Moral Education in the Classroom: A Lived Experiment

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> [I]t is perhaps the principal task of the political and moral theorist to enable rational agents to learn what they need to learn from the social and cultural tradition that they inherit, while becoming able to put in question that particular tradition's distortions and errors and so, often enough, engaging in a quarrel with some dominant forms of their own political moral culture.[1]

What would a course on ethics look like if it took into account Alasdair MacIntyre's concerns about actually teaching students ethical practices? How could professors induct students into practices that prompt both reflection on their cultural formation and self-knowledge of the ways they have been formed by it? According to MacIntyre, such elements are prerequisites for an adequate moral education. His criticism of what he terms "Morality" includes the claim that most courses don't even try to teach the right things. He charges that academic teaching has little if anything to do with character formation, whereas thick practices can transform lives in ways mere argument can never do.[2] Even those of us who appreciate his arguments and agree with his criticisms, however, may find implementing more adequate forms of ethical instruction in the university classroom a tall order.

My goal in this essay is to provide a sketch of my own experimental course on normative ethics in order to illustrate what teaching according to a more MacIntyrean program might look like. Following the lead of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* trilogy and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*,[3] my course undertakes a review of ethical theories along narrative-historical lines, explicitly framed as a form of reflective self-awareness and dialogical identity-formation. The purpose of such a frame is to help students recognize, articulate, and assess the coherence and cogency of their own moral inheritances. At the same time, students engage in week-long formative practices, reflecting on their own character formation at the end of each. From a better grasp of their own situation, they are able to evaluate their own practical commitments and be more intentional about the habits and virtues they need going forward.

Because only so much can be accomplished in a single semester, the course gives students a healthy introduction to such a project, aiming to incentive its ongoing development. That is, I hope to give them an initial appreciation of the long-term payoff, while equipping them with the motivation and tools they would need to continue the project after the course was over. Moreover, because I teach the course at a Christian liberal arts university,[4] I have additional theoretical and practical resources at my disposal. Namely, I can articulate substantive goods and a thick anthropology my students already assume, I can incorporate spiritual disciplines into the structure of the course, and I can point students to existing Christian churches as communities of practice that students could join. Nevertheless, as a philosopher, I am keen to approach even these matters through reflection and reasoned argument.

In *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre stresses that moral education requires that students learn "the disciplines of reflective practice."[5] My course is built on that theme, following ideas I had experimented with previously.[6] So, on the first day of class, we begin with a reflection on the state of moral theory and how it informs the standard way of teaching ethics, which I call the "Moral Cafeteria" approach. When adopting this approach, textbooks on moral theory typically outline three to five moral theories and then apply them to various case studies, moral dilemmas, or controversial social issues. Such approaches present normative ethics as a body of theoretical knowledge and technical expertise that anyone can apply, regardless of their moral character or stage of moral development.[7] In the standard approach's theory-application model, students learn each theory and attempt to apply it to case studies or moral dilemmas. However, the textbooks then leave them to choose, without any overarching criteria, between the array of theories, and to justify their choices in terms of the theory that best captures their pre-reflective intuitions about how hard cases should be handled. Where those intuitions came from and how they are formed is left unaddressed and unquestioned. If different theories justify different outcomes in various cases, students tend to adopt a cafeteria-like approach to the theories, tending toward whatever theoretical justification suits their needs to solve a given moral problem.

My criticism of this approach includes the following MacIntyrean objections: (a) it makes the basis of morality seem arbitrary, or reliant on individual preference (or current social consensus); (b) there do not seem to be any rational criteria on offer to adjudicate between theories; and (c) it is not clear to students why or how they should evaluate moral theories rationally other than by appeal to, say, the standard of internal consistency (and they aren't sure why internal consistency

should trump their own consciences or their sometimes-conflicting moral intuitions about what is right). Furthermore, (d) why this particular set of theoretical options is the correct one or the only one on offer remains mysterious, since the standard approach presents them as an ahistorical array of alternatives. Both MacIntyre and Taylor contend that, without any historical background, we are at a loss to explain *which* systems seem appealing, *what* counts as an ethical problem, and *which* moral concepts might be used to frame a situation (adequately or inadequately). Our answers to these questions depend on where we stand in the narrative of human history and culture. As a last point of objection, (e) moral judgment and choice cannot be captured in or taught as technique to be applied by just anyone (e.g., just any college undergraduate), regardless of moral character or experience. It matters whether people are experts in practical wisdom, or undeveloped apprentices with immature desires, or people whose eyes have been steadily corrupted by vice.

