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ARTICLE

Human Beings and Ethics in the Thought of Herbert McCabe

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Abstract

Cartesian pictures of the human self and act-centred understandings of ethics dominate modern thought. Throughout his work, Herbert McCabe challenges these, and as such remains an important resource for philosophical and theological ethics. This paper lays out McCabe's philosophical anthropology, showing how he draws on Wittgenstein to revive a Thomist account of the human person. It then shows how this anthropology feeds into a philosophical ethics, focused on human flourishing and the possibility of life being meaningful. This, in turn, underwrites a theological ethics, according to which the human person flourishes ultimately through graced participation in the divine life. The paper concludes with a discussion of McCabe's account of faith as participation in the divine self-knowledge.

Keywords: Aquinas; ethics; faith; Herbert McCabe; theological anthropology; Wittgenstein

A certain picture of ourselves proves a perpetual temptation for modern thought. Associated philosophically with Rene Descartes, on this view, we are fundamentally minds.[1] What it is to be a mind is logically distinct from possessing a body. Indeed what we might think of as our animal, corporeal, nature is not essential to us. 'I am', writes Descartes, 'in the strict sense only a thing that thinks (*res cogitans*); that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason'. The picture lends itself to an asocial construal of humanity; what is most fundamental to us is, after all, private and not essentially involved with the body, the means by which we are present to others. Fergus Kerr writes about a picture 'of the self-conscious and self-reliant, self-transparent and all-responsible individual'.[2] In his magisterial work on Wittgenstein and Cartesianism, Kerr goes on to diagnose a good deal of modern theology as being caught up in the Cartesian picture.

[1]A materialistic variant identifies us with our *brains*. It is striking how little difference this makes: we are still conceived of as basically private, individual, intellectual entities.

[2]Kerr 1997, p. 5.

Within religious contexts, the self, or mind, is often thought of as the *soul*. Herbert McCabe lays out some features of the soul conceived of in this way: it is an invisible entity, additional to and distinct from the body; it is immortal; it is associated with value, in contrast to the value-free material world described by the sciences; it is interior and it is private.[3] He draws out the practical theological implications of this picture,

> Because souls are thought to be private and interior, those Christians who talk about souls are thought to be the kind who would restrict the scope of the gospel to our private and interior lives. There are, as you know, Christians who think that the gospel has nothing to say about public, political, and social matters but is exclusively concerned with the interior life of the individual, with 'what we do with our solitude'. These Christians are said to think that the gospel is not about, say, poverty and liberation, but about 'saving our souls'. We consist of two bits: a body and a soul. The body has to do with the public world, with science and with the realm of Caeasar which passes away; the soul has to do with privacy, with values and with the realm of God, which does not pass away.[4]

At one point in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that,

> A picture held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.[5]

That is how it is for us with the Cartesian picture of ourselves, particularly for those of us who have learned to look at Christianity through a Cartesian lens, and so imagine that our faith requires of us assent to the picture.[6] Earlier in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein deploys another series of metaphors,

> The ideal, as we conceive of it, is unshakable. You can't step outside it. You must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe – How come? The idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.[7]

[3]McCabe 2007a, pp. 123–4.

[4]McCabe 2007a, p. 124. It should be noted, however (as Brian Davies has stressed in private correspondence), that for all McCabe's avowed anti-Cartesianism, he agrees with Aquinas in seeing the soul as subsistent, immaterial, and incorruptible (McCabe 1969). I think that there is a tension in McCabe's thought here, as there is in Aquinas, and as indeed there is in any theological anthropology committed at once to animalism and to traditional Catholic para-eschatology (on non-traditional options see Yates 2017). I have written elsewhere that this corresponds to the tension *in reality* in human existence before the Kingdom comes in its fullness (Hewitt 2022).

[5]PI 115.

[6]Compare feminist liberation theologians Gebara and Bingemer, 'The ancient split between spirit and matter still runs in our culture's blood and through our own veins, even when we try to claim something else' (1989, p. 5).

[7]PI 103. Wittgenstein's target here is in fact a view of language which, whilst not unrelated to Cartesianism, is not identical to it. On Wittgenstein's relevance to the issues discussed in this paper, see Kerr 1997. For the relevance of Aquinas to post-Wittgensteinian thought, see Pouivet 2008.

