THE PRIVATE CITIZEN: MACINTYRE, CICERO AND THE "CLASSICAL TRADITION" OF CIVIC LIFE

In his well-known criticism of contemporary moral philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre contrasts it with a "classical tradition" in ethical thought which he sees as restoring cohesion and coherence to social striving and ethical life (145, 204-5). In response to a contemporary ethical landscape which "exalts" the morally neutral exercise of bureaucratic expertise and which "partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour", he summons up the image of an holistic moral personhood lived in the pursuit of the virtues, those excavated coins of the ancient polis whose currency seemingly crosses every ethical border-post.

For MacIntyre, ethical theory is necessarily the outgrowth of a shared pattern of social life dominated by a specific sense of community and its connecting bonds. To critics who suggest that the ethical life of the polis is irrecoverable in a modern world of civil societies and nation states, MacIntyre insists that the fundamental conditions of a moral life based on the virtues are generalisable, even if the specific content of those virtues is not. A revived classical tradition of ethical life would require only a shared telos of the good life in which citizens might be trained from childhood, along with a shared pattern of social life, in which excellence in a range of key social and cultural accomplishments is definable as a form of the exercise of virtue (202-3, 187-8; cf. Gill "Personhood" 172).

At least two aspects of MacIntyre's criticism of modern moral theory ought to be uncontroversial. First, there is no doubt that classical ethical writing is strikingly different in character from the formal analytical disputation that animates moral philosophy today. As Pierre Hadot insisted some time ago, classical ethical thought was above all concerned with the art of living: it involved "a concrete attitude and a determinate life-style, which engages the whole of existence." Philosophy functioned as "a therapeutic of the passions", in order to heal and elevate the soul, and its goal was "a kind of self-formation, or paideia" (Hadot 83, 102). Second, moral philosophy since Kant has become strikingly unworldly: it has tended at once to universalise the capacity for moral judgement and responsibility, and at the same time to relegate its guiding impulse to an otherworldly sphere of necessary altruism (Minson 195-7; cf. e.g. Rawls 521-2). MacIntyre quite rightly objects that virtues are artefacts of particular cultures and styles of life, and that the force of specific ethical precepts requires a sense of participation in a determinate and closely-knit moral community.
Nevertheless, MacIntyre’s classical ethical landscape possesses an equally striking kind of unworldliness. His image of holistic moral personality, of a life lived as an unbroken moral narrative, is dependent on an heroically primitive picture of classical social existence viewed as an integrated whole, as opposed to the ethical segmentation of modern social life. As Julia Annas has recently pointed out (451), the image of classical ethical life as founded upon habituation in a set of uncontroversial conventional virtues is in all likelihood “a modern fantasy and projection” upon a more complicated social reality.

It is this image of a moral life without boundaries, of a social existence untroubled by ethical division or specialisation, which I want to put into question here. Hence rather than focussing on a strictly philosophical work such as the Nicomachean Ethics, as MacIntyre does, I want to examine the work widely accepted as the most influential handbook of practical ethical precepts in the late classical through to the early modern world, Cicero’s De officiis. While Aristotle’s ethics, like the classical philosophical handbooks of which Hadot writes, is self-consciously directed towards “conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason”, rather than with “human prejudices and social conventions”, Cicero’s marks an explicit attempt to reconcile this philosophical telos with the practical machinery of aristocratic paideia in late-republican Rome (Hadot 102).

The primary goal of De officiis is the maintenance and regulation of human conduct in deference to the dictates of honestas — what Cicero’s most recent translator renders as honourableness. Honestas in turn “arises” from the presence of one or more of four principle virtues, wisdom, justice, courage and seemliness (decorum), each of which informs a range of practical officia, or duties, the fulfilment of which can be recognised as an action of honestas (De officiis, I.15; cf. Griffin and Atkins xxii–xxiv). These virtues can be seen as habitual dispositions, or habits of mind, the preservation of which is necessary for the proper function of officia (cf. De inventione II.III.159, in Hubble). Thus far, we find ourselves in an ethical landscape familiar from MacIntyre’s account: Cicero’s telos is the society of honestas, and the practical correlates of his virtues are an apparently orderly assemblage of officia.

