

## The Language of Virtue: What can we learn from early journalism codes of ethics?

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“To describe a language is to describe a way of life.” -- *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

“What I am... is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present in some degree in my present.” -- *Alasdair MacIntyre*

The 1920s was a watershed decade for American press ethics. Journalism had been under fire since the turn of the century, for although the “Yellow Journalism” of the 1890s had passed, sensationalism was still bread and butter as journalists sought more readers. What was needed, many argued, was a press with “high moral integrity”. It would not be easy.

The culprit, many thought, was propaganda. The massive campaign mounted as the United States entered World War I in 1917 seemed an impregnable barrier to truthful reporting and a harbinger of the emerging field’s persuasive power. By the war’s end, the public was beginning to view even news as potentially propaganda, aided by the rise of public relations as a champion of business and industry. By the early 1920s, states were enacting privacy laws to hinder over-eager reporters. Other laws sought to prevent dishonest advertising (proliferate in newspapers). Some states and their press associations even suggested the licensing of journalists (Keeler, Brown & Tarpley, 2002, p.49; Cronin & McPherson, 1992, note 7). The practice of journalism desperately needed to become the profession of journalism.

Strides had been made in the late 19th century as professional associations, professional publications, and specialised “beats” emerged. However, these weren’t enough to shield journalism from some of its most serious critics -- journalists themselves. Insiders such as Walter Lippmann and Will Irwin decried reporters lack of training, their laxity in fact finding, and recurring sensationalism in even the most respected newspapers. The movement toward professionalism had apparently stalled. Ironically, at roughly the same time, the earliest schools of journalism began to appear in the United States, signifying an academic (thus, more professional) approach to the practice. The University of Missouri was the first, in 1908, followed by Columbia University in 1912, and the University of Oregon in 1916. The impetus toward professionalism was being renewed and lent new credibility through association with higher education even as it was under attack for unprofessional conduct.

Short of licensing, ethics codes are often considered a first step from practice to profession. (McLeod & Howley, 1964; Wilensky, 1964). Although ethics codes, or at least guidelines, had been around since the middle of the 19th century (Dicken-Garcia, 1989; Banning, 1999), It wasn’t until the 20th century that they

took full form. In 1910, the Kansas Editorial Association approved the earliest code of ethics adopted by journalist's association (Crawford, 1924).

Following the Kansas adoption, a spate of ethics codes appeared: Missouri and Texas in 1921, South Dakota and Oregon in 1922, Massachusetts and Washington in 1923, and Iowa and New Jersey in 1924 (Cronin & McPherson, 1992). By 1930, thirteen state ethics codes had been adopted. Notably, in 1923, the first national code of ethics was adopted by the newly formed American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). And, by 1926, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), which had been formed in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi (SDX), had officially adopted the ASNE code, which remained intact until it was rewritten specifically for SPJ in 1973. These early codes reflected a traditional libertarian press theory, stressing truth telling and public service. Most dealt with advertising, especially ads masquerading as news, and excessive editorializing within a potential conflict of interest (Keeler, Brown & Tarpley, p. 49). Because most of these codes followed closely on the heels of World War I, they also tended to deal with propaganda and the burgeoning influence of public relations. Seen from the hindsight of the 1960s, they often seemed "quaint" and "Victorian" in both their writing style and the sentiments they portrayed. (Weigle & Clark, p. 44).

But, are they really? Are they too time bound, too archaic, a bit too Victorian, a bit too naïve? Can anything valuable can be drawn today, almost 100 years later, from the language and conventions of early 20th century journalism codes? Moral ideas are constructed by language itself. But, as language changes, does the morality it refers to also change? As Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observed, it is exactly at the level of language that the moral inadequacies and corruptions of our own age are most evident (Hauerwas, 2007, p. 4).

