

THE POINT OF VIRTUE: NATURE, PRACTICAL REASON, AND TELEOLOGY IN  
RECENT NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy at the University of Kentucky

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## THE POINT OF VIRTUE: NATURE, PRACTICAL REASON, AND TELEOLOGY IN RECENT NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM

*ABSTRACT:* Recent Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists such as Philippa Foot and John McDowell, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre are united on several beliefs: the good person is the virtuous person; virtues are human goods; and human goods are in some way “natural”. They are divided on other questions: is virtue “natural” to humans because humans are rational animals, distinct from others in the animal kingdom or because humans are organisms, fundamentally continuous with all others in evolutionary tree of life? Humans exhibit normal biological processes as well as abstract and practical reasoning. So more generally, how are we to understand the relationship between rationality and biology?

Foot emphasizes the natural, biological aspect of virtue ethics (where virtues and vices are “natural goodness and defect”); John McDowell emphasizes the normative, rational aspect, where virtues are intersubjective, cultural forms of knowledge. Each has its advantages and drawbacks. Biological naturalism blocks cultural relativism but seems to require teleological realism. “Second nature” naturalism seems more aligned to the scientific view of nature but makes it difficult to explain how to criticize injustice in other cultures and how make social progress within one’s own.

Recent neo-Aristotelians have run aground of this difficult matter because, as Julia Annas explains, it reflects a broader perennial question about the relationship between normativity and nature, or between ethics and science. My dissertation systematically analyzes the related concepts of nature, virtue, practical reason, and teleology in several recent neo-Aristotelian writers and offers a novel account of how they fit together. I bolster the argument that virtues are human goods pertaining to our nature as practical, rational primates. Even within the confines of scientific naturalism and agnosticism, I give reasons to believe that Foot is right, contra McDowell, that scientific realists should (probably) also be teleological realists.

In brief, I argue that virtue is the excellence of rational practices and practical reasoning that enables and partly constitutes the realization of one's human life form. I defend a conception of virtue according to which virtuous traits are rational practices and emotions, and practical reasoning is the process of identifying the good. On this view of virtue, the definitive criterion by which to judge human beings is our success or failure in acquiring virtues such as moderation and tolerance, and our overall success in the pursuit of the good life for humans. I also provide an outline of a secular, humanistic conception of flourishing according to which becoming wise is the natural telos of practical rational animals, even though they may individually die and (one day) go extinct.

*KEYWORDS:* virtue, practical reason, teleology, neo-Aristotelianism, ethical naturalism

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Dedicated to Lindsay. As Chesterton said: "Oh, who shall understand but you; yea, who shall understand?"

KEDB, 2016

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γένοι' οἷος ἐσσι μαθών.

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—Pindar, *Pythian* 2, line 72



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# Chapter 1

## The Virtue Triangle

Not everything that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best.

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—Aristotle, *Physics*, 194a 32-33.

### I. Introduction

Recent neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalists are up to something fascinating: a unification of the natural and the normative. In one conversation, the anti-dualist impulse behind both American pragmatists and Anglo-American metaphysical naturalism (from Thomas Nagel) receives full expression. Yet at the same time the morally realist impulse behind the new wave of metaethical realists such as Russ Shafer-Landau, Terrence Cuneo, and David Enoch is fully represented too. And both find remarkable friendship in the recent revival of interest in the virtue tradition (both its Hellenistic and non-Hellenistic sources). Some have found this cocktail of philosophical impulses and interests a bit bemusing.

Early metaethical theorizing (read: G. E. Moore) predicated a sharp division between the natural and the normative, between the descriptive and prescriptive, the metaphysical and the ethical. Subsequent philosophers tended to accept the division between “is

and ought”. However, they tended to react in one of two ways: nature is non-normative or normativity is non-natural. For example, the prescriptivists, emotivists, and expressivists take the first way. These assume nature is “bald” and descriptive and so explain away moral language as a natural (read: descriptive) event occurring in the brains and words of moral beings. Moral realists of various stripes tended to quietly accept the claim (insult?) that they were “non-naturalists” about value, though they valiently defended the possibility of cognitivist moral assertions, moral perception, and moral knowledge.

On this way of framing the debate, the primary objection for ethical naturalists to overcome was the challenge of **Bald Nature**. Bald Nature arises on behalf of an allegedly scientific conception of nature that excludes teleology and other normativity from nature. I should call this the “Laplacian” picture.<sup>1</sup> Plantinga explains that the bald, disenchanted picture of nature that excludes all consciousness – both divine and human – should not be pinned on Newton, who was a pious Christian, but fits better with Pierre-Simon Laplace. Normative realists think Bald Nature cannot be overcome, and so do not try to fit normativity into nature. Normative anti-realists think it cannot be overcome, and so try to eliminate normativity or reduce it to the descriptive.

This way of framing the debate is not some deliverance from on high. There might be other ways. Indeed, some philosophers after the middle of the last century, such as MacIntyre and Murdoch, rose up to challenge the very assumptions on which the conversation had been predicated. Philippa Foot’s achievement was to sidestep many of these metaethical landmines and propose an ethical theory that was both philosophically cogent and intellectually clear. She combined careful attention to Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, with a robust normative theory commending the virtues with a sophisticated metaethical theory grounding moral realism in the normativity of nature.

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1. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 84.

Not everyone is impressed, of course. Although far too few professional philosophers have confronted the radical challenge of her philosophical ethics, some have proffered criticisms. I would suggest that many of her critics have underestimated the stakes of her view and hence given only superficial criticisms such as that she is “unclear.”<sup>2</sup> John McDowell is one critic who fully appreciates the depth and significance of Foot’s contributions. Like her, he denies supernaturalism and dualism as a matter of principle. Like her, he denies moral non-cognitivism and subjectivism because its plausibility withers under philosophical scrutiny, not to mention common sense. Like her, he defends a version of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism against its rivals.

However, McDowell is a critic of a mistake he calls “philistine scientism”. At first blush, the problem of philistine scientism is the problem of demanding that ethical thinking prove itself before the tribunal of empirical scientific findings and methods. If best ethical thinking cannot be derived from nor squared with a particular dogma of crass empiricism, so much the worse for crass empiricism. He almost, but not quite, says Foot is guilty of this mistake. I think McDowell is careful to distinguish his objection to philistine scientism from his objection to Foot, which is a bit more complex than that. For he *is* an empiricist about natural science.

His objection is that Foot perhaps has not fully accounted for the role that the human evaluator plays in identifying (or constructing) objective values. McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature” represents a second sort of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism live and well in the conversation. This sort of naturalism is not rooted in biology but in rationality. And since rationality is at least in part social (and perhaps essentially social), insofar as

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2. For example, James Lenman says: “Neo-Aristotelian naturalism is articulated at length and along mutually similar lines in two recent monographs, Foot’s *Natural Goodness* and Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics*. I will focus on Hursthouse whose account is the clearer and more detailed of the two.” James Lenman, “Moral Naturalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014.

we learn our first language and initial inventory of concepts and beliefs from our family and culture, so far is McDowell's ethical naturalism a kind of "cultural" naturalism. Moral virtue is a way of seeing things inculcated in the young by their parents and teachers and pastors and mentors. Moral virtue is an "outlook" acquired by sharing with others a single "form of life."<sup>3</sup>

What are we to make of this criticism of Foot's "first nature" naturalism rooted in the physical and organic world? And how does McDowell's "second nature" naturalism compare?

My view is that the neo-Aristotelians are united on some points but divided on others. Start with agreement:

Neo-Aristotelians are united on the idea that the human life form can bridge the gap between nature and normativity. Or rather, human nature, properly understood, can defy the opposition between is and ought, fact and value, descriptivity and normativity. For "the human being" is an organism exhibiting capacities not only for motion and action but for rational reflection. When we describe, say, the characteristic activities of the human life form as acquiring language, conversing with other humans, and acquiring knowledge – if that is a genuinely human norm, then someone who is willfully ignorant, or willfully mute, or willfully antisocial, is to some degree defective qua human. If someone is mute, ignorant, or suffers from an antisocial mental disorder by bad fortune, say by being born with genetic problems or being born into a circumstance wherein they are deprived of resources to acquire knowledge, study, grow, experiment, that person would be pitiable and not well-off, due to no fault of their own. By contrast, someone who is wilfully in pursuit of knowledge would be admirable. Maybe not *morally* admirable yet, but admirable in exemplifying their human life form and doing the kind of things *humans do*. The way that ducks fly south for winter, human beings pursue and acquire and amass and transmit knowledge.

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3. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 339.



Thus, philosophers as diverse as Thompson, Hursthouse, Foot, McDowell, MacIntyre, and Brown are united in the thought that some facts of nature are also inherently normative – namely, formal or teleological facts about human beings. These might be Hursthouse’s “characteristic activities”, or Thompson’s “life-form”<sup>4</sup> or McDowell’s “form of life”<sup>5</sup>, or the somewhat archaic-sounding “human nature”.

## II. Two strategies

What is the disagreement? They are divided on whether the human life form can undercut the is-ought gap in virtue of being an instance of an organic life form like any other or in virtue of being a unique, rational life form endowed with the capacity for society, culture, rationality, or practical agency.

These two strategies represent two different kinds of potential normativity: biological or rational, animal or cultural, teleonomic or teleological, organic or social.<sup>6</sup>

These two strategies go under many names.<sup>7</sup> The basic difference between the two

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4. Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 57

5. McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 339.

6. Cf. Larry Arnhart, “Aristotle’s Biopolitics: A Defense of Biological Teleology Against Biological Nihilism,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1988): pp. 173–229. Arnhart explains the difference between various kinds of natural functions, including those that are candidates for genuinely *teleological* functionality.

7. For example, Christopher Toner distinguishes between the “biological naturalism” of Thompson and Foot (and later MacIntyre) from the “second naturalism” or “excellence naturalism” or ‘culturalism’ of McDowell and (early) MacIntyre. Julia Annas distinguishes between the sort of naturalism that builds on the *biological* nature of humanity (at the expense of the odd normativity of our rationality) the sort that builds on the *rational* nature of humanity (at the expense of the mundane descriptivity of biology). (Cf. Julia Annas, “Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?” in Stephen Mark Gardiner, *Virtue Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 2005).) Furthermore, there exists a third, even more ambitious strategy. I should at least mention it here. That is to defend the view that *all* of nature is normative, even inorganic matter. Call this cosmic teleology. Cosmic teleology is the notion that everything – including stars and rocks – “has a purpose”, as if the cosmos were somehow organized and *going somewhere*. Such natural normativity in the form of natural teleology does have its recent defenders. For atheistic version of cosmic teleology, see Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 2012); for non-human centered

is pretty clear. Either natural normativity is intrinsic to human life insofar as we live in cultures or to all organisms insofar as they are alive.

My preferred terms to distinguish these two strategies are “Organic” and “Social” or “Practical” normativity. Each strategy has its challenges and attractions, which deserve a careful review.

Social normativity states that typical human life is naturally and intrinsically end-directed. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defends social teleology against its more biological, organic alternative. He emphasizes “second nature” far more than primary nature. That is, he finds a ground of normativity not in our life-form but in us: in our social identities, our culture, our rationality. For example, he announces that his account of virtue is “happily not Aristotelian... although this account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require any allegiance to Aristotle’s metaphysical biology.”<sup>8</sup> The “metaphysical biology” MacIntyre refers to here is the metaphysically realist view that formal and final causes inhere (and in fact constitute) biological species. Though he denies Aristotle’s form of ethics based on the normativity of human biology, MacIntyre does most emphatically argue for teleological ethics based on the normativity of *human society and rationality*. He grounds teleology not in non-human nature but in “human nature,” specifically our practical, social nature, which he calls “social teleology.”

The social normativity strategy is followed by McDowell, Hursthouse, and the early MacIntyre. Even Iris Murdoch assumed that human life has “no external point or *τελος*”, but that it has a point *from within*.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible, in other words, to bring our own human

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versions see John Leslie, *Universes* (Psychology Press, 1996) and Tim Mulgan, *Purpose in the Universe: The Moral and Metaphysical Case for Ananthropocentric Purposivism* (Oxford University Press, 2015). For Thomistic versions, see Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oneworld Publications, 2009); and Peter Kreeft, *Summa Philosophica* (St. Augustine, 2012).

8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 197.

9. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* (Mouette Press, 1998).

life, without remainder, under the concept of an *event*. Human life is an event too, but it must be brought under the concept of an intentional action or practice aiming at a goal.

The strength of this strategy is that we observe that human beings define themselves, think about the world, set goals, and pursue them. We do not act randomly, except when we are physically or mentally ill, drunk, asleep, or in some other disturbed state of mind. Rather, we act on reasons: Jane arises from bed *in order to* head to work; John works his job *in order to* contribute to society and retire comfortably; congress meets to deliberate about what *laws are to be passed*, and so on. Even on a modest view of personal responsibility and free will, a typical human life is a set of intentional practices undertaken by the agent. So perhaps one of the natural functions of rationality is to construct goals for itself and legislate laws for itself.<sup>10</sup> On this view, ethical conclusions are irreducibly based upon human facts such as human rationality, human culture, or human excellence.

So much for McDowellian second nature naturalism. What about the Footian alternative?

Organic normativity states that even natural states and properties like “being alive” or “being healthy” are inherently normative. To be alive is to be in danger of dying; to be healthy is to be in danger of becoming sick. At the level of individual organisms, one of the functions of *being alive at all* is that plants, animals, insects, and microbes perform whatever movements are necessary for them to survive, grow, and develop into the state of species-specific maturity.

Patterns of organic normativity obtain not only in particular species or ecosystems, but the entire global network of organic life. The importance of seeing organisms in a synop-

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10. Compare with Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). Korsgaard’s argument about the “Authority of Reflection” builds a case that human autonomy – the ability to be a law to oneself – is the source of normative authority. In other words, my own identity as a rational human agent obligates me to behave morally.

tic view can be read off the deliverances of biological sciences. So the conditions or states of affairs in which these movements and this development does not happen are instances of a kind of natural badness for those species or ecosystems. At the level of interconnected systems of organisms such as ecosystems, rainforests, and coral reefs need certain things to survive and thrive. The sense of “need” here is not a pragmatic or utilitarian one but a formal and teleological sense.

Organic naturalism is simply the interpretation that the complex biological system on earth cannot be exhaustively and scientifically described without normative concepts and terms. Organic naturalism is the belief that all living organisms have ineliminable, irreducible, normative properties. As Thomas Nagel puts it, with the existence of life in the cosmos arises the existence of beings “for which things can be good or bad.”<sup>11</sup> If you like, the order of objective value is the order of biological life.

Organic Teleology is the preferred strategy of Foot, Thompson, and the later MacIntyre. It seems to have won over Annas, Brown, and Barham, and a host of other philosophers and scientists.<sup>12</sup>

The cost of organic naturalism seems to be a “non-scientific” picture of nature. Are “natural norms” natural objects like other natural objects? How do we know them – through normal scientific methods or not? For many, scientific naturalism just is the commitment to believe all and only the best deliverances of all the sciences. Yet, the cost of social naturalism, as I shall explain in a later chapter, is incorrigible cultural relativism and an

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11. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 117.

12. Keith Ward, “Kant’s Teleological Ethics,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 85 (1971): 337–51; Arnhart, “Aristotle’s Biopolitics”; Monte Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Philippe Huneman, “Naturalising Purpose: From Comparative Anatomy to the ‘Adventure of Reason’,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37, no. 4 (2006): 649–74; Mariska Leunissen, *Explanation and Teleology in Aristotle’s Science of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a detailed exposition of the full menu of philosophical options, cf. Mark Perlman, “The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology,” *The Monist* 87, no. 1 (2004): 3–51.

undesirable nature/human dualism.

### III. My View

In the spirit of devil-may-care adventure seeking, I find it preferable to pursue the more ambitious strategy of defending natural normativity in all of organic nature, not just human beings. In my view, the costs of organic naturalism are not so great as they first appear. For, other ethical naturalists like Richard Boyd and Peter Railton would be quick to observe, at this juncture, that natural kinds themselves are part of the vocabulary of natural science.<sup>13</sup> And indeed, part of my strategy for defending the truth and scientific credentials of Footian naturalism is to appeal to generic truths about natural kinds.

Furthermore, the costs of social naturalism are greater than they first appear. For teleology is a respectable, natural, scientific phenomenon, or can be plausibly defended as *a* respectable scientific phenomenon that can be accepted into our scientific worldview. As Stephen Brown, for instance, says that “naturalized virtue ethics assumes that living things have ends in reference to which they can be evaluated... a neo-Aristotelian account of teleology is plausible both from the view of common sense and from a more scientific vantage point.”<sup>14</sup> So in the end, organic naturalism makes a stronger case. In a later chapter, I criticize social naturalism.

In particular, I defend the thesis that virtue is the acquirable excellence of rational practices and practical reasoning that enables and partly constitutes the realization of one’s human life form. Virtuous traits are rational practices and emotions, and practical reasoning is the process of identifying the good. On this view of virtue, the definitive criterion

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13. Cf. Richard Boyd, “Realism, Anti-Foundationalism and the Enthusiasm for Natural Kinds,” *Philosophical Studies* 61, no. 1 (1991): 127–48; Richard N Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” *Contemporary Materialism*, 1988, 307; Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (1986).

