

Teach the Stories, not the Debates: On MacIntyre’s Suggestion to Use Novels to Teach Ethics

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Teaching ethics is a thoroughly questionable activity. After all, a teacher in a university is typically meant to have earned the right to teach students in a subject by virtue of having developed a certain expertise in that subject. But most of us, I think, would balk at the idea that teachers of ethics are “ethical experts”¹: we are not necessarily any better than the average person at *being* ethical,² and if we are to be distinguished from the common run of people in anything it is likely to be simply in understanding a bit more deeply how conceptually difficult it is to determine what being ethical amounts to. And so it is natural to make the ethics class about that—to teach students not how to be good, but how to think in a careful and analytically rigorous way about debates about being good. Of course, in doing so, the ethics teacher need not abandon the properly ethical goal entirely. Indeed, she may tell herself, not totally implausibly, that the ability to think carefully about ethical debates, even if it does not itself amount to a good life, is at least a contributing element, and anyway that it is an ability the teacher is actually capable of developing in her students.

An ethics teacher inclined to this line of thinking will not find much encouragement in the writings of Alasdair MacIntyre. One of MacIntyre’s key lines of thought, which has been prominent throughout his writing career, undermines the link on which this self-justification depends. This line of thought stems from the observation that the debates we moderns have about political and moral controversies are interminable and mostly unproductive. The different sides of these debates appeal in their basic premises to fundamental norms and values that are different from and indeed incommensurable with the fundamental norms and values of the other side of the debate.³ Modern moral philosophers, in MacIntyre’s view, have not sought to understand why this is so. They have primarily set about clarifying the concepts involved in those fundamental norms and values. Many no doubt sincerely believed that conceptual clarification could resolve some of those debates, but in fact the result has been further entrenchment of opposing sides.

Such a result is bad enough for moral philosophy, but it is potentially disastrous for the teacher of ethics, if she wants to hold onto the idea that what she teaches will contribute in some way to the real moral education of her students. For if the best material available to her to teach presents

only more intellectually sophisticated versions of the familiar disputes, then she runs the serious risk of teaching her students not that they should take care when thinking about ethics, but that they should take care to sound sophisticated when talking about ethics. After all, if philosophical analysis does not actually move the debates toward resolution, what's the point? Ethics then appears to the student not as a serious attempt to grapple with the problems of life, but as a source of lofty-sounding potential justifications for whichever position she was already inclined towards.⁴ It would, in a way, be better if students found *that* to be pointless. In all likelihood, they will instead find that such a source of rationalizations is all too useful for them in their professional lives.

The problem, of course, is that if MacIntyre is right it is difficult to see what to do about the situation. One way to avoid giving students this impression is to insist that the debates *do* terminate ... in one's own position. But that doesn't solve the problem. Then the teacher is not a teacher at all (at least not of anything *philosophical*), but simply one more shrill voice in the interminable moral debates of modernity. But how can one avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism without falling back into the feeble project of merely teaching the debate?

I want to argue that one way of navigating through this particular Scylla and Charybdis is suggested by MacIntyre in *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity* (ECM), in the parenthetical remark that “[o]ne test of whether a particular academic course in ethics is or is not being taught in a morally serious way is whether or not its students are taught that a close reading of certain novels is indispensable to their learning what now needs to be learned.”⁵ The claim about novels is a toss-off in the book; MacIntyre doesn't try to explicate its meaning there or elsewhere in the book. But a reader familiar with his views about the role of narratives in human life, whether from ECM or his earlier work, will have some guesses.

MacIntyre's view, in brief, is that narrative structure is a necessary condition for the intelligibility of human action. When we seek to understand ourselves and others, to understand what goods we are or ought to be pursuing, we must understand our actions and those of others in the context of some kind of story in which those actions make sense. Such enacted stories are, for MacIntyre, essentially open-ended but also teleological: i.e., they are stories that are necessarily unpredictable and subject to revision, but they are also stories about attempts to find and achieve some good (or avoid some evil).⁶ In MacIntyre's view, a great deal of the impoverishment of modern moral discourse and the philosophy that stems from it is due to the forgetting of this point. The interminability of our debates is due in part to an “emotivist” or “expressivist” culture, one

which understands moral debates not as communal attempts at reaching a shared conception of some commonly held good, or in other words as episodes in a shared and ongoing narrative, but simply as warring expressions of subjectively held value judgments, in which both sides seek to exert their own will on that of the other side by whatever means necessary. For their own part, modern moral philosophers don't tend to try to understand their *own* activity in narrative terms, either. Thus MacIntyre's familiar claim that modern moral philosophy has forgotten the historical conditions which gave rise to it. Modern moral philosophy, even when it seeks to provide anti-expressivist arguments, is nonetheless ideologically expressivist and anti-narrative—it seeks to assert that formally valid arguments are more effective weapons in the morality wars than mere insults and exhortations, but it does not try to understand why we are warring in the first place and whether it is good for us.