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McCabe's work on human beings and our flourishing, which draws on Wittgenstein, as well as Aristotle and Aquinas, is an extended invitation to take off the Cartesian glasses through which we tend to view ourselves and others. The invitation is executed through providing an alternative, an ethics and anthropology that is both traditional and radical. Its traditionalism, however, can't consist in merely repeating what past thinkers have said. At crucial points, thinks McCabe, our context so distorts the language these thinkers use, that alternative modes of expression need to be found if we are not to be misled. So, for instance, he thinks that 'it is quite probable that we ought to abandon the word "soul" altogether when we are doing theology or philosophy'.[8] The task he sets himself is to find ways of communicating Thomas' account of human beings which does not feed Cartesian misunderstanding. That account in summary is one according to which we are social, linguistic, animals who flourish, humanly, through friendship with one another, and, divinely, through friendship with God. The rest of this paper is concerned with the details.

1. Animals

A perpetual temptation for religious thought is to imagine that we are fundamentally not material beings, that we are somehow like angels, perhaps temporarily equipped with a body but destined ultimately to be free from this encumbrance. We are, it might be suggested, to be identified with our souls. Kerr writes of, 'the Origenist theology which secretes a philosophy of psychology that tends to represent human beings as angels fallen into flesh'.[9] Against such theology McCabe agrees with Thomas, 'my soul is not me'.[10] We are human animals, inhabitants of the material world. To get clear about how McCabe understands what it is to be a human animal we should examine first animality, which we have in common with other animals, before going on to consider what is distinctively human.

As I write this, our lurcher, Lola, is lying on the sofa near where I am typing. Her ear is pricked up, listening no doubt for the postman who calls at around this time in the morning, and at whom she will, in spite of all attempts to train her to do otherwise, bark. Thinking about Lola provides a way in to thinking about animality. Lola is, first of all, alive; she is functioning as an organism (I can see her chest moving up and down as I write). Living beings, which include plants as well as animals, have a certain kind of unity to them, which distinguishes them from merely artificial assemblages, such as machines. Here, McCabe takes his lead from Aristotle as well as Aquinas:

> Life is some kind of autonomy, some kind of independence or freedom, some kind of self-originating. Fred is alive when, if one part of Fred moves another part of Fred, Fred is moving Fred. This occurs just when each part of Fred is Fred. This is

[8]McCabe 2007c, p. 124. The restriction to theological and philosophical contexts is presumably intended to exclude, e.g. liturgical use. Compare here Rowan Williams, '[P]art of the theologian's task in the Church may be to urge that we stand aside from some of our words we think we know, so that we may see better what our language is *for*' (2000, p. 85).

[9]Kerr 1997, p. 168.

[10]1 Ad. Cor. 15.

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> the case when the parts of Fred are organs …. An organ is a part of a structure which is most fundamentally defined as a part of the whole structure.[11]

Through its organs, the whole living being acts. Lola is listening with her ear (it would be strange to say that the ear listens: rather, the whole dog listens with her ear). She will, alas, bark with her mouth.

This much, the particular kind of unity distinctive of living organisms, is true not only of Lola but also of the spider plant on my desk; through the movement of the leaves the whole plant displays phototropism. But Lola is not simply alive, she is an animal. And that, according to McCabe, involves the world being meaningful for her.

> The sense organs of an animal are the means by which the world is meaningful to it. The forms and structures of the world around it are taken up into the complex organic structures of the animal body and thereby become meanings for that animal.[12]

Parts of the world assume a significance for Lola. The sausages defrosting in the kitchen are smelled and identified as tasty. The postman is heard and encountered as a threat. This understanding of animality in terms of meaning is McCabe giving a Wittgensteinian colouring to Aristotle's account of animals as *sensitive*. To be alive in McCabe's sense is, moreover, to be – in more traditional language – in possession of a soul. The difference from the Cartesian view is evident: far from being conceptually separable from embodiment, having a soul is precisely a matter of how a material body is organised as a unity. Having an animal soul is, in addition, a matter of a body being susceptible to meaning.

