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On Running Away to The Circus

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‘Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity’¹ begins with a consideration of how lives might go wrong through a series of failures in relation to desire. In probing the relationship between an agent’s desires and her beliefs, MacIntyre introduces a woman who has not considered ‘that she might run away and join the circus’,² and as we learn a few lines later, this possibility evades her because she wrongly believes that she could not become a trapeze artist. Incautious readers may regard this as a flippant illustration; but that would be an error. Trapeze is an example of the type of practice in which, on MacIntyre’s account, participation both requires and develops virtues, and the circus provides a context for the type of virtuous local political community to which MacIntyre gives his allegiance.

This paper uses the example of circus to illustrate the relationship between self-understanding and social order that underscores MacIntyre’s diagnoses of developments in mainstream moral and self-understanding.³ ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’ provides a largely sociological account as to why the distinctive and incoherent Morality of modernity persists, and moreover must persist, if the illusions of the conventional

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity – An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016).

²Ibid., 7.

³ This paper’s use of literary resources through which to distinguish MacIntyre’s politics of the practice-based community is designed to be appropriate to a journal which seeks to offer ‘a forum for discussion for the human person as both a political and a literary animal’ <https://www.politicsandpoetics.co.uk/about> [accessed 17 July 2017].

social order are to be maintained. MacIntyre's allusions to such contexts as the circus manifest the same intimate relationship between self-understanding and social order, but in contrast to modernity, provide a context for coherence.

Agents in coherent social orders have the potential, at least, to understand themselves and their fellows as working towards the achievement of common goods. On MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian account, participation in deliberation about and towards such goods is a precondition for the development of distinctively human capacities. The extent to which a social order enables this thereby provides a judgement as to whether it facilitates human flourishing. To be practically rational is to act on the outcome of those deliberations. To seek one's good by other means, through force or manipulation, is to fail to seek one's actual good; to have been deceived in a way that precludes its pursuit.

I intend to highlight the care with which MacIntyre illustrates these relationships by focussing on this apparently minor example of the circus. My contention is that were we to both desire well and to accept MacIntyre's arguments as to the dependence of virtue development upon our participation in both practices and practice-based communities, then we too would recognize that running away to the circus is an option worthy of consideration. Having made this case, I will consider some implications. I begin however with an outline of our main terms and some background.

The circus is both an institutional and communal form, which has presented acrobatics, balancing, juggling, animal husbandry (now fallen out of favour), comedy and music since 1768.⁴ The circus spread rapidly through the late eighteenth century and was world's most popular entertainment throughout the nineteenth; its performers numbering amongst the world's first global workers.⁵ Its history in the twentieth century has seen a decline in popularity and an increasing variety of institutional types, from the three ring circus to contemporary and social

⁴ For the history of the early circus see Marius Kwint, 'The Legitimation of the Circus in Late Georgian England', *Past and Present* 174, (2002), 72-115.

⁵ Catherine Holmes, *Aerial Stars: Femininity, Celebrity & Glamour in the Representations of Female Aerialists in the UK & USA in the 1920s and Early 1930s* (PhD Thesis, University of Exeter 2016).

circus.⁶ Despite this, the ongoing coherence of circus as an institutional form is located within what Paul Bouissac terms a ‘multimodal discourse’⁷ in which a series of acts performs before an audience. Each act comprises:

‘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’.⁸

The performance of circus acts, though not verbalised, follows a narrative structure in which the protagonist(s) attempts to succeed in the achievement of progressively more difficult tasks or, in the counter-narrative of comedy, clowns fail in their pursuit of progressively less coherent and commendable purposes. In the case of the former, jugglers, acrobats, wire-walkers and others are understood by their audience without the need for narration, precisely because the structure of successive challenges is understood by those who have, at least in part, participated in other practices that are structured around the achievement of such successions. To learn to read, to cook, to design architectural drawings or to master the intricacies of surgery requires us to recognise and meet challenges that could not be attempted had their predecessors not been mastered.

It should be uncontroversial that many if not all the acts that comprise traditional circus are practices. This is critical to my argument because practices are pivotal in MacIntyre’s account of the development

⁶ On the history of circus see Janet Davis. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2002), Gill Arrighi “The circus and modernity: A commitment to ‘the newer’ and ‘the newest’.” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10:2 (2012), 169-185., Duncan Hammarstrom, *Inside the Changing Circus: A Critic’s Guide* (Oklahoma: Bear Manor Media, 2012), Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey into the Wondrous World of Circus, Past and Present* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2012), Miriam Neirick, *When Pigs Could Fly and Bears could dance: A History of the circus in the Soviet Union* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1999), Mark St Leon, *Circus and nation: A critical enquiry into circus in its Australian setting, 1847-2006, from the perspectives of society, enterprise and culture* (PhD Thesis, University of Sydney School of History and Philosophical Enquiry, 2006).

