Chapter 4

Virtue as Rational Practice

> Men need virtues as bees need stings.
>
> —Peter Geach, *The Virtues* .

I. Introduction: Virtue as the Human Norm

My thesis in this chapter a normative one: virtues for practical rational primates are excellent rational practices and practical reasoning – while irrational practices and practical irrationality are natural vices.

The previous chapter laid out the criteria a naturalisic account of virtue would have to satisfy. Just as excellent specimens of any natural organism reflect an inherent natural normativity, excellent human beings would reflect an inherent "human" normativity that arises from our nature as practical, rational primates. Human norms must be *animal* since we are primates but human norms cannot be *merely* animal since we are practical primates with a peculiar form of life. My goal here is to explain how the normative virtue theories

of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre partially satisfy the criteria.[1] I state and discuss each writer's stance on virtue and reason to show how it is possible to evaluate the kind of life someone lives by comparing that with the normatively human. I then criticize their views and offer my own synthesis.

In section 2, I draw from Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre to show that virtues have (at least) eight properties in common: namely, they are almost always beneficial for their possessor; they are beneficial to all of the species (not just their possessor) and so break down the assume divide between altruistic or other-regarding virtues and egoistic or self-regarding virtues; virtues constitute excellent human *functioning*; they are especially beneficial in that they are corrective of tempting vices; virtues are not any positive traits such as those given by luck, nor are they necessarily even *acquired* at all – rather, virtues are *acquirable*; some virtues are are excellences of "rational practicing"; others are excellences of practical reasoning about one's whole life; finally, virtues are excellences of "social reasoning" in that they enable the health and progress of societies and traditions.

In section 3, I shall compare and synthesize these accounts into a new and coherent account that satisfies the criteria of ethical naturalism already articulated. My aim is to endorse a single, unified view according to which virtues are excellences of rational practice and practical reasoning, while vices are constituted by irrational practices and defective practical reasoning.

In section 4, I address a few objections that challenge my account or that demand further clarification.

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1. I derive their views from a variety of sources. Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay. 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" and "Values as Secondary Qualities."]

In the conclusion, I set up a more detailed discussion of practical reasoning, and the relation between practical reasoning and virtue, nature.

II. Virtue and Vice

Foot, MacIntyre, and McDowell each offer detailed accounts of virtue and its relation to reason and nature. For example, Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.[2] Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the virtuous person to succeed in individual praactices, in life, and in traditions.[3] MacIntyre's robust concepts of virtue and practical reason overlap nicely with Foot's. John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.[4]

McDowell's theses are that: (1) "The point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live?' "[5] (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."[6]

My goal in this section is to articulate a fairly comprehensive treatment of virtue, drawn what these three three writers agree on, but sensitive to what they disagree on. I first state eight points about virtue and the virtues that bring these ethical concepts into clear

2. 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.

3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

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

5. Ibid., 331.

6. Ibid., 331.

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Virtues Benefit Their Possessor; Vices Harm

The first point about virtue is that virtues are beneficial to their possessor. Hursthouse calls this "Plato's requirement" on the virtues. There is something counterintuitive about the notion that X is a virtue that could, in the end, ultimately harm you. She says: "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."[7]

As we have seen, this requirement fits Foot's account of natural normativity. As some traits make a 'good oak' or a 'good wolf, a good person exemplifies those good-making traits shared by all exemplary members of a natural species. Virtues are good-of-a-kind for creatures like us, namely, practical rational animals.

MacIntyre agrees. For MacIntyre, virtues are acquired *human* qualities.[8] Virtues enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods*. This clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. For MacIntyre, a virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills. Assuming that virtues cannot go bad 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,

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

8. Presumably, the point of specifying "human" qualities here is to distinguish human excellence from 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. MacIntyre's earlier work repudiated Aristotle's "biological" basis for human virtue, but his later *Dependent Rational Animals* retracts the assumed divide between human and non-human animals. In this initial formulation, MacIntyre disagrees with Foot and agrees with McDowell.

the glutton affable? MacIntyre indexes virtues to the *goods* internal to practices, but can't practices themselves be wicked? We might say this is this the problem of *when virtues go bad.*

There are two possible responses to this problem. The first response is to allow that virtues can go bad under certain conditions; and so individual virtues although *usually* or *typically* operating toward good ends *can* be corrupted in the absence of a higher-order executive virtue that coordinates virtues toward their proper ends and recognizes if and when a particular virtue has limits. That executive virtue is taken to be practical wisdom. An example of this second response is John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason". The problem of *virtues going bad* does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue; virtues benefit their possessor since they enable one (by definition) to live a good life.

