Local Virtues: The Case of the Circus

Ron Beadle

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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Ron Beadle

Northumbria University, UK

This paper considers the travelling circus as a context that may help us to consider the relationship between 'local' and 'universal' virtues. The paper begins by establishing the relationship between this issue and features of our understanding of the virtues more widely. It continues by drawing material from an ongoing contemporary study of circus careers[1] and historic first and third-person accounts before offering some provisional conclusions.

We begin with the question that the conference bids us address. This invites consideration of the merits of two positions. In the first, virtues are regarded as universal; for some potentiality to count as a virtue of any, it must potentially be a virtue of all. In the second, the virtues are 'local'. According to accounts of this type, it is unproblematic for our shared conception of the virtues that the particular virtues to which you give your allegiance – say a list that includes faith, hope and charity and those to which I give mine, a list that includes pride, productiveness and rationality, comprise different or even exclusive sets. So what sorts of items should fall within the virtue basket – and how wide or narrow should we consider its brim? To answer this requires us to establish our position on at least six preliminary questions.

First, we must identify the types of phenomena that may be described in terms of the virtues without doing violence to the coherence of the concept. Whilst virtue traditions have held the virtues to describe qualities of individual agents, we now encounter a wide variety of claims about the virtues of organizations, teams, leaders, and many others (see for examples Rego, Nueza and (2010); Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts and Chonko (2009); Palanski, Kahai and Yammarino (2011)). These attributions presuppose the claims of emotivism inasmuch as the virtues can name anything that one approves of. Using such a frame, your attribution of virtue to President Trump and my attribution of virtue to a well-prepared plate of linguini are examples of the same kind of activity. By contrast, this paper understands the virtues as only naming human excellences.

Second, to know what kinds of things might fill the basket we need a conception of characteristics as such. Though vulnerable to the situationist critique (Doris, 2002), the notion that agents might exhibit persistent characteristics in their conduct appears to be presupposed by any account of the virtues. If agents were incapable of acting consistently then the notion of a characteristic (whether a virtue or anything else) would lose dimensions of temporality and intensity and, thus vacated, would leave little of interest behind. This paper presupposes that there are attributes by which agents may be characterised and that the virtues name one such set.

Having claimed that the virtues pertain to individual human beings, the persistence of whose attributes enable their identification, we must now determine how to distinguish between characteristics that

[1] Meaningful Work and Career Priorities for Creatives in Circus, British Academy –Leverhulme Small Research Grant Award SG162738 (2017-2019)

comprise virtues and others not. Without such a distinction-one in which 'humour' may be considered a virtue but 'height' not, or in which 'courage' may be regarded as a virtue but 'extroversion' not-we will be unable to distinguish virtues and vices as a meaningful sub-set of characteristics. The understanding of some or other characteristic as serving and in part constituting the 'good' varies with understandings of 'good' and its cognates more widely. It is this wider conception that distinguishes the Christian from the objectivist virtue lists that were mentioned earlier.

Fourth, having established a coherent notion of the types of conditions that must be satisfied to designate a particular characteristic as a virtue, we can only put that concept to use if we can agree an account of the type of evidence that might satisfy these conditions. Here, Alzolo (2015) and MacIntyre (1999) have provided contemporary and strikingly similar neo-Aristotelian accounts of the types of intentions, reasons, feelings and observational conditions under which such attributions might be made. These differ markedly from the kind of conditions that satisfy positive psychology and other non-normative accounts of human character (Beadle, Sison and Fontrodona, 2015).

Fifth, we need to consider whether our understanding of how such conditions are to be evaluated entails restriction upon who might undertake such work. In neo-Aristotelian accounts, those capable of making good judgments about virtue must themselves exhibit the types of virtuous characteristics to which our earlier debates have pointed; on the account of positive psychology, no such restriction applies (Beadle, Sison and Fontrodona, 2015).