Before we go on to look at what McCabe takes to be distinctive of human animals, and constitutive of the most important difference between human and non-human animals, the possession of language, a word should be said about how he thinks about the ethics of our treatment of non-human animals. An important strand of contemporary theology, motivated by a desire to correct historic complicity in animal suffering, worries about *anthropocentrism*.[13] Predictably, there will be concerns about McCabe's stress on the distinction between human beings and other animals from this camp. But we might well ask: who is being genuinely anthropocentric here? McCabe is perfectly sensitive to issues around human treatment of non-human animals. He speaks of technological developments 'liberating' animals[14] and discusses cruelty without insisting that this discussion be contained within the rights-based framework suited to questions of human justice.[15] Arguably, McCabe provides us with a non-anthropocentric approach to the well-being of non-human animals, affirming concern for them without denying their difference from us.

[11]McCabe 2005, p. 59.
[12]McCabe 2005, p. 65.
[13]A key text here is Linzey 1994.
[14]McCabe 2005, p. 61.
[15]McCabe 2005, pp. 95–114.

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2. Linguistic animals

In what does that difference consist? In a word, language. To adapt an example of Wittgenstein's: Lola can be happy that I have come home after a walk, she cannot be happy that I will return home next week. By contrast, suppose that Lola is spending a few days at a friend's house – I can be happy at the prospect of her returning home in a few days.[16] The difference is that I possess language and so can possess concepts such as 'in a few days time' and 'next Wednesday'. Through language, more of the world becomes meaningful for us.

This capacity for linguistic meaning is, according to McCabe, constitutive of human freedom: 'it is [the] creative capacity to make new ways of interpreting the world that constitutes our freedom'.[17] The open-ended possibilities for interpreting the world that come with linguistic ability enable us to form judgements about what is good and desirable, judgements that might differ from those of others. Language also, and crucially, enables us to form intentions:

> What is special about the human animals is that we not only, like the dog, have things we like to do and things we are reluctant to do, we also formulate aims and intentions for ourselves. This formulation or setting of aims can only be expressed by saying 'We did what amounted to saying to ourselves: "This is what I am trying to achieve and this is how I am going to achieve it"'. This is different from simply having an aim in that you might not have formulated it or set it for yourself. It is just this 'is-but-might-not-have-been' that language exists to express.[18]

McCabe's understanding of human beings as essentially linguistic is his way of presenting, in a Wittgensteinian mode, Aristotle and Aquinas' understanding of human beings as *rational* animals. It is striking that the resulting view is one on which rationality, far from being a private and purely cerebral affair, is thoroughly social. Language is a social practice, one to which we need to be introduced by others. The language by means of which I am able to function as a rational creature is received from others,

> In … the linguistic community, what the part receives from the whole – language and rationality, the symbols in which she can represent herself to herself – are precisely what makes possible her special human kind of individuality.[19]

Elsewhere, McCabe contrasts the social reception of the means of linguistic meaning with the evolutionary inheritance of general animal capacities for meaning: 'nobody *inherits* the French language or even the Irish; instead of inheritance and evolution we have tradition and history'.[20]

Linguistic animals are intrinsically social. To be alive in the way that linguistic animals are alive is to be, in Aristotelian terms, in possession of a rational soul. Aquinas

[16] PI 650.
[17] McCabe 2005, p. 68.
[18] McCabe 2005, p. 69.
[19] McCabe 2005, p. 27.
[20] McCabe 2005, p. 68.

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argued that the rational soul is immaterial, and McCabe reiterates this argument and agrees with Aquinas.[21] Through our rational capacities, we transcend what is merely material. But, insists McCabe, in the face of the Cartesian tradition, this makes us more rather than less social. My thought is never in principle private, since through language it always has the capacity to go beyond me, to be shared with others. In a passage that deserves quoting at length, McCabe makes the point forcefully,

> For the Cartesian consciousness is a way of being private; it belongs to an essentially hidden inner life; for the Aristotelian, thinking belongs to a world more social, in the sense of more *shared*, than any other. So long as, like other animals, I am restricted to sensual experience, my life is private. No one can have *my* sensations; everyone can have my thoughts. If they could not they would not be thoughts. There is a special kind of conversation that we call discussion or argument which is a way of testing whether what I take to be my thoughts really are thoughts – they are not unless they can be shared by others. The use of language, then, is what frees us from imprisonment in the isolated [self]; it is a way of transcending my individuality; to use the old jargon, it is a way of being 'immaterial'.[22]

Importantly, language is the means by which we tell stories. As linguistic animals, we can understand ourselves narratively, tell our autobiography, and we can understand ourselves as part of wider stories (of humankind, of Israel, of the Church). This, thinks McCabe, is important for Christians not least because, considering our story in its widest sense, 'the wisdom which made this drama so loved his human characters that he became one himself to share their lives'.[23] Incarnational belief, in other words, can find expression in narrative terms.

