

Chapter 1

Virtue for Rational Animals

If riches are desirable in life, what is richer than Wisdom, who produces all things? ... Or if one loves righteousness, whose works are virtues, she teaches moderation and prudence, righteousness and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful than these.

Wisdom 8:5-7

I. Introduction

Our dialectic thus far has defended two major claims: first, that some natural facts are normative facts; and secondly, that some such facts are natural human facts. These natural norms are expressible in generic propositions of the familiar sort, such as ‘acorns become oak trees’ and ‘human beings are practical rational animals’. The “nature” – or set of in-built potentialities – of genetically modern humans is fixed enough to justify such generics. The current task is to see whether any of this has genuinely ethical significance for us.

Excellence

Our prediction from the last chapter was that virtues would pertain to the three aspects of our nature identified in the generic: “humans are practical, rational animals.” As animals we are inherently mortal, biological, beings whose life consists of a process of maturation, homeostatic maturity, aging, and death. Human being as rational *animals* by nature need to breathe, eat, sleep, and stay warm, deal with the urgings of our sexual nature, and so on. So our account of virtue will have to show how by reflection and deliberation, the virtuous person takes up his own biology and psychology into a space of reasons and construct a “pattern that, given the human situation, is likely to lead a good life.”¹ As practical, rational animals, 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. Although we are pushed about by our biological instincts and by social pressures, we do not *simply* stumble around through life, but, in general, also sometimes act on reasons. We deliberate about future actions, and reflect on past actions. The success of our actions is not guaranteed, and the reasonableness of our reasons is not guaranteed. So, we may tentatively hypothesize that the qualities that enable us to pursue our ends *well* would be excellent qualities. The practical, rational agents who consistently succeed at pursuing and achieving their ends would be models of virtue. I shall have much more to say below about what ends people *have* or *ought to have* and about the indeterminate concept of a human telos.²

Recall the criteria that are guiding our construction of an account of the excellence of rational animals: (1) Rationality is social, verbal, and symbolic (we learn to speak, to think, and to interpret from our family and community and culture). (2) Animality is social, physical, chemical, embodied (we must always care for the needs of nutrition, exercise, sleep, and our sexual nature). (3) Practical rationality is our active and proactive self-governance, including over all our thoughts

1. John Kekes, “Wisdom,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1983): 280.

2. Eudaimonists believe our telos to be human flourishing or happiness. Others believe it is something else, such as genetic proliferation, the creation of the self, or what have you. We shall return to this in a later chapter

and actions (we can affect but not change our appearance, strength, size, etc.).

But what is “excellence”? Some of our attributes actions may not be excellent, or may not be excellent in the way that accords without our pre-reflective moral intuitions. So our account must allow us distinguish between various kinds of excellence. Foot cautions against several species of terminological misunderstanding: *αρετή* for the Greeks refers “also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice”³. We should like to distinguish beauty, raw talent, strength, and other excellences that are not at all under our control from virtues – which are under our control, either partially or completely. Furthermore, even their list of “moral virtues” (*arete ethikai* or *virtues morales*) do not correspond precisely to *our* “moral virtues”. The traditional list of cardinal “moral virtues” (including courage, moderation, practical wisdom, and justice) includes positive traits we might classify as “self-regarding” (e.g., moderation) as well as “other-regarding” (e.g., justice), and includes practical wisdom (*phronesis/prudentia*) which, if we mentioned it all, we would be inclined to classify as an intellectual virtue. Finally, not all of the items on our list of positive qualities (e.g., unselfishness) obviously correspond to one of the classical virtues. So, we ought not to assume that the terms ‘excellence’ or even ‘moral excellence’ can be a short-cut for understanding the concept of virtue. We must, instead, construct our account with care and attention.

The concept of ‘excellence’ is relative to an object’s nature and function; an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*; but an excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, and so on. Artifacts receive their function by design, and even natural entities (such as dogs) have artificial functions insofar as they are trained by human users. It is tempting to assume that all functions are imposed on objects and that natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function. Nevertheless, natural entities such as organisms have natural functions as well, as we have argued above. And, we argued, the ‘function’ of organisms can be ‘read off’ its activity and its development

3. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 2; Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

from embryonic stages to maturity, even remaining agnostic about its mechanistic empirical origin and/or its origin in a divine design.

Excellence is relative to generic truths about the nature and potential of natural kinds. We have argued that human beings, too, have a nature and have argued that it is our nature to be rational animals. Even in extreme cases when a person's set of potentialities for rational activity such as speech and abstract thought is not realized because of genetic disorder, injury, or mental or physical illness, they are *a human being* by virtue of having a *human nature*, tragically unrealized or unrealizable.

Polyanna Objection

The major obstacle for this chapter is what Micah Lott calls the "Polyanna Problem."⁴ To see this problem, supposing that the other two objections have been overcome: human norms are discoverable and demonstrable both practical and relevant. Still are such norms merely "protonormative"⁵ or fully *ethical*? Are we obligated to fulfill all such norms? Just some? How are they to be distinguished from unethical, vile behaviors also statistically common among human behaviors? Empirically, some acorns become fully grown, mature oaks, but other acorns become stunted, sickly specimens. Most acorns never become anything other than acorns before they disintegrate into dust in the soil. So statistical majorities will not do the trick. Likewise, norms can be discovered for both good and evil: Some animals protect their young while other animals abandon or even consume their young. Some humans are kind and gentle while others are vicious and cruel. Anscombe anticipates this worry when she says:

The search for "norms" might lead someone to look for laws of nature, as if the universe were a legislator; but in the present day this is not likely to lead to good

4. Micah Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 3 (2012): 407–31.

5. Arthur Ward, "Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory" (PhD thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2013), chap. 2.

results: it might lead one to eat the weaker according to the laws of nature, but would hardly lead anyone nowadays to notions of justice.⁶

Can we move from vague statements such as “human beings are language users” to particular moral statements: ‘Human beings make and keep promises’?

The Polyanna Problem is the temptation to wink at the evils of human behavior in the effort to paint a portrait that is falsely full of sweetness and light. Put differently, even if human norms are discoverable, will they be *good*? Will they not be a mixed bag of good and apparently evil norms? Will we not need something else, such as conscience, or divine revelation, over and above these human laws, by which to judge which ones are normative for us?

Empty Definition Objection

Another objection is that the very definition of virtue as a *beneficial* or “positive” character trait is circular and therefore empty. To see the problem, 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, is this a trivial truth? An analytic truth? The affirmation that ‘courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good’ would appear to amount to the life-altering revelation that ‘good things are good’.

Virtue is Optional Objection

Another objection is that virtues are good but 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.

6. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 14.

Thesis

My thesis in this chapter is the thesis of the dissertation as a whole: **virtue is the plurality of acquirable excellent character traits (such as moderation, tolerance, and wisdom) that are necessary for practical, rational animals because virtue partly constitutes natural human flourishing.**

This builds on the thesis of the last chapter – that humans need virtues – and shows how, as humans mature, the need for particular virtues and for virtue in general increases, especially for traits that enable one to engage in successful practical reasoning. Such acquired character traits dispose us to do well at accomplishing the universal projects of human life (such as sustaining friendships) and to react well to the universal challenges of human life, such as the death of loved ones. The absence of virtues, and the presence of vices, corrupt practical reasoning and stultify the realization of our natural telos. Vices dispose us to succumb to common temptations and to fail at universal projects. Thirdly, and finally, I shall defend the resulting synthesis against various objections.