⁷ Paul Bouissac, *Circus As Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

of virtues.⁹ For MacIntyre, practices are schools of the virtues, activities whose demands are such that we can only progress if we are able to develop the virtues of truthfulness, courage and justice, amongst others. To provide a simple illustration, one cannot become courageous when devoid of opportunities to develop the virtue in contexts in which both rashness and cowardice would prevent us from achieving relevant goods. It is only those who have developed such virtues who can go on to pursue the wider goods of their own lives, understood in narrative terms as a progression, or to participate in deliberation about and action in pursuit of the common goods of communities. To be denied the opportunity to participate in practices is to be frustrated in the development of virtues. As Sinnicks has recently suggested, it is perhaps unsurprising that virtue ethicists have gone to such lengths to establish whether particular activities can be considered to be practices.¹⁰

MacIntyre has previously endorsed a view of the circus ‘as practice and institution’¹¹ and in ‘Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity’ approvingly notes Tom Burns’ list of practices including ‘fishing crews and ensembles of actors or acrobats or musicians’.¹² Acrobatics, highlighted here, is a staple of circus performance and features the complexity, co-operation, coherence and the pursuit of excellence which practices require. Acrobatics is moreover a practice with a narrative history, one which, as early as 1599, was defended in a treatise arguing for its equality with other physical arts, including the ballet.¹³

Practitioners in the circus pursue specific, tangible, even if momentary, goods internal to their practice. Feiler reports on the contemporary trapeze and springboard artist, Paulo, whose self-understanding is framed by concrete and particular internal goods:

‘I realize I’m not satisfied. The act could be better. The swing needs to be two feet taller. I need to be fifteen pounds lighter. The way the

⁹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue – A Study in Moral Theory – 3rd edn.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. Chapter 14.

¹⁰ Matthew Sinnicks, ‘Moral Education at Work: On the Scope of MacIntyre’s Concept of a Practice’, *Journal of Business Ethics*, (Online first, 2017).

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘How Aristotelianism can become Revolutionary: Ethics, Utopia and Resistance’, *Philosophy of Management*, 7:1 (2008), 3-8, at 6.

¹² Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’, 131.

¹³ Duncan Wall, ‘The Ordinary Acrobat’, 132.

act is now I would not want anybody I think is somebody to see it. Not in my business, which is somersaults. As soon as it's over I'm thinking, I want to do more, I want to give more. I want to shout at the audience, "Just wait until the flying act. That's when I know we'll show you something. That's when we'll really show you how to fly".¹⁴

For Paulo, as for other practitioners, desire is directed towards the achievement of goods internal to, that is neither achievable nor intelligible outside of, a practice. His frustration in respect of his current levels of performance ('I'm not satisfied'), his sense of responsibility ('I need to be fifteen pounds lighter'), his aspirations for achieving a level of excellence ('that's when we'll really show you how to fly'), and his recognition of the standards of excellence shared between practitioners ('anybody I think is somebody') are characteristic of MacIntyre's account of desires ordered to the achievement of excellence within a practice.

Were MacIntyre's claim simply that his fictitious agent should become a trapeze artist then our argument would end at the point at which we establish trapeze as a particular acrobatic practice which is especially associated with the circus rather than other institutional forms, but that is not his only claim.¹⁵

'The circus is an art of community'¹⁶ in which acts are performed by families who both work and live in close proximity to one another, predominantly touring but exceptionally in stationary settings. For the former, the travelling circus is a form of life in which art, work and community are inseparable. Nell Stroud, who ran away to the circus following an English degree at Oxford in the 1990s, and later became a circus owner, contrasts the commitment required by circus artistes to those of other arts:

'The circus is the only medium I can think of where life and art are undivided; the essence of circus life cannot be replicated anywhere else. Once you have been in circus you feel out of it in any other world ... There is nothing else to fall back on, to go home to. This is it – the

¹⁴ Bruce Feiler, *Under the Big Top: A Season with the Circus* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 108.

¹⁵ Ron Beadle and David Könyöt, 'The Man in the Red Coat – Management in the Circus', *Culture and Organization* 12:2 (2006) 127-137.

¹⁶ Wall, op.cit, 50.

wind and the flapping tent and the lorries in the night and the camels
slowly passing during tea outside the caravan'.¹⁷

Since the 1960s, contemporary or 'new circus' has provided an alternative model so that the presentation and ordering of acts, the variety of practices presented, the familial composition of the company, the relative autonomy of practitioners from managers and commercial funding are all and variously challenged and this has opened far more opportunities for running away to join the circus.¹⁸ Almost since its inception, people have done this, some temporarily, others permanently, some to become participants, others to write. This essay draws its arguments from ethnographic studies and especially from autobiographical narratives that have been selected as examples of what MacIntyre calls:

'narratives of the relevant kind, narratives that make the actions of particular agents intelligible and show them to be justified or unjustified'.¹⁹

This circus literature extends across continents and eras and is deployed here to surface continuities in the self-understanding of circus people across these generational and geographic contexts and across a variety of roles including owners, managers, clowns, ring-masters, and acrobats. Those who have both run away to and written of the circus have often provided stories which contrast the goods pursued in circus and those of money, power, and status that characterize the social order from which they have run. In order to stay close to this data, a large portion of this article is given to verbatim quotations from circus practitioners. These provide support for Yoram Carmeli's understanding of travelling circus as a 'mode of existence',²⁰ that requires participation in practices and a distinctive mode of institutionalisation, the circus itself, which affords

¹⁷ Nell Stroud, *Josser: Days and Nights at the Circus* (London: Little Brown and Co., 1999), 142-143.

¹⁸ See the discussions of the 'new circus' and 1960s counter-culture in Ernest Albrecht, *The New American Circus* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995); in Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat*; in Reg Bolton, *New Circus* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1987) and of 'social circus' in Katie Lavers, 'The resilient body in social circus: Father Jesus Silva, Boris Cyrulnik and Peter A. Levine' in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, eds. Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁹ MacIntyre, 'Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity', 242.

