Chapter 1

Virtue, Vice, and Rational Practice

"Men need virtues as bees need stings."

–Peter Geach, *The Virtues*

I. Introduction: The Application to Ethics

Some readers may be wondering what the notion of human nature has to do with ethics. The answer should become apparent upon reflection of the dialectic thus far. We have defended propositions (1)-(4) of the following:

(1) All natural organisms exhibit formal and functional (i.e., teleological) facts which are expressible in generics.
(2) Human beings are natural organisms.
(3) Human beings exhibit formal and teleological facts which are expressible in generics.
(4) Human beings are practical, rational animals.

As a generic, proposition (4) is both descriptive and normative. If practical rational animals is what we are (by nature), then, as we should expect, becoming truly or fully practical rational animals is

our natural telos. Peter Geach says "Men need virtues as bees need stings."[1] Philippa Foot echoes Geach's statement about "need" and "necessity" as well. Alasdair MacIntyre subtitled his most recent monograph: "human beings need the virtues."[2] The kind of necessity being predicated here is the same kind of necessity with which a bee needs a sting. It is a formal and teleological necessity.

Becoming fully or fully actualized practical rational animals requires the actualization not only of our animal nature (through growth, maturity, reproduction) but our rational potential (through intellectual growth, knowledge, wisdom, and a good life). In other words: (5) Humans are to become practical, rational animals. Hursthouse points out that we do not just admire those who survive but who exemplify a *human* form of life: "The human virtues make their possessor good qua human being, one who is as ordinarily well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way."[3]

That humans are practical rational animals is also the natural norm that obliges us to live in particular ways. What are those particular ways? The qualities of excellence for practical rational animals would be the moral and intellectual virtues. (6) The qualities human being acquire on the way to becoming fully practical, rational animals are virtues. Virtues are those qualities needed by us as members of the human species, each member of which exemplifies the same human nature of being a potentially practical, rational animals. Thus Hursthouse again: "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms."[4]

We are now in a position to articulate in greater detail what virtue (the concept) is and which qualities are virtues.

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1. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 208.

4. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2013.

II. Criteria

Let's develop an initial hypothesis. Virtues are instances of natural goodness or natural excellence for practical, rational animals. In general, such instances must be goods-of-a-kind for humans. They must recognizably good from the "outside" in the sense that an alien anthropologist could infer that such traits actuate the human life form. But a further confirmation would be that our list of virtues would align with our pre-analytical intuitions about what one would judge to be really admirable and praiseworthy.

More specifically, I hypothesize that natural excellence for humans will turn out to be the quality or set of qualities that enables one to be a good animal, and to perform well rational activities such as speaking, thinking, engaging in rational practices. We can state, in advance, some of the particular contours that such qualities will take.

As practical rational *animals* , we are inherently mortal, biological, beings whose life consists of a process of maturation, homeostatic maturity, aging, and death. We need to breathe, eat, sleep, and stay warm, deal with the urgings of our sexual nature, and so on.

As practical *rational* animals, we are inherently self-aware language-users who grow up and live in a language-community with a history and tradition, and who are curious to know what is true and to create tools and art and other products for our use and enjoyment. We are inherently conscious and self-conscious beings who speak, interpret, and create in the context of a linguistic community such as a family, society, and culture.

As *practical* rational animals, we are inherently goal-oriented and self-determining beings who are to some degree able to acquire new traits or lose them, able to achieve our natural ends or fail to achieve them, able to become aware of the "givenness" of our biology and work with or against it, and are able to treat an entire biological life not only as an event but as a project. Although we are pushed about by our biological instincts and by social pressures, we do not *simply* stumble around through life, but, sometimes also act on *reasons*. That is, we deliberate about future actions,

and reflect on past actions, and become puzzled in the present as to what is called for. The success of our actions is not guaranteed, and the reasonableness of our reasons is not guaranteed. Rather, we muddle through on the best evidence we have.

The particular virtues would be particular expressions of this categorical kind of natural goodness. Virtues are not just "morally praiseworthy" qualities; they are *the human* qualities. Virtues are *humanness* in its exemplary form, its actualized expression. As Micah Lott points out, and as I tried to argue the concept of human nature cannot be value-neutral:

> Rather it must embody a normatively significant understanding of human life and action. For any conception of human form is a natural-historical account of 'how the human lives.' As with 'the tiger' or 'the mayfly,' a natural-history of 'the human' provides an interpretation of the characteristic and non-defective life-cycle of the species. And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty of practical reason.[5]

III. Practical reason

What difference does practical reason make? One of the objections which I stated above, but put off rebutting, was the objection that practical reason makes humans just too different from other organisms, and so renders the limitations of our animal nature irrelevant for the purpose of ethics. Here is another, only partial response: I concede that practical reason makes a difference between us and the non-rational or less-rational animals. This does not confute my general point. Indeed, it reinforces it. With the emergence of practical reason as one of the capacities of the human species comes the emergence of a new standard for evaluating a member of the species: namely, how well one can practically reason. We may add to our hypothesis that particular virtues enable the exemplification of our life form the additional point that the excellence of practical reason enable us to pursue our ends *well*. The practical, rational agents who consistently succeed at pursuing and

5. Micah Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 3 (2012): 770–1.

achieving their ends would be models of virtue. (I shall have more to say in a later chapter about what ends people *have* or *ought to have*.)

Let me put the point in a slightly different way. Practical reason is the capacity by which the virtuous human takes up his own animal and rational nature and puts it to good use in expressing the human life form. But it is not just that. Practical reason is self-referential or recursive. That is, practical reason is the capacity by which the practical reasoning animal reflects upon the proper or improper uses of practical reason itself. The virtuous human takes up the basic facts of his or her own biology, psychology, and social anthropology into a space of reasons and weighs them against what seems good or not good to do. Furthermore, the virtuous human self-reflects on the process of "taking up into the space of reasons" itself. And, having considered the whole range of facts and reasons, the virtuous person then constructs a "pattern that, given the human situation, is likely to lead a good life."[6]

The criteria of a definition of virtue, then, is that the excellences intrinsic to our life form are those qualities that practical rational animals per se *need* to be what they are and become what they can potentially become. The negative side of the same hypothesis is that natural badness is the property or set of properties that practical rational animals *need to avoid*. Vices in particular are acquirable qualities that necessarily frustrate one's natural ends and hence lead to species-specific misery.

Beatific and Miserific exemplars

We can predict that evaluative features of a human being will be either beatific or miserable along these lines. We are not yet speaking of moral blame, just evaluation-of-a-kind. Not all practical rational animals fully actuate the human life form. Such failures to realize one's life form may still be tragic even if they are not that rational animal's *fault*. For example, in extreme cases when a person's set of potentialities for rational activity (such as speech and abstract thought) is not realized

6. John Kekes, "Wisdom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1983): 280.

because of genetic disorder, injury, or mental or physical illness, we still have no trouble identifying that are *a human being* by virtue of having a *human nature*.

A maximally miserable human being is one who has for whatever reason not become what human beings potentially can be and are by nature. He or she will be (a) physically imperfect (sick, weak, undeveloped, diseased), (b) rationally imperfect (ignorant, stupid, overly credulous and overly skeptical, unperceptive, angry) and (b) practically and socially imperfect (solitary, foolish, rash, unteachable, immoderate, highly valuing worthless things and disregarding the most valuable things). The maximally beautified human being is one who has for whatever reason become what human beings potentially can be and are by nature. He or she will be (a) physically excellent (healthy, strong, developed, well); (b) rationally excellent in knowledge, society (knowledgable, smart, properly trusting and properly critical, perceptive, calm) and practice (sociable, wise, patient, teachable, moderate, valuing each thing according to its worth).