14. R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008), 20.

by which to judge human beings is our success or failure in acquiring virtues such as moderation and tolerance, and our overall success in the pursuit of the good life for humans. I also provide an outline of a secular, humanistic conception of flourishing according to which becoming wise is the natural telos of practical rational animals, even though they may individually die and (one day) go extinct.

My hope in making these arguments is to offer arguments to both virtue ethicists and metaethical naturalists. That is, I aim to persuade scientific naturalists to consider virtue ethics, and to persuade virtue ethicists to consider that the empirical sciences may have something to contribute to ethics.

#### **IV. The Virtue Triangle**

My view may be seen as a conceptual linkage between practical reasoning (which, I argue, defines humanity), moral and intellectual virtues, and natural teleology. These three concepts may be graphed on a triangle. They also capture a crucial insight from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. There, he persuasively argues that there are three necessary "elements" to morality:<sup>15</sup> namely, a goal, a starting point, and the means from the starting point to the goal.

These three elements are necessary features of the performance of any task – however menial or lofty. In a simple project such as, say, cooking a dinner, my goal might be to reproduce what I see in the picture of a tasty meal from a cookbook. The starting point includes the raw materials at my disposal, such as the food in my fridge (and my cooking skills); the means to the end is a recipe, including a list of needed ingredients and instructions that, once enacted, will produce a copy of the meal pictured. Similarly, one cannot make any mundane journey without a destination, a starting location, and directions (on foot, by car, by plane, or what have you) to the destination. (Even the desire to "explore the

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15. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54 ff.

countryside” or even to “wander about” involves a set *goal* if not a set destination.)

The point of this simple reflection is that we ought to demand that any moral theory supply all three elements. MacIntyre explains that, in morality, the first element is “untutored human nature” (as it is). The second element is the moral human, humanity as it could be and should be. The third element is the set of traits, actions, emotions, habits, etc., needed to move from the first to the second points. Understanding “human-nature-as-it-is”<sup>16</sup> is a task for philosophers, as well as psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc. This would include a conception of the human species as rational animals as it is *prior* to deep self-reflection or moral effort. Understanding human nature “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos”<sup>17</sup> was “the whole point of ethics.” This third conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize. Moral rules or admirable character traits are the *content* of morality; but the telos of humanity is the *context* of morality. Telos makes morality make sense.

The project of rehabilitating natural teleology may seem overly optimistic.<sup>18</sup> It may be felt, for instance, that teleology has simply been debunked by modern science and therefore has no place in a scientific worldview, that Francis Bacon was right that the search for final causes “defiled philosophy”<sup>19</sup> and so that any attempt to revive teleological virtue talk is antiquarian and nostalgic.

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16. Ibid., 55.

17. Ibid., 55.

18. Arthur Ward’s recent dissertation, to be discussed in a later chapter, argues that the sort of teleological naturalism being pursued here is not a good foundation for ethics. Arthur Ward, “Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory” (PhD thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2013).

19. Cf. Bacon, *New Organon*, Book I. XLVIII “Although the most general principles in nature ought to be held merely positive, as they are discovered, and cannot with truth be referred to a cause, nevertheless the human understanding being unable to rest still seeks something prior in the order of nature. And then it is that in struggling toward that which is further off it falls back upon that which is nearer at hand, namely, on final causes, which have relation clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe; and from this source have strangely defiled philosophy.”

This objection is a serious one, and will receive a reply. For now, I would like to highlight the stakes of the question. The differences between teleological nihilism and teleological realism have significant ramifications for morality. For MacIntyre, the hypothesis that we ought to reject telos is the chief error of Enlightenment moralities. He explains why in his discussion of the three elements of morality which I have called “the virtue triangle.” It is difficult to understate the importance of this point about the self. Edward Oakes describes the removal of telos from our worldview as “perhaps the greatest category mistake ever made in the history of philosophy.”

That word “teleological” is the key to MacIntyre’s solution, the loss of which is the cause of the catastrophe described in his science-fiction parable. Teleology is the study of final causes, goals, purposes, and aims: a style of explanation that saturates Aristotle’s philosophy. After the combined impact of Newton and Darwin, however, this type of explanation seems mostly ‘quaint’ and once Aristotle’s science seemed quaint, his ethics soon followed: when Newton demonstrated how motion can be better explained as resulting from the outcome of mechanical laws, and when Darwin posited natural selection as the “mechanism” for explaining an organ’s functionality, the use of teleology in ethics was doomed... Emptying moral discourse of teleological concepts because of the perceived impact of Newton and Darwin has been for MacIntyre the catastrophe of our times.<sup>20</sup>

The problem is not that rejecting telos was unfortunate, or damaging, but that it was *a mistake*. Who are we, if we are not natural creatures? Since we are natural creatures, shifts in our thinking about nature are liable to match shifts in our thinking about ourselves. John Horton and Susan Mendus captures the stakes well:

Where Aristotle understood man as a creature with a definite function which he might fulfill or deny, modern morality sees man simply as a rational agent who has no true or definable purpose independent of his own will... By appealing to a telos, Aristotle was able to distinguish between the way we actually are and the way we should be. His conception of human beings as having a specific telos brought with it the possibility that we might fall short of the ideal... But with the rejection of Aristotelianism gain the rejection

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20. Edward Oakes, “The Achievement of Alasdair Macintyre,” *First Things*, 1996.



of any such distinction between what we are and what we should be. Post-Enlightenment man is seen as governed, not by a telos external to him, but simply by the dictates of his own inner reason... Thus the abandonment of an Aristotelian conception of the good has not only left us without standards by which to evaluate our moral arguments, it is also cast us adrift in the moral world.<sup>21</sup>

These reflections suggest that at least our conception of ethics needs to be teleological. As we have seen above, there are several ways to achieve this conception. Foot argues that teleology is genuinely natural to all living organisms; McDowell argues that it is not natural to all organisms but that it is to humans. Even MacIntyre's project is not *Aristotelian* but "neo-Aristotelian" in that he contrasts with Aristotle's project on several points.<sup>22</sup>

A fundamental feature of my thesis is that realism about natural teleology is – and can be shown to be – perfectly respectable, modern, scientific, and naturalistic. As I shall argue in a later chapter, while it is true that some modern sciences focus exclusively on non-teleological causes (material, efficient, and possibly formal causes), methodologically excluding phenomena from study is different from denying such phenomena outright. Furthermore, some modern sciences (such as biology, ecology, medicine, and others) do irreducibly and unavoidably focus on teleological causes. Perhaps, after several centuries, it is time to consider that the search for final causes, – rather than "defiling" science – advances it. Hence, a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics grounded on human nature can be both scientifically informed and action-guiding.

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21. John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre: After Virtue and After," in *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (Routledge, 2015), 6.

22. For instance, MacIntyre denies that Greek virtues are so timeless, abstract, and generically human as Aristotle would make them appear; they are partly indexed to fourth century, upper-class, educated Athenian culture. He also rejects Aristotle's metaphysics of nature. Nevertheless, he argues, the loss of a concept of telos is dramatic.

**V. Outline of Chapters**

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first part defends natural normativity and natural teleology in organisms and (hence) in human beings. It builds a framework for virtue and then develops a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue as rational practice to fit the framework. This project occupies chapters 2-4.

The second part defends a conception of virtue as practical reasoning where the goal of practical reasoning is to identify the human good, to correctly map the normative order, and live in conformity to it for the sake of one's own and others' wellbeing. It explores the notion of practical wisdom, and explains the relation between wisdom and other virtues and between wisdom and the finite, mortality of our species. This project occupies chapters 5-8.

## Chapter 2

### Natural Norms

Biology cannot, or at least in practice does not, eliminate functions and purposes.

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—Mark Perlman, “The Modern Resurrection of Teleology in Biology”<sup>6</sup>.

#### I. Introduction

This chapter argues that there are such things as natural norms. That is, normativity is to be found partly in nature, and not just in human evaluators. Examples of natural organic norms include natural life forms and functions of organisms or species.

The major alternative view to the one I defend is a view according to which nature is purely descriptive and non-normative. McDowell calls this picture of nature “bald nature” (i.e., bald of values, coldly factual, disenchanted from any supernatural esoterica, and so on) but I think a better term would be “Laplacian nature,” since it more closely aligns with Pierre-Simon Laplace’s mathematical and, I dare say, unscientific picture of nature.

Relying on the picture of bald or Laplacian nature, the major objection to ethical naturalism is the “is-ought gap.” The is-ought gap is sometimes taken to be *the* problem for

ethical naturalism. If ethical facts are real, what are they? Where are they? How can they motivate? If ethical facts are non-natural, then are they real or not?

I do think the is-ought gap is a problem for some forms of naturalism. However, I shall argue that there are at least two forms of the is-ought gap. One of them is insoluble but the other can be solved by appeal to natural norms. Ethical naturalists posit a particular relationship between natural facts and moral facts, or facts and values, or nature and normativity. Each does so in their own way. The attempt to show how facts entail norms is, I think, misguided. Instead, I shall attempt to show that some facts just are norms. These are natural norms. In other words, some scientifically respectable natural facts are also real, mundane, normative facts on a level with properties and processes like ‘being a penguin’ or ‘pumping blood.’

The respectable scientific notions I propose are natural kinds (life forms) and natural functions or ends. Though they can be given anti-realist or reductionist interpretations, anti-realism is by no means the default view of working scientists nor the default view of philosophers with a healthy respect for modern science. Polemicists who pretend that anti-realism or reductionism about natural kinds and natural functions are “the” scientific view are propagating their philosophical doctrine; the rhetoric is certainly powerful but the argument is weak.

The upshot of the normativity of nature for ethics is that if we can defend natural norms, it is at least possible that we can identify human natural norms. That is, we can identify a kind of normativity that is binding on human beings as practical rational animals but that is not merely invented by human individuals or human cultures. It would be natural without being crassly biological; it would be both biological and practical or rational in a way that I will explain later.

The first section distinguishes the two kinds of is-ought gap that have been thought to render ethical naturalism impossible and explains how natural norms make ethical natu-

ralism at least possible. The second section presents a case for natural norms of two types: formal and functional, organisms and their natural teleological processes. The third section considers and rebuts anti-realist or reductionist interpretations of these natural phenomena. If the case for organic normativity is successful, then the neo-Aristotelian might be able to appeal to natural norms with respect to human organisms.

## II. Natural Facts, Natural Norms

Many have posed a challenge to the very possibility of ethical naturalism. If this challenge cannot be met, then ethical naturalism is futile. Put the first challenge in this form:

1. If ethical naturalism is possibly true, then descriptive statements can serve as premises in arguments with normative conclusions.
2. But descriptive statements cannot serve as premises in arguments with normative conclusions.
3. Therefore, ethical naturalism is not possibly true.

The first premise sets out a criterion for naturalism as a broad philosophical strategy for grounding ethics. Normative statements such as “You ought to be wise” or “It is good to be tolerant of people with different views” or “It is bad to bring a gun to school and start shooting people” seem to me true and pretty uncontroversial. But why are they true? And how do we know them? The realist non-naturalist has a good explanation: such statements pick out fundamental, non-natural, moral facts. The naturalist anti-realist also has a good explanation: such statements express the speaker’s individual and cultural norms. The ethical naturalist’s explanation is a bit trickier. He or she must show how such statements relate to the *natural* facts. One way would be to argue that “you ought to be wise” is itself a natural fact, but that way strikes one as rather odd; another way would be to argue that “you ought to be wise” is a normative truth derivable from some other fact that is natural. Assuming that the natural facts are descriptive facts, the ethical naturalist would have to show how, in general, descriptive propositions can serve as premises with true normative conclusions.

The second premise seems to render hopeless the thought that we can evaluate things on the basis of what they are. But evaluating things on the basis of what they are is central to the kind of neo-Aristotelian naturalism I am pursuing here. Rosalind Hursthouse says that ethical evaluations of humans and non-ethical evaluations of plants and animals “both depend upon our identifying what is characteristic of the species in question.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the normative evaluation depends on the descriptive facts of the species: its activities, its life form, and so on. This would be momentous if true. Is the notion that an is statement can underwrite an ought statement even intelligible?

The is-ought gap is an intuitive notion. The problem originated in Hume.

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence.“<sup>2</sup>[(*A Treatise of Human Nature* book III, part I, section I).

Hume is often credited with (or blamed for) insisting that an ‘ought’ can never be derived from an ‘is.’ Arnhart and MacIntyre argue that Hume himself allows for a kind of inference from “is” to “ought” in other places.<sup>2</sup> I think Moore is the one to blame (or the one to give the credit).

The point is that when it comes to human evaluations, ‘is’ statements may be interesting but they seem useless for practical purposes. A few simple examples: Just because “most men wear tuxedos to the Oscars” does not mean that, if I am undecided as to what to wear, “I ought to wear a tux to the Oscars” — at least not without a prior normative

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1. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 10, abstract.

2. Larry Arnhart, “The New Darwinian Naturalism in Political Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 02 (1995): 389–400; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Hume on Is and Ought,” *The Philosophical Review*, 1959, 451–68

premise that “One ought to do whatever most others do.” And just because all human cultures have farmers or hunters who gather food doesn’t mean I ought to become a farmer or hunter. These are practical examples, not necessarily ethical ones. But the problem can be generalized. Even if all human beings and cultures exemplify a range of common facts or express range of common evaluative attitudes, the result would not necessarily be a normative ethics as much as a “descriptive ethics.” Descriptive ethics builds on and adds to evolutionary biology, psychology, sociology, human ethology, and anthropology by empirically studying what such-and-such a person or culture deems worthwhile or worthless and compares it to other persons or cultures or to other generations of the same culture. The results of descriptive ethics might be a detailed and scientific description of human behaviors in their consistency and variation. It would not be a plan for how to live one’s life. At least, it would not be a plan *without supplementary interpretation from normative ethics* prescribing that one should comply with the norms one’s own culture, or prescribing that one should criticize the norms of one’s culture, or prescribing some other response.

I said that the results of descriptive ethics detail the variation of ethical and cultural norms. They also detail consistency. For example, habits and attitudes toward drinking alcohol vary dramatically from culture to culture and generation to generation, but there seems to be a universal (cross-cultural) disapprobation for continual drunkenness, in even cultures (like the Bolivian Camba) that drink regularly and drink heavily. Thus, Anthropologist Dwight Heath says: “It is important to realize that drinking problems are virtually unknown in most of the world’s cultures, including many where drinking is commonplace and occasional drunkenness is accepted.”<sup>3</sup> Such insights might be quite interesting. But even for universal evaluative attitudes, their practical significance is not given; they can be put to use in more than one way.

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3. Dwight B Heath, “Sociocultural Variants in Alcoholism,” *Encyclopedic Handbook of Alcoholism*, 1982, 426–40.

There is more to the is-ought gap, but this is a fairly useful summary with which to begin. My response shall show how the is-ought gap can be undercut by one particular form of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism, even if (as I shall explain in a later chapter) the is-ought gap is fatal to *some* forms of ethical naturalism.

There is a second and more promising path for neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism to take. That is to start with basic, scientifically respectable natural norms. I call this notion “natural normativity”, following Philippa Foot. Some features of nature are properties she calls ‘natural goodness’ or ‘natural defect.’ About such qualities, she says:

...we might equally have been thinking in terms of, say, strength and weakness or health and disease, or again about an individual plant or animal being or not being as it should be, or ought to be, in this respect or that. Let us call the conceptual patterns found there, patterns of natural normativity.<sup>4</sup>

Natural normativity is an indeterminate concept. The way that Foot uses it she means that normativity exists wherever organic life is found. Wherever evaluative properties like health and disease appear, there are real instances of natural goodness and natural defect, then some evaluative properties are *primary qualities of nature* just like weight, color, size, relations of time and space, and so on. There is another sense in which ‘natural normativity’ is used by neo-Aristotelians like John McDowell. The neo-Aristotelians are of two minds about which sense is a more promising foundation for ethics. Where they agree, though, is in thinking that natural norms overcome or rather undercut the is-ought gap.

1. If ethical naturalism is possibly true, then some natural facts are genuinely both normative and natural – there are natural norms.
2. But there are no facts that are genuinely both normative and natural – there are no natural norms.
3. Therefore, ethical naturalism is not possibly true.

This argument like the first one sets out a criterion that ethical naturalism must satisfy. Namely, ethical naturalism must offer an account of some natural norms that are both real

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4. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.



and brutally natural, not derived from other (descriptive) facts. The second premise says that all norms are non-natural and all nature is non-normative. So it seems to be impossible to be an ethical naturalist.

Everything depends on whether or not nature consists of merely non-normative facts. I will grant that nature consists of merely *natural* facts. That nature consists of no non-natural facts is, of course, a tautology. I grant the tautology. I do not grant, without argument, that all such facts are descriptive and not normative; that would be to allow my opponent to beg the question. My opponent might likewise complain that if he or she allows me to stipulate that there *are* natural norms, this stipulation would beg the question in my favor. The only thing for it is for me to *argue* from agreed upon premises that there are such things as natural norms. Having done so, it is fair of me to request an argument to the contrary. If the critic merely insists on reaffirming that all nature is non-normative, that would be mere question-begging.