II. Virtue and Wisdom for Practical, Rational Animals

Virtues would be those character traits that rational animals *need*, tout court. They need them to *become* fully rational animals. While I will discuss in detail the natural human telos in a later chapter, here I only assert that actualizing the potential latent in human nature is necessarily good for us.⁷

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*.

So virtues are the acquired traits needed by creatures like us, by social rational animals.

There are two corollaries to this initial, formal definition of virtues as those traits human

7. Paul Bloomfield, “Virtue and Happiness,” ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012.

beings as practical reasoners need. Our rationality depends upon our education; If human nature is as “rational animals” then the unity of virtues as each depending on practical reason.⁸

The first corollary is the importance of moral and intellectual education. The beginning of human life, like the beginning of any organic life, is the foundation for all that follows. When a mother drinks heavily or uses cocaine while pregnant, the child is going to suffer the negative consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is abused – emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually – by her parents, the psychological cost is meted out across the entire life and across generations. By the same token, when a mother eats healthily and takes her vitamins while pregnant, the child is going to reap the positive consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is given love, approval, empowerment, discipline, by her parents, the psychological gains are meted out across the entire life and across generations. The original source of most people’s life maxims are not their ethics professors, favorite novels, Holy Bibles, or therapists, but their parents or other guardians.

This fact is 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.

The second corollary is a partial solution to the conundrum about the unity of virtues. Are there many virtues or just one? And if there are many, are they unified or a fundamental plurality? We should expect, on the basis of our nature as rational animals, that all virtues will be united in our rationality, and that our various concepts of virtue will be united in an appropriate concept of rationality. This is just what we will defend in a later chapter.

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

III. Foot: Excellence of Will

Foot argues that virtue is excellence of the rational will.⁹ Even Foot will expand her concept of will beyond its typical meaning to include intentions (see below). Since now is not the place to distinguish the two concepts, I shall herein treat her ‘rational will’ as identical to my ‘practical rationality’.

We saw above that virtues are, for Foot, examples of ‘natural goodness.’ That is, the concept of goodness being deployed in appellations such as a ‘good person’ is structurally the same as the concept of goodness in ‘a good oak’ or ‘a good wolf.’ A good person exemplifies those good-making features shared by all exemplary members of a natural species. What exactly can we say about such good-making features of rational animals?

Foot’s best account of the virtue argues that: (1) virtues are beneficial, to self and others, while vices are bad for self and others; (2) virtues are distinct from skills (such as strength, keen eyesight, reliable memory, etc.) because such excellences are not excellence of will or practical reason; (3) virtues are corrective of some tempting vice; and (4) virtues are only ‘operative’ toward good ends.¹⁰ Let’s examine each of these propositions in turn.

Virtue is beneficial

First, virtues are beneficial. She says, “Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror.”¹¹

9. I have hitherto avoided the word ‘will’ because it is not a cross-cultural concept. Cf. David Bradshaw, “The Mind and the Heart in the Christian East and West,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 5 (2009): 576–98. There 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.

10. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*.

11. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

But whom is benefited? Does a person possessing a virtue benefit the virtuous person or the society in which the virtuous person lives? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly *both*. For example, moderation with alcohol benefits oneself, one's family, one's community and so on. For other virtues, such as justice or charity, the answer is less clear. She says, "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."¹² Even so, she finds the alleged paradox between what we might wish to call "selfish" and "altruistic" virtues overblown. Certainly, sometimes life presents us with the opportunity to pursue only one of two contradicting or apparently irreconcilable goods; my own good *versus* your good. Sometimes, however, the cases in which virtuous deeds necessitate the loss of other goods are not so devastating as they might appear. It might be that, on occasion, it is better (say) for my family that I sacrifice my health in working hard to earn higher wages; while on other occasions it is better for my family that I sacrifice higher wages keep myself healthy. Even when there is a clear, irresolvable tension between my good and the good of the group (as when, say, I must sacrifice my life), we can make sense of the demand of morality by appealing to what is necessary *for humans* in general. As Geach says, "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."¹³ Geach further points out that the clear contrast between my "inclinations" (e.g., to self preservation) is largely an artifact of philosophical thinking; many people are *inclined* both to self-preservation *and* inclined to obey the moral law.

Foot says: "let us say then, leaving unsolved problems behind us, that virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows."¹⁴ We cannot ignore the notorious tensions between altruism and egoism, but we must move on in the pursuit of a definition of virtue.

12. Ibid., 3.

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

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

More than strength

The next — and more interesting question is how to distinguish moral virtue from a great memory, keen eyesight, or other admirable qualities we do not intuitively classify as virtuous.

Even defining virtues are “beneficial characteristics... a human being needs to have”, she admits that, “This will not, however, take us far towards a definition of a virtue, since there are many other qualities of a man that may be similarly beneficial, as for instance bodily characteristics such as health and physical strength, and mental powers such as those of memory and concentration.”¹⁵ And this is no small matter. 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.”¹⁶ And moral philosophers have continued to try to answer for the last 2,400 years. A recent volume edited by Mark Alfano¹⁷ discusses the range of which positive traits count as virtues.

What distinguishes virtue from strength? 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.”¹⁸ 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.

Foot 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

15. Ibid., 4.

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

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

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

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 on this passage is this:

What this suggests is that a man's virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit; and small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.¹⁹

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.²⁰

If virtuous dispositions are "multi-track,"²¹ is it necessary that good intentions and attitudes be effective in good action? If so, it seems that virtues become skills. But as we saw comparing virtue with strength, there seems to be something flat about calling the virtuous person *merely* skillful.²² The

19. Ibid., 5.

20. Robert Adams's concept of 'being for' is helpful in this connection. We intuitively (and correctly) judge that one must *be for* the good in the most general sense of orienting oneself – in thoughts, deeds, words, intentions, and wishes – toward the good.

21. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998): "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.)"

22. 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).

worry here is that we don't want to call skills morally valuable when they do not seem to have any moral import. Is a contractor who excels at hammering 16d nails into wooden frames to be admired for his *virtue*? Is the quarterback who can make accurate throws under pressure virtuous? This seems to us moderns to smack too much of the "Homeric" sense of virtue as *any* admirable quality.

What, if anything, differentiates virtues from skills? Foot's solution is an interpretation of the line from Aristotle that "in the matter of arts and skills... voluntary error is preferable to involuntary error, while in the matter of virtues... it is the reverse."²³ While this might be a bit baffling, the thought seems to be that deliberately erring in an art or skill is compatible with mastery; the teacher can err on purpose in order to instruct students. By contrast, deliberately erring in morality is still an error. One ought not steal to demonstrate to children that stealing is wrong.

Corrective

Foot also argues that virtues are "corrective". That is, each one stands "at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good."²⁴ In this discussion, she is illuminating a statement of Aristotle that "virtues are about what is difficult for men" and also objecting to a statement of Kant that *only* "actions done out of a sense of duty" have moral worth. In this connection, she discusses Kant's problem of the happy philanthropist. This problem is the troubling and dissonant conclusion that if a very generous philanthropist gets great pleasure out of helping others then such actions display no moral worth. Surely a commonsense moral judgment would accord moral worth to the very fact that the philanthropist *enjoys* doing what is good (which Aristotle builds into the definition of a virtuous person); he doesn't just grit his teeth and do good (which Aristotle would call mere *continence*).

Kant's error, according to Foot, is in failing to distinguish that which is "in accord" with virtue from that which is *virtuous* full stop. It may be, for example, that a novice tennis player makes

23. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 7.

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

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.”²⁵ So the solution to the happy philanthropist problem is that if he really does have such a character as to be delighted helping others, he is morally praiseworthy *because he has worked to achieve that character*. As she says:

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

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

Of course, commonsense judges that a philanthropist who persists in virtue even when he does not enjoy giving is also praiseworthy. Foot explains this too. She allows that it may take greater virtue for a man to *persist* in his philanthropy *even when* it brings him no delight.

