

On Being Quite a Few Things to Quite a Few People: Ethics Pedagogy as Stratified, Personal, Utopian Nudging

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“Without a vision, the people die.” (Proverbs 19:28)

“I don’t believe any more than Spinoza did in the utility of denouncing vice, evil, and sin. Why always accuse, why always condemn? That’s a sad ethic indeed, for a sad people.” (Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*)¹

“[S]uccess is distant and unlikely, so it’s helpful to have a taste for noble failure and for the camaraderie of the angry few.” (Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning*)²

1. Silence and Pessimism

John Haldane describes Alasdair MacIntyre as “the foremost philosophical witness to and interpreter of our conflicted contemporary condition.”³ For almost seven decades, MacIntyre has been a voice crying out in the desert, calling moral philosophy—calling broader academia, calling “modernity”—to a richer, more coherent, better-grounded worldview, a latter-day Aristotelianism redeemed by Aquinas and given a countercultural, cutting edge by Marx.

In good Aristotelian form, MacIntyre has long proclaimed that moral formation is central to human flourishing and that the best moral education comes from living in a good polis. A good community fosters, intentionally and confidently, the inherent moral capacities of its members, helping them to become increasingly adept practical deliberators and to cultivate the moral virtues tantamount to the living of a worthy human life.

A broadly sympathetic university-level ethics teacher might wonder what practical advice, for her particular vocation, emerges from a careful reading of MacIntyre’s subtle, historically and sociologically informed, virtue-oriented thinking. How, if she takes MacIntyre’s near-septuagenarian corpus seriously, should her ethics courses be taught? What positive roles might a gentle-as-a-dove, shrewd-as-a-serpent professor sensibly and responsibly aim to play in the moral formation of her college students?

This earnest teacher might find herself, if she takes much of what she reads to heart, dispirited. She could feel left in the lurch. As commentators remark, it's often easier to discern what MacIntyre is against than what he is for. Though MacIntyre provides rich, detailed descriptions of being apprenticed into various practices,⁴ he generally neglects to theorize about the good classroom. MacIntyre's "bleak diagnoses of the pathologies" of modern life get most of the ink, along with meticulous historical explanations of our culture's devolution into unprecedented ethical fragmentation.⁵ Proposals concerning university-level ethics pedagogy, and other conceivable constructive cultural counterpoises, seem to get short shrift.

Cultural pessimism saturates MacIntyre's corpus. As James Bernard Murphy puts it, "MacIntyre's famous opening of *After Virtue* invites us to imagine our contemporary moral life as a *post-apocalyptic nightmare* in which formerly integral traditions of moral practice and thought have been exploded into mere shards of genuine practices."⁶ Simply put, modern society isn't a good polis. Instead of a training ground for eudaimonia, our contemporary institutions are dominated, MacIntyre thinks, by the "ethics-of-the-market" and the "ethics-of-the-state," cultural forces geared to making us into avid consumers and compliant "citizens." Moral growth requires becoming an incisive, substantive critic of your own desires; corporations prefer you not question your hankerings for glimmery and techy things.

In this temper, MacIntyre is often bluntly negative about university-level ethics curricula. One might have predicted that MacIntyre, typically a gleeful critic of the modern technocrat, has pathologized today's educational assessment tools and their sterile vocabulary. Instead, he seemingly puts his trust in them: "we have no good reason to believe that the teaching of ethics through academic courses can be effective in bring about moral transformations."⁷ More, MacIntyre often construes the classroom itself as nothing more than an "instrument" of the prevailing, inimical forces: "the moral content of our educational system is simply a reflection of the moral content of our society."⁸ Perhaps MacIntyre's deep-running cultural pessimism *explains* his pedagogical silence: why speak about "the good classroom" if it is not, in this present darkness, a possible reality?

MacIntyre occasionally speaks more positively about "the teacher," which might be encouraging. However, he's called her "the forlorn hope of the western world."⁹ Given that "forlorn" connotes a sadness-tinged hopelessness, this ersatz encomium—the teacher as the "hopeless hope" of the western world—isn't ultimately much consolation.

What's our earnest ethics professor to do?

2. How to Respond?

A few possible reactions come to mind.

Our earnest educator might choose to *soldier on*. Camus praises Sisyphus as an “absurd hero” for endlessly pushing his rock up the mountain despite his lucid recognition that absolutely nothing will ever come of it.¹⁰ Likewise, a willful teacher might resolve to labor on absurdly, shaking her fists scornfully at the inexorable forces of society, in heroic defiance of her fate—and perhaps cultivating a “taste for noble failure” and “the camaraderie of the angry few.”¹¹

Or, our sincere educator might choose to *withdraw*, as Rod Dreher encourages, into a community—a “Benedict Option” commune, as it were—that attempts to socialize its members, intentionally and confidently, from childhood, partly by sheltering them from, partly by combatting the influence of, the forces inimical to their moral formation.¹² Or, following Stanley Fish’s counsel in *Save the World on Your Own Time*,¹³ she might choose henceforth to “aim low,” staying put in the university system, but *eschewing* her heartfelt vocation, and newly treating her role as a teacher as nothing more than a “job,” which she must complete adequately to warrant her salary.¹⁴ Or, in a different stroke of boldness, our teacher might shrug her shoulders, decide her quest for the holy grail of pedagogical advice from MacIntyre was a misdirected enquiry, double down on her fulsome vocation, and turn MacIntyre’s “negativity” into a hearty joke, perhaps by placing an ironic placard above the threshold of her Introduction to Ethics classroom: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

MacIntyre himself has sometimes prescribed that teachers, while resolutely upholding a “Utopian” ideal in their own hearts, take the willful, heroic, defiant, rock-pushing, Sisyphean course.¹⁵ This seems telling: revolutionary moral zeal and cultural pessimism surge deep within MacIntyre’s philosophical veins.

3. My Approach

As an ethics professor myself, I find it natural to consider where, within these rival, incompatible positions, to stand. Loath to treat the teacher-student relationship as merely transactional, I simply can’t go with Fish. Even if the best learning outcomes aren’t of world-historical significance, everyday teaching sends profound signals to students; aiming low communicates that sustained

ethical reflection isn't useful or important. (Talk about rank capitulation to prevailing forces.¹⁶) Good teachers, I trust, can find ways to talk—or to shrewdly nudge—many students into forms of moral reflection conducive to personal growth and better ethical decisions.

