

It's a Three-Ring Circus: How Morally Educative Practices Are Undermined by Institutions

Ron Beadle

Northumbria University, UK

Matthew Sinnicks

University of Southampton, UK

Since the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1981, tensions inherent to the relationship between morally educative practices and the institutions that house them have been widely noted. We propose a taxonomy of the ways in which the pursuit of external goods by institutions undermines the pursuit of the internal goods of practices. These comprise substitution, where the institution replaces the pursuit of one type of good by another; frustration, where opportunities for practitioners to discover goods or develop new standards of excellence are frustrated by institutional priorities and resource allocation; and injustice, which undermines the integrity of relationships within the organization and/or with partners. These threats, though analytically distinct, are often mutually reinforcing. This conceptual contribution is illustrated both by the extant literature and by a novel context, the three-ring circus.

Key Words: MacIntyre, practice-institution, virtue, substitution, frustration, injustice

Since the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1981, the relationship between morally educative practices and the institutions that house them has spawned research in a wide range of settings. These have included business (Moore 2002, 2005, 2012; Bernacchio and Couch 2022), banking (van de Ven 2011; Robson 2014), circus arts (Beadle 2013), corporate governance (Bernacchio and Couch 2015), employee rights (Bernacchio 2021), financial services (Rocchi and Thunder 2019; Rocchi, Ferrero, and Beadle 2021), healthcare (Dawson 2009; Hall 2011), higher education (Serrano del Pozo and Kreber 2015), mental health (Kempster, Jackson, and Conroy 2011), oil and gas (Crockett 2005), regulation (Sinnicks 2014), retail (Fernando and Moore 2015), risk management (Asher and Wilcox 2022), software development (Krogh et al. 2012), and transport (Wilcox 2012).

As Sinnicks (2019) argues, the case for an activity to be considered a practice is more easily made where participants engage regardless of financial compensation, than when considerations of profitability are to the fore. Nevertheless, MacIntyrean research continues to demonstrate that in a range of professional and commercial contexts, some practitioners have defended the integrity of their practices against a variety of perceived threats (Robson 2014; Krogh et al. 2012; Wilcox 2012). In line with MacIntyre's argument that practices may be undermined by commercial expansion and not only by decline (MacIntyre 2008, 7), these empirical studies highlight threats including commercialisation (Krogh et al. 2012), exploitation of customers (Robson 2015), and not only resistance by practitioners but also by organizational principals (Beadle 2013). The priority that practitioners afford to the goods of their practice and the relationships these require have led to different types of resistance. These include providing false information to managers in order to protect fellow employees (a type of sabotage reported in Wilcox 2012), career-limiting resignations (Robson 2014; Robson and Beadle 2019), and the creation of new organizational forms (Krogh et al. 2012) when practitioners have felt that the goods of the practice are threatened by the institutions that house them. The deployment of a MacIntyrean conceptual framework of virtues, goods, practices, and institutions appears particularly important when organizational agents act to promote or defend the goods of practices. For example, in their widely cited article on Open-Source Software, Krogh et al. (2012) argue that MacIntyre's work ("social practice theory," in their terminology) provides resources to account for phenomena that defy explanation in rival accounts of motivation, especially that of self-determination theory (see Gagné and Deci 2005). They argue:

According to the social practice view, motivation is intimately linked with a developer's experience of being a member of the social practice of OSS. One important result of this is that if people sense that the social practices they value have become corrupted *in some way*, for example by institutional goals, they often seek to change institutions (Krogh et al. 2012, 665—emphasis added).

While this and similar studies provide examples of institutional initiatives that have provoked practitioner responses, none offer a comprehensive account of this "in some way." This article addresses this gap by proposing a taxonomy of the ways in which the pursuit of external goods by institutions is perceived as undermining the pursuit of the internal goods of practices, which we hope can contribute to a more nuanced vocabulary for diagnosing organisational failure. These comprise *substitution*, where the institution replaces the pursuit of one type of good by another; *frustration*, where opportunities for practitioners to discover goods or develop new standards of excellence are frustrated by institutional priorities and resource allocation; and *injustice*, which undermines the integrity of relationships within the organisation and/or with partners. These threats, though analytically distinct, are often mutually reinforcing. We will draw on published empirical research of cases of practitioner resistance and a novel context, the three-ring circus, to illustrate the potentially corrupting power of institutional innovations that encourage and enable

individuals to act on vices rather than virtues (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 195). As we shall see, the introduction of the three-ring circus saw an upturn in the institutional control of circus performance required by the scaling up of the performance. It also created a new type of prize, a place in the centre ring, that encouraged some circus artists to use a variety of techniques, including seduction (Bradna 1953, 73), to acquire. The allure of power, money, and fame encouraged the vices amongst individual artists whilst at the institutional/managerial level it encouraged the substitution of artistry by spectacle, thereby undermining circus practices. Whilst not a common example in the business ethics literature, the three-ring circus was a remarkably successful business innovation, enabling its innovators to become some of the most financially successful entrepreneurs of their age (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960) as later circus innovators have emulated (Halperin 2009).

The next section of the article recapitulates MacIntyre's account of the tension inherent to the relationship between practices and institutions. The third section provides a background to the history of the travelling circus as the context within which the introduction of a new institutional form, the three-ring circus, was experienced as both opportunity and threat to the circus arts (Wall 2013). The fourth section introduces the taxonomy, illustrating three different types of threat to practice. This draws on insider accounts of the three-ring circus and extant cases in the relevant literature. The fifth section considers institutional reactions to the three-ring circus and the renaissance of the single-ring alternative. The final section concludes.

THE PRACTICE–INSTITUTION RELATIONSHIP

Good work is central to the good life. This claim animates an important line of thought in MacIntyre's mature work. MacIntyre's most nuanced and influential discussion of good work occurs in his account of practices. The concept of a practice is, along with the concepts of the narrative unity of life and of traditions of enquiry, fundamental to MacIntyre's account of the virtues. It is, therefore, worth outlining this concept in detail. MacIntyre offers the following definition:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative 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 ([1981] 2007, 187).

This definition has been central to contributions in business ethics which draw on MacIntyre's work. As noted above, such contributions have applied this concept to a variety of contexts, and often take the form of arguments in favour of certain forms of work being considered practices. Practices are valuable both in themselves, and because they constitute 'schools of the virtues.' According to MacIntyre, "[a] virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" ([1981] 2007, 191).

The notion of goods internal to practice is key here. These are goods that cannot be achieved in any way other than by engaging in the activity in question. The appeal of these goods provides a basic motivation for ethical development. In perhaps MacIntyre's most famous example, a child being paid in candy by their teacher when victorious in games of chess has every reason to cheat, that is to be unjust, so long as candy is their principal motivator. However as soon as they become motivated by the internal goods of chess, such as the development of a certain kind of strategic thinking unique to chess, or the joys experienced in developing such a strategy, they will recognise that losing is necessary to their learning and thereby have every motive to play the game fairly (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 188).