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

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

25. Ibid., 13.

Operative toward good ends

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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷

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

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

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

perhaps most of all. As we shall see in John McDowell's discussion of the virtuous person's perceptual capacities, it might be that when we admire a person's courage or moderation, we are often admiring the *wisdom* in the courage and the moderation.

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

There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired. Yet the fact is that many of us look up to some people whose chaotic lives contain rather little of wisdom or temperance, rather than to some others who possess these virtues. And while it may be that this is just romantic nonsense I suspect that it is not.²⁸

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. Before we stop to synthesize Foot's account, let's look at McDowell's.

IV. McDowell: knowing how to live

McDowell 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?'"²⁹; (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."³⁰ Let's examine each of these in turn to uncover McDowell's account of virtue.

The first point is that ethical reflection aims at answering the ever relevant question "How should one live?"³¹ We notice that ethical reflection is *reflection* about *practice*. It seems to me that this obvious truth is almost too close to be seen, like one's nose. It is far too often overlooked. We do not

28. Ibid., 17.

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

30. Ibid., 331.

31. Ibid., 331.

merely act (like a deer or a dog) nor do we *merely* calculate (like a computer or an angel); we reflect upon what we ought to do, how we ought to live. Such reflection only makes sense concerning issues within my control. Insofar as one cannot but sleep sometimes, the question of whether or not to sleep at all is not an ethical question; it is not in my control. Insofar as one can either stay or go, pursue or avoid, harm or help, such decisions are ethical decisions and the question of how to live is an ethical question. One must decide which larger, longer-term projects to pursue and which objects are worthwhile to obtain; and one must, along the way of these long-term pursuits, decide rather extemporaneously how to react to the vicissitudes of circumstance. Each of us must decide how to react to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”³²

Virtue is Knowledge?

As for the thesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge, McDowell argues that morality is *practical knowledge* (a “disposition to act well”). Such practical knowledge (and this is the third point) seems to demand “a moral outlook” to act well.³³ To see why it makes sense to conceive of virtue as practical knowledge, suppose that some platitudinous value (say, kindness) is really a virtue. The kind person is reliably kind and is kind *on purpose*. A person who merely happens to be kind or who commits acts of kindness resulting from blind instinct does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. A person who is kind once, or even every now and then, likewise does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. Rather, a kind person is one who is regularly sensitive to a range of reasons for behaving in a particular way. The kind person, McDowell adduces, “has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behavior” and such “deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge.”³⁴ The kind person *knows* what is called for, is intentional about avoiding cruel or indifferent behavior, and so on.

If kindness is “a sort of perceptual capacity”, “specialized sensitivity” to a particular range of

32. *Hamlet* III.1

33. *Ibid.*, 331.

34. *Ibid.*, 332.

reasons for action (say, the feelings of others), then perhaps the same holds true for other virtues.³⁵ In fact, McDowell suggests, the notion that virtues are specialized sensitivities — each a kind of knowledge — helps us understand the Socratic notion of the unity of virtue.

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

McDowell’s “preliminary case” that virtue is knowledge is that the “requirement imposed by the situation... must exhaust his reason for acting as he does.”³⁶ It would disqualify the act as a candidate for an example of kindness if the agent performed it *because* it was kind *and because good repute was likely to follow*. If we run the same calculus on each particular virtue, we can hypothesize that virtuous agents’ behavior in each case is explained by their sensitivity to those particular kinds of reasons. In turn, their behavior in general (when virtuous) is explained by their sensitivity in general. He concludes, “thus the particular virtues are not a batch of Independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one’s behavior. It is a single complex sensitivity of the sort which we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook.”³⁷

35. Ibid., 332.

36. Ibid., 332.

37. Ibid., 333.

Two Objections

One objection to the view that virtue is that a “single complex sensitivity” to requirements upon one’s behavior arises from considerations of the internalism/externalism debate regarding moral motivation. Suppose two persons in the same situation are equipped with identical perceptual capacities and so sensitive to the same range of reasons for action, but only one of them does the right thing. If such a supposed situation were to obtain, it would disconfirm McDowell’s conclusion. But one man’s *modus ponens* is another man’s *modus tollens*. If virtue is to be identified with a single complex sensitivity, then a supposed situation in which two persons perceive a situation and its practical requirements identically but act differently cannot obtain.³⁸ Socrates took this line. But McDowell suggests we look to Aristotle. Aristotle allowed that “appreciation of what [a virtuous person] observes is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise.”³⁹ The point of such an allowance is that the break between the sensitivity to reasons (which is virtue) and a resultant wrong action occurs when other psychological factors interfere. What interference? McDowell mentions desires and also a “distortion in one’s appreciation” of the relevant reasons.⁴⁰

A second possible objection McDowell draws from Donald Davidson. Davidson argues to the effect that a person might fail to perform the resultant right action even without such interfering factors. McDowell responds that the point is true, but it is not an objection. Aristotle’s account of continence details that continence is not a virtue. Continence is better than incontinence, but not as good as virtue. The continent person is able to perform the right action because he recognizes it as right, *despite* countervailing pressures (from desires, say) to do the wrong action. Since a fully developed virtue definitionally includes having the proper motivation as well, continence is only needed in the absence of a fully developed virtue. Furthermore, the virtuous person is not always one who “balances” reasons for X against countervailing reasons for Y. The virtuous person is

38. Ibid., 333.

39. Ibid., 334.

40. Ibid., 334.

the one for whom simply identifying a reason (“in this situation, courage requires that I run into danger”) silences countervailing reasons. The virtuous person sees the danger (and perhaps feels rightly apprehensive) but also sees that courage in the face of this danger is required; the latter perception, according to McDowell, “silences” other pressures.⁴¹ The merely continent person has to “weigh” reasons; the virtuous person fluently and instantly *acts* on the best reason.

Is virtue-knowledge *codifiable*?

McDowell considers the objection that if virtue is knowledge, ‘knowing-what-to-do’ must be codifiable in propositional form. But ‘knowing-what-to-do’ is not codifiable, so virtue must not be knowledge. On this objection, the virtuous person enjoys knowledge of one or a few universal ethical precepts and reliably calculates the application of those principles to individual occasions. The virtuous person’s ethical arguments “take the form of a ‘practical syllogism’” wherein the universal proposition is the major premise and the “relevant particular knowledge” is a minor premise, while the issuing conclusion is the judgment of “what is to be done.”⁴² Furthermore, on this objection, the defender of Humean moral psychology can keep the identification of relevant particular knowledge with a “minor premise” but substitute the proposed major premise (a proposition such as “It is always good to be courageous”) with a non-cognitive desire or commitment (such as “*I want* to be courageous” or “Be courageous!”). Now, they can explain how a virtuous person and non-virtuous person can both perceive a situation identically but fail to perform the same action with reference to their different desires or commitments.

