Life after Virtue: The Thoughts of Alasdair MacIntyre and the Practices of the Church

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Preacher: David Robinson

[0:00] Well, thank you for having me this morning. Is that my microphone on? Yeah. And thank you as well. I think I've been consoled three times that you don't eat people here.

So I'll take your word for that. As you'll see in the rather cumbersome title that I've put together for today, we're going to be talking about virtue. And so what I'd like to do is just start with a brief reading from Scripture, and then pray to guide us.
I'm going to read from 2 Peter 1, verse 3 and following. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.
For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.
For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
[1:32] Let me pray for us to begin. Our God, we gather this morning as a community, as a class, seeking life and godliness, seeking formation in the image of your Son.

We thank you for your provision of all we need in that pursuit. God, we renounce our anxiety that we will not have what we need in that pursuit.
And God, we take this morning's learning, this morning's opportunity, as part of your provision. So I pray that you would grant us knowledge in this time, and that you would embed that knowledge in the virtue, and the faith that you are forming in us.
Amen. Life after virtue, the thought of Alistair MacIntyre, and the practices of the Church.
Well, why this particular thinker? He's been a very influential moral philosopher, as many of you know, as Harvey mentioned to us a few weeks ago. And what he's been doing is trying to retrieve the virtue tradition, which I'll try to color in for you a bit during the course of this lecture.
[2:50] And indeed, in the process of doing this, he has recovered the Christian faith. That's something that we'll talk about as well. This has been going back towards that. But at the time of this book, was not yet returned to that.

After virtue was published in 1981, it's now in its third edition. And it has an incredible depth and range to it, for any of you who have ever read MacIntyre.
One of his readers says this, The sheer range of MacIntyre's work is a challenge to anyone who would understand him. He is able not only to write in a scholarly and intelligent manner about Aristotle, Abelard, and Aquinas, but he is equally adept when he treats Freud, Weber, and Wittgenstein.
I sometimes have the impression he has never forgotten anything he has read. Few know what MacIntyre knows, but to understand MacIntyre is often necessary to have read what he has read.
Well, I don't presume to have read all he has read, nor to have retained it. But I am consoled by the fact that he actually says in the preface to this book that it's written for the plain person.
[3:58] He says that often when the tradition of the virtues is regenerated, it's in the practices of everyday life, in the households, in the schools, the clinics, political communities, indeed, even in the church.

And so I commend it to you as having both depth, but as being meant for the plain person, and certainly, I think, for the life of our church. So you have an outline in front of you.
My apologies for the lack of technological sophistication. I realize you're used to much more in this class, but I hope it proves helpful on this absurdly ambitious quest to summarize the book.
I hope along the way you can flag areas that you'd like to bring out during our discussion time, if I don't cover them well for you. So, point one. Upsetting the stage.
The reason I've titled it such is that it's important for MacIntyre that philosophers never set the stage. They never begin in some vacuum.
[5:01] You're always speaking into a play that's already in session. And so he's sort of speaking in something that's already in medias race. And as we remember from Harvey's lecture a few weeks back, we are, of course, in a secular age.

We are living in life after God, to borrow the title of a Vancouver novelist's work. And if you remember Charles Taylor's characterization of the secular time, he argued that we have a complex historical narrative behind us, but in many ways that's given way to rather simplistic polemics.
And the argument has always assumed to have been made. And what I see MacIntyre doing is similar to what Harvey characterizes Charles Taylor's work as, which is going back and saying, let's look again at that historical narrative to see where we've gotten, how we've gotten where we are.
And so here I want to take up that similar project. And, of course, we're going to be talking specifically here about moral and ethical discourse in a secular age.
So that's where we're headed today. And I'm going to begin with a disquieting suggestion. Sorry about the mistype there. And this is how MacIntyre begins his book.
[6:22] With a rather dramatic thought experiment. So let me read briefly. This is the very start of this book. Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe.

A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur. Laboratories are burnt down. Physicists are lynched.
Books and instruments are destroyed. Finally, a know-nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists.
Later still, there is a reaction against this destructive movement, and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. All that they possess are fragments.
A knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance. Parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess, or to experiment.
[7:30] Instruments whose use has been forgotten. Half chapters from books. Single pages from articles. Not always fully legible because torn and charred. Nonetheless, all these fragments are re-embodied in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry, and biology.

Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory, and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each.
Children learn by heart the surviving portion of the periodic table, and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all.
For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence, and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.
So McIntyre begins with this story, and then he forwards his thesis immediately, which is that what he's posited is having happen in the natural sciences, in that thought experiment, is exactly what has happened with our moral language.
[8:59] You have the appearance, you have the terms of morality, but they have suffered this catastrophic shift, this loss, and they now only have the appearance, they're only simulatra of morality.

They don't in fact have the context, the thick context that they once had, and the practices that make them intelligible for us. So McIntyre's task is going to be one of retrieval in this book.

But he says, to call our current culture, and particularly our moral discourse, to call it pluralistic, or pluralism, is in essence to say, peace, peace, when there is no peace.
We do not live in a pluralistic time, we live in a fragmented time. And we're trying to speak out a context that's not there.
We're using terms that are divorced from their prior context. So let me fill that in a bit for you. Point two, morality today. First of all, he's just going to characterize a bit of where we find ourselves, and what that fragmentation might look like.
[10:10] This could also be titled, Why We Live Lives We Do Not Understand, as one theologian has put it. McIntyre argues that there's no way, we can't come to agreement on moral issues.