I also have no intention to plunk for the Benedict option. I'm going to keep my current job. When choosing a proper pedagogical approach, context matters, of course. I happen to teach at a small liberal arts college in the Holy Cross Catholic tradition, a college which includes “fostering knowledge of the Catholic tradition” among its learning outcomes for core philosophy courses. This means I'm not only licensed but expected to engage the Christian moral traditional in the classroom. That said, slightly more than half of my university's student body identifies as Catholic. Is my classroom, then, a “half-Benedict” situation? “Quarter-Benedict”?

As for the Sisyphean mentality, I'm strongly averse to seeing myself in such grandiose terms. I'm not against fighting a good fight when the prospects of success are modest to low, but in my view an attitude of heroic defiance not only ignores the substantial goods a thoughtful teacher can facilitate, it threatens to mutate into self-importance and self-pity.¹⁷ In comparison, the jestful strategy strikes me as wiser.

In this essay, I intend to steer a steady course between a forlorn, rock-pushing mentality and the jester's choice. Like the persevering jester, I'm simply less pessimistic about both modernity and ethics instruction than MacIntyre. (My mentality is closer, perhaps, to Charles Taylor's. Taylor, himself troubled by this secular age's vices and foibles, simultaneously regards modernity as replete with half-understood virtues and spiritual seeking.¹⁸) A thoughtfully constructed ethics course cannot be all things to all students: 45 contact hours over the course of 15 weeks isn't, I agree, an apprenticeship. But it can be quite a few things to quite a few people.

Unlike the jesting strategy, though, I won't treat critical engagement with MacIntyre as a “misdirected enquiry.” I agree with so much: among other things, MacIntyre's desire for ethics pedagogy to cut to the philosophical, existential bone; the corresponding prominence of his “utopian” streak; his emphasis on sociological self-knowledge; and his appeal to the value of narrative and imagination to moral transformation.

I've struggled to put my finger on what, precisely, I disagree with MacIntyre about. My sense is: MacIntyre's utopianism can feel, too often, like a cudgel. Elsewhere, I've argued for the theoretical, moral, and pedagogical value of “big picture,” “unattainable” moral ideals, such as the biblical commandment to love neighbor as self.¹⁹ One of my basic principles, the foundation of a

pedagogical strategy, reflects the quotations from Proverbs and from Comte-Sponville at the beginning of this essay: students are more likely to struggle—for forty years in the desert, as it were—if they vividly, imaginatively recognize what they are struggling for. MacIntyre doesn't really do aspiration. When he speaks of his utopian ideals, it's often to note how far short of glory our society has fallen. Start with MacIntyre's bluntly negative appraisal of contemporary ethics courses, add his remark that "we need a Utopian concept of the curriculum [...] in order to provide an instructive measure of achievement,"²⁰ and his can seem a sad ethics, indeed.

4. Stage Setting

As I read MacIntyre, I find myself continuously asking, but uncertain how to answer, at least three broad, highly salient questions about how to interpret his thinking about ethics education.

The first: What does MacIntyre take "students these days" to be like? Of course, a good teacher needs to know her subject matter—in this case, what counts, broadly speaking, as (less than) exemplary ethical reasoning. She also needs to know her audience.²¹ To discern good pedagogical strategies, it's helpful to have significant insight into what her students' particular needs, mental habits, and aspirations are, as well as what "epistemological framework and evaluative standards" they often think and act from.²²

The contemporary college student isn't a character that populates MacIntyre's philosophical prose—except, of course, as yet another creature addled by modernity. Rich accounts of the moral lives of contemporary teens and young adults do exist. In a 2001 profile of high achieving Ivy League students,²³ the journalist David Brooks describes his regular encounters with the "organization kid" (OK), a student who is affable, tolerant, hard-working, highly scheduled, smart, and career-oriented, but whom he finds somewhat troubling. For all her undeniable virtues, the OK is also deferential to authority to the point of conformist, as well as "blinker" in the sense of being absorbed in her own life and significantly unaware of what's happening in the broader world. Most notably, this sort of student lacks a "robust ethical vocabulary." When moral questions arise, the affable OKs—skittish about giving offense—change the subject. When they do reflect upon the ethical trajectory of their lives, OKs speak in terms of their hopes for future "love, success, and happiness," not with robust concepts such as justice, mercy, and humility.

In his extensive, qualitative research, the sociologist Christian Smith paints a strikingly similar picture of many American teenagers and young adults.²⁴ Whatever their academic credentials and

work habits, many contemporary U.S. teenagers and young adults are, in an important sense, “moralists.” In a faint allusion to moral traditions such as Aristotle’s, they accept that “central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person.” In their sensibility, this means being nice, pleasant, tolerant, respectful, and responsible. It’s important, they believe, to work hard to make something of oneself. Fluent in many subjects, these teens and young adults are, similar to the OKs, notably inarticulate about ethical (and religious) topics.

Though “kids these days” are not all of a piece, and new cultural trends are emerging,²⁵ Brooks and Smith present a fairly accurate picture of many of the second- to fourth-year students who take my ethics courses. A salient question—for me, and I suspect for many other teachers—is how best to engage such a student? How strong are the prospects, if we show a bit of insight and ingenuity, for helping these particular people grow? What—from within their mentality—can we as teachers intelligently and responsibly use as leverage?

My second interpretive question: How does MacIntyre *conceive* of university-level ethics pedagogy? MacIntyre is critical of contemporary ethics courses, but he doesn’t overtly describe them. A highly plausible guess is that, since MacIntyre thinks the modern university to be—infelicitously—an instrument of the prevailing ethos within modernity, “Morality,” he presumably supposes ethics courses reflect the broad contours of this complicated mindset.