The problem with this objection, McDowell thinks, is not so much a problem with our moral theory but a problem with our conception of rationality. The problem stems from a “deep-rooted prejudice” that rationality is a rule-following procedure. If rationality is a rule-following procedure, then it follows that *either* practical rationality and morality are likewise rule-following

41. Ibid., 335.

42. Ibid., 336.

procedures *or* that practical rationality and morality is not, ultimately, sufficiently *rational*. Some philosophers (often followers of Hume but not necessarily Hume himself) think that morality is a not rational domain but a domain of sentiments, desires, commitments, approvals, and so on. Other philosophers (often followers of Kant) think that morality is a rational domain and hence must be a matter of identifying first principles and “applying” them to particular situations. But what they share in common is a belief that “rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle.”⁴³ This common belief McDowell wishes to refute.⁴⁴

McDowell’s discussion here (drawing on Wittgenstein and others) is hard to follow. The point seems to be that even apparently obvious cases where the rational thing to do is to follow an objective rule (say, by extending a series of numbers) turn out to be cases of a much messier process in which there is no such objective rule by appeal to which we can explain rational thoughts or behaviors. If Bob instructs Charlie to “add 2” to a number and continue applying the rule indefinitely, we tend to be confident Charlie will produce “2, 4, 6, 8,” etc., which will “churn out the appropriate behavior with the sort of reliability which a physical mechanism, say a piece of clockwork, might have.” We postulate a “psychological mechanism, underlying his behavior, by an inference analogous to that whereby one might hypothesize a physical structure underlying the observable motions of some inanimate object.”⁴⁵ The “ground and nature of our confidence” that we will reliably apply rules is not but a common form of life. The ‘form of life’ is a term of art here from Wittgenstein (and quoted with approval from Stanley Cavell) that refers to that difficult-to-define process by which we learn how reliably to use words in our native language, how to make exclamations like a pained “ow!” or an excited “ooh!”, when to laugh at jokes, and when to cry in pity. Our shared rationality, McDowell suggests, is not grounded in “external” objective rules but

43. Ibid., 337.

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

45. McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 337.

in a shared form of life or what he calls a “congruence of subjectivities.”⁴⁶ McDowell admits this is a disconcerting hypothesis; it induces “vertigo.” But, our response to such vertigo should not be to embrace a “consoling myth”. That myth he says is the two notions that (a) rule-following is a psychological mechanism that — absent mistakes — guarantees consistency, and that there exist objective facts of the matter over and above the congruence of subjectivities. If we abandon these two notions and embrace the model of deductive rationality as grounded only in our intersubjective form of life, then the corresponding model of practical rationality will become tenable.

The Moral Outlook

Recall McDowell’s third thesis: The question of how to live must be approached from “within” a moral outlook and approached “*via* the notion of a virtuous person.”⁴⁷

McDowell’s solution to the problem of the “vertigo” we feel when contemplating the dependence of our rational concept-application on nothing more than our shared form of life is to simply accept that we cannot think from a third-person, detached, “sideways on” point of view; we can only think from within our point of view. His main opponent, of course, is the notion that morality can be adduced from an objective third-person sort of view. He says, “The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up on the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life.”⁴⁸ This is part of the movement toward his thesis that that virtues are ethical qualities that only make sense ‘from within’, that they lend a certain kind of perceptive ability to their bearers.

McDowell points out the familiar case of a discussion or disagreement that end at loggerheads, with both parties asking “But don’t you see?” Although it is tempting to want to resolve such loggerheads by appeal to a third-personal point of view standing outside either of our forms of life, McDowell thinks it must be resolved, if at all, from firmly within our form of life. That is not to

46. Ibid., 339.

47. Ibid., 331.

48. Ibid., 341.

say that persuasion is not possible. He reassures us that the “Don’t you see?” question “can often be supplemented with words aimed at persuasion.”⁴⁹ Rather, persuasion will consist in “bring[ing] someone to see it as one wants”, in one or both parties appreciating reasons they may not have seen before. It sometimes takes efforts to make someone see (to make oneself or others see) “the right way to handle a given situation.”⁵⁰

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

The ‘practical syllogism’ takes the following shape:

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

On the strictly deductive logical model, the role of the major premise is to provide rock solid universal ethical principles from which to derive particular moral duties. But McDowell resists this model. On the strictly non-cognitivist model, without universal ethical principles we are left with universal psychological states (consistent desires, plans, values, or norms). McDowell also resists this. On the non-codifiable model, what does the major premise do? Its role, he says, is to state a “certain conception of how to live... [namely] the *virtuous person’s conception* of the sort of life a human being should lead.”⁵¹ It is clear upon reflection that this account is a sort of circular reasoning. For the

49. Ibid., 342.

50. Ibid., 342.

51. Ibid., 343. Emphasis added.

virtuous person's conception of how to live is itself conditioned by what he called earlier 'the moral outlook'. That conception of how to live, in turn, conditions what particular saliences are noticed (what minor premises) and generates practical conclusions about what is to be done. What kind of life should a human being lead? The answer "cannot be definitively written down."⁵² Furthermore, "Any attempt to capture it in words will recapitulate the character of the teaching whereby it might be instilled: generalizations will be approximate at best..."⁵³ The upshot of the combination of non-codifiability with a practical syllogistic form is that the virtuous person takes for a rule of life some conception of how to live but that this conception is part of what it means to be a virtuous person. (Hence the vertigo.)

We might wonder why we are bothering about formal syllogistic reasoning at this point. But this way of understanding the practical syllogism *does* do good job of providing a plausible explanation of moral motivation (reasons one might act in some way) and moral behavior (reasons one acted that way). To paraphrase McDowell: "Explanations of judgments about what to do are explanations of actions."⁵⁴ I can explain your behavior by understanding that you were concerned for your friend's welfare and reached out to help. Likewise, you can explain your decision to help by assuring me that you are concerned for your friend's welfare. For McDowell, the general structure of the practical syllogism is useful. He says "the rationality of virtue... is not demonstrable from an external standpoint."⁵⁵

Two Further Objections

McDowell cites a common objection, familiarly attributed to Hume, that practical reasons by themselves cannot motivate — that they need the presence of a conative mental state (such as a desire) as well. The common judgment is that "cognition and volition are distinct." Surely the virtuous

52. Ibid., 343.

53. Ibid., 343.

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

55. Ibid., 346.

person's behavior is conditioned both by knowledge and their non-cognitive psychological states. In McDowell's example, one is aware that one's friend is in trouble and that the friend is able to be comforted (the cognitive bit) and a desire (or motivation or inclination or settled passion) for helping one's friends (the non-cognitive bit). Surely these two *together* and neither in isolation explains the behavior.

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

Perhaps, furthermore, to be rational, a genuine reason must be verifiable from an external, "neutral standpoint" open to any rational observer whatsoever. Surely *something*, such as scientific or deductive logical beliefs, are objective in the sense that they look the same to any rational being whatsoever.

Even here, McDowell undermines the objection as based partly in "vertigo". It is a "craving for a kind of rationality independently demonstrable as such."⁵⁶ He admits that the intelligibility and consistency of the virtuous person's way of life are an "orectic state" but not that it is a straightforward desire as much as "a conception of how to live."

Although McDowell sees another more "subtle non-cognitivism" arising from the ashes, he does not fully develop it. Rather, he says:

"I suspect that its origin is a philistine scientism, probably based on the misleading idea that the right of scientific method to rational acceptance is discernible from a more objective standpoint than that from which we seem to perceive the saliences. A scientific conception of reality is eminently open to dispute. When we ask the metaphysical question whether reality is what science can find out about, we cannot,

56. Ibid., 346.

without begging the question, restrict the materials for an answer to those which science can countenance.”⁵⁷

V. Summary if Needed

VI. MacIntyre: Rational Tradition

Foot’s definition of virtue is excellence of the rational will; McDowell’s definition of the sensitivity to values (qua secondary qualities) which are conducive to the virtuous life. MacIntyre’s definition of virtue is acquired human qualities that enable their possessors to sustain and improve traditions, to live a successful whole life, and to succeed in practices.