This raises a sixth issue as to the characteristics of social orders in which such discriminations are held to be rationally defensible at all and those, I am tempted to say including ours, in which they are not. Answers to these six questions provides a measure of agreement without which the identification of and relationship between local and universal virtues could not be intelligibly posed as a question.

Let us pose it now. As a matter of surd historical fact, different traditions have given their allegiance to different sets of virtues – heroic virtues, Confucian virtues, Christian virtues, Lakota Sioux virtues and myriad others have provided distinct social orders with normative orientation. For example, a heroic social order in which virtues were understood as excellences peculiar to social roles occupied by men would have no conception of virtues available to human beings *qua* human beings; the question of local and universal virtues presupposes an understanding of universality that has no place in such a schema (MacIntyre 1988). It follows from this that although our contemporaries have developed core conceptions of the virtues, these may not be capable of translation into the idioms and practices of radically divergent social orders. Is a common conception defensible in the face of such diversity? Two different procedures for resolving this issue have been especially influential, those of Peterson and Seligman (2004) and MacIntyre (2007/1981).

Peterson and Seligman's (2004) oft–cited list of character strengths was developed through a conceptually straightforward though doubtless time consuming exercise. Having accumulated items derived from myriad traditions, calculations allowed the development of a set of core character strengths, the Virtues in Action list. As Robson (2015) highlights, although their source material may have distinguished virtues from vices and non-normative characteristics, the exercise itself involved no normative criteria. Were cannibal communities to have shared a conception of a virtue of discerning the succulence of human flesh, then the presence of a sufficient number of such communities in the sample would have led to its inclusion (see also Banicki, 2014).

In place of such accounts, this paper deploys Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of the virtues. 'After Virtue' (2007/1981, Ch.14) describes radically conflicting sets of virtues at home in the heroic societies, the early Christian church and 19th century America. MacIntyre argues that although the characteristics held to be virtues differ widely between these traditions, they nonetheless share an understanding of what it is that distinguishes virtues from both vices and such non-normative characteristics as skills. On MacIntyre's account, virtues are character traits that facilitate the achievement of goods at three interconnected levels – those of practices, of human lives understood in narrative terms and of the moral traditions of communities (MacIntyre 2007/1981). A characteristic may only count as a virtue if it can be shown to be beneficial in all three domains (MacIntyre 1994). Using this understanding of the virtues, a small set of items are claimed as universal inasmuch as no intelligible account of a communal moral tradition, of the good life or the goods internal to particular practices could be envisaged that neither required nor developed the virtues of justice, courage, truthfulness and, in his words, "perhaps some others" (MacIntyre 2007/1982: 192). Further characteristics derive their status as virtues within traditions whose practices, social orders and self-understandings vary widely.

This paper will use both historic sources and interview data collected in Europe and North America in 2018, to exemplify the importance of such virtues in the self-understanding of circus artistes. In the context of a short conference paper, the evidence I offer will however be merely illustrative. The illustrations support three theses. The first is that we must distinguish the different senses in which the 'local' and 'universal' may be understood if we are to consider the relationship between them. Circus sheds a particular light on this issue because it exemplifies a "mode of existence" (Carmeli 1991: 283) in which geographic locality plays no part. The mobility of the travelling circus, often a condition for its continued existence, requires, in Rupert Croft-Cook's phrase, that "the circus has no home" (Croft-Cook, 1941).

Second, evidence from the circus suggests that the importance of particular virtues varies between practices. For example, temperance is a matter of survival for flying trapeze artistes, but is relatively unimportant to clowns. However, both the clown and the flyer will require courage in taking risks to protect the common good of the circus tent when threatened by weather or fire (Beadle 2018). The protection that the Althoff circus afforded to Jewish artistes during the holocaust provides a notable example of courage and justice alongside some considerable ingenuity (Otte 2006, 115-6).