2.1 Friendship and virtue

Ethics, for McCabe, is concerned with how we, being the kind of social, linguistic animals that have been described, flourish. McCabe is a moral realist: he holds that there is such a thing as human flourishing, which can be identified and which is objective. When I say something such as 'murder is wrong', I am not simply expressing disapproval of murder. Rather I am saying something *true*. Nor when I say 'Herbert is wise' am I merely expressing my admiration, but rather I am picking out a real quality, which an individual may or may not possess.[24] It makes sense, according to McCabe, to praise or blame people or their actions, and when we engage in the activities of praising or blaming we are responding to real features of those people or actions.

What am I doing when I praise someone in an ethically salient fashion? We can get a handle on this, McCabe thinks, by comparison with other occasions on which we

[21] McCabe 1969, 2005, p. 73 See here STh Ia, q75. On the background ideas in Aquinas, again interpreted through a Wittgensteinian lens, see Kenny 1993.
[22] McCabe 2005, pp. 72–3.
[23] McCabe 2007b, p. 47.
[24] McCabe 2005, pp. 15–23.

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might praise someone. If I put forward the opinion that someone is a good footballer, I am saying that they have the dispositions required to perform a certain activity well – playing football. Such a person will, in appropriate circumstances, tackle or shoot, or whatever makes good sense to do at a certain point in the game. From what they do, we can infer that they are good at playing the game: 'do you see how he anticipates what the opposing players are going to do? He is a good footballer!' Similarly, thinks McCabe, someone who is simply a good person – not merely good at one or other of the activities that human beings perform – is disposed to live well, to be good at being human. And we can make that judgement on the basis of what they do: 'Do you see how she takes time to be considerate to those around her? She is a good person!'

In setting out the ethical terrain in this way, McCabe is quite deliberately setting his face against the tradition stemming from David Hume, and still influential in contemporary moral philosophy, that it is a mistake to seek to infer an 'ought' from an 'is'. For McCabe, just as my observation that a player curled in a goal from well outside the box contains already the judgement that she is a good footballer, so recognition that someone is disposed to take advantage of the innocent forces the judgement that he is a bad person. McCabe writes,

> [I]n every ordinary use of 'good' and 'bad', saying that something is *good* because of what it *is*, is *exactly* what we do. According to Humean thinkers, there is one tone of voice in which we say exactly what is being done, what a piece of human activity it is, and quite another in which we praise it or say it is good or bad. But the truth seems to be that this separation of values from facts is ordinarily thought of as the mark of someone who is not very good at making value judgements, someone who is not a reliable guide to what is good and bad.[25]

But what is it to be a good person, to be good at being human? There are, thinks McCabe, two levels at which this question can be answered, one which belongs to philosophy (which any human being can engage in) and one which belongs to theology (which depends on the revelation communicated in scripture).[26] These do not conflict; as Aquinas insists 'grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it'.[27] We'll focus on the philosophical answer for now and turn to the theological answer in a subsequent section.

Living well, being a good human being, is analogous to playing a game well: recall the example of the footballer. And, writes McCabe, '[f]rom the point of moral *philosophy*, the game is human friendship'.[28] Friendship is, for him, 'the fundamental

[25]McCabe 2005, p. 20. Note that the appeal to ordinary usage against the philosophical theory of the Humean is a characteristically Wittgensteinian move: 'What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use'. (PI 116).

[26]McCabe 2005, pp. 87–8.

[27]STh Ia, q1, a8, ad. 2.

[28]McCabe 2005, p. 87.

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relationship by which people are fellow citizens', the basis of living in community. Hence,

> [A] good human being is one who enters into community well. The good human being is the one who is, in this sense, politically good.[29]

To live well is to live alongside others, in community with them, and engaging in significant shared projects with them. On this view, there is no sharp divide between ethics and politics: social circumstances can prevent me from living alongside others well, forcing me into competition with them, for instance, or placing me in a situation in which I benefit from unjust discrimination against them. I have written elsewhere about McCabe's most explicitly political thought,[30] but it is important to be aware that the distinction between ethics and politics is, within the framework in which McCabe is working, ultimately an artificial one.[31] Aristotle describes the study of the human good as *politics*. And in *The Good Life*, a posthumously published book on ethics, McCabe terms the linguistic community, from which I receive my rational capability and within which alone I can flourish, the *polis*.