MacIntyre is most notable for resurrecting the notion of virtue (as described by Aristotle) as a tool for reuniting moral language with moral acts -- in the form of historical narrative embodied in a moral tradition. In *After Virtue* (1984) he proposes that "the forms of practical rationality that guide ethical decision making are intimately linked to the various moral traditions from which they spring" (Lambeth, 1990, p. 76). Humans, MacIntyre says, are natural story tellers, and seek to pass on the "truth" -- as it relates to their lives and roles -- via their narratives. As Donahue (1990) points out, "An ethics of narrative provides a way in which the norms and principles that constitute a moral tradition can derive their substance and meaning. Stories make principles come alive" (p. 233).

To use narrative in ethical decision-making means to locate moral choices within the context of a 'unified life story.' It is to try to assess in what ways a particular choice is connected to the developing story, to show how a choice 'flows out of' or 'fits into' the history of a person or community (p. 239).

MacIntyre suggests that "the concepts distinctive of a particular historically embedded moral system are embodied in and draw meaning from particular forms of social practice. Practices in turn find their meanings and their developments in an on-going narrative of stability and transformation within the history of a particular society. It is precisely the process of handing on these practices and narratives that constitutes a tradition" (Cain, 1007, p. 10). These practices and narratives are tied by that tradition to the past, yet with an obligation to the future to

continue to provide excellence so that the tradition will be passed on in “good order to those who will practice it in the future” (Clayton, 2005). As Slingerland (2001) notes, “Being initiated into a social practice requires accepting the authority of the teacher, as well as the standards of excellence handed down by the practice tradition” (p. 106).

The narrative integral to the passing on of tradition is composed of words, and words should relate directly to the concepts that they seek to describe, embodied in the tradition of which they are a part. MacIntyre’s linking of moral traditions, moral language, and social practice are particularly relevant to the “practice” of journalism. Many of the journalism codes of the early 20th century used moral language in a way that bore an actual relationship to the beliefs of their creators and to the normative guidelines those beliefs engendered. I argue that today this is no longer true. My premise is that the relationship between belief, language, and action can and should be revitalized. What we might take as out-of-date may still inform our modern age in which we have lost contact with what is morally important in journalism -- as reflected then and now in its codes.

Using several codes from the early 20th century, and applying a MacIntyrean analysis, I will attempt to determine whether the reaction to the world in which these journalists lived, as presented within their codes, can provide us with a more common-sense, simpler, and perhaps more elegant approach to the ethics of modern journalistic practices. At the same time, I will highlight a resurgence of both Aristotelian and MacIntyrean concepts newly applied to journalism today -- a resurgence that resonates surprisingly with one code in particular from nearly 100 years ago.

### **MacIntyre’s project**

Aristotle’s virtues are community-centered; they contribute to the betterment of society, not just the individual. However, it is within the virtuous actor that morality lies, not in the action itself or the output produced by the actor. A person who acts virtuously while producing a product, will produce a good product. The Aristotelian tradition aligned the virtues with the practical and moral excellence produced within a society, the ultimate goal of which is “human flourishing” (eudemonia). This is the telos (end) to which all humans should subscribe, and it is this telos that MacIntyre says is missing from the world we now live in.

Teleology is the belief that final causes (goals, purposes) exist not only in nature, but also in human beings. Humans have, or should have, a goal, which is to flourish through the development of a good character, leading to good action. According to MacIntyre, the philosophers of the Enlightenment rejected Aristotle’s teleological explanation for human behaviour and substituted approaches privileging either vaguely specified ends with varying outcomes (utilitarianism) or human intuition guided by intent and an innate sense of obligation, resulting in unalterable rules (deontology). He sees the current state of morality in disarray because humans lack a clear sense of what they should aspire to, which is to be good -- not “happy”, not self-sufficient, not self-indulged -- but good within the framework of a society whose members share the goal and benefit of virtuous action. MacIntyre also holds that by rejecting Aristotle’s teleology, we also reject any context in

which moral language equals factual language. For example, “good” has an agreed-upon meaning.

