Chapter 1

What We Are

> Human nature is normative, such that to be morally good is to fulfill one's nature.
>
> —Christopher Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism,"221.

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

My thesis in this chapter is a normative one: virtues for practical rational primates are excellent rational practices and practical reasoning – while irrational practices and practical irrationality are natural vices. To put a fine point on it, the description of a fully virtuous agent is a more accurate description of 'the human being' than any mere statistical generalization. Human virtue – and especially practical wisdom – describe *what we are*. The task of the moral life is to become what we are.

My purpose is to defend this paradoxical notion by building on the normative virtue

theories of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre.[1] These neo-Aristotelians show how it is possible to evaluate the kind of life one is actually living with reference to the normatively human. I also discuss and critique their accounts. The result is a unified view according to which virtues are excellences of rational practice and practical reasoning, while vices are constituted by irrational practices and defective practical reasoning.

Section 1 draws from Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre to develop a concept of virtue: firstly, virtues benefit humankind (including but not limited to their possessor) while vices harm. This point breaks down the putative divide between altruistic or other-regarding and self-regarding virtues.

Section 2 argues that virtues constitute excellent human *functioning* and that they are especially beneficial in that they are corrective of tempting vices.

Section 3 virtues are not just any positive traits such as those given by luck, nor are they necessarily even *acquired* at all – rather, virtues are in principle *acquirable*.

Section 4 argues that some virtues are excellences of "rational practicing" while others are excellences of practical reasoning about one's whole life.

Section 5 argues that virtues are excellences of "social reasoning" in that they enable the health and progress of societies and traditions.

1. I derive their views from a variety of sources. Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay. For MacIntyre, I draw from *After Virtue*, where he builds his three stage account of virtue (relating to practice, then life, then tradition) from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition. But I also draw from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animals*. McDowell's writings on virtue and reason span several essays and books, such as *Mind, Value and Reality*. I especially draw from "Virtue and Reason" and "Values as Secondary Qualities."

1. Virtue as Natural Goodness

Foot, MacIntyre, and McDowell each offer detailed accounts of virtue and its relation to reason and nature. For example, Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.[2] Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the virtuous person to succeed in individual practices, in life, and in traditions.[3] John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.[4] My goal in this section is to articulate a fairly comprehensive treatment of virtue, drawn from what these three writers agree on, but sensitive to what they disagree on. I shall first state eight points about virtue and vices that bring these ethical concepts into clear light.

The first point about virtue is that virtues are beneficial to their possessor. Hursthouse calls this "Plato's requirement" on the virtues: "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms."[5] While virtues may come with a cost, there is something counterintuitive about the notion that X is a virtue that could, in the end, ultimately be a detriment its possessor.

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

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

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

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

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

MacIntyre agrees. For MacIntyre, virtues are "acquired *human* qualities."[6] Such human qualities enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods.* MacIntyre's second clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. For MacIntyre, a virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills.

Assuming that virtues cannot go bad will bring some trouble for MacIntyre's initial definition in *After Virtue*. 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, the prude moderate? MacIntyre indexes virtues to the *goods* internal to practices, but can't practices themselves be wicked? We might say this is the problem of *virtue going bad.*

I should explore three possible responses to this problem before offering my own solution. The first response is to stipulate away the possibility that virtues can go bad. For example, Jonathan Sanford's recent monograph, *Before Virtue*, argues that Aristotle's doctrine that "it is impossible to exercise any virtue, with the exception of technical skill, wrongly."[7] On this response, virtues are always good, such that if a particular action or trait turns out to be bad, then it must not be a virtuous action or trait. The danger of this response

6. Presumably, the point of specifying that virtues are *human* qualities here is to contrast human excellence with analogous formal or functional biological features that enable non-human animals to survive and thrive (e.g., the flexible flagellum of a bacterium, the swiftness of a deer. For MacIntyre's initial formulation here, such biological features are excluded from the class of virtues by definition; his later *Dependent Rational Animals* retracts the assumed divide between human and non-human animals.

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

is that it seems like an ad hoc "No True Scotsman" fallacy.[8]

It seems to me Foot argues that virtues cannot go bad while trying to do justice to the worry that the stipulation is ad hoc. Her solution is, I think, ingenious. She makes an analogy to poisons and 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.[9]

An agent's commission of an otherwise virtuous action may be a mistake *for that agent* at that time.