And to set that example, he uses three main issues, one being war, one being abortion, and one being access to health care and education.
And he'll put various positions on these topics. And I'll just briefly go over the one on the war, which I think is timely for us, and timely for me. And my brother actually has just been deployed to Afghanistan, so it's been one that I've thought of a lot lately.
Three positions on war that he puts forward to show this disagreement, this interminability of moral discourse. Position A would say, a just war is one in which the good to be achieved outweighs the evils involved in waging the war, and in which a clear distinction can be made between combatants and innocent non-combatants.
Just war. But in a modern war, calculation of future escalation is never reliable, and no practically applicable distinction between combatants and non-combatants can be made.
[11:28] Therefore, no modern war can be a just war, and we all now ought to be pacifists. So position A. Position B. If you wish for peace, prepare for war.

The only way to achieve peace is to deter potential aggressors. Therefore, you must build up your armaments and make it clear that going to war on any particular scale is not necessarily ruled out by your policies.
An inescapable part of making this clear is being prepared both to fight limited wars and to go not only to but beyond the nuclear brink on certain types of occasion. Otherwise, you will not avoid war and you will be defeated.
Position B. Position C. Wars between the great powers are purely destructive, but wars waged to liberate oppressed groups, especially in the third world, are a necessary and therefore justified means for destroying exploitative domination, which stands between mankind and happiness.
Position C. So McIntyre argues that you have these three positions or these various positions and he'll kind of tease out different characteristics of how this debate between those positions would take place.
[12:44] And as you see in the outline there, there's three qualities he gives to this debate. The first is that there's a conceptual incommensurability which is only to say that each argument, position A, B, and C, might be logically valid in its own right.

But each premise has a very different kind of evaluative concept. So in the example we just had, position A talks about notions of justice and presence.
Position B talks about notions of survival and success. And McIntyre argues that those premises just don't meet. You can't seem to kind of talk on those. Other examples that we're used to, claims on access to health care or economic redistribution.
You'll have premises, arguments coming from liberty and legitimate entitlement of an individual versus equality and the needs of others.
And there'll be sort of a debate that misses each other there. Or of course, pro-choice and pro-life in the abortion debate. And it seems like these premises just don't meet.
[13:53] And so moral discourse just becomes about assertion and counter-assertion. And the argument just becomes louder or more shrill to make up for the fact that these premises don't meet and you can't actually have an engaged moral discourse that then gets somewhere.

So conceptual incommensurability, that's what he's talking about there. Point two, they're purportedly impersonal. So people won't, in arguing those positions that we talked about, people won't typically say, this is what I wish were the case.
They'll say, this will provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Or, this is your duty. Or something like that. And they'll appeal to something in person, something beyond the speaker and the hearer in making their case for a certain moral action.

So it's purportedly impersonal. And we'll return to that later. The last point he makes is that moral discourse and these moral positions have wide and various historical origins.
In our example on war, position A can run back through Aristotle and the virtues. Position B has its genealogy running through Bismarck to Machiavelli. Position C marks in his precedence.
[15:08] But, MacIntyre says that to treat it as only a matter of solitary thinkers and individuals is to oversimplify. We need to look also at the various social, cultural, political factors of the time and so on.

And so one of MacIntyre's key arguments or points is that we can't do moral philosophy. We can't talk about ethics in a way that's ahistorical, that's divorced from the history of things and the way these ideas have been given rise.
And we need to try to tease that out as we talk about different arguments and that may help us to see why they seem incommensurable so often. So his project is very much one of genealogy.
And he'll say that at the beginning you remember he posited a very catastrophic occurrence in our moral language and immediately he's a bit self-conscious about that and he'll say like wouldn't we have noticed this?
Shouldn't we have noticed this? Shouldn't this be more readily available? Why would we still use the language of morality so blithely if this catastrophe in fact had happened? And one of the ways he argues for this is saying these terms have taken on quite different meanings than they used to.
[16:21] So terms like justice or virtue or duty now mean quite a lot different than they used to given changing social contexts and he wants to look through that.

But yes, he says we have no shared concept of the good in our moral discourse and so we have a confrontation between these incommensurable moral premises and moral commitment becomes the expression of a criterion-less choice between those premises a choice for which no rational justification can be given.
And so what is one that they in practice if not in theory is emotivism and I've got his definition of that for you there. The doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference expressions of attitude or feeling insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.
And so if we were to take the statement this is good what emotivism how emotivism would explain that statement in our current discourse is that it roughly translates to I approve of this or I prefer this you should as well.
So this is good becomes that in an emotivist climate. What McIntyre is going to argue is that emotivism has won the day and it's won the day in practice although not in theory and we'll tease that out later but he'll say that emotivism is effectively how we argue and so on even though it doesn't have grounds for that and that's kind of going to be where he attacks it but that's something we'll fill in.
[18:16] But one of the key aspects of emotivism is that you lose a distinction or there's all kinds of space for manipulation of others in it. When it becomes about your own preference we lose that distinction between something that's manipulative and something that's non-manipulative and to paint that a bit he gives us three characters and you'll see that in point C and as McIntyre has said it's always important to look at a moral philosophy historical context it's also always important to look at how a moral philosophy is played out in social embodiment so essentially would the ethic that you're stating would you want your kid to actually live like this or would you want your fellow congregants to actually live like this that type of question you want to put to any ethical theory and so he looks at emotivism and he looks at kind of our current cultural climate and he picks out three characters three representatives of what emotivism would look like the mask worn by a moral philosophy the first is the rich as thete and this is someone this is a difficult one to explain