The second response is to stipulate that virtues are always good, such that if a particular action or trait turns out to be bad, then it must not be a virtuous action or trait. The danger of this response is that it seems like a No True Scotsman fallacy. Nevertheless, the beneficialness of virtue *does* seem to be part of the definition of 'virtue'. And to assume that *no traits* are always good would be to beg the question in favor of moral nihilism or relativism. Hence, it seems to me safe to insist on the minimal stipulation: almost all virtues almost always benefit their possessor. Any theory of virtue according to which virtues turn out to harm their possessor *overall* is simply ruled out by this hypothesis. This hedge allows me to concede intuitive objection that some virtues (honesty) might be corruptible by the presence of overwhelming vices (such as cruelty) or that individual virtues (such as courage) may be *costly* and so cause their possessor pain or discomfort – many a just politician has passed up personal wealth by refusing bribes. However, this minimal stipulation leaves room for me to defend that some virtues (such as practical wisdom) are *always* operative to good ends and that all virtues, if they are truly virtues, are *typically* beneficial.

Beneficial to Humankind

Plato's requirement is that virtues benefit their possessor. I have allowed that they may cause their possessor to lose out on money, fame, or comfort. A natural follow-up question is whether virtues benefit others or only their possessor. Are virtuous persons beneficial to society or only to themselves? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly *both*. Virtues, by hypothesis, are beneficial to humans as a kind, not just this or that individual. Who is benefited more?

The answer is difficult to state systematically. This difficulty does not cause trouble for the account. By hypothesis, virtues are beneficial to *human beings*. One can approach the thesis that virtues are beneficial to human beings qua human from two angles. Consider moderation with respect alcohol. Such moderation benefits one's family, one's community and so on. The ravages of alcoholism on marriages, children, and extended families are widely known. So it would seem to be alturistic not to overdrink. Nevertheless, moderation with alcohol also benefits oneself. Indeed, parsing up the benefit seems foolhardy. (Who benefits more, your children or your liver?)

For virtues such as justice or charity, the answer might be less clear, but the lack of clarity does not damage the account. Foot 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."[9] 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

9. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

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 to 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."[10] 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.

If people *need* the virtues and even "altruistic" or other-regarding virtues benefit oneself, is it then egoistic or selfish to pursue virtue? Not at all. Some critics have hastily posed an objection to the effect that we only need virtue if we want to be happy. Virtues are formal necessities, like bees need stings. If this is right, then everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits such as being moderate, tolerant, and wise. The obligation to be wise, for example, arises not from a prior commitment to one's own happiness as opposed to a prior commitment to the happiness of others; it simply arises from one's finding oneself to be a human being subject to a particular form of practical life which, as it turns out, is perfected or realized by practical wisdom.

The pursuit of virtue, then, is not selfish in the pejorative sense of the word; it is not 'egoism' for the charge of egoism assumes that what is *good for me* is not *good for humans*. We need not assume this. It may be established, upon reflection, that sometimes what is good for me is bad for humanity in general but it may turn out that what is good for humanity in general is ipso facto good for me as a human. We have to look at cases.

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

Take an example: I would argue that various simple pleasures of life arising from cooking and eating good food, or strolling through natural beauty, chatting with an old friend, are on balance good parts of life. They are not *the* only goods. If they were the only goods, one might go in for those pleasures and those pleasures alone. One might construct one's whole life around them. But having moderation is a good as well. So 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. As Foot argues: "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."[11]

In this connection, we should recall the brief argument above that virtues are intrinsic goods. They are not just traits that *lead to good consequences* for organisms like us (that too). The recent revival of virtue consequentialism defines virtues as instrumental goods useful because they secure other, intrinsic goods.[12] Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. Alasdair MacIntyre is careful to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental goods; he says that virtues "enable their possessor to achieve … goods" of practices, which might sound as if he means virtue are mere *instruments* to goods. 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.

To use a well-worn example, it seems pretty uncontroversial to believe that friendship is a good for practical, rational, social animals. Suppose that *having friends* is dependent, in part, on *being friendly*. By 'being friendly' I mean not just being affable but having the traits that make one a good friend: being a good listener, showing genuine concern for others, being happy when a friend's life is going well and being sad when they are suffering.

11. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2–3.
12. Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Having such traits is not valuable *merely* because it will lead to the state of affairs "having friends". Rather, it is valuable because those traits make one a good human being. It so happens that, when two people have such traits, they will be good friends to each other. Good humans make good friends. And it is better, on balance, to have those traits whether or not friends are forthcoming. Fortune may place one in a lonely setting: military posts, solitary jobs, and so on. But as Judith Thomson says, a virtue is a trait such that, "whatever else is true of those among whom we live, it is better if they have it."[13] Likewise, Philippa 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."[14]

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.

Excellent Functioning

The third point about virtue is that virtues cause and partly constitute the excellent functioning of a human being. They are not static states but lived or enacted character traits.

But what do we mean by "excellent"? The concept of excellence is relative to an object's nature and function. The common example is that an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*. But more complex beings have more complex functions and therefore a more complex kind of excellence. An excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, but remains friendly to its owner, and so on.

Now, artifacts receive their function by design, and even natural entities (such as dogs) have artificial functions insofar a they are trained by human users. It is tempting to

13. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Right and the Good," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 6 (1997): 273–98.

14. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 4.

assume that *all* functions are artificial objects of human invention. On this view, natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function.

As I have argued, however, 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 that an acorn is a Quercus alba (white oak) only by observing and reflecting upon its development from embryonic stages to maturity, and by observing the characteristic activities exhibited by mature, typical members of the species.

A natural inference to draw would be that human beings have a "function", howsoever complex, and that a detailed knowledge of this function is necessary for defining human excellence. I do not think it is necessary to know in great detail our function. We can hypothesize a quite general function in accord with the pattern above. The function of a practical rational animal is, at least, to become a fully mature practical rational animal.

Just as we cannot define a priori how tall redwoods grow or the lifespan of an red-toothed shrew, we should not expect that we could define, a priori, what how wise a human specimen can become. (How many languages can one person learn? 10? 25? 50? 100?) Instead, we should preserve a health agnosticism and openness to new possibilities. That said, we have an easier time spotting weak and sickly specimens of a species. In plants, a well-trained botanist can diagnose *something wrong* with even an unfamiliar species via tell-tale signs such as spots, colors, and sickly shapes. Similarly, a competent adult can diagnose *something wrong* with a hopelessly addicted drug-user whose habit is ruining his or her life, or with an incorrigible fool whose life is tragically cut short by his or her own recklessness.

What details can we expect to find? When we find fully mature rational animals, we are likely to observe that they do not just sit around "being human" all day; they per-

form "characteristic action" typical of the species, whatever that turns out to be. Aristotle famously concluded that the human function was discernible: the theoretical or speculative activity of the intellect was that characteristic action. 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.

Corrective

The fourth point in our account of virtue is that virtues are corrective – that is, virtues become urgent in life at the same moment as common, tempting, human evils. 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."[15]

It might seem odd that "evil" could be tempting. But examples are all too easy to supply. Obesity and malnutrition or starvation are both bad for human beings. The obvious difference is that malnutrition is usually involuntary while obesity is usually voluntary – few people (though some) starve themselves but many people (though not all) gain weight by electing to eat too much when the high calorie foods are available. Habitually going in for overeating is an example of immoderation. 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.

Foot's discussion of Kant on this point is instructive here. She paradoxically objects to a statement of Kant that *only* "actions done out of a sense of duty" have moral worth and at the same time agrees with Aristotle that "virtues are about what is difficult for men." How can we make sense of this paradox?

15. Ibid., 8.

Consider 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. The philanthropist doesn't grit his teeth and do good. Gritting one's teeth and doing good is what Aristotle would call mere *continence*; the virtuous philanthropist enjoys the activity in accord with virtue. Ease or fluency in performing virtuous activity is baked in to the definition of the virtuous person.

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."[16] 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.

16. Ibid., 13.

Of course, commonsense would judge 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 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.

Two Objections Thus Far

Before stating the next part of my account of virtue, I must pause to address two objections to what we have said so far. The first worry is that 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 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…[17]

We can furnish more examples: It is good to be kind; and cruelty is bad. Pleasure is a good. Wise people make good leaders. 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 truisms) 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 precipitate them. The principle that torturing children is wicked and the fundamental laws of quantum mechanics are both candidates for quasi-analyticity.[18]

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

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

These ethical propositions do not seem to be tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. "It is polite to say please" is a Platitude. Some Platitudes are small, others great. For example, "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.[19]

The Great Platitudes are basic, common, and hardly disputable. But that does not mean they are tautologous. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[20] Great Platitudes are rather hard-won insights. It is only by reflection that it can be known 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.