In order to be able to engage reliably in shared activities with others I will need certain dispositions, propensities to act, think, or desire in certain ways. These dispositions are the virtues; in his catechism, McCabe tells his readers that '[a] virtue is a settled disposition, acquired by practice, or given as a grace, to behave in ways appropriate to the good life'.[32] He goes on to detail the four cardinal virtues (and the three theological virtues, which will be addressed below): justice, courage, temperateness, and good sense.[33] Of these he says,

> By our own efforts and through education, we can acquire an incomplete form of the cardinal virtues which dispose us to live well in secular society; but, since this society is itself for the sake of the Kingdom of God, the cardinal virtues need to be perfected and enlivened by the theological virtues, especially charity.[34]

It is with this form of virtue, incomplete from the perspective of the Kingdom, that moral philosophy, as distinct from theology, is concerned. Considered as a moral philosopher, McCabe stands squarely within the tradition of *virtue ethics*. Against the kind of view that thinks about ethics primarily in terms of actions – whether certain types of action are prohibited or obligated, and so on – virtue ethics focuses its attention first on agents, the people who perform actions. It asks questions about the dispositions, and so the character, of people who live well, and accordingly shifts

[29]McCabe 2005.
[30]Hewitt 2018.
[31]This point is an important one, since versions of virtue ethics extant in contemporary philosophy often lack the political sensibility very obviously present in McCabe.
[32]McCabe 1985, 148.
[33]What McCabe calls here 'good sense' is what Aquinas called *prudentia*, commonly translated *prudence* (STh Iiii, q47). McCabe reads this in terms of Jane Austen's 'good sense. See McCabe 2002a. 'Prudence suggests to us a certain caution and canniness, whereas *prudentia* is much nearer to wisdom, practical wisdom' (2002a, p. 152).
[34]McCabe 1985, 182.

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attention away from the question *what should we do*? onto *what kind of people should we be*? Contemporary virtue ethics is customarily thought to have begun with the publication in 1958 of *Modern Moral Philosophy* by Elizabeth Anscombe, an acknowledged influence on McCabe.[35] McCabe can be viewed as insisting, against views that see Aquinas as an act-focused ethicist, that he is rather properly regarded as a virtue ethicist. McCabe's own ethical writing is a modern outworking of virtue ethics in the tradition of Thomas.[36]

Complementing McCabe's account of the good life as characterised by virtue is a parallel understanding of it as *meaningful*. McCabe tells us that 'moral values are objective in the same way as meanings, and indeed are the meanings of behaviour'.[37] On this basis, he draws an insightful comparison,

> Ethics … is the study of human behaviour as communication. Ethics does for the whole of life what literary criticism does for the whole part.[38]

To the extent that our actions are meaningful, have significance within the linguistic community, they are good. Thus,

> [T]he purpose of ethics is … to enable us to enjoy life by responding to it more sensitively, by entering into the significance of human action.[39]

On the other hand, lives may be superficial, lacking meaningful coherence, and to that extent fail to be good. It may seem that McCabe is presenting us with two disjoint accounts of the good life: the good life as virtuous, and the good life as meaningful, but this is not the case. Virtues are just those dispositions that enable us and move us to engage in significant shared activities. The virtuous life is meaningful, and conversely the meaningful life is virtuous.

3. Law and love

McCabe's writings about ethics coincided with a ferment within the theological ethics of Western Christianity. On the one hand, in the face of upheavals in Western societies and popular morality, some Catholic authors sought to defend a natural law based understanding of thomistic ethics, according to which commands and prohibitions, binding on all human beings, and knowable by natural reason alone, lie at the centre of ethical life. On the other hand, other Christians attempted to carve out a position that rejected absolute command and prohibition save the requirement to do the most loving thing in any situation. *Situation ethics*, as the latter position was called, was at the height of influence in the 1960s and the 1970s and lingers on (at least in Britain) in school religious education syllabuses. McCabe is a sophisticated critic of both the legalist and the situation ethicist positions, viewing neither of them as adequate but

[35] Anscombe 1958.

[36] Of interest here is the relationship between McCabe and Alisdair MacIntyre, one of the foremost exponents of virtue ethics within philosophy. See Manni 2020, pp. 37–9.