²⁰ Yoram Carmeli, 'Performance and family in the world of British Circus', *Semiotica* 85: 3 / 4 (1991), 257-289 at 283.

the potential to become a ‘practice-based community’.²¹ On MacIntyre’s account such communities comprise a:

‘mode[s] of social practice ... in which social relationships are informed by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal practices, so that the uses of power and wealth are subordinated to the achievement of those goods, mak[ing] possible a form of life in which participants pursue their own goods rationally and critically, rather than having continually to struggle, with greater or lesser success, against being reduced to the status of instruments for this or that type of capital formation’.²²

To the potential objection that circus fails by the standards that the wider community might adopt to order *its* goods, MacIntyre himself has provided an answer in his endorsement of Aquinas’s defence of those predecessor medieval clowns, the *jongleurs*:

‘Play and delight taken in play are therefore necessary to the exchanges and interchanges, the *conversationes*, of human life. And there are therefore *officia* through which what is needed may be supplied. These are the *officia* of players and entertainers, including *jongleurs*, and theirs is a legitimate full-time occupation’.²³

MacIntyre’s contrast between social orders in which the virtues are developed and the modern social order which undermines them, is central to his politics of local community. As we shall see, similar contrasts have been evident to and indeed animating for some who have run away to join the circus. Alongside MacIntyre’s oft-cited fishermen, whose desires are transformed by their discovery of goods internal to fishing²⁴; for many in the circus, ‘running away’, initially had higher priority than their destination. Katie Hickman’s ethnographic account of Mexican circus reports that:

²¹ See especially Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals – Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Selected Essays Volume 2: Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 156.

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Selected Essays Volume 2: Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 57; italics retained from original.

²⁴ See for example MacIntyre, ‘How Aristotelianism can become Revolutionary’; Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘The Recovery of Moral Agency’ in *The Best Christian Writing 2000* ed. John Wilson (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 111-136 (originally published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* April 16, 1999) and Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘A partial response to my critics’, in eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 283-304.

‘The circus is full of the enchanted: many come here for love, both girls and men; others are orphans, runaways, or simply nomads, such as myself. Our presence occasions neither comment nor surprise: it is expected; because it has always been so’.²⁵

Alongside Hickman, who moved from mere observation to performing in the ring, those who stay with the circus learn to regard the internal goods of relevant practices as their own goods and the circus community as their community. A half-century earlier and in another continent, Rupert-Croft Cook, one of a generation of British writers who spent time with the circus, described Charles Lawrence,

‘[a] trustworthy employee of one of the great money lending concerns which are known as the Big Five Banks, he had found in the rich and motley atmosphere of the circus an escape from the grinding monotony of the life and work which such employment imposes. Every week-end he joined the Rosaires, wherever they might be, and was a happy and living man until Monday’.²⁶

Lawrence later joined the circus on a full-time basis. One might think the circus a strange kind of utopia for a 1930’s bank clerk, a utopia of dirt, hard work, poverty, marginality, animal faeces, and stench which comprises a radical otherness—movement rather than spatial fixity, the creation of art that leaves no traces—consumed in the moment of its production, in a community of multi-generational families whose derision towards outsiders mirrors the enmity they themselves routinely experience.²⁷ On top of that is the constant risk of injury and death. Death comes with grim regularity and takes multiple forms, in the aptly named ‘wheel of death’,²⁸ from aerial falls,²⁹ falls from the high-wire,³⁰ failed somersaults,³¹ broken necks,³² being crushed by falling animals,³³

²⁵ Katie Hickman, *A Trip to the Light Fantastic: Travels with a Mexican Circus* (London: Flamingo, 1995), 16.

²⁶ Rupert Croft-Cooke, *The Circus Has No Home* (Toronto: The Falcon Press, 1941), 28.

²⁷ Mary Douglas, ‘My Circus Fieldwork’, *Semiotica* 85: 3 / 4 (1991), 201-204.

²⁸ Gerry Cottle with Helen Batten, *Confessions of a Showman: My Life in the Circus*. (London: Vision, 2005), 247.

²⁹ David McPherson, *Circus Mania* (London: Peter Owen, 2010), 23.

³⁰ Ruth Manning-Saunders, *The English Circus* (London: Werner Laurie, 1952), 268 and Cyril Bertram-Mills, *Bertram Mills Circus – 2nd Ed.* (Avon: Ashgrove Press 1983[1967]), 65.

³¹ Wall, ‘An Ordinary Acrobat’, 158.

³² *Ibid.*, 159.

³³ Pamela McGregor-Morris, *Sawdust and Spangles* (London: HF & G Witherby, 1960), 65.

and even from a juggling stick slicing the inside of an artist's neck.³⁴ Wall cites the French historian Roland Auguet's comment that: 'Circus isn't a show about death, but death is its permanent guest'.³⁵ More mundane is the constancy of physical demands of both rehearsal and performance, from travel and erecting and disassembling tents, seats, poles, and props in often muddy fields. Fr. Nick Weber, whose mission as a Catholic priest called him to run a circus from the 1960s, emphasizes the constant battle with earth:

'When I described our public workplace as "this humble ring" in the poem with which I opened so many shows, I was aware of more than the truth of what we were doing and what I had done to make it possible. Lexically, humble derives from the Latin notion of earth and soil, humus. That's why humility is associated with lowliness, as in "coming back down to earth," and remembering "where you came from." If there's one constant preoccupation for a man running an outdoor circus, its earth and soil. Rough or smooth, planted or not, soft or firm, were all attributes vital to our playing spaces. Unicycle tires, animal hooves, our own footing, what the audience would sit on, how easily and deeply our stakes could be driven, and the whether or when of automatic irrigation: these were all parts of an almost daily interface with earth'.³⁶

The result, for the average runaway, is the replacement of a fantasy: 'the circus will knock the romance out of you eventually'³⁷ but this neither necessitates regret nor occasions departure. As Gerry Cottle, who ran away to the circus as a teenager and was to become a leading circus entrepreneur, wrote of his first year in the British circus of the 1960s:

'It was the best apprenticeship I could get ... By the end of the season, just sixteen years of age, I had survived a year at the sharp end of circus life. Not only had I learned about tents and seating and the endless bits of practical knowledge about bell-rings, tow bars, stringers and generators, but I had also been taking notes about the business, recording in my diary the size of the population of places we visited and how well or badly we did there. I also got in the habit of hard

³⁴ Wall, 'An Ordinary Acrobat', 64

³⁵ Ibid., 159.

