**Education, Values, and Religious Awareness: Towards and Integrative Vision**

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**Short Bio:**

Born in 1976 in Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia, Prof. Dr. Michal Valco, PhD. finished his Master of Divinity studies at the Lutheran Theological Faculty of Comenius University (LTF CU), Bratislava, where he also completed his doctoral studies in Historical Theology (2005). He was habilitated in religious studies at the Greek Catholic Theological Faculty of Prešov University in Prešov, Slovakia in 2013. His current employer is the University of Žilina in Žilina, Slovakia, where he holds the position of Professor of Religious Studies.

**Abstract**

This paper examines the role of education in cultivating values in human societies. It emphasizes the need to critically examine cultural and religious narratives in connection to their constitutive function in forming human identity. The article notices the context of crisis of the European society, pointing out the dangers of downplaying the importance of the embodied nature of human existence, people’s narrative-relational identity, as well as their social responsibility. The role of education and that of educators is lifted up as a key factor in our common strife for a more cohesive and peaceful multicultural and multi-religious society, providing the educational process takes seriously the power of cultural and religious narratives as sources of values, virtues, and motivation of human actions.

**Keywords**: Values. Cultural-Religious Narrative. Education. European Value Study.

# Introduction: The Importance of Values and Cultural-Religious Narratives for the European Integration, Unity and Wellbeing

Values appear to play a key role in the lives of individuals and societies. Sociology and political sciences have recently come to a greater appreciation of the role values play in the European integration processes itself. On the other hand, the postmodern destabilization of value foundations, the roots of which can be found in the intellectual (or perhaps even volitional) resignation on the epistemological and hermeneutic capacities of the human being, spawns uncertainty, contradictions and chaos within the moral and social fibers of our societies. Similarities and common traits in foundational values, however, “are conducive to greater trust between people. … Higher levels of trust encourage greater cooperation and economic integration” (Nevitte – Inglehart, 1995, 108-109). In order to promote a certain measure of value convergence, the notion of culture as the ‘breeding ground’ of values should thus be interpreted according to a more complex anthropological meaning, and not a narrow idealistic vision that reduces cultural value to an aesthetic dimension, viewed merely for entertainment and **not for increasing human capital through the knowledge of history** (cf. Golineli, 2015, viii).

## Recent Findings of the European Value Study

Revealing in this regard has been the European Value Study (EVS) conducted on the bases of several consecutive waves of surveys across Europe. Its mission has been to point out the importance of studying a wide variety of social and moral values, regarding a broad variety of life domains, such as work and leisure time, society and politics, religion and morality, marriage and family life. It wishes to explore the linkages between the value orientations identified in these different life spheres; to detect the basic value patterns underlying the specific value orientations; and to study the interrelationships between people’s basic value orientations and European social institutions. The EVS’ recent findings, published in *The Cultural Diversity of European Unity: Findings, Explanations and Reflections from the European Values Study* (2003)*,* came to us as a wakeup call, warning us that Europe is a far less homogenous environment than previously expected.

“European unity seems to be a unity of diversity; there appear important differences between Europe’s societies that have to do with different levels of economic development but also with varieties in cultural heritages, languages, *religious and ideological traditions* [emphasis mine], and differences in political and educational systems. … The dynamics of values change cannot be summarized in a single and straightforward way by referring to a single theory of change. Value orientations appear dependent upon specific national contexts and a nation’s historical development.” (Arts, 2003, 47)

This paper examines the role of education in cultivating values by critically examining cultural and religious narratives in connection to their constitutive function in forming human identity The article notices the context of crisis of the European society, pointing out the dangers of downplaying the importance of the embodied nature of human existence, people’s narrative-relational identity, as well as their social and ecological responsibility. Based on available research, it can be inferred that human individuals as well as human communities need to relearn what it means to live as human beings in the complex processes of the present globalized environment.