This robust concept of virtue he derives from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition. In order to capture all of the (sometimes opposing) features of virtue from Homer to Jane Austen, MacIntyre’s account includes three concentric stages: the first is virtues relative to “practices.” The second is virtues relative to the whole of an integrated human life. The third phase is virtue related to tradition and rationality.⁵⁸

Initial account

The first stage of MacIntyre’s definition is that virtues are “acquired human qualities that enable their possessor to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.”⁵⁹ This is perhaps a puzzling definition. Let’s examine it a bit more closely.

First, virtues are acquired *human* qualities. Presumably, human qualities are opposed to analogous qualities of non-human animals. The flexible flagellum of a bacterium, the swiftness of a deer – formal or functional biological features that enable an animal to survive and thrive – are

57. Ibid., 346.

58. For MacIntyre “tradition” is almost synonymous with “rationality”. He calls it “tradition-constituted rationality” We will examine his notion of tradition-constituted rationality in the next chapter.

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

excluded from the class of virtues by definition. MacIntyre's later *Dependent Rational Animals* retracts the assumed divide between human and non-human animals. (But here, virtues do not arise from nor depend on biology. In this, MacIntyre's initial formulation disagrees with Foot but agrees with McDowell, as we saw.)

Secondly, virtues are *acquired* human qualities. This is an important point and relates to the first, for natural biological features are inborn. Virtues, rather, are acquired. That is not to say that virtues are not *natural* in the sense that natural attributes such as hair color are 'automatic'. But they are natural in the sense that they are proper to human beings, such as singing and telling jokes is *the kind of thing we do*. In this, he agrees with Aristotle that virtue is *in accordance with* nature but not *by nature*. Rather, virtuous traits are a "normal" psychological outgrowth of cultivating excellence within particular human practices.

Thirdly, virtues enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods*. This clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. A virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills. This assumption will bring some trouble for MacIntyre's initial definition in *After Virtue*. As we saw with Foot, it seems quite possible that people who have particular virtues can be, overall, wicked. (Can't the thief be courageous, the dictator magnanimous, the glutton affable?) It certainly seems that the answer is yes. Even indexing virtues to practices does not solve the problem; can practices be wicked? For McDowell, this problem does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue. I shall discuss this problem a bit more in the next sub-sections.

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

First Stage: Practice

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

For example, a farmer is engaged in a series of activities, from tilling, sowing, watering, protecting, harvesting, storing, etc., all of which are embedded within a social context and organized around a particular goal. Each practice has a history, a set of practitioners, a common set of standards, and a common goal. And virtues are those qualities that enable their possessor to excel in practices. Leading MacIntyre scholar, Christopher Lutz, highlights four aspects of MacIntyre’s famous definition of practice. A practice is:

[1] a complex social activity that [2] enables participants to gain goods internal to the practice. [3] Participants achieve excellence in practices by gaining the internal goods. When participants achieve excellence, [4] the social understandings of excellence in the practice, of the goods of the practice, and of the possibility of achieving excellence in the practice are systematically extended.⁶⁰

Let’s consider an example of a practice in a bit more detail: teaching. A secondary school teacher, say, is engaged in a series of activities, in order to give children the basic knowledge and skills they need to transition to functional adults in society, whether by getting a job, starting a business, or advancing to higher stages of education.⁶¹ 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

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

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

(rather than beginning work on a farm or in town by the age of 16) was the exception rather than the rule. It has standards, both legal standards and “best practices” passed from mentor to student teacher. It pretty obviously has standards of excellence according to which most educators are average, some poor, and some excellent. An educator who wants to join that profession will be enculturated with that history, taught those standards, and given a chance (usually by trial and error) to become a good teacher. Lutz’ first condition is met, since [1] teaching is an inherently complex *social* activity, in that teachers cannot be teachers without students, and (usually) do not teach in isolation but in community with colleagues and administrators and parents. [2] Secondary education qua practice enables teachers to gain the goods “internal to the practice”, namely students who are educated enough to be ready for legal adulthood – for a job or college. [3] Good teachers are those that demonstrate the ability reliably to produce educated students, sometimes in the face of incredible obstacles. And [4] good schools and good teachers usually have a *history* and social context that is being “extended” across generations. Good schools recruit and train good teachers, good teachers train the next generation of good teachers, and so on.

I’ve spoken of the goods of teaching. But MacIntyre defines virtues with reference to goods “*internal to*” practices. What does he mean by employing the internal/external relation here? MacIntyre later refashions the contrast between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ goods into one between ‘goods of excellence’ and ‘goods of effectiveness.’ (I prefer the latter terminology. But the point is, I think, clear.) The goods of excellence just 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 *neces-*

sary 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.⁶²

Second Stage: Whole Life

The second stage depends on the notions of a complete human life, the sum of all the practices of one's life.⁶³ He says that “without an overriding conception of the telos of a whole human life, conceived as a unity, our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial and incomplete.”⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵

Despite the obstacles to such a vision, it is possible. The obstacles MacIntyre cites are both “social and philosophical.” The social obstacle is the fragmentation of modern life: “work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms.”⁶⁶ 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

62. 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.

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

64. Ibid., 202.

65. Ibid., 204.

66. Ibid., 204.

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 second and philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions... in terms of simple components."⁶⁷ MacIntyre's argument here is highly significant. He begins by analyzing the way we might answer a simple question such as: "what is he doing?"

One and the same segment of human behavior may be correctly characterized in a number of different ways. To the question 'What is he doing?' the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be 'Digging', 'Gardening', 'Taking exercise', 'Preparing for winter' or 'Pleasing his wife.'⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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."⁷⁰ 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

67. Ibid., 204.

68. Ibid., 206.

69. Ibid., 207.

70. Ibid., 208.

essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”⁷¹ 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.”⁷²

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

But if this is true of conversations, it is true also *mutatis mutandis* of battles, chess games, courtships, philosophy seminars, families at the dinner table, businessmen negotiating contracts- that is, of human transactions in general. For conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general. Conversational behavior is not a special sort or aspect of human behavior, even though the forms of language-using and of human life are such that the deeds of others speak for them as much as do their words. For that is possible only because they are the deeds of those who have words.⁷³

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.⁷⁴

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre’s discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.⁷⁵ For we have arrived at the supports needed for building the second stage of his

71. Ibid., 208.

72. Ibid., 209.

73. Ibid., 211.

74. Stanley Hauerwas, “The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre,” *First Things*, 2007.

75. 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?’ ”

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.”⁷⁶

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

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices. but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good. by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good.⁷⁷

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

Third stage: Tradition

MacIntyre’s third stage of his virtue account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context. That context he simply calls ‘tradition.’ What is a MacIntyrean tradition? He calls it a “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”⁷⁸ In this third stage, virtues are qualities that enable the health and persistence of traditions.

Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness. lack of courage. lack of the relevant intellectual virtues—these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices

76. Ibid., 219.

77. Ibid., 220.

78. Ibid., 222.

which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments.⁷⁹

While we shall pick up MacIntyre's highly contentious concept of tradition in a later chapter, here it will be worth underscoring a few key points.

Tradition-constituted rationality objections

One family of objections pertain to the way MacIntyre's ethical theory appeals to tradition-constituted rationality.

MacIntyre argues that we should return to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue and practical reason. We must beware one misunderstanding. Any talk of "returning" is liable to sound nostalgic. At the risk of sounding paradoxical, we might put it this way: MacIntyre's positive ethical positions are *traditional* but not *nostalgic*. In fact, his definition of tradition is *progressive*. Tradition is an ongoing, socially-embedded argument over time, which necessarily entails that moral enquiry is dynamic – even *modern*. To be traditional is not to be past-oriented; to be traditional is to be staunchly future-oriented, since the business of life is not only the pursuit of our telos but the transmission of everything valuable and precious to the next generation.