Without a variety of virtues, in particular justice, truthfulness, and courage, it is impossible to properly engage in practices. Justice is required because the achievement of excellence must be duly rewarded, truthfulness—including being honest with oneself—is required for us to have our successes and shortcomings, as well as those of others, properly in view. As we shall see, courage is required because we may be called upon to defend the goods of the practice from a variety of corruptions and attacks.

MacIntyre provides a number of examples of practices, including architecture, chess, portrait painting, physics, farming, and football ([1981] 2007, 187), and it is also worth noting that in his most recent major work, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre acknowledges the possibility of practice-based work within contemporary manufacture (2016, 170–71). Internal goods underpin the morally educative nature of practices. Such goods are intrinsically worthwhile, and their achievement requires the development and exercise of the virtues. So, what may start as an ostensibly amoral enjoyment of some activity ultimately requires the development of a virtuous moral character, other things being equal. This ethical development is also supported by the communal aspect of practices. According to MacIntyre:

to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice ... Practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time—painting has no such goal nor has physics—but the goods themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity ([1981] 2007, 194).

Engagement in practices therefore involves a process of discovery, it requires a deep commitment, and demands creativity and innovation. MacIntyre emphasises the discovery and rediscovery of the ends of practices ([1981] 2007, 273), highlighting their changing nature. The transformation this changing nature entails can be enriching both for practices and practitioners.

New practices can, of course, be created; each practice has its own history, which implies a starting point. Historical establishment is part of what makes a practice what it is. The first children in Tudor England to protect some precursor to stumps from a ball with some kind of bat were not yet engaged in the practice of cricket, even if they invented it. These proto-practitioners would not have been inclined to make claims for their activities, which can be and are made about practices that are

historically established, because they could not have understood themselves as engaging in something that has evolved historically.

Practices are mediated by their own history in a way that informs MacIntyre's account of traditions (see MacIntyre [1981] 2007, chap. 15), which are understood as extended arguments through time (MacIntyre 1988, 12) by the contemporary community of practitioners rather than in the more familiar, conservative sense (Scruton 1984, 40–43). MacIntyre says, “whether we are painters or physicists or quarterbacks or indeed just lovers of good painting or first-rate experiments or a well thrown pass,” we must subordinate “ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners” ([1981] 2007, 191). This subordination is both demanding and costly. It requires, amongst other things, to accept that we cannot adequately critique a tradition, either intellectually or practically, until we have both mastered the skills it requires of us and understand the contributions made by predecessors in the context in which they were working. This requires and develops virtues including intellectual humility, resilience, trust, and ultimately, creativity.

Notice that MacIntyre includes those who are lovers of a well-thrown pass as well as footballers and notes the “enjoyments of those who play games as different as soccer, cricket, and chess with great skill are matched by the enjoyments of those spectators who combine an appreciation of those skills with the devotion of fans” (2016, 132–33). This move is revealing and expands the scope of practices to include informed critics, as well as connoisseurs, who can be said to engage in the practices that are the object of their informed and serious consumption (see Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2014).

However, this expansion of the concept of practices also highlights the importance of a proper commitment to internal goods of a practice, and ultimately the place the practice in question occupies in one's life. The orientation to goods pursued over time, matters more than the successful or skilled completion of the activity that constitutes the practice. The chess master who played *only* to enjoy crushing opponents, experiences the good of dominant victory. But as this can be achieved in any number of ways—through chess or tic-tac-toe, football or a ball-throwing competition—it can only be accounted an external good. Nevertheless, we know enough about human achievement in practices to appreciate that there is a powerful relationship between constancy and genuine commitment to a practice, on the one hand, and excellence on the other. This constancy and genuine commitment are available to the serious critic and to the devoted fan, for whom the practice in question may be a deeply important concern (Sinnicks 2019).

The issue of a proper appreciation of internal goods takes us on to another important facet of MacIntyre's account of practices: the relationship between practices and institutions. Institutions pursue external goods—that is, goods that are external to any particular practice in that they can be achieved in a variety of ways—rather than internal goods. Practices need institutions in order to survive—football needs football clubs, fields of scholarly enquiry need schools and universities. Given the romantic tenor of some of MacIntyre's comments on work, or rather, given how easy it is to misread MacIntyre as being something of a romantic about work in spite of his insistence that “[o]nly sentimentalists believe that work ought or can be always

interesting” (1979, 44), it is worth stressing this point. External goods are *goods* (Beadle and Moore 2006, 331), and without them the achievement of internal goods of the arts, sciences, sporting competitions and so on, would be impossible. However, these internal goods are also threatened by institutional acquisitiveness. In order to secure the external goods that practices need for their survival, institutions are always liable to come to dominate the practices they were designed to serve. This dynamic is central to much of the research in business ethics and organisation studies that draws on MacIntyre’s work (Moore and Beadle 2006).

Nevertheless, MacIntyre also notes that “the making and sustaining of forms of human community—and therefore of institutions—itsself has all the characteristics of a practice” ([1981] 2007, 194). It is important to note that MacIntyre’s conceptualisation of institutions refers to organisations as a whole rather than to institutions as processes, such as employment or marriage. While such phenomena do mark, in their different ways, attempts to secure external goods—such as power, understood in terms of leverage; reputation, understood in terms of legal recognition; and money, or at least financial stability—MacIntyre’s own warning of the danger of institutional acquisitiveness, corruption, and the like, are written at a generic level (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 194–95). Three points of note for the development of scholarship that has focused on the practice–institution relationship follow.

The first is that studies have focused on particular examples of institutional acquisitiveness—for example the attempt to establish proprietary rights over code (Krogh et al. 2012)—and this article likewise identifies particular dynamics through which practices are threatened by a novel and acquisitive institutional form. The second is that some scholars have cast management as a kind of practice (e.g., Beabout 2012), though MacIntyre regards the practice in question as politics, in the Aristotelian sense. By adopting a broader understanding of what it is to engage in a practice, we are able to appreciate how managers may be peripheral practitioners, partially engaged in the practice their organisation houses. However, it is worth remembering that MacIntyre remains committed to the view that the “practice of the virtues ... is something difficult to reconcile with functioning well in the present economic order” (MacIntyre 2008, 6). This difficulty arises precisely because the present economic order seems geared to facilitate the domination of institutional acquisitiveness.

The third is that such acquisitiveness is both a structural feature of market orders but that “the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices” (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 195) and likewise both the defence of practices, and, as we shall argue, the creation of new forms of practice-embodying institutions “causally requires the exercise of the virtues” (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 195). Studies of the conflict between practices and institutions have therefore attended both to structural dynamics and to individual agency, providing illustrations at a greater level of granularity than MacIntyre’s work offers itself.