IV. Introduction

We need an account of virtue that fits the criteria hypothesized above. My account of virtue will now work carefully through the distinct accounts of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre. Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay.[7] Alasdair MacIntyre's robust concepts of virtue and practical reason overlap nicely with Foot's. I draw from *After Virtue*, where he builds his three stage account of virtue (relating to practice, then life, then tradition) from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition. But I also draw from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animals*. McDowell's writings on virtue and reason span several essays and books, such as *Mind, Value and Reality*. I especially draw from "Virtue and Reason"[8], and "Values as

7. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

8. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331–50.

Secondary Qualities"[9].

Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.[10] Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the virtuous person to "achieve those goods" of practices, to live a successful whole life, and to sustain traditions.[11] John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.[12] My definition of virtue is this: virtue is the acquirable excellence of practical reasoning and rational practice. It will include but improve upon theirs.

A brief overview of points to be presented and defended:

1. Virtues are excellences of rational practice. 2. They are, by definition, good for their possessor; they are beneficial for humankind, both oneself and others. 3. They enable the actualization or realization of one's life form, including our animal nature as mortal creatures that need to eat, drink, stay warm, reproduce, and live an embodied existence in a particular time and place. 4. They are corrective, especially benefiting humankind at tempting vices. 5. Virtues are not just any excellent human traits, but the acquirable ones.
2. Virtues are also excellences of practical reasoning; some, but not all virtues, just are knowledge. 7. Without excellent practical reasoning, virtues would fail to be good for their possessor. 8. Intellectual virtues enable one to grasp truth, self-reflect, speak well, and so on. 9. Social and intellectual virtues enable societies and traditions to improve, create new practical reasoners, and so on.

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9. John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (Routledge, 1985), 110–29.

10. Her exact words are that virtue is excellence of "the rational will." After expanding the concept of 'will' beyond its typical meaning to include intentions, it is clear her 'rational will' as identical to my 'practical rationality'. I want to avoid the word will because it might be a narrowly western way of viewing the capacity for practical reasoning. David Bradshaw distinguishes the cluster of concepts such as heart, mind, and will, and shows that Aristotle and others did not have a concept of a distinct, sub-rational faculty for choosing. Cf. David Bradshaw, "The Mind and the Heart in the Christian East and West," *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 5 (2009): 576–98.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 191.

12. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.

V. Defining Excellence

Beneficial

Virtues are good-of-a-kind for creatures like us, namely, practical rational animals. We saw above that virtues are, for Foot, examples of 'natural goodness'. So like a 'good oak' or 'good wolf, a good person exemplifies those good-making features shared by all exemplary members of a natural species. Hursthouse calls this "Plato's requirement" on the virtues, that they benefit their possessor. "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms."[13]

For MacIntyre, likewise, virtues are acquired *human* qualities. Presumably, human qualities are opposed to analogous qualities of non-human animals. The flexible flagellum of a bacterium, the swiftness of a deer – formal or functional biological features that enable an animal to survive and thrive – are excluded from the class of virtues by definition.[14] Secondly, virtues enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods*. This clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. A virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills. This assumption will bring some trouble for MacIntyre's initial definition in *After Virtue*. As we saw with Foot, it seems quite possible that people who have particular virtues can be, overall, wicked. (Can't the thief be courageous, the dictator magnanimous, the glutton affable?) It certainly seems that the answer is yes. Even indexing virtues to practices does not solve the problem; can practices be wicked? We will address this problem later.

For McDowell, this problem does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue. He argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live. McDowell's theses are that: (1) "The point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of

13. Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."

14. MacIntyre's later *Dependent Rational Animals* retracts the assumed divide between human and non-human animals. But here, virtues do not arise from nor depend on biology. In this, MacIntyre's initial formulation disagrees with Foot but agrees with McDowell.

the question 'How should one live?' "[15] (2) Virtues are kinds of knowledge and *virtue* is a kind of knowledge; and (3) The question of how to live must be approached from "within" a moral outlook and approached "*via* the notion of a virtuous person."[16]

Actualize our life form

A related point is that virtues enable and partly constitute the realization of one's life-form. At this juncture, I would like to say a word about "excellence." The concept of 'excellence' is relative to an object's nature and function; an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*; but an excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, and so on. Artifacts receive their function by design, and even natural entities (such as dogs) have artificial functions insofar a they are trained by human users. So is it not necessary to know the telos of the human life form, our "function"? I do not think it is necessary to know our function, at least not in great detail.

Although, it is tempting to assume that all functions are imposed on objects and that natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function, I have argued above that natural entities such as organisms have natural functions, namely to develop fully into what they are. We can empirically discover the telos of an organism by observing it and discerning between exemplary and non-exemplary members of the kind, remaining agnostic about its physical-mechanical or divine origin. That is, we can learn what acorns are by observing and reflecting upon their development from embryonic stages to maturity and the activities mature, typical members of the species exhibit.

So, similarly, we can hypothesis that the "function" of a practical rational animal is to become a fully mature practical rational animal. We might not be able to define, a priori, what such an specimen would look like. We might need to gather a sample of persons who seem to us to be virtuous, discerning carefully between those that are actually virtuous and those that merely seem so. But pretty obviously, some people are exemplary specimens of how not to live.

15. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
16. Ibid., 331.

When we find fully mature rational animals, we will observe that they do not just sit around "being human" all day; they perform "characteristic action" typical of the species. Famously, Aristotle concluded that the theoretical or speculative activity of the intellect was that characteristic action. I will dispute Aristotle's conclusion (or this interpretation of Aristotle) in a later chapter. For now, I will only insist that we do not need to specify at the outset what activities are characteristic actions of practical rational animals; we can keep the notion indeterminate: our characteristic actions will involve practical reasoning and rational acting.

It is also important to specify that virtues are not just traits that *lead to good consequences* for organisms like us (that too). Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. To use a well-worn example, friendship is a good for practical, rational, social animals. But having the traits that make one a good friend is not valuable *merely* because it will lead to the state of affairs "having friends"; it is valuable because those traits make one a good human being, whether or not friends are forthcoming. Good humans make good friends.

Even MacIntyre is careful to make this point. He does say that "enable their possessor to achieve … goods", which might make it sound like virtue are mere *instruments* to goods, not goods themselves. This would be a grave misunderstanding. Virtues *are* instrumental for MacIntyre, but they are not *merely* instrumental. They are both instrumental (to the achievement of certain goods) and also *partly constitutive of those goods.* Virtues are both means to an end and also ends in themselves. Now, this conflation of means and ends is liable to worry some critics. The worry is not trivial. However, for the sake of completing my presentation of virtue, I must set it aside for now.

Beneficial for self and others

Foot says, "Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist

terror."[17]

But whom is benefited? Does a person possessing a virtue benefit the virtuous person or the society in which the virtuous person lives? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly *both*. For example, moderation with alcohol benefits oneself, one's family, one's community and so on. For other virtues, such as justice or charity, the answer is less clear. She says, "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."[18] Even so, she finds the alleged paradox between what we might wish to call "selfish" and "altruistic" virtues overblown. Certainly, sometimes life presents us with the opportunity to pursue only one of two contradicting or apparently irreconcilable goods; my own good *versus* your good. Sometimes, however, the cases in which virtuous deeds necessitate the loss of other goods are not so devastating as they might appear. It might be that, on occasion, it is better (say) for my family that I sacrifice my health in working hard to earn higher wages; while on other occasions it is better for my family that I sacrifice higher wages keep myself healthy. Even when there is a clear, irresolvable tension between my good and the good of the group (as when, say, I must sacrifice my life), we can make sense of the demand of morality by appealing to what is necessary *for humans* in general. As Geach says: "Men need virtues as bees need stings. An individual bee may perish from stinging, all the same bees need stings; an individual man may perish by being brave or justice, but all the same, men need courage and justice."[19] Geach further points out that the clear contrast between my "inclinations" (e.g., to self preservation) is largely an artifact of philosophical thinking; many people are *inclined* both to self-preservation *and* inclined to obey the moral law.