So our first task is to supply an adequate defense of the existence of natural norms. Even if such a notion can be defended philosophically and scientifically, we should remember that all that logically follows is that ethical naturalism is possibly true. What we need, beyond mere possibility, is to defend in general natural normativity and then to apply patterns of natural normativity and how these form binding ethical normative structures.

### **III. The Case for Natural, Organic Norms**

So far, all that I've said is that the neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalist denies this premise that all of nature is non-normative or purely descriptive. One way to defeat the premise is to provide counterexamples. As it turns out, there are several plausible ones. I'd now like briefly introduce some examples of natural norms that might undercut the is-ought gap.

The two candidates for natural normative facts I shall defend are life forms or natural kinds, and teleological facts or natural function. Although these two kinds of facts are

related, it is helpful to distinguish between formal and teleological normativity, between structures and their functions.

Nature is full of kinds; sunflowers are not oxygen; stars are not organisms; lead is not gold; water is not soil; and so on. Kind concepts allow us to both distinguish x from y and to gather together all the x's. Zebras and horses are both Equidae; lead and gold are both elements; ice and the sea and steam are all water. Thinking in kind categories is intuitive and natural.<sup>5</sup> Thinking in categories is probably inevitable, a constitutive feature of thought.

Nature is also full of end-directed activity. Each thing does its own thing: sunflowers grow toward the sun, wolves hunt deer and deer flee wolves; hearts pump blood and eyes see; the sun warms the planet; phytoplankton oxygenates the atmosphere. Such processes are non-intentional end-directed processes. Non-intentional processes are sometimes called 'teleonomic.'<sup>6</sup> Teleonomic phenomena do not have a *director* but they do have a *direction*.

Kinds and their ends can be conceptually distinguished but not very far. Forms and functions, structures and activities, are two aspects of one thing. Is the hip bone shape adaptive for a purpose or is the purpose conducive to the development of such-and-such shape? It is better to allow that the structure and function of natural organisms and at least some of their parts are an inseparable whole. Indeed, Lewens summarizes the folk biological conception of a "kind" by mashing together the concept of a life form or "essence" with the concept of a function or "telos": a kind is a "teleo-essence", a thing with an end.

My initial hypothesis, which will be explicated further, is that formal facts (natural kinds and their natural properties) and teleological facts (natural functions) are both in-

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5. Susan A Gelman and Lawrence A Hirschfeld, "How Biological Is Essentialism," *Folkbiology* 9 (1999): 403–46; Stefan Linquist et al., "Exploring the Folkbiological Conception of Human Nature," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences* 366, no. 1563 (2011): 444–53.

6. Ernst Mayr, "The Idea of Teleology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 1 (1992): pp. 117–35.

stances of natural norms. We have not yet said anything about human ethical norms, which is our ultimate aim. Human ethical norms, if they can be said to be natural, will turn out to be formal and teleological facts about our life form identifiable as instances of a broader pattern of natural normativity. But the argument must proceed in stages; the goal for now is simply to defend natural normativity.

What are we to make of kinds and their teleonomic behaviors? The explanations may be either realist, reductionist, or anti-realist. Realist explanations argue that kinds and their ends are what they seem to be: fundamental facts of nature. Reductionist or anti-realist explanations argue that kinds and their ends are not what they seem. The nihilist argues that kinds don't exist, there is only one thing; ends don't exist, there is only one mechanical kind of process. The reductionist argues that *some* kinds exist, but they do not correspond to our initial scientific categorization; and *some* end-directed teleonomic processes are real but it is reducible to non-end-directed processes. Before discussing these options in full, let's explore the neo-Aristotelian treatment of natural normativity in more detail.

### **Foot's Case for Natural Normativity**

Philippa Foot argues that human virtues are instances of a broader class of natural properties: 'natural goodness.'<sup>7</sup> To earn an audience for her argument, her first chapter (which she call a "fresh start") clears away some shaky assumptions inherited from Hume and Moore. Instead of treating human valuations as *sui generis*, a miraculous new appearance in the cosmos that only appears with the existence of humans, we should expand the scope of our inquiry to examine our status as natural entities. Foot is well aware that her offering is likely to offend the ears of some listeners. Her defense is the thought (drawn from Wittgenstein) that crude beginnings are often a necessary first step on the way to something refined.

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7. Foot, *Natural Goodness*; cf. Sanford S Levy, "Philippa Foot's Theory of Natural Goodness," in *Forum Philosophicum*, vol. 14, 1, 2009, 1–15.

Among the “shaky assumptions” she wishes to clear is Moore’s assumption that, in philosophical ethics, ‘good’ was the ultimate predicate under review. By contrast, she argues that statements like “pleasure is good” are not good paradigms for philosophical reflection. Evaluation of human creatures and evaluation of plants and animals follow *the same logical pattern*. In such evaluations, good is good *for*. Contrast ‘good’ with other predicates like ‘red’ or ‘beautiful.’ In a statement such as ‘the house is beautiful’, the predicate ‘beautiful’ doesn’t need a complement. The house is *beautiful* – full stop. But ‘good’ has a different logical function. ‘Good’ is more like ‘useful.’ The phrase ‘The house is useful’ *does* need a complement. When we say ‘the house is useful’ we must specify what it is useful for – *for a mom of six, or useful for an artist*, or what have you. Likewise, ‘good’ always means *good for someone* or *for something*. ‘Good’ always needs a complement. If this crude beginning is anywhere near to correct, we can distance ourselves from Moore’s starting point and build on another starting point: the life-form of human beings.

In this Foot agrees with Thompson’s groundbreaking work.<sup>8</sup> Thompson argues that the concept of “life” is not, as it may seem to some, a property of some beings where *being* is the fundamental concept; rather “life” is a fundamental concept.<sup>9</sup> He says, “Vital description of individual organisms is itself the primitive expression of a conception of things in terms of ‘life-form’ or ‘species’, and if we want to understand these categories in philosophy we must bring them back to that form of description.”<sup>10</sup> When we observe and examine living things we rightly employ some shared categories and our conclusions rightly share a logical structure. What is that common structure? Thompson reviews and refutes a variety of crude definitions of life such as that anything that is alive reproduces, grows, metabolizes, etc. Such properties may be co-extensive with the property of being

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8. Michael Thompson, “The Representation of Life,” in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. Lawrence Hursthouse Rosalind and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 247–96. Thompson works out the arguments of this article more fully in his 2008 monograph.

9. Thompson, *Life and Action*, chapter 1.

10. *Ibid.*, 57.

alive, but they are wildly insufficient for the task of *defining* life because such properties depend on a prior understanding of life. Thompson's alternative is that life is a fundamental concept.

Once we accept the intuitive conclusion that life is a fundamental concept (along with 'being', 'quantity' and others) then the argument gets interesting. For every individual living being is a member of a species or life-form. And living beings are not just *acted upon*; they *act*. Species have characteristic actions. Thompson says "action in this sense is a specific form of *life process*."<sup>11</sup> Since each particular species engages in its own characteristic activities: beavers build dams, and robins build nests. There are, then, life-form specific *successes* and *failures* to act. Each life-form is subject to its own normative appraisals: something would be wrong with beaver that built a tiny nest or a robin that tried to build a massive dam.

Now, humans are certainly a unique *kind* of living being with a unique life-form – the biggest difference between a human organism and another primate is that the human engages in rational practices and practical reasoning. And we shall examine more what difference the differences make. But for now, the point is to identify the broader class of natural properties to which 'natural goodness' belongs. We ought not assume, at the outset, that 'good' and 'bad' are sui generis evaluative properties "in people's heads" as it were. Foot's analysis of our evaluative language about plants and animals indicates that a more reasonable starting place is to assume that such terms are relative to natural kinds especially life-forms. Foot concludes that this point holds about "goodness and badness, and therefore about evaluation in its most general form."

By introducing the term 'natural normativity', Foot is insisting on a point that is both interesting and controversial. If evaluative properties like health and disease are really instances of natural goodness and natural defect, then some evaluative properties are *pri-*

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11. Ibid., 27.

*mary qualities of nature*. Still, McDowell and others will object to this characterization of natural normativity. They think it “queer” that nature should exhibit such properties, and they find it easier to judge that human beings are the only evaluators.

The response to this worry, in part, is to insist that the natural goodness under discussion is not just a human ascription but seems to be something humans *recognize* in all living things. Certainly, some properties are human ascriptions only. Other properties are in the world and only show up in human ascriptions insofar as we accurately reflect the facts. Foot’s point is that *some* instances of natural goodness seem much more plausibly instances of this latter kind. Despite For, there is “no change in the meaning of ‘good’ between the word as it appears in ‘good roots’ and as it appears in ‘good dispositions of the human will.’”<sup>12</sup> The identification of what is *good for* a non-human organism is sometimes identical to the identification of what is *good for* a human being. Foot’s theory explains this in the simplest way.

By contrast, McDowell and those who would draw a sharp contrast between “moral” and “non-moral” uses of the term must give long and sophisticated explanations for why it makes sense to describe a healthy plant and a moral person both as “doing well.” The plant is not just doing well *for my garden* but doing well as itself. It is doing what such plants are supposed to live. The human being is not just living well *for a westerner* or *for a Californian* but doing well as what human beings are supposed to live. Rosalind Hursthouse articulates Foot’s basic point in this way:

The starting point is an idea that she has never lost sight of, and which figures in her early attack on Hare. It is the idea that ‘good’, like ‘small’, is an attributive adjective. What that entails is that, although you can evaluate and choose things according to almost any criteria you like, you must select the noun or noun phrase you use to describe the thing you are calling good advisedly, for it determines the criteria of goodness that are appropriate. Hare can call a cactus a good one on the grounds that it is diseased and dying, and

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12. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

choose it for that reason, but what he must not do is describe it as a good cactus, for a cactus is a living thing. He can describe it as a good ‘decorative object for my windowsill’ or ‘present to give my detestable mother  $\square$  in  $\square$  law’, but not as a good cactus.<sup>13</sup>

There are two qualifications I should make about the scope of my thesis here. First, the ‘good’ in question here is a good-of-a-kind, the way that typical robins are blue-of-a-kind. The good-of-a-kind analysis works for all organisms and all biological species, which are most plausibly understood as natural kinds, rather than social groups, which are not. Folk ontology does tend to group nationalities and ethnicities as natural kinds along with leopards and bears; but my analysis trades on the concepts used in biology. Secondly, it would be a natural leap to assume that the good-for-us is an instance of the good simpliciter, but this is a different question altogether. Blackman argues that there *is* no good other than goods of kinds.<sup>14</sup> Others would argue that the good-of-a-kind is an instance of the good simpliciter. I wish to remain agnostic on this issue. While my thesis identifies what is good for us as an instance of something *truly good*, it remains agnostic about the broader metaphysical or cosmic significance of the fact. These are both interesting and important questions but they would take us too far afield of the main point.

### A Novel Case

A defense of natural normativity would render ethical naturalism possible. A defense of natural normativity would have to furnish instances of natural norms from widely agreed upon premises from common sense and science. My case for natural normativity depends on two notions: the first is a minimal scientific realism.<sup>15</sup> The second basic notion is a little-

13. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 195.

14. Reid D. Blackman, “Meta-Ethical Realism with Good of a Kind,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2015): 273–92. Blackman also disputes the kind of biological foundation of ethics I am trying to defend here. Nevertheless, his article is a good introduction into the sort of “kindism” being discussed.

15. While scientific realism is not uncontroversial per se, my intended audience are committed scientific realists or sympathetic to realism. By minimal scientific realism, I

utilized feature of language called “generic propositions,” which I shall explain below. The case in brief is this:

1. If some generic statements describing natural entities are true, then some facts are both genuinely natural and normative – there are “natural norms.”
2. Some generic statements describing natural entities are true.
3. Therefore, some facts are genuinely both natural and normative – there are “natural norms.”

### The Special Logic of Generics

Michael Thompson is one of the first to work out “the special logic of judgments we make about living things, and then to indicate its application to ethics.” Such judgments have a variety of names in the recent neo-Aristotelian literature: the most common are “Aristotelian categoricals”<sup>16</sup> and “natural-historical judgements,”<sup>17</sup>; less common are “norms,”<sup>18</sup> or “bare mean something quite general, such as the belief that most sciences, when successful, describe the world. Thus, Anjan Chakravartty: “Scientific realism is a positive epistemic attitude towards the content of our best theories and models, recommending belief in both observable and unobservable aspects of the world described by the sciences. This epistemic attitude has important metaphysical and semantic dimensions, and these various commitments are contested by a number of rival epistemologies of science, known collectively as forms of scientific antirealism... Metaphysically, realism is committed to the mind-independent existence of the world investigated by the sciences. This idea is best clarified in contrast with positions that deny it. For instance, it is denied by any position that falls under the traditional heading of ‘idealism’... Semantically, realism is committed to a literal interpretation of scientific claims about the world. In common parlance, realists take theoretical statements at “face value”. According to realism, claims about scientific entities, processes, properties, and relations, whether they be observable or unobservable, should be construed literally as having truth values, whether true or false... Epistemologically, realism is committed to the idea that theoretical claims (interpreted literally as describing a mind-independent reality) constitute knowledge of the world.” Cf. Anjan Chakravartty, “Scientific Realism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015. McDowell, as a sort of idealist, will deny this minimal scientific realism in favor of something a bit more idealist, as we shall see.

16. Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

17. Thompson, “The Representation of Life”; Thompson, *Life and Action*.

18. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19



plurals.”<sup>19</sup> I prefer the shorter and less adorned term ‘*generic*.’<sup>20</sup>

My postulate is this: **some generics about human beings are true.** If this is true then, I shall suggest, we have good hope of cutting up nature at the joints. When combined with a moderate scientific realism, generic truths from sciences such as biology, physics, and anthropology (and perhaps others) support a modest natural normativity which will be further articulated (in a later chapter) to indicate which traits are virtues or vices for human beings.

### **Generics are neither universal nor particular**

Now, what are generics? “A fine question, but a difficult one,” Andrew Bailey says. His recent paper provides a helpful (and humorous) introduction to the topic of generic statements:

Start with this sentence: ‘Buddhists are way into meditation’. This first sentence is, let us suppose, true. So far so good. But is it equivalent to ‘for every x, if x is a Buddhist, x is way into meditation’? It does not appear to be. For the second sentence might be false (some Buddhists might not be way into meditation) even if the first sentence is, as we have supposed, true. The first sentence could be true, somehow, even if not all Buddhists are way into meditation (similarly, ‘ducks lay eggs’ may be true even if not all ducks

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19. Greg N Carlson, “A Unified Analysis of the English Bare Plural,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1977): 413–57. Carlson’s essay is an early attempt to account for a variety of linguistic forms under one concept of reference to kinds

20. Cf. Francis Jeffrey Pelletier and Greg N Carlson, *The Generic Book* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Sarah-Jane Leslie, “Generics: Cognition and Acquisition,” *Philosophical Review* 117, no. 1 (2008): 1–47; Andrew M Bailey, “Animalism,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 12 (2015): 867–83 for a discussion of a specific generic: “we are animals” in metaphysics and philosophical anthropology; Andrei Cimpian, Amanda C Brandone, and Susan A Gelman, “Generic Statements Require Little Evidence for Acceptance but Have Powerful Implications,” *Cognitive Science* 34, no. 8 (2010): 1452–82 for an experiment in cognitive psychology that seeks to quantify the prevalence levels at which subjects tend to agree to generics, i.e., how many birds have to lay eggs before we agree to the assertion that “birds lay eggs”? Manfred Krifka, “Bare NPs: Kind-Referring, Indefinites, Both, or Neither?” in *Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, vol. 13, 2003, 180–203; Ariel Cohen, “On the Generic Use of Indefinite Singulars,” *Journal of Semantics* 18, no. 3 (2001): 183–209.

lay eggs, ‘mosquitos carry dengue fever’ may be true even if only a very few mosquitos carry that virus, and so on). We are now positioned to observe one curious property of generics: they admit of exceptions.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, generics are statements of the form “S is F” or “S has or does F” where S is not an individual but a class or natural kind. The logical form of “all S’s  $\phi$ ” does not predicate  $\phi$ -ing to all members of the category S without exception, nor does it simply assert that some “S’s  $\phi$ ”, which is true but uninteresting. For example, consider the statement “wolves hunt in packs.” Logically, the proposition expressed in this statement is neither strictly universal nor strictly particular. It is not a strictly true universal judgment (for rabid wolves hunt alone, and injured, or very old wolves don’t hunt at all). Furthermore, it is true but trivial that *some wolves hunt in packs*.

A generic is interesting because it is, or we treat it as, a truth about forms, or species. The subject of the statement is not all S’s nor merely some S’s, but the “infima species.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, generics pick out what we might call formal facts, facts about the life form in question. Thus Sarah Leslie: “It is widely accepted that [definite] generics are singular statements which predicate properties directly of kinds. For example, “tigers are extinct” predicates the property of being extinct directly of the kind *Panthera tigris*, and would be true just in case *Panthera tigris* had the property of being extinct.”<sup>23</sup>

Generics are not merely statistical regularities. The members of extinct species do not exhibit any properties at all, yet it is still true in some sense that *the species* is extinct. Likewise, all the living members of a species might fail to exemplify its formal attributes. Consider the fact that “California condors can fly for hours without resting.”<sup>24</sup> In 1987

21. Bailey, “Animalism,” 869.

22. Christopher Toner, “Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 222. “Infima species” is the narrowest cut in a genus-species tree, or the most determinate determinable.