The standard approach therefore frequently breeds cynicism, heightens students' already highly subjective approach to moral questions, and makes them despair of having any good reason to be moral, even if they assume they can "master" a moral system's technical demands. Importantly, the standard approach also neglects altogether several important moral features of the lives of MacIntyre's "plain persons," a category that includes my students. For example, missing topics include what role friendship and common projects might play in a good life,[8] and how moral development happens over time (vs. a present-moment "snapshot" conception of moral choices). Further, this approach fails to reflect that most of our moral lives centers not on crisis situations or intractable dilemmas, but rather everyday routines and the implicit formation that comes from participating in certain types of communities or institutions. Finally, it is notable that ethics textbooks fail to mention how the ethical life relates to religious commitments and the formative influence of religious communities.

I introduce our course as an intentional contrast to the standard approach. Thus we examine our own moral situation and identity as the result of a long history of inheritances (some of which content is now highly de-contextualized). This means taking a historical approach to our current predicament and fragmented moral identity, following the example of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. In a parallel way, we assume that our moral lives are themselves an unfolding narrative of formative practices and reflective evaluation in which character develops within a community over time. We assume, too, that we inhabit a metaphysical stance toward goodness and truth that not only enables us to evaluate the deficiencies of modern

moral theories (and their common assumptions about morality), but shows how a religious ethical tradition has the resources to rationally assess the strengths and weaknesses of its rivals, while acknowledging its own status as a self-critical community of practitioners. This is possible in large part because as a tradition—in MacIntyre's sense—its lived articulation of the human good is carried on cross-culturally and over a long history, it depends on transcendent standards, and it includes as its main goal personal transformation and apprenticeship into a certain kind of communal life. Because most of the students identify as members of this tradition already, they have some of the moral training and experience needed to see where theorizing makes sense of (or fails to make sense of) the shared practices of their families, churches, and communities.[9]

MacIntyre insists that students—as practical reasoners and moral agents—will need self-awareness and self-knowledge to reflect and learn from past mistakes *as* mistakes, especially since we often recognize these only retrospectively. This point inspires our first class exercise. Students are given twenty to thirty minutes to work on a "memento mori" exercise.[10] In this assignment, they imagine and then write out the eulogy that might be given at their funeral by an honest friend or family member. Funerals are one of the few places in contemporary life where people focus on personal character, assessed from a whole-life perspective. (This in contrast to retirement or graduation parties, where successful performances or achievements are the main focus.) The assignment prompts students to ask and answer two questions: Who have I become so far in my life?—an assessment of current character—and, Who might I wish to become if I had more time?—an articulation of aspirational character.

Many of the students find themselves unaccustomed to reflection on their lives as a whole, unfamiliar with character assessment in general, and inarticulate about virtue terms and concepts with which someone might capture a person's character. The exercise implicitly raises questions about the difference between personality traits and virtues of character, how students' current character might have been formed, who might have most influenced their formation, and what sorts of traits or virtues are worth cultivating going forward. In the discussion after the exercise, I make these points explicit via conversation prompts:

1. How does this exercise focus on different things from a graduation ceremony?
2. How has the family you are a part of, or the school or church community you are a part of, or the culture around you, shaped the character you observe in yourself?

3. What makes a trait a virtue vs. a characteristic part of your personality (such as being sarcastic, or optimistic, or being organized, or a leader)?