MacIntyre suggests novels as a way of teaching ethics in a “morally serious way.” MacIntyre doesn't seek to define “moral seriousness,” but it is clear that he means something other than sophisticated and rigorous philosophical argumentation.⁷ What is dangerous about modern moral philosophy (and about foregrounding it in ethics classes) is that it encourages us to confuse moral seriousness with the application of admittedly valuable but limited analytic skills to the questions of ethics. Moral seriousness for MacIntyre is instead a matter of seeking to face squarely the root causes of our moral problems, especially under conditions in which it is tempting not to.⁸ It is here that the idea of lives as enacted narratives proves indispensable. Moral seriousness consists in insisting on asking oneself the question, in relation to one's actions, “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”⁹ And that requires thinking about one's actions in relationship to others, and in relation to the sociological and historical conditions in which one finds oneself.

Why might novels help students to learn to ask that question? It might be tempting here to give a simple and universal answer, namely, to suggest that reading novels is just in itself morally salubrious. Novels are themselves narratives, of course, and thus reading them is bound to make students think in narrative terms, and thus perhaps apply that thinking to their own lives. It has even been argued that reading literary fiction improves the human ability that researchers call “Theory of Mind,” i.e., the ability to understand the beliefs and desires of people distinct from oneself.¹⁰ But it is important to see that MacIntyre's claim about the value of using novels to teach ethics is not universal in scope.¹¹ He stresses that it is not the reading of novels as such, but only of “certain” novels, that will help. Earlier in the same paragraph, MacIntyre suggests that different

kinds of novels will form people in different kinds of ways, and contrasts the way novels like those of Austen or Eliot would inform moral development with the way novels like those of Woolf or Murdoch might.¹² And in both *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* and *After Virtue*, MacIntyre points to Sartre's *La Nausée* as an example of a novel whose primary import is precisely to *undermine* the points about narrative MacIntyre is keen to stress.¹³

Nor will it do to advance the familiar argument that novels (or fictions generally, including short stories, films, etc.) serve well in an introductory capacity for ethics and other philosophy subjects, since they are accessible entry points. It is true, of course, that authors of these fictions generally intend to appeal to wide audiences, and so the barrier to entry tends to be lower than for, e.g., technical philosophical prose. But first, we can repeat the previous point: if this were all there was to it, any novel would do, so long as it dealt with moral problems in some way or another. And second, this line of argument undermines MacIntyre's key claim that reading novels is a necessary condition for the moral *seriousness* of the course of instruction, a seriousness we are likely to avoid unless we are forced to develop it. If the novel is to have special pedagogical value, it will not lie in its accessibility but in its peculiar ability to help us tackle the problems of living an enacted narrative; those are problems that persist even at the highest levels of moral development. Indeed, the ways in which MacIntyre himself makes use of examples from novels in his own philosophical work suggests that their usefulness persists even at relatively high levels of development of moral reflection (presuming that MacIntyre's reflections themselves evince just such a high level of development).

And so, a good ethics instructor will have to select the novel or novels to be used with a great deal of care, and the fact that the novels present a serious challenge to her students, or at any rate are not universally accessible, will often be a point in favor of choosing them.¹⁴ For example, a novel could invite students to compare their own way of life with that of a character in a very different social and historical situation, which lacks some of the problems endemic to their own situation but includes different and unfamiliar ones. Another novel might present the challenge of seeing written out in black and white the dangerous implications of a certain kind of evaluative judgment to which they are inclined, or which is encouraged by or even taken for granted in the culture in which they live or the institutions within which they work. And certainly any novel that will develop the kind of moral outlook MacIntyre promotes will present the challenge of needing to understand what character traits allow the characters to understand and respond well to the

problems of their own situation, and how the reader herself might cultivate those same traits in herself.