23. Leslie, “Generics,” sec. 1.

24. Jeffrey P. Cohn, “Saving the California Condor,” *BioScience* 49, no. 11 (1999): 864–68.

there were only 27 known condors alive. One could easily imagine a scenario in which every living member of such an endangered species were too injured, old, or diseased to exemplify this attribute. It would be strictly false of the individual condors that any of them could fly for hours; nevertheless the generic would still be true that “condors” (as a class) *can* fly for hours.

McDowell thinks that such exceptions are a “logical weakness” in deriving ethical conclusions from generics about human beings. He cites the example from Anscombe (and Aristotle) that “humans have 32 teeth”, saying “there is a truth we can state in those terms, but from that truth, together with the fact that I am a human being, it does not follow that I have 32 teeth. (In fact it is false).”<sup>25</sup> McDowell accepts that generics are generally true. His objection to their application seems to be that the relation between a normative expectation and reality fails to reach deductive certainty. If this is his objection, it rather misses the point. Aristotelian-categoricals are not half-hearted universal judgments; they are not universes with widely-acknowledge counterexamples. They are judgments of a logically different kind. Far from being a logical weakness, generics are what enable us to capture truths about natural kinds that help explain statistical variation and inconsistency.

Prasada says that, “Much of our conceptual knowledge consists of generic knowledge — knowledge about kinds of things and their properties.”<sup>26</sup> We can approach generics through a “formal, quantificational” semantics or through “principled connections”. Principled connections support formal explanations, normative expectations, and a statistical expectation of prevalence. In other words, we explain that the dog has four legs *because* it is a dog (formal explanation); we expect that Fido should have four legs *unless something is wrong* (normative expectations); and we expect that if we counted up a population of dogs,

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25. John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 171–2.

26. Sandeep Prasada et al., “Conceptual Distinctions Amongst Generics,” *Cognition* 126, no. 3 (2013): 405.

*most* dogs would in fact turn out to have four legs (statistical expectation). Generic truths, once discovered, set a normative expectation by which we evaluate individual members on how well or badly they exemplify their life form.<sup>27</sup>

There is much to be learned about the linguistic features of generics. For example, the correlation between statistical prevalence and normative identity is unclear; many generic truths describe what is statistically prevalent but not all. What is the difference? Is one reducible to the other? Furthermore, Leslie distinguishes between indefinite generics such as “tigers are striped” which admits of the specification “that tiger over there is striped” and definite generics such as “domestic cats are common” which does not admit of specification, “that domestic cat is common”. What is the difference here? Finally, Indefinite generics are trickier: “Ducks lay eggs” is a true generic, while “ducks are female” is false, yet it is only the female ducks who ever lay eggs. “Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus” is true, and “books are paperbacks” is false, yet less than one percent of mosquitoes carry the virus, while over eighty percent of books are paper backs.”<sup>28</sup> These unexplored frontiers represent fascinating puzzles but do not render generics unsuitable for use in normative and ethical arguments. Nor should the presence of outstanding questions lead one to believe generic propositions are confusing or confused. Rather, their normal acquisition and usage is a very familiar, and perhaps inevitable.

Generic truths are acquired via a normal scientific means of empirical observation, rational reflection, and discussion. To use a silly example, suppose that someone from a warm and landlocked country has never heard of penguins before. This person visits a zoo and sees penguins for the first time. He notices that these astonishing creatures are called ‘penguins’, and appear to be birds (for they have beaks, feathers, lay eggs, emit squawks, etc.). He reflects that most – if not all birds – have many of these macro features. Fas-

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27. Ibid., 3.

28. Leslie, “Generics.”

minated, he consults encyclopedias, biology or zoology textbooks, and consult zoologist friends. All these sources confirm the categorization. Although I am not aware of when the first penguin was studied by a modern naturalist, we can easily imagine that it was from observations and reflections such as these that penguins long ago earned an entry in the annals of scientific knowledge. The biological community gave them a scientific name ('sphenisciformes') and began to fill in gaps with a detailed description of their evolutionary history, characteristics, genetics, environments, diet, predators, and so on. The scientific conclusion, upon initial observation, bolstered by reflection, underwrites the initial hypothesis: penguins are indeed birds. This familiar scientific process may not be easy or free of dangers, but it is at least *a familiar scientific process*. Scientists are continually correcting formerly established generics (the notion that all mammals give live birth was thrown into crisis by the platypus). Scientists also work to distinguish between the (statistically) normal and (statistically) abnormal traits of a species, and within abnormal traits distinguish good from defective traits.

This familiar process is certainly revisable. For example, an ethologist who discovers a wolf hunting alone may have a "normative expectation" that the wolf is not healthy. But she cannot know certainly in advance that this is so. She must test the hypothesis. A few reasonable interpretations are available: perhaps the lone wolf is unhealthy; perhaps the initial generic that 'wolves hunt in packs' was false; or perhaps this wolf is actually a new species of wolf. As it happens, in the case of wolves, no known species of wolf hunts alone so there is very strong reason to conclude that a lone wolf is rabid. But the point more generally is that generics are acquired and modified by a familiar, if complicated, process of scientific reasoning. Michael Thompson points out that: there is a "general and thorough-going reciprocal mutual interdependence of vital description of the individual and natural

historical judgment about the form or kind.”<sup>29</sup> Put differently, Micah Lott says:

At each stage of an empirical investigation, our observations are mediated by our current understanding of the life form whose members we are observing. At the same time, our observations of those individual members will in turn improve our understanding of the life form itself, which then makes possible even more accurate and extensive future observations.<sup>30</sup>

Again, the fact that generic truths are revisable is not a weakness but a strength of the case I am building. It may be, for all we know, that penguins can fly (in the air), that some species of penguin can fly, or that all penguins are really just defective birds. But the most reasonable belief thus far is the generic truth that penguins don’t fly; that they are excellent swimmers, not defective flyers; and that these truths hold of penguins *as a kind* – a biologist or zoologist who discovered the first flying penguin would become (justifiably) famous because we would all be (justifiably) surprised. The surprise would not originate merely from something out of the ordinary — new and extraordinary creatures, both living and extinct, are discovered every year. The surprise would originate from the upending of a firmly established scientific fact.

### **Generics are teleological**

The first kind of natural normativity I am defending is the mere idea of a life-form. Knowing what a thing is, knowing about its species or life-form, is to know something descriptive and something normative about any member of that species. Knowing what a thing is, furthermore, licenses a range of normative expectations. But we can make the case for natural normativity stronger. There is another, related kind of normativity in the natural

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29. Michael Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54 (2004): 52.

30. Micah Lott, “Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form,” *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 3 (2012): 414.

teleological features of life-forms. Such natural teleology can also be captured in generic propositions.

To see this second kind of natural normativity, begin with the concept of a function. Eyes perform the function (in an organism) of seeing, hemlock trees perform the function (in an ecosystem) of shading rivers, and so on. Thompson, for example, cites the scientific observation that “flowers have blossoms of such-and-such type in order that such-and-such insects should be attracted and spread their pollen about.”<sup>31</sup>

Now, Mayr calls such processes “teleonomic” in order to leave open the question of whether they are genuinely teleological.<sup>32</sup> For my purposes, however, even teleonomic processes would count as instances of natural normativity insofar as the development of an organism at one time does not yet fully express the form that it will, under proper conditions, one day express. Barham clarifies the notion of natural teleology in this way:

By “teleology,” I have in mind such words and concepts as “purpose,” “end,” “goal,” “function,” “control,” and “regulation,” as well as the real-world biological phenomena to which these words and concepts refer. This means that the word “teleology” should always be construed here in its internal or “immanent” sense—purposiveness existing in living beings themselves—and never in its external or “transcendent” sense of an overarching cosmic principle.<sup>33</sup>

Taken broadly, then, the first point is to realize that talk about functions and ends is just as scientific as talk about life-forms, species, and natural health or disease. As Mark Perlman says:

Many objects in the world have functions. Some of the objects with functions are organs or parts of living organisms... Hearts are for pumping blood. Eyes are for seeing. Countless works in biology explain the “Form, Function, and Evolution of ...” everything from bee dances to elephant tusks to

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31. Thompson, *Life and Action*, 293–94.

32. Mayr, “The Idea of Teleology.”

33. James Barham, “Teleological Realism in Biology” (PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame; Web, 2011), 1.

pandas' 'thumbs'. Many scientific explanations, in areas as diverse as psychology, sociology, economics, medical research, and neuroscience, rest on appeals to the function and/or malfunction of things or systems.<sup>34</sup>

Generic propositions usefully capture the functional or teleological properties of natural organisms. As Chris Toner says, "natural-historical judgments readily admit of combination into teleological judgments."<sup>35</sup> This kind of combination of generic truths is very familiar. No sooner have I learned the formal facts about a penguin (that it is a bird, that it can swim, that it has a countershaded white belly and dark back etc.) do I learn that *penguins are countershaded in order to avoid predators from above and below*.<sup>36</sup> Since an individual penguin may fail to be countershaded in the way that expresses its form, it would be defective. This defect is not a judgment made by scientists and "imposed" as it were, from the outside, on the penguin. It is rather a normative fact about the penguin. As Hursthouse says, "Wolves hunt in packs; a 'free-rider' wolf that doesn't join in the hunt fails to act well and is thereby defective."<sup>37</sup>

We should add that generics express the formal and functional features of natural entities *when they are mature*. It is a normal – indeed universal – fact of organisms that they grow and develop and mature according to the life process of their particular species. Before maturation, we might say, the formal and functional properties in question exist merely potentially. For example, a wolf that cannot hunt might be injured, ill, or simply young. Similarly, eyes that cannot see might be injured, ill, or simply developing.

Nevertheless, it is true that "eyes see". In discovering and expressing the simple generic truth that "eyes see", we abstract away from the processes of maturation and development to pick out a fact that is true of all eyes that are normal and have had enough time.

34. Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology," 1–4.

35. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism," 222.

36. A shark looking up may miss a penguin, because its white belly blends in with the sunlight surface waters; a shark looking down may miss a penguin, because it blends in with the pitch dark waters of the abyss.

37. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 201.



This is a descriptive, judgment that is also a normative judgment – without changing our meaning we could say that fully developed eyes are *supposed to see*, *ought to see* – or just that *eyes see*.

#### IV. Three Paths Forward

In my overall argument, generic truths are intended to serve as a counterexample to premise 2 of the **Bald Nature Challenge** above. That challenge asserted that no facts are genuinely both natural and normative. Generics are both genuinely natural and normative: natural, in that a large percentage of scientific knowledge consists of scientists predicating generic truths of natural kinds; normative, in that the life-form in question is one which an individual may or may not “live up” to, and in that *some* generics pick out natural functional or teleological facts about life forms (that penguins are counter-shaded *to avoid* predators, that hearts are *for* pumping blood, etc.). On my view, accepting the straightforward, generic truths delivered by such sciences about forms and functions is quite simply the respectable thing to do.

But it seems to me there are three paths forward: reject, reduce, or accept Organic Teleology.

##### Reject

The first path is to reject generic truths about species and their formal and functional characteristics. Probably, those who are tempted to reject natural teleology believe there are no *ends* (τελτοι). Call this view teleological nihilism.<sup>38</sup> Teleological nihilism claims as its evidence “*modern science*” as a whole. Abandoning the search for natural teleology was a harbinger of modern science; Francis Bacon and others believed that the search for final causes corrupted science. So, if best science tells us that nature is *only* descriptive, natu-

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38. Also called teleological eliminativism.

ral normativity is dismissed out of court.<sup>39</sup> In fact, natural sciences and the experimental, empirical methods that advance them have progressed far more than anyone could have dreamed. In part, this success is the result of giving up magical thinking.[ Garten: Isn't a better version of this argument to simply claim that a simpler scientific theory is one which only appeals to efficient causality and doesn't use final causality? They can just say that it's adding in an extra, unparsimonious entity to posit an end for an organism whose total physical description does not require such an end.

I bet there are also arguments based on the predictive failures of teleological thinking (Aristotle was dumb to think that heavenly bodies would move in perfect circles because they were fulfilling a telos of perfect, eternal motion) and the fruitfulness of science in discovering truths about biology without teleology.]

The proper reply to Bacon is that the teleological nihilism hypothesis has been tried and found wanting. Animals, plants, and all living things exhibit end-directed or teleonomic behavior: eyes see, hemlock trees offer shade to fish, stomachs digest, deer leap to avoid predators. Even when Kant denies natural teleology – the biological theory that the form of an organism causes the parts to grow and relate to each other in a particular way – he admits we *cannot help thinking so*.<sup>40</sup>

Things are even clearer when it comes to natural kinds and generic truths about species. If we accept scientific realism of any form, we cannot deny that some generics are true. It is probably true that if we accept *any* form of conceptual knowledge, we are probably implicitly already committed to the truth of some generics, for much of our conceptual

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39. Cf. Bacon, *New Organon*, Book I. XLVIII “Although the most general principles in nature ought to be held merely positive, as they are discovered, and cannot with truth be referred to a cause, nevertheless the human understanding being unable to rest still seeks something prior in the order of nature. And then it is that in struggling toward that which is further off it falls back upon that which is nearer at hand, namely, on final causes, which have relation clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe; and from this source have strangely defiled philosophy.”

40. Huneman, “Naturalising Purpose.”

knowledge consists in generics.<sup>41</sup> Animals, plants, and all living things belong to species, and our knowledge of them consists of generic truths about not just individuals but that species. A species involves a defined range of potential attributes that normally come to be actualized over time. An individual hemlock tree may or may not shade any fish in any rivers, but it may in time; or it may never do so, but it is still a scientific insight that that is one thing ‘hemlock trees’ in general do.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, to reject *all truths* about natural kinds and natural functions, I contend, is untenable. And generics are, it seems, necessarily normative propositions. If we suppose for *reductio* that no generic statements are true, then not only do we reject natural functional talk but natural formal talk. If all generics are false (or only conventionally true) then it is in some important sense false that ‘wolves hunt in packs’ and false even that ‘penguins are birds’. It is false not only that “eyes see” but even that “humans are primates”. Such denials are, I think, absurdities.<sup>43</sup> If we accept the truth of at least some generics, then Perlman’s surprise is well founded: “It is surprising that analytic philosophers, with their strong focus on science, would reject a notion that is so central to some areas of science, most notably, biology and engineering sciences... Biology cannot, or at least in practice does not, eliminate functions and purposes.”<sup>44</sup> One might suppose that Perlman’s qualification “or at least in practice does not” leaves open space for the normative anti-realist. I welcome the critic who would try to show that biology *can* eliminate functions; what I have tried to suggest, and what Barham argues in great detail, is that the attempt has been made and

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41. Prasada et al., “Conceptual Distinctions Amongst Generics.

42. Compare with Thomas Nagel’s point that some “laws of nature would apply directly to the relation between the present and the future.” Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* 93.

43. That is not to say that the denial is not worth considering. It might well be true. My point in calling the denial ‘absurd’ is to say that if it is true, an absurdity is true. If it is true, then the truth is absurd. And reality itself might well be absurd. I don’t think it is, but there have been many philosophers who have thought so, and such thoughts cannot be justly dismissed without consideration. Since absurdist philosophers are not my primary audience, I simply lay the issue aside.

44. Perlman, “The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology,” 6.

has failed. A few failed attempts at reduction does not prove that reduction is impossible. But it does make the more plausible view, teleological realism, a better candidate for the default view. And the great cost of throwing out generics entirely is that we would seem to have to throw out many scientific statements in biology, organic chemistry, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, anatomy, and medicine.

The notion that some of nature is normative – or that some norms are natural – is not only a good logical explanation of the natural phenomena of biology but also a good *scientific* explanation. While natural teleological realism is still controversial, it is not a controversy between science and philosophy but a controversy *within science*. It is a legitimate discussion between scientists of one stripe and scientists of another.

## Reduce

The second path is to accept natural teleonomic behavior and even the appearance of natural teleology, natural functions, etc., but to *reduce* these phenomena to less spooky (read: more mechanistic) terms consistent with a conception of bald nature.

Now, arguing for or against teleoreductionism has become a cottage industry.<sup>45</sup> It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of the dialectic here. I will content myself to note, and critique, two popular forms of reduction: the first reduces biological functions to causal contributions to a system and the second reduces teleonomic biological functions to naturally selected effects. A proponent of the first reduction is Donald Davidson. A proponent of the second is Ruth Millikan. For example, Ruth Millikan argues that an organism's proper function simply cannot be "read off" its capacities at present but must be known via empirical history. Her theory entails the unpalatable conclusion that an organ that is otherwise physically identical to, say, a heart, that was magically apparated into existence would not have a "proper function". She bites the bullet on this.

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45. Cf. *ibid.*, sec. III; and Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," chap. 3.