A second, slightly different response is to allow that some virtues can go bad under certain conditions; and so individual virtues although *usually* or *typically* operating toward good ends *can* be corrupted in the absence of a higher-order executive virtue that coordinates virtues toward their proper ends and recognizes if and when a particular virtue has limits. That executive virtue is usually taken to be practical wisdom. An apparently courageous act may serve depraved ends if we allow that the apparently courageous person acted unwisely *in this case*. On this second response, all the virtues depend for their successful execution on the coordinating management of practical wisdom. We might categorize John McDowell's account as an example of this type. In "Virtue and Reason," he argues that all virtues are, in the end, examples of practical wisdom. And since practical wisdom, by definition, cannot

8. For example, Smith: All Scotsmen love haggis. Jones: But McDougal over there is a Scotsman, and he hates haggis. Smith: That just goes to show McDougal is no *true* Scotsman. Cf. Antony Flew, *Thinking About Thinking: Or, Do I Sincerely Want to Be Right?* (Fontana/Collins, 1975)

9. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 16.

go bad, the problem of *virtues going bad* does not arise. "Virtues" benefit their possessor since they amount to the kind of wisdom by which one is able to live a good life. (I shall dispute McDowell's conflation of all virtues with practical wisdom in chapter 5.)

A third response is to expose a hidden assumption in the problem. There are admittedly putative cases of virtues going bad; the critic alleges that *any* traditional virtue might turn out to be bad in some circumstance. To assert that *no traits* are always good would be to beg the question in favor of moral nihilism or relativism.

It seems to me the safest course is to insist on the following minimal stipulation: almost all virtues almost always benefit their possessor. By this stipulation, any theory of virtue according to which virtues turn out to harm their possessor *overall* is simply ruled out. At the same time, the stipulation has three strengths. First, it allows us to take seriously cases wherein a seeming virtue seems to harm its possessor or others; perhaps, if a trait is not beneficial, then we have simply misjudged it as a virtue. Secondly, it allows us to concede the intuitive objection that some virtues (honesty) might be corruptible by the presence of overwhelming vices (such as cruelty) or that individual virtues (such as courage) may be *costly* and so cause their possessor pain or discomfort – many a just politician has passed up personal wealth by refusing bribes. Thirdly, this minimal stipulation agrees with Foot that at least one virtue – practical wisdom – is *always* operative to good ends. I shall discuss this problem a bit more below. For now, I conclude that almost all virtues, if they are truly virtues, are almost always beneficial.

Plato's requirement is that virtues benefit their possessor. I have allowed that they may cause their possessor to lose out on money, fame, or comfort. A related query is whether virtues are supposed to benefit *others* as well or only their possessor. For some virtues, the answer is clearly *both*. Still, aren't some individual virtues *more* beneficial to one party, possibly at the expense of the other?

The answer is difficult to state systematically. By hypothesis, virtues are beneficial

to *human beings* as a kind, not just this or that individual. One can approach the thesis that virtues are beneficial to human beings qua human from two angles. Consider moderation with respect to alcohol. Such moderation benefits one's family, one's community and so on. The ravages of alcoholism on marriages, children, and extended families are widely known. So it would seem to be altruistic not to over-drink. Nevertheless, moderation with alcohol also benefits oneself. Indeed, parsing up the benefit seems foolhardy. (Who benefits more, your children or your liver?)

For virtues such as justice or charity, the answer might be less clear, but the lack of clarity does not damage the account. Foot says, "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."[10] Even so, she finds the alleged paradox between what we might wish to call "selfish" and "altruistic" virtues overblown.

Certainly, sometimes life presents us with the opportunity to pursue only one of two contradicting or apparently irreconcilable goods; my own good *versus* your good. Sometimes, however, the cases in which virtuous deeds necessitate the loss of other goods are not so devastating as they might appear. It might be that, on occasion, it is better (say) for my family that I sacrifice my health in working hard to earn higher wages; while on other occasions it is better for my family that I sacrifice higher wages to keep myself healthy. Even when there is a clear, irresolvable tension between my good and the good of the group (as when, say, I must sacrifice my life), we can make sense of the demand of morality by appealing to what is necessary *for humans* in general. As Geach says: "Men need virtues as bees need stings. An individual bee may perish from stinging, all the same bees need stings; an individual man may perish by being brave or justice, but all the same, men need courage

10. Ibid., 3.

and justice."[11] 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 preserve themselves *and* to obey the moral law.