The exercise raises questions of virtue and character to prompt students to recognize for themselves that these sorts of "big picture" questions are both curiously missing from most moral discourse and theorizing and nonetheless implicitly assumed in their own daily practice. Through the assignment, they become aware that they have already given—in fact, are already living out—an answer to the question about what is a worthwhile way to live as a human being. Their own choices have accumulated into character traits that likely reflect some ordering of goods. As MacIntyre remarks, "Reflective agents thus increasingly understand themselves and others in terms of a certain kind of narrative, a story in which they as agents direct themselves or fail to direct themselves toward a final end, the nature of which they initially apprehend in and through their activities as rational agents."[11] He goes on to say this means that

> the initial task of theoretical enquiry is to articulate and develop further what is implicit in or presupposed by practice. And it needs to be stressed once again that agents engaged in such theoretical reflection continue to need to learn from each other, albeit not primarily as fellow students of theory, but as fellow agents engaged in achieving common goods in the practice and productive activities of everyday life, so that their moral and political education needs to be very different from that of the academic theorist.[12]

This college ethics course gives them, like Aristotle's students in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, a chance to reflect on their formation so far. After appropriate self-study, they can either endorse what they have become and carry that project forward, or they can embark on further transformation in a revised direction—assuming there are practicing communities to which they can appropriately apprentice themselves.

The next section of the course is therefore offered as a response to the existential questions of plain persons: e.g. What sort of person am I becoming? Is that a good kind of human being to become? What sort of life am I already living, and what goods does it prioritize? What sorts of character traits does it encourage and reward? Is that kind of life in fact a good human life? What

reasons might I give for this picture of the good life being adequate? Why do I find obvious the answers that I give to those questions (or that my culture or community gives)? What sorts of reasons do I have that might not be accessible outside my way of life? What alternatives have I not considered? Do my answers seem coherent and correct?

In part one of the course, we begin with primary sources in eudaimonist (virtue) ethics. First, we read sections of Plato's *Republic* that portray philosophy (i.e., striving after the common goods of wisdom and virtue) as a rival way of life to *pleonexia* (i.e., acquisitiveness regarding competitive goods). Each life has a contrasting ordering of goods and incompatible programs of desire and habit formation. We also study Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, focusing on the training of appetite required for proper self-love, the inter-relationship of virtues of character and practical wisdom, and the friendship books. Secondary sources, such as chapters on ancient philosophy and Christianity as "spiritual exercises" in Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*,[13] chapters on "the need to learn and the drive to aspire" in Julia Annas's *Intelligent Virtue*, and Myles Burnyeat's paper "Aristotle on Learning to be Good" on the stages of moral education,[14] are also recommended supplementary readings on the syllabus at this point. Further, we consider three examples of "cultural translation" of Aristotle in later historical periods,[15] all from the Christian tradition. First, Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, offers a narrative portrayal of the three marriages that exemplify Aristotle's three types of friendships based on pleasure, utility, and virtue.[16] Then we consider what intellectual virtue looks like in Augustine (i.e., the well-ordered desire for knowledge vs. *curiositas*, its prideful and possessive opposite[17]), and how courage is reshaped by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in Aquinas. Exemplars of virtue shift accordingly: both the citizen-soldier advancing the civic good despite painful obstacles *and* the martyr who endures persecution, holding fast to the eternal good, meet the Aristotelian definition of courage, even if the latter does so in ways that Aristotle would not have recognized.[18] Such examples show how later thinkers both appropriated and adapted this ancient tradition in new social, historical, and religious contexts. Moreover, we note ways in which later thinkers worked from vantage points that enabled criticism and correction of earlier versions of a virtuous life. For example, Augustinian humility pushes in one way against Platonic hubris, and in another way against modern humanism.

While we study appropriations of Aristotle, we engage in a week-long practice exercise, documenting our own daily efforts to practice the virtue of temperance. The instructions prompt

the students to contrast temperance (the virtue) with mere self-control. Students also follow instructions to heed Aristotle's advice about hitting the mean of virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9 by compensating for both human nature (most notably, tendencies toward excess pleasure-seeking) and their own personal proclivities. At the end of a week, they have to submit their journal (a daily log and brief reflection). Then they answer open-ended follow-up questions together in classroom discussion groups. In other words, students practice the type of Aristotelian virtue cultivation they read about, while reflecting individually and corporately on a specific practice that comprises part of an Aristotelian virtue cultivation program. From previous experience, many of the students "knew" that they tended to eat poorly when tired, but the week-long exercise seemed to illuminate and internalize this point: they came away from the week planning ways to mitigate this situation and its attendant temptations. That meant that reshaping their desires for food meant reshaping much more of their lives: eating at more regular times, sharing meals with others/eating communally, cooking food they had purchased themselves, getting more regular sleep, and so on. MacIntyre highlights "the importance of such habits and their relationship to those institutionalized routines that structure our everyday lives."[19] Ideally, such reflection leads both to new personal habits and different communal routines and ways of life.