James Barham argues that neither of these forms of reduction is very promising. Neither alternative is coherent, in his view. The problem with the “causal-role” reduction of teleonomic phenomena is that in order to even posit a hypothesis about how some parts of a system contribute to the achievement of its end or purpose, we must identify *in advance* which parts of the organism play a role in bringing about the end or purpose. But if we already know the causal contribution of those parts, what more could we learn by positing the causal-role theory?<sup>46</sup>

As regards the second form, things are no more promising. While Millikan’s theory of “proper function” might be ingenious and might be true of the historical or “etioloical” history of present-day functional attributes of organisms, it is irrelevant. The question is not “how historically did present-day function X come to be?” but “is present-day X a function?” One cannot go looking for the etioloical history of a functioning organism if one does not already know, in advance, that the organism in question is functioning.

Michael Thompson, too, insists that judgments about natural teleology are made true from the form of life under question, not from “hypotheses about the past.”<sup>47</sup> James Barham points out that the problem with Aristotle’s views of biology (say, believing that the seat of perception was not in the brain) was not that he lacked knowledge of evolution, but that he lacked adequate knowledge of physiology.

### **Accept as is**

The third option is to accept that some natural facts are intrinsically normative, irreducible, natural facts. Although the very word ‘teleology’ is liable to sound quaint to modern ears,

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46. Cf. Barham, “Teleological Realism in Biology,” chapter 3.

47. Cf. Thompson, “The Representation of Life,” 293. Christopher Toner adds that judgments about natural teleological facts are made true regardless of the origin of the facts, “whether about creation or natural selection.”, Toner, “Sorts of Naturalism,” 223. This seems right to me. It does not matter for present purposes *how* the function came to be, just whether or not it really *is* at present.

Barham has argued that ‘teleological realism’ is a rationally permissible view to take on biology. Indeed, it is making a come-back. For instance, Arnhart persuasively argues that teleology is assumed in medicine.<sup>48</sup> Zammito clarifies its ongoing relevance in biology, since organisms seem to be intrinsically purposeful.<sup>49</sup> Fitzpatrick says that, “While neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory does soundly reject any appeal to teleology in the process of evolution itself, there is a large literature in contemporary philosophy of biology defending the legitimacy of employing teleological concepts in connection with adaptations.”<sup>50</sup>

Thomas Nagel has offered one philosophical defense of scientific, Darwinian, natural teleology.<sup>51</sup> Michael Chorost’s review of Thomas Nagel’s *Mind and Cosmos* reminds readers that natural teleology is not so scientifically heretical as it might first seem. He says:

Natural teleology is unorthodox, but it has a long and honorable history. For example, in 1953 the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley argued that it’s in the nature of nature to get more advanced over time. “If we take a snapshot view, improvement eludes us,” he wrote. “But as soon as we introduce time, we see trends of improvement.”...<sup>52</sup>

Chorost argues that Nagel did not “go wrong” in his thesis but in presenting it philosophically without engaging the support from relevant scientific literature. He continues with a few more examples:

paleontologist Simon Conway Morris, at the University of Cambridge, has argued that natural structures such as eyes, neurons, brains, and hands are so beneficial that they will get invented over and over again. They are, in

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48. Arnhart, “Aristotle’s Biopolitics.”

49. John Zammito, “Teleology Then and Now: The Question of Kant’s Relevance for Contemporary Controversies over Function in Biology,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part 37*, no. 4 (2006): 748–70.

50. William FitzPatrick, “Morality and Evolutionary Biology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2016 (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/morality-biology/>, 2016).

51. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

52. Michael Chorost, “Where Thomas Nagel Went Wrong,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2013.

effect, attractors in an abstract biological space that pull life in their direction. Contingency and catastrophe will delay them but cannot stop them. Conway Morris sees this as evidence that not only life but human life, and humanlike minds, will emerge naturally from the cosmos: “If we humans had not evolved, then something more or less identical would have emerged sooner or later.

My point here is that a respectable subset of scientists and others countenance natural normativity in organic nature. Philosophers of various schools (metaphysicians and ethicists) would do well to dialogue with biologists and cosmologists to come to grips with the possibility that our best evidence suggests that there are normative natural life forms and natural ends.

## V. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to meet the **Bald Nature Challenge** to Ethical Naturalism stated above. The challenge, recall, was this:

1. If ethical naturalism is possibly true, then some facts are genuinely both natural and normative.
2. But no facts are genuinely both natural and normative.
3. Therefore ethical naturalism is not possibly true.

The conclusion we have drawn is that indeed *some* facts – especially facts about living things – are both natural and irreducibly normative. These are natural formal and functional facts about organic beings and their parts and operations. Such facts are expressed in perfectly respectable scientific judgments we have called “generics” but may also be called “Aristotelian categoricals”, “natural-historical judgements”, “norms”, “bare plurals”, etc. Generics like these render it at least *possible* to conclude the the scientific picture of nature includes normativity in the form of natural teleology. If true generics could be stated about human beings, then it is conceivable we can use them as a basis for ethical theory.

A natural norm is not some paradoxical notion of a prescriptive fact or natural 'ought'; these rhetorical phrases render the argument implausible by suggesting that natural norms apply only to human agents capable of understanding prescriptions and either complying or not complying with them. J. L. Mackie exploits the apparent silliness of the notion that "to-be-pursuedness" is built into things. Instead, we should think of other perfectly ordinary natural relations such as causation. A natural norm is not a one-place predicate things but a relation between things. For example, one type of natural norm might be a relation between a living thing and another object, such as food, shade, or a predator. Given the kind of thing snakes are, and the kind of thing mice are, a mouse is to be eaten by the snake and the snake is to be fled by the mouse.

Of course, I have not yet tried to show *which* true generics about humans can serve as the basis for ethical theory. All I have tried to show is that *some* of these generics are true. By denying the consequent, we are not necessarily affirming the antecedent. That affirmation requires another step, namely, to apply the above argument to human beings. Foot is well aware that the imposition of normativity onto brute nature, or the derivation of normativity from brute nature, is likely to seem absurd:

The idea that any features and operations of humans could be evaluated in the same way as those of plants and animals may provoke instant opposition. For to say that this is possible is to imply that some at least of our judgements of goodness and badness in human beings are given truth or falsity by the conditions of human life. And even if it is allowed that certain evaluations of this kind are possible—those vaguely thought of perhaps as 'merely biological'—there is bound to be skepticism about the possibility that 'moral evaluation' could be like this.<sup>53</sup>

Despite such legitimate worries, we have followed Foot in trying to earn a hearing for this notion by arguing that the "meaning of 'good' in so-called 'moral contexts' " does not have a special logic of its own. Rather, 'good' and 'defective' pick out natural properties of

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53. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 38.



living things. The goodness of a cactus is relative to its cactus nature; the goodness of human beings is relative to their human nature. And that human nature is to be or have the potential to become practical, rational animals. Hursthouse continues:

When we moved from the evaluations of other social animals to ethical evaluations of ourselves, there was an obvious addition to the list of aspects which are evaluated. The other animals act [as opposed to chemicals which are only acted upon]. So do we occasionally, but mostly we act from reason, as they do not, and it is primarily in virtue of our actions from reason that we are ethically good or bad human beings. So that is one difference that our being rational makes.<sup>54</sup>

The task in discovering true generics about human beings is capturing what is common between us and other animals and what is unique about rational animals. The argument that will help us transition from generics about the biological world in general to generics about human beings and which may provide the basis of normative *ethics* is this:

#### **Human Normativity**

1. On ethical naturalism, generics about natural entities are both descriptive and normative (they are natural norms), and hence can be used as premises in arguments with normative conclusions.
2. Humans are natural entities, (there are some *human* natural norms).
3. Therefore, generics about humans are both descriptive and normative, and hence can be used as premises in arguments with normative conclusions.

Establishing premise 1 has been our task in this chapter. Establishing premise 2 is the task for the next chapter.

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54. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 217.



## Chapter 3

### Practical Primates

Human nature is normative, such that to be morally good is to fulfill one's nature.

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—Christopher Toner, “Sorts of Naturalism”, 221.

#### I. Introduction

This chapter argues for the truth of the generic proposition that humans are practical, rational animals. This is “human nature”, although I don’t insist on the traditional locution, for some reject it on aesthetic grounds.

The last chapter argued that ethical naturalism is at least possible: The is-ought gap is no barrier to a successful theory, so long as we can identify natural norms and show how human norms are examples of natural norms. And I argued that generic propositions do allow us to articulate our scientific knowledge about organisms and the organic normativity of natural life forms and functions. What is needed now is to explain how exactly humans fit into the broader class of natural organisms and inherit the properties belonging to the broader class. If all of organic nature is subject to evaluation according to patterns of natural normativity, and human beings are natural organisms, then the basic idea is that generic

propositions about humans would all us to express scientific knowledge about the natural life form and function of humans. These natural human norms would form a firm basis for ethical evaluations of individual human beings. Rosalind Hursthouse states that ethical evaluations of *human beings* “depend upon our identifying what is characteristic of the species in question.”<sup>1</sup> The ‘characteristic’, I take it, is a differentiam determining or defining the human life form, or nature, or archetype.

In brief, the argument in the remainder of this chapter is this:

### **Normative Human Nature Argument**

- (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.

Chapter 2 argued for premise (1). This chapter will argue for (2) and (3).

## **II. Animals of a peculiar sort**

### **Natures?**

Chris Toner’s quotation in the epigraph says that “human nature is normative.” I don’t insist on the term ‘nature’; we could equally say that a genetically modern *homo sapiens sapiens* is potentially a practical, rational primate. The important thing is not the term ‘nature’ or ‘human nature’ but the concept of a nature. What do I mean by a nature or life form?

In the old classificatory schemes, philosophers provided a genus and a differentiam to pick out the unique “nature” of any life form or natural kind. Not every concept of a kind corresponds to a real nature. But when it does, its nature is potentially discernible both by contrasting it with other kinds of things and by comparing it with instances of the same kind. As Hans Fink explains:

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1. Ibid., chap. 9 abstract.

The nature of x is both what is special about this x and what makes this x one of the x's as opposed to the y's. When x is defined per genus et differentiam both the genus and the differentiating characteristic and their combination could be taken to express what is the nature of x.... Human nature is what differentiates us from the animals and the plants. By nature we are rational beings. Our human nature, however, is also that in virtue of which we belong to the animal kingdom and to the living organisms. By nature we are mammals. We may thus use the concept of nature to differentiate rather than include, but also to include rather than differentiate. And we may use the concept of nature to express that differentiation and inclusion should not be seen as incompatible."<sup>2</sup>

As Fink points out, the concept of a nature gathers and divides. It gathers up all the members or putative members of a kind and divides the kind from other kinds. With this definition in view, we can see what the point of the old formula was, that man was a rational animal, or a featherless biped. There are many animals, but few (if any) other rational ones. There may even be other rational creatures who are not animals: artificial intelligences, gods, Alpha Centurions, archangels, dryads or what have you. But, so far as we know, we are the only rational animals in the cosmos.

Hence, I think this formula, slightly modified, is still the best way of reflecting on ourselves as members of the organic kingdom, as organisms within the evolutionary tree of life, and as physical objects in the cosmos: a human being is (potentially) a practical, rational primate. This simple, generic proposition is astonishingly rich. I shall argue that it captures the facts of our life form and can be demonstrated to be true from within the human point of view, and from outside it; an alien anthropologist studying human beings from its own non-human point of view could discover that humans are practical, rational primates.

If indeed a neo-Aristotelian account can pinpoint the human life form, then it becomes possible to form a hypothesis as to what kinds of attributes will turn out to be human virtues. And just as we can evaluate an individual wolf by reference to its life form, perhaps

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2. Hans Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (August 2006): 207.

we can evaluate individual human characters and abilities, human actions and lives by reference to our life form. Virtues are the qualities belonging to creatures like us. Virtues are the human specific goods-of-a-kind. Relatedly, the acquisition of virtues both causes and constitutes the actualization of our life form as practical rational primates. Truly exemplifying our life form constitutes our species-specific flourishing.

The thought is that virtues are commonly supposed to be excellences of human beings. If virtue is “excellence,” relative to what is it excellent? The answer can only be that virtues are excellences relative to our nature or life form. They are the traits or qualities that enable us to actualize our life form, to fully express in a life what we are by nature. If what we are by nature is practical, rational primates, then virtues (we can further predict) will be traits pertaining to practical reason and animality.

Furthermore, if our nature is to be practical, rational primates, then we have some vague notion of our natural “function.” I shall not go in for the Aristotelian view that the natural work (ergon) of human beings is contemplative science, an activity by reference to which success and failure may be judged. Rather, I shall be more ecumenical: the telos of every life form is, minimally, to do all the activities that constitute its mature flourishing. So we should predict quite generally that the human telos is to become *fully mature* practical, rational primates. The conceptions of human nature (as practical reasoning animals) must be defined in relation to virtue (the excellences of rational practice and practical reason) and to human nature as it could be, our natural telos (to be excellent and mature practical, rational primates).

As a corollary, any traits that deviate from this life form would be defects. Some “defects” would not be moral defects. For example, human speech consists of such-and-such range of individual sounds, such-and-such variety of pitches and voice, physiological and neurological properties of the tongue and the brain, syntactical and grammatical properties of the natural language, and so on. These generics help us to identify speech disorders such

as apraxia, muteness, and stuttering by comparison to a conception of what human speech is like. But some defects would be moral defects. We might be able to identify moral vices in the same way as we identify disorders, mental illness, injury, and so on – by comparison to a conception of what human virtue is.

Spelling out the details of virtue and vice shall be the task for the next chapter. The task in this chapter is to lay the groundwork by defending a conception of human nature according to which humans fit the larger pattern of natural normativity defended in chapter 2. By comparison to the human life form, evaluations of individual human beings is possible. Our task is to provide a conception of human nature that is seamlessly both normative and descriptive. We must first uncover, if possible, a set of scientific generics about humanity, specifying what kind of natural creature human beings are and what kind of characteristic life they live – what kind of life they live “by nature”. Such generics, it is hoped, will give us initial insight into the concept and content of virtue, excellence, wisdom, and flourishing, which are our main themes.

The first section spells out the cluster of concepts entailed in the concept of being an animal and the cluster entailed in ‘practical rationality.’ It argues that observing human behaviors both from “within” and “without” the human point of view allows us to see what is unique about human beings, their capacities, and ends. The second section discusses a variety of objections. It attempts to sympathetically articulate and provide a response to a series of worries philosophers have about the neo-Aristotelian project of grounding ethical evaluations in some normatively loaded conception of human nature. For example, some think that there are no such things as the sort of “natures” as I have described; others think that there are natures but that there is no human nature; others think that human nature comes with no built in teleological boundaries; others think that human nature comes with a few built in teleological boundaries are the ends of reproduction and survival. Each of these receives an initial rebuttal, though a few of them will require further comment in a

later chapter.

### **Humans as Natural Organisms**

I said above in proposition (2) that “Human beings are natural organisms.” Is this true? On its face, it appears to be an innocent truism. Humans are primates of the chordata phylum who, like every other organism, enjoy a particular evolutionary history, and move about the earth engaging in activities such as reproducing, sleeping, feeding, dying, and so on.

Nevertheless, as it is currently phrased, the proposition can be agreed upon by two very different readers. One sort of reader believes that human beings are *merely* natural; under the guise of merely asserting an innocent truism, this reader would insist that humans are machines made of meat, or “heaps of glorified clockwork”<sup>3</sup> in the same sense that all of Laplacian nature is a heap of glorified clockwork and all its myriad variegated objects are just parts of the heap. This first sort of reader can acknowledge that the human brain exhibits rarefied neurocognitive processes we do not observe anywhere else but would deny that human beings are different in kind. A second sort of reader believes that humans are natural organisms and something more; under the guise of asserting an innocent truism, this reader would insist that human beings are organisms of an altogether different kind. Perhaps human beings are made in the image of God, or have a divine spark, or represent the crest of the wave of evolution. This sort of reader can acknowledge that the human body is a material organism like many others but would insist that the mind is something of a different order – humans are, (in an unforgettable phrase from novelist Walker Percy) “angelic beasts” or “bestial angels”.

Rather than pick sides on this issue, I prefer to leave the premise ambiguous. Debating such matters would take us into deep metaphysical waters, while our main goal is to

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3. Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Penguin, 2003).



identify, as far as we can, what exactly characterizes our life form only in order to explore whether this examination bears any relevance to the ethics of virtue and vice. My hope is that calculated indeterminacy on this issue will allow for both kinds of readers to participate in the dialectic regardless of their prior metaphysical commitments.

What both readers agree on is that human beings are (at least) primates – material beings, living organisms, mammals of a peculiar sort. This agreement is not so trivial as it might seem. To be an animal entails the presence of several other properties, some of which will be seen below to have potential ethical significance. For example, it entails a particular set of relations with respect to other animals and ecosystems.

I will first spell out a few properties that come along with being an primate, and show how these properties might have potentially ethical significance. Then, I will spell out the properties involved in being practical rational primates.

### **What We Share with Other Organisms**

To be an animal is to belong to the “tree of life” — and to have a location in the broader story of life on earth. As Michael Mautner explains, all living things (on earth at least) share common ancestors and even share genetic material. He says:

...phylogenetic trees indicate that all terrestrial life can be traced to a common ancestor. Organisms as different from us as yeasts share half; mice, over 90%, chimpanzees, over 95%, and different human individuals share over 99% of our genome. These scientific insights give a deeper meaning to the unity of all Life. Our complex molecular patterns are common to all organic gene/protein life and distinguish us from any other phenomena of nature.<sup>4</sup>

While we should not make too much of the genetic similarities between all living things, we should not ignore it.

