms and rules appropriate to the work of socialists.

Practical Anarchism and Virtue Ethics

Franks repeatedly emphasises that 'practical anarchism' rejects consequentialism, for example:

Anarchist prefigurative methods are identifiable as they are the types of practices that would collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society. However, the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially. Anarchists, for instance, employ anti-hierarchical forms of social interaction (for instance, in their formal methods of organisation) not because they will bring about their ends more quickly than centralised authoritarian political structures, but because they produce the very forms of social relationship, albeit in miniature, that they hope to achieve in the longer term. (p. 146)

The qualification "more quickly" is a red-herring. Anyone who thinks that the issue is about how *quickly* socialism can be attained is seriously deluded. If Franks is saying anything at all, he is saying that the employment of anti-hierarchical methods can bring about socialism whereas the employment of hierarchical structures *cannot*, otherwise the whole argument is moot. How is this to be done?

Franks says that these practices will "collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society ... albeit in miniature." Now this is not an ethical argument, it is a *social theory*, viz., the theory that by creating a better world in miniature, a transformation of the entire world may be achieved by "contamination," to use the term coined by Maeckelbergh (2009).

The general assembly, it seems, can “build up” to a larger and larger meeting until the entire world is drawn into its anti-hierarchical structure, without the use of delegates or representatives (which anarchists deem to be inherently hierarchical). Franks does not use the rather pejorative word ‘contamination’, but he does believe that practice of the virtues is ‘generative’, that is, that practice of the virtues promotes the formation of a virtuous character, and it is more than reasonable to suppose that virtuous practices will serve to generate further such practices. But the fact is that we have not seen the evidence of this in growing numbers of anarchists and socialists in the world. If this is to happen by some kind of moral education, then we need a theory about how this is achieved. It is not automatic.

Although embedded in an exposition of MacIntyre’s virtue ethics, the proposal for prefigurative politics is in fact *not an ethical argument* at all, but an expression of a highly questionable, unproven social theory, that of *contamination* – simple force of example. The force of example is not in itself a reason for doing something. An action must first of all be judged on its own merits.

Let us look more closely. Franks argues that prefigurative politics are adopted *not for consequential reasons*. To be fair, Franks *means* “not for consequential reasons alone,” but this line of argument, without the qualification “alone,” is so pervasive in anarchist literature it cannot be allowed to pass. Actions are *always* for their consequence. It is just that actions can be subject to constraints, and these can be constraints of justice or fairness, for example. But if there is any *other* purpose to an action, then such other purposes cannot be imported into a collective action without the explicit consent of participants. If an action is to be carried out for the purpose of promoting anarchism or recruiting other participants to the Party, then everyone involved has consent to that.

So for example, if a non-hierarchical structure is adopted for a campaign and as a consequence of this structure, let us say, an important decision is not made in a timely manner, and the campaign fails (the forest is burnt, the refugees remain in detention, the houses are demolished or whatever) then the argument is that still it was right to adopt the non-hierarchical structure, despite it being the *cause* of the failure of the campaign. Now I have to say that there most definitely *are* circumstances in which it would be correct to eschew a tactic despite the fact that it may be the only way to produce the most desirable outcome. But in general, it is fair to say that the process of contamination is unlikely to be effective in spreading non-hierarchical structures if a non-hierarchical structure consistently leads to the failure of campaigns. However, if participants are consulted, and agree that failure with an inclusive procedure is preferable to success with less exclusive procedure, then the goal of the action is duly amended and that’s fine.

Also, to employ a method without seeking to justify it consequentially *in order to* achieve socialism by means of ‘contamination’ is a performative contradiction, because the reason for doing was that the consequence would be socialism.

The question which confronts the activist is whether the need to achieve the proximate aim(s) of the campaign is *genuinely* in conflict with the need for a ‘horizontalist’ organisation. If, for example, a group of workers are engaged in a campaign for a wage increase and a union official is able to convince the boss to grant the increase by spending the day on the golf course with him and making a secret deal, I would say that such a means is corrupt and not justified by the end because of the negative impact it has on union organisation, loss of trust, etc. But Consensus, for example, is not the only way of resolving differences in a campaign and sometimes such processes are *not* the best way of resolving differences. Knowing the best way to resolve differences in a campaign requires the exercise of phronesis, a capacity that is acquired through long experience in organising and willingness at all times to learn from experience and eschew dogma, and to know when to adopt one means of overcoming differences and when to adopt another.