On the neo-Aristotelian account, the attribution of virtue may only be made if certain epistemological conditions are met (Alzolo 2015, MacIntyre 2000). Those who make claims about others' virtues and vices must have grounds to identify the relevant agent's intentions, have established relevant counterfactual conditions, witnessed appropriate affect and have considered these features over a range of situations and times. Without ongoing and proximate relationships with others, we cannot make claims about their virtues. MacIntyre (1998, 2016) holds that the virtues can flourish only in particular types of local political community, those in which our knowledge of and mutual accountabilities to one another are such as to enable such judgments. My third thesis is that circus provides such a context.

I turn first to the issue of locality. As a type of institution, the travelling circus dates back to the early 19th century. Since then, the material conditions associated with travelling, performance and their attendant precariousness have attended the lives of all who are 'del circo' (Hickman 1995: 50).

Accounts of circus lives demonstrate that loyalty to this identity as 'circus people' often trumps other sources of identity such as nation and even family.

We have considerable evidence that those who undertook what are now known as circus arts before the development of 'circus' as an institution, were also nomadic. The rope walkers, jugglers, acrobats, jongleurs, minstrels and animal trainers that appear regularly in accounts of classical civilisations through to the late middle ages and early modernity (Wall 2012, Hippisley-Coxe 1951) were essentially nomadic though many became attached to particular courts and developed other institutions including guilds (Daniel 2011). They fared well in some social orders but poorly in most. Legislation requiring rope-walkers to use a safety net was introduced to the Roman amphitheatres in the early second century (Lecky 1895) but despite Aquinas's defence of jongleurs in the eleventh century (Daniels 2011), European medieval legislation regarded them as vagabonds liable to summary arrest. Their circus descendants (metaphorically and often literally), continued their vulnerable nomadic life although they were now members of institutions, albeit temporary ones. As late as the 1820s, witch trials were conducted against circus artists in America (Wall 2012:192). Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European circus artistes had to collect references from hosts in so–called 'conduct books'; without these they may have been prevented from crossing borders (Eiperr 1931: 85). It is perhaps unsurprising that circus people regard contemporary legislative bans as a continuation of centuries-long persecution (Birkett, 2018).

The suspicion with which circus artistes have been held is partly explained by their status as strangers. More positive attitudes towards circus artistes were evident in the 20th century. Reflecting their own internationalism, some enlightenment liberals of that era judged circus as something of a moral exemplar. Consider this extract from 1960:

> *politicians might find an object lesson in the spectacle of Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, Scandinavians and English artistes living cheek by jowl, their caravans parked closely together in circus tobers, for months and even years at a time in complete and utter harmony. They are more than neighbours; they are friends in the deepest interpretation of the word. Each picks up a smattering of the other's language, and they converse with a practical understanding, for their life and their art is bigger and of far greater importance than any trifling racial differences* (McGregor-Morris, 1960: 12).

At a more prosaic level, Eipper's ethnographic account of a Swedish circus in 1931, describes the physical environment that conditions the working experience of circus artistes:

> *When the artist opens his door, whether in Italy or the Baltic, he sees the stable alley that leads to the ring. Whoever belongs to a circus knows no boundaries, neither of countries nor of language.* (Eipper 1931, 7)

These somewhat idealistic accounts may fail to acknowledge a degree of national identification manifest, for example, in occasional hostility between American circus artistes who originated from the combatants in World War One (Bradna, 1953). It is nevertheless the case that circus itself operates as a powerful identifier that may be more central to self-understanding than ties of family or nationhood. Consider two further accounts. The first is from Central America in the early 20th century:

> *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.* (Hickman, 1995:50)

The second comes from a 21st century circus ethnography:

> *I asked her once what her first language was, her mother tongue. 'Well,' she says slowly, considering, 'my father always spoke French with my mother, but I was always around my cousins who were usually speaking Italian, but we were in a circus in Germany, and there were always a lot of Americans speaking English. So I guess French, Italian, German, and English come first.' She ticks them off on her fingers. 'But then there was Spanish, a little Polish, and, oh yeah, Portuguese. And I'm learning Russian, of course.' She forgets to count the Swiss dialects she has mastered over the past few years travelling throughout Switzerland.* (Offen, 2010: 479)

My first thesis then is that evidence from different regions and eras demonstrates that the nomadic nature of circus work, artistes' routine exchanges across territories and language and their identity as 'circus', belies any notion of geographic 'locality'. Circus thereby provides a telling counter-example to any contrast between the merely 'local' and the 'universal'; the issue remaining is whether the particularities of practices and moral traditions undermine claims of universality to virtues.