Cicero’s discussion of the second of these virtues is instructive in this connection. Here, Cicero outlines the “several degrees of fellowship [societas] between men” — ranging upwards from marriage and the household through wider familial ties to the fellowship of the city, to those of tribe and genus, and ultimately to “that vast fellowship of the human race”, the Stoic cosmopolis (De officiis I.53–54: hereafter cited merely by book and section). This is the system of “hierarchically ordered reciprocities” referred to by MacIntyre: indeed, a broadly similar reading has been proposed by expert scholars such as Peter
Brunt ("Cicero’s Officium " 14; cf. MacKendrick 234) Such a reading is tempting no doubt because it presents Cicero’s account in the most philosophically consistent fashion.

However, Cicero’s hierarchical system is rather less orderly than we might suppose. At first he insists that the most important type of societas is that between “good men of similar conduct bound by familiarity” (I.55; cf. Brunt “Amicitia” 352). Immediately afterwards he decides on the contrary that no fellowship is “more serious, and none dearer”, than “that of each of us with the republic” (I.57). This is abruptly modified to exalt the societas of “our country and our parents” as the most important of a series of fellowships, followed in descending order by that of children, household and relations. Later on in De officiis, he appears to propose a different downward hierarchy, this time capped by “our duties to the immortal gods” (I.160). In short, there is here on the face of it a hierarchy, but it is far from clear in which direction the hierarchy operates, or indeed if it is unidirectional at all.

Our anticipation of an orderly hierarchy of societas is further disrupted when Cicero acknowledges that “the degrees of ties of relationship will not be the same as those of circumstance”. Thus you should help your neighbour before your own brother or friend should his harvest need gathering, but on the other hand in a lawsuit favour a friend or relative ahead of a neighbour. Hence the relative value of ties of societas is dependent not only on circumstances but on a complex and uneven social landscape in which the citizen may be required to match different duties with different inter-personal and legal personae. Virtues, it becomes clear, so far from being universal, may be status-specific. This is most obviously the case of Cicero’s third virtue — courage, or the possession of a “lofty and magnificent spirit”. It is the special and distinctive characteristic of the active and prominent citizen (be they magistrate, senator or lawyer) both in war and in peace. The fourth virtue, decorum or seemliness, is a more complex case, being the attribute of those who behave well in the callings appropriate to their station and personal situation, even though that station may not necessarily be a noble one (I.94).

It is clear that, for Cicero, honestas and adherence to social conventions march hand in hand: the criteria for the honestas of vocations are not internal to the concept of honestas itself. “We need give no advice about things done in accordance with custom and civil codes of behaviour”, comments Cicero, “as they themselves constitute pieces of advice”. It is true, he admits, that philosophers such as Socrates and Aristippus flouted “custom and civil practice”. However, they were sapientes who had disciplined themselves to live in accordance with natural reason. We on the other hand (as Cicero observes
elsewhere) live with “those who are doing splendidly if they have in them mere images of virtue”, and for us social conventions are the bulwarks of honestas (I.148, 146; cf. Brunt “Stoicism” 14).

It is here that the figure of the persona, a much-remarked feature of De officiis, takes the stage. Cicero remarks that “we have been clothed, as it were, by nature” for a number of roles or personae, and that these roles engage us at two distinct levels of our corporeal existence, as human beings and as individuals. One role requires of us that we exercise our share in the universal stock of reason — just as the Stoic sapiens was required “to pass beyond the limits of individuality, to recognise [themselves] as a part of the reason-animated cosmos” (Hadot 86). Another, it seems, is dependent upon the specific and variable personal characteristics of individuals — of those, in short, who having failed to pass beyond these limits are required to imitate the image of virtue in their individual selves (cf. Gill “Personhood” 175).