MacIntyre generally presents Morality—or “the morality system”—as an “unwieldy product of modern social and ideological changes, given intellectual standing by three centuries of unwitting theorists.”²⁶ Morality is presented as a set of impersonal rules or maxims that, e.g., prohibit the violation of moral rights and require a degree of truthfulness, tolerance, and altruistic benevolence. Morality treats these norms as rules to which any rational agent whatsoever ought to give assent. Within the morality system, there are competing answers to the question why these norms deserve universal assent. There’s the Kantian idea, grounded in a fundamental commitment to human equality and dignity, that obedience to such maxims by others is something that as rational agents we cannot but will, and so consistency requires that we also take those maxims to govern our own actions. The utilitarian answer, grounded in fundamental commitments to impartiality and benevolence, is that compliance with such maxims maximizes society-wide well-being or happiness or utility. A contractualist answer is that these maxims represent social expectations it’s reasonable for us to foist on others and for others to foist on us.²⁷

Extrapolating from this, a Morality-based ethics course would describe utilitarianism, Kantianism or some other form of “deontology,” and social contractarianism, perhaps with a few classes also devoted to talking about the merits and demerits of ethical relativism. These theories might subsequently be applied to case studies or to culturally contentious ethical questions. The student might be asked not only to describe and apply the competing theories, but to reflect on which theory she finds most sanguine. The course likely ends, literally and philosophically, there. For the sake of ease, let’s call this the “standard” ethics course.²⁸

Fish applauds the standard course. MacIntyre is peeved by it, for principled reasons. First, such a course is historically and sociologically mute, and so doesn’t compel a student to interrogate the ethical environment she inhabits.²⁹ Second, it is blithely monistic in its philosophical mindset. Utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractarianism, and relativism take the complexity of morality, with the many distinct values morality promotes and protects, and attempt to boil this complexity down into a theory with a single, fundamental value: human dignity or utility or deference to prevailing cultural codes. In doing so, Morality “does not illuminate the particularities, textures, and valences of moral [...] considerations as we experience them.”³⁰ In *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, among other places, MacIntyre implicitly raises a third objection to the standard course: he calls for forms of moral socialization that treat students not merely as brains that need to think a bit more clearly, but as persons for whom narrative can have transformative value. On these three points, I agree fully with MacIntyre.

As a confession, I have occasionally taught the standard course. At the very beginning of my career, I did so ham-fistedly, but I grew past it in pursuit of pedagogy philosophically, rhetorically, and psychologically more subtle. More recently, when I taught in an international context and couldn’t anticipate what my students would be like, I followed a Fishier syllabus that “aimed lower.” (That decision continues to seem sensible to me.)

My third and final interpretive question concerns the “depth” of MacIntyre’s cultural pessimism, though I don’t know how to put the question very precisely. Just “how strong”—how causally powerful, how determinative—does he take the forces of global capitalism and political liberalism to be? Do these forces make moral growth impossible for most anyone, not merely for students within the contemporary university system? On the flipside, just how strong is MacIntyre’s “it takes a polis” thesis? Of course, people have never lived in perfect moral

communities, and yet some people do seem—even today—to live worthy human lives. I certainly have students who strike me as morally committed and thoughtful.

There are elements of MacIntyre's thinking that could mitigate his pessimism about the prospects of ethics pedagogy. MacIntyre's brand of Aristotelianism is made "neo" partly by his belief that "the ways in which human capacities can be realized are diverse and that the range of considerations relevant to human flourishing [are] also variable."³¹ The idea is that, though human flourishing always requires the cardinal moral virtues, eudaimonia can manifest in otherwise strikingly different human lives and contexts. This pluralistic commitment makes MacIntyre less elitist than Aristotle himself. And given that it posits multiple paths to a well-lived life, it would seem to be grounds for greater hope. I wonder why this idea doesn't seem to qualify MacIntyre's bluntly negative commentary on ethics teaching.

MacIntyre's answers to my three broad questions form the backdrop for his assessments of contemporary ethics instruction, but it's not always easy to know what his answers are. From time to time, I will simply need to hope I haven't misinterpreted him.

5. A Critical Analysis of MacIntyre on University Education

In a broadly admiring but ultimately sharply critical appraisal of MacIntyre's thinking about contemporary university education, Murphy describes the ambient mood of MacIntyre's writing as "quixotic pessimism," which strikes me as spot on. MacIntyre's thoughts on university education form more of a "collage" than an integrated philosophy of education.³² But there are notable themes alongside his neo-Aristotelian Thomist philosophical and ethical convictions, his Marxist analysis of our contemporary economic situation, and his emphasis upon our culture's fragmented moral vocabulary.

First and foremost, there's MacIntyre's idiosyncratic form of idealism. Committed to the liberal arts, ethics teachers generally express high aspirations for student learning and development. In Murphy's view, though, MacIntyre is not merely a garden-variety idealist; he's a "resolute moralist," and in two important senses. First, his reflections on education are dominated by a desire that the university be an instrument of revolutionary social and moral reform.³³ Second, MacIntyre sometimes seems to set the bar exceedingly high for counting as having a properly virtuous sensibility. The Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who seems to have lived a highly admirable life, apparently fails to measure up, on the grounds she didn't adequately scrutinize the

fundamental—and fundamentally decent—moral and political commitments she assiduously and effectively devoted her life to.³⁴ No doubt, authentic moral formation, a process of socialization much broader than schooling, includes the transformation of desire and an increased talent at consistently making good choices.³⁵ Does living virtuously require morally unassailable foundations? Does it require being able to articulate, with philosophical sophistication, why they are? Such exacting intelligence strikes me as a profound strength, but not a necessity for moral goodness.

What, we might wonder, are the pedagogical implications of MacIntyre's high-minded, sometimes intellectualist, revolutionary moralism? Let's say an ethics teacher succeeds in helping several OKs become considerably more comfortable speaking up about moral questions. Or in helping a student inarticulate about justice approach fluency in the complex, specialized language of moral rights. Or let's say her student, initially committed to a vaguely conceived conception of tolerance, comes to recognize, first, that tolerance is a "limited virtue"—there are times when a tolerant person should choose, not to forbear, but to act out—and, second, that he must adopt a broad, coherent moral outlook if he is going to decide judiciously where the relevant line is to be drawn. Even though these advances don't revolutionize society, and they don't guarantee fully-fledged practical wisdom in the relevant student, these seem to be small, hard-won victories. Would MacIntyre deny their value?