[37] McCabe 2003a, p. 89.

[38] McCabe 2003a, p. 94.

[39] McCabe 2003a, p. 95.

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holding that each contains important insights. In *Law, Love and Language*, published in 1968, McCabe engages with both viewpoints, as well as developing a version of the ideas sketched above.

Situation ethics was most prominently developed by liberal theologian Joseph Fletcher. For Fletcher, the only invariant good is love.[40] The decisions of Christians should be governed by love, and whether a given action is good on a particular occasion depends on whether or not it is loving. No type of action is absolutely right or wrong of itself; the ethical question is always whether the decision to act in a particular way is right (which is to say, loving), in a particular situation, hence *situation ethics*.

Situation ethics is, according to McCabe, incoherent. This is not because there isn't a certain open-endedness to love. New possibilities and opportunities for loving conduct arise as human societies develop, and there is no possibility of neatly codifying this. On this McCabe agrees with the situation ethicists, writing of 'love' as 'a growing word'.[41] But, he insists, 'this does not in the least imply that it is a vague word, one that might mean almost anything'.

McCabe's point against situation ethics, revealing again the influence of Wittgenstein, concerns *meaning*. In order for the word 'love' to be meaningful, there have to be rules for its use, and in particular, there have to be applications of the word that are ruled out. Were it in order for me to say 'this is loving' of anything – killing the innocent, for instance – then there is no way you could come to understand what I mean by 'love'. But meaning is public.[42] If the word 'love' is meaningful, that meaning has to be available to be learned and understood, which it would not be if there was no type of action which ruled out being called 'loving'. Since the word 'love' is meaningful, then, situation ethics must be mistaken.

McCabe suggests, then, that moral laws are rules of meaning for the word 'love',

> Now a man who says that killing babies is always wrong may not, after all, be a legalist trying to stifle man's creative inspiration under a load of rules and regulations. He may be simply trying to explain what love means to him – whatever it comes to mean, it cannot mean *this*.[43]

In contrast to the situation ethicist, McCabe holds that there are absolute moral prohibitions. He does not, however, think that these are the primary focus of ethics, that the good life is adequately understood in terms of obedience to them, and here he differs from advocates of law-orientated approaches to ethics. 'Laws define the boundaries of the game', writes McCabe,[44] but there is far more to playing a game than simply abiding by the rules. A good midfielder is not merely someone who refrains from picking up the ball with her hands and does not foul other players. Abiding by the rules are prerequisites for playing the game at all, not guarantees of playing it well. Someone who

[40]Fletcher 1966, p. 56.
[41]McCabe 2003a, p. 18.
[42]Those familiar with Wittgenstein will recognise the influence of the so-called 'private language argument' from the *Philosophical Investigations* here.
[43]McCabe 2003a, p. 21.
[44]McCabe 2005, p. 87.

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picks up the ball and runs with it is simply not playing football, similarly someone who kills the innocent is not engaged in the practice of human friendship. But in both cases, more is involved in being engaged in the activity well, and this is not possible to codify. We can recognise and describe the features of a good footballer – her poise, alertness, team-spirit, initiative – but this does not translate into our being able to lay down rules for how she will behave on every situation. In the same way, we can talk about what it is that makes a person good: she lives meaningfully, is temperate, just, courageous, and has good sense, but this does not translate into the availability of catch-all moral laws. For this reason, thinks McCabe, whilst ethics concerns itself marginally with laws, as marking the boundaries of the good life, they are not the heart of its concern, which is the art of living well.

4. Divine language and virtue

We are not, thinks McCabe, called simply to friendship with one another. Rather, through Christ, we enter into a relationship of friendship with God, one which transfigures our human relationships as well. This is the concern of moral theology, as distinct from moral philosophy. McCabe presents the bearing of Christ on human existence in terms of language,

> The word of God is the way in which the Father sees himself, his realisation of himself; the incarnation means that this divine self-realisation is shared with us. We are able to enter into the language, and hence the life, of the Father.[45]

That the Word is the Father's concept of himself is an insight from Aquinas.[46] McCabe applies that insight within his more general understanding of human beings as linguistic animals. Through Christ, we are offered a new means of communicating, one that is universal and constitutes the meaning of humankind. To be human, to be what we have been created and redeemed to be, is to live communicatively, in friendship, with the whole of humanity, and this possibility is offered by God through Christ. That is to say it is Christ himself who constitutes this new, universal, means of communication: 'he is offering himself as the centre of this new society'.[47]