A second worry that needs addressing is this: 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."[21] 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

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

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

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

> 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.[22]

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". Knowledge may and does contribute to wicked actions, but wisdom (by definition) entails a proper application of knowledge. 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 wisdom *in* the moderation.

A second response to the worry that one must be completely virtuous to be virtuous at all is that we do admire virtues when they all appear in a remarkably virtuous people and when only one or two appear in a partially virtuous person. Foot says:

> 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.[23]

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22. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 16.
23. Ibid., 17.

Foot believes that 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.

This objection is a formidable one. I do not think these brief comments are sufficient to fully quell the worry. However, as it will resurface in a later chapter, I will continue with the remaining points in my account of virtue.

Acquirable

The fifth attribute of virtues is that they are acquirable. *How* virtue is to be acquired is an age-old theme. 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?"[24] 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[25] discusses the range of which positive traits count as virtues.

That said, 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.

Even without stating *how* virtues are acquired, it is still essential to see that they must be *acquirable.* If we ignore this point, our account will be vulnerable to a misunderstanding,

24. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997), *Meno* 70a.

25. Mark Alfano, *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (Routledge, 2015).

even by someone who concedes that a virtue is a natural excellence for practical reasoners, a good-of-a-kind for creatures like us. The misunderstanding is this: is *any* trait that benefits humans a virtue? Are traits such as physical strength, a powerful intellect, keen eyesight, and a reliable memory virtues? 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?

I think categorizing such traits as virtues is a mistake, but it is an understandable mistake. Homer's list of virtues included such items. 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)."[26] 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*.[27]

A caution about terminological misunderstanding from Foot is relevant here. She points out that: *αρετή* for the Greeks refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice"[28]. 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

26. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

27. 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).

28. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2; Cf. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."

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.

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."[29] 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 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.

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

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.[30]

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. To capture a similar point in a slightly different way, consider Hursthouse's argument that virtuous dispositions are "multi-track" dispositions. 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" 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.)[31]

There is a clear similarity, I think, between Hursthouse's notion of a multi-track disposition and McDowell's notion of perceptual sensitivity. To be sensitive to a range of requirements for action involves one's emotions, beliefs, habits, and so on.

MacIntyre, for his part, also argues that virtues are *acquired* human qualities. (I would only modify this this definition to "acquirable", because not everyone has all the virtues and some people never acquire some virtues.) He does argue, with Aristotle, that

30. Ibid., 5.
31. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

virtues are "natural" for humans. More exactly, Aristotle taught that virtue is *in accordance with* nature but not *by nature*. That is, virtues are not *natural* in the sense that natural attributes such as hair color are 'automatic' but they are natural in the sense that they are *proper* to human beings, they are formal features of practical, rational animals. Virtuous traits are a "normal" psychological outgrowth of cultivating excellence within particular human practices.

There is more to be said about this point. I shall return to it in an objection below. For now, I must complete the account of virtue.

Rational practice

My definition of virtue was this: virtue is acquirable excellence in rational practice and practical reasoning. Thus far I have defended the following notions: virtues are beneficial to humankind; that they enable the actualization of our human form of life; that they are corrective of tempting vice; and that they are acquirable traits such as actions and habits under a normal, mature adult's control. The remainder of the account focuses on the concept of "practice" and to practical reasoning.

The sixth point about virtue is that virtues enable excellence in rational practices. To defend this claim, I will first summarize MacIntyre's notion of "practice." Not only is this term of art an interesting concept in its own right, it is crucial to MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue*.

What is a practice, for MacIntyre? A practice is a social activity aimed at defined ends. For example, MacIntyre mentions farming, chess, and political activity, among other examples. (We commonly speak of "practicing" medicine in this sense.) A practice is not merely a reflexive action such as scratching an itch, nor merely a single, discrete, intelligible action such as pulling a weed. It is, rather, an intelligible set of actions undertaken in pursuit of a pre-determined end. Practices not only have pre-determined ends, but em-

bodied histories. 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.[32]

We could use any number of illustrations of practices to unpack these four aspects. I shall use a practice in which I have personal experience: secondary school education. The practice of educating young people a complex social activity, aimed a certain goods, with a particular history and standards of excellence. A secondary school teacher is engaged in a series of activities aimed at giving children a body of knowledge and skills they need to transition to functional adults in society, whether by getting a job, starting a business, or advancing to higher stages of education. Secondary education might have other de facto purposes as well. Many parents send their children to school to socialize them in a community of peers and authorities, or to afford them opportunities for recreation, art, clubs, or simply to get a break from parenting. 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.