Some critics have posed an objection to the effect that virtues are what Kant would call "hypothetical imperatives" – that we only need virtue *if* we want to be happy. On the contrary, the acquisition of virtue is a formal necessity for all members of the human race. As the gestating bee needs to develop its sting in order to realize its life form, we need virtues *to be human*. If this is right, then everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits such as being moderate, tolerant, and wise. Consider only practical wisdom for the moment: the obligation to become practically wise stems not from the agent's prior commitment to happiness but simply from finding oneself to be a human, and hence subject to a particular form of practical life which, as it turns out, is perfected or realized by practical wisdom.

A somewhat different critic might accept the analogy between human virtues and bee stings but point out that, in fact, some bees *don't* need stings. For example, considering the common honey bee, only females, including the queen, have stings; male drones do not. By the same analogy, could there be humans that don't need some virtues? MacIntyre illustrates this objection with respect to promise-breaking. He asks us to imagine a complex, social species who each perform some function on behalf of the survival of the whole. However, the society also includes "free riders" who do not perform any function. He says:

> Such a society would suffer from a natural defect if there were too many free riders, but the existence of some free riders would not be a defect, and the free-riders are themselves not necessarily defective members of the species. For their existence might have the important function of making other members of their society and species more vigilant in sustaining the practices necessary for the society's and species' survival and functioning. So it might perhaps be for human beings with promise breakers.[12]

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

12. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Virtues in Foot and Geach," *Philosophical Quarterly*, no. 52 (2002): 621–31.

This objection brings out an important distinction between 'the human' qua a biological species bearing a common life form and humans qua members of society playing various social roles. I cannot fully explore the distinction here. Suffice it to say that the existence of various social roles with accompanying, role-specific virtues is compatible with virtues accompanying a universally distributed life form. As Foot argues: "Human beings do not get on well without [virtues]. 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."[13] Notice the generic form of her statements: "humans" do not get on well. This is compatible with saying that courage is *especially* necessary for a soldier or a firefighter. Even so, plumbers, parents, and professors need a basic level of human courage. And, again, practical wisdom is needed by all who are physically and mentally capable of acquiring it. MacIntyre's example shows how a (virtuous) society *can* sustain the presence of vice-ridden members without being utterly destroyed; it even supports the surprising notion that a virtuous society can retain or augment its virtues by supporting vice-ridden members. It does not do anything to justify the suggestion that vice-ridden members are ipso facto necessary. For even if the presence of free-riders were a net benefit to the imagined society, it is possible for others to play that role, such as the young, the critically injured, and so on.

Another critic might accept all this and ask: if people *need* the virtues, and if even "altruistic" or other-regarding virtues benefit their possessor, is it then egoistic and "selfish" to pursue virtue? Not at all. Acquiring one's own virtue is no more selfish than eating one's own food and getting one's own sleep. The pursuit of virtue is beneficial to the self, but not selfish in the pejorative sense that usually implies neglect of proper sensitivity to the needs of others. Furthermore, the charge of egoism assumes that in every case what is *good for me* is ipso facto *bad for someone else*. We need not assume this. It may be established, upon

13. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2–3.

reflection, that in some cases what might be good for me turns out to be bad for someone else, or for humanity in general, but this must be established case by case. For it may turn out that what is good for humanity in general is ipso facto good for me as a human. Take an example: I would argue that various simple pleasures of life arising from cooking and eating good food, or strolling through natural beauty, chatting with an old friend, are on balance good parts of life. But they are not *the only* goods. If they were the only goods, one might go in for those pleasures and those pleasures alone. One might construct one's whole life around them. But having moderation is a good as well. So a person who enjoys both the moderate pleasures of life and the moderation of pleasure and pain is both a better fellow and better person.

In this connection, we should recall the brief argument above that virtues are intrinsic goods. They are not just traits that *lead to good consequences* for organisms like us (that too). The recent revival of virtue consequentialism defines virtues as instrumental goods useful because they secure other, intrinsic goods.[14] Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. Alasdair MacIntyre is careful to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental goods; he says that virtues "enable their possessor to achieve … goods" of practices, which might sound as if he means virtues are mere *instruments* to goods. They are instrumental but not *merely* instrumental to the achievement of goods. They are also *partly constitutive of those goods.* I end up agreeing with Hurka's later view that virtues have "recursive" value; they are both good as means to (other) intrinsically good ends, and also have some intrinsic goodness in themselves.[15]