I'll just mention it briefly it's quite a subtle one and quite an ironic one but someone that's free from the need to work a surplus of leisure and resources and in seeking to meet their tastes and ward off boredom we'll use other people to and use other contexts to kind of fulfill an aesthetic need and it becomes about like being oriented around that pleasure and the arts and so on but again that's more difficult we'll spend more time on the next two the manager and the therapist now both of these treat ends or telos to ethical decision ethical action as a given and they're almost purely focused on technique and efficiency so the manager for instance is successful is good if they can transform raw materials into final products unskilled labor into skilled labor investment into profits the therapist is successful in so far as she transforms neurotic symptoms into directed energy or

maladjusted individuals into well adjusted ones an interesting point that he makes about these two roles in society and this isn't necessarily just linked to limited to managers or therapists per se it can certainly be a pastor that embodies these or whatever so these are just these are types certain modes of being but he'll say by nature of their roles and by nature of their being purely about technique and efficiency they're actually unable to engage in moral debate they become these uncontested figures that work in the realm of facts or means or measurable effectiveness and he'll talk about concepts like management expertise and that type of thing and that that's essentially what their role is it's not to get caught up in ethical quandaries and so on and that's all assumed to be something bracketed out and so

MacIntyre has several chapters critiquing some aspects of social science where they presume to generalize and predict patterns of behavior and one of the ways we might see this kind of thing in the church is in maybe some excesses in the church growth movement where you have people that will come and have expertise about how we can control or manufacture the social reality that is the church and so you bracket out certain ethical questions of what discipleship is and what that full treatment is in order to have technique and efficiency and be able to mold this social reality so that's one way that manager technique and we say the same but something else about therapist technique is involved in the church so how did we get here how did we get to a place where emotivism is prominent where these characters have a place in our society history and I'm going to do a very brief history of morals of course

MacIntyre's argument is far more textured than I can represent here and it's important to say as well that history for MacIntyre is itself an argument you'll notice that of course this history is evaluative he's going with a concept as we saw in that opening illustration a concept of a fall or a catastrophe in our moral language so it's evaluative for sure but the way he argues through much of this book is by telling the history retelling the history which is interesting and which has implications for how we might want to give witness for instance to Christian faith that kind of thing but using history as argument is something very important for MacIntyre and in doing so he sets up the classical or the theistic framework and he'll nuance that he'll distinguish between the two but he is going back and he's retrieving some classical Greek thought he's retrieving the theistic framework of people like Aquinas and so on and he's saying that there's a commonality here that we can see and that commonality involves three elements and I have them there on your page the first man as he happens to be the second man as he could be if he realized his full potential or one could say a telos or a goal or a purpose to human life so you've got those two elements and then the third ethics then becomes the science of rational principles which enable people to move from the former how they are to the latter how they could be what the telos or the goal of human life is and that's that's derived from what human nature would seem to be what the essence of a person is so ethics are a way of moving from A to

B from how you are to how you could be as a human being and man in the Aristotelian frame is a functional concept so if you were to call a man good and man I'm using of course in the inclusive sense is the same way that you could call a watch good or a farmer or a harpist because they have a certain function that they would carry up by virtue of their nature and so when you say someone is good or an action is true or false it accords with that telos that goal of that person so that's the way it was seen in the classical world when you get to Aquinas you see that in theistic framework and in Christian thinkers that will adopt this ethical rules are not only determined by a teleology that we can think out based on human nature but also have theological informing so they're also expressions of a divine ordained law or something like that so that's another element to it but that again in the theistic framework plays into that third point in bringing us ethics you have the divine law as a part of this and so moral judgments are both hypothetical where you discern your conduct your ethical conduct in light of what would be appropriate given the end of human being and for the [26:06] Christian categorical they report the universal divine command to the individual so ethics are typically done within that framework generalizing of course that would be a classical and that be a framework framework and then we get to the enlightenment and what happens there what he highlights is happening there is you get a fall away from that scheme and he calls it a fall some other people may call it progress get away from the burden of the divine command or the confusion of teleology because there are some reasons to indeed be rid of that but we have a loss of view of what a human essence is what a human nature is and so we lose that end and so in the classical or framework that second point man as he could be if you realize its full potential is cut out and all you have left is man the human being as they are and then this task of ethics without necessarily an end

for it and so with the enlightenment what a number of thinkers enlightenment seek to do is find a new telos or a new end for the human being and that may become pleasure or aversion to pain or something like that so we do our ethics according to how we can bring the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people or that kind of thing and so utilitarianism is one of the philosophical movements that he treats and talks about that how do we get the greatest number of happiness or how do we get utility out of our ethics and in doing so he points out that a number of philosophers see a problem here because it's very difficult to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures or happiness and whose do you prioritize and there are all these different value judgments that are in there happiness is a concept that can be flexible and McIntyre quite harshly says it's a pseudo concept available for a wide variety of ideological uses so happiness isn't something that's solid that we're really based as our key laws and so moral judgments he will argue continue to be linguistic survivals and I've got a quote there that's a bit difficult but let's see if we can make sense of it he says linguistic survivals just mean as you'll remember from that early illustration of a catastrophe in the natural sciences you'll have terms like neutrino or mass or atomic weight and they just don't have their survivals they've kind of been cut adrift a bit from the context that made them intelligent so he says this the meaning of moral expressions is and remains such as would have been warranted only if at least one of the philosophical projects had been successful but the use the emotivist use is precisely what one would expect if philosophical projects had all failed so what I take them to mean there is when you say this is good this is a good action this is an ethical action the meaning of that statement is sound it or it