MacIntyre suggests that Aristotle’s belief in a telos common to human endeavour led to a formulation of language as part of the carrier of moral understanding. Thus, the language that has come down to us as a descriptor of moral action is that which describes the path that leads to achieving that telos. So, “good” becomes a designation of effectiveness in carrying out a task, or fulfilling a purpose, leading to a goal. How effectively that purpose is realized will determine the “goodness” or “badness” of the act, and the person’s character. Moral language, thus, has a direct connection to moral action. MacIntyre believes that modernity, and specifically Enlightenment philosophy, has severed the link between the language used to describe morality and the moral act itself.

Starting from his premise that morality has lost any grounding -- and is based not on reason but on “shrill” disagreements that can never be settled -- MacIntyre attempts to rebuild, from an Aristotelian platform, a social concept that ties telos to virtuous action through practices, links life to a narrative order that includes practices, and links that narrative order to a moral tradition that can be passed on.

### ***Virtues, practices, and traditions***

As MacIntyre notes, any area of human endeavour, such as professions, in which standards of excellence guide the production of societal goods is an “appropriate locus for the exercise of the virtues, and the virtues are those qualities that allow practitioners to excel in their roles” (Levy, 2004, p. 111). He calls these endeavours “practices”.

According to MacIntyre, a practice is a unique environment in which people may apply their virtues to their work, and by so doing, help establish and further standards of excellence within that practice. As part of this pursuit of excellence, the activity must produce both “internal goods” and “external goods”. Internal goods are those produced through excellent performance resulting in an excellent product, one that serves not only the practice, but also the community as a whole. External goods are those such as money, power, and fame, the acquisition of which by an individual or a practice is self-serving, and often runs counter or even interferes with the production of internal goods.

Values that drive excellence often proceed from virtues or character. For example, a belief in truth telling derives from the virtue of honesty (i.e., having an honest character). The employment of values such as these within a practice results in excellence of internal goods. In turn, MacIntyre’s definition of a virtue stems from his definition of a practice. 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” (p. 191). He identifies three basic virtues that are common to most endeavours.

- justice, which demands that we recognize the skills, knowledge, and expertise of other practitioners, and that we learn from those who know more and have greater experience than we do;
- courage, which requires that we take self-endangering risks, push ourselves to the limits of our capacities, and be prepared to challenge existing practice

in the interest of extending the practice, despite institutional pressures against such critique;

- honesty, which asks us to be able to accept criticism and to learn from our errors and mistakes (MacIntyre, 1984).

Justice, especially, points out the Aristotelian focus on learning from our predecessors. These virtues and resulting standards of excellence are thus passed on via the language of historical narrative.

### ***The practice and virtues of journalism***

Although MacIntyre's examples of practices are limited, several scholars have noted that journalism has the potential to fit rather neatly into this category. In 1987, Klaidman & Beauchamp coined the phrase the "virtuous journalist". Lambeth (1990, 1992) also explored the application of MacIntyre's ideas to journalism, identifying its internal goods as: serving the public interest, fairness, clear, vivid, and precise prose, keeping the reader squarely in mind, and preserving First Amendment rights to free expression. These goods, he says, "derive from the heart of the practice of journalism", benefiting both society and the practice (Lambeth, 1992, p. 73).

The journalistic virtues required for excellence in the practice are listed by Lambeth (1992) as what he calls "principles": truth telling, humaneness, justice, freedom and stewardship of free expression (p. 80). In a more recent, in-depth study of MacIntyre's approach, Borden (2007, p. 80) lists the following journalistic virtues and their functions:

- Courage and ingenuity: Defending against corruption by external goods.
- Stewardship: Sustaining institutional bearers of the practice.
- Justice, courage, honesty (MacIntyre's key virtues): Maintaining relationships needed to achieve practice's goals through a discipline of verification.
- Integrity, sense of legacy: Preserving practice's link to tradition.
- Accountability, modesty: Supporting practice's regenerative capabilities through a discipline of confirmation.

She cautions, however, that "it is not just that individual virtues are necessary to achieve the practice's internal goods; they also make possible the conditions that enable practices themselves to flourish" (p. 80).