The point is that the consequences of (for example) adopting a certain structure *are* significant in deciding whether to utilise it, but it takes judgment. One ought to know the proximate outcome of

a decision one makes – for example, that the adoption of a ‘horizontalist’ structure for a campaign will lead to failure of the campaign, and this has to be taken into account and *weighed*. But the tradition of which one is a part and the self-concept of the practice, which includes its social theory and its norms, provide the concepts, rules and inferences which will also guide you in making a decision:— whether or not to let the campaign fail in the interests of (for example) preserving relationships within the campaign and being able to learn from a failure. To adopt virtue ethics is not to turn a blind eye to the proximate consequences of one’s actions and certainly not to ignore the wisdom accumulated by the anti-capitalist movement over the past two hundred years, encoded in the founding principles of the First International and the socialist and anarchist literature produced by the movement since. It is to know how to apply it.

Making a virtue ethic the basis for an approach to social change activism means paying attention to cultivating the capacity for ethical judgment, phronesis, among the activists and building organisations which are themselves virtuous, and will not be captive to rigid dogmas and procedural imperatives (deontology).

Goals and Motives

I have said that one knows, or ought to know, the proximate outcome of one’s decisions, and an organisation bears moral responsibility for those outcomes and other unintended outcomes insofar as they were foreseeable. But socialist society is never such an outcome. On any reasonable judgment, socialist society is generations into the future. No course of action can be judged consequentially on the basis that its outcome will be socialist society. Only a raving idiot could believe that, the more so in the light of the experience of the twentieth century.

An action has effects. These effects combine with the totality of conditions at the time and the responses of all the players to produce a new totality of conditions. One can never know the ultimate consequences of one’s action. However, history *is* intelligible and the socialist and anarchist traditions have built up a body of social theory over the past two hundred years which provides rules of conduct and some capacity to analyse conditions and estimate the consequences of different conditions and events. There is always going to be room for argument about how this struggle may unfold, and most likely this argument will be settled only in some distant time when people are more intelligent than we are now. What ethics can provide however is that which social theory cannot: guidance on how to work together when we do not agree about the efficacy of this or that decision. It is here I believe that Franks’ proposal for a politics based on virtue ethics comes into play.

Ethics and Utopia

If prefigurative politics is to be justified, it has to be on the basis of virtue ethics, but this does *not* imply that this or that organisational structure is validated *irrespective of consequences*. ‘Socialist Society’ – the utopian vision we share of a future world after the overthrow of capital – is not a ‘consequence’. This is because it is absolutely impossible to predict the arrival of such a society generations into the future, as a result not just of *our* actions, but those of everyone else. ‘Consequences’ are the proximate and foreseeable outcomes of decisions made and it is these we must take moral responsibility for.

‘Socialist society’ is a rendering of the ethics of socialism into utopian form.

It is our *socialist ethics*, which determines our actions, supported by the social theory which we have also acquired through the practices of the anti-capitalist tradition. Our socialist ethics must be, as Franks argues, a virtue ethics, which means we pay attention to the moral education of our cadres

so that they will be able to exercise wise judgment in the struggle for justice and freedom. It is a fact that there are many differences in matters of social theory within our movement, despite the fact that we share a common vision of socialism, but there is surely reason to believe that we could share an ethic.

From whence does a socialist ethic arise? Not by transplanting a utopian vision of socialist society into the present, in 'miniature'. No. It is more the other way around: the utopian vision of socialist society is a 'projection' of our (somewhat) shared socialist ethic on to a future world. This socialist ethic exists and develops precisely in and through the practices in which we all *collaborate* together (cooperating and conflicting) and work through our differences, make our mistakes and share our successes and failures, and learn together. If Maeckelbergh's idea of 'reciprocal contamination' means anything it must mean the negotiation and internalisation of shared ethics in the course of collaborating in common projects. If this is the case, then it would be very useful to try to elaborate this socialist ethics and discuss it.

This is a very important and concrete task, because as Franks notes, there will never come a time when all conflicts have been resolved. To moderate the differences *within* the anti-capitalist movement is surely the most attractive way to develop the ethics of socialist society in which an even wider range of aspirations will exist.

The mere posing of socialist society as an *end* is misconceived. It is not a question of bringing means and ends into conformity, as many argue, and any attempt to do so can only lead to a barren utopianism by subordinating our means – our organising practices of today – to an imaginary utopia – a world in which the socialist ethic has been universalised. In fact, when I do this, what is actually happening is that:

I begin with my spontaneously adopted ethics;
I then (consciously or unconsciously) project them on to a future socialist society, and
I then deduce the ethics with which I actually began, but now with the illusory justification that it prefigures our shared end, socialist society.

In other words, it is a fraud. (It is somewhat like the argument which project capitalist competition on to Nature, and then claimed that competition is the way of the world, human as well as natural). It implies discussing how to collaborate here and now in terms of how we think people living in some imaginary future society would collaborate, when differences in wealth, power, education and welfare have been overcome and no longer have to be taken into account.