# The Nature of the Contemporary Crisis of Identity

The intrinsically relational self of a human being is not able to cope with the ridiculously fast pace of information exchange, workplace related growth in mobility, and shifts in cultural trends and fashions in the environment of the human “global village” today. This creates unprecedented tensions in one’s self-perception and identity shaping and preservation. In addition, with the traditional family waning, there is a growing sense of up-rootedness and fragmentation. (Benne, 2003, 12) The lack of stability and continuity in one’s experience of belonging to a living tradition that constitutes one’s vision of life (meaning and purpose) and ethos (values and virtues) produces a new experience of a shattered visage (Zacharias, 1990) – a sense of meaninglessness, disconnectedness, brokenness, and ultimately despair. The loss of life’s vision (or a fundamental life’s orientation) goes hand in hand with a lack of togetherness, lost sense of community, feelings of alienation, and emotional numbness. Reality around us seems to be shattered to pieces. Our modern technology has been able to not only to expedite our experience of life but also to overcome seemingly all distances. Paradoxically, however, it has failed to create an authentic nearness, human mutuality and empathy.

“All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. … The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication. Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range. Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance.” (Heidegger, 1971, 163)

We (parents or educators) may know what is taking place in the most remote places in Australia but we often fail to notice what is going on in the soul of the child next to us. Thus, despite all our technological advancements, we end up being estranged, alienated individuals, fighting our emotional aridity with hyper-sensual experience. However, such a “flattened conception of human being leads to a flattened, shallow vision of life, finally resulting in profoundly discontented individuals who are unable to socialize in meaningful, long-lasting, and deeply satisfying ways.” (Valčo, 2015, 275-276) These then become an easy prey for manipulators, extremists and terrorists.

## Critical Questions for Educators as well as Policy Makers

What then is the future of Europe? How do we build our common European home if we continue to be divided on key issues of: (a) safety / Immigration; (b) Politics / Democracy; (c) Religion and its place in society; (d) Values / Personal and cultural identities…? The only way out seems to be to intentionally examine and critically embrace the constitutive elements of our cultural (civilizational) narrative. So, instead of only asking: (1) what does each country want for itself; and (2) how do we strike a compromise deal? – we should rather ask: what is the constitutive cultural metanarrative of the European civilization and how do our national narratives derive their vision of life and ethos from this unifying narrative?!

# The role of education in the shaping and cultivation of a “narrative” identity

I am convinced that education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world. I am also convinced that educators, whether secular or religious, should strive to project such vision of life and articulate such questions concerning life’s meaning that will prevent young people from being caught in the trap of consumerism, meaningless hedonism, or dangerous ideologies. We need a holistic education which will foster and integrate the necessary knowledge, skills, values and attitudes into a positive vision of life towards a sustainable future.

## The Role and Potential of the Teacher

The level of such “existential”, humanistic examination of life depends, of course, on the type of the given study program. It is obvious that math classes or subjects in natural sciences do not offer as much space to discuss these issues as subjects in the humanities, such as ethics, citizenship education, religious education, history, philosophy, aesthetics (etc.) – these are the kind of subjects in which, providing we will have highly qualified teachers (academically and humanly speaking), deeper questions of life can be reflected upon.[[1]](#footnote-1) I am talking about teachers who care about their students as fellow human beings; who love their work and who share the awareness of the importance of the questions related to values and purpose within the school environment. This seems to be the way to shape the vision of life and ethos in a new generation.

## The Need for a Balanced Use of Modern Technology

It is a complex and expensive adventure. Yet, the only thing more expensive than education is ignorance, as Benjamin Franklin warned his generation over 200 years ago. In this adventure, modern technology will surely be a useful tool: (1) in nurturing powerful communities of learning; (2) extending the reach of high-quality education to all; (3) enabling relevant, personalized and engaged learning; (4) giving teachers greater insight and more time; (5) and supporting agile, efficient and connected education systems. Current digital technologies offer almost inexhaustible resources that students should be encouraged to explore and use. By introducing to them a wide array of relevant web tools and resources, the teacher can motivate students to remain eager participants in the process of learning.