One critic who misunderstands MacIntyre along these lines is Martha Nussbaum.⁸⁰ She begins her review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* with an age-old dilemma between the social stability afforded by tradition (with its danger of hidebound error) and the social volatility endemic to critical reflection (with its opportunity of progress toward truth). She alludes to this dilemma as articulated by Aristotle:

In the second book of the *Politics*, Aristotle asks whether it is a good thing to encourage changes in society. Should people be offered rewards for inventing some change in the traditional laws? No, he writes, because this would lead to instability and unnecessary tampering with what is working well. Should we, on the other hand, listen

79. *Ibid.*, 223.

80. Martha Nussbaum, "Recoiling from Reason," *The New York Review of Books* 36, no. 19 (1989): 36–41.

to those who wish to keep ancestral traditions fixed and immune from criticism? No again—for if we reason well we can make progress in lawmaking, just as we do in other arts and sciences.⁸¹

Aristotle's solution is that it should be *hard but not impossible* to change societal structures. Of course, we don't have to pick just one or the other. But one necessary feature of every society is a particular level of difficulty in making social changes. Should one err on the side of difficulty or ease?

Putting it starkly, of the two it is better to gamble for progress toward truth at the risk of instability than to gamble for stability at the risk of hidebound error. Strangely, Nussbaum takes MacIntyre to be reversing Aristotle's balance. She thinks MacIntyre is urging for betting on social stability even if it means sticking closer to existing tradition (and hence surpassing or intentionally avoiding critical reflection) than is compatible with unfettered progress.

This is not an objection to MacIntyre — it is a misreading. He rejects fideism and this kind of conservative traditionalism. MacIntyre sides with Aristotle, in my view, that the risk of complacent error is greater than the risk of instability. For hidebound error is likely to perpetuate itself across generations, while the instability arising from a cacophony of disagreement is likely to be short-lived. Nussbaum does not see that MacIntyre's proposed solution is not a sort of *anti-progressive* longing for the past. It is radically progressive. His solution is not to reverse progress but to replace the Enlightenment's standard of progress with a more tenable alternative.

MacIntyre anticipates this misreading of his theory. He says:

We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate.⁸²

In short, tradition cannot be a name for the impulse to resist change or to fear political tension and turmoil. Quite the contrary: political tensions of a particular character and expression are

81. Ibid.

82. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

intrinsic to MacIntyre tradition. As he defines tradition, the internal conflict about the “goods which constitute that tradition” is a necessary feature.

Ironically, it appears to me that Nussbaum is too conservative in her defense of the Enlightenment’s standard of progress; MacIntyre is the progressive here. Rather than accusing MacIntyre of being too conservative, Nussbaum should focus on his critique of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre’s critique may be wrong, but it is with that critique that she should take issue. She should not accuse him of failing to “make progress... [in] arts and sciences” but of “tampering with what is working well.” MacIntyre’s theory of rationality may be wrong, but it is not wrong along the lines that Nussbaum attacks.

Not rival to rationality

Secondly, tradition is not rival to reason and critical reflection. Rather, one learns to reason – to critically reflect – within a MacIntyrean tradition. It is a truism that one learns one’s first language within a culture. But it is equally true that one learns facts and methods of reasoning within a tradition, conceived as a community of thinkers who share not only a common tongue but common concepts and a repertoire of facts, beliefs, customs, etc.

So, rather than tradition being opposed to reason, tradition is the first source of our reasoning. And rather than tradition being opposed to critical reflection, tradition is the first source of the habit of critically reflecting. The very ability to expand the repertoire of facts or modify the methods of thinking depends upon the awareness that one inhabits a tradition. This awareness MacIntyre even elevates to the level of a virtue, saying it is “one whose importance is perhaps most obvious when it is least present.” What is that virtue?

the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one. This virtue is not to be confused with any form of conservative antiquarianism; I am not praising those who choose the conventional conservative role of *laudator temporis acti*. It is rather the case that an adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed

narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.⁸³

Conclusion on Tradition

In short, a tradition is an extended argument, in part about the goods that constitute that tradition and the terms of that argument. 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.

We should note that the very concept of virtue MacIntyre defends exemplifies his method of working within a tradition. He derives his account of virtue from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition, but does not limit himself to what has come before.

There is much more to say about tradition, and we shall say some of it in a later chapter. But this is all we shall say about tradition here. For MacIntyre, rationality itself is tradition-constituted. So insofar as practical rationality is the differentium of human nature, and insofar as virtues all depend for their effective operation on the coordinating management of practical reason, tradition will again become an essential concept.

VII. Virtue Discussion

For Foot, virtues are those beneficial qualities that we need qua human beings in order to safely navigate the normal human temptations to corrupt oneself and others. They are beneficial. These qualities are what Hursthouse calls multi-track, embroiling our whole psychology as it is directed by what might call the 'will' or 'practical rationality', including intentions, attitudes, deliberative choices, and habits. Virtuous traits are only 'operative' toward good ends, and so we need the

83. Ibid., 223.

tutelage practical wisdom in order to attain virtues, and even once acquired, virtues stand in need of the governance of practical wisdom.

Foot's account of virtue satisfies all of these: For virtues are operative only toward good and are beneficial to humans as a species (benefiting the group and also, usually, benefiting the individual), which satisfies criterion (1); virtues are more than strength or skill in engaging all the motives, intentions, habits, and so on that fall under the broadest appellation of the rational will, which satisfies criterion (3); they are corrective of typical temptations to vice, which satisfies (1) and (2); and genuine virtues are operative only to good ends, which satisfies (1) as well. How do these neo-Aristotelians satisfy, or fail to satisfy, these criteria?

McDowell argues that rational virtue is a kind of knowledge — a kind of sensitivity — against the objection that rational virtue is either a type of universalizable, objective, deductive logic or else non-cognitive. His rebuttal is to deny that deductive reasoning is so objective. Rather, deductive reasoning is not rule-following, except in that we follow a vague collection of rules associated by our common forms of life. We only know deduction, too, from within. So moral reasoning, he avers, we also know from within, by doing it, while doing it, because of our common forms of life. He does not much advance a view of virtue beyond the Aristotelian notion that virtues are qualities of reliable good-choosing, good-acting. He does however limit Aristotle's optimism about the metaphysical realist assumptions underlying an understanding of deductive reason and practical reason. McDowell's account of virtue is especially strong in satisfying (1), since for him not only evaluative practical reasoning but all reasoning derives from a shared form of life — the "congruence of subjectivities."⁸⁴ His account, likewise, satisfies (3) by emphasizing the role of reason (both theoretical and practical) in constructing one's view of a life worth living. McDowell's account is less adequate with regard to (2). He simply takes it for granted that the virtuous person (with a virtuous outlook) will notice what is morally salient, without giving any further suggestion as to what details might be morally salient. He mentions a morally salient fact (a friend in trouble) but does not seem to

84. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 339.

acknowledge that “trouble” is not just a feature of human animals. A mother lioness can notice that her cub is in trouble; a cardinal can be in trouble, even if no human or animal notices. While positing the moral outlook as something unique to humans, McDowell has estranged the non-human world. And, finally, McDowell’s view takes a disastrous misstep in attempting to ground all our ethical thinking in a groundless human form of life. While he grants that “incorrect” evaluations can be corrected piecemeal, like the ship of Neurath, he denies that they can be corrected against external reality. We cannot match up – or fail to match up – our moral judgments with the moral facts. By arguing (rightly I think) that the moral outlook can only be ratified from *within the moral outlook*, McDowell has cut off a range of reasonable supports to the moral outlook that can be drawn from “outside.” We *can* draw from other natural objects (via generics or Aristotelian categoricals) notions such as “health” and “sickness”, “exemplary” and “defective”. Just as disastrously, McDowell makes the same point about theoretical reason. This is his capitulation to Kantian idealism. He accuses those who think his view irrational of “longing” for some “comfort” by external validation from without, when really my accusation has nothing to do with feelings. His view helps itself to the correspondance theory of truth even while denying that there is any truth to which our judgments may correspond. I shall return to this objection in a later chapter.