No, the socialist ethic has to be justified in terms of the exigencies of organising here and now, in the light of the wisdom we have inherited from our shared tradition. 'Socialist society' has no determinate content other than the generalisation of the socialist ethic. But the socialist ethic is not something for the future: it is now. The means of our activity, including the social consciousness of our activists, are in fact elements of the capitalist society of which we are a part and which is the very object which we are trying to change. This is where the identity of means and ends is located, in the subjectivity of the social strata which are thrown into opposition by the development of capitalism itself.

The social structures and forms in which the socialist ethic might be universalised must remain obscure to us for some time. Franks claims (p. 141) that anarchism lacks "determinate ends" and surely this must be true for all of us in this tradition.

But it is unclear what Franks refers to when he counterposes this indeterminate end to "our goals." His definition of prefiguration as "tactics [which] encapsulate the values desired in [our] preferred goals," comes close to what I am arguing. But virtues are not goals and what are the "values" which have now been introduced? If we are introducing an axiology into MacIntyre's virtue ethics,

rather than the kind of ethics in which exchangeable ‘values’ are usually a part, this needs to be explained. ‘Goal’ is usually used to denote proximate aims, in contrast to more remote ‘ends’ which Franks “hopes to achieve in the end” by means of prefiguration (p. 146). The meaning of these terms is not fixed, but in the context of talking about acting without concern for the consequences but hoping to achieve something “in the end,” this all needs clarification.

I shall elaborate an approach to resolving this question by means of an innovation in virtue ethics which marks a departure from the concept of virtue used hitherto.

The Virtues of Practices

The traditional concept of ‘virtue’ is intrinsically individuated in that it references an aspect of an individual’s character. On the other hand, an aspect of an individual’s character is only a virtue if its exercise contributes to the internal goods of the practice of which it is a part, and what counts as the social good is determined by the social practice and the tradition of which it is a part. Further, character is itself shaped by participation in practices even though the character is itself a psychological formation. Virtue is thus essentially both social and individual in content.

This ambiguity is not unique to the concept of virtue. Knowledge, for example, is not simply an entity attached to an individual. Knowledge can only be realised in the context of social activity and what counts as knowledge depends on the practice in which it is realised, and individuals in general acquire and realise knowledge only through interaction within that practice. In a similar vein, customs are taken to be attributes of a community, conformity to which is acquired by individuals in the individual’s habits and conduct.

I believe it is justified to take virtue (like knowledge and custom) as in the first place *a property of a social formation* or project, evaluated within the tradition of which the project is a part, and only *derivatively* a property of the character of a participating individual. What is taken to be virtuous in a given practice is realised in actions which manifest that virtue. Like custom and knowledge, virtues should be understood primarily as attributes of a project, realised and manifested in the activities of the project and *derivatively* as something acquired by individual human beings in and through their participation in the practice, according to the quality of their participation and position in that practice. We are all familiar with the inclusive social movement, the competitive sports club, the supportive self-help club, the solid union or the egalitarian community.

Virtues are attributes of practices, not individuals.

The starting point of the enquiry then is to determine those virtues which we see as characterising anti-capitalist politics and how they are fostered in the practices which make up our tradition. This conception of *virtuous* political activities is our starting point, and it is reasonable to suppose, at least to start with, that individuals will acquire or at least actualise, the virtues by participating in virtuous political practices. Surely, taking everything into account, the best possible outcome, if not some utopia, will result from the exercise of those virtues.

So this moves the discussion to the *virtues of social practices* (‘collaborative projects’ in my terminology), over and above the usual vocabulary of individuated virtues. As MacIntyre pointed out, the study of the virtues is fundamentally an *empirical exercise*, not an abstract theoretical speculation, and much of the necessary empirical data is summarised in my book *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2015).

Social change practices must be underpinned by the deontological maxim: *we* decide what *we* do. This is the progressive, secular version of the Golden Rule. The virtues of social change activism are developed on the basis of this maxim and the resolution of conflicts which arise in the course of

collective decision making. It is these virtues which *prefigure* the kind of world we are fighting for, not 'in miniature' but concretely, in reality, here and now.

Anarchism and Mediation

Franks, like all other anarchists, is 'opposed to' mediation. I put the word in quotes because to me this is like being 'opposed to' nature or 'opposed to' social relations. Mediation is ubiquitous. In Hegel's words: "There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation" (1816, §92). In a personal communication, Franks explained that this is because "the mediating term, which initially acts as the method to achieve a goal, begins to dominate. So mediation itself changes its meaning, where once it is initially a mode of assistance, it becomes a feature of dependence and domination." I have to say that it is a fact that wherever two terms come into relation with one another, their mediation generates or strengthens a middle term, and that other things being equal that mediating term takes on a 'life of its own', that is to say, develops according to its own logic. So the organiser must always pay attention to the means of mediation. But I see no necessity mediation becoming "dependence and domination."