In the following section, we outline the context of the circus, before going on to detail three ways in which institutions can undermine practices through substitution, frustration, and injustice. Research has examined a number of contexts in which practitioners have resisted a variety of institutional initiatives but the conceptualisation

of the types of damage that provokes such responses has not developed since MacIntyre claimed that without the virtues, “without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions” ([1981] 2007, 194). The aim of the argument we develop is to provide this.

THE THREE-RING CIRCUS

Over the past 250 years, such has been the rate of change within circus as an “art of community” (Wall, 2013, 50), as a “multimodal discourse” (Bouissac 2013), as an “art form that is adaptable to almost any situation or any kind of participant” (Cadwell 2018, 19) as “the most colourful and materially focused performing art” (Arrighi 2015, 62), that any definition of circus “invites contestation” (Tait and Lavers 2016, 3).

Despite this, it exhibits ongoing characteristics that provide a particularly appropriate locus for MacIntyrean research. First, circus is simultaneously a set of practices, institutional forms, and working and living communities, thereby allowing the relationships central to the MacIntyrean account of organisational ethics to be explored. Second, unlike a number of forms of practice (see Sinnicks 2021), a flourishing circus marks an equal marriage between the excellence of the practices within the circus, with the goods of sustaining the supporting community. According to ethnographer Yoram Carmeli, circus is “a mode of survival which is a mode of existence” (2011, 770) where the goods of practices and of community combine; practitioners of juggling, wire-walking, trapeze, and clowning learn through apprenticeship the standards of excellence internal to their practice, those by which they are judged by fellow practitioners, and the goods whose pursuit enables their achievement (Wall 2013; Bouissac 2013).

At the same time however, they share a communal life whose challenges, especially of travelling and weather (Parker 2011), require community contributions from raising (known in circus as ‘pull up’) and lowering the tent (known in circus as ‘pull-down’) to dealing with emergencies from vehicle breakdowns to flooding (Mardon 1961, 183–85; McPherson 2010, 62). The nomadic lifestyle of the circus, the fact that touring performers live together, and the requirement that performers share in the mundane tasks, make it rather different from the overwhelming majority of occupations. Most devoted practitioners return home at the end of the working day, separating, to at least some degree, personal life from work. This is not so for circus performers, and while there are other practices where a similar set of circumstances obtains, it nevertheless marks out circus life as peculiarly demanding.

Third, MacIntyre himself has referenced the circus arts as practices (MacIntyre 2008, 6), supported Aquinas’s defence of street performance (MacIntyre 2006, 57), included acrobats (MacIntyre 2016, 7) and circus clowns (MacIntyre 1994, 78) in lists of practice-based occupations and referred positively to running away to the circus (MacIntyre 2016, 7).

Fourth, the circus provides examples of practices that would not, could not have developed outside of the context of the institutional innovation that comprised the circus itself. Whilst minor examples would include the wheel of death and the silks,

the most famous is doubtlessly the flying trapeze, developed in the middle of the nineteenth century by Jules Leotard—it was only the height afforded by distinctive circus spaces that enabled the trapeze act to be seen and thereafter developed by subsequent generations of practitioners (Wall 2013). The circus puts the lie to any glib association between practices as good and institutions as bad.

Finally, circus has undergone a wide range of institutional innovations over its 250-year history and continues to operate in a wide variety of institutional forms. Innovations have included the introduction of tents to enable a single company to travel between sites and thereby to maintain itself over long periods (Wilmeth 2016; Otte 2006), the use of the railroad to enable large scale circuses to travel between distances (Hughes 2021) and the adoption of electricity to enable performance at night (Arrighi 2012). Alongside these, the institutional forms taken by circuses have varied widely in terms of ownership and management structure, ranging from family ownership (Carmeli 2011), to individual ownership and partnerships (Cottle 2005), state ownership (Neirick 2016), and communal ownership (Maleval 2016). Furthermore, the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw a flowering of different artistic forms and memberships from the global successes of the Quebecois circus (Leroux and Batson 2016) to the development of social circus (Lavers 2016), youth circus (Funk 2021), and circus based on a limited number of circus practices such as aerial (Sizorn 2019) and wide semiotic difference between traditional circuses (Beadle and Könyöt 2006), circuses of horrors (Barltrop 2013), anarchic circus (Little 1995), and radical feminist circus (Tait 2004) amongst others. Regular reinventions at the institutional level have been critical to its survival.

Circus therefore provides an opportunity to consider the implications of different institutional forms for morally educative practices. This article focuses on one such innovation, the introduction of three-rings in the North American circus in the late nineteenth century.

Although some of the practices associated with circus (gymnastics, rope walking, juggling) date back to antiquity (Davis 2002; Wall 2013), the circus was an institutional innovation of modernity:

when the circus entered the Western cultural landscape in the form in which we experience it today, it was not the continuation of a historical institution but a new type of organization. The acts, themselves, though, were based on very ancient skills. The merging of scores of performers under traveling tents or in permanent buildings was made possible by the convergence of modern technologies, rising demography, urban concentration, and secularism (Bouissac 2013, 159).

Permanent circus buildings became a feature of towns and cities across Europe, North America, and Russia from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. In the late 1820s, the introduction of the chapiteau enabled circuses to reach smaller communities by becoming mobile (Wall 2013, 191). Customer demand for novelty in permanent locations had necessitated regular changes to circus programmes and hence performers, but the new ‘tenting’ model allowed circuses to tour for up to two to three years with the same company; each town visited saw the show as a novelty. At the same time, the touring circus company—bound together by goods of

co-operative endeavour including the protection of the tent during inclement weather, the sharing of transport in the event of breakdowns, and dealing with potential conflict with townspeople (Sanger-Coleman and Lukens 1974)—created semi-permanent communities of travelling performers from the early nineteenth century to the present.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, larger American circuses were having difficulty in meeting high levels of public demand for performances. The three-ring circus was an institutional response designed to remedy this. Although there is some dispute as to whether this innovation was first introduced in Britain in 1860 (Sanger-Coleman and Lukens 1974/1956, 98), its longest running incarnation is in no doubt Barnum and Bailey's (later Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey's) circus, which introduced three rings in 1871 and closed some 146 years later in 2017. Writing in 1932, industrial historian Earl Chapin-May explained the business logic of three rings:

Coup [Barnum's original partner—Ed] and his followers correctly gauged American psychology. A thing had to be big if it was really good. Patrons wanted to see a lot for their money. If they saw so much that they could not grasp all of it they naturally went home hungry for another look at the performance (Chapin-May 1932, 226).