MacIntyre's quixoticism sometimes manifests as a penchant for diminishing the value of his own relatively modest, but sensible practical advice. This raises important questions: for example, whether a teacher's primary focus should be on changing society or, instead, on fostering the inherent moral capacities of her students. The answer seems obvious. And it seems as though it should be clear to MacIntyre, too, given that the second part of what "makes his Aristotelianism 'neo'" is Aquinas's correction of Aristotle that "progress toward good judgment and rightly directed desire is often partial and uneven, so that someone who exemplifies them admirably in some area [...] may fail miserably [...] in some other area."³⁶ When a teacher facilitates partial moral progress, it is progress, and it is consequential, as it disposes the student to make substantively better ethical decisions and to form stronger personal relationships.

In any case, in Murphy's final analysis, quixotic pessimism is precisely what you would experience if you were to adopt MacIntyre's blend of revolutionary idealism, with its uncompromising, intellectualist standards, and his deep-going cultural pessimism. This sensibility

leads—inexorably—to “burden[ing] schooling with impossible expectations and then wonder[ing] why we are always so disappointed.”³⁷

6. MacIntyre and the Irrelevance of Ethics

Murphy’s 2013 analysis of MacIntyre is strongly confirmed by a close reading of MacIntyre’s 2015 essay, “The Irrelevance of Ethics.” All of the elements of MacIntyre’s quixotic temperament are starkly present: the deep-in-the-bloodstream cultural pessimism and anti-modernist spirit; the forlorn, “utopian” moralism; and the penchant to diminish the value of his own (sensible) proposals. These are joined, I might add, by gestures at a “we-know-not-what” socioeconomic world that would be meaningfully better than ours (and would not simply trade one set of human, foible-filled institutions for another).

In “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” MacIntyre’s skepticism about the efficacy of university-level ethics courses is especially brusque and dismissive. When an ethics scandal rocks the financial or political world, there is invariably a public outcry: “Bring on the ethicists! Make students take more ethics courses!” MacIntyre responds, paraphrased: “Don’t bother.” MacIntyre’s specific target in his essay, though, is university-level *business* ethics. MacIntyre judges such courses “at best” distractions from what truly matters, an investigation “into the nature and causes of what is flawed in our economic institutions and activities.”³⁸ His more robust conclusion is that business ethics courses, and the business schools that require them, unwittingly send their fledgling graduates unawares into the fowler’s snare: “the financial sector as a whole” is “a school of bad character,”³⁹ for which a B+ in a standard ethics course imparts to graduates a false sense of ethical security.

In MacIntyre’s judgment, business ethics instructors proceed—mistakenly—as though their students can have both moral and financial success. In reality, they confront an existential choice between their souls and their wallets: “we may measure ourselves and our activities by the standards of wisdom and temperateness, [that is,] by the standards of virtue, or by the standards of money, but we cannot do both. We have to choose between them.”⁴⁰

To illustrate, MacIntyre asks his reader to compare the mental habits of a morally virtuous person and a “successful” financial trader. First, consider four, interrelated moral virtues. A good person has a “tempered [Socratic] realism” about herself; she won’t overestimate her powers or think she knows what she does not know. Her just estimation of herself disposes her to judge risks

with a clear and judicious mind. With courage, she acts neither rashly nor cowardly in the face of true risks. More, if the common good truly calls for it, she will put skin in the game; it's not an act of courage to risk other people's hides. In good Aristotelian form, MacIntyre ends by commenting on the morally virtuous person's disposition to see her life *as a whole*. Accordingly, she will not be guilty of ungrounded "time biases," such as giving up her own soul for the piece of bread that will sate only this quarter's hunger.

MacIntyre presents the successful financial trader—successful by "the standards of money"—in glaring contrast. Confronting the complexity of the market, a sensible person will not think, nor insinuate, she knows its future.⁴¹ However, the financial trader needs to project self-confidence so as to earn and keep the trust of clients. In other words, he "can't afford" to be properly self-questioning or self-doubting. Also, a good financial trader shifts risks away from himself; he doesn't put more skin in the game than strategically necessary. A good financial trader, one who plays by the rules of the trading world, need not be a thorough-going egoist, but he will be a "group chauvinist" who favors the interests of self, company, and shareholder, a pursuit which does not demand sensitivity to the common good. He will also accede to a "time bias," namely, the prevailing demand to meet short-term earning goals. In sum, for the successful financial trader to take on the project of becoming morally virtuous would, MacIntyre contends, create an "insuperable disadvantage" to his continued professional success. Without argument, MacIntyre judges it's legitimate to extrapolate to other business professions; within our economy, virtue and mammon don't mix.

In MacIntyre's judgment, this unhappy reality needs to be directly confronted, and the pedagogy of business ethics isn't up to the task. The spirit of standard business ethics courses is severally misguided: first, it presumes a falsely benign view of the global market; second, it operates with a cramped conception of moral obligation, supposing moral goodness doesn't demand "training in desire" or a robust devotion to the common good. So long as an accountant or store manager obeys legal restrictions and various moral side constraints, he's done his duty.

What, according to MacIntyre, should be done about all this? At times, MacIntyre's prescriptions are vague and defeatist. Sounding more resigned than heroically defiant, MacIntyre writes, "the most we can hope to do is [...] understand the limitations of our present moral and intellectual condition, and then ask how we can best live and act in that condition."⁴² At other points, MacIntyre gestures at specific but relatively modest proposals. A blithe market

triumphalism—with its “all boats, rising tides” aphorisms— dangerously pervades the thinking of some business students. Business faculty would do well to highlight, not merely the social benefits of a market economy, but the morally serious costs. Also, MacIntyre notes a common fallacy: ordinary non-philosophical people, whether inside or outside of the business world, often infer, from a fancy title or a well-tailored suit, that the bearer must be an admirable person. A good ethics course could challenge such deference to wealth, which permits the wolves of Wall Street to hide in plain sight. Very thoughtfully, MacIntyre alludes to a form of profound confusion ordinary non-philosophical people often feel. For the manufacturing class whose jobs have gone overseas, the global market—a force which gives, and a force which takes away—is a “Great Big Incomprehensible.”⁴³ Against a disciplinary tendency to conceive of economic factors as impersonal forces, MacIntyre claims economic networks are human constructs and are built by human decisions. If that truth is recognized, it becomes possible to reconstrue market relationships and activities in moral terms, even in the language of moral virtue. It is people who ship people’s jobs overseas; “when,” business faculty should get in the habit of asking, “are their deliberations proper?”