For others, the key benefit of virtue ethics as it applies to the practice of journalism is that it supports democracy.<sup>1</sup> As Cohen (2002) says:

Within a democracy, the virtues of journalists include character traits that are conducive to the stated end of journalistic practice . . . [T]hese character traits can be defined as habits or dispositions to act in manners that advance the end of a democratic press. These habits involve dedication to principles of conduct that follow from the journalistic end of serving democracy. Insofar as this end is a moral end, these virtues and their corresponding principles are also moral (p. 268).

Cohen suggests that virtues such as responsibility, loyalty, fairness, impartiality, honesty and courage in reporting news are all part of "what it means to be a competent journalist" (p. 269).

Quinn (2007) proposes that ethical decisions are best made when internally derived (as from the elements of good character) rather than externally derived (as from rules or guidelines) (p. 172). Following Aristotle, Quinn suggests that character is best provided by education and life experience.

Quinn also suggests that journalists develop an ideal “standard by which one ought to judge one’s actions both in a general sense -- what it is to be a good journalist -- or in a particular circumstance, how ought a journalist to act in this situation, right now” (p. 172). This requires internalizing a standard of conduct and a conception of excellence by which to guide one’s motivations and judge one’s own actions. Quinn says that the process of developing this internalized standard allows journalists to bolster certain key virtues, such as justice and integrity, while continually testing and adjusting their actions. The novice may require constant comparison of the ideal against the impulse. The seasoned journalist, on the other hand, may have reached a point of character development in which the right action has become second nature. This is completely in line with Aristotle’s notion that the “golden mean” is always the obvious choice.

The question that this raises, however, is: If character ought to be the focus of action, and is derived, at least in part, from tradition, then why do we need a code of ethics at all? Why not rely simply on tradition and the historical narrative by which it is passed on?

### **The relationship of codes to character**

One of the strongest reasons for belonging to a profession is that certain behaviours, peculiar to that occupation, are spelled out and either encouraged or discouraged by its code. For many, a formal code of ethics provides a first line of defence against proposed unethical actions. It is a reference point for the profession as a whole and a sounding board against which to test options for action. Ethicist Richard Johannesen (1996) states, “For some people, formal codes are a necessary mark of a true profession”. He offers a list of how professional codes function as useful guidelines for practitioners, among them that “Codes should be seen as having a function not just of serving as rules of behavior, but primarily as establishing expectations for character. In other words, codes reflect a wide range of character traits necessary for someone to be a professional” (Johannesen, 2002) p. 184).

This last point is extremely instructional if we are to understand why something normally expected to be rule-bound can also serve a different function. Johannesen (1988) points out that a code should declare the moral bases on which it is founded, and strongly suggests that codes should be seen as having a function not just of serving as rules of behaviour, but primarily as establishing expectations for character -- to depict the ideal character of the professional for whom the code is written. In the words of Karen Lebacqz (1985), a “professional is called not simply to do something but to be something” (p. 71). This goes beyond the common view of a code as simply a set of guidelines for professionals to follow. This speaks directly to character.

Lebacqz cites several key virtues, or character traits, that go to the core of what professionals value most: justice, beneficence, non-injury, honesty, and fidelity. These are not always stated directly in codes, but rather appear in code

provisions that, in essence, paint a picture of the professional as a person of moral character (p. 68). In fact, she points out that that such codes describe the virtuous professional as one “bound by certain ethical principles and as incorporating those principles into his or her very character” (p. 70). Ultimately, “when we act, we not only do something, we also shape our own character.... And so each choice about what to do is also a choice about whom to be -- or more accurately, whom to become” (p. 83).

### **Comparing codes and their use of moral language**

Scholarly research into early press codes has been somewhat spotty, but on the rise since the 1980s. Dicken-Garcia’s 1989 book explored 19th century precursors to 20th century codes. the 1980s. Dicken-Garcia’s 1989 book explored 19th century precursors to 20th century codes. Cronin & McPherson (1992) covered the early 20th century codes in a detailed comparison. Most recently, Wilkins & Brennan (2004) contrast two codes from the early part of the 20th century with a modern code from *The New York Times*. They view journalism codes of ethics from a cultural materialist perspective, noting that, as such, they may be seen as “cultural practices existing within an ongoing social process” (p. 298).