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

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

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.

One other feature of MacIntyre's concept of practice deserves comment. He defined virtues with reference to goods *"internal to"* practices, and later refashions the contrast between 'internal' and 'external' goods into one between 'goods of excellence' and 'goods of effectiveness.' What is the point of this distinction?

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.[33]

Practical Reasoning Through Life

McDowell argued that *all* of virtue is by definition a kind of practical knowledge or disposition. I would suggest that this is a mistake. I agree that *some* virtues are excellences in practical reasoning but others are excellences in in rational practice. (I offer a full critique McDowell's conception of moral and practical reasoning in a later chapter.) Nevertheless, the two cannot be conceptually divided. 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.

This is the seventh point about virtue: some virtues are excellences of practical reasoning that enable one to live a good life. The presence of a sufficient number of virtues 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 well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way."[34]

I shall again turn to MacIntyre and *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's first stage defined virtue in relation to practices. His second stage goes further to include the whole of life.[35]

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33. 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.

34. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.

35. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 15.

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."[36] 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."[37]

Envisaging human life in this way faces serious obstacles. Answering them requires a bit of arguing that might be labelled "philosophy of action".

The two kinds obstacles MacIntyre cites are (a) social and (b) 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."[38] 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 *humans as such*? They would have to be dispositions applicable in personal, private, business, spheres, in young and middle and old age, etc.

The philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions… in terms of simple components."[39] 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?"

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36. Ibid., 202.
37. Ibid., 204.
38. Ibid., 204.
39. Ibid., 204.

> 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.'[40]

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.[41] 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."[42] 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."[43] MacIntyre scholar Stanley Hauerwas explains the significance of this conclusion: "the central contention in *After Virtue* is his remark that "the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action."[44]

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

40. Ibid., 206.
41. Ibid., 207.
42. Ibid., 208.
43. Ibid., 208.
44. Ibid., 209.

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.[45]

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.[46]

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre's discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.[47] 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."[48]

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45. Ibid., 211.

46. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," *First Things*, 2007.

47. 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?' "

48. 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.[49]

Social Reasoning

The eighth and final point about virtue is that virtues in enable the health and progress of societies. Virtues are personal but not individualistic; virtues are inherently human and humanity is inherently social. This is just what we should expect if, as I argued in chapter 3, the practical rationality that characterizes the human primate is defined in part by sociality.

MacIntyre captures this point in a creative way. The third stage of his virtue account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context – namely, a 'tradition.' Making this point requires a brief introduction of MacIntyre's beguiling concept of a 'tradition', which we shall return to later.

What is a MacIntyrean tradition? An initial definition is this: A tradition is a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[50] Traditions derive from a source text and continue

49. Ibid., 220.
50. Ibid., 222.

across generations via normal sociological channels (schools, friendships, political institutions, etc.). So, by MacIntyre's lights, history-writing is a tradition. It is rooted in source texts such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Gibbon and extending through Europe and the western world, consisting of a series of historical and historiographical arguments over not just "what happened" but how to conduct historical enquiry.

This is a puzzling concept. Traditions are not easily equated with particular institutions, religions, philosophical schools of thought, societies, or "worldviews." He carefully excludes the possibility that we can equate any of these. For example, he calls the religion of Judaism a tradition but also calls Augustianism and Thomism traditions (rather than the religion of Christianity as a whole). He calls the academic enterprise of history-writing a tradition but does not seem to think literature or sociology are traditions.

This obscurity is, I think, intentional. A tradition like history-writing is *embodied* in institutions such as western universities but it is not simply a university. History-writing has survived the death of many universities. A secular tradition such as Enlightenment liberalism emerged from the religious tradition of western Christianity; but a religious tradition such as Thomism emerged from the prior religious tradition, Augustianism.

A tradition is an extended conversation within a social group, but it is not identifiable with the social group, since a particular nation may be home to many competing traditions.