I should say the meaning of that statement would be valid if the enlightenment project had succeeded in providing a new goal or a new telos and so for us to say this is good we're appraising it on the basis of that older scheme as meaning but the use the way it's often used as we said before this is good translated I prefer this the use the way those statements are used is exactly what we would expect if the philosophical projects had failed which is what he says they have failed we haven't substituted an appropriate new telos an appropriate new goal for human nature and for our ethical movement to become good people we can tease that out a bit later but he'll say that a big way that this incoherence between saying this is good and indeed acting as though I prefer this without being the meaning is well shown in our discussion of rights of natural or human rights and what
McIntyre will say is quite critical of arguments for rights he'll say that just as utility or happiness the concept of rights have highly specific properties they can't always be demonstrated to argue for the rights of a human being qua human being doesn't give you a firm enough basis for rights there's a lot of pre-modern societies that just didn't have a concept of rights just based on being human and we need something more to ground that in and again what we often devolve into and talks about rights is my rights versus yours and we just get this loud protest and the invasion of one's rights by another's utility and again this incommensurability takes over and what it often just comes down to is ethics becoming unmasking the motives of arbitrary will or desire and the modern ethical task becomes one of deconstruction how do we tease out find out what manipulation is being put on me by this ethical command or indeed as we at
St. John's are familiar with what phobia is impinging on my rights so phobias will to power that type of thing what is behind ethical discourse when you're in a motivist context what are ethical terms and commands being used for and what McIntyre is going to do is run this whole project right up to Nietzsche who's standing in the ruins of the enlightenment and he says if there's nothing to morality if there's nothing to ethics but an expression of will then morality must be what my will creates and there's a rather chilling quotation of his in your outline there he says let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good and let us stop brooding about the moral values of our actions we want to become those we are human beings who are new unique incomparable who give themselves laws who create themselves and so one of
Macintyre's central chapters in the book is titled Nietzsche or Aristotle and what he's going to do is he's going to say either you have to follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the enlightenment project and end up with Nietzsche's diagnosis which is very incisive he thinks but then as well Nietzsche's solution or you have to go back and you have to say maybe that project started in the wrong place or maybe it didn't start in the most complete place and we need to do some retrieval of something like what Aristotle was after so Nietzsche or Aristotle and he treats

Aristotle quite carefully and fully and again today I'm going to have to go over that fairly quickly but a couple of the things he mines here for his own constructive process and I'll just make a disclaimer here that he's not seeking to revive Aristotle he will draw a lot from Aristotle but he does want to recognize the historical changes that have taken place some of the challenges and appropriate challenges to the Aristotelian scheme as well as some of the ways that
[34:27] Christians have handled that and adopted that and so he's looking back on it you know some 2,500 years later and saying look we're not just trying to revive that as it was there's adoption needs to take place but we can mine some good things from this thinker one of those things is the concept of the polis or the concept of a common good a determinant of good and he'll talk a lot about how the self was seen in classical society and how you couldn't account for virtues say apart from their embeddedness in a social structure and the self was connected with one's social role loyalties to tribe or city and he had this interesting comment where he says one of the things that we prize in our current moral philosophy or just thinking generally is the ability to detach oneself from a situation from social obligation or setting or whatever and then make appraisals on things and he says that's something if you were in a classical society they would see you as being less substantial something like a ghost like how do you detach yourself from your social role so he says that the virtues always take place within the polis one way that this is seen is in the way that aristotle sees friendship friendship was not primarily about mutual affection or even mutual utility but the common goal of the polis the common goal of the life of the city and the sustaining of this community that you have and so you have this orientation around the common good in contrast mcintyre looks at today's political scene looks at liberal politics today and he says that we have a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their common protection and he said politics essentially is holding the ring for everyone to do what is wise in his or her own eyes and goods are rendered private and politics just become a form of civil war then so you don't have that same concept of a common goal that we work towards and that's one of the things that he limits us losing and so you get a situation where you have people that argue for their freedom to marry someone of the same sex and others argue well as long as it doesn't have a hint on our freedom to practice our religion so again you have different goods and the ring is held for both and can we fit as much as possible into this world without necessarily working for that common good that all people see fully here's his definition of

Aristotelian ethics the education of the passions into conformity with pursuit of what theoretical reasoning identifies as the telos and practical reasoning as the right action to do in each particular time and place now I realize a number of these definitions are wordy and so on they're for your use if they're difficult they should be I mean it requires the context of his argument and he'll choose his words very carefully but I just give them to you for your use a couple of things to point out about the Aristotelian project of ethics one is that it has that telos again it has that notion of what human flourishing looks like and secondly he points out ethics have Aristotelian ethics you see strikingly few rules there he has this concept in the quote there practical reasoning is the right action to do in each particular time and place the word for that would be phrenesis and his way of applying principles his way of acting according to concrete circumstances that come up
I think it's a lovely way of doing it because again of course ethics are tied with a whole formation in character and some of these things I'll tease out here soon but yeah you have a character that can discern what's right it's not just a question of abstract principles and so on that you fulfill you're actually you're meant to live a life of virtue and you have a unity of life thereby so reclaiming virtue and its context what does what does McIntyre propose we take from this the first is the notion of intelligible action and I think this is very key for McIntyre let me use an illustration to get into this say you're standing by a bus stop say at Granville and King Ed and you have a person there who says this the name of the common wild duck is histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus the name of the common wild duck and there's no problem with the meaning of that sentence is there
I mean not it makes sense in a form but what was that person doing when they uttered that I mean if this person just went around uttering this at random we'd see that as a form of madness on the other hand that statement would be intelligible if he'd just come from a session with his psychotherapist who's trying to get him to overcome his shyness and he says well what shall I do and he's like well say something he's like well what do I say well just say anything so hence his choice another way that could be intelligible if he mistook you for the library visitor who'd asked him yesterday what the name of the common wild duck was in Latin and he retrieved that out to you