Ethics codes are explicit forms of practical communication created in a historically specific society and produced under particular social, economic, and political conditions (p. 298).

They draw from this perspective the suggestion that what is found missing in codes (especially when compared across time) “provides insights into the larger issues associated with the incorporation of specific journalistic ethics codes” (p.298). Although they recognize the shifting social landscape as being an active change agent in the type of responses evident in codes over time, they also point out that codes are “within the domain of ethics and moral philosophy”, which allows them to “articulate both a set of rules for ‘normal journalistic practice’ as well as an inspiration to the highest ideals in the profession” (p. 302).

The study supports their thesis that time, ideology, and social-political-economic pressures dictate the focus of the codes. They point out that the early codes reflect “an era of classical realism, in which texts are thought to represent the truth non-problematically” (p.208). Importantly, they also suggest that such ideals as public trust, history and culture may, in today’s environment, succumb to the reality of economic competition. Their study highlights the problems that those involved in a practice such as journalism encounter when the acquisition of external goods overrides the production of internal goods. As MacIntyre (1984) warns:

The cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues and become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition. We would therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might first suffer attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound. (p. 196).

Lambeth (1992, p. 19) lists such external goods as wealth, fame, prestige, and position -- the pursuit of which “can corrupt practices such as journalism”. Or, as Aucoin (1993) says, “if the making of profit is recognized as a mark of excellence in a practice such as journalism, there would be incongruity between the standard of excellence and the internal values of the activity, which would include such things as telling the whole story, providing a representative view of society and telling the truth” (p. 19.)

It is interesting to note that a piece in the *St. Louis Journalism Review* (2004) featuring the Wilkins & Brennen study was titled, “Evolving ethics may be eroding journalism”. One of the authors of the study is quoted as saying, “If the recent Jayson Blair incident is any indication, management’s financial concerns -- as articulated in the [New York Times] ethics code -- have their parallels in real life. The emphasis reveals something central about the profession: concerns about financial profitability do remain on an equal footing with journalistic duty and service”. The Review’s piece also notes that “Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass may thus be the result of an evolving marketplace that has largely bypassed journalism’s early traditions” [emphasis added].

These “early traditions” were themselves the product of a narrative that had existed at the turn of the 20th century and before (Dicken-Garcia, 1989). Those precursors to the codes of the 1920s had laid the moral groundwork with phrases which, though fraught with Victorian sensibilities, nonetheless spoke the language of character. “The newspaper should be a gentleman”, Will Irwin wrote in 1911 (Weigle & Clark, p. 44).

Locating language in time tells us something about that time and the people who spoke those words, but as Brewer (2007) observed,

[W]ords tend to change in meaning as time passes. This need not matter if words have an arbitrary relationship with the things or concepts to which they refer, for in this case change in language can be seen as a form of natural development (or even progress). But if words are linked, for example by their etymology, to some fixed and independent meaning, then the more words diverge from their original form, the more corrupt... language becomes. (Brewer, 2007).

It is my thesis that the words used to describe morality, especially in early codes of ethics, did relate to a “fixed and independent meaning”, and that those same words, and the sentiments they portray, have diverged so far from their original meaning that the moral standing of modern codes has become corrupted.

### ***What’s in a word?***

A recent study by Kesebir & Kesebir (2012) tracked the appearance of words related to moral character and virtue in American books from 1901 to 2000. The results show a drastic decline in the use of such concepts as decency, dignity, morality, and virtue. In addition, words denoting virtues (honesty, honor, kindness, courage, mercy, etc.) also significantly declined throughout the 20th century. They conclude that, “in keeping with the larger trends in the moral landscape of the United States... the attention paid to concepts of moral character and virtue has declined over the course of the twentieth century” (p. 12). The authors noted, “People simply do not think/talk/write about morality and virtue as much any-

more. The vocabulary for talking about issues of good and bad, right and wrong thus seems to be shrinking” (Doll, 2012).