These strike me as excellent suggestions. There are many others. Ethics courses that ask students to reflect on the moral limits of markets⁴⁴ and nudge them to distrust the manufactured neologisms of corporations and politicians, and ethics courses that raise the question what type of moral character, and what type of personal habits, it takes to be a whistleblower—these, too, strike me as worthwhile. These are conversations that will prime some graduates to gird up against the fowler’s snares to come.

In “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” MacIntyre’s penchant for pulling the carpet from under his own counsel emerges. The essay ends on an infelicitous note: “ethics will once again *become relevant*” only when principles “very different from those of either a wholly free market economy or of the state-and-market economies of present day Europe” are ascendant.⁴⁵ Until society is profoundly reformed—MacIntyre’s word choices suggest—our thinking will be so hopelessly fragmented that we won’t be able to think in ways that are “relevant.”

In this context, MacIntyre gestures at a better socioeconomic world. But he doesn’t say much about what it would be like, beyond that it would be a realm in which “thinking about virtues and thinking about money” would be “reconnected.” MacIntyre needn’t be so quaint as to proclaim that this new economic reality would flow with milk and honey, but his vision of what “Should

Be” threatens to become—even for the sympathetic, inquiring, earnest ethics instructor—yet another “Great Big Incomprehensible.” MacIntyre hasn’t given her much sense of what moral vision she is to teach towards.

7. A Few Curiosities

Some, seeing greater virtue in the liberal state and the market economy, will be put off by MacIntyre’s Marxist critique. I’m not much of a market triumphalist, but I can’t say, when I work to improve my students’ marketable skills, I’m doing so only because of my job description. I’m happy to enhance their writing and communications skills so they’ll come to write better memos and conduct smarter, tighter meetings—a too rare skill. In any case, in this section I will note several other contestable elements of MacIntyre’s arguments.

First, a question about MacIntyre’s own argumentative strategy. MacIntyre tells us he devotes *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* to the “plain nonphilosophical person,” a character who emerges in the book’s second sentence.⁴⁶ MacIntyre subsequently sets up a dialectic that presumably leads this person from the (naïve realism of) Morality to expressivism, and then from (anti- or quasi-realist) expressivism to his ultimate conclusion, an Aristotelian form of critical realism. As usual in MacIntyre’s philosophizing, the way a person is able, reasonably, to choose between “incompatible rival positions” is to find what questions a particular tradition of thought raises but can’t itself answer. The “better” tradition is superior because it’s able to explain, powerfully, why the competing tradition can’t move beyond its inherent lacunas. MacIntyre ultimately expresses confidence that ordinary reflective people, at least those who earnestly consider how they should live, are “covert Aristotelians.”⁴⁷ Their best convictions and practices implicitly commit them to this type of critical realism.⁴⁸

Curiously, if a teacher were to follow MacIntyre’s (quasi-Hegelian) script, elements of the standard ethics course would be necessary, not irrelevant: a vital *propaedeutic*, at least within modernity, to his neo-Aristotelianism. MacIntyre’s expressivist-style critique of Morality can’t get off the ground if his readers are unfamiliar with the basic elements of the mindset being critiqued. Accordingly, MacIntyre himself should cry out, “Bring on the ethicists!”

More curiously yet, MacIntyre, in drawing his battle lines so starkly, seems to embody a strikingly un-ecumenical spirit. To begin with, won’t utilitarians and Kantians find themselves rather surprised that they’re mere instruments of the ethics-of-the-market? Such thinkers might

remark that MacIntyre's own moral critique of the primary causes of the 2008 global financial collapse are often deeply consistent with elements of Morality. A Kantian will point out that fine print and subprime loans do not treat customers with dignity. Further, a blinkered focus on self, company, and shareholders and a fixation on short-term gains over long-term fiscal viability don't square with the long-term, pragmatic, impartial heart of utilitarian thinking. Only emasculated forms of these theories, forms of Kantianism and utilitarianism that go totally mute at selective points, will serve so blithely as tools in the hands of global capitalism. This raises the question whether MacIntyre is guilty of treating half-allies as complete enemies. The morally virtuous person in Thomist thinking, lacking Morality's "monistic" disposition, isn't a thorough-going utilitarian or a pure Kantian. But she will care intensely about the moral values at the foundations of utilitarianism and Kantianism, namely, impartiality, benevolence, and human dignity. So, why tilt at useful windmills?

Put pedagogically, our earnest ethics teacher might have guessed that if our cultural climate is fragmented, some of the bits and pieces might serve as small, Archimedean rocks, from which we might leverage students to better views. To treat Kantianism and utilitarianism as mere enemies is not only philosophically charitable, it cuts off a more positive, constructive pedagogical approach. If the Brooks-Smith image of "kids these days" is true of a significant number of college students, they're already committed to values such as tolerance, equality, respect for human dignity, and benevolence. When my own students read Brooks, they intuitively sense that the OKs are "good people" in whom "something is missing." Naturally, some of these students begin to wonder whether they, too, lack a "robust ethical vocabulary" and a broad, underlying moral sensibility geared to helping them discern, among other things, when (not) to exercise tolerance. They begin to wonder, too, whether they have grasped the real-life, possibly life-altering implications of a serious, consistent commitment to equality, moral rights, and benevolent concern.

8. Teaching as Stratified, Personal, Utopian Nudging

MacIntyre hasn't explicitly prescribed that teachers openly betray an attitude of quixotic pessimism to their students. And he doesn't overtly claim university professors must treat the central dialectic of *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* as the central script for ethics curriculum. (Does MacIntyre imply it should be, though, when he prescribes, rather narrowly, "certain novels"—by Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence—as necessary for any "serious" ethics course?)

Even so, let's consider how cut-down-to-the-bone, "utopian" ethics courses could be taught more optimistically and constructively. If we'd like a course that asks students to confront profound existential choices and taps positively into moral imagination, what form might it take?