Christ's offer of a new, and universal, way of being human was, of course, rejected. In a quite clear sense, the earthly life of Jesus ended in failure. 'Because Jesus failed', writes McCabe starkly, 'he did not lay the foundations of a new kind of society'.[48] That failure was a result of the kind of world we have made: 'a crucifying world, a world doomed to reject its own meaning'.[49] The resurrection, however, means that this rejection is not ultimate. Through the resurrection the *future* possibility of human community is present to us. Christ, who is himself our means of communication, is present to our history as it heads towards the fullness of the Kingdom, the realisation of which will not be a matter of smooth evolution but of revolutionary continuity in

[45]McCabe 2003a, p. 126.
[46]STh Ia, q34, a1.
[47]McCabe 2003a, p. 130.
[48]McCabe 2003a, p. 140.
[49]McCabe 2003a, p. 132.

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discontinuity with our present existence. The life of this Kingdom is anticipated and signified in the Church and its celebration of the sacraments.

The Church, for McCabe, is a revolutionary organisation, committed to a future of friendship with God and amongst human beings, a future radically at odds with key features of our present society. This means that McCabe thinks that Christians ought to be committed to political change. In terms of day to day moral guidance, however, he takes the implications of his account of flourishing in Christ to be other than might be imagined:

> We have not a code of conduct – except in the crudest sense in which we may dismiss certain kinds of behaviour as obviously incompatible with the kingdom – we propose a way of life, a way of discovering about the depths of life, out of which decisions about our behaviour will emerge. The way to make an accurate Christian assessment of a moral problem is to have been for some time engaged in the Christian task of overcoming the world.[50]

The way of life talked about here is characteristic of Christians and 'makes us able to take human behaviour seriously, to make moral judgements'.[51] As we engage in it, crucially through celebrating the sacraments, we gain insight into the world similar to that gained from literature or drama.[52] Rather than a set of rules, the principal ethical characteristic of Christianity is something like a way of interpreting the world and of being disposed towards it. In the background here is a traditional account of Christian life as characterised by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It is by the gift of hope that we see the world in the light of 'God's plans to bring humankind to the Kingdom in Christ'.[53] Charity, meanwhile, finds expression in love 'which is to wish well to someone and to desire to be united with her or him',[54] and this love between human beings, and between human beings and God, will be brought to perfection in the Kingdom.

4.1 Faith

If charity is the final destination of Christian life, the virtue of faith is its beginning. McCabe has a distinctive emphasis in his approach to faith: faith is sharing in God's self-knowledge. As such it is orientated towards a more-than-human fulfilment for human beings, made possible by Christ's communication of the divine life:

> However we envisage human fulfilment, human perfection or human happiness, our divine purpose is far beyond this.[55]

To say that our divine purpose, friendship with God and with others in God, is beyond merely human fulfilment is not, for McCabe, to suggest a tension or a conflict between

[50]McCabe 2003a, pp. 172–3.
[51]McCabe 2003a, pp. 145–6.
[52]McCabe 2003a, p. 162.
[53]McCabe 1985, 170.
[54]McCabe 1985, 199.
[55]McCabe 2007c, p. 25.

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human and divine perfection. All that has been said about the nature of human animals and our fulfilment remains true when we consider human beings as recipients of God's offer of life in Christ. Faith is, therefore, 'communal' and 'social', a matter of sharing something with others, as befits the social, language-using creatures that we are: 'faith belongs to human animals'.[56] And what those human animals share is God's self-knowledge. What does this involve?

McCabe is definite,

> The whole of our faith is the belief that God loves us; I mean there isn't anything else. Anything else we say we believe is just a way of saying that God loves us. Any proposition, any article of faith is only an expression of faith if it is a way of saying that God loves us.[57]

God knows God's self and thereby knows that God is loving and knows what God has done in history out of love for us. God shares this knowledge with us, and this is faith, which provides the starting point for Christian life; the realisation that we are loved sets us free to live in a new way. This way of life is dynamic and directed towards the Kingdom where faith will be no longer necessary. Commenting on the letter to the Hebrews in a homily, McCabe says, 'Faith … is seen in terms of a journey, a movement'.[58] By faith, we are aware of what we need to be aware of, namely the ways in which God has loved us, for our journey towards perfect friendship with God and with one another.