Not only did the three-ring circus enable burgeoning demand to be met but its scale and spectacle (“the Greatest Show on Earth”) justified rapidly increased prices, especially for seats around the centre ring. The three-ring shows offered performers higher salaries and benefits, such as Pullman coaches on circus trains (Bradna 1953, 16–17), for celebrity performers. In an era that predated radio and talking pictures, let alone television, it was the circus that provided North America with its first entertainment celebrities, with performers competing to join this group (Davis 2002).

Three rings allowed circuses to accommodate an audience of more than 10,000 in an auditorium up to 440 feet long and 190 feet wide (Mabert and Showalter 2010, 78). Although ‘the three-ring circus’ is now used as a metaphor for chaos, circus had been technically innovative (Arrighi 2012) and logistically advanced. Early adoption of electricity enabled performances to be given at night (Otte 2006, 31) and three rings encouraged advances that were to spread throughout the circus industry and other entertainments. These included, inter alia, railway transportation from the late nineteenth century (at its height, Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey used 84 carriages in their tour of 1911), the employment of light metals for king poles and the replacement of wooden bleaches by portable steel grandstands in the late 1940s (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960, 285). In the run-up to the First World War, German and British military planners visited Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey's circus (Bradna 1953, 27–28; Selby-Lowndes 1962, 35) to study logistics and procurements. The dismantling, overnight moving, and reassembly of large auditoria and additional structures (including the menagerie, cookhouse, and sideshow tents) was repeated over 150 times in the seven-month circus season (Mabert and Showalter 2010), and involved moving 700 workers and more than 300 animals.

The late nineteenth century saw the first regular triple somersault in trapeze, ever larger teams of wire-walkers, jugglers increasing the number and range of objects in their repertoire, rope artists achieving ever faster circumlocutions high above the audience alongside those performing feats outside of the circus such as wire walks crossing the Niagara Falls, before returning to the big top (Davis 2002; Wall 2013) and spectacles facilitated by the larger setting such as the human cannonball, chariot racing, and “an insane character calling himself Speedy diving eighty feet from the dome of the roof into a small tank of water three and a half feet deep” (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960, 97).

Popular songs were written for circus performers and a genre of hagiographical literature developed (Carmeli 1995). The three-ring shows, and in particular Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey’s, Sells-Floto, Hagenbeck-Wallace, and Al G Barnes, dominated circus entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century. Some single-ring circuses continued to tour more limited geographical routes through the twentieth century with larger and more prestigious single-ring shows characteristically aligning with charitable organisations such as the Shriners, whose membership could provide audiences in different towns and cities (Hammarstrom 2008, 43). The owners of America’s three-ring circuses became some of the wealthiest entrepreneurs of their era (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960, 164) and in successive decades the three-ring circus became the subject of Oscar-winning movies (Stoddart 2000). However, as Wall highlights, albeit with the benefit of hindsight:

by diminishing the emphasis on individual acts, by promising “the Greatest Show on Earth,” circus owners walked themselves onto an existential tightrope. Every year, the circus would have to be bigger, more impressive, more extravagant than the year before (Wall 2013, 203–204).

From their initial appearance, the three-ring circus experienced criticism both from performers and from critics. *The London Times*, reporting on Barnum and Bailey’s European tour in 1889, suggested that the three-ring show was “in its strict etymological sense” incomprehensible, but that Barnum’s business genius was that visitors would have to see the show multiple times if they were to appreciate all of its acts (quoted in Simon 2014, 85). Even Chapin-May, who allied the three rings to the American character, expressed a preference for the single ring (Chapin-May 1932, 304). The threat that the new institutional form, an inevitable consequence of the expanded scale, posed was predominantly understood as the substitution of spectacle for the circus arts, for reducing the economic viability of the traditional smaller circus and inhibiting the development of circus practices. Over the following decades, biographical and autobiographical material attested to injustices both undermining internal relationships and also understood as short-changing the audience. The emergence of the ‘New American Circus’ from the 1970s combined a reversion to a single ring with a commitment to different priorities and relationships. As we noted above, on the MacIntyrean account, practices and institutions are in tension, and comparison with the single-ring circus that both preceded and

succeeded the three-ring version reveals the variety of ways in which institutional innovations can exacerbate or reduce them.

The dominance of this institutional form was always and only a North American phenomenon. Across Europe, Asia, South America, Oceania, and Africa, the one-ring circus persisted despite occasional failed attempts to introduce the three-ring model (e.g., in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s, see Jordan and Štefanová 2021, 80). Simon even reports a French circus presenting a mockery of the three-ring circus as a “frantically paced performance accompanied by blaring music” (Simon 2014, 70). The availability of mass markets and mass transportation across a continent rendered the United States a far more conducive environment for mass entertainment attractions than that available elsewhere.

THREE THREATS TO PRACTICE

In this section we illustrate our taxonomy of substitution, frustration, and injustice as the three threats to practice that elicit resistance from practitioners and commentators, using historical sources in relation to the three-ring circus. As we noted above, MacIntyre regards institutional acquisitiveness as a major threat to practices. This threat partly stems from the fact that institutions, by their very nature, are concerned with the pursuit of external goods: the power, prestige, and money required to support and protect practices (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 194). Because of this focus, there is a recurrent danger of institutional domination, which leads to the pursuit of external goods becoming an end in itself, and even the central aim of organisations. Where the goals of practices and institutions come to diverge, the shared deliberation required to sustain a community is imperilled (MacIntyre 1999, 144; 2006, 39), and the kind of friendship required to fully share in a common project (see MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 156) is undermined. Furthermore, the undemocratic nature of many, perhaps most, workplaces (see Anderson 2017), leads to an undue deference to powerful elites, a dynamic that also plays out in contemporary politics (MacIntyre 2006, 215), and prevents the kind of creative conflict that benefits both individuals and institutions in their shared deliberations (see MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 164, 171).

Because MacIntyre’s discussion of institutions occurs in the context of his attempt to provide an account of the virtues, it is unsurprising that it focuses on the role of virtues in ensuring institutions serve their proper purpose. In addition to highlighting the importance of justice, courage, and truthfulness to the sustaining of practices ([1981] 2007, 194), MacIntyre notes that the “integrity of a practice causally requires the exercise of the virtues by at least some of the individuals who embody it in their activities; and conversely the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices” ([1981] 2007, 195). In what follows, we aim to complement these comments on individual failure by exploring more closely the contours of institutional failure.