My second thesis is that the importance of particular virtues does vary between practices. We will begin with illustrations of virtues whose importance differs between practitioners and then consider those that have been highlighted as critical to maintaining circus communities. In both cases, the pursuit of common goods (those internal to practices) and those of the community as a whole distinguish characteristics that are to be understood as virtues from those not.

That particular virtues figure in both the self-understanding and observation of individual circus practices is evident from accounts spanning continents and eras. The virtues of fortitude and constancy have never been far from accounts of acrobatics both ground and aerial, both with and without animals. Wall's account of being knocked out whilst training in the French National Circus School from 2003 illustrates the relationship between acrobatic skill and fortitude and characterises the traditional understanding of its necessity in the circus community itself:

> *The accident rattled me. For a week afterward, I couldn't go near the trampoline without feeling fear. But in the longer term it was almost calming…The old circus families had an expression: "eating sawdust". It referred to a performer's first accident and marked the aspirant's introduction to circus life ("Now that you've eaten sawdust, you might, with a lot of work, become an artist," the famous clown Footit's grandmother told him when he fell off his first horse.) My frustration, my impatience, my bumps and bruises – I realized they were all part of the system. Possibly hundreds of thousands of people had undergone identical training, had suffered the same mistakes*. (Wall, 2012: 132)

Illustrating the constancy that characterises a French wire walker, Stroud's (1999) ethnography isolates this virtue in both practice and domestic contexts. This kind of observational strategy aligns with the requirements that both Alzolo (2015) and MacIntyre (1999) hold for the attribution of virtue:

> *He did an act on wire. He said that the thickness of the wire increased with his age – he worked on a twelve millimetre wire now, whereas when he was younger the wire was eight millimetres - thin enough to cut him in half if he slipped on completion of a forward summersault … He made his own props. He had a precisely engineered practice wire set up at the back of the tent and he would run up and down it every day, his arms held out from his shoulders, balancing the body like wings. He polished the wire every day... Along the top of the windscreen of his white van was a sticker reading 'Bouglione – Le Professional du Cirque'. He did not disappoint this assertion, and it seemed to me that the precision of his life was the precision of his weight on the wire. If his caravan looked dirty he would slip in the air.* (Stroud, 1999: 292)

A first person British account in 2018 exhibits both fortitude and constancy:

> *I just got the bug for practising the wire and I used to live on the wire and practice and practice and practice, and eventually got the act I love doing which was the stilts across the wire, doing three jumps in and out of hoops, which is quite dangerous, across the wire …. My wire was like eight foot high which is quite high for a girl in the circus , because normally it's only six foot height, but I always liked a challenge – I've always been determined to do, you know, to set out and finish what I started.*

Inasmuch as fortitude and constancy are required if the internal goods of acrobatic practices are to be achieved, accounts of animal training and juggling emphasize the virtue of patience. Manning-Sanders, writing in 1952 Manning-Sanders observed:

> *There is that infinite patience, for instance, that thinks nothing of practising for ten years a trick that may take but a few seconds to perform, and of which, when it is done, the spectators may not grasp the skill. But that does not matter-it is the achievement that counts, for the circus, though on the surface it may appear as glamorous and fantastic as a fairy tale, is, intrinsically, a place of real values. Reality in the life that is lived, reality in the work that is accomplished; so clear and sharp and insistent is the presence of this reality, that the outsider, when first coming into contact with it, seems to see life with new eyes.* (Manning-Sanders, 1952: 336)