another case maybe he's a Soviet spy waiting at a prearranged rendezvous uttering the ill chosen code sentence meant to identify him to his contact so McIntyre says these are ways that we can hear that statement the name of the common wild duck as intelligible when we find its place in a narrative and he'll say that one of the concepts we need to retrieve is the notion of human life as a narrative unity birth to life to death and that virtues are exhibited in that narrative in that story of a human life and so we should give account for our actions we should be able to say this is why this action is intelligible and what he's writing against here are philosophers who would say things like that human life is composed of discrete actions which lead nowhere they have no order and all the storytellers do is impose an order on them

Sartre will say that so he's writing against that type of thing he's saying no there's a unity that we need to recover and a basis then for doing that ethic and I think it's important although we might not go so far as to say that human actions aren't unified as we discussed last week in regards to Psalm 90 often we lose that unity of a human life birth to life to death as the context for doing our ethics for acting virtuously death is often marginalized and so in Psalm 90 when we get the prayer number our days help us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom I think that's something similar to what MacIntyre is after by saying we need to see this life as unity and indeed mortality was often an important element in the classical tradition before looking at the story of a life this also this concept of a narrative unity to life and action being intelligible within that narrative works against the way that a lot of human social life nowadays is partitioned off and so you'll get people that have very different frames of reference or world views that they're inhabiting on the sales floor on the yoga mat in their literary study at the dinner table at church and the idea is that you have someone think in a unified way and act ethically in a unified way throughout all of those but the temptation is that you act differently on the sales floor say than you do at the dining table or whatever and so he's saying we want to recover that notion that the virtues and ethical decisions are made in the unity of human life that you learn to think in a certain way all the time and that you act according to a certain way all the time the last thing I'll say about intelligible action is I was reading one

[43:28] Christian ethicist who made a very interesting comment when he said he was talking about sexual ethics and he said premarital sex is unintelligible unintelligible to the Christian and he's saying we're not even going to conceive that term because marriage is the context we're working with that's the practice that we have as a community and so if you're going to talk about premarital sex that just doesn't make sense to us it's incoherent it doesn't work as a practice and so I thought that was an interesting way to put this and it is important for us to try we'll see this when we talk about practices and other things but to try in our practices in our discourse to have the gospel the gospel is intelligible but to be able to show that intelligibility to people someone remarked to me once that the gospel will often seem to be immoral in our expressive individualist culture so when you have that emotivism you know where it's about preference and so on if you tell someone to die to sell that will seem like you're doing something immoral you're impinging on the basic moral or virtue which is tolerance or which is letting people live and express themselves as they will so we have this challenge often where some of the terms of the gospel are unintelligible to people or they they come across even as immoral because they don't see the thick context they're coming out of which has to do with things of the nature of

God practices like marriage and commitment that type of thing so one of the things that I think McIntyre helps us with is saying think about this concept of intelligibility and think about what that means for how we speak the gospel how we evangelize that type of thing second point there are practices and intrinsic goods another thing he wants to try to recover is the notion of a practice which he sees as a cooperative human activity where intrinsic goods are realized we could think for instance of our liturgy of confession that type of thing I mentioned before trying to speak trying to tell someone that's not within the Christian framework the necessity of dying to self or that type of thing and that may seem unintelligible but maybe as they come and see the practices we're engaged in of liturgy of confession of that type of thing all of a sudden when you're there and you see people around you meaning speaking these words that gives some content to what dying to self means and it does indeed for us it forms us in what dying to self means it forms us and what it means to confess to receive forgiveness from God so it's it's it's it's one of the communal practices that we have where we can then recognize some of these intrinsic goods for those of you that were at a lecture this week

David Lyle Jeffries was a lecture on the EBC campus about education and was talking about how we often sacrifice those intrinsic goods like wisdom or virtue or that type of thing in education for technique or efficiency or skill and as we talked about earlier with manager with therapist that type of thing McIntyre's after this too he's saying we want to be sure that we're highlighting those intrinsic goods in a community of virtue and so on and so virtue your definition is there McIntyre calls it those dispositions again we're talking about a habit of being we're not just talking about a set of rules or a list of rules that you follow this is about being disposed towards doing the good those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices but will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good by enabling us to overcome the harms dangers temptations and distractions which we encounter which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good so there's an unknown element to it you have a telos you have a goal to which you're going in your ethics in your attempt to be a virtuous person but at the same time you continue to discover what that will look like and how maybe particularly that will look in your own life but as you undergo this quest you're not undergoing it as an unencumbered self or as a solitary self because virtues always take place in a key concept for MacIntyre which is the tradition or the living tradition and he's got a lovely definition of that an historically extended socially embodied argument and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition and MacIntyre I think has retrieved the concept of tradition well this isn't just nostalgia and this isn't just a static thing that we somehow appeal to it's an engaged setting it's dynamic it's where you argue and discuss what the goods are that you pursue and so and it has not yet completed character it's always moving towards the good and it's going to be the virtues or the lack of virtues that either sustain or weaken the tradition and he'll say that virtues are necessary for how that tradition continues on as it goes on arguing about how the good looks and it's given social context but he says we don't want to get into a situation where the self is isolated where the self is working on its own morals and we certainly don't want to get into the solipsism that you get with