Substitution

The first threat that the pursuit of external goods by institutions poses to the practices they house is the substitution of non-practice-based routines and activities for practice-

based work. The replacement of skilled labour by capital under Taylorist systems of production provides the standard example (Kanigel 1997). But there are also subtler versions of practices being substituted by activities that appear to be similar, but which, on closer inspection, lack the rich internal goods partially definitive of practices proper. Examples might include when league tables in education (Wiggins and Tymms 2002) or healthcare (Mannion and Braithwaite 2012) encourage the substitution of a proper concern for teaching and medicine with a fixation on the measures determining league position, leading to a quite different kind of activity. The practice in question may continue in a way that appears unchanged to the untrained eye, and yet the substitution is keenly felt by practitioners. Critics of the three-ring circus focused on the replacement of skilled performers by production ‘numbers’ and spectacle, designed to appeal to the untutored preferences of the broadest audience possible.

In the context of the circus, Barnum and his successors’ claims to presenting ‘The Greatest Show on Earth’ were supported by the numbers of animal performers presented at one time, by the distance travelled by the human cannonball, the number of triple somersaults achieved by trapeze artists, the number of items kept in the air at one time by jugglers and so on, with the result that patrons would be able to say that they had seen these world-record feats by what Barnum called in his advertisements his “avalanche of attractions” (Wall 2013, 202).

By contrast, standards of excellence within circus practices, whilst not ignoring quantitative indicators, framed them within a broadly qualitative understanding, which included the artistry of presentation (Clarke 1936, 67; Reynolds 1954, 92; Simon 2014, 21–22), the originality of routines (Stroud 1999, 291), and the integrity of acts including choice of music, costume, and the presentation of successively more difficult tricks; in short, the internal goods of circus performance. This priority of qualitative over quantitative appreciation reflects the fact that, while circus performers want to perform for an audience, the merits of their performance are not directly correlated with the size of that audience. This aligns them with many other kinds of creative artistic practitioners—chefs, artists, musicians, and so on—who want people to *enjoy* their work but also to properly *appreciate* their work. Therefore, alongside entertainment of the audience, recognition from fellow master-practitioners is also extremely important, and a freedom to develop their act in accordance with their own understanding of what the pursuit of excellence requires is paramount.

Circus semiotician, Paul Bouissac writes:

A circus act is a set of routines ordered according to their real or apparent difficulty along a time line whose duration is predetermined by the producer of the program. The clusters of signs carried by the actors are constant qualities which have been selected in view of the staging of particular acts. The music and lighting, whatever may be the connotations they bring to the act, narrowly follow the bodies’ dynamic. All these semiotic components result from deliberate choices to produce some anticipated effects in the audience (Bouissac 2013, 31).

The substitution of artistry by spectacle was not limited to issues around priority and balance in the show but in two other cases involved the complete substitution of acts.

The first dimension was the replacement of dedicated acts with performers who offered a variety of specialisms of lower artistic merit. This was exacerbated during wartime when opportunities to recruit celebrated acts were reduced. Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey's long-time ringmaster Fred Bradna recalled that during the First World war, a family of performers:

whom I had hired in Europe, were all over the programme, six times appearing by name and five times as Spelvins, the name traditionally utilised to cover duplication in casting. Acrobats doubled on the tight wire; trapeze stars became hand balancers; slack-wire virtuosi displayed as tumblers and plate spinners. Anything to fill up the greedy rings (Bradna 1953, 76–77).

This requirement to take on whatever role was needed—to “fill up the greedy rings”—is clearly antithetical to time and devotion required to develop an excellent act.

It is also important to note that the problem with substitution does not involve a limitation on innovation. As we have already noted, the circus combines practices that originate in classical civilisations with practices that could not have developed outside the context of the circus itself. Whilst each circus must determine the combination of practices that it will offer to its audience, the choice to say, replace this year's Juggler with next year's Chinese Pole does not create the kind of threat that the substitution of advanced clowning practitioners by novice clowns clearly did.

The second dimension represented such a complete and permanent substitution. Clowning traditions vary across countries and time periods, Renaissance *Commedia del Arte* (de Colle et al. 2017), French musical clowning (Reynolds 1954, 24) and medieval minstrels and fool (Bouissac 2013, 144; Manning-Sanders 1952, 18–21) traditions being notably influential. Amongst clowns themselves, these traditions are widely understood. Circus ethnographer Katie Hickman writes of a Mexican clown that:

Mundo knew everything there was to know about clowns. The clown acts used by most circuses are traditional ones, but Mundo knew exactly where each one had originated—Italy, Germany, Russia, or America—and how they had been adapted for the Mexican audience. He knew all the different stage make-ups of all the famous clowns from all over the world, and could apply them without hesitation, using a special set of greasepaints made up for him (Hickman 1995, 243).

In Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey, different types of clown acts reflecting such traditions were first reduced and then replaced by clown troupes whose role was predominantly to provide distraction during set changes (Chapin-May 1932, 60–72; Peacock 2021; Davis 2002, 171). Clowns who developed relationships with their audience during the course of a show and/or provided long and slowly developing routines with the audience of a single ring were substituted by slapstick artists whose job was to move quickly, throw water or paste and fall over—activities that required little training and nothing by way of historically informed understanding of the

practice (Feiler 1995, 77; Selby-Lowndes 1962, 100). Ringling Brother's/Barnum and Baileys 'Clown College' enabled novices to qualify for the clown troupe in two months (Hammarstrom, 2008, 58); whereas apprenticeships for clowning, throughout its history, has continued to take many years (Grock 1957; Bridel and Lebank 2022). Bradna recalled the clown Frank 'Slivers' Oakley as the most popular to have ever appeared:

He had only one act, a solo baseball game which he performed on the hippodrome track. It stopped the show wherever he appeared. His argument with the umpire actually caused cases of audience hysteria which required medical attention. That type of clowning is almost gone. It is engulfed in the vastness of today's sixteen-thousand-seat arena. For five years, from 1920 to 1925, John and Charlie Ringling clashed over the status of the clowns. Mr. John maintained that the long build-up of the solo clowns required to establish rapport with the onlookers slowed the show and therefore hurt the production. Mr. Charlie as emphatically insisted that the clowns be allowed to develop their art in their own way. After Mr Charlie's death in 1925, Mr. John abolished long clown solos (Bradna 1953, 180).

Writing some thirty-five years after this decision was made, a member of the Ringling-North family provided additional reasons for the substitution of clown troupes for individual clown acts:

On several occasions John has imported fine European clowns. They were wonderful performers but they got lost in the vast spaces of our three-ring arenas and their talents were wasted on our audiences, who were not used to having their attention commanded for so long a time. They prefer the walk-around type of clowning with laughs based on quick sight gags and comic properties such as three-foot cigars, water-spouting hats, and wired-on pursuing skunks (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960, 289).

