



## Book Review: *Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations*

ELIZABET WENDT

### ABSTRACT

In [Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations](#), Geoff Moore applies the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre to the puzzle of the modern organization and argues in favor of bringing virtue ethics into the workplace. Virtue ethics is a branch of ethics that centers on people, the stories they tell about their lives, and how these stories develop or hinder their self-realization. This article reviews [Virtue at Work](#), outlining the content of the book and highlighting its potential uses for ombudsmen.

### KEYWORDS

Ombudsman, Managers, Situational Management, Workplace Ethics, Organizational Culture, Ethics



Like it or not, many of us spend the majority of our days at work. In the best case scenario, the time we spend at our job is enriching and fulfilling, allowing us to exercise skills and build our capacity to do and be more. In the worst case scenario, none of this is true. With [Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations](#), Geoff Moore wants to help more of us find our way to the best case scenario and he makes a strong case that bringing ethics into the workplace is the way to do so.

The ethics Moore deals with are, more precisely, virtue ethics. Like other branches of ethics, virtue ethics tries to identify how to live a good life. However, the virtue ethics approach is distinct from other branches of ethics in that it centers on people and the stories they tell about their lives. In other words, virtue ethics holds that how people talk about their lives, how they place events along their narrative quest, can have profound impacts on whether or not they become fully realized individuals.

As a book about ethics, this is not a particularly tactical read. It will not advise ombudsmen on how to conduct the business of being of an ombudsperson. However, it will be of use for an ombudsperson with an interest in analyzing how to create experiences and structures within a workplace that help people act virtuously.

The foundation of [Virtue at Work](#) comes from the thinking of Scottish moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, and more specifically, MacIntyre's book [After Virtue: A Study in Moral Thinking](#). With [Virtue at Work](#), Moore applies MacIntyre's philosophy to the questions that arise for working people about their jobs, putting into practice MacIntyre's belief that philosophy needs to respond to everyday questions of everyday people.

The book is structured into three parts. Part I introduces the concepts which will be used throughout the rest of the book. This includes the definition of what an organization is in Chapter 2, an explanation of virtue ethics in Chapter 3, and an overview of the MacIntyrean approach to virtue ethics in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 is particularly important to understanding the rest of the book since it introduces the concepts of internal goods (excellence in practice, pursuit of virtue and character) and external goods (wealth, fame, reputation), the potential risks if the pursuit of external goods is prioritized over the pursuit of internal goods, and the concepts of practices and the common good.

Part II is a significant section which takes the MacIntyrean framework of virtue ethics and applies it to the individual, manager, and organization. Chapter 5 outlines characteristic of virtuous individuals and discusses the importance of integrity as a virtue in an individual's life. Here, Moore spends time on explaining meaningful work and explores how work can be objectively or subjectively meaningful.

Chapter 6 focuses on managers and management. Moore acknowledges MacIntyre's largely negative view of managers as "morally neutral achievers" before trying to repurpose their image. Moore also identifies the characteristics of a virtuous manager. Most notable on this list are resistance and concern about the mode of institutionalization of the organization.

Chapter 7 introduces a list of eight characteristics of virtuous organizations. It also proposes eight ways for adding virtue, or crowding-in virtue as Moore puts it, to an organization. These include recruiting a larger proportion of staff who are naturally pro-social (meaning they play for the common good), creating inclusive governance, encouraging group identity (potentially by limiting executive pay), and adding transparency. Because of its potential impact and practicality, this section was one of the most useful parts of the book.

With Part III, the book concludes by looking at examples of how this framework has been used by different kinds of organizations. Businesses, including banks and pharmaceuticals, are the focus of Chapter 8. Non-business such as symphonies, circuses, and churches are the focus of Chapter 9. In this section, Moore highlights the recurring tension that exists in organizations about balancing the pursuit of excellence in practices (internal goods) with the need for money and resources (external goods). He also makes some notes about factors that can mitigate some of the noxious impacts of institutionalization of



practices. In particular, he identifies professional associations, environments (or micro-climates) conducive to virtuous behavior, and less harmful forms of organizational institutionalization as potential mitigating factors.

Even with all that's good about *Virtue at Work*, one note of caution needs to be added. This is not really the right choice for a casual office book club or anyone looking for light reading. Despite the book's stated purpose of making philosophy "understandable to those we might call 'everyday persons'", it seems unlikely casual readers would stick with it. The language is challenging. For example, "everyday plain persons" is used to describe, essentially, non-philosophical working people. Later on, on page 119, Geoff explains the implications of virtue ethics for organizations, saying, "a virtuous organization would understand that its primary function is to focus on the core practice, to ensure excellence in the pursuit of the internal goods of that practice." Moore is an excellent and clear writer, but the language creates a stuffiness in the text which risks alienating some readers.

In addition, the work stays heavily on the side of theory. There are times when natural questions of application which might come up for those "everyday plain persons" interested in using the framework for their lives are set aside as outside the scope of this book. For example, the rather juicy question of how we can decide collectively if a job is meaningful is stated and then set aside. While it's fair for Moore to set limits on scope, this choice keeps the concepts largely in a theoretical space.

Still, *Virtue at Work* is a worthwhile read for those who are willing to dig in. It confronts a rather challenging question of how to use work as a tool for self-development, even when parts of work exist in opposition to the qualities we may want to develop. It could be particularly impactful for organizational leaders and managers who have the ability to influence organizational culture. Sections which may be valuable to ombudsmen include the section of Chapter 7 outlining how to add virtue at an organizational level, along with the illustration described in Chapter 8 of how self-reflection on MacIntyre's framework was used as a tool to influence management. Additionally, the overall approach to developing an ethical framework for work practice maybe generally helpful to ombudsmen.

Overall, with *Virtue at Work*, Moore creates a well-ordered book which carefully introduces and layers ideas to reach its final conclusion, that a MacIntyrean framework could act as a powerful tool to help guide employees and organizational leaders to direct their work towards more responsible and ethical ends.



## REFERENCES

Moore, Geoff. *Virtue at Work: Ethics for Individuals, Managers, and Organizations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.



## AUTHOR BIO

**Elizabeth Wendt** Elizabeth Wendt is a graduate of the University of Washington and currently works on issues of charter school compliance at Oakland Unified School District.  
(elizabeth.wendt@ousd.org)