A second practice exercise focuses on the intellectual virtues and the formation of the mind and imagination. Iris Murdoch makes the point in "Vision and Choice in Morality" that, by the moment any specific moral decision-making happens, most of the moral work has already been done.[20] Which goods one has in view (in light of a life well lived), the motivations and emotions that vision cultivates and cues up, which situations present themselves as imaginatively possible or as requiring a response from us, all frame the content and character of decisions of the moment— indeed, they have often already sorted whether an explicit decision needs to be made at all. Moral philosophy must begin, therefore, by cultivating the moral imagination, by presenting the good, the true, and the beautiful as cornerstones of our characteristic motivational structure and as attractive and inspiring ends to be desired. No moral theory is complete without a "vision of the good," says Murdoch. A principle-application model is therefore only a truncated formal system of decision-making technique. It either lacks such a vision, or (as in MacIntyre's depiction of the market) depends on one that is implicit. What possibilities and goods we envision, picture through role models or narratives, and articulate with thick moral concepts deeply form our character and the concrete choices that follow from it. For my students, the worlds of possible human experience

they have imaginatively inhabited and the goods they therefore long for are already set by the films they have watched, the advertisements they think they have become inured to, and the images of a successful life their communities have championed (or omitted). Any "mere" decision-making technique will work from and within these ideals, rather than challenging them or reflectively examining their value. Inmates I also teach could not envision, or even imagine, at age eighteen or nineteen, when they committed their crimes, that there was a way of life that included lifelong religious commitments, sacrifice of their immediate desires, or educational endeavors that they could find worthwhile and pursue successfully, nor did they have pictures of fatherhood that involved mentoring, attention, prayer, patience, and so on. Moreover, such visions are best "caught" and not merely theoretically "taught." Ancient ethics took these visions of the good seriously as the groundwork from which the moral life begins, and it did not confine them to ethics classrooms. This is why Plato cares so deeply about poetry and music, and why Aristotle thinks pleasure- and emotion-training is essential to character development: we have to learn to long for and delight in the right sorts of goods in order to have practical reason's "good eye" in the moment of deliberation.

The next practice exercise engages Augustine on intellectual virtue. In his view, the well-ordered pursuit of knowledge as a gift involves humble and delighted participation in God's knowledge, a paradigm that contrasts with human mastery of instrumentally valuable but otherwise inert subject matter. Along with the readings, students spend a week memorizing 1 Corinthians 13 (on love as the "most excellent way" of life). They are given the option of reading the whole chapter slowly and then memorizing only verses 4–8a, or memorizing the whole chapter. The exercise is called "Contemplation as an Act of Love." Its purpose is to dwell on the same ideas and the same text by repeating them slowly, memorizing and internalizing what we read, and meditating on or contemplating key phrases. Most of the reading students do is on screens, in skim-and-scroll, rapid information-gathering mode. Contemplative reading is a counter-cultural, re-formational practice designed to slow them down and get them to sit with a text, returning to it multiple times to see if different insights emerge from multiple readings. The practice is a way of apprenticing oneself to the wisdom of the text, in a mode of receptivity to unfolding revelation, rather than a mode of mastery, possession, and disposable use. Much of the content of the passage, moreover, concerns the relationship between knowledge and love (e.g., knowledge without love is empty and vain; knowledge is partial in this life; love brings knowledge to perfection "face to

face"). So the act of contemplating a text on love, as itself an act of love, holds together the practice and reflection on it. In this section of the course, we therefore try to understand and live into ways that key figures in the Christian tradition translated the ancient eudaimonist/virtue paradigm into its own idiom and framework, theoretically and practically.