No doubt, there's more than one possibility. One option is to follow Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski's proposal to give pride of place, in our moral theorizing and in moral education, to moral exemplars.⁴⁹ From a young age, much moral development occurs through the imitation of virtuous models: a caring mother, a thoughtful teacher, a good coach. Despite this, philosophical treatments of ethics have often paid little attention to theorizing about people who are morally admirable and whose exemplary traits motivate others to emulate them; the utilitarian, Kantian, and social contract traditions do not emphasize this idea. This common oversight prompts Zagzebski to present a competing theory that "serves the same purpose as deontological, consequentialist, and virtue theories."⁵⁰ Her "exemplarist" view defines the meaning of a wide range of moral concepts in terms of traits we admire in exemplars. As Zagzebski points out, one pedagogical advantage of her theory is that there is wider agreement about who counts as an exemplar than about which particular moral values—utility or dignity, say—should be given the greatest priority within practical deliberation. Reflection on moral exemplars naturally privileges narrative.⁵¹ And Zagzebski's (plausible) hope is that a student's admiration will have the power to create a yearning to emulate goodness.

Another possibility is to follow the lead of ethics teachers who structure courses in the spirit of much ancient Greek philosophy, with its Socratic emphasis on the question, "How ought I to live?" Such a course might ask students to imagine themselves, trenchantly, into the mental and moral lives of Epicureans, Stoics, Socrates himself, Aristotelians, various medieval thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, or broad-minded, humanistic contemporary thinkers. This idea reminds me of the book *Five Great Philosophies of Life*,⁵² originally titled *From Epicurus to Christ*, by William DeWitt Hyde, President of Bowdoin College from 1885–1917. The book, whose pages are occasionally spotted by unhappy elements of its early-twentieth century sensibility, has several redeeming pedagogical virtues. For example, DeWitt Hyde skillfully picks out Epicurean and Stoic themes in the best poetry and literature of his day, which enriches his argument and helps his readers feel the (continued) compelling force of some ideas at the heart of these "ancient" philosophies. For a second virtue, DeWitt Hyde's book, with philosophical charity, constructively "builds" towards a broad, coherent ethical outlook. DeWitt Hyde makes a point of drawing positive

and compelling lessons from each worldview he ultimately critiques. As he constructs a subtle picture of a way of life—a Christian worldview with strong marks of New England Protestantism—he finds an important place for such lessons. Alongside somewhat dated prescriptions, there’s considerable wisdom; and in a philosophy class, DeWitt Hyde’s controversial conclusions can themselves be substantively critiqued. In my view, it can be very powerful for students, even students strongly averse to a book’s ultimate conclusions, to witness what it looks like for an incisive thinker to sketch a broad picture of the moral life. It helps them to envision how having a coherent, reflectively grounded worldview can answer questions they themselves confront in the run of life. This approach is, I think, one significant antidote to what ails the affable, tolerant, respectful OKs who mumble about ethics.

9. A Puzzling Phenomenon and My Own Pedagogic Practice

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues it’s a very bad idea for a person to strive to live up to, and for a society to prescribe for its citizens, the biblical commandment “love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵³ If a reader happens to enjoy the tweaking of an old piety, she’s likely to find Freud’s arguments, which have a relentless, pithy, streetwise charisma, great fun. Freud argues that striving to love every “inhabitant of the earth” equally and intensely would come at serious, unrequited personal costs. It would, predictably: anger your friends and family, who justifiably expect you to love them more than strangers; “stretch you thin” emotionally; and, worse, imprudently leave you susceptible, when you turn the other cheek, to being twice bruised. Given his pessimistic view of human nature, and so his belief that most of our “neighbors” are “aggressive creatures” not given to love, Freud predicts you’ll fail—miserably, in both outcome and mood—to live up to the principle, which will eventually make you resentful of morality and its unreasonable demands. In its stead, for you and for society, Freud prescribes a principle of tit-for-tat reciprocity, “do unto others as they (intend to) do to you,” which he finds more self-protective and so more reasonable.

When students in my college-level ethics course are confronted with “Freud against neighbor love,” many publicly *express* agreement with him, at least initially. By this point in my career, I know their “yeah, he’s rights” are coming; but their response repeatedly surprises me. Many of the very same students who nod at Freud’s punchy arguments also describe themselves as Christians.

One might have guessed such students would dig in their convictional heels. Instead, they give off the impression of capitulating to Freud's acidic cynicism.

After eliciting the students' first reactions, the classroom dialectic continues. We tease out Freud's assumptions and begin to raise objections to his arguments and to the underlying worldview that gives rise to them. As it turns out, the case against Freud against neighbor love is fairly strong, and almost as punchy. Freud's arguments lack balance: he neglects to put his own tit-for-tat principle under the type of scrutiny he subjects neighbor love to; he doesn't contend with any of neighbor love's sharper, more sophisticated advocates. He's often (demonstrably) guilty of misconstruing what agape is, and he ignores—or implausibly denies—its positive effects, personal and social. Freud also operates with a strikingly narrow conception of the purpose of morality, and so he fails to recognize the theoretical and moral value of “unattainable” moral ideals such as “love neighbor as self.”

Once these objections are laid out, many students—predictably—express that they ultimately disagree with Freud's reasoning. In the span of two or three classes, something akin to a quorum of young scholars swings, pendulously, from being seemingly oblivious to a Freud-style critique to being pro-Freud to being anti-Freud.

The general trajectory of this classroom discussion of Freud is one example of a familiar experience I have in teaching philosophy. Pendular swings are common. If you frame a debate by asking certain questions, you can prompt students to express one set of convictions. If you ask certain other questions, you can prompt them to deny, implicitly or explicitly, the very same convictions. This is true, I find, when classroom discussion turns to relativism, to the question whether we all have a moral right to our own beliefs, and so on. Fragmentation, indeed. What explains these swings?