## The Need for a Holistic Understanding of the Purpose of Education

But we should not – in fact, we must not – let technology or any immediate utilitarian aims overshadow other aspects of the learning process. As Aristotle would say: “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” More recently, Martin Luther King put it in these words: “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.” (King, 1947) Or, as C.S. Lewis implied even more urgently by his *The Abolition of Man*: Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil. A “values-free” philosophy of education will bear bitter fruits, as it produces more intelligent and sophisticated “sinners,” i.e., broken people without a clear moral vision, and while it may provide us with tools that will help us avoid the consequences of our failures individually, neither the individual, nor the society will ultimately escape the inevitable consequences. As Lewis himself argues, “[t]he final stage” of a morally divested scientific agenda “is come when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. *Human* nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man.” (Lewis, 2009, 59) The result of this would be nihilism with its bottomless abyss of despair.

When we begin to see the truth of these statements, we will be prompted to believe that each person needs to grow not only in the sphere of cognitive abilities and professional skills through subjects and academic programs that help them find a good-paying job. This is only one side of education, a very important one, to be sure! But when we speak of upbringing and education in general, we should not neglect the other component, the richness and potential of human sciences for helping people mature cognitively, relationally, emotionally, ethically (etc.). A deliberate cultivation of values and virtues in humans should be recognized as a key goal of all types of education. It seems to me that there is more space we can devote to this task in our education environment – the task of refining and nurturing the moral fiber in the lives of our students so as to motivate and equip them to live a meaningful, deeply satisfying, prosocial life.

## Towards Rediscovering the Importance of Humanities

Students themselves begin to perceive that there is a shortage of resources allotted to culture and education. Various apocalyptic scenarios keep emerging in movies, on social networks, in literature (the so called dystopian novels), threatening with an imminent demise of our civilization or even the whole human race. There is a feeling of uneasiness, insecurity and even despair. Surprisingly, we encounter a curious paradox in this regard. On the one hand, people talk about apocalyptic scenarios that are looming ahead, which people in Europe – people comprising our civilization – anticipate to hit us locally and globally; yet on the other hand, we notice that many education officials, e.g. the Slovak Ministry of Education (and a host of contemporary educators along with it), bring to forefront the technical disciplines, or they unilaterally emphasize the need for the so-called “dual education” oriented on training professionals with the more immediate aim of securing enough qualified workers for industry which will subsequently bring money into the state budget. While this emphasis is understandable and legitimate, what remains neglected is the wider perspective, the issue of interdependence and interconnectedness of things from the perspective of humanities.

This perspective reminds us of questions, like: How will we live (thrive, not merely survive) as a human community? How do we achieve a satisfactory level of prosocial behavior and attitudes? How do we eradicate corruption, or how can we at least fight corruption in this country or in Europe in general (etc.)? Questions such as these are of crucial importance. If we do not intentionally articulate them in an open, critical discourse and if we fail to realize their acuteness, we may end up becoming a society of technically, economically, and linguistically trained individuals with enviable IT competencies, who will nevertheless lack a clear perception why they are alive, to what purposes they should use their acquired education, and how to work towards a sustainable development of human communities (socially, culturally, economically, environmentally etc.) in Europe and globally.

A prosocial, philanthropic, environmentally conscious human character must be intentionally cultivated – it won’t come as a result of happy coincidences. All fields of study – life sciences, natural sciences, economics, computer sciences, as well as professional training – need to be more intentionally interwoven with some fundamental themes from the humanities. I am not advocating for educating more experts in the field of humanities; I am rather advocating for future experts in all fields of knowledge (including technical and natural sciences) to have a robust formation in cultural and religious narratives, customs and values as part of their training. We may call it “Liberal Arts Basics” or “Humanities Foundation”, which would include a variety of experiences of voluntary service in charities etc.

# Valuable lessons from personal experience

Valuable lessons can be learned from one’s personal experience, too. I give lectures in Christian ethics, History of Christianity, History of Christian Doctrine, but also History of Philosophy. These courses are specifically focused on dealing with the above mentioned issues. In addition to that, these courses help answer the question: How did Christianity spread its values throughout history; how did the formulation of Christian faith and values change in the course of history? I structure my lectures in such a way as to allow independent student work or group discussions. This gives my students an opportunity to surface and articulate their own questions and solutions, drawing all people involved (including the lecturer) into an adventure of learning together. The students also learn to use the information they got from reading assigned literature.