We devote an entire class period to discussing in small groups what the practice exercises illuminated about our habits and implicit view of the good. The exercises are designed to develop self-knowledge and to raise awareness of how our own formation had been culturally (or "sociologically") influenced, for better or worse. Students often discover, as MacIntyre predicts, that "the transformation of ourselves that is involved is significantly different from what we had expected."[21] Many students take the occasion to comment on how the exercise changed their view of themselves or made them consider more intentionally what goods were worth pursuing. Like my incarcerated students, many often conclude that such goods are currently unattainable, since they require maturity that only comes with more practice. The exercise serves as an occasion to self-identify as apprentices in a larger moral community of more seasoned practitioners. This takes humility and trust, since "some of our important ends are such that it would be a mistake to think of them as adequately specifiable by us in advance of and independently of our involvement in those activities through which we try to realize them."[22] Furthermore, to achieve certain ends, we at the same time need to become the right sort of person.

Lastly, David Solomon's "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics" raises objections to the virtue/eudaimonist approach to ethics.[23] This essay also includes one "external" criticism of virtue ethics, or at least to an Aristotelian (or Platonic) version of it. The objection is that such a moral program requires adherence to a substantive and teleological conception of human nature and the human good. But, Solomon notes, ancient conceptions have been roundly rejected, and attempts to find substitutes have ended in hopeless controversy—either metaphysical, theological, or both. MacIntyre sets out the alternatives as "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" precisely because such debates have typically ended in the conclusion that, because no natures and no objective truth about goods exist, everyone should be left to follow her own preferred "revaluation of values."[24] Virtue ethics' choice of virtues and human goodness seems to require one to inhabit a thick tradition, and one often equally at odds with contemporary ways of life and their theoretical assumptions about morality.

In the next two sections of the course, we track the major ethical theories of the modern period, Kantian deontology and variants of consequentialism in Hume, Bentham, and Mill. In keeping with our narrative approach to these ethical developments, we consider each alternative not as an abstract slate of theories, but via primary texts situated in their respective historical and sociological contexts. Each theory was developed in response to a particular historical moment and rival ideas. So, for example, Kant's construction of formal systems reacts to post-Reformation intractable religious conflict and the inadequacies of resting universal moral norms on Humean/human material contingencies, such as feelings of sympathy, desires for social approval, and considerations of utility. Both Kant and Mill think they can capture the vast part of the content of what was previously a Christian ethic, while rejecting its (and Aristotle's) metaphysical baggage. Again, reading assignments canvas contemporary appropriations, in part to appreciate that functionally we (that is, contemporary North Americans) have already incorporated this approach, its characteristic reasoning, and its conclusions into certain parts of our own identities and spheres of contemporary life. For example, debates about abortion and gun ownership are carried out almost exclusively in terms of rights talk, which is grounded in the inviolable dignity and autonomy of each human being and likewise in the sovereignty of rational persons' free choice of the will. Likewise, implicitly and operationally we tend to identify ourselves as individual choosers, autonomous agents, and bearers of rights. This is evident, for example, in the ways we experience angry entitlement (behind the wheel, in the political arena), shopping and consumer habits that revolve around individual choice, and our attitudes toward personal relationships as contracts of consent. Students read both Thomas Hill's essay on self-respect as a Kantian duty (treating Hill as a contemporary appropriator of Kantian deontology) and Robin Dillon's essay (as a critic) on how self-respect duly cultivated depends on a unduly masculinist view of a respect-worthy moral self.[25] Dillon's essay points out the implicit cultural picture of idealized human nature behind the moral obligations set forth. At the end of her article, Dillon comments that human beings learn to respect themselves by being respected by others *in a community*—an insight that hints at more Aristotelian approaches to moral development. We note the ways that key aspects of eudaimonist ethics (virtues and character development over time, friendship and community) seem absent without a second thought in a deontological system.