A few explanations come to mind. The one I tend to favor is that (many) students are highly impressionable. The students in my ethics courses are—similar to the students described by Brooks and Smith—often earnest, respectful, and, by perfectly sensible standards, bright. Many give the strong impression they take their schooling, if not invariably their broader education, very seriously. And if we accept the analysis I've favored, perhaps the students' willingness to change their minds reflects a measure of intellectual virtue, or at least the absence of a particular intellectual vice: a petty, reactionary, partisan close-mindedness to *new* arguments. That said, my students' rapid-fire philosophical waffling raises hard questions for me as a teacher. It makes me

worry that, among other things, they're highly susceptible to being pushed around, not only by well-meaning teachers who gently suggest sensible conclusions, but by advertisers, managers, and demagogues, whose intentions aren't so civic. When I think of what a strong graduate of a liberal arts education is like, I imagine her to be open-minded, but not credulous and easily manipulated. I'm with MacIntyre here: an ideal graduate has developed a strong sense of who she is, with a developing, well-grounded sensibility, one that helps her to be resolute when she confronts ideas that oppose her most commendable underlying convictions. How to help a student begin to find her convictional bearings? And how to do so in a responsible manner?⁵⁴

The standard ethics course doesn't do this. Aspiring to do better, I've taken to structuring my "Ethics and the Good Life" syllabus in accordance with the DeWitt-Hyde-like argumentative arc of a more recent book. In *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, the French moral philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville construes the principle "love neighbor as self" as a profound "summary" of the entirety of "the moral law." He understands the moral life to be, at its very best, an attempt to strive to become more and more agapic: in his view, agape is an unswerving, heartfelt commitment to a form of justice seasoned by generosity and mercy. Comte-Sponville is an atheist in terms of his metaphysic, but deeply invested in the New Testament—as well as Aristotle, Pascal, Spinoza, and Kant—in terms of his conception of morality. Sponville's agapic picture of morality is crucial to his understanding of moral virtues such as tolerance, courage, fidelity, justice, and generosity, each of which he calls "a feeble approximation of love."

In my course, we talk about many topics independently of Sponville, but over the semester the course "builds," partly by following a trajectory that reflects Sponville's "hierarchy" of moral virtues, from chapters about "less exalted" moral virtues such as tolerance, to greater moral virtues such as justice and generosity. Comte-Sponville's book is rhetorically rich, substantive, chock full of smaller insights. It is also replete with metaphors and digressions. Not all teachers will find his somewhat messy, digressive style right for them.⁵⁵ Sponville's broad argument and his overarching agapic commitments are also, in our contemporary environment, controversial. But we don't let Comte-Sponville off the hook. One reason we read Freud is to think through his "punchy" objections to neighbor love. What Comte-Sponville, similar to DeWitt Hyde, does well is construct a "big picture" conception of the moral life that is geared up to help any devotee make (better) quotidian decisions. It also self-consciously paints the moral virtues in an attractive light.

10. Concluding Remarks

Scholastic education, MacIntyre is correct, is superficial in comparison to a lengthy process of apprenticeship. Moreover, some college students simply aren't prepared for cut-to-the-bone reflection. In other words, no ethics course can be all things to all people. But a well-constructed course, working at "different levels," can be quite a few things to quite a few students. In my "Ethics and the Good Life" course, ordinary learning outcomes are certainly met. All students have the opportunity to improve their writing skills; their critical thinking skills, by tangling with arguments about topics such as relativism, tolerance, and moral rights; and their interpretive skills, partly by fighting through, with guidance, Comte-Sponville's metaphor- and digression-rich style.

For the students who have ears to hear, "Ethics and the Good Life" intimates greater things. It consistently asks them to scrutinize their ethical environment and to confront their self-reported "value commitments." They are asked to consider whether their commitments to tolerance and respect for humanity compel them to contextualize these virtues within a broader moral outlook. Over the course of the semester, Comte-Sponville, among others, models sustained, worldview-oriented ethical reflection.

In the final analysis, Comte-Sponville turns out to be a "utopian realist," an idealist in terms of his moral vision, generally unimpressed with human moral character. MacIntyre's cudgel is present, for Comte-Sponville also employs the moral virtues as "instructive measurements of achievement."⁵⁶ A clear conception of justice and of generosity, he remarks, will tell us how unjust and ungenerous we generally are.⁵⁷ However, Comte-Sponville also sounds other, more aspirational notes. Gentle, shrewd,⁵⁸ incisive, historically-informed, book-length reflection upon moral virtue can draw many ordinary people upwards—in his view, towards neighbor love and towards the relationships neighbor love makes possible. Not such a sad ethics.

Notes

1. Andre Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* (New York: Holt, 1996), 1.
2. Larissa MacFarquhar, *Drowning Strangers: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 16.
3. John Haldane, "MacIntyre Against Morality," *First Things*, May 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/05/macintyre-against-morality>.

4. For a good summary, see Christopher H. Toner, “Maritain and MacIntyre on Moral Education,” in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglas A. Ollivant (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2002), 224–241, especially 232–239.
5. Haldane, “MacIntyre Against Morality.”
6. James Bernard Murphy, “The Teacher as the Forlorn Hope of Modernity: MacIntyre on Education and Schooling,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2 (2013): 183–199, at 189 (emphasis mine).
7. If the statistical data of pedagogical technocrats don’t ground MacIntyre’s pessimism, what does? See Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” in *Virtue and Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, eds. Andrius Bielskis and Kelvin Knight (London: Routledge, 2015), 1–21, at 16.
8. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Against Utilitarianism,” in *Aims in Education*, ed. T.H.B. Hollins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 1–23, at 1.
9. Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Idea of an Educated Public,” in *Education and Values*, ed. Graham Haydon (London: University of London Press, 1987), 15–36, at 16.
10. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).
11. Larissa MacFarquhar, *Drowning Strangers: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Urge to Help*, 16.
12. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).
13. Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
14. Gregory Bassham summarizes Fish’s arguments in this way: “What professors should be doing in the classroom is (1) introducing ‘students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience,’ and (2) equipping ‘those same students with the analytical skills—of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over’. What professors should not be doing in the classroom is (1) consciously aiming to shape students’ moral, political or civic values, or (2) taking partisan stands, endorsing contestable ideas or policies, or advocating any values other than those that are immanent in the academic enterprise itself (honesty, thoroughness,

rigor, and so forth) [...] Fish’s ‘purified’ academy is thus a values-free zone in which instructors never step over the line between is and ought.” In his critical remarks, Bassham emphasizes the “limited” power of professors to shape their students’ values and behavior, but also that “limited” does not equal “no” power. See Gregory Bassham, “Fish’s Purified Ivory Tower,” *Journal of College and University Law*, 36.1 (2009), 287–293.