The dominance of the institutional goods of the production as a whole and the maintenance of an appeal to a mass audience is clear in both accounts of this substitution. This development met with the despair of circus traditionalists including the era's best-known clown, Charlie Chaplin who referred to a clown with whom he had worked many ears previously, Marceline:

In 1918, or thereabouts, Ringling Brothers' three-ring circus came to Los Angeles, and Marceline was with them. I expected that he would be featured, but I was shocked to find him just one of the many clowns that ran around the enormous ring—a great artist lost in the vulgar extravagance of a three-ring circus (Chaplin 1964, 41).

What is notable here is the contrast between the tradition of solo clowning, epitomised by the likes of Oakley, Marceline, and Chaplin, albeit in a different medium, and the "vulgar extravagance" of its replacement. By contrast, in Europe, the continuation of one-ring shows allowed individual clowns and small groups to maintain intimate routines (Peacock 2021).

Frustration

Less dramatic than the substitution of practices, but nevertheless animating resistance and opposition is the second type of tension between practices and institutions,

which we label as frustration. This involves situations where the achievement or enjoyment of the internal goods of practices is frustrated by institutional agency. Frustration may follow from, *inter alia*, resource constraints, managerial routines and instructions, organisational culture, and restrictions on working with external partners. As MacIntyre notes, when describing attempts to establish properly Aristotelian and practice-based institutions, “[w]hat you will be told by those who represent established power is that the kind of institutions that you are trying to create and sustain are simply not possible, that you are unrealistic” (2008, 5). This refusal to support practice-based communities marks a typical example of frustration. There are also subtler forms of frustration, as when particular ways of engaging in a practice is given excessive weight or institutional support. Such restriction hinders the historical development of the practice and undermines the discretion of practitioners.

Reported cases of frustration in extant research include Krogh et al.’s (2012) study of the development of open-source software by coders resisting their employer’s attempt to exercise proprietary property rights over their codes. They believed that this would frustrate the development of code by undermining networked communication between organisations and individuals and subsequently developed open-source platforms to enable themselves and others to develop their practice without this institutional restriction. Discontent about and resistance to managerialism has also been reported in MacIntyrean studies based in public administration (Overeem and Tholen 2011) and higher education (Pianezzi, Nørreklit, and Cinquini 2020).

Control over their own routines and hence the achievement of the internal goods of their practices through skilled and creative performance is an essential feature of the mastery achieved by advanced circus practitioners. In 1941, journalist and author Rupert Croft-Cooke quoted a conversation with British wire-walker Dennis Rosaire, to highlight the importance of originality to circus performers. Rosaire discussed what he learned from other wire-walking acts:

Then I saw a wire act called “the Littlefields”, and thought it was the best thing I had ever seen. I made up my mind to be as good as that, but not in the same way. In fact every trick in my act which I saw them doing I cut out. You see I wanted mine to be original. That seemed to me half the secret of a good wire act—to show people something they haven’t seen before. However well you may do the old tricks and however difficult they may be, they still are old tricks (1941, 207).

Writing over half a century later, Stroud’s circus ethnography also confirms the importance of developing an original routine (number, in circus parlance), to circus performers, as well as the importance of a serious and enduring commitment:

At Circus Roncali I see that the best artists are those who have given over their whole lives to the circus. I see that an artist is someone who has worked out a complete number for themselves. They are not simply participating in a circus. They are creating and inventing it by their work (Stroud 1999, 291).

By contrast the three-ring circus rigorously controlled performers' acts through workflow, in particular the requirement for acts in the outside rings to work to the music and timings of the centre ring (Bradna 1953, 16–17), by managerial control over the look of the show, for example in controlling costumes (Ringling-North and Hatch 1960, 214) and more specific direction by management over the content and delivery of performers' routines (Chapin-May 1932, 249). Such restrictions on performers' autonomy had another less obvious implication. Except for star acts, incentivised to produce ever more spectacular and dangerous stunts, the opportunity for performers to introduce changes to their routines was lost and some confirmed their motivation was undermined (Hammarstrom 2008, 53). British clown Butch Reynolds noted in 1954 that:

The mammoth modern circuses seem to have lost this virtue and have sacrificed with it much of their charm. Their size has imposed on them all the dullness of high-powered organization, routine and specialization. They attract talent by their large salaries, but they rarely produce it (Reynolds 1954, 197).

It is the imposition of routine and specialisation that undermines the artist's creativity in developing their act. Reynolds' paean for the frustration of the development of original performance reflects his commitment to the achievement of internal goods of circus practices and to the development of new skills and tricks. For peripheral practitioners who expressed criticism of the three-ring model, the enjoyment of particular acts was the source of frustration. E.B. White lamented the circus "is at its best at certain moments when it comes to a point, as through a burning glass, in the activity and destiny of a single performer out of so many. One ring is better than three" (White 1954, cited in Simon 2014, 21).

The evidence of this frustration exists only amongst those whose writing remains available—journalists, essayists, and the like. It should not be overstated, however, for the three-ring circus remains the most significant institutional form ever taken by the circus, attracting and retaining millions of customers over generations. Resistance against its values of spectacle and speed was rare in the United States up until the late 1960s.

Injustice

As we noted in our account of practices and institutions above, the role of justice in the pursuit of the internal goods of practices is central to their conceptualisation. While different accounts of justice abound, it is the perception of injustice that animates the resistance that interests us here. This relates principally to internal relationships between practitioners, including the just allocation of the right to practice (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 192), between senior and junior practitioners (Hall 2011), with institutions (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 190–91), and with the beneficiaries of the practices' products or services (MacIntyre 1978). On MacIntyre's account, commitment to the virtues, including justice, are required for "making and sustaining institutions that provide for those practices through which common goods are achieved" (MacIntyre 2016, 110). These relationships of

giving and receiving acknowledge mutual dependence and have informed relationships between businesses where strong communal links have emerged (Bernacchio 2018). But just this came under threat in the three-ring circus because, as with other threats to the justice inherent in practices, other criteria were systematically preferred to practice-based deliberation in the distribution of resources.

While it would be unrealistic to imagine that personal rivalries never emerged, in single-ring circuses performers had every reason to support one another's efforts. There would only be one act of each type in a typical show and therefore competition between acts as to the best juggler, rope-walker, or whatever, would be rare. The success of preceding acts created a more appreciative audience for subsequent performers and encouraged circus attendance in a particular locale. The common good of the circus as an institution was bound up with the achievement of the goods of individual circus practitioners. While competition can often inspire greater achievement, in the context of the circus community it seems likely that its costs would be particularly significant.