MacIntyre argues that virtues are those acquired human qualities that enable the achievement of goods of excellence in one’s whole life, in traditions, and in practices. MacIntyre, like McDowell, is strongest on the social and practical criteria but less strong on the biological criterion. His biggest insight is to conceptually link individual virtue with tradition, and to link tradition with rationality itself. Virtues, as we shall argue, cannot be defined as “moral” traits and severed from intellectual traits (such as sensitivity, perceptiveness, proactivity, judgment). But our intellectual traits cannot be acquired in isolation; we initially acquire our thoughts and tools for thinking such as we possess from the culture in which we are raised and the tradition in which we are educated. As for biology and animality, the *After Virtue* account is inadequate but it is much corrected by the *Dependent Rational Animals* account. Our remaining task, then, is to discuss the unity of animality and

rationality, or biology and tradition.

Foot's account is lacking in some respects that McDowell and MacIntyre can supply. What Foot is missing is an account of human virtue and rationality *in society and tradition*. The virtues are not just beneficial to human beings tout court, unmediated by tradition. The human experience unmediated by tradition does not exist. To be a human being is, as McDowell rightly says, to participate in *Bildung*, a process of formation in which a person with language, thoughts, beliefs, desires, evaluative judgments, etc. are (at least initially) the product. What MacIntyre is missing is a full account of humanity as not just a social being but a biological being. We are animals. We are *rational* animals, to be sure – but animals just the same. Similarly, McDowell is missing a clear accounting of the relation between second nature and nature. (Rationality will be the main theme in a later chapter.) By locating the activity of evaluating solely in human nature's inhabitation of the space of reasons, he has divorced humanity from the world. As Julia Annas summarizes, non-reductive naturalisms risk trivializing moral or normative facts by implausibly cordoning them within humans: "Non-naturalistic accounts of ethical terms assume that their function, prominently their normativity, is something that arises with humans, or is produced by humans, in a way which owes nothing to the nature which we share with other living things."⁸⁵ That link is supplied by Foot (and Thompson et. al.) As Annas continues:

What is so helpful for ethics from this kind of biological naturalism is that we find that the normativity of our ethical discourse is not something which emerges mysteriously with humans and can only be projected back, in an anthropomorphic way, onto trees and their roots. Rather, we find normativity in the realm of living things, plants and animals, already. It is part of the great merit of the work of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse to have stressed this point. Like many important philosophical points, it is obvious once pointed out...⁸⁶

If one knows the natural function of an organism, evaluations as to its excellence or defect are not purely subjective impositions of the evaluator's preferences or opinions, nor are they mere "facts"

⁸⁵. Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics, Old and New," ed. Stephen Gardiner (Cornell University Press, 2005), 12.

⁸⁶. Ibid.

given by the situation. Rather, the evaluator must judge the function of the thing and judge how well its performance matches up or fails to match up to that function.

An intuitive inference to make would be that moral virtues are qualities that enable a human being to achieve his or her natural function. But, as soon as the inference is stated, it sounds odd. Do human beings have a function? Surely each of us has a “function” within our family system (son, daughter, the responsible one, the funny one, peacemaker) or within society (teacher, student, parent, voter). But does it even make sense to speak of singular natural functions qua living thing? Even if there were such a thing as a “human function,” would it be the same function (e.g., ‘to think’) for all human beings as such or would there be an unlimited set of functions (e.g., to do and become whatever we want, whatever that might be)? Or perhaps is there some definite plurality of functions (e.g., to survive, to reproduce, to enjoy ourselves, and to reason)?

Response to Polyanna Objection

EVALUATIVE THESIS: There is such a property of being a good K if and only if K is a goodness-fixing kind. (Thomson, 21) 22

DIRECTIVE THESIS: For it to be the case that A ought to V is for it to be the case that there is a directive kind K such that: A is a K, and if a K doesn’t V, then it is a defective K. (209)

According to Thomson, it is a moral defect not to care about justice. It might be objected that someone might still ask, “Why should I care about justice?” We need to give that person a reason to care and it doesn’t seem to be enough to say that lacking justice is a moral defect. However, the same problem arises in any view. Why should I care about what’s wrong? Why should I care about what I ought to do? Why should I care about what I have most reasons to do? In fact, why should I care about what I should care about? No view seems immune from this sort of worry.⁸⁷

87. ??? %.

Response to Empty Definition Objection

This is an important objection but also misses the point. It is a synthetic truth discoverable only by reflection that humans have a nature, a telos, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our telos while others are conducive to our stultification. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.⁸⁸ All truths are true, in part, in virtue of the words used. But not all truths by definition are empty and content-less; rather, the stuff of life from which we derive our conceptual definitions or which we must fit into our conceptual definitions is a contentfull task. Let's consider this objection in another way.

Some ethical propositions are thought to be self-evidently true:⁸⁹ it is good to be good. This is a tautology. And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial. Other ethical propositions are not tautologous but are so widely and commonly accepted as to be easily mistaken for tautologies: it is good to be kind; cruelty is bad. Pleasure is 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. "Do good and avoid evil" (called the first principles of practical reason). Moderation is good (called the foundation of all ethics). "Drunkenness" or alcoholism are shameful. The Golden Rule (called the only objective rule in both religious and atheistic moralities). Injustice is bad. We ought to care for children and respect elders. Generosity is admirable.

Of course, if we define "kindness" simply as "a good disposition to treat others well" 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*. Kindness, it seems to me, and to many others upon reflection, is a special sort of quality we can recognize and name but not ultimately define. Cruelty, likewise, we "know it when we see it." There is more to our recognition of cruelty than the arbitrary application of "a bad disposition to hurt others." We know that children

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

89. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 4 (Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter %.

who tortures animals for fun is acting cruelly. We try to help him or her to satisfy curiosity or get parental attention through other means. We help them stop nursing a disposition to cruelty.

These ethical propositions do not seem to me tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. Some Platitudes are small, others great. “It is polite to say please” is a Platitude. But “treat others as you would wish to be treated” is a Great Platitude.

Some philosophers take their task to be to debunk the Great Platitudes. They wish to explain them away, to explain *why* they are false and *how so many people fall in for them*. The platitudes are either *false* (“know your place” taken as a justification of socio-economic or gender inequality is false) or as trivial; *of course* “murder is unjust” is true because, ‘murder’ is defined as ‘unjust killing.’

Other philosophers take their task to be to *underwrite* the great platitudes. They wish to explain them, to explain why they are true and how it is we learn them, preserve them, and (most crucially) live well by taking them as sound practical advice. Both philosophers are sophisticated; but one is sophisticated in attacking and explaining away the Great Platitudes while the other is sophisticated in defending and explaining them.