³⁶ Nick Weber. *The Circus that ran away with a Jesuit Priest* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2012), 158.

³⁷ Stroud, 'Josser', 10.

physical graft and came to accept constant physical exhaustion as a necessary part of the business'.³⁸

Despite their continuous travelling on routes that may require weekly or even daily moves,³⁹ the consistency of the work tasks, the layout of caravans, and the flow of the normal day creates routines that persist. Circus artistes are born, trained, work, raise their own families, and die in a context in which membership of the circus community provides a distinct source of identity. Ethnographers in a variety of contexts including Sweden in the 1920s,⁴⁰ England in the 1960s⁴¹ and Russia in the 2000s⁴² have noted that circus identity dominates national and other social identities in their self-understanding. The Mexican circus artiste, Yvonne, explains:

'When you are 'del circo', the circus is more important than anything. It is more important than your country – circuses can tour abroad for years at a time. More important than your family even – I haven't seen mine more than twice in the last thirteen years ... You see, the circus is not just a way of life, it is your life'.⁴³

A precondition for this mode of existence, one shared with other practice-based communities, is the central space afforded to the achievement and protection of common goods. The common good of the 'show'⁴⁴ requires relationships informed by the virtues, the courage to hold fast to burning ropes when the wind threatens to tear the tent from the ground, to spend the night digging trenches to divert rain-water, the temperateness to keep one's act to time so the warm up routines of the next act can go well, the fortitude to perform despite illness, injury, or bereavement. Writing during the second world war, Croft-Cook reports:

'Even to-day there was not one of them who would not have made any sacrifice to avoid missing his act. This spirit had little of the theatrical

³⁸ Cottle with Batten, 'Confessions of a Showman', 17.

³⁹ Martin Parker, 'Organizing the Circus: the Engineering of Miracles', *Organization Studies* 32:4 (2011), 555-569.

⁴⁰ Paul Eipper, *Circus: Men, Beasts and the Joys of the Road*, tr. F.H.Martin (London: George Routledge and Son, 1931), 7.

⁴¹ McGregor-Morris, 'Sawdust and Spangles', 12.

⁴² Mark Schreiber, *Dreams of the Solo Trapeze: Offstage with Cirque du Soleil* (Austin: Greenleaf Book Group, 2005), 257.

⁴³ Hickman, 'A Trip to the Light Fantastic', 50.

⁴⁴ Ron Beadle, 'Managerial Work in a practice-embodied institution – The role of calling, the virtue of constancy', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113: 4 (2013), 679-690.

‘the show must go on’ sentimentality about it. There was no exaggerated respect for the audience. It was just a solid and inbred determination to ‘make the show a success’, not from selfish or predatory ends, not to please an audience or to gain a reputation, but for the show’s own sake. They had the artist’s only qualification, a passionate wish to do the one thing he can do as well as possible’.⁴⁵

The dominance of the goods of both practices and the show over the pursuit of other goods could barely be clearer. The pursuit and defence of the common good of the show, and the actions, virtues and friendship this requires, have characterised travelling circus communities across generations and continents. Theirs is not the life of the active critic of capitalism but provides, as Charles Dickens intimated in ‘Hard Times’⁴⁶ as long ago as 1854, a ‘critically performative’⁴⁷ alternative to both industrial production and its utilitarian mode of practical reasoning.

On MacIntyre’s account, the distinctive politics of such local communities is predicated on a three-fold distinction between individual, public, and common goods.⁴⁸ Whilst the achievement of each of these depends on degrees of co-operation, the rationale for their pursuit differs markedly. For example, in the case of individual goods, co-operation is rational:

‘only so long as and insofar as it provides a more efficient method of achieving their individual ends than would alternative types of activity open to them’.⁴⁹

The rationale for the pursuit of public goods remains private, but involves the community in a pragmatic, instrumental manner. Public goods are those non-excludable goods ‘which individuals need if they are to function successfully in such an economy, but which they cannot provide for themselves’.⁵⁰ The rationale for the pursuit of common goods is quite

⁴⁵ Croft-Cook, ‘The Circus Has No Home’, 250.

⁴⁶ For a commentary see Richard Smith, ‘Paths of Judgment; the Revival of Practical Wisdom’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31:3 (1999), 327-340.

⁴⁷ Bernard Paraque and Hugh Willmott, ‘Cooperatives – Saviours or gravediggers of capitalism? Critical Performativity and the John Lewis Partnership’, *Organization*, 21:5 (2014), 604-625.

⁴⁸ MacIntyre, ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’, 168-9.

⁴⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good’, in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 240.