Supposing that virtues *benefit their possessor*, is it then egoistic or selfish to pursue virtue? Although it seems we only need virtue if we want to be happy, everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits because virtues help us become who we are. Such a pursuit is not selfish in the pejo-

17. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2–3.
18. Ibid., 3.
19. Geach, *The Virtues*, 17.

rative sense of the word; it is not 'egoism' for the charge of egoism assumes that the good for men is not *the good* per se. But we need not assume this. It may be that the good for men is the good. Pleasure is not the good, though it is *a* good. Moderation is a good as well. and a person who enjoys both the moderate pleasures of life and the moderation of pleasure and pain is both a better fellow and better person.

While we cannot pretend to have settled the notorious tensions between altruism and egoism, we must move on in the pursuit of a definition of virtue. Foot says: "let us say then, leaving unsolved problems behind us, that virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows."[20]

Corrective

Virtues are corrective of common, tempting, human bads. It might seem odd that "badness" could be tempting. But examples are all too easy to supply. Consider obesity as a human bad-of-a-kind. While self-starvation is usually motivated by complex social and psychological factors, some cases of obesity have straightforward causes. A person does not exercise much but eats a rich diet of flavorful, high calorie foods every day. Under certain metabolic conditions, such a person will steadily gain weight and eventually become obese. The temptation to each rich, flavorful, high calorie foods is simply that such foods taste good; but obesity is also motivated by physiological and psychological factors: many people like the feeling "full", and many people eat to reduce anxiety, anger, or boredom. But immoderation with respect to eating is bad for oneself. So at the point where the temptation to embrace the bad comes in, the possibility of virtue comes in as well. As Foot says, each virtue stands "at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good."[21]

Foot illuminates a statement of Aristotle that "virtues are about what is difficult for men" and

20. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 4.
21. Ibid., 8.

she objects to a statement of Kant that *only* "actions done out of a sense of duty" have moral worth. In this connection, she discusses Kant's problem of the happy philanthropist. This problem is the troubling and dissonant conclusion that if a very generous philanthropist gets great pleasure out of helping others then such actions display no moral worth. Surely a commonsense moral judgment would accord moral worth to the very fact that the philanthropist *enjoys* doing what is good (which Aristotle builds into the definition of a virtuous person); he doesn't just grit his teeth and do good (which Aristotle would call mere *continence*).

Kant's error, according to Foot, is in failing to distinguish that which is "in accord" with virtue from that which is *virtuous* full stop. It may be, for example, that a novice tennis player makes an expert shot while remaining merely a novice. The hit is "in accord" with excellence but is not, in this case, an instance of excellence – only beginner's luck. In her self-love example, Foot points out that there is no virtue required to eat one's breakfast and avoid life-threatening danger, but there may sometimes be cases where self-love is a duty – even a difficult, painful duty. She says, "sometimes it is what is owed to others that should keep a man from destroying himself, and then he may act out of a sense of duty."[22] So the solution to the happy philanthropist problem is that if he really does have such a character as to be delighted helping others, he is morally praiseworthy *because he has worked to achieve that character*. As she says:

> For charity is, as we said, a virtue of attachment as well as action, and the sympathy that makes it easier to act with charity is part of the virtue. The man who acts charitably out of a sense of duty is not to be undervalued, but it is the other who most shows virtue and therefore to the other that most moral worth is attributed.[foot2002virtues 14]

Since charity is a "virtue of attachment" (I should say "affection"), the feelings of the philanthropist count in favor of proving the presence of a virtue.

Of course, commonsense judges that a philanthropist who persists in virtue even when he does not enjoy giving is also praiseworthy. Foot explains this too. She allows that it may take greater

22. Ibid., 13.

virtue for a man to *persist* in his philanthropy *even when* it brings him no delight.

> Only a detail of Kant's presentation of the case of the dutiful philanthropist tells on the other side. For what he actually said was that this man felt no sympathy and took no pleasure in the good of others because 'his mind was clouded by some sorrow of his own', and this is the kind of circumstance that increases the virtue that is needed if a man is to act well.

For someone who has acquired a kind of immunity to some kinds of temptation is through sustained effort and in many small victories is, ipso facto, especially admirable. Virtues are indeed corrective of tempting vices and tempting moral errors. However, the presence of temptation is not a necessary condition for the presence of a virtue.

Acquirable

Virtues are acquirable. In the first line of Plato's *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates a question "whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?"[23] While Plato gives hints as to his answer, Socrates himself punts on the question of how virtue is acquired and directs Meno to what virtue is. Moral philosophers have continued to try to answer this question for the last 2,400 years. A recent volume edited by Mark Alfano[24] discusses the range of which positive traits count as virtues.

This is a deep issue. My goal here is not to address *how* virtue is acquired. My only goal here is to argue that a trait must be *acquirable* to be a virtue. This point is in service of my conception that virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is the process of acquiring new traits one does not have but potentially can have (or of shedding old traits one has but can potentially lose).

Since virtues are acquirable, they must be distinct from mere inborn strength, acquired skill, or other human excellences.

23. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997), *Meno* 70a.
24. Mark Alfano, *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (Routledge, 2015).

Begin with the following apparent problem. Someone might concede to everything that has been said so far. A virtue is a natural excellence for practical reasoners, a good-of-a-kind for creatures like us. But then, it would seem that *any* trait that benefits humans is a virtue; such as strength, a powerful intellect, keen eyesight, and a reliable memory. Is a contractor who excels at hammering 16d nails into wooden frames to be admired for his *virtue*? Is the quarterback who can make accurate throws under pressure virtuous? The Homeric virtues included beauty, skill in war, and other socially valuable traits. As MacIntyre says, "The word *arete*, which later comes to be translated as 'virtue', is in the Homeric poems used for excellence of any kind; a fast runner displays the arete of his feet (*Iliad* 20. 411) and a son excels his father in every kind of arete-as athlete, as soldier and in mind (*Iliad* 15. 642)."[25] Even if we grant that such traits are goods-of-a-kind (and they seem open to dispute), they do not seem to us particularly *moral*.[26]

So how, if at all, should we pick out that moral virtue from other expressions of human excellence? At first glance, the answer seems to be something about the *will*; Foot thinks virtues are revealed not only by a person's abilities but by his or her *intentions*. But what are intentions? Foot argues that the 'will' must be understood in its broadest sense, "to cover what is wished for as well as what is sought."[27] Intentions are not the *only* thing we judge, for a well-intentioned nincompoop who always harms when "helping" is rightly judged as deficient in virtue. Neither do we only judge the result of a person's action, for we sometimes exculpate a failing performance in part because the person *meant well*, though it also perhaps it the exculpation is called for because circumstances were not favorable, chances of success were low, etc.

She attempts to capture the point that we admire someone who not only does the right thing but who has conditioned himself to do the right thing fluently and almost instantly. She quotes from John Hersey's novel *A Single Pebble* in which the narrator relates watching a man save a boy from

25. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

26. Julia Annas's argument that virtues are skills of a particular type takes advantage of the intuitive similarity between virtue and skill. Cf. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

27. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 5.

drowning:

> It was the head tracker's marvelous swift response that captured my admiration at first, his split second solicitousness when he heard a cry of pain, his finding in mid-air, as it were, the only way to save the injured boy. But there was more to it than that. His action, which could not have been mulled over in his mind, showed a deep, instinctive love of life, a compassion, an optimism, which made me feel very good.

Foot's comment is this:

> What this suggests is that a man's virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit; and small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.[28]

I find this analysis convincing. The outward behavior (the swift response) discloses not only the savior's intentions and attitudes, but something even deeper; settled dispositions that can be betrayed in the smallest facial expressions or the most "instinctive" gut reactions.