Our moral inheritances and sense of self are further shaped by consequentialist conceptualizations of the moral life. From their initial home in social reform movements of the

1800s, utilitarian attempts to increase and maximize human welfare were increasingly bureaucratized. Especially when dealing with social systems (e.g., health care) and economic distribution over large-scale populations, we now tend to default into consequentialist-style reasoning. It feels natural to us to think that we should weigh or sum overall outcomes when debating what policies to implement. Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" is a signature piece of such reasoning.[26] Students usually find it intuitively appealing prior to reflection. Human welfare is the focus of moral obligation, and costs and benefits must be weighed in a world of scarce resources to maximize overall outcomes. Strikingly, Singer's essay is also representative of consequentialists' gravitation toward consideration of physical needs, in part because these are observable and quantifiable measures of well-being (by contrast, consider MacIntyre's commentary on the World Happiness Database),[27] but also because decision-making is thereby done from an ostensibly value-neutral, naturalistic perspective using only instrumental reasoning. From such a (limited) perspective, physical well-being might be one of the few things we can agree are part of the human good. Singer's piece also provides a textbook case of the tyranny of the moral over all other concerns and MacIntyre's own description of "Morality," which names a specialized sphere of obligation that trumps other concerns and overrides all other goods. Despite the criticism lodged against the consequentialist point of view (we also read Bernard Williams on the virtue of integrity—a virtue unintelligible to utilitarian reasoners), part of the point of this section of the course, like the other two, is to recognize that utilitarian intuitions and patterns of thinking are in fact already partially formative of our own default moral identities.

To prompt critical reflection on utilitarian approaches to the distribution of goods, we practice a week of gratitude. The exercise is framed by Robert C. Roberts' chapter on gratitude in *Spiritual Emotions*.[28] The exercise is designed not only to have students practice expressing gratitude for the good things in their lives, but also to give them eyes to see the world in terms of gifts and goodness they have been (gratuitously) given. The religious perspective Roberts articulates shows students the difference between a stance of entitlement amid scarce resources and a stance of grateful receptivity, and the ways in which detachment and attachment to contingent and ephemeral worldly goods are radically reconceived from a Christian point of view. In that view, the ultimate and unconditionally given gift of a love relationship to the Giver remains the point of central concern, not the accumulation of good things or contingent blessings in this life.[29] Further, as in Griffiths' work on a rightly-ordered desire for knowledge, the primary stance of the recipient

should be wise stewardship of whatever gifts she has in service of the common good. Unlike the model of privately isolated or exclusive ownership, goods are meant to benefit the whole community. Not surprisingly, this frame might well lead to similar conclusions as Singer's (i.e., practices of radical giving), but in very different ways, with very different motives. The take-away from the gratitude exercise is that not all practices that appear to be externally similar are the same activities with the same formative effect on desire or the same good as their *telos*. Again, we are trying to capture Aristotelian insights: virtue habituation must transcend mere imitation, must be modeled by the practically wise who have a good eye both for ends and means *because of* their rightly trained emotional attachments and aversions, and must include knowledge of both what one is doing and why.

At this point in the course, I sketch out key features of each view, the places in our lives when each moral *modus operandi* seems natural to us (individually and as political communities) to default to, and the incompatibilities between them. This summation captures the "sociological self-knowledge" that MacIntyre commends.[30] Students have now come to see their own identity as a conglomeration of practices and points of views that don't all cohere and sometimes compete with each other. But they have also been shown that this identity—however fragmented[31]—feeds and forms their practice. It shapes the character and value of their lives as human beings. If this needs to become more explicit, a reprise of the eulogy exercise can be helpful. The existential predicament for students is now two-fold: first, how can I make my own identity and character coherent, instead of fragmented, and second, around which sort of picture of the human good can I build such a life (with adequate justification)?

Returning to Solomon's external objection, I raise the concern that we can't resolve disputes without digging down to metaphysical commitments, but I also suggest a MacIntyrean way to go forward rationally in the face of incompatible options. We read MacIntyre's paper "Epistemological Crises"[32] to explore the thesis that often the only rational way to make such evaluative judgments is to live inside a tradition and see which problems it can solve, which pseudo-problems from other views it can successfully resolve or reconfigure, and which lacunas and insoluble puzzles of its own remain. In addition, I stress, in light of the practice exercises, that every way forward requires both intellectual and practical commitments. Given the dialogical character of identity formation and all the implicit formation that shapes our moral character, we can't live out any option without practice and a thick community of practitioners.