[M]oral values and virtues require a supportive sociocultural environment to flourish.... A lexicon of morality and virtue concepts is an integral part of this supportive structure, and its fading from public arena may thus inflict personal and societal costs.... We believe that a virtue-salient culture would provide a more fertile ground for individual and societal flourishing than one where concepts of moral excellence are at the fringes of public conversation (Kesebir & Kesebir, p. 14).

Most of the codes developed in the 1920s included broad stroke preambles followed by more specific advice on how to accomplish the traditional goals of journalism. The typical approach at the time included paeans to journalism's watchdog role, its growing professionalism, as a purveyor of strict editorial standards, a bringer of truth, and an independent voice free from the pressures of advertisers and others. Importantly, they varied in philosophical grounding and in the language they used to present their cause. “Some of the codes [from this era] are long and utilitarian, others short, grandiloquent and vague, with most combining both flowery language and practical direction” (Cronin & McPherson, 1992, pp. 357-358). Among those that consistently cite the virtues of both journalism and journalists are the South Dakota Code (1922), The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) code (1923), and, especially, the Oregon code (1922).

### **The Oregon journalism code**

On January 14, 1922, a Code of Ethics for Journalism was adopted unanimously by the Oregon State Editorial Association (OSEA) at its annual convention (Crawford, 1924, pp. 187-194). It was written by Colin V. Dymont, a faculty member in the School of Journalism and Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Oregon. Dymont had worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for a number of years, and it was the combination of practical experience and a scholarly mind that led to his appointment to the Oregon faculty in 1913. The head of the department, later dean of the School, Eric Allen, was himself a graduate in philosophy. He and Dymont were of accord in believing in a strong, liberal arts education for young journalists-to-be, and a solid, philosophical foundation in ethics (Turnbull, 1965, pp. 17-25). According to Cronin & McPherson (1992), journalism professors such as Dymont and Allen were in the forefront of the campaign for ethics codes. “Professors served as the trade's conscience, exhorting journalists to follow the lead of lawyers and doctors by heightening the requirements for admission to practice journalism as well as encouraging the adoption of codes of ethics” (p. 356).

Dymont was commissioned by the OSEA convention “to take charge of drawing up a code which should lay the emphasis not upon such matters as the maintenance of rates, etc., but upon the ethical relation of the newspaper to the public” (Allen, 1922, p. 177). Importantly, Allen noted that the code was “chary of either prescribing or condemning concrete practices”, recognizing that practices would often differ, because individual editors would apply the principles differently (p. 178). Allen and Dymont both realized that “Beyond the making clear of causes and results, ethics, as a science, does not go. From that point good will and clean

intent must take hold; if these do not exist society is in a parlous state” (p. 176). In the foreword to the volume from which Allen is quoted here (devoted entirely to professional ethics), R.M. MacIver, a professor of political economy, echoed Allen’s sentiments -- and Aristotle’s.

Ethics cannot be summed up into a series of inviolate rules or commandments which can be applied everywhere and always without regard of circumstances, thought of consequences, or comprehension of the ends to be attained. What is universal is the good in view, and ethical rules are but the generally approved ways of preserving it. The rules may clash with one another, and then the only way out is to look for guidance to the ideal (MacIver, 1922, p. 8).

This belief is also emphasized more recently by Klaidman & Beauchamp (1987) when they note that, “By cultivating moral virtues, doing what is right... can become a matter of course rather than a conflicted debate over how to interpret rules whose meaning and application may be less than clear (p. 19).

### ***Virtue versus rules***

What makes the Oregon code important is its focus on the Aristotelian idea of a telos for journalism. Allen (1922) saw the code as at “minimum the best practices of the profession, and as the optimum the state of perfect knowledge, perfect good will and perfect courage”. He stressed the Aristotelian ideal of a morally mature person capable of using both learned education and life experience to make moral decisions.