⁵⁰ MacIntyre, ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’, 68.

different. Common goods ‘are only to be enjoyed and achieved ... by individuals qua members of various groups or qua participants in various activities’.⁵¹ Such common goods are realized within practices and within:

‘a kind of community in which each individuals’ achievement of her or his own good is inseparable both from achieving the shared goods of practices and from achieving the common good of the community as a whole’.⁵²

Participation in a practice-based community requires pursuit of both the internal goods of practice, (which are expressed as the common goods of workplaces in ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’⁵³) and the common goods of the community. Where the community also includes the other primary loci in which common goods are pursued, namely those of the family and the school,⁵⁴ the pursuit of their common goods are likewise implicated. The circus literature provides significant evidence both of the pursuit of such goods and of the identification of the actor’s life narrative with these mutually supportive contexts. For example, McPherson reports the story of Svetlana and her daughter Valerie:

‘Svetlana leans forward: “People don’t realise that this is our profession. Valerie was doing very well at college, and people were asking me why she wasn’t going to university to be a lawyer or a doctor or something. They don’t understand that we’re circus people and this is what we do”’.⁵⁵

The goods whose pursuit binds circus people are also evidenced in numerous stories of displacement and return:

‘Yvonne described herself as being ‘del circo’, which meant that she too was from a circus family. When her grandmother had first married, she told me, her husband’s family had despised the circus and made her give it up. But she missed the life so much that soon she left him and married another man, a Guatemalan, who was from the same world as her, and she had gone on to found her own circus in Costa Rica’.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid., 168-9.

⁵² MacIntyre, ‘Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good’, 240.

⁵³ MacIntyre, ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’, 38 and footnote 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 168-183.

⁵⁵ David McPherson, ‘Circus Mania’, 210.

⁵⁶ Hickman, ‘A Trip to the Light Fantastic’, 50.

The required commitment to circus as such and to the particular circus show, is, if all goes well, mutually implicative, so that pursuit of the good of the show expresses both. The realisation of these goods depends on the ongoing work of management,⁵⁷ performance and labour (often but not always conducted by the same people). Since the 1830's, shows have predominantly been performed in tents, enabling circuses to find new audiences. Permanent circus buildings survive only in vacation resorts whose visitors provide fresh audiences weekly. The great circus tent, the big top itself, has provided a principal source of stories illustrating the commitment of circus members in combatting fire, extreme weather and circumstances in which depleted resources threaten the ability of the circus to erect ('build-up' in circus parlance) or disassemble ('pull down') it. Bippo, a British 21st century clown, explains:

'If the wind gets up in the night everyone has to get up to put more stakes in to hold the tent down. It's not like the artistes think: Aw, it's windy. The workers will get up and put more stakes in. Everybody's up – the girls, everybody. Not through anybody asking – through choice. We're all in this together, and the tent is the most important thing in the circus. If we don't have a tent we wouldn't be able to work. So everyone pitches in'.⁵⁸

Writing in 1961, Michael Mardon, also known as Cuthbert the Clown, reports the response to a storm:

'We all set to work, rebuilding the seating and generally restoring some semblance of order. All hands were set to stitching canvass, but the Big Top was out of action that day. There was no time for more than a cup of coffee before our first performance, which we gave in the open. That night we had our first hot meal of the day. The next morning we got the Big Top up, and the day after we went on our way'.⁵⁹

Note here, that no special virtues are claimed and no exceptional reactions attested. Bippo is expressing the conclusion of practical reasoning, and like all good practical reasoners, his reasoning results in an action rather than a conclusion; Mardon simply reports the action. The relationship

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the how management in a practice-based community might escape MacIntyre's critique of the manager see Beadle 'Managerial Work', 2013.

⁵⁸ McPherson, 'Circus Mania', 62.

⁵⁹ Michael Mardon, *A Circus Year* (London: Putnam, 1961), 185.

between the conclusion of practical reasoning and action is pivotal to MacIntyre's account of the virtues and in line with both Bippo's and Cuthbert's reports. MacIntyre argues:

'the conclusion of the reasoning is an action and not the utterance of a decision, or an expression of an intention. Indeed such an utterance or expression would be an interruption of the process of practical reasoning'.⁶⁰

Stories of such responses to calamity are numerous in the circus literature.⁶¹ One feature of these accounts is the contrast between the self-understanding of circus artistes for whom the pursuit of such common goods is unremarkable and of observers for whom such demonstrations of virtue is contrasted with the behaviour of agents in the wider social order. Observers routinely contrast the loyalty, courage and perseverance of circus artistes with the supposed indolence and individualism of conventional agents in a way that is rarely if ever found in the accounts of artistes themselves. Contrast Bippo's and Cuthbert's descriptions with that of Cyril Bertram-Mills, whose 1967 account of the loyalty of circus artistes to his father's circus has a somewhat patrician quality:

'If the whole circus has been delayed on road or rail and there is still four hours' work in which to do it the artistes' wives, the secretaries, usherettes and box office girls will all be there, carrying anything they are able to lift, and it is a job to prevent them from tackling things which are far too heavy for them. They are not there because it is part of their jobs, or even because anyone has asked them to be, but because our circus is their circus and nobody wants to be late for an opening – above all everyone is determined that a performance shall not be lost. In an age when so many people couldn't care less and when so many only want to be sure of their pay packet and don't give a cuss whether the employer loses money or his reputation, this is something of which every circus man is proud'.⁶²

Writing some 15 years earlier, the same sentiment is reported by the writer, Ruth Manning-Sanders:

⁶⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Practical Rationalities as forms of Social Structure' *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4, 5.

⁶¹ These include Cottle, 'My Life', 164., Grock, *King of Clowns*, tr. B. Creighton (London: Methuen, 1957), 211.

⁶² Bertram-Mills, 'Bertram Mills Circus', 56-57.