A tradition is not a time-stamped conversation, for traditions can and do transcend generations. What unites it is a self-reflective conversation where one of the major topics uniting the members of the tradition is the "goods that constitute that tradition" itself.

Nevertheless, a member of a tradition cannot reason without the resources of that tradition. We can put the matter obscurely by asserting that, for MacIntyre, rationality itself is tradition-constituted. Insofar as practical rationality is the differentiam 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.

This is all very provisional. The point is that virtues cannot be individualistic any more than a person can be a mere atomized indidividual. Rather, vices weigh down the whole tradition and virtues correct and potentially elevate it. MacIntyre says:

> 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.[51]

III. Synthesis

Thus the first stage of my account of virtue to endorse eight basic truths about virtue, and flag some issues to which we must return. Now, I must synthesize what has been said and respond to a few objections.

Thus far, virtue has come to light as the excellent traits belonging to a fully mature and exemplary practical, rational primate. Such a person does not necessarily enjoy all the blessings of good fortune, but he or she does take up all that is given in one's fate and put it to the best possible use. He or she avoids the common and tempting traps one faces along the way of a normal human life, taking up up all the intrinsic and natural urges of animality (hunger, thirst, the sexual drive, desires for shelter, comfort, and companionship) into practices that makes sense. He or she works to acquire those traits that benefit humanity, both oneself and others, and that enable him or her to engage in such practices as make sense for human beings. He or she also satisfies the requirements of the community, as

51. Ibid., 223.

far as possible proactively cultivating virtues in others when appropriate but without undue interference in their own practical reasoning.

Virtuous people's lives are remarkable not for what they are given: any celebrity or cad might be born wealthy or physically attractive or talented. Virtuous people's lives are remarkable for what they do with what they are given.

Insofar as one cannot but sleep sometimes, the question of whether or not to sleep at all is not an ethical question. It is simply 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."[52]

While we may admire "winners" of the natural lottery for their extraordinary talent or beauty, 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 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.

The same principle applies to the various aspects of being a practical, rational animal

52. *Hamlet* III.1

we can mention. Aristotle taught that "affability" was a virtue. Some of us might chuckle to imagine that naturally phlegmatic people are somehow *morally* better than their melancholic counterparts. Surely something so little under one's control is not a basis for evaluation?

Aristotle is not completely wrong that sociable traits (which can to some extent be cultivated) are beneficial. But we must 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. Consider two person's who wilfully cultivate two quite different social attitudes: one is cold, unfeeling, humorless, or self-absorbed person, while the other is warm-hearted, empathetic, cheerful, and outwardly-focused. Social interactions are an optional part of most human lives. Hence, insofar as such attitudes might but under one's control rather than the result of natural lottery, we do judge (and we do seem *rightly* to judge) that the second set of attitudes are more optimal. Not everyone needs to be entertaining or well-connected, but basic skills in relating well to other persons in family and social situations are generically good. 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.

IV. Objections

Not good fortune

Above I stressed that virtues are acquirable. This is an important point for two reasons: first, not all virtues are *acquired* by all. And secondly, not all human goods are acquirable – some are inborn, automatic, or given.

This neat distinction served its purpose but it masks an important objection. To state the objection, first distinguish between the features of one's life and character that under the

control of a normal, functional, adult human being, and those that are not. Call the set of features over which human beings are not in control their "fortune". One's fortune is simply given. Each human being is given a practical rational animal nature by fortune. But fortune consists of more than that. 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 fortune. 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.

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.

Not 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.[53] 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.

V. 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 irrational traits and practices that do not make sense, since they harm oneself and others. They are

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

negative or destructive traits 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, and so on.) 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. And finally, virtues enable societies to flourish (especially when it helps a society to successfully produce more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Several problems remain. The problems we flagged but which remain to be addressed are these: (1) What, if anything, is the human ergon? (2) What is the relation between practical reasoning and rational practice? I said McDowell mistakes the relation between virtue qua knowledge and virtue qua rational organization of one's psychology – including emotions, bodily urges, physical situation, unthinking habits, and so on? (3) Can virtue go bad? It seems that, without further guidance, otherwise virtuous traits might operate towards wicked ends, or co-exist with vices inside an (overall) miserable and vicious person. (4) Secondly, when we pay attention to the social context of humanity, we realize that certain virtues and vices can be given to one by "fortune".

The solution to several of these problems is to argue that excellent practical reasoning in community is the guide to the execution of virtuous activity. That is our next task.