The editor’s belief as to what constitutes ‘public and social interest’ can be affected only by the gradual moralization and rationalization of all society, by education of the young newspapermen and by logical criticism. For his informed judgment no written rule can be substituted (p. 176).

The Preamble to the Oregon code opens with a quote from Aristotle, reflecting the scholarly depth and interests of its author: “Not only all arts and sciences but all actions directed by choice aim at some good.” As Johannesen suggested, a code should declare the moral bases on which it is founded (1988). The Oregon preamble is sprinkled with hints of its Aristotelian roots.

- We believe in the teaching of the great ethicists that a general state of happiness and well-being is attainable throughout the world; and that this state is the chief end-in-view of society.
- We recognize an instinct in every good man that his utterances and his deeds should make a reasonable and continuous contribution toward this ultimate state, in the possibility of which we reiterate our belief, however remote it may now seem.
- All the agencies and instrumentalities employed by men, singly or collectively, should be based upon the best ethical practice of the time, so that the end-in-view of society may thereby be hastened. [emphasis added throughout]

In addition, four of the seven articles of the code following this preamble begin with a set of virtues: Sincerity, truth, care, competency, thoroughness, justice, mercy, kindness, moderation, conservatism, and proportion. The remaining three articles deal with the specific concerns of partisanship and propaganda, public

service and social policy, and advertising and circulation -- topics common to nearly all codes written during this period.

Most importantly, Article VI flatly states that a newspaper and its journalists should be moral exemplars -- an attitude that supports both Aristotle's and MacIntyre's insistence on moral leadership as a teaching tool for those exploring the path to a virtuous character.

We dispute the maxim sometimes heard that a newspaper should follow its constituency in public morals and policy rather than try to lead it.... It is not true that a newspaper should be only as advanced in its ethical atmosphere as it conceives the average of its readers to be. No man who is not in ethical advance of the average of his community should be in the profession of journalism.

The Oregon code was not the only code that made use of the language of virtue (although it was the only one to overtly refer to its philosophical roots). The South Dakota code noted that it was founded on the "basic principle of truth and justice", and embodied "those ideals of service and that sense of propriety and honor which should imbue the motives and guide the actions of all who enter upon this profession". This preamble is followed, like Oregon's code, with a series of articles headed by virtues such as truth and honesty, fairness and accuracy, sincerity and decency, honor, and respect (Crawford, pp. 195-198).

Likewise, the ASNE code (pp. 183-185), adopted the year following the Oregon and South Dakota codes, references a set of journalistic virtues: sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, fair play, and decency. Its preamble also notes, in a very Aristotelian manner, that, "Journalism... demands of its practitioners the widest range of intelligence, or knowledge, and of experience, as well as natural and trained powers of observation and reasoning". It also cites its obligations as "teacher and interpreter".

What all of these early codes of ethics had in common, regardless of their philosophical or practical approaches, was that they relied on already existing press traditions, and "therefore, were useful in publicizing the standards, ideals and values that many journalists considered professional" (Cronin & McPherson, 1992, p. 371).

## **A RETURN TO THE LANGUAGE OF TRADITION**

As noted earlier, MacIntyre (1984) warns that all we have left today, both linguistically and philosophically, are "simulacra of morality", and we have "lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality" itself (p. 2). Or, as the *St. Louis Journalism Review*, referring to the Wilkins & Brennen (2004) study, opined, perhaps today's "evolving marketplace... has largely bypassed journalism's early traditions". However, this is the easy explanation for what has happened to the tone of journalism codes over the past 100 years. The question posed at the beginning of this chapter was whether anything valuable can be drawn today from the language and conventions of early 20<sup>th</sup> century journalism codes, or whether we are simply being forced to react to a moral complexity that we see as unique to our present time -- thus justifying our rejection of a moral language we now find a bit too naïve?