The willingness of performers to train one another's children in their practices (McPherson 2010, 198), to unite in common tasks such as digging ditches to prevent flooding, removing the tent in high winds, and many others, are routine parts of the single-ring experience (Beadle 2018). However, the pursuit of such common goods, and the virtues whose exercise these prompted, were to be significantly challenged by the three-ring format. Not only was work on such communal tasks shifted to labourers, partly as a reflection of the increased scale of operation, but the advantages enjoyed by centre-ring artists provoked levels of competitiveness and intrigue little known in the single-ring version. One indication was Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Baileys' practice of making relationships between performers and managers a dismissible offence (Bradna 1953, 73). Bradna observes that performers began to plot against one another in order to receive benefits that a good relationship with management might bring:

Such professional manoeuvring was incomprehensible to us. The family circuses of Europe know no such intrigue. In an intimate, one-ring show, the complement works as a splendid unit, each applauding each other's acts, all sharing the general triumph. Further, as we learned quickly, the big show did something to people. Temperament developed with importance, athletes become artistes, suspicion and indignation supplanted co-operation and good will. The struggling novice of yesterday was the favourite of today, or gone. I have seen the greatest arrive and depart, and I must admit that few of them were strong enough in character to remain aloof from the intrigues of competition (Bradna 1953, 17).

Bradna's view may be somewhat hyperbolic as circus ethnographies in single-ring settings have identified conflict between family members (Carmeli 2011) and between ownership and artistes (Offen 2010), but the three rings created zero-sum games for artists to compete in. This was new. Active injustice in such competition for external goods was a consequence of the creation of the centre ring as a prize, and the loose relation between its allocation and the accepted hierarchy of talent and difficulty within the circus community. Acts that presented the spectacle—such as

looping the loop in a car—could be paid up to US\$2,000 weekly in the 1930s compared to US\$35–40 for clowns (Bradna 1953, 28–29). At the very least, such inequity distracted performers, and at worst threatened to undermine the bonds of community that the single-ring circus had relied upon. MacIntyre, following Aristotle, distinguishes between two types of moral failure: failure to be good enough, and to “do positive wrong” ([1981] 2007, 152). If frustration facilitates failure to be good enough by undermining opportunities to develop excellence, institutional injustice facilitates the latter, as community members withhold the kinds of mutual support needed for the community to flourish.¹

Alongside injustice within the circus community itself, knowledgeable observers argued that a wider injustice was being done to the audience and thereby to the performers. Writing in 1931, circus ethnographer Paul Eipper argued that:

I do not think that the many ring circus will endure in the long run. The attention of the public is diverted too much from the individual performances, and the artist suffers from the divided concentration of the audience (Eipper 1931, 145).

As this example shows, the relationship between substitution, frustration, and injustice is intimate in the context of practices.

The Mutually Reinforcing Nature of Substitution, Frustration, and Injustice

Although cases of perceived injustice (in wages, for example), may not involve either substitution or frustration, both substitution and frustration will be experienced as forms of injustice. This is something that is underlined by the cost associated with devoting oneself to a particular practice. Given the time and commitment required to master a practice, and given the virtues required to develop as a practitioner, there is a sense in which such practitioners deserve to have access to the internal goods of the practice in question.

Furthermore, frustration can pave the way for substitution, as when the frustrated practitioner starts to lose hope in protecting the practice against further degradation by way of unwelcome developments, and no longer feels empowered to mount the sort of defence of the practice that might preserve it. Substitution likewise exacerbates the experience of frustration, as the possibility of a meaningful engagement in the practice is diluted by the need to adapt to the more standardised substituted activities, rather than focusing on the development of an excellent original routine.

RENAISSANCE OF THE SINGLE RING

By the mid-twentieth century, European circuses had become aware of the contrast between their philosophy and that of their notable American counterparts

¹ We are grateful to an anonymous review for encouraging us to locate this distinction within our discussion.

(e.g., Foster and Bosworth 1937, 139). Circus writer Antony Hippisley-Cox, expressed this distinction in 1951 as follows:

During the American three-ring heyday, circuses were pushed by a public conditioned to judge a show on its size. The modern-era embracement of the older European style helped to deconstruct this uniquely American fetish largely engendered by Mr Barnum and his colleagues. Now, in lieu of magnitude and spectacle, atmosphere and artistry are preferred (Hippisley-Cox, cited in Hammarstrom 2012, 85).

Writing in 1956, a scion of the British Sanger circus family concurred:

I eventually came to believe from my own experience with the Barnum and Bailey show, that three performances going on simultaneously in three different rings merely bedazzled the audience, which was too busy glancing from one ring to the other to appreciate properly any of the acts (Sanger-Coleman and Lukens 1974/1956, 98).

Doing injustice to the beneficiaries of the practice matters to practitioners whose focus can never be solely internal. This dimension of the critique of the three-ring circus finds echoes in Robson's research with Scottish banking leaders (Robson 2015; Robson and Beadle 2019). In a number of cases the perception of injustice towards customers occasioned by the transition from a service to a sales culture precipitated resignations by bankers who understood this as breaching standards of justice that should inform relationships with business customers. Of these, a number joined smaller financial institutions that maintained the traditional culture. Likewise, the coders in Krogh et al.'s (2012) study required a different institutional form (open-source software) to continue to work in their practice without such conflict. The renaissance of the single-ring circus in North America was also explicitly occasioned by the critique of the three-ring form. While the single-ring circus had never disappeared in America, only the mid-century Polack Brothers Circus had retained a reputation that competed with their three-ringed counterparts. The Great Depression had led to multiple circus closures and more than one former three-ring circus displayed single-ring shows in their existing mammoth tents in order to reduce costs (Hammarstrom 2008, 53). The economic recovery following the Second World War led to a recovery in their fortunes. But from the 1950s onward a combination of labour disputes and falling audiences saw the closure of a number of three-ring shows and major changes for others. Labour disputes with unionised roustabouts precipitated the Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey giant to forsake touring under canvas in 1956. For the next six decades the remaining three-ring shows worked only in arenas, which required far less labour (Hammarstrom 2008, 5–19).

The critique of the three-ring circus evident in early decades of the twentieth century explicitly informed the renaissance of the single-ring circus in its latter half. Summarising these developments, Albrecht explicitly links the single-ring to the justice towards audience members embedded in individual performance:

With an audience's entire attention focused on one ring, there is little room for the performer to fake or cheat. Nor is there any way of hiding a flop, as there might be in the hurly burly of a three-ring spectacle. The artist must give one hundred percent. If any

artist does not, the audience knows it is being cheated. On the other hand, the audience also tends to be far more supportive of a performer's honest efforts when they are as close as they are in a one-ring circus. From there they can see the sweat, the strain, and the tension (Albrecht 1995, 51).

The claim to justice as inhering in the relationship of the circus artist to their audience (and its contrast to theatrical production) regularly features in their understanding. Since this relationship was seen to be undermined by the three-ring form, the solution was the renaissance of the single-ring and an appeal to an audience that valued this relationship. By 1955, Polack Brothers' Circus programme refers to its owner, Louis Stern as being: "a leader in bringing about the present high popularity in America of the Continental style circus, wherein one act is presented at a time, with every act superior in merit" (quoted in Hammarstrom 2008, 31).