Of course, a particularly good novel might present all of these challenges in one and the same story. Such a story would require for its proper understanding the meeting of many imaginative and moral challenges, but would also hopefully provide some of the materials necessary for meeting those challenges. It is, I think, for this reason and not because of any romanticized devotion to the “great books” that the “certain novels” MacIntyre likes to recommend (e.g., the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot) tend to fall into the fairly small range of classic, realist novels from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, and novels from later periods that are obviously influenced by their example (e.g., the novels of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch). Part of what is distinctive about these novels is their sociological ambition: novels like *Persuasion*, *Middlemarch*, and *Crime and Punishment* seek not just to tell a story about individual characters, but to do so in the context of a larger world whose social, political, and economic conditions place constraints on action, and thus whose (often explicit) description is itself part of the novelist’s task.¹⁵ Such novels are particularly apt to encourage their readers to develop what MacIntyre likes to call “sociological self-knowledge”: roughly speaking, the knowledge of how one’s own individual narrative fits in with the current social, political, and economic situation and its history.¹⁶ But the other part of their distinctiveness lies in the fact that they don’t conceive of their descriptive ambition in purely theoretical, value-free terms. A good novel can describe, in one and the same story, what a society is like and how individuals make moral choices within it. In so doing, it can implicitly praise or condemn certain kinds of social structures, encourage certain kinds of responses to it, and (most important for MacIntyre) help to identify the virtues most needed to navigate the problems it poses.¹⁷

Thus, the distinctive pedagogical value of the novel lies in the combination of sociological self-knowledge and unflinching treatment of moral dilemmas in one narrative whole. That is valuable because it reflects the fact that a human life actually is a narrative whole, and not a series of detachable parts. A key part of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity is that it encourages modern individuals to compartmentalize their lives based on their various social roles and their competing obligations.¹⁸ If MacIntyre is right that human lives are morally charged narrative wholes, then in order to understand my life, I have to tell *one* story with *one* character at its center (myself); otherwise, any deviations from what I take to be my basic obligations can simply be understood

as required by the obligation of some different role, which allows me to ignore altogether basic questions about what kind of person I should be, what character traits I should develop, what goods I should pursue. One duty of an ethics instructor is to encourage students who are going into various professions not to allow the norms, whether formal or informal, of the (corruptible) institutions in which they work to undermine their commitment to more basic ethical values.¹⁹ But, as I said above, it can be difficult to convey this to students without reverting to dogmatism, e.g., by simply appealing to some basic ethical value that the student *ought* to endorse. If one is unconvinced, as MacIntyre is, that modern moral philosophy can effectively solve this problem simply by providing a rigorous and clearly articulated set of debates about these issues, then the appeal of novels is evident. The dramatization a novel provides can suggest answers to moral dilemmas, and invite certain moral reactions, without didactically insisting upon them, all while providing the background information necessary for understanding how those moral issues arise from modern life in the first place. They thus provide a model for seriousness in moral thinking very different from that of modern moral philosophy, and one arguably more appropriate to the problems of moral life.

Notes

1. For some recent discussion of this question in one of its most practically urgent forms (viz., bioethics), see David Archard, "Why Moral Philosophers Are not and Should not Be Moral Experts," *Bioethics* 25.3 (2011):119–127; and John-Stewart Gordon, "Moral Philosophers Are Moral Experts! A Reply to David Archard," *Bioethics* 28.4 (2014): 203–206.
2. See, for example, the study of Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, "The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors: Relationships Among Self-Reported Behavior, Expressed Normative Attitude, and Directly Observed Behavior," *Philosophical Psychology* 27.3 (2014): 293–327, and a replication study by Phillip Schönneker and Johannes Wagner, "The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors: A Replication Extension in German-Speaking Countries," *Philosophical Psychology* 32.4 (2018): 532–559.
3. See MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6–11. MacIntyre's examples are debates about just war, abortion, and universal access to education and health care.