MacIntyre's definition was that virtues are *acquired* human qualities. Since natural biological features are inborn, I would only modify this this definition to "acquirable". Not everyone has all the virtues and some people never acquire some virtues. Virtues are not *natural* in the sense that natural attributes such as hair color are 'automatic'; they are natural in the sense that they are *proper* to human beings, they are formal features of practical, rational animals. In this, I am agreeing with Aristotle that virtue is *in accordance with* nature but not *by nature*. Rather, virtuous traits are a "normal" psychological outgrowth of cultivating excellence within particular human practices.

In sum, virtues are acquired traits of excellent, rational practice or excellent practical reasoning. To capture this point in slightly different way, consider Hursthouse's argument that virtuous dispositions are "multi-track,"[29] She says:

> A virtue such as honesty or generosity is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous, nor is it to be helpfully specified as a "desirable" or "morally valuable"

28. Ibid., 5.
29. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

> character trait. It is, indeed a character trait—that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say "goes all the way down", unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. (Hence the extreme recklessness of attributing a virtue on the basis of a single action.)"

VI. Two objections

Not just given

Practical reasoning is not a simple process different from other kinds of reasoning or practice; it is the whole complex process by which we undertake to direct our own lives. The global understanding of practical reason is also important to block another objection.

To state the objection, first distinguish between what is "given" and what is under the control of a normal, functional, adult human being. Simply put, one's nature is given, and one's choices throughout life are controllable. But what is given in the life of a child includes (at least) one's genetic identity, one's time and place in history, one's culture and tradition, one's parents or guardians. If virtues are first inculcated in a child by tradition and only later acquired by an individual's own initiative, then it seems the dichotomy breaks down. It seems, in short, that the virtues one acquires or fails to acquire are part of the given. If Jim and Jane grow up in very different cultures with very different kinds of parents and very different opportunities, it would each is given his or her virtues and vices "up front", with little to no chance for acquiring new virtues or shedding vices.

Furthermore, some of our attributes and actions may fail to be excellent without being our *fault*. So our account must allow us distinguish between various kinds of excellence. Consider the broadest set of things labelled 'good for humans'. All of the good things of human life enable the realization of a fully human life. But not all good things are subject to our control. The virtues are

among those good things under our control – good dispositions we each choose to cultivate or fail to cultivate. Unlike other goods (say, wealth), virtues become *what we are*.

A related worry might be that the account thus far does nothing to correct the suggestion that those who are natively intelligent are *morally* superior to those who are natively unintelligent; and it does nothing to correct the suggestion that those who are trained and educated in various excellences are morally superior to those who lack such good fortune. I think such corrections can be made, however; we are still remaining true to Anscombe's directive of avoiding the concepts of "moral fault" and "moral superiority" for now. And while even after such corrections, there may be natural differences between people's excellence and imperfection there is nothing about the *very facts* of the human life form that is elitist or unjustly hierarchical – nature produces people with a wide diversity of physical attributes (height, weight, size, color) and will continue to do so.

On this point, Foot cautions against several species of terminological misunderstanding: *αρετή* for the Greeks refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice"[30]. We should like to distinguish beauty, raw talent, strength, and other excellences that are not at all under our control from virtues – which are under our control, either partially or completely. Furthermore, even their list of "moral virtues" (*arete ethikai* or *virtues morales*) do not correspond precisely to *our* "moral virtues". The traditional list of cardinal "moral virtues" (including courage, moderation, practical wisdom, and justice) includes positive traits we might classify as "self-regarding" (e.g., moderation) as well as "other-regarding" (e.g., justice), and includes practical wisdom (*phronesis/prudentia*) which, if we mentioned it all, we would be inclined to classify as an intellectual virtue. Finally, not all of the items on our list of positive qualities (e.g., unselfishness) obviously correspond to one of the classical virtues. So, we ought not to assume that the terms 'excellence' or even 'moral excellence' can be a short-cut for understanding the concept of virtue. We must, instead, construct our account with care and attention.

30. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2; Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

A partial answer is that the cardinal virtues are especially important because they are necessary for success in any worthwhile human endeavor. Jim and Jane do not need the same professional skills since they do not perform the same social function; but they both need the "moral skills" of relating to their friends and family, cultivating their talents, and striving self-actualization. Most people in the world will not write books or even read many books; however, every human being in the world has biological parents and hence has family. Every living human being belongs to a community; even orphans and street urchins live in a community. These traits are indeed acquirable and obligatory.

A related worry is that acquiring virtues might be good but is not obligatory. They are not "perfect duties" in Kant's sense. Since clearly not all ethicists are virtue ethicists, it would seem a bit overreaching to assert that the pursuit of virtue is obligatory on every ethicist. Also, since not all people are westerners or neo-Aristotelians, it would seem cultural imperialism to assert that the pursuit of virtue is obligatory on everyone in the world. Nevertheless, if it is possible to discover human virtues (like moderation and practical wisdom), then it is possible to discover virtues the acquisition of which is incumbent upon everyone regardless of their level of academic knowledge or the content of their metaphysical commitments.

Having said that, some might object that not everyone has equal opportunity to acquire even the cardinal virtues. For if moral education, virtuous parents and teachers, and proper social conditions (wherein vice will not be gratuitously rewarded or virtues gratuitously punished) are helpful then some people are better situated than others. This is not, strictly speaking, a problem with the account of virtue. It is a problem with life. Though every human being has equal responsibility to acquire them.

Since, for the first decade or two of life, we are not primarily responsible for our own traits, the first corollary is high importance of moral and intellectual education. In many respects, our individuality depends on fate and luck. But in some very key respects, the acquisition of virtues and

vices with which we begin adult life depends upon our education.[31] The beginning of human life, like the beginning of any organic life, is the foundation for all that follows. When a mother drinks heavily or uses cocaine while pregnant, the child is going to suffer the negative consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is abused – emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually – by her parents, the psychological cost is meted out across the entire life and across generations. By the same token, when a mother eats healthily and takes her vitamins while pregnant, the child is going to reap the positive consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is given love, approval, empowerment, discipline, by her parents, the psychological gains are meted out across the entire life and across generations. The original source of most people's life maxims are not their ethics professors, favorite novels, Holy Bibles, or therapists, but their parents or other guardians. This corollary might be obvious but we must never forget it. It is important to the argument because we should never give into the temptation to think that the cultivation of virtue is simply a business for adults (least of all adult professional academics) to argue for and against. It is the business of societies and families to do or fail to do every day.

Empty tautology

Another objection that might arise to what we have said so far is this: defining virtue as "beneficial" or "positive" by definition is circular and therefore empty. Suppose we define "boldness" as *doing hard things* and "courage" as doing hard things when it is good. Boldness is, so to speak, value neutral. One can be bold in wrongdoing or bold in doing well. If courage is just boldness in doing good, then affirmation that 'courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good' would appear to amount to the trivial revelation that 'good things are good'. And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial.

This is an important objection, but it misses the point. These ethical propositions are not tautologous but are so widely and commonly accepted as to be easily mistaken for tautologies. Of

31. W. Jay Wood, "Prudence," in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A Boyd (Oxford University Press, 2014).

course, if we define "kindness" simply as "a disposition of treating others *in a good way*" then it appears that "it is good to be kind" amounts to the same tautologous proposition "it is good to be good." But kindness is *not* best defined simply as *something good*.

Instead, we must realize that some ethical propositions are synthetic, yet so widely believed and so widely affirmed that they appear to be tautologous. But philosophers argue that this widespread, near universal belief is a sign that these propositions are self-evidently true. For instance, Russ Shafer-Landau says:

> It seems to me self-evident that, other things equal, it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent, and to sell another's secrets solely for personal gain.[32]

We can furnish more examples: It is good to be kind; and cruelty is bad. Pleasure is a good. Wise people make good leaders. I ought to keep my promises. A just society is desirable. Fools are ridiculous and the wise are admirable. Being moderate is responsible. Alcoholism is ill-advised. Injustice is bad. We ought to care for children and respect elders. Generosity is admirable. Pursue good and avoid evil.