‘That is why Ernest Schumann, when a horse kicked his knee out of joint, told the grooms to sit on it till they pressed it back into place, and then went on with his work. That is why his daughter Marie, when her thumb was torn off by the bridle during a haute école act, performed her act again that very evening-minus her thumb. How forcibly does this circus world, in its subservience of the self to the ideal of perfection, contrast with the larger world of today, with its strikes and grievances, class hatreds, bitter graspings, and frenzied insistence on the rights and vindication of self, self, self!’⁶³

For circus people, unlike their observers, working towards common goods is reported without such acclaim. Henry Ringling-North, a member of the family that owned Ringling Brothers’ and Barnum and Baileys Circus, reports the reaction to the labour shortage occasioned by America’s entry into the First World War:

‘In the Barnum show, for example, the Kőnyöts⁶⁴ appeared six times under their own name and five times as the Spelvins. Great equestrians risked their necks riding as jockeys in the hippodrome races; and acrobats learned to walk the tightwire. Finally, because the labor shortage was even more acute-80 canvassmen instead of 250-everybody pitched in to move the show. Equestrian Director Fred Bradna would be out at 6a.m. wielding a sledge to drive stakes for the Big Top; aerialists and clowns manhandled the poles, seats, and canvass; great women stars loaded wardrobe trunks on the wagons’.⁶⁵

The pursuit of common goods extends from physical to emotional labour and examples abound in the literature. The trapeze artist Mundo learned of his father’s death moments before he was due to perform:

‘Even at that moment, one of the saddest moments in my life, all I could think about was that act. I knew it could not be done without me; I knew that the others depended on me to make it work. My father was dead, but I did not hesitate. I could not. Even though the tears were running down my face, the next moment I was out there, out in the ring as usual’.⁶⁶

⁶³ Manning-Saunders, ‘The English Circus’, 335.

⁶⁴ In the interests of disclosure it is appropriate to report that the author is a descendent of this family.

⁶⁵ Henry Ringling-North with Alden Hatch, *The Circus Kings* (Dell: New York, 1960), 147.

⁶⁶ Hickman, ‘A Trip to the Light Fantastic’, 243, John Clarke, *The Circus Parade* (London: BT Batsford, 1936), 48; Manning-Sanders, ‘The English Circus’, 305; and Mardon, ‘A Circus Year’, 191; for further examples.

Pursuit of common goods is not restricted to such dramatic occasions. A central theme of 'Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity' is the relationship between the achievement of the common goods of the family, school, workplace, and political community. The travelling circus is home to each of these and thus provides a context in which we might consider MacIntyre's contentions as to the relationship between the achievement of such goods and the directedness of agents' desires.

The transformation of desires that may be accomplished through participation in practices requires that teachers connect achievement at the level of practice with achievement of those personal and communal goods on which practices depend. In 1994, responding to a critic, MacIntyre argued that qualities could only be characterised as virtues if they served the achievement of not only of the goods internal to practices, but also of those of agents' lives as well as those of communities.⁶⁷ Recognition of the relationship between such goods is built in to circus training, especially necessary for those who have run away to join it.

'Circus Harmony', a circus arts based programme in St Louis, USA⁶⁸ boasts a remarkable record, both for training socially excluded youth and for its work with partners seeking to bridge the divide between Israeli and Palestinian young people.⁶⁹ Its training is both an introduction to circus practices (acrobatics, juggling, clowning, and the like) and to the wider requirements of participation in their practice-based community. Levenson illustrates dimensions of the relationship between commitment to the goods of practices and practice-based communities by recounting the training provide to the acrobat Sidney Iking Bateman ('Iking') by his trainer, Tom.

'On some days Tom gave Iking surprising assignments. Iking would come to the circus expecting to practice pikes for his audition but Tom would make him sweep the bleachers or paint the pillars instead. "How's that going to help me?" Iking asked him. "It's going to help you respect your space," Tom answered, "because it looks nice, respect

⁶⁷ MacIntyre, 'A partial response', 284.

⁶⁸ See <http://circusharmony.org/about/>; [Accessed 27 August 2017]

⁶⁹ Cynthia Levinson, *Watch out for Flying Kids: How Two Circuses, Two Countries, and Nine Kids Confront Conflict and Build Community* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 2015).

your discipline.” He added, “Circus skills are just one part of it. You have to have respect for the show, respect for everything you do”.⁷⁰

The results, for Sidney Iking Bateman, though not described in the idiom of the virtues, are striking for their coherence with MacIntyre’s account of desire transformation through participation in practices. Levinson continues her description:

‘Iking became accustomed to arriving hours ahead of class time to clean-not to check off compulsory chores but to carry out self-imposed responsibilities. After he was satisfied that he’d done a good job, he trained. He made gruelling physical and mental demands of himself and determined to meet them. Over time, the combination and the intensity of these activities had an impact on Iking: “I changed the way I look at life because of the audition. Before this audition, I did not respect the circus as much. I didn’t care about things as much”’.⁷¹

Having illustrated the pursuit of the goods internal to practices and the common goods of the show, I now consider the claim that circus can exemplify the type of practice-based community to which MacIntyre points and here we must begin by noting that in respect of its ideological representation, its self-understanding and its political activity, the record varies.⁷² Practice-based communities are always potentialities whose instantiation requires particular institutional and communal forms⁷³; so with MacIntyre’s oft-cited fishing examples and so with circus.