As examples of the Debunkers, consider J. L. Mackie and Alan Gibbard. Mackie claims to be running counter to the great tradition of European moral philosophy.⁹⁰ Gibbard’s metaethical works aim to capture our common sense belief that morality is objective but without the Platonism. He says, “It might be thought ordinary conceptions of rationality Platonistic or intuitionistic. On the Platonistic Picture coma among the facts of the world are facts of what is rational and what is not. A person of normal mental powers can discern these facts. Judgments of nationality are thus straightforward apprehensions of fact, not through sense perception through a mental faculty analogous to sense perception...”⁹¹

As examples of Defenders, consider G. E. Moore, Robert Adams, and Frank Jackson. Moore’s grandiloquent denouncements of moral philosophy are not, as one might expect, the harbingers of

90. John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin UK, 1977).

91. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 155.

a revolutionary transvaluation of values; by the end of *Principia Ethica* he has given a sophisticated 300 page articulation of the yawningly common judgment that beauty, friendship, and knowledge are goods. Robert Adams' metaethical work aims to capture the common sense belief that morality is objective... by providing a systematic defense of Platonism. Plato sees goodness as becoming like god: "Fleeing [evil] is becoming like god so far as one can, and to become like god is to become just and pious with wisdom."⁹² And Adams defends this resemblance relation as well. But not all Defenders are non-naturalists. Frank Jackson's influential account of functionalism⁹³ aims to naturalize "mature folk morality" without necessarily invalidating all of it.

It does no good to object that the Great Platitudes are *evil* or *oppressive*, binding women to social subjugation or condemning the poor to poverty. Rather, the corrections to the errors of European (and more broadly, western) moral philosophy are contained *within the resources* of western moral philosophy. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" tells more powerfully against sexism or classism than any revolutionary ideal.

Virtue not Optional Response

This objection, as stated, misses the point. By arguing that virtues – whatever they may turn out to be – are those qualities needed by practical reasoners, we are not arguing about the *concept* of virtue but that *very qualities themselves*. Any culture, business, family, civilization, will thrive insofar as it is virtuous and disintegrate insofar as it fails. Virtue is necessary because it is human. Justice, prudence, and courage are "needed in any human-scale enterprise"⁹⁴, from motherhood, to a successful career, to farming.

Put negatively, the thesis of this chapter is that vices necessarily contribute to misery, unhappiness, and human stultification and stagnation. Human nature is the starting point, flourishing

92. Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato Statesman* 176a5-b2; John M Armstrong, "After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004): 171–83.

93. Frank Jackson, "From Metaphysics to Ethics" (Clarendon Press, 1998).

94. Geach, *The Virtues*.

is the goal, and the moral and intellectual virtues are the means by which we move from start to goal. Vices are those qualities that partly constitute human misery. Many kinds of living conditions are miserable; excessive cold or heat; starvation; illness; mental handicap; injury; extreme isolation and loneliness, and so on. But these kinds of circumstances are not *always* and *necessarily* miserable. Rather, being a lying, treacherous, scheming, envious, whining, daydreaming moral agent is truly miserable, even such happens to have a comfortable bed to sleep in and enough money to get through life. Such a person is despicable, a worthy specimen of human failure.

Some vices, especially intellectual vices, are especially despicable. Not everyone has equal amounts of intelligence conceived as raw mental horsepower. Some children even at a young age excel at doing “mental math” or memorizing geographical names, while others never acquire the knack for it. However, not all unintelligent people are stupid in the deplorable sense: stubborn, unteachable, slow to learn and resenting every bit, arrogant, smug, self-satisfied, and willfully ignorant. Such persons demonstrate intellectual vices noxious to all their fellows except those equally debased, and especially noxious to those unfortunate enough to be their teachers, parents, or guardians. And such intellectual vices are in a special way exemplary of human failing.

Another answer: deontic necessity

‘Telos’ picks out the Greek concept of an end, purpose, direction, limit, fulfillment, destination. It is pretty clear that human beings set ends for themselves, undertake projects, chart courses in a particular direction, and so on. To say that there is a “given” telos for humanity is to suggest that there is at least one or a set of ends “built in.”⁹⁵ Put crudely, there are some goals we *ought* to have regardless of our other goals; or perhaps more accurately, the concept of inbuilt teleology suggests that there are some ends we *simply have* by virtue of being human. The question then becomes how to coordinate our chosen ends and our “given” ends. This question is by no means easy. However, I shall take a stab at it.

95. Ibid., chap. 1.

One way that moral philosophers (divine command theorists and Kantians, for instance) answer the question of the relation between our inbuilt ends and our chosen ends is to suggest that our inbuilt ends are “categorical imperatives” — that is, imperatives that are obligatory and authoritatively binding regardless of our chosen ends. The divine command theorist sees laws of God being objectively binding on all human beings. The Kantian substitutes a divine law for an autonomous, self-given law that each rational agent necessarily imposes upon oneself. However, each of these theories makes the law a brute obligation, a necessity without further conditions.

The virtue theorists I am discussing — and in some cases defending — take a different approach. Rather than treating the moral law as a divine “positive law” or a law of practical reason as such, they treat moral laws such as they are as laws of nature. Of course, these are not “descriptive” laws of nature, like the law of universal gravitation. It is a brute prescriptive law arising from the nature of humans as such. Now, since humans are (as I shall argue) rational animals, my view aligns rather closely with Kant’s. However, I take a different line of argument on the controversy Kant had with Reinhold and others about whether or not one can freely choose to disobey the moral law. Kant thought one could not, since he defined “freedom” as conformity to the moral law (rather than conformity to natural, selfish, law of inclination or egoism). My view is closer to Reinhold’s on this point, in that I think that our natural law is objectively prescriptive and binding, and in some sense defines who we *already are*, but that it is given to us to fulfill. We must align our chosen end with our given end. Failing to achieve our given end is, by definition, human misery. So even if I am “successful” in achieving my chosen ends, I shall be necessarily miserable if my chosen ends are radically opposed to my given ends.

Response to Beneficial by Definition

The second objection, building on the above response, is about the very definition of virtue as a *beneficial* or “positive” character trait. To see the problem, 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, is this a trivial truth? An analytic truth? The affirmation that ‘courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good’ would appear to amount to the life-altering revelation that ‘good things are good’.

This is an important objection but also misses the point. It is a synthetic truth discoverable only by reflection that humans have a nature, a telos, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our telos while others are conducive to our stultification. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn’t mean it is content-less.⁹⁶ All truths are true, in part, in virtue of the words used. But not all truths by definition are empty and content-less; rather, the stuff of life from which we derive our conceptual definitions or which we must fit into our conceptual definitions is a contentfull task. Let’s consider this objection in another way.

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96. Ibid., Chapter 1.

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97. Mackie, *Ethics*.

98. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 155.

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Hursthouse

In response, it is worth pointing out that, if I know that I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one, should this be possible. This is far from being a trivial point, for it gives a straightforward explanation of an important aspect of our moral life, namely the fact that we do not always act as 'autonomous', utterly self-determining agents, but quite often seek moral guidance from people we think are morally better than ourselves. When I am looking for an excuse to do something I have a horrid suspicion is wrong, I ask my moral inferiors (or peers if I am bad enough), 'Wouldn't you do such-and-such if you were in my shoes?' But when I am anxious to do what is right, and do not see my way clear, I go to people I respect and admire: people who I think are kinder, more honest, more just, wiser,

99. Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato Statesman* 176a5-b2; Armstrong, "After the Ascent."

100. Jackson, "From Metaphysics to Ethics."

than I am myself, and ask them what they would do in my circumstances. How, or indeed whether, utilitarianism and deontology can explain this fact, I do not know, but, as I said, the explanation within the terms of virtue ethics is straightforward. If you want to do what is right, and doing what is right is doing what the virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, then you should find out what she would do if you do not already know.¹⁰¹

101. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 35.