## The Need for an Open Discussion, Facilitating Disagreements

There are times, naturally, when I encounter dissent and opposition on the side of my students but that is exactly what makes the whole enterprise of teaching worthwhile. I am proud of my students when they are able to articulate their reservations, for at those moments I see that they do not ignore the subject, nor my teaching. On the contrary, the hotly debated issues bother them existentially and they yearn for credible answers. They may not agree with those that I lay down in front of them, yet it is precisely in this critical debate where they learn the most. In the end, we may not achieve more than an informed disagreement, which I happen to consider very valuable. We have learned to overcome our prejudices and think critically for ourselves – and that is what counts.

The trick is to be able to work creatively with the tension between the young person’s desire for immediate benefits, such as wealth and comfortable life, and between those fundamental questions related to human values and the purpose of human life. I, myself, experience this tension internally, not only as a teacher but also as a parent. I have two children, ages 10 and 13. They have already entered the age of: ‘I want a better computer; a better cell phone…’ Already now they ponder about what kind of car they would buy. So, of course, for me as parent (though not merely a parent), this arises as an acute question. I try to cope with it and work with it as an educator, too.

## The Value of Trust in Interpersonal Relationships

I am finding out that when students find trust in me, a basic human trust to me as an educator and a fellow human being, we are then able to talk about concrete life situations. This gives us an opportunity, on the basis of the personal narratives that we discuss together, to observe their outcomes (i.e., of the discussed stories), to discern what the agents of these stories considered valuable in life. I prompt my students to think about the kind of foundation we can dare to build our life upon, the kind of values we should form it around, the kind of life results we aspire to attain. Thus, to some measure, as we pull them into such an imaginative thinking about how my personal story resembles to the life of the given person we’ve just considered, who was (or wasn’t) successful; who is (or isn’t) happy and fulfilled – the students have a chance, in a correlative way, to start perceiving their own life situation from new angles. From my own experience I can testify that stories with interwoven threads of potent cultural and religious narratives carry the highest potential for boosting one’s motivation; for re-discovering, clarifying and embracing values; as well as for the emergence of fear and hostility – if the discussion is not handled well.

# Towards Building an Integrative Vision of Education

Obviously, we must not understand humanities in any kind of antagonism to economics, naturals sciences, or technology. One can never say that these latter sciences are unimportant, or less important. On the contrary, if we want to survive, it is vitally important – to care about the economy, production processes, producing material values, etc. We should be after bringing to a constructive balance the two poles of thinking, which can be an extremely difficult process. By no means did I wish to emphasize my previous points in an exclusive manner, that is, in the sense of neglecting professional training in order to elevate humanities. I see it as a wholesome picture with interconnected elements in which there must be a balance. Yet I insist that humanities are currently being undervalued (economically and socially) throughout Europe (perhaps even globally) and that the value of humanities can be appraised and quantified economically, even though it might be a bit more complicated to do so. Nevertheless, if our society consist of workaholics, for example, who in addition abuse drugs and addictive substances; or if we let corruption spread like cancer, this will affect our economy negatively which can be calculated in real money (just to list several real-life examples).

## The Overlooked Power of New Media

It is difficult to strike the right kind of balance on these issues for several reasons. One of them is that we must deal with an enormous influence of media on the young generation. The media usually present radically different values and they do it with such a formidable force and frequency (or rather consistency) that it appears to be very difficult to fight it. I fear that we, as cultural entities and religious institutions, have lagged behind and underestimated the influence of media. We have also quite possibly underestimated the possibilities of media presentation of value stances, or alternative ways of thinking. Cultural, religious, as well as educational institutions should learn to use the great power and possibilities of media, such as the Internet media, interviews, or public debates.