Nietzsche where one just creates their own morality he says the concept the conception of a good of what we pursue when we're giving our ethics has to always be expounded in terms of practices of the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition so MacIntyre is trying to embed ethics again in things that they were they've always been embedded in in ways that we kind of intuit as people that go to church regularly he's trying to embed ethics in practices in things like liturgy confession etc in the narrative unity of a human life seeing it not as a bunch of discrete actions or roles that you play but one self with integrity and a virtue that works through all those different roles that someone might play and of a moral tradition and something that's been passed down to us and that we continue to engage and consider and so he'll say that we're at best no more than a co-author of our life because virtue ethics are always worked out in these various contexts contexts and I think that has as I've mentioned important implications for evangelism important implications for why we attend church and why we don't do religion or do kind of seek the ethical life take some of Jesus ethics whatever to then work out how we're going to be a good individual we come into the context of community into the context of practices and tradition to work these things out a couple notes there on translation

[51:30] I won't be able to treat this well but this did come up in the context of our talk about Charles Taylor how do you translate well if you're in one tradition if you're in one set of practices if you're seeking the good within a given context how do you translate that to another tradition or someone that's completely unmoored perhaps I think they're unmoored from tradition and one of the things that McIntyre argues against is the charge that he's a relativist and he says he does so by saying this he'll say you can actually defeat a rival tradition by first of all inhabiting it using let's say you use your philosophical imagination to inhabit and understand the terms and understand the presuppositions of it and so on as though you were a convinced adherent of it and then you look for the unsolved problems or the unresolved issues which every tradition has including one's own we can think of for instance if you look at the history of the Christian doctrine the working out of the

Trinitarian doctrine and how you have an epistemological crisis there or a challenge that comes to the Christian how are we going to work this out with different data these people with different thoughts on this and it's in that context that the tradition either succeeds and is able to move ahead and work with what it's been given or flounder and he'll say that what you can do in this course or in translation between your tradition and another is inhabit that tradition and then say here are some

of the unresolved issues and in fact they can't be resolved as well as they can if you take the resources from my tradition or this other tradition here and so he'll say that that's one way that he'll argue and so argument is always tradition you're not appealing to some neutral criteria but you will say here are the tradition here are the resources let's say
Christian tradition and we want to suggest those for you and your tradition because your tradition has this conflict in it that can't be resolved or it doesn't deal well with for instance death or whatever so that's one thing we can do finally how does this relate to theology I've been interspersing that throughout but I want to talk a bit about McIntyre and people that have dealt with him and now he himself has dealt with theology he says that some argument is possible and some ethical discourse is possible as I've mentioned you can inhabit traditions and so on but he ends on a rather bleak note he gives a bit of a qualified analogy to the dark ages the time when people of goodwill turned aside from the imperium and shoring that up and saying we need to create local communities as our space for seeking the good because we've lost confidence in that greater society or indeed the barbarians are at the gate
McIntyre will say quite strongly the barbarians are not at the gate this time they are among us the esthete the manager the therapist and he'll he ends with this cryptic prayer he says in light of the darkness that seems to be descended on us in our ethical discourse all the things we mentioned and how he characterizes morality today he says we are waiting not for a Godot but for another admittedly quite different Saint Benedict and that's the final line of this book and there's a certain irony because he argues for virtue and tradition but he's not throughout the book he's not arguing for any particular tradition or any particular virtue and the incompletion is part of the intriguing part of this the book is sort of a torso without a head and later he's going to he kind of alludes to Saint Benedict here later he's actually going to turn to Aquinas and turn to the commitment of of Thomism and he'll say that Aquinas is actually a better Aristotelian than Aristotle was and Aquinas has taught me that I need this metaphysical grounding and that I need to see the human telos the human goal as he quotes later the state of perfect happiness which is the contemplation of God in the beatific vision so he'll start to say I do recognize that the tradition I want to inhabit is in fact this Christian one this appropriation of Aristotle in this way and I'm going to put God as that telos recognize that God is that telos there's a book that I found helpful in this it's written by a professor at care named Jonathan Wilson and he's just a little book but he's adapting the thought of MacIntyre for the church it's called living faithfully in a fragmented world and Jonathan said that he sent this to [56:47] Alistair MacIntyre when he wrote it and MacIntyre went back and said that's great but I'm not particularly interested in theology I'm a philosopher so you do well about this and so then Jonathan mentioned this to Stanley Hauerwas who was his mentor of theological ethicists and Hauerwas said that's great then we're just going to keep painting MacIntyre with a theological brush as much as we can and a number of theologians have done that a lot of theologians have taken up MacIntyre's insights and saying yes there's this move towards Thomism that he makes but we want to continue to adopt him and deal with some of his insights theologically and someone that's been very helpful for me in this is Stanley Hauerwas and I just want to end with a few of his remarks he says that he uses the concept of virtue ethics and something of what MacIntyre's after by mining the classical tradition and so on he uses it to help Christians become what they are or what they already should be and a lot of this has been familiar to us tradition practices that type of thing but Hauerwas will say there's also dangers in virtue language for instance he doesn't call himself a virtue ethicist because that might assume or that might suggest that there are different ways of doing ethics and he's saying no the Christian one is what