The circus has both been represented as a space in which achievement and scale are exemplified and thus as embodying a peculiarly American individualist aesthetic⁷⁴ and as an exemplar of a collectivist ethos in both

⁷⁰ Cynthia Levinson, *Watch out for Flying Kids: How Two Circuses, Two Countries, and Nine Kids Confront Conflict and Build Community* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 2015), 153.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 153-4. Bateman is now an internationally renowned circus artist. See http://www.stlamerican.com/entertainment/living_it/full-circle-for-iking-bateman-at-circus-flora/article_5d7ebf9e-4669-11e7-8f7e-7b02715d709e.html [Accessed 26 April 2018].

⁷² The record of circuses in Nazi Germany for example includes both those who supported and encouraged the removal of Jewish competition and those who protected Jewish artists during the holocaust. Maria and Adolf Althoff are recognized amongst the ‘Righteous of the Nations’ by the State of Israel. See Marline Otte, *Jewish identities in German Popular Entertainment 1890-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) esp. 115-116.

⁷³ Geoff Moore and Ron Beadle, ‘In search of organisational virtue in business: agents, goods, practices, institutions and environments’, *Organization Studies* 27: 3 (2006), 369-389.

⁷⁴ See for example Earl Chapin May, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* (New York: Duffield and Green, 1932) in which it is claimed that circus could only achieve ‘stature and magnificence’ under American leadership (v) and that maintaining a small show ‘did not mean progress, did not fit the American scheme’ (166).

the state circuses of the Soviet Union and a number of contemporary circus companies.⁷⁵ Such representations echo those of a wider political culture in which individualism and collectivism are regarded as the only available alternatives. At the level of political engagement and action the record of circus elites is equally conventional with industry associations reacting to the contemporary threats to circuses with animals alongside the desire for state recognition and funding; by creating the European Circus Manifesto in 2016.⁷⁶

By contrast are a small number of circuses whose self-understanding includes an overtly political dimension and who engage in participative deliberation about the pursuit of goods. Of the latter, Croft-Cook reports of the Rosaire family circus in the 1930s that:

‘This democratic system was both the strength and weakness on Rosaire’s Circus, as it has been of the country which has produced it. For any innovation there was free discussion, and since it was among people who were by nature uncompromising and downright, it was sometimes pretty emphatic. But out of it the idea formed, the change came or did not come, and the results were generally for the best’.⁷⁷

Overtly political circus communities have include Father Jesus Silva’s circus designed to provide opportunities for destitute boys in Franco’s Spain,⁷⁸ Australia’s radical feminist Circus Oz⁷⁹ and the French Les Arts Sauts, established as a ‘pure collective’ in which:

‘Every member – the cooks, the performers, the crew, contributed equally to its finances and had an equal voice in company operations’.⁸⁰

The overtly political circus companies are notable for maintaining permanent membership and thereby resisting a central feature of commercial circus operations in which artistes are replaced on a time scale

⁷⁵ Paul Bouissac, *Circus As Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual*, (London: Bloomsbury 2013) 180-181; Hammerston, *Inside the Changing Circus*, 221; Wall, ‘An Ordinary Acrobat’, 33-34, 105-6.

⁷⁶ See <http://circusmanifesto.eu/> Accessed February 17, 2017.

⁷⁷ Croft-Cook, ‘The Circus Has No Home’, 71.

⁷⁸ Lavers, ‘The Resilient Body’, 510-513; Bouissac, ‘Circus as a Multimodal Discourse’, 194-5.

⁷⁹ Peta Tait, ‘Risk, danger and other paradoxes in circus and in Circus Oz parody’ In *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, eds. Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 528-543., Jane Mullett, *Acts of Conscience*. (Paper presented to: Australian Circus and Physical Theater Conference, University of Wollangong 2006) Available at <http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/circus/Acts%20of%20Conscience.pdf> [Accessed 26 April 2018].

⁸⁰ Wall, ‘An Ordinary Acrobat’, 166.

that aligns with their tours so that the circus can claim novelty (which is widely regarded as critical to repeat custom) with each return to a location and an audience. Instead of this, permanent companies will create new shows collectively so that the novelty is provided by the performance rather than by new performers. Such is their prioritization of common over individual (and in this case external) goods that when invited to franchise their show, Les Arts Sauts responded firmly:

“He wanted us to stay a year,” Laurence told me. He would leave the company creative control, but reproduce the existing show into multiple companies, to tour simultaneously. But Les Arts Sauts refused. “We told him to fuck off” was how Frank, the catcher, put it. “We’re not going to sell out to the Anglo-Saxon system”⁸¹

MacIntyre argues for a politics of self-defence for local political communities when dealing with the agents of the state and the market. His contrast between the rationalities, directedness, goods pursued, and the virtues understood by each is manifest in the above example:

‘The values of state and market are not only different from, but on many types of occasion incompatible with, the values of such local community. For the former, decision-making is arrived at by a summing of preferences and by a series of trade-offs, in which whose preferences are summed and what is traded off against what depends on the political and economic bargaining power of the representatives of contending interests. For the latter, a shared understanding of the common good of the relevant type of activity or sets of activities provides a standard independent of preferences and interests, one by reference to which individual preferences and group interests are to be evaluated. For the former there is no consideration that may not under certain circumstances be outweighed by some other consideration. For the latter there are conclusive considerations, those that refer us to goods that cannot be sacrificed or foregone without rendering the activity in which the community is engaged pointless. For the former, a gift for flexibility and compromise, for knowing when and how to exchange one set of principles for another, is accounted a central political virtue. For the latter, a certain moral intransigence of a kind that is apt to prevent success in the larger worlds of the state and the market economy is accounted among the political virtues’⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., 270.

⁸² MacIntyre, ‘Selected Essays’, 212-213.