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4. Michael N Mautner, “Life-Centered Ethics, and the Human Future in Space,” *Bioethics* 23, no. 8 (2009): 434–5.

Zoom out for a moment and consider the human's place in the cosmos. Consider in your imagination that the earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago; that life arose on earth 3.5 billion years ago; and that anatomically modern humans arose on the earth about 200,000 years ago or in the "Late Pleistocene of 120,000 years ago."<sup>5</sup> The first among our species lived in Africa. They emigrated from that landmass and settled in various parts of the globe. In contemporary classificatory scheme, we can locate humans within the phylum chordata, the class mammalia, the order of primates, the suborder haplorhini, the family hominidae, the genus homo, the species homo sapiens.

What can we say about such creatures? Firstly, being an animal entails that one was produced by sexual reproduction. Unlike prokaryotic organisms (such as bacteria), all mammals come to be through process of fusing dimorphic gametes, such as ova and sperm cells, into a fertilized zygote. New fertilized zygotes, once generated, grow through a process of cell division found only in eukaryotic organisms, such as fungi, plants, mammals. Meiosis, unlike mitosis, is a process of division leading to the creation of four daughter cells that do not contain the same genetic material as the original. However, in all such organisms it is possible that errors occur in meiosis, which results in genetic defects. The ethical implications of genetic defect in humans is profound, since some genetic defects are associated with common mental illnesses.<sup>6</sup> And mental illness is in turn prevalent among prison populations, or people who are unwilling or unable to conform to the minimum legal and ethical standards of their community.<sup>7</sup> Not all inmates are justly imprisoned, and not all are "bad people"; my point is any reproductive technology which increases the chances

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5. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 102.

6. Jo C Phelan, "Genetic Bases of Mental Illness—a Cure for Stigma?" *Trends in Neurosciences* 25, no. 8 (2002): 430–31.

7. Pamela M Diamond et al., "The Prevalence of Mental Illness in Prison," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 29, no. 1 (2001): 21–40.

of errors in meiosis or mitosis might be ipso facto ill-advised.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, being an animal entails mortality. Life is a process with a beginning and an end; an organism begins life as a tiny zygote and progresses through gestation to infancy, maturation, and adulthood, at which point it may reproduce itself before dying. All of these phases we notice in human animals as well. The human life cycle is characterized by various phases, including growth, language acquisition, puberty, physical maturity and characteristic activities, aging, and death. It should not be a difficult or particularly profound inference that human beings are mortal. However, as we shall see, the value of questioning or attempting to subvert this basic condition is one of the live controversies in bioethics. Furthermore, the question of individual death is part and parcel of the larger question of species extinction. To zoom our perspective out a bit further, we can observe that human beings (like other species) not only have a natural history, and a characteristic natural life cycle, but also a natural destiny — such as extinction, or evolution into a new species, or indefinite preservation through sexual reproduction, or something else. I will pick up this theme in a later chapter.

Thirdly, human beings are animals that have a particular pattern of life. At this point in a description of the human species, the difficulty (I should say impossibility) of separating the biological, behavioral, and social conditions of being a human being becomes plain. For example, humans have 23 chromosomes in each somatic cell, with about 22,000 total genes. Genetic defects, however, wreak havoc on the individual human being. Humans have 32 teeth and an extremely diverse diet of carbohydrates, fats, fiber, minerals, proteins, vitamins, and water: they eat vegetables, red meat, fish, nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, mush-

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8. Diana Lucifero, J Richard Chaillet, and Jacquetta M Trasler, “Potential Significance of Genomic Imprinting Defects for Reproduction and Assisted Reproductive Technology,” *Human Reproduction Update* 10, no. 1 (2004): 3–18; JOINT SOGC–CFAS GUIDELINE, “Pregnancy Outcomes After Assisted Reproductive Technology,” *J Obstet Gynaecol Can* 28, no. 3 (2006): 220–33.

room, mollusks, herbs, and more. However, poor tooth care or poor diet can damage a person's health and lead to illnesses and death.

Humans have opposable thumbs, are bipedal, and walk upright, with heights ranging from 4'7" to 6'3" (plus or minus) and weights range from 120-180 pounds (plus or minus). However, these attributes are fragile. Many illnesses or injuries can render humans immobile. Growth disorders such as dwarfism (under 4'10" in human adults) or gigantism can render a person overly large or overly small relative to the healthy levels capture in these generic propositions.

Apparently innocent descriptions of human animals are inseparable from ethological and anthropological descriptions, which can blend into the normative. The property of being an animal encompasses a whole range of biological and neurophysiological facts that obtain in each normal human being. For example, humans have large brains relative to other primates, with a neocortex and prefrontal cortex that correlate with abstract thinking, problem solving, society, and culture. Genetically modern humans don't just hunt and gather like other animals; they farm, store, combine, ferment, and cook food.

Humans don't just suffer physiological responses like fear and excitement or arousal, they wilfully seek out such emotions for themselves through art and entertainment and wilfully cause them in others. Presumably, even an alien anthropologist who knew nothing of human language or "what it is like to be a human" would be able to notice, upon examination, that a human's laugh or cry is different from a hyena's laugh or a crocodile's tears.

Part of the alien anthropologist's examination would be to examine the body, brain, and hands of human beings. One of the first things we can imagine they would notice is that humans live in cultures and societies. They are not merely "social animals" like apes; they are language-users, communicating in signs and symbols. Their language is an extremely complex, open-ended system which is both recursive (able to nest propositions

within propositions) and productive (able to create sentences by potentially limitless combinations of words). In virtue of language and their opposable thumbs, they are creative; they don't just live on the ground or under ground, but build houses and shelters, sometimes in new places, such as caves, trees, hills, mountains, etc. Also, they are self-reflective. They establish social relations upon biological grounds (some children growing up with natural parents) and upon normative grounds (some orphans growing up in orphanages created by philanthropists).

What is the point of these reflections? I wish to point out just how much we can know about our form of life by appealing to the "objective" or third-person point of view of scientific exploration, data gathering, inductive generalization. Before we examine the ethical significance of these facts, we must explore the peculiar differentium of our species: practical rationality.

### **What we don't share**

Practical reason occupies a place of importance in the theories of many virtue ethicists. My primary sources among the neo-Aristotelians have each thematized practical reason in their own way.<sup>9</sup>

I shall use 'practical rationality' and 'practical reason' as synonymous. Warren Quinn uses 'practical reason' to mean the faculty and 'practical rationality' to mean the excellence use of the faculty. In a later chapter, I will contrast the faculty with 'practical wisdom', which is the excellence thereof.<sup>10</sup> I will also defend a robust account of practical reason in relation to theoretical or speculative reason. For now, I shall only offer an initial

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9. Cf. Especially Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chapter 4; McDowell, "Virtue and Reason"; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

10. Cf. Warren Quinn, "Rationality and the Human Good," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 02 (1992): 81–95

exploration of what it means to say that human beings are primates who engage in practical reasoning.

Taking a wide view, which activities elicit the label ‘rational’ or ‘reasonable’ or ‘reason’? As we observe human behavior in context of other animal behavior, the activities that we call ‘rational’ are as follows: to observe, to perceive as, and reflect; to remember, predict, and categorize; to decide, determine and pursue; to abstract, explain, and infer; to criticize, blame, and praise; to admonish, prohibit, and command; and so on. Is there any way to pare down this list or to generalize these capacities?

I do not think the best way to understand the old formula of “rational animals” is to take “rational” to mean “abstract thought.” Practical reasoning is indeed a form of reasoning. And while other members of the animal kingdom “think” in one sense of that term, as far as we know, no other animal constructs theories about the cognitive capacities of the animal kingdom. Nevertheless, abstract thinking is not a sufficient property to distinguish the human life form as a whole. Only a relatively small minority of humans engage in that kind of abstract reflection that characterizes science, theology, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, and so on, while all people of all cultures and of all intelligence quotients engage in practical reasoning and deliberation. I want to make it indelibly clear that I am not supposing human nature to be rationality per se but practical rationality.

I would like to argue that being a potentially rational animal entails at least four other properties besides the capacity for abstract thought. They are: speech, sociality, rational practice, and creativity. Let’s consider each in turn, and show how they interconnect.

First, take speech. Aristotle observed that, “Man alone of the animals possesses speech.”<sup>11</sup> Nothing in modern science has superseded or contradicted the observation (obvious to anyone) that human speech is different from other animal noises. Other animals have speech and communication. The difference between non-human and human speech is not

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11. *Politics*, 1.1253a.

obvious to infant humans, who learned by imitation words just as well as they learn tweets barks and growls. Upon reflection, researchers have observed that animals communicate with non-grammatical closed systems with a small, finite set of symbols. Communication systems used by other animals such as bees or apes are closed systems that consist of a finite, usually very limited, number of possible ideas that can be expressed. In contrast, human language is open-ended and productive, meaning that it allows humans to produce a vast range of utterances from a finite set of elements, and to create new words and sentences. Our language is unique: it is grammatical, open-ended, recursive, and productive. We are animals who use signs and symbols to communicate self-reflective and abstract thought.<sup>12</sup>

Speech is inseparable from self-reflectivity and sociality. Through our animal senses comes a sensitivity to our surroundings, the ability to see the world, ourselves, the sun and stars, to hear our fellow creatures, and to take the whole cosmos into consciousness. But through speech comes a whole second cosmos of culture. Through speech comes intentionality in all its forms. Through speech comes communication (“pass the salt”), distinct languages and cultures (about 5,000 distinct languages), self-consciousness (“who am I?”), abstraction (“all grass is green”), science, philosophy, religion, mythology, technology and more. Perhaps even art and music arise from the rational capacity to direct our actions to create not only what instinct demands but whatever the imagination can invent.<sup>13</sup>

The second constitutive feature of practical reason is sociality. When Aristotle asserted that “Humans are political animals,” he did not mean the facile point that human beings prefer to reside in groups or enjoy “getting involved in politics”. We ought to interpret this assertion as a generic truth. Human beings are formally constituted by being animals in political or communal settings. This truth is best viewed in light of our animal-

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12. Terrence W Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (WW Norton & Company, 1998).

13. Gordon H. Orians, “Nature & Human Nature,” *Daedalus* 137, no. 2 (2008): 39–48. Orians says that “Americans spend more money on music than on sex or prescription drugs.”

ity and speech: for to be a human being is to be a creature produced by the sexual union of two other human gametes, and to be able to speak is to be enculturated in a particular natural language in a time in human history and a place on the globe. We shall return to the importance of sociality in our discussion of traditions in a later chapter.

The third feature of practical reason is the ability to engage in rational practices. All organisms initiate *action* in the most general sense that they move about and do things. And all higher mammals engage in complex (and often social) practices, such as communal hunting, grooming, and building. Humans exhibit something apparently unique: We do not just act but act on reasons. Micah Lott says: “Human form is characterized by practical reason. This is the capacity to act in light of an awareness of the ground of our actions, to recognize and respond to practical reasons.”<sup>14</sup> We set goals. We undertake long, complicated sets of actions in order to achieve those goals. We also reflect on past actions and evaluate them to decide whether it is advisable to do the same thing again or try something else. Practical reasoning includes not just deliberating about what to do but weighing the apparent reasons for and against a particular course of action. Hence, as I shall explain more later, it is under the category of ‘rational practice’ that I will include everything unique about humans having to do with morality.

The fourth feature is rational creation. The concept of ‘creativity’ is not metaphysically distinct from rational practice, but since it is conceptually distinct, it deserves some mention. Our speech and grammatical systems allow us to create new words, propositions, phrases, and of course to do thing like write philosophy papers or tell stories. Our social identity within a social order allows us to create living spaces, utensils, farming implements, and so on as well as to create new social orders themselves. And one of the forms practical reasoning takes is that we *innovate* — we create and design and plan actions, new behaviors, new games, new languages, new activities, and so on.

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14. Lott, “Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form.”



The human differentiam of ‘practical rationality’ entails not only abstract reasoning but speech, sociality, rational practice, and creation. The alien anthropologist, if indeed it had enough of its own rationality to be able to have anthropological science, could observe these actions and infer the existence of the property of rationality.

### Potential

The point of these reflections has been to bear out the truth of the generic that human beings are practical, rational animals. I must address a few possible misunderstandings.

First, some unwittingly entertain the assumption that “rationality” for Aristotle meant speculative reasoning — that is, *theoria*, abstract thinking, or contemplative science. The capacity for abstract or “theoretical reason” is certainly an important feature of human nature and stands out from the capacities of other organisms. But it is not merely *thought* but *thoughtful action* that I would like to emphasize.

Secondly, “human beings are practical rational animals” might be interpreted to mean that anyone who is not rational is not human. There does exist a monstrous thought that humans who are not fully rational are not “*really*” human. An uncharitable critic might accuse me of insinuating that monstrous thought. If people in comas, or the mentally ill, the genetically defective, are not even human then it would seem to be permissible to do all sorts of inhumanities.

Robert P. George makes this point well:

Various criteria for where the line should be drawn [between living things it is permissible to use and those it is not permissible to use] have been proposed: sentience, consciousness, self-awareness, rationality, or being a moral agent (the last two come to the same thing). We will argue that the criterion is: having a rational nature, that is, having the natural capacity to reason and make free choices, a capacity it ordinarily takes months, or even years, to actualize, and which various impediments might prevent from being brought to full actualization, at least in this life. Thus, every human

being has full moral worth or dignity, for every human being possesses such a rational nature.<sup>15</sup>

On the contrary, one of its strengths of the fact that ‘humans are practical rational animals’ is a generic is that it blocks this kind of monstrous thought, for it admits of exceptions. Generics describe a life form well only when the sample includes exemplary instances of the species — not young, immature, ill, or injured instances. Especially in the case of young organisms we need to invoke the notion of *potential*. Even single celled organisms have the potential to reproduce and develop.

Anencephalic babies will never exemplify their natural potential for practical reasoning, for they lack the subvenient brain structure necessary for rational consciousness. They are recognizably *human* (they are not opossums), just defectively so. Similarly, we may call humans “bipedal” by nature but recognize that a war veteran is still human even after he or she is no longer bipedal.

Injury, illness, genetic defect, radiation poisoning, coma, mental illness, and any number of other negatives may render a human being sub-rational or non-practical — that is, unable to direct his or her own life. The same point can be applied to those organisms, who by injury or illness, will never reveal the potentials inherent in their life form. Although that individual instance may be imperfectly actuating its species, it is still a member of the species.

Scientists do not judge the characteristics of a newly discovered species by examining its young. If an alien anthropologist were to study 12-year-old humans, they would come to all sorts of conclusions about humanity in general. Their conclusions would be a week since their sample is weak. Alien anthropologists would need to look at mature human beings of both sexes, healthy and in the “prime” of life. Younger than this range

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15. Adam Schulman, *Human Dignity and Bioethics: Essays Commissioned by the President’s Council on Bioethics* (Government Printing Office, 2008), chap. 16, “The Nature and Basis of Human Dignity”.

and humans tend to (but do not always) lack the brain development to fully represent characteristic behaviors; older than this range and humans tend to (but do not always) suffer degenerations of the joints, memory, health, and so on. A similar point can be made with regard to injury and illness.

Before considering the application of my argument to ethics, I would like to stop and address a few objections.

### III. Objections

I would like to consider a couple of possible responses the reader might have at this juncture. These objections are formidable. However, responses are possible, even though some of the responses I will offer now will require further comment in a later chapter. Let's consider each in turn.

#### No human nature

The first objection is simply that the search for human nature is hopeless because there is no human nature. This objection has three iterations. The first sort of critic might deny that there is any such thing as a human life form because there are no life forms at all. This is an objection to the very concept of a nature. Perhaps, instead of real life forms and natural kinds, we should be nominalist about divisions between various branches of the tree of life. One iteration of this criticism is an alleged tension between the flexibility of species (as represented in evolutionary biology) and a fixed notion of human nature. Ernst Mayr says:

The concepts of unchanging essences and of complete discontinuities between every *eidos* (type) and all others make genuine evolutionary thinking impossible. I agree with those who claim that the essentialist philosophies of Aristotle and Plato are incompatible with evolutionary thinking.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Ernst Mayr, *Populations, Species, and Evolution: An Abridgment of Animal Species and Evolution* (Harvard University Press, 1970), 4.

Arthur Ward is one who agrees with Mayr here. He argues that “naturalists should reject the idea of ‘human nature,’ and indeed should reject that any organism or its parts or operations has a nature, purpose, proper function, or the like.”<sup>17</sup> I have already pointed out that rejecting all organic natures and purposes is not necessarily the only rational, scientific option; indeed, such a rejection seems to me to be motivated by philosophical materialism far more than it is motivated by any respect for actual biological science. Nevertheless, I cannot insist on the other hand that accepting organic natures and purposes is the *only* rational, scientific option. Rather, to the idea that there are no natural kinds, I can only give a general and unsatisfactory response. This dissertation cannot chase down the (justifiably important) conversation about realism and nominalism in natural kinds. However, the arguments of the previous chapter, built on the assumption of a minimal scientific realism, is enough to secure a fairly solid grounding for the notion of natural kinds.