The appeal to the notion of merit is critical in distinguishing the single sequence of circus acts as an echo of the sequencing of tricks within acts and by contrast to both the number of points of spectacle and the distractions of the three-ring form. By the 1970s, the Big Apple Circus had been created in New York with the specific intention of restoring the classical single-ring form in a permanent location, as it launched extensive annual runs at Lincoln Centre (Albrecht 1995, 50). For artistry to replace spectacle in the North American Circus "a limited seating capacity was a philosophical necessity" (Albrecht 1995, 135). While extremely important, the institutional goal of securing income was thus secondary to the goals of the practice.

Big Apple Circus director Paul Binder combined the critique of injustice in the performer–audience relationship with an awareness of the conditions required for circus performers to pursue the internal goods of their practices. Binder claimed that at first the audiences:

didn't for a minute understand the fine points of the craft, so I was determined to show them the direction. It was very important to have an educated audience. I wanted an educated audience. If I am going to present the highest standard of circus in the world I want people who can appreciate it. They appreciate it on a gut level, but I wanted them to appreciate the finer points as well (Paul Binder quoted in Albrecht 1995, 60–61).

Binder was not the first to seek to educate the audience. In the 1930s circus veterinarian John Clarke wrote guides for the audience of a British circus to understand the differing complexities of tricks (Clarke 1936, 34). Common to both Clarke and Binder's missions was the desire to align the audience's appreciation with the internal goods of practices recognised by performers themselves. The early years of the Big Apple Circus showed that such understanding was far from a precondition to attendance or to the institution's economic viability; but these were not Binder's animating purposes. Alongside the circus directors interviewed in Beadle's (2013) study, Binder's commitment was to the circus as a form of community and practice. Writing to the *New York Times*, the Chairman of the Big Apple Circus, Alan Sifka, summarised the philosophy that grounded the relationship between practitioners and audience. Albrecht quotes this at length:

My particular interest is in the utilisation of Circus as a powerful, uplifting, transformational performing ritual whose capacities to connect directly the fundamental spirit and soul of its audience to the bodies and spirits of the performers enable an uplifting and healing. When one leaves a good Circus, one feels cleansed and healed, in part because one's inner child has been nurtured, in part because one's wise soul has been reconnected to the beauty and strength that is possible in this world. Accordingly, I have no interest in those forms of Circus where the inherent honesty, purity and dignity of Circus are perverted by exhibitionism, the easy or dishonest trick, or commercial exploitation. Any perversion of the Circus leaves an audience dishonoured and unfulfilled. The single ring with its focused energy is an unforgiving performance space (Sifka, cited in Albrecht 1995, 50–51).

The contrast between the 'purity' of authentic circus and the 'perversion' of exhibitionism is clearly a reference to the contrast between Big Apple and the three-ring circus and calls to mind the distinction between an internal goods orientation and a focus on external goods that suggests institutional domination. Sifka's distinction between good and bad circuses is not ontological but ethical; on his account the three-ring circus is still a circus. However, the good circus remains focused on practices whose achievements are to be enjoyed by an audience taught to appreciate them; it is compromising on this good that condemns exhibitionism. Indeed, without the three-ring innovation, the emphasis given to the ethical claims of the single-ring circus would not have taken the prominent role evident in the narratives of Binder, Sifka, and Stern, moral agency being occasioned by such conflict (Robson and Beadle 2019).

The three-ring innovation was itself to be undermined by the market, as tastes changed, and dwindling audiences could no longer finance the cost of large productions. In particular, the taste for performing animals has been reducing for decades and the Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Baileys' decision to retire its elephants in 2016 was swiftly followed by its decision to retire the show altogether in 2017; at the end the removal of the elephant attraction may have actually hastened the reduction in ticket sales (Sirkin, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The extent to which institutions promote or undermine practices cannot be understood at any single level, neither the vices nor virtues of powerful institutional agents, nor the mode of institutionalisation, nor the market and other critical environments can explain this alone (Moore and Beadle 2006). The renaissance of the single-ring, or perhaps more accurately, single performance space circus, is a story in which changing tastes have shifted the market towards the appreciation of skill and endeavour. At the same time the creation of new market-making institutions and the agency of individuals to re-imagine circus in a variety of ways has enabled the industry to change and, in many ways, to prosper. The students in higher education academies devoted to circus arts in cities including Paris, Montreal, and London (Wall 2013), are not training for a future in one of three rings. This renaissance provides grounds for hope, and reminds us that, as MacIntyre puts it, there is "always

more to be hoped for in any and every situation than the empirical facts seem to show” (2008, 7).

This emphasis on hope even in unpropitious social circumstances is one of the reasons MacIntyre characterises his own Aristotelianism as “revolutionary” (2008), and stems from the observation that “every human being is potentially a fully fledged ... Aristotelian” (MacIntyre 1992, 14), to whom excellence and the internal goods of practices naturally appeal. This tendency to appreciate excellence, coupled with the virtues required and developed by practice engagement, is what allows us to sustain practices even in the face of the institutional threats we outlined above, and even in the context of a broader culture liable to indifference, and occasionally hostility, towards practices.

As we noted above, for MacIntyre, virtues such as justice, courage, and truthfulness are necessary for practices to resist the potentially corrupting power of institutions. MacIntyrean enquiries into organisations, including this article, have illustrated resistance to organisational initiatives animated by ethical concerns of practitioners and peripheral practitioners. *That* institutions tend to threaten practices has been widely noted in the literature, and in this article, we have attempted to provide a more detailed account of how this threat becomes manifest, and a more nuanced vocabulary for exploring institutional failure from a MacIntyrean perspective. This article’s contribution is to encourage future researchers to apply a common heuristic for understanding the kinds of institutional threats that elicit resistance and thereby to enter into clearer dialogue with one another.

Coda: Following the closure of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey circus in 2017, its current owners announced its return from 2023/2024 in a single ring where: “a 360-degree experience will break down the barriers between the performers and attendees” (Feld Entertainment, 2022).

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RON BEADLE is professor of organisation and business ethics at Northumbria University, where he has worked since 1992. His research has principally sought to defend, apply, and extend Alasdair MacIntyre's thought. This article is the latest of several conceptual and empirical papers that have addressed the relationship between goods, virtues practices, and institutions in the context of the travelling circus. Other research has looked at meaningful work and calling, the happiness/positive psychology literature, corporate philanthropy, trade unions, and reward management.

MATTHEW SINNICKS (m.sinnicks@soton.ac.uk, corresponding author) is associate professor in the Department of Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour, Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, where he has worked since 2022. His research interests include flourishing and alienation in the workplace, the ethical quality of market society, virtue ethics in business and organisations, and the ethics of competition.

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