## From National Particularism to a more Global Perspective

Furthermore, we need to realize more urgently that we do not live on a secluded island called Slovakia (or any other country). The processes that are occurring in the European Union have a clear bearing on us, too, although we commonly may not realize it fully because we tend to solve more immediate issues related to our lives. As soon as we start deliberating in a wider context, new issues emerge: the problem of distribution of social capital in the EU; the refugee crisis; or issues concerning the relationship between religion and society – these are all questions that we have to deal with here in Slovakia, and elsewhere in Europe, too. It can be argued that the current crises – and not just the Greek, economic crisis but also our contemporary, cultural-political crisis revealing itself in all its urgency in how we deal with refugees, expose a significant level of confusion regarding our governing cultural narratives from which we derive social and personal values.

## Defining the ‘European Soul’ or: The Question of Europe’s Cultural-Civilizational Heritage

But what kind of values and who is to tell? Our confusion in identifying and agreeing upon our core values reveals the urgency of the following question: What is the cultural-civilizational heritage of Europe upon which we could build our common European home? Or, should we, at all, focus our attention at this heritage? Should we not simply settle for certain structural economic settings, redistribution of resources, social peace, tolerance etc.?

If we want to see our European home stable and secure, we need to grow in appreciation of the common heritage and those values that exert a constitutive, integrative function culturally, socially and politically across the European geopolitical environment.[[2]](#footnote-2) A thorough understanding of the key economic and political forces, and institutional procedures within the EU is an inconclusive indicator as far as the future of the EU is concerned. What we lack is a clear articulation and an honest, courageous tackling of the question: ‘**What is a European Soul?**’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Contemporary Europe seems to be teetering on the brink of not just a socio-economic and political breakdown but also a serious cultural and religious instability. Our endeavors in educating future generations of European citizens should thus be intentionally aiming at promoting a wider cultural and religious understanding, including intercultural and interreligious competencies, remembering that both cultural and religious narratives are exceptionally potent motivation factors in the lives of individuals and communities. Besides learning competently about the array of historical traditions, however, the representatives of each tradition should first of all master the content of their own tradition, which then becomes a historical as well as existential point of reference in any ongoing dialogue.

I am convinced that Europe needs to ask these cultural and civilizational questions and that we should go back to the kind of reflection that considers the historical argument that our civilization has been built on the Judeo-Christian ideals, along with the ideals of Roman law and Greek democracy. These “ideals” (or Traditions) grew together, intertwined with one another and influenced each other. (Benne, 2003, 15) The so called “Republican” Tradition of Roman Law and Greek Democracy and then the Judeo-Christian Tradition constituting the moral dimension of this civilizational heritage produced a viable vision of life and ethos. They strived (and succeeded, to a large extent) to create such a social and cultural fabric in Europe which would make living together in our European house possible and sustainable in the long term. Therefore, we need to rediscover and critically re-appropriate – by means of an ongoing educational process – the contributions of historically relevant cultural and religious narratives, including the comprehensive vision of the Christian theological anthropology which, as Valčová (et. al.) points out:

“understands the human being as a personal, holistic unity of …[ontology and ethics as they were captivated by the Gospel narrative], integrating them with transcendent, spiritual realities. These provide an invaluable life orientation, inner motivational force, along with a structure of meaning and purpose. While the spiritual aspect of human existential experience can be expressed through biopsychosocial media, it should be distinguished as a unique, separate anthropological entity that overlaps into transcendent reality. Spiritual etiology, among other things, adds valuable insight into the multifaceted socio-ethical discourse in the contemporary debate between the secularists and those who point out a world-wide resurgence of religious traditions and new forms of spirituality.” (Valčová et. al., 2016, 100-101)

Even in spite of problems that arose in history – for Europe was never a perfectly coherent society – I remain convinced that the Europeans managed to create a wholesome, coherent culture that values human life and the individual human liberties, stemming from the inalienable dignity of each human person. The European civilization has produced a culture that respects and values the natural world, a culture that is free to explore it – a feature not commonly seen in many other cultures around the globe; a political culture which has matured over time, arriving at the point of dividing the power into three independent (yet accountable) branches – judicial, executive, and legislative. And even though this democratic system is not perfect, it is functional and sustainable precisely because of the regulative, renewal mechanisms that are inherent in it. If we lose this vision of life with its foundational values, if our society no longer has a critical number of internally convinced democrats (with a corresponding, adequate level of value stances and virtues) who care at least to some extent about the wellbeing of others, all our democratic laws will be in vain and our judicial system will become dysfunctional. A corrupt judge signals a crisis of a good judicial system. A democracy without individual citizens with a noticeable democratic awareness will inadvertently turn into totalitarianism. Laws by themselves will simply not do the job. A multicultural society without a solid awareness of the power and potential of cultural and religious narratives will become a stage of superstition, suspicion and conflict. We need to start talking and deliberating about virtues and about how to cultivate virtues in human individuals that will reflect the best of our common European cultural heritage.

