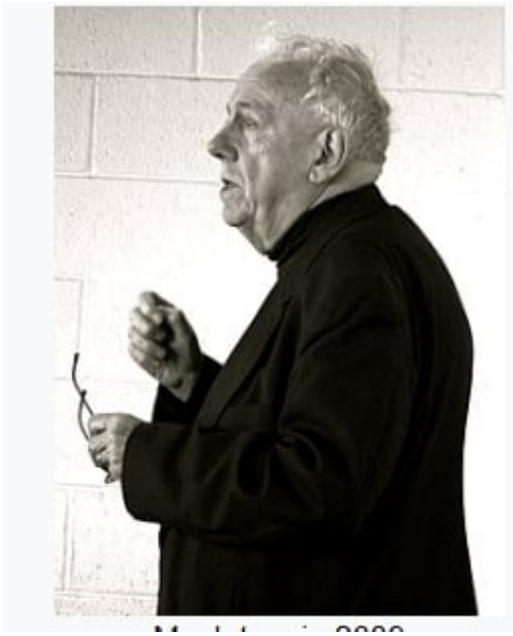
Remembering Alasdair MacIntyre: Truth, Practices, and the University

By Patrick Keeney

The death of Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre on May 21 of this year, at the age of 95, marks the passing of one of the most formidable and influential critics of modern moral thought in the twentieth century. Best known for his seminal work *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre's intellectual journey—from early Marxism to a mature Thomism—was characterized by a sustained effort to expose the fractures within contemporary ethical discourse and to recover a moral tradition rooted in the classical and Christian understanding of human flourishing.



In an age when the cultural inheritance of the West is increasingly met with indifference, if not outright contempt, MacIntyre's work stands as a sober reminder of what is lost when we sever ourselves from the moral and metaphysical foundations that once undergirded our civilization. His critique of the Enlightenment project, along with his deep-seated suspicion of bureaucratic managerialism and the reduction of politics to a form of liberal proceduralism, has found a receptive audience among many conservative thinkers.

Yet to view his ideas solely through a partisan lens is to misunderstand their philosophical depth and ambition. Central to his project is a more profound concern: the revival of a

moral anthropology grounded not in abstract theories but in the realities of lived human experience—an anthropology that genuinely acknowledges our dependence, vulnerability, and our potential to flourish within communities and practices aimed at shared goals.

This vision reaches its fullest expression in his 1999 book *Dependent Rational Animals*, where he extends Aristotle's definition of the human being as a "rational animal" by emphasizing our embodied vulnerability and social dependence. For MacIntyre, we are not isolated agents pursuing private goods, but beings whose flourishing relies on our participation in practices and communities focused on shared goals. It is within these networks of tradition-bound activity that we learn to exercise reason, foster virtue, and pursue the common good.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre famously argued that our modern moral language is a fractured remnant of a once-cohesive worldview. In a now-classic analogy, he likened our moral condition to that of survivors of a civilizational catastrophe, who only possess scattered pieces of an ethical vocabulary, lacking the conceptual framework that once gave their words and ideas coherence. As a result, our public moral disagreements are not only endless but also incommensurable. Terms such as "virtue," "justice," and "duty" still circulate in our discourse, but they have become, in his words, mere "echoes of a former self," detached from the context and vision that once imbued them with force and meaning.

To address this moral fragmentation, MacIntyre turned to the concept of practices – a key element in his effort to restore a meaningful understanding of human flourishing. For MacIntyre, practices provide a way to rebuild moral life from within, rooted not in abstract rules or personal preferences, but in socially grounded forms of excellence. Unlike the instrumental perspective that dominates much of modern life – where activities are mainly valued for their utility –

MacIntyre describes a practice as a consistent, socially recognized activity, such as architecture, teaching, medicine, or hockey, each with its internal goods and standards of excellence. These internal goods aren’t external rewards, such as fame, money, or power, but rather the genuine satisfactions and accomplishments that can only be achieved through disciplined involvement with the goods internal to the activity itself.

These internal goods require active practice; they cannot be achieved through mere passive observation or ratiocination. They require developing qualities such as honesty, courage, and patience, which enable the practitioner to engage meaningfully with the activity and be shaped by it in turn. For example, one does not become a skilled hockey player simply by reading about the game or watching it from the stands. Mastery only comes through sustained practice: learning to skate, pass, shoot, and respond wisely to the game’s flow. The same applies to teaching, medicine, the arts, or any other meaningful human pursuit. In every case, excellence is closely connected to the internalization of standards passed down through a living tradition.

Crucially, human practices are not carried out in isolation. They are rooted within communities that pass their traditions down through generations. It is through participation in these communities—via apprenticeship, imitation, and mutual accountability—that practitioners come to understand and internalize the values at stake. Practices thus function not only as pathways to human excellence but also as schools of character, shaping individuals in the habits and judgments necessary to pursue the good collectively.