Franks further explained to me that:

Whilst you are right that anarchists are suspicious of representatives, they do not reject them in total, if there is no practical alternative, but they do put additional safeguards, usually rejected by more orthodox socialist movements. Such as limits on time served in posts, and number of times they can re-elected, as well as areas for decision making. Delegates usually have to abide by the decision of the local group. (personal communication 2016)

This is far more rational than simply being 'opposed to' mediation. However, the populist limitation of delegates to the role of messenger is, except in special situations, misconceived. Mediation needs to be enhanced not nobbled. If they are to be authentic, delegates have to have the right to fully participate in rational debate in the forum to which they are delegates, and then report back and explain themselves. Only in this way, can the delegating group fully participate in the debate and learn from it.

Anarchist Anthropology

Anarchist researchers tend to see their task like that of an anthropologist, and report what anarchists do and what anarchists say, but they never seek to exercise their own critical judgment in relation to these beliefs or practices. If the most thoughtful and reflective representatives of anarchism do not engage in evaluation of anarchist practices and beliefs, then the possibilities for furthering discussion between tendencies within the socialist tradition is curtailed.

I recall from an earlier time in my own life, when I was a trade union activist and not a researcher, being approached by a researcher and questioned about my beliefs. But this was not the discussion between two people who each had an opinion. I was acutely aware that I was a research object and it was very alienating and I put an end to the discussion. So I can see the point, and I understand that this is an ethical problem in the relation between researcher and research object.

A reflective socialist who wishes to conduct research into social struggles, is under an ethical obligation to do so as a fully committed *participant observer*. Every conversation must, like any other action, be in pursuance of a goal agreed by all the participants. No "hidden agendas."

Summary

Ethical communities are not constructed by moral philosophers or even by revolutionary leaders, police and judges. Ethical communities are constructed by collaborative projects of various kinds, essentially by forms of collective decision making and action. The virtues which are manifested in social life have their basis in the demands of specific modes of collaboration, both forms of collaboration between distinct projects – mutuality, solidarity, philanthropy and collaboration as such, and forms of decision making within collectives of individuals – Counsel, Majority and Consensus. The virtues we have mentioned above – good faith, care, solidarity, trust, wisdom, attention, equality, tolerance, inclusion and respect and more – all originate in specific forms of collaborative project.

The Question of Delegation and Hierarchy

Two problems have plagued social change activism over the past millennium: delegation and hierarchy, with the incipient transformation of delegates into officers.

The tendency of a delegate structure to solidify into a hierarchy does not issue from egotism on the part of delegates, but on the contrary, more often because of the unwillingness or incapacity of other members of a collective to do the work required of a delegate (an incapacity which may be itself a product of the structure of delegation). Even in organisations where representation and delegation are absent, there is an incipient tendency for informal roles to fossilise into offices, and representatives to be transformed into managers. Voluntary associations have been aware of this tendency and have struggled to overcome it for at least 500 years. But without the use of delegation it is impossible to organise on a scale larger than the number of people who can meet together in one room. Over the centuries, organisations have used various measures, such as limiting terms of office, mandation of delegates, rotation of positions, etc., to manage this situation. There is however no substitute for the fostering of virtues among all the participants. The internet certainly moderates these pressures but I don't believe it essentially changes the situation.

MacIntyre's advice quoted above is relevant here: "without the virtues ... practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions." The fossilisation of delegate structures into hierarchies is *a symptom not a cause* of the loss of the practical virtues and the degeneration of workers' democracy.

Conclusion

The two principal components of Franks' proposal – virtue ethics and prefiguration – are supported in the above reflections. However, in my reading, Franks chose to frame prefiguration not as the practice of virtues, but as a social theory according to which prefiguration is a means to end, which is in turn conceived of in utopian terms.

The utopian conception of 'socialist society' is a projection on to a future society of socialist ethics. The practice of socialist ethics is not 'in miniature' but a fully concrete practice here and now.

Practices and their various projects and campaigns are not aimless, but *always* directed at their consequences. But *which* consequences are aimed at is always a matter of social theory and inevitably subject to on-going argument and reflection.

To answer "why did the chicken cross the road?" by "to get to the other side," is obviously missing the point. Humans, at least, do things for a reason which differs from the immediate goal of the

action. Our immediate goals are intelligible in terms of our social theory and our motivation. Our motivation will be consistent with our conception of the good, reflected in our socialist ethics.

Socialists do not need to be lectured on the evil of means-justify-the-end thinking. Our socialist ethics are developed through decades of workers' struggles and they are in accord with the imperative of self-emancipation of the working class through the practice of solidarity. The virtue ethics which socialists embrace does not mandate this or that method of decision making, delegation, representation or structure. Invariably many imperatives come to bear in deciding on these matters and practical wisdom is always required to work out the best thing to do in each circumstance.

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