The last section of the course revisits the virtue/eudaimonist tradition, but this time from a Christian perspective—a historical tradition embodied in thick communities of distinctive liturgies and practices. We read essays on Christian virtues and chapters on vices, including pieces on the vice of vainglory and "liturgical sincerity" (i.e., sincerity as a virtue desired in worship practices),[33] viewed through this historical and communal lens and undergirded by a picture of human nature and the human good. At the same time, we engage in one last practice exercise, which is the culmination of a daily practice we've done together all semester. From the first day of the course, we spend the first three minutes of class time in silence together. I do not guide this practice much, but only instruct students to breathe deeply and be still. If nothing else, I tell them, this will give them practice in pausing before a task to calmly center their attention and intentionally ready themselves for it; ideally, it will be an exercise in living against the culture of busy achievement and the deluge of information that they inhabit the rest of the day. (As one student put it, "I realized that it was the only time of day that I ever stopped doing something.") We sit together, awkwardly at first, in total silence—without music, a news feed, phone alerts, or conversation. As the semester wears on, the students begin to appreciate and look forward to that time. But during the reading on the vice of vainglory, we try the ancient Christian practice of silence for a full week. The instructions give students the option to try a modified form of it—a week of silencing self-talk— to make it possible to live on a college campus and still do the assignment with integrity. In one form or the other, this week is a more intensive version of what we'd been practicing all semester. The insights that come in a week of intentional individual practice are typically different from those that come from intentionally guided communal practice over several months' time.

The upshot of the course is, with MacIntyre and Nietzsche, to reject modern "Morality," or at least put it into serious question, especially in the fragmented, incoherent version of it without adequate foundations that we have inherited and currently practice. But rather than leave students at sea looking for an adequate alternative, we end the course with the theoretical and practical resources of Christian theology, inviting students to explore its resources. Can this appropriation and translation of the Thomist-Aristotelian tradition give us metaphysical foundations, in the form of a satisfying view of human nature and the human good (as social beings created for a fellowship of love with God and each other)? Can its view of human nature offer reasons why pleonexic expressivist individualism and Nietzchean self-creation will not ultimately satisfy us? Can it provide—in the form of the local and global church—an arena for embodying virtue practices and

carrying on the tradition (in intergenerational ways that can be adapted across cultures and eras of history)? And, most important, can students envision themselves as its apprentices (now) and its future role models and articulators (later), formed by its signature virtues (faith, hope, and love) and striving to better understand how to live them well?

There are obvious limits to what anyone could accomplish in a liberal arts classroom in a single semester. I take MacIntyre's point that academic instruction cannot substitute for life-long character formation even in the best of settings. In the worst, it remains "irrelevant." My goal with the course is to move our study of normative ethics—in terms of the way people live their ordinary lives and engage in daily formative practices—*closer* to being relevant to moral formation. You might think of the course as a lived experiment into the limits of the potential of the contemporary college classroom experience. A classroom community is comparatively thin; it is also constrained and motivated by powerful external goods—grades, financial aid, scholarships, and student debt, institutional rubrics of success that measure only quantitative results, and other demands on students' time—that press hard on students' ability to invest in learning for the sake of lifelong character formation and a well-lived human life. Such goods, as MacIntyre rightly points out in "The Irrelevance of Ethics," do not weigh heavily on the scales of short-term gains and are hard to capture in learning outcomes. To compensate, the end of the course does not leave students on their own, but instead points them toward thick communities of practice already in place. Such communities, already committed to robust common goods and dedicated to the cultivation of virtue, can plausibly provide opportunities and occasions for the long-term training needed to develop students' character more fully.