Nowhere is this insight more urgent than in the context of the modern university. For MacIntyre, the university at its best is not a service provider catering to consumer demands, nor a place to prepare workers, nor a crucible for social experimentation; rather, it is a community of inquiry

sustained by practices oriented toward the search for truth. Teaching and scholarship, rightly understood, are not reducible to the transmission of information or the conferral of credentials. They are practices governed by internal standards—rigorous thinking, intellectual honesty, open argument, and sustained effort —whose proper end is understanding, not utility; wisdom, not technique.

Mark Mercer, a philosophy professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, offers a compelling analogy—drawing on MacIntyre's insights—to illuminate the academic vocation. He compares the pursuit of truth in the university to trying to win in hockey: "The search for truth is to the academic endeavour what trying to win is to playing hockey," he writes. "Trying to win and seeking the truth shape and guide one's efforts, but the main point is the engagement."

In both areas, excellence is not measured merely about outcomes. Instead, it resides in developing habits, virtues, and types of judgment that are natural to the activity itself. What matters is not just that someone has scored a goal or received an A on a term paper, but that they have performed well, meaning with integrity, discipline, and a dedication to the core values of the practice.

A well-played game of hockey, like a well-conducted academic inquiry, is valuable not for its outcomes but for what it embodies—an expression of disciplined skill, integrity, and thoughtful engagement. For Professor Mercer, the university should be understood in precisely these terms: as a community where the standards of excellence are defined by the intrinsic goods of intellectual practice, such intellectual virtues as rigorous thinking, open dialogue, respectful exchange of criticism, and the ability to connect across different fields of knowledge.

University practices cannot be subordinated to external objectives—whether economic utility, ideological conformity,

or bureaucratic targets—without fundamentally distorting their purpose. To instrumentalize the university in this way is to transform inquiry into performance and education into mere credentialing. It is to exchange the pursuit of understanding for the production of outcomes.

The historic mission of the university, in MacIntyrean terms, is a place where inquiry is pursued for its own sake, where the pursuit of truth is not driven by profit or political gain, but because it is worth knowing. To subordinate that pursuit to external goals is not just to misuse the university; it is to dismantle the very practices that give it meaning. In stripping away these practices, we not only weaken academic standards but also undermine the moral and intellectual foundations that make higher learning possible in the first place.

This insight is especially significant for the modern university, which often appears to have lost confidence in its mission. In an era when higher education is increasingly shaped by market imperatives, political agendas, or bureaucratic mandates, MacIntyre reminds us that the university, at its best, is not a service provider nor an ideological apparatus, but a *community of inquiry*—oriented not by consensus or utility, but by a *shared and sustained pursuit of truth*, however complex, contested, or incomplete that pursuit may be. Absent this orientation, academic life risks devolving into a series of managerial procedures and measurable outputs, hollowed of their deeper intellectual and moral substance.

What, then, would it mean to embody MacIntyre's vision within the context of a university? At its most basic level, it would require rejecting the now-familiar tendency to reduce education to workforce training or to view students merely as future employees or consumers. This is not only a narrowing of the university's purpose, but also a fundamental distortion of its moral vocation. For MacIntyre, the university is not a

neutral space for the transactional exchange of information, nor is it a tool of economic efficiency. It is, instead, a community structured by *practices*—tradition-bound activities directed toward internal goods that both cultivate excellence and form character.

To reimagine the university in this light is to recover it as a moral and civic enterprise—a place where the pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from the cultivation of judgment, responsibility, and care. Education, rightly understood, is not a commodity to be consumed, nor a service to be delivered, but a formative journey through which students are initiated into living traditions of thought, taught to discern standards of excellence, and shaped by the virtues essential to personal integrity and the common good.

Restoring such a vision requires more than just curricular reform or institutional rebranding. It demands the intentional development of intellectual and moral virtues—such as patience, honesty, humility, and courage—that allow for thoughtful engagement with difficult questions and meaningful conversations across differences. These virtues are not cultivated in isolation; they grow within communities where excellence is valued as an internal good, where practices are honoured and maintained, and where tradition is seen not as a constraint but as an inheritance—a living legacy that guides inquiry and grounds meaning.

In an era when universities appear to be subject to the whims of politicians and the marketplace, MacIntyre presents a more profound vision: the university as a guardian of intellectual integrity and a community united by the pursuit of truth. His writings are not a blueprint for institutional reform, but a call to moral seriousness—a reminder that the renewal of education, and of public life, begins not with policy but with persons who ask what kind of human beings we are becoming, and what kind of common life we ought to build.