15. MacIntyre, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 36.1 (2002): 1–19, at 15.
16. Fish revels in the role of provocateur. If he enjoys his spot of fun, I don’t begrudge him. But perhaps Fish has—in the form of a good paycheck and his desired notoriety—received his reward.
17. For a similar judgment, see Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 11–23, at 23.
18. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 487. See also James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 79–91.
19. Regan Lance Reitsma, “On the Usefulness of Being Unrealistic,” in *From Banality to Genocide: Perspectives on Evil*, ed. Kanta Dihal (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), 195–219, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004409262_011.
20. MacIntyre, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne,” 14.
21. As Joseph Dunne puts it, teaching is a “triadic relationship” between a teacher, the subject matter, and a student. See Dunne, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 36.1 (2002): 1–19, at 9.
22. Christian Smith, “Moral Therapeutic Deism as U.S. Teenagers’ Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith: A Summary,” *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005). This summary can also be found on the Catholic Education Research Center website: <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html>.
23. David Brooks, “The Organization Kid,” *The Atlantic*, April 2001, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/>.

24. Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
25. Arthur Brooks registers a beware-what-you-wish-for warning. He relates that he used to complain about yesteryear's "student relativists," who are, in his view, being replaced by today's upsurge of "student social justice warriors." These students, in his accounting, are morally committed, but shrill and immature. See Brooks, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America From a Culture of Contempt* (New York: Broadside, 2019), 1–18.
26. Haldane, "MacIntyre Against Morality."
27. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65.
28. How frequently college-level ethics course map onto this picture, I'm not sure. But ethics textbooks have commonly been structured in roughly this way.
29. Simon Blackburn, *Being Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–8.
30. Haldane, "MacIntyre Against Morality."
31. Ibid.
32. James Bernard Murphy, "Aquinas' Critique of Education," in *Philosophers on Education*, ed. A. O. Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 95–108, at 96. Murphy himself argues for a philosophy of education closer to John Henry Newman's. According to Cardinal Newman, the university's special role is to foster intellectual culture, and so to help students develop intellectual virtues, not moral virtues. This doesn't imply that ethical questions are ignored within university education, but that the goal of ethics courses would be to learn how to think ethically.
33. In "The Idea of an Educated Public," MacIntyre opines that, in recent times, only Scotland in the Eighteenth Century has passed muster in producing broad, social results.
34. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 264–273.
35. MacIntyre also frequently strikes a wistfully authoritarian note. The only type of community that can enact the proper level of discipline these days is the military academy or the reform school.
36. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 51.
37. Murphy, "The Teacher as the Forlorn Hope of Modernity," 198.

38. MacIntyre, “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” 8.
39. *Ibid.*, 12.
40. *Ibid.*, 1.
41. *Ibid.*, 14.
42. *Ibid.*, 12.
43. See, for example, Farah Stockman, “Becoming a Steelworker Liberated Her, Then Her Job Moved to Mexico,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/us/union-jobs-mexico-rexnord.html>.
44. See, for example, Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012).
45. MacIntyre, “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” 20 (emphasis mine).
46. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, ix.
47. *Ibid.*, 30.
48. Personally, I’m not convinced a naïve realist needs to take a route *through expressivism* to become a critical realist. Why can’t she simply become less naïve? If a student, for example, were to confront arguments for relativism, recognize the serious shortcomings of relativist thinking, and in the process deepen her understanding of the proper role of moral virtues such as intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and tolerance, her realism has become more critical without any foray into expressivism.
49. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
50. *Ibid.*, 3.
51. To prompt students to reflect on whether there are important limits to the value of reflecting on moral exemplars, a Zagzebski-inspired course might consider Susan Wolf’s arguments that striving to be a moral saint is a bad idea, as well as Robert Adam’s critique of Wolf’s arguments. See Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79.8 (1982): 419–439; and Robert Adams, “Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 81.7 (1984): 392–401.
52. William De Witt Hyde, *The Five Great Philosophies of Life* (New York: MacMillan, 1904).

53. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 2010), Section V.
54. If you happen to ask whether it's unduly manipulative to "nudge" students to consider "big picture" moral outlooks such as agapic ethics, I'd answer—in good MacIntyre-style—that many advertisers won't be wringing their hands about what's best for the same students when they push them about. But more importantly, the course scrutinizes Comte-Sponville's thinking and the substance of his agapic morality. And the course doesn't deny that other big picture ethical perspectives might have power and insight. My immediate aim is to get the students into the game of thinking big picture.
55. Personally, I find Comte-Sponville's text to be an excellent teaching tool, partly because he makes what I regard as "pedagogically useful mistakes." There is just enough insight in his writing for it to be worth fighting to discern what he's saying, and there are just enough puzzles and problems to make it feel as though we are, as a class, piercing through these puzzles and problems to thoughtful solutions. See further Regan Lance Reitsma, "Being Moral, Being Polite," in *Evil and Human Wickedness*, ed. Alexandra Cheira (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 23–34; "Tolerance and Intellectual Humility," *The Conference Proceedings of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* 7 (2010): 91–99; and "Against Humility as Informed Contempt," in *This Thing of Darkness*, eds. Claudio V. Zanini and Lima Bhuiyan (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016), 83–94.
56. MacIntyre, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," 14.
57. Comte-Sponville says, "Some will regard [my writing of a book on moral virtues] as presumptuous or naïve. The latter reproach I take as a compliment; as for the first, I'm afraid it is nonsense. To venture to write about the virtues is to subject one's self-esteem to constant bruising, to be made acutely aware, again and again, of one's own mediocrity" (5).
58. Yes, shrewd. To give one example, Comte-Sponville encourages his reader to become more generous not only because it will do others good, but because it will benefit her significantly, too. The generous person is not "possessed by" her possessions (93), and so she enjoys profound freedom, a mastery over her "desires, and over jealousy and envy" (95). Furthermore, to be generous is to be able to give "when so many seem only to know

how to desire, to demand, to take” (95). To paraphrase: “Do you yearn to be popular? Well then, give, give, give. Who doesn’t, after all, admire a generous person?”