Writing in 1957 Grock, one of the leading clowns of the mid 20th century, describes the Horse-trainer Schumann:

> *Schumann himself was the most famous trainer of animals in the world and I often watched him at work with the horses. An outsider can have no idea of the inexhaustible patience it requires to train a horse for the haute école. A six-hour lesson a day for months on end is needed merely to lay a foundation, and it takes even a gifted horse two years, that is, about four thousand hours, before it had learnt all the accomplishments that so entrance the spectator.* (Grock, 1957 :81)

Eiperr made similar observations in 1931:

> *Blacks, light chestnuts, and iron-greys have been selected among many of their brethren as the very best, and Gautier's mastery has educated their inborn abilities to the last degree of perfection. Day after day I have watched him drilling them, during the winter in Stellingen, and on summer circus tours, and have seen with what never-ending patience a man must try to win the confidence of young, nervous, blooded horses*. (Eipper, 1931: 74)

Whilst acrobats, jugglers and animal trainers might present the same performance regardless of audience, that sensitivity to context which features in accounts of practical wisdom (Dunne 2005) inheres in the practice of clowning. Adjusting to the particularities of audiences is critical to excellence in this practice. Consider both a third and first-person account of this. Writing in 1931 and describing a Swedish clown troupe, the Bronnetts, Eiperr writes:

> *I have made note of as many as forty two clown-acts of theirs, "entries", as they are known in the language of the lot. I saw and heard perhaps as many as a hundred times in English, German, Dutch, French and Swedish. And the dialogue was invariably somewhat differently shaded, suited to the individual situation and audience. The four brothers reached an understanding with one another while they were working, by means of a glance or a gesture, and took the audience as it wished to be taken, one day playing to the gallery with rough jokes, laying it on thick, and the following day, when the better-class public was in the majority, giving it jests more delicately pointed and gestures less grotesque"* (Eipper, 1931: 88)

In 2010 McPherson reports the British clown, Bippo, as making similar claims of his practice; practical wisdom is understood as developing over time and with experience:

> *As we enter the tent Bippo is 'on doors', greeting the patrons and selling flashing windmills. He's also sizing up potential volunteers to pick out during his act. 'The risk you take in getting audience members out is that is could go very well or it could be awful. If the audience see the volunteer isn't having a good time then it becomes more of a taking-the-Mick thing than laughing with them. When I started I used to just think: He'll be fine, and pick him out, and it would be complete rubbish. So now, when the audience are coming in, I always go up to people and ask them, "How are you? You all right?" If a man just sort of goes "Yep" and moves along quickly I know he won't be a good volunteer. It's about reading your audience, and I think it takes ages to know how to do it.* (McPherson, 2010: 66)

Whilst the internal goods of particular circus arts require different virtues to differing degrees, working on a travelling circus requires commitment to undertaking the common tasks of that community, including the labour associated with building up and pulling down tents and transporting equipment. Consider this 2018 account from a circus rigger in the United States contrasting the collaborative working of the circus community to the competitiveness of school sports:

> *All through my entire like high school career and any time I was involved in competitive athletics, it wouldn't …it never felt … it was always competition within the team. And so it never really felt like it was a people working together towards a goal. And then … and [Circus Name] or like tent crew of everywhere was the first … was like the biggest thing in my life that was like a collaborative effort. And it was-it was that sense of like working together and your competition or your like you know your antagonist or whatever, is the elements, and is time. And is holy s**t we have to be, you know, eighty miles down the road in like three hours and all this stuff is still up, so let's go to it*

A Danish Circus Musical Director makes the same point in another interview from the same research project:

> *To live in a caravan in a small community and the whole mentality of making this show happen every day – if workers go home then we all have to help and being in the rain and having to empty your toilet and being stuck on the side of a motorway – it's a really exciting life and I think so many people join the circus and they fall in love with it because its so different to a normal life … it's something that makes me stay with the circus*