Another way of putting what is perhaps the same point is to call these propositions "quasi-analytic":

> Indeed, many fundamental scientific laws (as well as some scientific tru- isms) and many fundamental moral principles have the property which we might call quasi-analyticity (see, e.g., Putnam 1962). Because of their conceptual and methodological centrality, even when we know that their justification is a posteriori rather than a priori, we find it extremely difficult to envision circumstances under which they would be disconfirmed. For as long as they occupy so central a conceptual and methodological role, they are immune from empirical revision, and principles incompatible with them are ineligiblefor empirical confirmation (let's call them quasi-analytically ineligible). As Putnam indicates, quasi-analyticity and quasi-analytic ineligibility can be altered only by pretty serious conceptual and theoretical "revolutions," whose directions are all but impossible to anticipate prior to the innovations or crises which

32. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 4 (Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 11.

> precipitate them. The principle that torturing children is wicked and the fundamental laws of quantum mechanics are both candidates for quasi-analyticity.[33]

These ethical propositions do not seem to be tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. Some Platitudes are small, others great. "It is polite to say please" is a Platitude. But "treat others as you would wish to be treated" is a Great Platitude. The core principles of "common morality" that have achieved an astonishingly wide consensus in bioethical discussions are good examples of Great Platitudes.[34]

It is only by reflection that humans have a nature, a species-specific kind of flourishing, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our life form while others are conducive to its stultification. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[35]

VII. Rational action

Virtues bear an important relationship to rational action. Some *enable* rational action; others *are* rational actions.

I would like now to explore MacIntyre's notion of "practice." Practice is a key term of art; to misunderstand it would be to misunderstand MacIntyre. A practice is a social activity aimed at defined ends. (We commonly speak of "practicing" medicine in this sense.) MacIntyre mentions farming, chess, and political activity, among other examples. A practice is not merely a reflexive action (like scratching an itch) nor merely a single, discrete, intelligible action (like pulling a weed); it is an intelligible set of actions. .

A secondary school teacher, say, is engaged in a series of activities, in order to give children the basic knowledge and skills they need to transition to functional adults in society, whether by

33. Richard Boyd, "Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, no. 3 (2003): 520.

34. Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

35. Geach, *The Virtues*, Chapter 1.

getting a job, starting a business, or advancing to higher stages of education.[36] Secondary education in the U.S. is a practice with a history (or a set of histories) from the present time back to when Americans completing high school (rather than beginning work on a farm or in town by the age of 16) was the exception rather than the rule. It has standards, both legal standards and "best practices" passed from mentor to student teacher. It pretty obviously has standards of excellence according to which most educators are average, some poor, and some excellent. An educator who wants to join that profession will be enculturated with that history, taught those standards, and given a chance (usually by trial and error) to become a good teacher. Lutz' first condition is met, since [1] teaching is an inherently complex *social* activity, in that teachers cannot be teachers without students, and (usually) do not teach in isolation but in community with colleagues and administrators and parents. [2] Secondary education qua practice enables teachers to gain the goods "internal to the practice", namely students who are educated enough to be ready for legal adulthood – for a job or college. [3] Good teachers are those that demonstrate the ability reliably to produce educated students, sometimes in the face of incredible obstacles. And [4] good schools and good teachers usually have a *history* and social context that is being "extended" across generations. Good schools recruit and train good teachers, good teachers train the next generation of good teachers, and so on. Leading MacIntyre scholar, Christopher Lutz, highlights four aspects of MacIntyre's famous definition of practice. A practice is:

> [1] a complex social activity that [2] enables participants to gain goods internal to the practice. [3] Participants achieve excellence in practices by gaining the internal goods. When participants achieve excellence, [4] the social understandings of excellence in the practice, of the goods of the practice, and of the possibility of achieving excellence in the practice are systematically extended.[37]

36. Secondary education has other (perhaps de facto) purposes, like to socialize young people in a community of peers and authorities, and to afford them opportunities for recreation, art, clubs, to give parents a break, and so on. For the sake of simplicity, I shall focus on what seems to me the primary goal of education, which is education (in knowledge) and training (in skills) needed for becoming a legal adult.

37. Christopher Lutz, "Alasdair MacIntyre" (Web; Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015).

I've spoken of the goods of teaching. But MacIntyre defines virtues with reference to goods *"internal to"* practices. What does he mean by employing the internal/external relation here? MacIntyre later refashions the contrast between 'internal' and 'external' goods into one between 'goods of excellence' and 'goods of effectiveness.' (I prefer the latter terminology. But the point is, I think, clear.) The "goods of excellence" of a practice are those that necessarily contribute to success within a given practice. In secondary education, success is defined by, say, graduation rates, retention of information, high test scores, acceptance to good colleges, low drug use, and so on. The profession-specific virtues needed include understanding (to stay patient with struggling students), affability (to keep rapport), articulateness (to present material effectively), and so on. More general virtues needed include honesty, integrity, courage, faithfulness, and so on. Without these, *teaching* may be possible but *teaching well* is impossible.

By contrast, goods of effectiveness are those that might fit with the practice but are not *necessary* for achieving the end of that practice: high pay, an excellent teacher lounge, a short commute to work, and so on. Mere efficiency in attaining such external goods does not entail the presence of a virtue. In fact, the desire to pursue such goods *instead of* the goods of excellence is not a neutral desire — it is a *temptation.* Virtues are needed to overcome those temptations and to succeed according to the standards of the practice itself.[38]

Whole life

Virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical rationality. As McDowell has argued, at least some virtues are kinds of knowledge. But all virtue is useless unless it results in a good life. Hursthouse points out that we do not just admire those who survive but who exemplify a *human* form of life: "The human virtues make their possessor good qua human being, one who is as ordinarily

38. To illustrate the temptation goods of effectiveness might pose, we need only think about political activity. Some (I suppose) become politicians *in order to bring about* the survival, security, and prosperity of the *polis*; others engage in order merely to satisfy their own ambition or achieve fame. Often we see American politicians running for office only one apparent aim: book sales.

well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way."[39]

The virtuous person lives the human life. For "human life" cannot be defined in a value-neutral way, to which "good life" must be appended. Rather, "human life" is by definition the exemplary sort of human life. Our definition of 'human' must, Micah Lott says: >embody a normatively significant understanding of human life and action. For any conception of human form is a natural-historical account of 'how the human lives.' As with 'the tiger' or 'the mayfly,' a natural-history of 'the human' provides an interpretation of the characteristic and non-defective life-cycle of the species. And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty of practical reason.[40]

The practical animal "takes up" all that is intrinsic to being an animal – hungers, thirsts, sleepiness, sexual urges, a desire for shelter and comfort – and lives a life with them. A practical animal takes up all that is given in the natural lottery – strengths, weaknesses, defects, injuries, sicknesses, and talents – and must put it to use in living a life. Insofar as one cannot but sleep sometimes, the question of whether or not to sleep at all is not an ethical question; it is not in my control. Insofar as one can either stay or go, pursue or avoid, harm or help, such decisions are ethical decisions and the question of how to live is an ethical question. One must decide which larger, longer-term projects to pursue and which objects are worthwhile to obtain; and one must, along the way of these long-term pursuits, decide rather extemporaneously how to react to the vicissitudes of circumstance. Each of us must decide how to react to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."[41]

While we may admire "winners" of the natural lottery, we admire more the person who uses the attributes they were given well, who makes an investment of them that pays dividends. Compare, for example, the crowds cheering for Olympic runner Derek Redmond when he is winning the gold

39. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.
40. Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," 770–1.
41. *Hamlet* III.1

medal with the crowds cheering for Derek Redmond finishing last after his hamstring tore and his father helped him to cross the finish line. There have been many gold medal winning races that millions of people have witnessed and forgotten. But this race, when an otherwise naturally talented and well-trained athlete finished *last* that remains forever etched in the memory of millions more. It's not just the unbridled emotion Redmond displayed in that moment which so touches viewers; it's the obvious love from his father shown in supporting his son's commitment to finish the race, even dead last.