4. A particularly striking example of the phenomenon: I had a precocious, brave, and especially open student once who told a very personal story in class about her father's death, and how among other things it inspired in her a strong commitment to the value of human dignity. But she resolutely refused to take that insight as valid for anyone other than herself (i.e., refused to take it *as an insight* at all). It was her own strongly held view, but holding it strongly did not for her imply that others should hold it, too. And it is hard to blame her for this strange position: she took it not (or at least not merely), as some college teachers seem to think, because of some deep relativism baked into her generation's DNA, but in part, I think, because the standard presentation of competing ethical theories (along with other cultural forces, of course) suggested to her that acceptance of a value orientation is rather like picking which sports team one will root for.
5. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 219.
6. See especially MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–218.
7. This is not to suggest, of course, that MacIntyre does (or we should) regard careful, rigorous philosophical argumentation as anything other than a good thing, *ceteris paribus*.
8. It is worth noting that MacIntyre comes close here to one component of existentialist conceptions of the relationship of human beings to value: namely, the idea that our everyday lives are often based on deep contradictions, which require ever more sophisticated evasions (which Sartre collectively calls “bad faith”) if we are to save ourselves the trouble of trying to resolve them. We might thus compare MacIntyre's “moral seriousness” with, e.g., Sartre's emphasis on responsibility or Kierkegaard's use of the term “earnestness.” Compare John J. Davenport, “Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre,” in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative and Virtue*, eds. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago & Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 276–283. Of course, while the (Sartrean) existentialist sees the evasion of responsibility as the human plight in general, MacIntyre will insist that this is a problem local to modernity, and in principle capable of solution. In this he is closer to Marx.
9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.
10. See David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” *Science* 342.6156 (2013): 377–380.

11. The claim that novels make people morally better is misleading anyway. Good literary fiction, when it touches on moral subjects, rather obviously does so in a complex rather than a didactic way. We can say of it what Nietzsche said of great pain: "I doubt that [it] makes us 'better'—but I know that it makes us *deeper*"; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6–7. Of course, all other things being equal, it might be better to be "deeper," and that is part of what MacIntyre might mean by moral seriousness. But this hardly implies that those who read lots of literary fiction will tend to be higher on the ethical scoreboard. Whatever else it does, literary fiction is bound to complicate us in ways that make us less, rather than more, predictable. Insofar as we conceive of being "morally better" as predictably performing (or refraining from) a certain predefined set of actions, we will certainly have to deny that literary fiction makes us so.
12. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 219.
13. See *ibid.*, 232–233; compare MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 214.
14. Of course, any good teacher will give *some* thought to accessibility, since it is simply a pedagogical error to present students with challenges they are not equipped to face. An instructor has to think long and hard about how to avoid that error, and can only do so if she knows who her students are. All I am trying to do here is to undermine the familiar thought that the usefulness of novels lies primarily in their accessibility. The kind of usefulness it seems to me that MacIntyre wishes to attribute to them depends upon their presenting certain (hopefully surmountable) moral and imaginative challenges.
15. Of course, capitalism in particular and something like the Marxist description and critique of it loom large in MacIntyre's own philosophical analysis of modernity. See especially *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 93–101, but also his "The Irrelevance of Ethics," in *Virtue and the Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, eds. Andrius Bielskis and Kelvin Knight (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7–21. Given this, it is no surprise that many of the novels he recommends are set in the centuries of capitalism's early development. It is also worth remembering here the well-known influence of the novelist Balzac on the theorizing of Marx and Engels, the latter of whom famously said that "I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians put together." See Engels' letter to Margaret Harkness, April 1888, in *Marx and Engels on*

Literature and Art, eds. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973), 115.

16. For further discussion of sociological self-knowledge, see MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 111–112, 211–213. To have it, he says, is “to know who you and those around you are in terms of your and their roles and relationships to each other, to the common goods of family, workplace, and school, and to the structures through which power and money are distributed” (211).
17. It is worth noting that on this point MacIntyre was critical of Marx, who was famously hesitant to provide a specifically *moral* critique of capitalism: “Marx [...] supposed that if individuals in their social and economic roles act out their parts with systemic regularity, they cannot be called to account as responsible moral agents for what they do. But this is a mistake. For at key points the system can be successfully resisted and even changed. And a first condition of its being so resisted, of knowing when and how to resist it, is that its workings are understood in moral terms.” See MacIntyre, “The Irrelevance of Ethics,” 17.
18. The theme is introduced in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204; for a fuller treatment see his “Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency,” in *Ethics & Politics: Selected Essays*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 186–204.
19. For this reason, there is not necessarily any need for a business ethics class to use novels *about* business, or for a medical ethics class to use novels *about* medicine, and so on. Indeed, such a selection might encourage rather than diminish the compartmentalization impulse. What is important is to find a story that dramatizes the more general moral challenges that a person working in the modern business or medical world will have to face (e.g., challenges with how to value money and efficiency, how to deal with tragic conflicts between respecting the value of individuals and following the norms of institutions, and so on).