A second sort of critic accepts natural kinds but denies that these kinds have teleological features. This reader would agree with Bernard Williams: “The first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no such teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play, still has to find its way into ethical thought.”<sup>18</sup>

He says elsewhere:

The idea of a naturalistic ethics was born of a deeply teleological outlook, and its best expression, in many ways, is still to be found in Aristotle’s philosophy, a philosophy according to which there is inherent in each natural kind of thing an appropriate way for things of that kind to behave.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Ward, “Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory,” 1.

18. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), 44.

19. Cf. Bernard Williams, in *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 109.

This sort of critic thinks that there are natures or natural kinds and stable species with objective properties, but is underwhelmed by the arguments of the previous chapter to the effect that functional or teleological properties feature in purely biological descriptions of organisms.

My response is this: Williams voices a common opinion when he alleges an incompatibility between Darwinism and teleological realism. The response of Hursthouse, Foot, Brown, etc., is that natural teleology is indeed compatible with Darwinism and does indeed provide a “an appropriate way to behave” (or we might add, *ways*) that is “inherent in each natural kind of thing.” Such a view is not incompatible with evolutionary theory.

Strictly speaking, evolutionary theory may be summarized in five theses explaining the current multiplicity and shape of terrestrial life: 1. The earth is very old; 2. Life has progressed from relatively simple to relatively complex forms; 3. Through slow and gradual changes, all the modern forms of life have appeared; 4. All of life originated from one original place and species; 5. Some mechanism such as natural selection drives the process of descent with modification.<sup>20</sup> The set of theses together explain biological processes of genetic mutation, reproduction, preservation, and proliferation. Thus, evolutionary theory, strictly speaking says absolutely nothing about teleological causes or properties.<sup>21</sup>

A sixth thesis, often appended to the first five, is that the process of natural selection is unguided by any causes but mechanical ones. But this claim is a philosophical belief, not a biological one. Polemicists will sometimes cite the popularity of the philosophical belief among biologists as proof that it is a “biological” claim. But we do not determine truth by vote. If belief in God was popular among biologists of a certain era, it does not follow that theological claims are strictly biological claims.

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20. Cf. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 8–9.

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 10.

Thomas Nagel recently presented a persuasive (and controversial) case for what he calls “Darwinism plus” — that is, naturalistic Darwinian evolution plus natural teleological causation.<sup>22</sup> Teleological laws work impersonally on entities over time at the same moment that physical laws work impersonally on entities at a given time. I do not wish here to defend Nagel’s view so much as to point out that teleological realism is compatible with evolutionary theory. Asserting that teleological realism about biology is incompatible with Darwinism does not make it so. Naturalistic teleological realism is certainly incompatible with a teleological nihilism distinctive of (certain brands) of metaphysical reductionism. If our knowledge of natural teleology is well-grounded enough then so much the worse for metaphysical reductionism.

There is another point to make. Williams despairs of finding human nature, including human telos because he thinks such despair is demanded by biological science. But Hursthouse’s response to Williams is that his worry is not actually rooted in the progress of modern science. And she is right. Williams himself admits that “many of course have come to that conclusion before... that human beings are to some degree a mess... for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially.”<sup>23</sup> If many have come to that (philosophical) conclusion before, without the benefit of modern science, then it is a non sequitur to cite modern science as evidence for the philosophical conclusion. A condensed caricature of the argument: “modern science is very advanced. Therefore life is absurd.”

Instead, Hursthouse points out, we should interpret Williams’ worry as an expression of moral nihilism and despair. It may be a rational despair, but the rationality or irrationality cannot simply be read off the biological facts. Indeed, I shall pick up the theme of rational despair in a later chapter. For now I shall only say that Williams believes human

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22. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

23. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 261, quoting from Williams.

nature is a mess *because* he believes no form of life is completely satisfactory for everyone. But cannot the ground and consequent be reversed? Doesn't that blade both ways? If one has hope that some form of life is or may be at least mostly satisfactory for at least some people, it makes sense to believe human nature even at its present state, mid-evolutionary process, is not *completely* a mess. If one looks to exemplary human animals who demonstrate how to live admirable and wise and just lives, even mixed with suffering or tragedy, then perhaps, even if their lives are not *completely* satisfactory, one has a sort of existential evidence that life can be *somewhat* satisfactory. And Hursthouse movingly praises hope as a virtue.

Alternatively (or perhaps as well) we could stick with what we have—those facts about human nature and the way human life goes that support the claim that the virtues on the standard list benefit their possessor, and the reading of human history that ascribes our persisting failure to achieve *eudaimonia* in anything but very small patches to our vices. True, it is not easy to hold on to them sometimes; despair and misanthropy are temptations. But we should.<sup>24</sup>

For my part, I should not like to deny that human society and many, many human individuals are indeed “a mess” in one sense. Humans are a “mess” in the sense that corruption is a real feature of human life. A selected list of the dark side of our species: War, oppression, disease, genetic defect, injury, hatred, vice, a large (and ever growing) list of different kinds of injustice. These, also, are empirical facts of anthropology and psychology. I should not like to deny that *things are bad*. I should only like to make space for the possibility that *things are not all bad*. The universal optimist is obliged unrealistically to deny all the dark side of our existence. But the universal pessimist is obliged unrealistically to deny all the light side: peace and freedom, glowing health, genetic order, beauty that persists into old age, love, virtue, and the halting but admirable efforts toward justice and social harmony. In short, the human race is quite a mixed bag. But this is all too grand and sweeping for

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24. Ibid., 265.

present purposes. The only question in this section is whether the universal characteristics of human nature can be hypothesized and confirmed.

Below I shall make the case that specific ethical conclusions can be derived from natural facts about human beings. Here I only wish to make room for the possibility that our data set of such facts cannot with integrity include all light and sweetness nor all dank and dark cynicism.

A third iteration of the “no human nature” objection is that if there is such thing as “human nature”, it is nothing more or less than our biological and physiological makeup. Tim Lewens argues that “the only biologically respectable notion of human nature that remains is an extremely permissive one that names the reliable dispositions of the human species as a whole. This conception offers no ethical guidance...”<sup>25</sup>

On Lewens’ view, the only talk about our “nature” that would be scientific would be an indeterminate series of complicated stories about our genetics, evolutionary history, and neurophysiology, perhaps even including cultural, geographical, and ecological settings. The problem, as we have seen, is that an empirical “scientific” conception of human nature has nothing to do with *ethics*. All of the complicated stories we could tell – if they are genuinely scientific – would be purely *descriptive*.<sup>26</sup>

Bernard Williams expresses a similar point. He says that nature has bestowed upon us an “ill-sorted bricolage of powers and instincts”:

[the problem] lies not in the particular ways in which human beings may have evolved, but simply in the fact that they have evolved, and by natural selection... On that [evolutionary] view it must be the deepest desire — need? — purpose? — satisfaction? — of human beings to live in the way that is in this objective sense appropriate to them (the fact that modern words break up into these alternatives expresses the modern break-up of Aristo-

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25. Tim Lewens, “Human Nature: The Very Idea,” *Philosophy & Technology* 25, no. 4 (2012): 459–74.

26. Cf. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, chap. 10; Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, chap. 5; Ward, “Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory.”



tle's view).

This is also Fitzpatrick's main worry, not that we have evolved poorly, but that we evolved at all.<sup>27</sup> He argues that evolved organisms have a telos to reproduce, not to "flourish". "If, however, natural functions and ends in living things are structured by special relations established through the process of evolution through natural selection, i.e., non-incidental relations between traits and a special subset of their effects that figured into the selection process, then natural teleology will not ultimately or generally be about the welfare or flourishing of organisms (FitzPatrick 2000)."

Stephen Brown is ambivalent but seems to think that ethics is, in the end, a descriptive discipline; even virtue ethics, after being appropriately "naturalized", does not *commend* the virtues so much as *detail* the traits which happen to be adaptive for creatures like us to survive and propagate our genotype.<sup>28</sup>

Although the "characteristic form of life" of human beings involves highly rarified neurological and cognitive processes we do not observe in other animals, nevertheless, nature only reveals one kind of biological concept of nature: a species. And species aim to survive and reproduce.

This objection is certainly relevant. Lewens, Fitzpatrick, and Brown urge that human nature, if it is anything, is simply to reproduce and propagate one's genotype. We are mammals, after all, and the telos of mammals is to reproduce. But this objection begs the question. We are animals, certainly. That is an empirical assertion, as I have been at pains to show. We exhibit quite a sufficient number of tell-tale properties shared by other mammals: a neocortex, hair, mammary glands, and hearts of a particular form and function. But we are also animals of a peculiar sort. That is, we are rational animals. From what we

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27. FitzPatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology."

28. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*; Stephen Brown, "Really Naturalizing Virtue," *Ethica* 4 (2005): 7–22.

observe of ourselves both “from inside” and “from outside” we exhibit a range of properties not shared by other mammals: grammar and language, fire-making, cooking, sex for pleasure, abstract reasoning, science, philosophy, religion, mythology, agriculture. But to say that humans are *merely* mammals is an anti-empirical assertion that requires denying all this. In light of our status as practical, rational animals, it seems obvious to most people that reproduction is not our only natural telos. Reproduction is certainly *one* of our natural ends. “Human beings reproduce” is an instance of a broader natural generic truth, “organisms survive and reproduce.” Human reproduction as a generic pattern is compatible with exceptions: The celibate, the pre-pubescent, the single, the infertile couple, the homosexual couple, and others do not reproduce. Nevertheless it may be true that humans reproduce (like every other organism). It may even be true that if, *as a species*, we ceased to reproduce, something would have gone wrong. That individual members of the species do not reproduce is not an automatic sign of defect; that the entire species has ceased (by choice or by injury or illness) to reproduce might be a sign of defect.<sup>29</sup>

I said that classifying reproduction as the end of humanity is obviously a mistake. This may only be “obvious” from within the practical point of view. It is obvious nonetheless. It is even obvious to Lewens, Fitzpatrick, and Brown (although Brown’s faith wavers). Their point in bringing up reproduction is that we need something *more* than our natural teleology to capture the distinctively human rational process of deliberately defining teleological goals. That something more is “the practical point of view”, the point of view from within human subjectivity, the

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29. The “Voluntary Human Extinction Movement” is an example of a group who find the reasons for reproduction *as a species* to be on balance outweighed by the reasons for ceasing to reproduce. Two comments: first, on first impression, VHEMT strikes most people as satire. It is a laughable movement. It is not necessarily mistaken, but it is certainly laughable. Secondly, VHEMT acknowledges the *prima facie* force of the need to reproduce. They argue that that need is outweighed. So in that they think species-wide reproduction is a default natural norm, we agree.

The idea that natural teleological facts about human nature can only be known “within” some particular point of view is an important one, and I shall have to address it in a later chapter. For now I shall only say that slippery spatial analogies like “inside” and “outside” admit of multiple senses: “inside” can and often does mean what can be known via introspection (e.g., the way I know what it feels like to be slighted or to be praised, the way I remember the color of my grandmother’s house) and what can be known from accepting limitations of a first-personal or second-personal human point of view more generally (e.g., it appears that the sun orbits the earth rather than the other way around; and I know when my mother is upset because I just “know” that look). Looking at things from the “outside” might mean what can be known via sensory perception or what can be known – if anything – by pretending to a neutral, objective, third-person, God’s eye view. We can posit counterfactuals, as for example when we speculate what intelligent extraterrestrials would think of humans if they observed and studied our species, with fresh eyes, alongside every other. All that matters for my purposes now is that our species exhibits a range of peculiar activities that distinguish us from mammals, from animals more broadly, and from any other known natural entity in the cosmos – and that recognizing as much is an *empirical* matter. To deny our uniqueness is rationally possible, after a long inquiry. But to be blind to our uniqueness from the outset is to be subject, in all likelihood, to philistine reductionism that has little to do with genuine scientific thinking.

### **Our nature is unknown**

A second objection might come from someone who simply urged that human nature is mysterious. For all we can tell (without the benefit of divine revelation) humanity is an anomaly. Our origin is shrouded in mystery, our destiny undecided.

The main thesis of this chapter has been that the following generic is true: “human beings are practical, rational primates.” This generic, I have argued, is defensible both

philosophically and scientifically. It is discoverable both by humans examining our species from “within” the human point of view and by alien anthropologists examining our species from “outside” the human point of view (so long as they too were intelligent and rational). This generic picks out a property or set of properties we might describe as ‘human nature.’

The final objection that our origin and destiny are mysterious is true but misses the point. That humans are practical rational primates is not supposed to provide complete, comprehensive knowledge of our species. It is a minimal starting point of knowledge upon which to build. Knowing that snakes are legless reptiles is not an end to the scientific inquiry, but a beginning. Indeed, one cannot know about snakes unless one knows, roughly, what snakes are. So capturing the genus and differentiam of a kind of organism is in fact necessary for creating a conceptual placeholder *on which to attach new knowledge*. Knowing what human beings are, however roughly, gives us a concept-category within which to fill in the depth and breadth of facts and information.

### **Knowing from “inside”**

A third objection states that there are no objective properties obtaining in each and every human *which can be known from the objective, external, scientific point of view*. Perhaps some universal intersubjective properties, like a desire for belonging, obtain in all human beings who have conscious experiences. Even so, these can only be known “from within” the practical point of view and so would not count as “scientific” in a narrow sense.

Those properties that can be known externally would be irrelevant. If by being practical reasoners we are free of the tyranny of biology, then biology is irrelevant to morality. Hursthouse assumes that knowledge of humanity “from the outside” is useless or futile. She says, “Ethical naturalism is not to be construed as the attempt to ground ethical evaluations in a scientific account of human nature.”<sup>30</sup> She emphatically *does* mean to make evalua-

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30. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* especially chapter 10.

tions of human beings can be made in a way analogous to the way we evaluate cacti or deer. In each case we rely on the notion of natural kinds and their appropriate way of behaving:

[I]n relation to which they are evaluated as good or defective. The evaluations do not—as they might in a post-Darwinian age—evaluate members of species of living things simply as good, or not so good, or downright defective, as replicators of their genes.<sup>31</sup>

Hursthouse and McDowell's alternative is to base ethical considerations on our nature as rational agents. This is still loosely naturalistic, in that we are talking about "human nature" or "second nature". This objection will be picked up in a later chapter.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have said that the generic truths about the human life form, if we can pinpoint them, would be of momentous importance for ethics for we could identify some human norms that are universal across every member of our species, regardless of culture and upbringing.

Both "practical rationality" and "primate" entail a cluster of concepts. To be a primate is to be an animal that is alive and so on. This is what we have in common with all of organic nature. Mautner continues: "Life is a process whose outcome is the self-reproduction of complex molecular patterns'. Importantly, Life is then a process that requires a constant flow of information, matter and energy."<sup>32</sup> That process of life on earth has been a continuous one, throughout time, since the first origins of life on the planet. Furthermore, we are not just "living beings" but primates belonging to a wider class of mammals. We come to be in similar ways as other mammals, have similar needs for oxygen, food, society, warmth, exercise, and sleep. And to be a common life form entails that each of us begins life in roughly the same way, need the same range of nutrients to grow and survive, and deserve the same respect.

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31. Ibid., 257–8.

32. Mautner, "Life-Centered Ethics, and the Human Future in Space," 435.

To be a practical rational primate means that something changes when we examine human beings compared to all other animals or all other natural kinds.<sup>33</sup> We are not just animals but practical rational primates. This entails the emergence of a new set of capacities: abstract thought, speech, sociality, rational practice, and creativity. So, we can predict that just as the scientist evaluates members of a species by how well or badly it exemplifies its particular life form, human beings are evaluable by how well or badly they exemplify their particular life form. We continue to evaluate humans on the basis of their species, but we evaluate not just their health and normal developmental stages, and their maturity, but their *actions*.

Michael Thompson summarizes:

... we may view this line of thought as beginning with the idea... that will and practical reason are on the face of it just two more faculties or powers a living being may bear, on a level with the powers of sight and hearing and memory. The second crucial thought is that an individual instance of any of the latter powers — sight, hearing, memory — is intuitively to be judged as defective or sound, good or bad, well-working or ill-working, by reference to its bearer's life-form or kind or species.<sup>34</sup>

The good-of-a-kind for our species is not *only* about practical reasoning, but also about animality. For example, starving to death, or being born without limbs, or being unable to reproduce is a bad-of-a-kind for creatures like us (not a moral bad, of course, but a real misfortune). So an exemplary member of our species would have to exemplify a whole range of good properties.

The sort of naturalism(s) represented by Foot, Hursthouse, and McDowell aim to ground evaluations of a member of a species on the life form of that species. The generic that 'a human being is a practical, rational animal' captures the life form of the species in a manner that is accessible to an "alien anthropologist" observing humanity from the "out-

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33. Katherine Hawley and Alexander Bird, "What Are Natural Kinds?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, no. 1 (2011): 205–21.

34. Thompson, *Life and Action*, 29.

side”, from outside the practical point of view. The presence in humanity of such generically animal behaviors such as birthing, reproducing sexually, eating, sleeping, and dying betray a common root and identity with the animal kingdom and with the biological world as a whole; yet other human behaviors, especially language, deliberation, reflection, and intentional action betray a curious difference. As such, those qualities that enable human beings to be practical, rational animals are liable to turn out to be virtues. Those qualities of natural excellence enable the member of the species to actuate the potentials inherent in such a life form. Showing how such qualities as show up on “normal” catalog of virtues, and how perhaps even others, fall under the concept of natural excellence, is the task for the next chapter.