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The same principle applies to the various aspects of being a practical, rational animal we can mention. Aristotle taught that "affability" was a virtue, where many of us might chuckle to imagine that naturally phlegmatic people are morally better than their melancholic counterparts. Surely something so little under one's control is not a basis for evaluation? We should first remember that the "moral" virtues are not, for Aristotle, obedience to categorical imperatives or divine commands but simply ways of developing one's emotions into the likeness of a true human being. In this light, it does seem to me common for people to judge their fellows on the basis of *wilfully chosen* habits of relating to others – the cold, unfeeling, humorless, or self-absorbed person is not being judged for losing any natural lottery but for allowing him or herself to become a poor companion. The

warm-hearted, empathetic, cheerful, and outwardly-focused person is rightly judged for cultivating sociable attitudes and habits. While not everyone needs to be entertaining or well-connected,basic levels of relating to other persons in family and social situations is not an optional part of human life but part of our very nature. And like Derek Redmond, someone who is naturally disposed to be solidarity, melancholic, cynical, bitter, or otherwise negative is all the more admirable when he or she becomes and remains affable against the odds.

MacIntyre's second stage of his account of virtue goes beyond the notion of mere practices to include the whole life.[42] He says that "without an overriding conception of the telos of a whole human life, conceived as a unity, our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial and incomplete."[43] The example given shows how justice demands an ordering of the various goods of excellence within each practice. MacIntyre undermines the notion that the virtues which enable success in practices can be sufficient for an account of virtue in general. He argues that we need to "envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate telos."[44]

Despite the obstacles to such a vision, it is possible. The obstacles MacIntyre cites are both "social and philosophical." The social obstacle is the fragmentation of modern life: "work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms."[45] Just as the temporal segments of life are fragmented into bits (one thinks of the inherently patronizing talk of "senior citizens" compared from the older, inherently reverent talk of "elders"), so also the various projects and pursuits of life are partitioned, labelled, and cordoned off. On this fragmented view of life, the self's social roles are so many conventions masking the "true" underlying nature of the self. This presents a puzzle: how could virtues arise to the level of excellent dispositions for

42. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 15.
43. Ibid., 202.
44. Ibid., 204.
45. Ibid., 204.

humans as such? They would have to be dispositions applicable in personal, private, business, spheres, in young and middle and old age, etc.

The second and philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions… in terms of simple components."[46] MacIntyre's argument here is highly significant. He begins by analyzing the way we might answer a simple question such as: "what is he doing?"

> One and the same segment of human behavior may be correctly characterized in a number of different ways. To the question 'What is he doing?' the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be 'Digging', 'Gardening', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for winter' or 'Pleasing his wife.'[47]

The first fact to notice is that each of these answers picks out different aspects of the agent's action: intentions, intended consequences, unintended consequences, etc. And, importantly, each of these answers places the simple atomic action within a narrative history: situated in an "annual cycle of domestic activity", in a hobby, in a marriage, and so on – each with its own history and "setting." The second fact to notice is that the answers to a similarly simple question "Why is he writing a sentence?" might be situated in different time horizons: immediately, he is writing to finish his book; but also he is contributing to a philosophical debate; but also he is trying to get tenure.[48] The upshot of these reflections is that individual actions, abstracted from their context are only intelligible if they are "ordered both causally and temporally… the correct identification of the agent's beliefs will be an essential constituent of this task."[49] MacIntyre's astonishing conclusion from these innocuous premises is this: "there is no such thing as 'behavior', to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings… Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[50] MacIntyre scholar Stanley Hauerwas explains the significance of this conclusion: "the central contention in *After Virtue* is his remark that

46. Ibid., 204.
47. Ibid., 206.
48. Ibid., 207.
49. Ibid., 208.
50. Ibid., 208.

"the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action."[51]

The actions one performs in practices find their intelligibility not only in practices but in the narrative of a whole human life. The same is true for verbal contributions to a conversation. Each turn people take in speaking to each other contributes to an unfolding narrative with a history and a telos, without which statements are random and unintelligible. MacIntyre continues:

> But if this is true of conversations, it is true also *mutatis mutandis* of battles, chess games, courtships, philosophy seminars, families at the dinner table, businessmen negotiating contracts- that is, of human transactions in general. For conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general. Conversational behavior is not a special sort or aspect of human behavior, even though the forms of language-using and of human life are such that the deeds of others speak for them as much as do their words. For that is possible only because they are the deeds of those who have words.[52]

Hauerwas continues:

> This may seem a small philosophical point, but much revolves around it: His understandings of the centrality of practical reason, the significance of the body for agency, why the teleological character of our lives must be displayed through narrative, the character of rationality, the nature of the virtues, why training in a craft is paradigmatic of learning to think as well as live, his understanding of why the Enlightenment project had to fail, his particular way of being a historicist, and why the plain person is the necessary subject of philosophy.[53]

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre's discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.[54] For we have arrived at a the supports needed for building the second stage of his account of virtue: the unity of many practices into a single whole. He says: "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest."[55]

51. Ibid., 209.
52. Ibid., 211.
53. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," *First Things*, 2007.
54. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 216. Consider such fascinating statements as: "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' "
55. Ibid., 219.

Naturally, to be on a quest is to strive for a goal, even if one fails to reach the goal. The goal, he says, is to quest for "*the* good" (as one understands it at the beginning of the quest). But the conception of *the* good can grow or morph along the way. How do the virtues relate to this quest?

> The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices. but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good. by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good.[56]

In the first stage, virtues enabled success in practices. In this second stage, virtues enable us to coordinate various practices and pursuits – including relationships with friends, family, fellow citizens, and strangers – into a coherent quest to live our lives well.

VIII. Practical reasoning

3. virtues bear a crucial relationship to knowledge. Some of them just are knowledge, but others require a kind of knowledge to ensure that they are only 'operative' toward good ends.[57] Furthermore, in ways that will be specified, virtues important relations to speech, self-reflection, society, and tradition.

Virtues bear an important relationship to practical reasoning, speech, self-reflection and society. In these sections, I would like to explore this relationship.

For example, some virtues *enable* rational action; others *are* rational actions.

I would like to explore McDowell's account of virtue in a bit more detail. McDowell argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live.

56. Ibid., 220.
57. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*.

His first claim is that the "point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live?' "[58]. We notice that ethical reflection is *reflection* about *practice*. As we have argued, as practical reasoners we do not *merely* act (like a deer or a dog) nor do we *merely* calculate (like a computer or an angel); we reflect upon what we ought to do, how we ought to live. Such reflection only makes sense concerning issues within my control.

Virtue is Knowledge?

As for the thesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge, McDowell argues that morality is *practical knowledge* (a "disposition to act well"). Such practical knowledge (and this is the third point) seems to demand "a moral outlook" to act well.[59] To see why it makes sense to conceive of virtue as practical knowledge, suppose that some platitudinous value (say, kindness) is really a virtue. The kind person is reliably kind and is kind *on purpose*. A person who merely happens to be kind or who commits acts of kindness resulting from blind instinct does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. A person who is kind once, or even every now and then, likewise does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. Rather, a kind person is one who is regularly sensitive to a range of reasons for behaving in a particular way. The kind person, McDowell adduces, "has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behavior" and such "deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge."[60] The kind person *knows* what is called for, is intentional about avoiding cruel or indifferent behavior, and so on.

If kindness is "a sort of perceptual capacity", "specialized sensitivity" to a particular range of reasons for action (say, the feelings of others), then perhaps the same holds true for other virtues.[61] In fact, McDowell suggests, the notion that virtues are specialized sensitivities — each a kind of knowledge — helps us understand the Socratic notion of the unity of virtue.

58. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
59. Ibid., 331.
60. Ibid., 332.
61. Ibid., 332.