Do codes, as Wilkins & Brennan suggest, simply reflect the exigencies of the times in which they are written, or is there a larger tradition that may inform journalism outside of time and socially constituted pressures? Journalism *has* changed. Today's concerns and the effect of those concerns on the practice are surely a reaction to pressures that in some ways are unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; however, journalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was also reacting to enormous changes and pressures. Although times have changed, the challenges that face modern journalism bear a remarkable resemblance to those of nearly 100 years ago when, in 1922, Eric Allen noted that, "Economic laws are behind most of the tendencies of present day journalism" (p. 175) -- a statement that could have been made today.

The 1920s brought complex challenges to a practice already in flux. Journalism was changing then as it is changing now, and that earlier change brought about an introspection that questioned journalism's place within the paradigm of a democratic society. In many cases, the response was reflexive, resulting in codes, not unlike the modern-day *New York Times* code explicated by Wilkins & Brennan (2004), that dealt with the specific threats and challenges facing newspapers of the day. They were worried about the effects and pressures of advertising and propaganda, and how to distinguish in the minds of their constituents the true value of news from those other loud and demanding messages. As Cronin & McPherson (1995) note:

From the outset, ethics codes have been more than philosophical statements of virtuous practices. They provide situational guidelines as well. Editors recognize that new reporters do not enter newsrooms with an understanding of news ethics. Ethics must be taught: often through compiling lists of norms considered ethical. This duality of purpose helps explain why ethics codes are often ignored within a few years of adoption -- situational concerns can become out-dated quickly (Cronin & McPherson, 1995, p. 890).

However, many of these codes went beyond a simple listing of issues. The best of them presented journalism with a philosophical framework that would allow individual newspapers and editors the leeway to make their own decisions without having to resort to rules. Instead, they were asked to rely on education, and life, and professional experience.

They also invoked the tradition of journalism -- a tradition stressing public service couched within a practice based on the expected virtues of its members. And, 60 years before MacIntyre built his theory of practices and warned of the tension between the creation of internal and external goods, Eric Allen was declaiming, "conscience is alive in the newspaper profession; the writer knows many, many newspapers which sacrifice and have sacrificed profits to principle; and the establishment of a code is a step in the already active mobilization of the constructive ethical forces in journalism". These codes were emphasizing the virtues of sincerity, truth, care, competency, thoroughness, justice, mercy, kindness, moderation, conservatism, and proportion. These virtues, their writers believed, would result in a journalism whose actions were, as Aristotle urged, "directed by

choice” and aimed “at some good” -- not just for journalism, but for society as a whole.

Yes, times *have* changed. As Dicken-Garcia (1989) points out, the contemporary discussion of journalistic ethics tends to “proceed from the practical”, concentrating on the everyday activities of journalists, especially decision making. Nineteenth- and early 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions tended to focus on the broader effects of the press. She points out that, “Present-day interest in decision-making processes leads to an emphasis on the concrete, the realm of standards, and confusion of standards with the higher-level abstraction of ethics -- at the expense of studying ethics in the larger social context” (p. 235). And, as Cronin & McPherson (1995) note, practical concerns “have continually kept ethics codes from being a central concern to press members” (p. 897).

In a prescient warning, Eric Allen noted in 1922 that differentiating between a simple listing of rules and a flexible and intellectually useful philosophical grounding illustrated “some of the difficulties that await the future author of a code which shall be explicit as to practices and which will not, like the Oregon Code, rest content with principles” (p.179). Although he couldn’t have foreseen the complexities of modern society and its effects on journalism, he was certainly aware of the forces, contemporary and potential, that affected the journalism of his day -- forces not entirely alien to today’s purveyors of news. The big questions that consume journalism today aren’t that much different than they were then: How to survive in a challenging economic climate, how to differentiate between news and everything else, how to serve the public interest, how to remain a vital component of a working democracy. But, most importantly, how to articulate the principles that you stand for. Then, as now, we have only words. And, as playwright Tom Stoppard (1984, p. 53) said, “words are sacred; they deserve respect”.

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