It is difficult to read Cicero’s account of these personal characteristics — what he describes as “our own nature” — without imagining that he is summoning up the thoroughly anachronistic imagery of modern personality, with its distinctive psychological focus on the ineffable uniqueness of the individual spirit (Gill “Personhood” 170–172). Yet Cicero’s invocation of one’s own nature is not so much an observation of personality as an invocation of the ethical notion of character familiar from the Greco-Roman stage, from whence the term persona had emerged into wider usage (Rorty). The Greek conception of character or ethos (often rendered in Latin by the deceptive natura, or nature) denoted chiefly the primal characteristics by means of which stage-characters responded to the need to make immediate and decisive ethical judgements (Gill “Character-Personality” 2). As one might expect, ethos was not possessed as an inward quality, nor could it simply be maintained in reputation: rather it had of necessity to be enacted visibly in the practical actions of argument and speechifying (Kennedy 68, 100). Cicero’s examples in De officiis are instructive here: Crassus had “plenty of wit”, Laelius was “jolly”, Hannibal was “crafty” while Lysander was patient (I.107–9). The characteristics are no more inward than those represented in the various mask-types of the Roman stage.

Cicero’s point, then, is that while we all have a share of that common humanity towards which the Stoic philosopher always reaches, those of us who lack the ethical evenness of the sapiens will have to rely upon some key character-trait or ethos to animate our public persona. In a sense, then, it is only the wise philosopher who possesses something resembling a fully-developed personality: as Marcel Mauss observed many decades ago, the sapiens is in certain
respects the heroic ancestor of the modern person understood as a self-reflexive moral agent (Mauss 18-19; cf. Engberg-Pederson 109-111).

As we might expect, Cicero’s image of this second persona is not that of the interior personality of modern psychological common-sense. Rather, it is of a finished artefact that has to be deliberately fashioned out of the uneven raw material of our impulses and capacities (I.111). Nothing is more conducive to decorum, he tells us, than “an evenness both of one’s whole life and of one’s actions”. This evenness itself is not part of our nature, nor does it come easily: everyone is required “to weigh the characteristics that are his own, and to regulate them.” The analogy that occurs to Cicero at this point, fittingly, is that of the stage. Like actors, we should choose carefully our parts, and the plays in which we perform, in order to match our existing talents to the most fitting persona (I.114). Of course in practice we may be forced to play parts for which, as we discover, we are ill-suited. Cicero’s advice here is salutary: if we have mischosen our type of life we should alter our behaviour and our plans “gradually and tentatively”, so as to “appear to have done so with good judgement” (I.115-121).

The man of Stoic constanlia, then, is one who moulds his nature into an even public persona, and who then follows the ethical precepts which that specific persona dictates. Epictetus recounts that Paconius’s persona forbade him from going to Nero’s games, but that he nevertheless encouraged others to do so, and in De officiis Cicero notes that Cato’s decision to commit political suicide, while necessary and even inevitable for him, would have been inappropriate for others (Brunt “Stoicism” 15). Cato’s persona was in concert with his nature in this respect, but not dependent upon it: nature had assigned to him “an extraordinary seriousness, which he himself had consolidated by his unfailing constancy [constantia]”, to the point that it dictated the necessity of certain fateful actions in specified situations (I.112).

What is striking about this discussion of personae and their duties is that quite distinct and often incompatible ethical comportments are required both by the responsibilities associated with different occupations and statuses, and by the characteristic ethical postures of those personae appropriate to the fulfilment of those functions. Cato’s persona required that he act courageously and, as it were, sagaciously, in taking his own life. But then, his persona was of an unusual constantia. Had other gentler individuals behaved in the same manner, the same action “would perhaps have been counted as a fault” (I.112; cf. Brunt “Stoicism” 15).

Again, the ethical requirements upon different types of citizens are not only dissimilar, but may actually be opposing. Thus the magistrate, we are told, must always remember “that he assumes the
persona of the city” and must impose his views accordingly, while the private person is required “to live on fair and peaceful terms with the other citizens” and “to want public affairs to be peaceful and honourable” — in short, to refrain from acting, where necessary, for the sake of the republic (I.124). Finally, one may wear different personae at different points in one’s life, and these may require one not only to present oneself in different ways, but to subject oneself to quite distinct ethical precepts. A magistrate who returns to being a private citizen, for instance, will be required to modify both his formal oratorical style and the practical temper of his relationships with his fellow-citizens — just as, from the other direction, would an alien who gained citizenship.

There is in Cicero’s discussion the inescapable sense that personae are not in themselves tokens of a unified moral personality, but rather the effect of cultivating an appearance of such a personality as a means of approaching towards it. This appearance will be necessary for all those who lack the sagely capacity to develop such a personality through the mastery of impulse by reason — for those, in short, “who are doing splendidly if they have in them mere images of virtue”. Personae are first and foremost performative: it is above all essential that the citizen should be seen to behave in certain ways, and not to behave in others.