McCabe's position on faith is interesting from the perspective of contemporary philosophical theology, since it is *propositional*. An account of faith is propositional just in case according to it having faith includes believing certain propositions to be true, that is believing *that* something is the case. The contrast is with simply believing *in* God, in the sense of trusting God. On a propositional account, it is part of faith that the faithful person believes, say, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or that Jesus rose from the dead. McCabe advocates a propositional account; human beings are rational animals, and our journey towards the Kingdom appropriately engages our intellect. However, faith is not narrowly cerebral for McCabe. To be lived properly, faith must be lived out in love of God and one another, 'informed' by charity.[59]

One potential difficulty with McCabe's account of faith might be thought to be a tension between his conviction that faith is a sharing in God's self-knowledge and his propositional view of the nature of faith. For, by virtue of McCabe's own apophatic theism, it seems wrong to say that God is a propositional knower – indeed, at one point he writes,

> Whatever we can mean by speaking of God's knowledge, we know that it cannot mean that God is well-informed, that he assents to a large number of true statements.[60]

[56]McCabe 2007d, p. 36.
[57]McCabe 2007d, p. 33.
[58]McCabe 2003, p. 2.
[59]McCabe 1985, S164. See STh IIii, q4, a3.
[60]McCabe 1987a, p. 59.

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But then if what it is for God to know is not propositional, how can faith be both a sharing in God's self-knowledge, and yet propositional? McCabe would surely respond as Aquinas does on this question,

> Just as [God] knows material things immaterially, and composite things simply, so likewise He knows enunciable things not after the manner of enunciable things, as if in his intellect there were composition or division of enunciations; for he knows each thing by simple intelligence, by understanding the essence of each thing; as if we by the very fact that we understand what man is, were to understand all that can be predicated of man.[61]

What God knows with God's simple intellect, non-propositionally ('not after the manner of enunciable things'), we hold by faith propositionally. 'Whatever is divided and multiplied in creatures exists in God simply and unitedly'.[62] As far as it goes, however, this is just a restatement of the problem. How, it can be insisted, can the very same knowledge be at once non-propositional, and yet shared propositionally? How can it be that something propositional is a sharing in something non-propositional? Consistently with his apophaticism, McCabe could deflate our expectations of an intelligible answer here: we do not understand the simple divine knowledge and so cannot come up with anything like a theory of how it can be participated in propositionally. Nevertheless, there are perhaps analogies that would help us see that the suggestion is not absurd. Think of an artist's knowledge of the work of art that she is producing: there is an immediacy about it; she knows the work through knowing herself producing the work. I cannot have this kind of knowledge of her work. But nevertheless, through watching her at work, I come to know things about the work she is producing. I know that there is a patch of blue in the corner of the canvass, or that there is a perfect cadence at the end of the first phrase, or whatever the case may be. Faith, on this analogy, is like the second-hand knowledge of the artistic spectator, made possible by the creative activity of the creating and redeeming God, who knows her own work in creation and redemption immediately.

Finally, it should be remarked, faith for McCabe has a complex relationship to doubt. Doubt, he insists, is not the same thing as disbelief. As the absence of faith, disbelief is a failure to recognise that we are loved by God, and this is nothing other than damaging – seeing ourselves as unloved, perhaps unloveable, we retreat into the protection of an atomised individualism.[63] But this is quite different from doubt. Doubt is a kind of radical questioning and is an integral part of the life of faith. The propositions believed on the basis of faith are supposed to express God's love. We need to question ourselves, thinks McCabe, to make sure that they are genuinely expressing God's love. How they do this might not be clear, nor might the meaning of some particular doctrine or its relationship to the other parts of faith. For all these reasons, an insistent questioning, characteristic of the activity we call 'theology', is a normal aspect of the life of faith. Far from being disbelief, it is the opposite, since faith's assurance of

[61] STh Ia, q14, a14, sc.
[62] STh Ia, q14, a1, ad 2.
[63] McCabe 2007d.

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God's love for us liberates us to ask questions without fear. 'Faith', writes McCabe, 'will exclude doubt altogether only when it ceases to be faith and becomes the vision of the eternal love which is God'.[64] It is for this vision that the human animal was created.

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[64] McCabe 2007d, p. 40.

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