I represent this isn't a little club or a little sect within that this is just trying to get ethics back on track and he'll say this we cannot begin with Aristotle's virtues and fill in the gaps with Christianity nor can we as Christians defend virtue first and Christianity later the strategy we often find prevalent in McIntyre and he'll say this the virtue tradition can be used by Christians but it shouldn't be built upon I think this is a good quote we believe that great Christian thinkers such as St. Paul and St. Thomas meant to teach us that Greek accounts of the virtue are there to be used by Christians not built upon these named two quite different things to use requires that one apply a thing within a framework significantly other than the one in which it originally appeared which is precisely what Christianity requires in so far as it re-found human life on the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so let's say we don't want to begin in virtue ethics we can appropriately take good things from them but our starting point does need to remain to be the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

and from that we can then take these good things that McIntyre would offer us but he's careful to say I'm not becoming a virtue ethicist as something distinct from being a Christian that is fundamentally my commitment but he does say that and in this way he references
Aquinas who says virtue isn't fundamentally our achievement which is something we could slip into by appropriating this Greek tradition it is something infused in us by God's action something given to us by God and here I reference the text I read at the start 2nd Peter where it says God divine power has given us everything we need for life and God in us that being said that infusion doesn't happen all at once and so in our text from 2nd Peter it says for this very reason because he has provided everything for this very reason make every effort to add to your faith knowledge virtue etc and so in that way I think some of MacIntyre's project is helpful for helping us understand the nature of how we make every effort how practices how community how intelligible action all play a part in this to slide down to the last point there a new monasticism
Jonathan Wilson again in this book takes up MacIntyre's final line of waiting for a new Saint Benedict and says that we want to consider some of the ways that monasticism can be helpful for us or retrieval of some of the ways the monastic life works and he says this isn't a withdrawal for protection from the world but it is an attempt to recover central things you'll hear the term new monasticism around I think it was a cover story of Christianity today last year but Jonathan Wilson makes a case for this and you'll see the four points there that he thinks are necessary for the church and the church in a sense as a monastic community in the larger society and he'll say we do this to recover central things to recover the life and witness of the church to make the church's witness intelligible to its own members again and then of course to make it intelligible and compelling to the society at large and so the practices the living tradition of the church become apologetic for us so I'll end by just reminding us of the
[62:21] Westminster Catechism the human's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever and that needs to be the centralizing focus of our lives and so in our fragmented world may we learn in our practices our lives our traditions the psalmist's posture when he prays you are my lord apart from you I have no good thing amen thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you do you find do you find yourself as you immerse yourself in these suspicious of absolutes that you find there?

Is that the anathema of a lot of philosophers that where religion is concerned, let's say Christianity, there are many absolutes that are embedded in it?
Which, of course, ruins the argument, doesn't it? It sort of ends the argument. So, when Jesus was confronted by Herod, he would say a thing to him, but earlier he called him a fox.
So, he did it without sin, but we couldn't do it without sin, probably. So, Jesus also was a philosopher.
He was able to talk to the Greeks. He knew their philosophy. And he was able to get to the nitty-gritty, probably with absolutes.
[64:21] Probably with absolutes. But it is anathema, isn't it, to philosophers? Are you a philosopher? Would you call yourself a philosopher? I'm not. This is out of my discipline, for sure. I see, yeah.

But absolutes does seem to be the great barrier to great thinkers. Sure. Sure. And I think McIntyre is helpful.
Like, when I talked about his concept of translation a bit, and how to get into another tradition, I think one of the things you can do is, for instance, challenge the ways that even people who say there are no absolutes are using a lot of absolutes implicitly in some of their arguments, and say, in fact, you are making universal claims, and maybe your issue shouldn't be about, you know, there being universal claims.
Another thing you can do is, yeah, as you inhabit that, to say, look, these are universal claims that are far more worthy of your adherence, or whatever.
But yeah, to do that, that kind of work, I guess. Because if you, for instance, if you were to make an absolute claim, I mean, one of the things that McIntyre helps us with is if you say, this is an absolute, Jesus is Lord, or whatever, you need to think about how that's going to come across to someone.
[65:39] Because you may have a very good notion of what that means, but someone else may not. For instance, with emotivism being the key of the day, they might say, well, Bill, you're not actually appealing to an absolute, you're just trying to get power over me, aren't you?

Or that's just your preference, and you're just disguising it as an absolute, you know? And that's, in fact, immoral for you to do, you know? And so I think it's important for us, if we use the language of absolutes, or whatever, to be aware that that's how it often comes across.
And I think McIntyre is helpful in, like, helping us to realize that's the way it comes across, and learn to say what we mean, you know? And learn for that person to hear what we mean, which is not, we're not trying to make a power play in the sense that they might mean it, you know?
Certainly we think that the Lord Jesus Christ has a claim on people's lives, but that's not something that you yourself, just as Bill Chandler or as David Robinson, are trying to levy over them.
That's something you're appealing to that's, you know, that is a reality beyond us both. And the character of that Lord Jesus Christ is not the domineering, et cetera, person. This is your loving Lord, the crucified and risen one, and so on.
[66:50] So I think, I think that's what McIntyre's helpful in this discussion of absolutes, is the way that absolutist language can be misunderstood or seen as invested with something that's not appropriate to it.

So, that's that. Yes? Good. It is perhaps worth saying that absolutist language, when challenged, can always come back and point out that the challenger is using absolutist language himself and that you can't get away from it.
So that if, if you're in the kind of pop post-modernist discussion where somebody grandly says there are no absolute values, all you have to do is to punch them on the nose or step on their foot or something and draw out of them a complaint, you shouldn't have done that, and then demonstrate to see that this person is appealing to an absolute, which maybe he or she didn't recognize that, recognize was inhabiting their money.
But who used it to us? Everybody has absolutes, so that it's absolute against absolute. And McIntyre sees through that, and I think it's a good thing for all of us that he does.
Yeah. No, that's not. And it's interesting that the claim there are no absolutes is often seen as the modest thing to say. You know what I mean?
[68:37] Like, it's just the way of not claiming an absolute over someone else when in fact it's maybe the most immodest claim I've ever heard. You know, there's an incredible hubris behind it in saying I can see past all these absolute so-called that people seem to commit their lives to in these various traditions.