## Chapter 4

### Rational and Irrational Practice

Men need virtues as bees need stings.

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—Peter Geach, *The Virtues* .

#### I. Introduction

The last chapter argued that human beings are practical, rational primates. That is, it extended the normative conception of nature from chapter 2 to include a normative conception of human nature according to which human beings have a given life form and (therefore) are not fully actualizing their humanity when they are born, or when they are children, or even when they are adults. If “human” is a normative concept, then the best exemplars of humanity would be fully mature, fully practical and rational primates. All others are in process of fully actuating that life form and liable to the risk of not doing so.

So much is, I hope, clear in outline. What is needed is to fill in the details of the outline. This chapter addresses what traits are admirable and praiseworthy for creatures like us. It argues more precisely that all the human virtues fall under the categories of excellent rational practice and excellent practical reasoning. These are terms of art, and

will be fully explained. Although the two notions are inextricably, I primarily focus on 'rational practices' in this chapter and 'practical reasoning' in the next.

In this chapter, I first argue the formal point that the qualities that enable and partly constitute the actualization of our life form are human virtues. I then argue the material point that such qualities are, for creatures like us, virtues and vices pretty well corresponding to the list of virtues.

## II. Requirements for a Successful Theory

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 and knowledge, and practical wisdom that sublimates all of one's emotions and bodily desires and physical settings into 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."<sup>1</sup>

As a generic, the proposition that humans are practical, rational primates is both descriptive and normative. If practical rational animals is what we are (by nature), then the pattern of natural normativity would lead us to expect that becoming truly or fully practical rational animals is our natural telos. This thought, I think, explains why Peter Geach says "Men need virtues as bees need stings."<sup>2</sup> Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre echo this talk of "need" and "necessity" as well. (MacIntyre's most recent monograph is subtitled, "why human beings need the virtues."<sup>3</sup> The kind of necessity being predicated here is the

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

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

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the*

same kind of necessity with which a bee needs a sting or a knife needs to be sharp. It is a formal and teleological necessity.

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, including moderation and immoderation, justice and injustice, practical wisdom and foolishness, and so on.

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."<sup>4</sup>

In outline, the argument is this:

- (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) For any x, the excellences of x are the qualities that enable and partly constitute its being a fully mature x.
- (5) Human beings are practical, rational primates.
- (6) The excellences or virtues of human beings are the qualities that enable and partly constitute its becoming a fully practical, rational primates.
- (7) Rational practices and practical reasoning enable human the virtues that enable persons and societies to become fully practical, rational primates.

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*Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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

### III. Traits That Benefit

What we have said so far points in the direction of the hypothesis: virtues must be instances of natural goodness or natural excellence for practical, rational primates like ourselves. Virtues must be a subset of natural goods, or goods-of-a-kind for human beings. Furthermore, they must be recognizably good from the outside and the inside; that is, not only should at least some virtues correspond to the standard list of qualities that are admired universally or near universally, such as courage and justice, but in order to block the charge of subjectivism, they should be plausibly recognizable by an alien anthropologist who could study the human life form and discover which traits actuate it.

More specifically, virtues on my account will turn out to be qualities that enable one to be fully become a primate (and animal and organism more generally): as mortal creatures and animals, our biological life consists of a process of maturation, nutrition, rest, exercise, homeostatic maturity, reproduction, characteristic activities, aging, and death. Many human goods enable this process, from oxygen, food, sleep, and so on. Virtues may not be material things but are likely to relate to such material and emotional parts of a normal human life.

Human virtues would also be those qualities that enable one to perform well characteristically rational activities such as speaking, socializing, thoughtful acting, and creating. By nature, 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 about ourselves and our world. We are also extravagantly innovative, creating myriad tools, forms of 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. And 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; at times we also act on *reasons*. That is, we deliberate about future actions, and reflect on past actions, and become puzzled about what is called for in the present. 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 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 to live life in such a way as to become what they can potentially become.

Just as importantly, *natural badness* would be the property or set of properties that practical rational animals *need to avoid*. The category of natural evils is expansive: hunger, exposure to predators or extreme temperatures, disease, accidental injury, and premature death. In some sense, each of these frustrates one’s development toward the natural end of being a fully mature practical reasoner and hence partly constitute species-specific misery. But the sub-set of natural evils we should call ‘vices’ would be those acquirable qualities that we inflict upon ourselves and others.

To illustrate my meaning, it might be helpful at this juncture to paint the portrait of the kind of naturally developed human being I have in mind. Without discriminating between *virtuous* or acquired excellence and *natural* or unacquired, we can say that the maximally *human* person would be (a) physically excellent, healthy, strong, developed, and whole; (b) rationally excellent in speech, knowledge, reasoning, and social interaction – perhaps knowledgeable, smart, properly trusting and properly critical, perceptive, calm, sociable, wise, patient, teachable, moderate, valuing each thing according to its worth. Call this person beautiful. The maximally beautified human being is one who has by whatever means become what human beings potentially can be and are by nature.

By contrast, the maximally inhuman person would exemplify all that could go wrong with a human life, both due to bad fortune and to a person's own fault. Such a person would be (a) physically imperfect, sick, weak, undeveloped, diseased, (b) ignorant, stupid, overly credulous and overly skeptical, unperceptive, angry, solitary, foolish, rash, unteachable, immoderate, highly valuing worthless things and disregarding the most valuable things. Call this person miserific: both pitiable for their bad fortune and despicable for their bad character and bad choices. The maximally miserific person is the one who has by whatever means become the worst possible example of what a human being can be.

Before I analyze some recent neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue and vice, I should make a couple of clarifications.

### **Intrinsic Goods**

The first clarificatory point is that virtues are intrinsic goods. When I say that they "enable" one to be a practical, rational primate, I don't mean that virtues are only instrumentally valuable – that too. Virtues on my account will also turn out to simply constitutive of humanity. It may seem to odd to categorize essential properties of humanity as morally praiseworthy traits. But the point is essential to my case. Virtues are not just "morally praiseworthy" qualities; they are *the human* qualities. Virtues are examples of *humanness* in its exemplary form.

I grant that the notion that virtues are "the human" qualities is a reversal on the all-too-common mistake that "human" qualities are neutral with respect to moral praise or blame. The reason for this reversal of, as I tried to argue above, is that all life forms discovered by scientific investigation and articulated in generic propositions are inherently normative. Hence, the concept of human nature cannot and should not be value-neutral. Rather, as Micah Lott points out, the concept of human nature:

...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.<sup>5</sup>

### **Biological and Rational Goods**

The particular virtues would be particular expressions of the kind of natural goodness appropriate to creatures like us. Lott continues: "And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty of practical reason."<sup>6</sup> So natural goodness in humans (and hence virtues) would be somehow related to the faculty of practical reason.

This is the second clarifying remark: virtues must pertain to both our animal and rational aspects. Human beings can and ought to become what they are, and completely so.

What difference does practical reasoning make? Is it enough to ruin the continuity between humans and other natural organisms? That is, does the presence of the capacity for practical reasoning render irrelevant the conditions of our physical and organic nature irrelevant for ethical purposes? This is a very important objection and a later chapter attempts a satisfying response.

For now, my primary concern is to concede that practical reason makes a real difference between humans and other less rational or non-rational organisms. This concession does not harm the case. Far from refuting the continuity between humanity and the rest of nature, this concession reinforces the case.

For if practical reasoning is one of our capacities like sight and hearing, then just as we have license to say that blindness or deafness is a disability, the inability to practical reasoning would be a disability. In other words, with the emergence of practical reason

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5. Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," 770–1.

6. Ibid., 770–1.

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.

Practical reasoning is not just a process of deciding what to do by running a calculus or a two-column ledger; it requires sensitivity to a range of reasons, both external to oneself (facts and states of affairs) and internal to one's own psychology (desires, fears) and physiology (weakness, hunger), etc. Success, if such be possible, would mean taking up the basic facts of one's biology, psychology, and social anthropology into a space of reasons, and the basic facts of the situation in which one finds oneself, weighing and ranking reasons for action, and acting. 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."<sup>7</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that such evaluations are quick and easy. Evaluating someone's ability to practically reason is no easy task. For Smith to evaluate Jones requires Smith to practically reason *about* Jones' practical reasoning. Any errors Smith makes *while reasoning* about Jones are liable to result in misjudgments *about Jones*. Even worse, 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. Smith to self-reflect – for Smith to evaluate *Smith's* own practical reasoning' – requires Smith to *use* practical reasoning. Self-reflection is putting the microscope itself under the microscope.

I shall have much more to say about the labyrinthine difficulties of practical reasoning in a later chapter. For now, I simply wish to underscore that, according to my hypothesis thus far, particular virtues enable the exemplification of our life form, and the excellence of practical reason enable us to pursue our ends *well*. The practical, rational agents who

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



consistently succeed at pursuing and achieving their ends would be models of virtue.

### Unity of Virtues

A third clarification is that, while I have been suggesting that there is only one set of such traits and that there is only one type of mature, flourishing practical reasoner, I am aware that I have not yet argued for any unity. I would suggest that most kinds of misery are the same but there might be a million different types of human flourishing. Only a great novelist like Tolstoy could get away with saying something so stupid as that every unhappy family is different. Therapists and psychiatrists hear the same sad stories over and over again. But I do not insist on the point.

## IV. Virtue and Vice

With the criteria for my account of virtue laid out, my goal is to systematically present and analyze the virtue accounts of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre.

I derive their views from a variety of sources. For example, Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.<sup>8</sup> Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay.<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the virtuous person to "achieve those goods" of practices, to live a

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8. 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.

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

successful whole life, and to sustain traditions.<sup>10</sup> His 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*. John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.<sup>11</sup> 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"<sup>12</sup>, and "Values as Secondary Qualities."<sup>13</sup>

By comparing and discussing each, a new and coherent account that satisfies the criteria above will emerge. The first stage of my account will state and discuss each writer's stance on virtue and reason. (Some issues will need a more thorough treatment later on, so I will simply highlight and flag the issue and move on.)

The second stage will synthesize these views in order 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. The third stage will explicate in detail how the emerging account satisfies the above criteria.

A brief overview of points to be presented and defended is this:

1. Virtues are, by definition, good for their possessor.
2. They are generically beneficial for humankind, both oneself and others.
3. Virtues constitute excellent functioning.
4. They are corrective, especially benefiting humankind at tempting vices.
5. Virtues acquirable traits, not just any excellent human traits.
6. Some virtues are excellences in rational practice.

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10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

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

12. Ibid.

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

7. Some virtues are excellences in practical reasoning about one's whole life.
8. Virtues enable the health and progress of societies and traditions.

### Beneficial

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."<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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, the glutton affable?) It certainly seems that the answer is yes. Even indexing virtues to practices

14. Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."

15. 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.

does not solve the problem; can practices be wicked? We might say this is the problem of when virtues go bad. We will address this problem more fully in a later chapter.

John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason" 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 the question 'How should one live?'"<sup>16</sup> (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."<sup>17</sup> We will examine each of these theses below. Here, I want to note that McDowell likewise agrees that virtues benefit their possessor since they enable one to live a good life. The problem of virtues going bad does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue.

So the first point about virtue is that it must benefit its possessor. Individual virtues may be *costly* and so "harm" their possessor in some way; many a just politician has passed up personal wealth by refusing bribes. But any theory of virtue according to which virtues turn out to harm their possessor *overall* is simply ruled out by this hypothesis.

### **Beneficial to All**

A natural query to Plato's requirement would be to ask *to whom* virtues are supposed to be beneficial. Does a virtuous person benefit or does the society in which the virtuous person lives? 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.

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

17. *Ibid.*, 331.

Take moderation with 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 altruistic 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."<sup>18</sup> 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 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."<sup>19</sup> 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

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18. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 3.

19. Geach, *The Virtues*, 17.

*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. The obligation arises not from a prior commitment to one’s “happiness” (whatever that might be) but from the fact that one is a human being and virtues help us become who we are.

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 the good for men is not good for humans. But we need not assume this. It may be that the good for humanity in general is ipso facto good for me as a human.

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.”<sup>20</sup>

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

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20. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2–3.

useful because they secure other, intrinsic goods.<sup>21</sup> Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. 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. Having such traits 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.”<sup>22</sup>

MacIntyre is also careful to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental goods. He does say that “enable their possessor to achieve ... goods”, which might sound as if he means virtue are mere *instruments* to goods. 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. The conflation of means and ends is liable to worry some critics. The worry is not trivial, but we must leave it aside for now. So long as the point is clear that, on my account thus far, virtues enable and partly constitute the realization of one’s life-form. Just as sunflowers and wolves can be excellent or defective relative to its form of life, human beings can be excellent or defective relative to their distinctive form of life.

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21. Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

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

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.”<sup>23</sup>

### 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 as they are trained by human users. It is tempting to assume that *all* functions are artificial objects of human invention. On this view, natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function.

But 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.

A natural inference to draw would be that human beings have a “function”, how-

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



soever complex, and that a detailed knowledge of this function is necessary for defining human excellence. I do not think it is necessary to know our function, at least not in great detail. Rather, preserving the argument made above, we can hypothesize a quite general “function” of a practical rational animal: to become a fully mature practical rational animal.

Just as we cannot define a priori how tall redwoods grow or the lifespan of a star, we should not expect that we could define, a priori, what an exemplary human specimen would look like. Pretty obviously, some people are exemplary specimens of how *not* to live. To go beyond the basic assertion that some people are living perfectly horrible lives, 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.

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 perform “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. His case for this conclusion rests on a host of assumptions moderns are not likely to grant. I will dispute the Aristotelian conclusion (or what is supposed to be his conclusion) 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.

### **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.

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. Starvation is

not usually voluntarily, and when it is, it is usually motivated by complex social and psychological factors. And obesity is not always voluntary. Nevertheless, some cases of obesity have straightforward causes. For example, many of us are who live in wealthy societies are tempted to eat a rich diet of flavorful, high calorie foods every day, and are tempted not to exercise. Under certain metabolic conditions, we will steadily gain weight and eventually become obese. The temptation to eat rich, flavorful, high calorie foods is simply that such foods taste good. (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. I am intentionally simplifying the example.) 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. 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.”<sup>24</sup>

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?

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.

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24. Ibid., 8.

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."<sup>25</sup> 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 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.

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25. Ibid., 13.

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.

## V. Two Objections

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, and to sell another's secrets solely for personal gain.<sup>26</sup>

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 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 ineligible for 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.<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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

Platitude. The core principles of “common morality” that have achieved an astonishingly wide consensus in bioethical discussions are good examples of Great Platitudes.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> Great Platitudes are rather hard-won insights. 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.

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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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

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

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

31. 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 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.<sup>32</sup>

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

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32. Ibid., 17.

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?"<sup>33</sup> 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<sup>34</sup> 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, 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

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

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



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)."<sup>35</sup> 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*.<sup>36</sup>

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"<sup>37</sup>. 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

35. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

36. 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).

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

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."<sup>38</sup> 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.

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

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

small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.<sup>39</sup>

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.)<sup>40</sup>

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 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

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39. Ibid., 5.

40. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

*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 embodied 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 inter-

nal 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.<sup>41</sup>

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 will be enculturated with that history, taught those standards, and given a chance (usually by trial and error) to become a good teacher.

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41. Christopher Lutz, “Alasdair MacIntyre” (Web; Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015).

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.<sup>42</sup>

### 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 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."<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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

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42. 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.

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

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

incomplete.”<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup>

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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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’, ‘Garden-

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45. Ibid., 202.

46. Ibid., 204.

47. Ibid., 204.

48. Ibid., 204.



ing', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for winter' or 'Pleasing his wife.'<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> 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."<sup>51</sup> 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."<sup>52</sup> 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."<sup>53</sup>

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:

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49. Ibid., 206.

50. Ibid., 207.

51. Ibid., 208.

52. Ibid., 208.

53. Ibid., 209.

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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre's discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.<sup>56</sup> For we have arrived at 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."<sup>57</sup>

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?

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54. Ibid., 211.

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

56. 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?'"

57. Ibid., 219.

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.<sup>58</sup>

### **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.

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.”<sup>59</sup> Traditions derive from a source text and continue 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.

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58. Ibid., 220.

59. Ibid., 222.

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 Augustinianism 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, Augustinianism.

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 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.

This is all very provisional. The point is that virtues cannot be individualistic any more than a person can be a mere atomized individual. 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.<sup>60</sup>

## **VI. Synthesis**

Thus the first stage of my account of virtue is complete. I have endorsed eight basic truths about virtue, and flagged 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 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 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

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60. Ibid., 223.

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.”<sup>61</sup>

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 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

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61. *Hamlet* III.1

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.

## VII. 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 be 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.<sup>62</sup> The beginning of human life, like the beginning of any organic life, is the foundation

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

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.

### **VIII. Criteria Met**

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 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 immediate problems to be addressed are two: first, without further guidance, some virtues seem to be able to “go bad”; that is, otherwise virtuous traits might cease to be operative as virtues. 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 both 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.