These reflections support the notion that this kind of knowledge ("sensitivity to reasons") is necessary for the virtue but not sufficient. For it might be that one is sensitive to what another would feel but still fail to act rightly. Why? Perhaps, like the overindulgent parent, one is *too* sensitive to the feelings of the child or *not sensitive enough* to other considerations, like the child's health or (McDowell's example) fairness. The virtuous person is sensitive to a whole range of reasons; since reason A and reason B might commend different acts, part of virtue must be the meta-cognitive capacity to reflect upon all those reasons available to one, to rank and order them.

McDowell's "preliminary case" that virtue is knowledge is that the "requirement imposed by the situation… must exhaust his reason for acting as he does."[62] It would disqualify the act as a candidate for an example of kindness if the agent performed it *because* it was kind *and because good repute was likely to follow*. If we run the same calculus on each particular virtue, we can hypothesize that virtuous agents' behavior in each case is explained by their sensitivity to those particular kinds of reasons. In turn, their behavior in general (when virtuous) is explained by their sensitivity in general. He concludes, "thus the particular virtues are not a batch of Independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behavior. It is a single complex sensitivity of the sort which we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook."[63]

One objection to the view that virtue is that a "single complex sensitivity" to requirements upon one's behavior arises from considerations of the internalism/externalism debate regarding moral motivation. Suppose two persons in the same situation are equipped with identical perceptual capacities and so sensitive to the same range of reasons for action, but only one of them does the right thing. If such a supposed situation were to obtain, it would disconfirm McDowell's conclusion. But one man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens.* If virtue is to be identified with a single

62. Ibid., 332.
63. Ibid., 333.

complex sensitivity, then a supposed situation in which two persons perceive a situation and its practical requirements identically but act differently cannot obtain.[64] Socrates took this line. But McDowell suggests we look to Aristotle. Aristotle allowed that "appreciation of what [a virtuous person] observes is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise."[65] The point of such an allowances is that the break between the sensitivity to reasons (which is virtue) and a resultant wrong action occurs when other psychological factors interfere. What interference? McDowell mentions desires and also a "distortion in one's appreciation" of the relevant reasons.[66]

A second possible objection McDowell draws from Donald Davidson. Davidson argues to the effect that a person might fail to perform the resultant right action even without such interfering factors. McDowell responds that the point is true, but it is not an objection. Aristotle's account of continence details that continence is not a virtue. Continence is better than incontinence, but not as good as virtue. The continent person is able to perform the right action because he recognizes it as right, *despite* countervailing pressures (from desires, say) to do the wrong action. Since a fully developed virtue definitionally includes having the proper motivation as well, continence is only needed in the absence of a fully developed virtue. Furthermore, the virtuous person is not always one who "balances" reasons for X against countervailing reasons for Y. The virtuous person is the one for whom simply identifying a reason ("in this situation, courage requires that I run into danger") silences countervailing reasons. The virtuous persons sees the danger (and perhaps feels rightly apprehensive) but also sees that courage in the face of this danger is required; the latter perception, according to McDowell, "silences" other pressures.[67] The merely continent person has to "weigh" reasons; the virtuous person fluently and instantly *acts* on the best reason.

64. Ibid., 333.
65. Ibid., 334.
66. Ibid., 334.
67. Ibid., 335.

Is virtue-knowledge *codifiable*?

McDowell considers the objection that if virtue is knowledge, 'knowing-what-to-do' must be codifiable in propositional form. But 'knowing-what-to-do' is not codifiable, so virtue must not be knowledge. On this objection, the virtuous person enjoys knowledge of one or a few universal ethical precepts and reliably calculates the application of those principles to individual occasions. The virtuous person's ethical arguments "take the form of a 'practical syllogism' " wherein the universal proposition is the major premise and the "relevant particular knowledge" is a minor premise, while the issuing conclusion is the judgment of "what is to be done."[68] Furthermore, on this objection, the defender of Humean moral psychology can keep the identification of relevant particular knowledge with a "minor premise" but substitute the proposed major premise (a proposition such as "It is always good to be courageous") with a non-cognitive desire or commitment (such as "*I want* to be courageous" or "Be courageous!"). Now, they can explain how a virtuous person and non-virtuous person can both perceive a situation identically but fail to perform the same action with reference to their different desires or commitments.

The problem with this objection, McDowell thinks, is not so much a problem with our moral theory but a problem with our conception of rationality. The problem stems from a "deep-rooted prejudice" that rationality is a rule-following procedure. If rationality is a rule-following procedure, then it follows that *either* practical rationality and morality are likewise rule-following procedures *or* that practical rationality and morality is not, ultimately, sufficiently *rational*. Some philosophers (often followers of Hume but not necessarily Hume himself) think that morality is a not rational domain but a domain of sentiments, desires, commitments, approvals, and so on. Other philosophers (often followers of Kant) think that morality is a rational domain and hence must be a matter of identifying first principles and "applying" them to particular situations. But what they share in common is a belief that "rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a

68. Ibid., 336.

formulable universal principle."[69] This common belief McDowell wishes to refute.[70]

McDowell's discussion here (drawing on Wittgenstein and others) is hard to follow. The point seems to be that even apparently obvious cases where the rational thing to do is to follow an objective rule (say, by extending a series of numbers) turn out to be cases of a much messier process in which there is no such objective rule by appeal to which we can explain rational thoughts or behaviors. If Bob instructs Charlie to "add 2" to a number and continue applying the rule indefinitely, we tend to be confident Charlie will produce "2, 4, 6, 8," etc., which will "churn out the appropriate behavior with the sort of reliability which a physical mechanism, say a piece of clockwork, might have." We postulate a "psychological mechanism, underlying his behavior, by an inference analogous to that whereby one might hypothesize a physical structure underlying the observable motions of some inanimate object."[71] The "ground and nature of our confidence" that we will reliably apply rules is not but a common form of life. The 'form of life' is a term of art here from Wittgenstein (and quoted with approval from Stanley Cavell) that refers to that difficult-to-define process by which we learn how reliably to use words in our native language, how to make exclamations like a pained "ow!" or an excited "ooh!", when to laugh at jokes, and when to cry in pity. Our shared rationality, McDowell suggests, is not grounded in "external" objective rules but in a shared form of life or what he calls a "congruence of subjectivities."[72] McDowell admits this is a disconcerting hypothesis; it induces "vertigo." But, our response to such vertigo should not be to embrace a "consoling myth". That myth he says is the two notions that (a) rule-following is a psychological mechanism that — absent mistakes — guarantees consistency, and that there exist objective facts of the matter over and above the congruence of subjectivities. If we abandon these

69. Ibid., 337.

70. In Alasdair MacIntyre, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" *The Monist* 67, no. 4 (1984): 498–513. MacIntyre argues a similar point. In this essay, he denies the assumption that normative ethical rules can be derived from universal ethical principles the way we "apply" universal logical truths to particular logical conclusions via a middle term.

71. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 337.

72. Ibid., 339.

two notions and embrace the model of deductive rationality as grounded only in our intersubjective form of life, then the corresponding model of practical rationality will become tenable.

Although McDowell argues that virtue is not codifiable, still it is a kind of knowledge. But if virtue knowledge is not codifiable then how is it *consistent*? What guarantees that the moral person's behavior is intelligibly the same from case to case? On the one hand, if moral knowledge is rational then it is consistent from case to case and situation to situation; but if, as McDowell has been arguing, both deductive reasoning and practical reasoning are not merely consistent by being like a rule-following machine or computer, how do we explain the virtuous person's reliably correct behavior? Section 5 of the article answers this question by way of Aristotle's practical syllogisms.

The 'practical syllogism' takes the following shape:

1. X is good to do, desirable, worthwhile, etc. (E.g., it is good to instantiate justice in the classroom).
2. Z would be X. (E.g., giving everyone a chance to re-take a quiz that was unavailable due to technical problems would be instantiate justice in my classroom.)
3. Therefore, Z would be good to do, desirable, worthwhile, etc.