This essay has sought to demonstrate that MacIntyre was not being flippant in his example of the damage done to agent whose false beliefs about her skills prevent her from becoming a trapeze artist. Had she tested that belief, as circus artistes are daily tested in rehearsals and the ring, a more adequate sense of her own potential and therefore of her available options, would have emerged.

Should a circus life have been possible to her, she would have entered a practice which would have tested her virtues and required their development. In addressing such challenges she would make her own contribution to a narrative history through which trapeze artists understand and extend their own practice. This is a history of frustration as well as success, of both literal and conceptual leaps through which new artistic possibilities and standards of excellence have emerged and which have provided a wide array of performance possibilities. In becoming a trapeze artiste, she would become a ‘co-author’⁸³ of this wider narrative. But she would not only have taken up a practice; by ‘running away’ to the Circus she would also have joined a community.

As a member of that community, and possibly of Les Arts Sauts, she might also have discovered the relationship between the goods of her own performance and those of a troupe and a wider circus community, whose own histories and goods are mutually presupposed by those of her own practice, both conceptually (no circus, no performance) and materially, as we have seen. Her participation in the pursuit of the goods of this wider community could have led her, as I have attempted to show it having led others, to understanding their lives as being unintelligible outside of those structures of mutual dependence, support, achievement, and deliberation that characterize the circus at its best.

MacIntyre does not engage in unintentional flippancy. Rather his remark about a trapeze artist reflects his acknowledgment of the potential of the traditional travelling circus to be the kind of practice-based community in which the coherence of one’s life and the development of one’s virtues are vested in the ability to engage in practical rationality in pursuit of common goods. MacIntyre is not the first to have understood

⁸³ MacIntyre, ‘After Virtue’, 213.

that the circus provides such an environment. Butch Reynolds, who ran away to become a circus clown in the 1920s, contrasted the features of small scale circuses to those of larger organizations, including larger institutionalized forms of circus, and reflected that:

‘There seems to be something stultifying about mere size, and human beings seem to be at their best in the smaller units: the Greek City State, the English country village, the little family business, the small tenting circus were all good forcing grounds for the interesting and curious flowers of human personality. The mammoth modern circuses seem to have lost this virtue and to 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.’⁸⁴

What then of us? Does this extended example of the circus offer resources from which we can learn, alongside those of the Danish fishing communities and Brazilian favelas provided by MacIntyre in ‘Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity’.⁸⁵ I suggest five generic lessons that might be drawn from this example.

The first is that despite both the ‘nostalgia’ and ‘pessimism’ critiques⁸⁶ which accuse MacIntyre’s work as lauding pre-modern social forms that can never return, the circus furnishes a contemporary example of a sustainable form of life in a practice-based community. The fact that this is a community with a long history and ongoing traditions should not surprise MacIntyre’s readers, nor should its scale and nor should its institutionalization in a variety of forms which are more and less coherent in their pursuit of common goods. Nevertheless, despite the small scale of its units and though no authoritative data has been collected, estimates suggest that there are somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 circus artists across Europe,⁸⁷ and if the foregoing account is correct, they and their counterparts elsewhere at least have an opportunity to live morally

⁸⁴ Butch Reynolds, *Broken Hearted Clown* (London: Arco Publications, 1954), 197.

⁸⁵ MacIntyre, ‘Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity’, 176-183.

⁸⁶ Christopher Lutz, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue* (London: Continuum, 2012), 179-181.

⁸⁷ See <http://circusmanifesto.eu/> Accessed February 17, 2017.

integrated lives in a way denied to the vast majority of their contemporaries.

Second, the very absurdity of the notion that the circus might provide a moral exemplar⁸⁸ should encourage readers to consider whether other, perhaps similarly marginal modes of living, might warrant attention.⁸⁹ Third, this paper shows how that narrative accounts might illustrate reasoning about and towards goods within a practice-based community. MacIntyre argues that a notable feature of the compartmentalization of the contemporary social order is its neglect of storytelling and that this is in striking contrast to cultures in which listening to stories is considered critical to the development of an adequate self-understanding.⁹⁰ Whilst the stories recounted here are excerpts from wider narratives, the communities they illustrate are marked by storytelling.⁹¹

Fourth, these stories will rarely, if ever, involve the identification of virtues or self-approbation beyond the achievement of specific goods internal to relevant practices. As we have seen in the contrast between narratives of circus artistes and their observers, the virtues of those within the practice-based community are far more likely to be recognized by the latter, who cannot but notice the contrast between the rationalities of these alternative moral, social and political orders. Some of them run away to join the communities they find.

Finally, whilst there is now a significant literature on MacIntyre's notion of practices⁹² and the tensions between practices and institutions⁹³ this paper is the first to illustrate characteristics indicative of the type of practice-based community to which MacIntyreans might give their allegiance; readers are invited to take up the challenge of finding others.

⁸⁸ When an earlier version of this paper was presented at the 11th conference of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry, one attendee confessed to me that before he heard the paper, he thought it was a joke.

⁸⁹ I owe this point to one of this paper's reviewers. I thank both of them and the editors of this Special Issue for their attention and for the suggestions which have significantly enhanced this paper. Errors, are of course, mine.

⁹⁰ MacIntyre, 'Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity', 236-238.

⁹¹ See for example Croft-Cook, 'The Circus Has No Home', 137-146.

⁹² Sinnicks, 'Moral Education at Work'.

⁹³ Ron Beadle 'MacIntyre's Influence in Business Ethics', in Sison, A., Fontrondona, J and G. Beabout. (Eds.) *Handbook of Virtue Ethics in Business* (New York: Springer, 2016), 59-67.

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