This commitment to the common goods of the community is expressed most dramatically in responses to physical threats such as high winds. The reports that follow are made by clown Bippo, in 2010 and the circus owner Cyril Mills, writing in the late 1960s:

> *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 artiste's 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.* (McPherson, 2010: 62)

On Mills account:

> *For some reason being a part of a circus means something more than just having a job and getting a living, but none of us knows the reason. The ways in which the spirit of co-operation manifests itself are legion and, although we became accustomed to it, it is in times of stress that it is seen more clearly. When the weather is ghastly and the circus has to be dragged out of one quagmire and built up in another overnight; when it rains or blows incessantly the circus people are in trouble and that means all of them. If floodwater is flowing through stables where their horse and elephants will be in a couple of hours it is the job of grooms and those who own horses to divert the water but you may be sure that every acrobat, juggler and aerialist will be there with a pick or shovel digging trenches*. (Mills, 1983/1967: 56)

Justice expressed through the involvement of everyone in common effort and courage in the face of threats are pre-requisite to the achievement of the goods of political community (MacIntyre, 2006). The circus illustrates both virtues that are associated with particular practices alongside those that condition the continued existence of the community.

My final thesis is that the day to day life of the community, the risks inherent in its work and its relative immunity from the lures of external goods, qualifies it as the type of association that fosters moral development (MacIntyre 1998, 2016). A final selection of voices from within circus exhibits a self-understanding replete with such claims. The first is the mid-twentieth century clown Reynolds:

> *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*. (Reynolds, 1954: 197)

From the same period, the writer turned clown Mardon observed of one of his colleagues, an exceptional acrobat, that:

> *He works hard, possibly risking his neck, for little money and no fame; no adulation will come his way, no teenagers will swoon, no mounted police will have to be called out to clear his path; his*

> *name needs no neon lights; not for him the brief notoriety of the glossy weeklies, nor the celluloid splendours of a film star's life; he will never be asked to take part in a TV panel game. Not for him the fetishes and superstitions of addle democracy. Like a monk, he had little, yet he has much*. (Mardon, 1961: 125)

Both the intensity of workflow and the necessity of team-work are regarded as requiring the development of virtues in contemporary accounts:

> *Aloysia Gavre, the director of Cirque School in Los Angeles, described the phenomenon as "quick bonding," an accelerated version of the teambuilding exercises that most companies foist on their employees. "in almost every circus act," she told me, "you are being asked to trust people quickly, whether you're being thrown, pitched, or caught, whether somebody is holding your line or not offstage."* (Wall, 2012: 178)

The mode of institutionalisation of circus practices threatens the somewhat cosy picture that I have drawn in this paper. In circus as elsewhere institutional forms and the pursuit of external goods can distract and corrupt but many of the leaders of circus communities understand this threat and their deliberate desire is to maintain their communities on a scale and in a pattern that encourages the kind of communal life that fosters their own and other virtues (Beadle 2013). It is considerations such as these that have led MacIntyre to endorse the circus as a practice-based community (Beadle 2018). The development of social circus and circus school movement makes explicit such communal and political ends. Reg Bolton, who pioneered social circus wrote this:

> *Perhaps the most significant thing about New Circus is where it happens. No longer is circus confined to the Big top, although it is, of course, still happening there too. New Circus can be found in the street, in the community hall, in the park, in the theatre, in cabaret, on TV, in schools and holiday camps*. (Bolton, 1987: 7)

Jessica Hentoff, director of Circus Harmony, a circus school in St Louis says:

> *Circus Harmony teaches the art of life through circus education. We work to build character and expand community for youth of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds. Through teaching and performance of circus arts, we help people defy gravity; soar with confidence, and leap over social barriers, all at the same time.* (Cited in Levinson, 2015: 22)

Much more of course needs to be said but I hope that these illustrations have provided support for the view that circus has much to teach about virtues both particular and universal. The example of the circus suggests that their cultivation depends on communities in which traditions develop and common goods are pursued by those whose relationships are characterised by such mutual accountability. This wider case is however for another time.

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