On the strictly deductive logical model, the role of the major premise is to provide rock solid universal ethical principles from which to derive particular moral duties. But McDowell resists this model. On the strictly non-cognitivist model, without universal ethical principles we are left with universal psychological states (consistent desires, plans, values, or norms). McDowell also resists this. On the non-codifiable model, what does the major premise do? Its role, he says, is to state a "certain conception of how to live… [namely] the *virtuous person's conception* of the sort of life a human being should lead."[73] It is clear upon reflection that this account is a sort of circular reasoning. For the virtuous person's conception of how to live is itself conditioned by what he called earlier 'the moral outlook'. That conception of how to live, in turn, conditions what particular saliences are noticed (what minor premises) and generates practical conclusions about what is to be done. What kind of life should a human being lead? The answer "cannot be definitively written down."[74] Further-

73. Ibid., 343. Emphasis added.
74. Ibid., 343.

more, "Any attempt to capture it in words will recapitulate the character of the teaching whereby it might be instilled: generalizations will be approximate at best…"[75] The upshot of the combination of non-codifiability with a practical syllogistic form is that the virtuous person takes for a rule of life some conception of how to live but that this conception is part of what it means to be a virtuous person. (Hence the vertigo.)

We might wonder why we are bothering about formal syllogistic reasoning at this point. But this way of understanding the practical syllogism *does* do good job of providing a plausible explanation of moral motivation (reasons one might act in some way) and moral behavior (reasons one acted that way). To paraphrase McDowell: "Explanations of judgments about what to do are explanations of actions."[76] I can explain your behavior by understanding that you were concerned for your friend's welfare and reached out to help. Likewise, you can explain your decision to help by assuring me that you are concerned for your friend's welfare. For McDowell, the general structure of the practical syllogism is useful. He says "the rationality of virtue… is not demonstrable from an external standpoint."[77]

IX. Objections

Can reasons motivate?

McDowell cites a common objection, familiarly attributed to Hume, that practical reasons by themselves cannot motivate — that they need the presence of a conative mental state (such as a desire) as well. The common judgment is that "cognition and volition are distinct." Surely the virtuous person's behavior is conditioned both by knowledge and their non-cognitive psychological states. In McDowell's example, one is aware that one's friend is in trouble and that the friend is able to be comforted (the cognitive bit) and a desire (or motivation or inclination or settled passion) for helping

75. Ibid., 343.

76. Ibid., 342. Verbatim, he says: "The explanations, so far treated as explanations of judgments about what to do, are equally explanations of actions."

77. Ibid., 346.

one's friends (the non-cognitive bit). Surely these two *together* and neither in isolation explains the behavior.

The problem with this objection is that, as McDowell has plausibly argued, an essential component of the awareness that one's friend is in trouble is the very sensitivity that is virtue. The difference between the vicious and virtuous person lies not just in their desires and reactions to what they notice about the world but in the noticing itself. Furthermore, McDowell points out, this non-cognitivist makes use of the deductive model of practical reasoning he has been at pains to deflate.

Can virtue go bad?

Can virtue enable the more efficient achievement of ignoble aims? On the one hand, examples are easy to furnish: a prude might display moderation; a thief might display courage. It seems commonsensical that whatever attributes we designate as 'courageous' can be found in agents pursuing bad ends. On the other hand, the Aristotelian line excludes such a possibility by definition. Jonathan Sanford's recent monograph, *Before Virtue*, argues that Aristotle's doctrine is "ethics insists it is impossible to exercise any virtue, with the exception of technical skill, wrongly."[78] Foot attempts to do justice to both these concerns. The analogy is to poisons or solvents:

> It is quite natural to say on occasion 'P does not act as a poison here' though P is a poison and it is P that is acting here. Similarly courage is not operating as a virtue when the murderer turns his courage, which is a virtue, to bad ends. Not surprisingly the resistance that some of us registered was not to the expression 'the courage of the murderer' or to the assertion that what he did 'took courage' but rather to the description of that action as an act of courage or a courageous act. It is not that the action could not be so described, but that the fact that courage does not here have its characteristic operation is a reason for finding the description strange.[79]

78. Jonathan Sanford, *Before Virtue:Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (The Catholic University of American Press, 2015), 163.

79. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 16.

An agent's commission of an otherwise virtuous action may be a mistake *for that agent* at that time. This may seem ad hoc, but we must remember that Foot is attempting to make space for the "commonsense" observation that some good traits operate to bad ends *within* the philosophically rigorous definition of virtue as beneficial.

One objection Foot responds to is the worry some might have that she is saying *only* those who are completely virtuous are virtuous at all. She has two responses. The first response is that there is one virtue, at least, that always operates as a virtue, namely, wisdom. While it might make some sense to speak of "foolish courage" (recklessness) or "foolish moderation" (prudishness) it makes no sense to speak of "foolish wisdom". Since wisdom always operates as a virtue, we admire wisdom perhaps most of all. As we shall see in John McDowell's discussion of the virtuous person's perceptual capacities, it might be that when we admire a person's courage or moderation,we are often admiring the *wisdom in* the courage and the moderation.

A second response, though, is that we do admire some who have only a subset of all the virtues:

> There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired. Yet the fact is that many of us look up to some people whose chaotic lives contain rather little of wisdom or temperance, rather than to some others who possess these virtues. And while it may be that this is just romantic nonsense I suspect that it is not.[80]

Even those whose overall life is a mishmash of virtues and vices are admirable. My interpretation of this sentiment is that such are admirable insofar as they demonstrate some excellent qualities.

Third stage: Tradition

MacIntyre's response to the problem of virtues going bad is to add a third stage to his account of virtue.

80. Ibid., 17.

That third stage of his virtue account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context – namely, a 'tradition.' We should note that the very concept of virtue MacIntyre defends exemplifies his method of working within a tradition. He derives his account of virtue from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition, but does not limit himself to what has come before.

What is a MacIntyrean tradition? He calls it a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[81] In this third stage, virtues are qualities that enable the health and persistence of traditions.

> Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness. lack of courage. lack of the relevant intellectual virtues–these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments.[82]

We shall pick up MacIntyre's highly contentious concept of tradition in a later chapter. For now, let it suffice that a tradition is an extended argument, in part about the goods that constitute that tradition and the terms of that argument. For MacIntyre, rationality itself is tradition-constituted. So insofar as practical rationality is the differentium of human nature, and insofar as virtues all depend for their effective operation on the coordinating management of practical reason, tradition will again become an essential concept. Virtues as related to practices are individual but not individualistic, since practices themselves are social activities. Virtues as related to the whole of life are cultural but not culturally relativistic, for every culture ought to provide for its members some minimal goods.

X. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning. Virtues benefit their possessor but not egoistically; they are good for humans as a kind. Vices, by contrast, are corruptions of life that are all too common. They are negative or destructive traits

81. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.
82. Ibid., 223.

to which one is tempted somewhere in the common course of human life. Pleasures tempt us to immoderation; the urges to do favors for friends or to slight enemies tempt us to injustice; danger, difficulty, and other kinds of resistance tempt us to cowardice and *acedia*; laziness, arrogance, and culpable ignorance tempt us to practical foolishness. By correcting for tempting vices and common errors, virtues enable individuals to actualize their life form and become excellent specimens of the human race. Furthermore, virtues are distinguished from other forms of excellence in that they are acquirable. Acquiring them is a matter I did not discuss, but presumably it involves education. Insofar as virtue is a kind of practical knowledge — a disposition or sensitivity — it can be taught and learned. Excellent practical reasoning guides the execution of virtuous activity. Without such a guide, other virtues might "go bad", that is, otherwise virtuous traits might cease to be operative as virtues. Finally, virtues enable societies to flourish (especially by producing more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Remaining tasks