This task can be fulfilled in a secular environment, just as it can and should be done in religious environments. I commend the ideas of Theodosios Tsivolas who provides the following valuable insight about how to integrate a religious-cultural heritage in a secular society:

The need for preserving religious cultural heritage implicates also the involvement of all associated non-State actors: religious communities, academic institutions, property owners, private funding bodies, charities and other interested partners. The public obligation of the religious communities in particular, correlates also with their autonomous right to act on an equal basis within the public sphere, in order to perpetuate their own cultural treasures according to their internal laws, in view of the principle of State’s neutrality. On the other hand, a *positively neutral* [emphasis mine], and not an indifferent, State can protect effectively the religious cultural treasures that it encompasses and, hence, be in the position to safeguard the diversity, both in religious and cultural terms, of the heritage located within its territory. Indeed, within the cultural sphere, which is located at the periphery of the State’s sovereignty and includes among other the protection of heritage assets, each State must welcome the various cultural goods that have been created by the different religious traditions, and shelter them under its aegis as protected elements of a common European heritage. The crucial point is to establish efficient *cultural policies that strike a careful balance between the collective freedom of religion and the protection of the fundamental rights of the individual* [emphasis mine]. (Tsivolas, 2015, 179-180)

Tsivolas’ views reflect also my conviction and I believe that the Next Europe project of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (<http://www.euro-acad.eu/next-europea>) means to articulate these questions, among others. It wants to bring to our attention the necessity to think intentionally about the kind of foundations we want to build future Europe on. In my contribution, I have argued that the question of Next Europe’s foundations inevitably includes a reflection on its constitutive cultural-religious narratives. Human societies need the so called “meta-narratives” for these “have a constitutive function for moral deliberation and action. If moral philosophy [as well as political science] abandons its teleological structure provided by a constitutive narrative, it becomes nothing but a forum of inexplicably subjective rules and principles,” (Valčo, 2015, 278)[[4]](#footnote-4)resulting in a nihilistic chaos. Hence the need for a solid, competent reflection on Europe’s constitutive cultural-religious narrative. Ensuing from this reflection will be an ethical discourse focused on how to cultivate inner values in humans and what role does (and should) education play in this important task. Europe has a common future if we succeed in answering these questions well.

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1. See an excellent collection of essays outlining the ways in which the preservation of cultural heritage is uniquely connected to ‘cultural rights’ as a form of human rights: Michele Langfield, et al. (eds). 2010. *Cultural Diversity, Heritage and Human Rights: Intersections in Theory and Practice.* Routledge. This collection explores the intricate relationships between maintaining cultural diversity, conserving cultural heritage, defining and establishing cultural citizenship and enforcing human rights in a pluralist context of our globalized world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter A. Kraus’ study reminds us that weak cultural foundations will not provide a sufficiently solid basis for constructing integrated European Union. He explores the issue of cultural heterogeneity and whether it inhibits the formation and articulation of a common political will among Europeans. See: Peter A. Kraus,Von Westfalen nach Kosmopolis? Die Problematik kultureller Identität in der europäischen Politik. *Berliner Journal für Soziologie,* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2000): 203–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See a provocative study on this topic by Donald Loose, titled “Europe: A Question Unto Itself?” In: Wil Arts, et al. (eds). *The Cultural Diversity of European Unity: Findings, Explanations and Reflections from the European Values Study*. Brill, 2003, p. 469-476. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alasdair MacIntyre came to call this phenomenon “moral emotivism” in his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981; 1984; 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)