In the meantime, the fact that the students and I have been training (with successes and failures) and reflecting regularly on our training together provides a sort of communal bonding experience. Many students cite adjusting past the awkwardness of practicing silence together as a challenging but trust-building moment. The class exercises are meant to give them an insider's view of the power of such disciplines to transform their lives and the benefits of submitting to them. Reflection on the practices (in small groups, after each week-long exercise, guided by readings and discussion prompts) points students to how dramatically counter-cultural and intentionally carried out their formation will have to be in some cases. If my experiment to craft a more MacIntyrean model of ethical instruction is ultimately successful, it incentivizes that project and points students to places

where they can continue it—well beyond the walls of the classroom and the time frame of the semester—to make character formation in virtue a way of life.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 76–77. Further citations will be to *ECM*.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Irrelevance of Ethics," in *Virtue and the Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, eds. Andrius Bielskis and Kelvin Knight (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8–9.

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

4. I might add that Calvin University explicitly self-identifies as part of a historical tradition ("the Reformed tradition").

5. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 90.

6. See Rebecca K. DeYoung, "Pedagogical Rhythms: Practices and Reflections on Practice," in *Teaching and Christian Practices*, eds. David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 24–42.

7. Edmund Pincoffs called doing ethics via hard cases of application "quandary ethics." In different ways, Julia Annas (*Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford University Press, 2011) and Linda Zagzebski (*Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2017) have challenged this case-study approach and provided constructive alternatives to it.

8. Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 6.

9. *ECM*, 71 and 76. MacIntyre criticizes moral theorizing as isolated from "political and moral practice" and from inherited "social and cultural tradition[s]."

10. In several semesters when the weather permitted, we drove to a local cemetery, fanned out across the gravestones to find individual quiet spots, and wrote our eulogies there. When I have to do the exercise in the classroom, I play selections from John Rutter's *Requiem* mass (e.g., the "Pie Jesu") to set the mood.

11. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 54.

12. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 111.

13. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

14. Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 69–92.

15. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 87.

16. Austen's example of the virtue friendship between her two main characters, Elizabeth Bennett and Fitzwilliam Darcy, shows how moral development requires contrition as well as moral conversion in ways that move her account beyond Aristotle into a Christian key.

17. Augustine's account shows how the creation-Creator relationship makes knowledge a common and participated good, rather than a possession to master and own and display. See Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009) and *The Vice of Curiosity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

18. Rebecca K. DeYoung, "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11.2 (2003): 147–180.

19. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 7.

20. See excerpt found in *The Norton Anthology of Western Philosophy: After Kant*, vol. 2, eds. James Conant and Jay Elliott (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), see especially 1404.

21. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 51.

22. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 50. Both Talbot Brewer's *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and the recent philosophical literature on "transformative experiences" echo this point in different ways. See L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

23. David Solomon, "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XIII, *Ethical Theory, Character, and Virtue*, eds. Peter French et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 428–441.

24. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 9. See also Charles Taylor's analysis in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

25. Thomas E. Hill, Jr. "Servility and Self-Respect," *The Monist* 57.1 (1973): 87–104; Robin S. Dillon, "Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect," *Hypatia* 7/1 (1992): 52–69.

26. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1.1 (1972): 229–243.

27. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 194–196.

28. Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), chapter 9. We compare and contrast his approach to that of Robert Emmons' work in positive psychology; see for example the work of The Greater Good Institute, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude. Roberts thinks, for example, that gratitude involves not just the appreciation of good things one has, but also their attribution to a giver, as well as an ordering of goods one is grateful for (some transcend changes in circumstances, others do not).

29. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the gracious father's reply to the eldest son's complaints about distribution of the inheritance is, in part, that "you have *always had me* with you." Both sons mistake the nature of the real gift—it's a relationship of love with their father, not possession of his material wealth.

30. MacIntyre, *ECM*, 112–113.

31. See the preface to *After Virtue*.

32. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist*, 60.4 (1977): 453–472.

33. We use chapters from my *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009 [revised and expanded 2nd edition 2020]) and *Vainglory: The Forgotten Vice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). See also John D. Witvliet, "The Mysteries of Liturgical Sincerity," *Worship*, May 2018, excerpted at https://www.praytellblog.com/index.php/2018/04/26/the-mysteries-of-liturgical-sincerity/.