A useful parallel here is a conception of personality with which Cicero would have been familiar from his professional life — that embodied in the principles of Roman law. Since at least the time of Locke and his forensic definition of the person, our broad conception of legal personality has been based upon the capacity for the exercise of moral responsibility, whether in individuals or in other legal persons such as corporations. It follows that, for the purposes of determining guilt and punishment, one is either a responsible legal person or not.

By contrast, as Richard Tur has observed, Roman legal personality was a relative fact, based upon one’s current position within a formally-defined hierarchy of statuses — the status of freedom (or its lack), the status of citizenship (or its absence), and the status of command over a family or subordination within it. Punishment by the law involved the loss of one, two or all three of these statuses — and in each case the individual after this capitis deminutio was legally recognised as having become a different person, or else as having ceased to be a person at all. In the course of a lifetime, one might shift across the entire range of statuses, and both the degree and the character of one’s legal persona would alter accordingly (Tur 116–118).

It is instructive to compare this schema with the ideal of Stoic constantia represented by Cato’s example. Cato had moulded an exemplarily even (aequabilis) persona out of the raw material of his
spear disposition (gravitas): this persona was sustained through a lifetime of unremitting political activity. Had his civic life been interrupted or terminated in some fashion — as Cicero’s own career was in the period of writing of De officiis — this degree of evenness would have been impossible and in fact inappropriate. His civic persona, like those legal personae of free men whose statuses had been revised, would have been altered, and with his change in comportment his disposition also would have been changed. Indeed, Cato in a sense died in order to maintain his persona, albeit only in death.

How does this reading of De officiis square with MacIntyre’s image of the classical tradition? In the first place, Cicero’s ethical hierarchy is clearly less orderly than MacIntyre’s and the duties appropriate to particular statuses more fragmented and less neatly equated with the exercise of the virtues. More importantly, though, it is clear that the unitary moral personality that occupies the centre of MacIntyre’s stage is in fact for Cicero a special and exemplary figure, produced by a combination of good fortune and exceptional personal capacity. On the other hand, it is clear that for most moral actors in Cicero’s account constantia is necessarily a fraught and unstable product of a concerted and repetitious presentation of the self, one threatened by the diminution of social status or a transference between distinct ethical domains of social life.

None of this is easily explained in terms of MacIntyre’s account. For MacIntyre the notion of role-playing as the basis for social interaction is the prerogative of modern liberal societies with their pervasive social atomism and ethical emotivism (115-117). The persona as a performative model of moral personality has no place in the classical tradition, because for MacIntyre it is associated with the abrogation of personal moral responsibility in favour of a succession of passively-viewed emotional states. Indeed, it is deeply upsetting to MacIntyre’s image of moral personality seen as a kind of unitary life-narrative, the truth of which is capable of being perceived through the harmony of the different segments.

Again, MacIntyre’s schema allows of no significant ethical divisions of existence in the classical tradition — indeed, he assumes that it transcends such divisions (MacIntyre 204–221). Thus the conception of a human life as a succession of distinct ethical episodes each requiring the presentation of a different face, and the Roman legal conception of a graded hierarchy of personae each of different levels of capacity, are both equally alien to him. For MacIntyre, in the creation of a unitary life-narrative constantia is all.

It is difficult to see what useful role in this picture is being played by Cicero’s virtuous private citizen, the patient soul whose duty is “to live on fair and peaceful terms with the other citizens”. The magistrate
has all of social life as his province, and he is able to roam about it exerting his ethical prejudices at will. The private citizen, on the other hand, is required to respect the ethical boundaries of other styles of life, other vocations, and other *persona* — to behave civilly, as well as civically. Yet this sounds uncomfortably like the kind of segmentation of ethical life MacIntyre so abhors.

In short, MacIntyre's image of classical virtue is of an Eden for Catos, each heroically refusing unto death to accept the ethical boundaries others are forced to respect in the name of civil harmony and peace. Cicero the moralist would evidently have been somewhat uncomfortable there; Cicero the private citizen would have had no place. And with Cicero would go most of us.

**Works Cited**