In fact, I have the vantage point that sees beyond all of them. And that's what McIntyre says. No, you're always in a tradition. And so what tradition is that going to be? If you're not aware of the tradition you're thinking out of, then that's a particularly, I think, unfortunate place to be.
And he would say, expose the tradition and expose the historic, the genealogy of that tradition and then you have your discourse. And then hopefully you can find premises that meet, you know, or some form of commonality in this.
Is it helpful, I wonder, to tell people, because you may, you folks may not know, that McIntyre has traveled and been there. I mean, he started, and I'm now going back to the days when I was a theological student reading his first published work, he started as a kind of neo-orthodox protestant. He inhabited that world for a time, but then discovered that he could find no compelling reason to do so and became a Marxist.
[69:58] He inhabited that world, for a time, until he saw the unanswered and unanswerable questions that are built into the Marxist scheme of things, because we all know Marxism cannot deal with human sin.

And when you look at real people, you cannot avoid seeing the sin. So where do we go from there? So quietly, he has moved on from Marxism into Christianity.
Can you verify, I think he's a Roman Catholic now. That's what I'm saying. He certainly teaches at Notre Dame University, which is a Roman Catholic institution, and he certainly appreciates Thomas.
Well, I would pat him on the back for that, because Thomas is really magnificent. that he's traveled, and a lot of the arguments that he constructs in after virtue reflect what he discovered on his travels.
And I think that, well, I mustn't get going on this, but I think that often when we discuss with colon intellectuals, or at least people who think they're intellectuals, I put it that way because a lot of people who think they're intellectuals are actually driven by unacknowledged prejudices and traumas and all sorts of distorting factors, which, I mean, in their makeup or their history, which

they're not acknowledging.
[71:46] People like Dawkins, for instance, obviously he was badly hurt by some form of Christianity early in life. That explains Dawkins.

You can't explain him in any other terms. But, sorry, getting back to where we were, I was going to say, intellectuals, just because this is the truth, regularly the truth about them, they have to be given space when we discuss with them, space to travel and prove in their own experience, by their own intellectual travels, that they are, well, like the emperor, you know, in the history story, the emperor has no clothes.
They don't have rational arguments explaining everything that they thought they could explain. They are, in fact, people living on prejudice and fantasy, wishful thinking, so on, and their position at base is no more respectable than anybody else's position, which is based on fantasy and wishful thinking.
But intellectuals take time, I mean, people who take themselves as the intellectuals take time to get there, as did, like, entirely so.
So, I think it's worth saying that, I mean, I understand, talking, in talking to intellectuals with ultimately an evangelistic purpose, you can't hammer them into the kingdom.
[73:31] You've got to give them space to discover for themselves, helped perhaps by things that you've said to them, that they are like the emperor with no clothes.

This is the wisdom of Sheikah. Sheikah, incidentally. The wisdom, I mean, that Sheikah applies so skillfully to root-less pseudo-intellectual students who came to Labrie, you know, and he had his own praise for what he started doing as he took them through their own and answered intellectual figure fixed points.
He spoke of himself as taking the roof off. It's a wonderful phrase. He kept putting to them considerations which showed them that, in fact, they were living in a house with no roof.
and that they couldn't allow themselves to stay there or they'd go mad. Students, I mean, students see things very vividly in those terms.
Well, that's the same sort of endeavor in a different context. I think, from that entire endeavor after virtue. what he wants to do is to sow the seeds in the minds of intellectual ethicists which eventually will make them realize that they've got no clothes unless, well, in due course he will reveal to them unless they turn across.
[75:12] Yeah, and not only sow the ideas but to also show the community the practices and so on that can reveal some of your business for what it is. Do you have a hard question?

Oh, that is very twisted. Sorry, do you believe that when the early Christians said, Jesus is Lord, that is to say, Caesar is Lord is not true.
Would they have said, yes, come, that confession, they're both absolute, but the practice of the church revealing Jesus tells you what Lordship now is.
Yes. Suffering, servanthood, lowliness is now Lordship. I mean, I think the other Christians may have just known what MacIntyre was saying. They would have thought, is there any other way to do it?
Yeah. Do you think that's true or am I reading that back into them? I think that's precisely true, yeah. I think that, and that's, when MacIntyre says at the start of his book, he says, I think, like when he says in writing for the plain person, he'll say, this is often what is intuitive by people who are involved in such practices.
[76:18] And I think, yeah, when the early church was living out a suffering, disturbing communal life within the context of the situation where you have a rival claim to Lordship, yeah, then I think they knew well that they were trying to qualify the claims of Caesar's own Lordships by saying, this is what Lordship should look like as embodied in our community.

I think it got muddled a bit when, yeah, that, well, obviously, in the historical stuff that's happened since, but just in a, when you have a church that's not persecuted in that same way, it's easier. When you have a public square that you're trying to speak into, and you tend to thin out maybe that message in order to get heard, and so you maybe lose that, like, robust communal practice of that time.
But I think you're right, the early Christians were certainly onto that, and this is, McIntyre explains them well here. Thank you. Okay, we've got a little bit of time, but, um, thank you, thank you, David. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.