To use a well-worn example, it is fairly uncontroversial that friendship is a good for practically rational, social animals. Suppose that one's *having friends* depends, in part, on one's *being friendly*. What does it mean to 'be friendly'? Being affable is not enough; one

14. Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
15. Ibid., chap. 1.

must have some of the traits that make one a good friend: being a good listener, showing genuine concern for others, rejoicing when a friend's life is going well, empathizing when it is not, and so on. Such traits are not commendable *merely* because they happen to help one to have friends. Rather, they are commendable because such traits, in part, make one a good human being. It so happens that, when two people have such traits, they will be good friends to each other. Good humans make good friends. And it is better, on balance, to have those traits whether or not friends are forthcoming. Fortune may place one in a lonely setting: military posts, solitary jobs, and so on. But as Judith Thomson says, a virtue is a trait such that, "whatever else is true of those among whom we live, it is better if they have it."[16] Likewise, Philippa Foot says: "let us say then, leaving unsolved problems behind us, that virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows."[17] While we cannot pretend to have resolved the notorious tensions between altruism and egoism, we must move on in the pursuit of a definition of virtue.

2. Excellent and Corrective Traits

The second point about virtue is that virtues cause and partly constitute the excellent functioning of a human being. What is 'excellence'? The concept of excellence is relative to an object's nature and function. The common example is that the function of a knife is to cut, so an excellent knife *cuts well*. More complex beings have more complex functions and therefore a more complex kind of excellence. An excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, but remains gentle with friends, and so on. Artifacts receive their function by design, but even a natural entity such as a dog receives an artificial function

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

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

(guarding) by design. It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that *all* functions are artificial objects of human invention. On this view, natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function, and no function at all unless one is imposed upon it by an agent from the outside.

As I have argued, however, natural organisms have natural functions, namely to develop fully into what they are. Even without knowing the full details of its origin, we can empirically discover the telos of an organism by observing it grow in proper conditions, and discerning between exemplary and non-exemplary members of the kind. We can learn that an acorn is a *Quercus alba* (white oak) only by observing and reflecting upon its development from embryonic stages to maturity, and by observing the characteristic activities exhibited by mature, typical members of the species. Likewise, the use of dogs in guarding roles is not *only* artificial; even before breeding, some dogs are not at all suited to the task, while others are well suited. We observe that the natural behavior of some full-grown, healthy dogs is to be more alert, protective, fierce, or what have you. Breeders and trainers then augment these natural ends and direct them toward human ends.

A natural inference to draw would be that human beings have a "function," howsoever complex, and that a detailed knowledge of this function is necessary for defining human excellence. I am persuaded by Geach that it is not necessary to be able to specify in great detail, in advance, our function. He says:

> … in that way of thinking it makes good sense to ask 'What are men for?' We may not be so ready with an answer, even a partial answer, as when we ask 'What are hearts for?… But there's always right to my mind in desiderating an answer – the success in bringing men's partial organs and activities under a teleological account should encourage us to think that some answer maybe found. Not as quickly as Aristotle thought it does not show straight off what men are for if we know that men and men only are capable of theoretical discourse… Consider the fact that people of different religions or of no religion at all can agree to build and rent a hospital, and agree broadly and what shall be done in the hospital. There will of course be marginal policy disagreements… But there can be an agreement on fighting disease, because

> disease impedes men's efforts towards most goals.[18]

Geach goes on, later in the same book, to argue for a quite particular conception of the function or telos of humanity. For my purposes, I remain content to hypothesize a quite general function in accord with the pattern above. The function of a practical rational primate is, at least, to become a fully mature practical rational primate – to become, as Pindar recommends, what we are, having learned what that is. This quite general function should not be interpreted to mean that virtuous human beings just sit around "being human" all day; they perform "characteristic action" typical of the species, whatever that turns out to be. Just as we cannot define a priori how tall redwoods grow or the lifespan of an red-toothed shrew, we should not expect that we could define, a priori, how wise a human specimen can become. Instead, we should preserve a healthy agnosticism that is open to new possibilities. Wisdom, like knowledge, is expansive; how many languages can one person learn? 10? 25? 100?[19] How widespread can competence with the basics of quantum physics become? Similarly, how much practical wisdom can one person acquire in a lifetime? How much practical wisdom can a society accumulate in a hundred generations? It seems to me that these questions admit of no obvious, in principle limits.

Still, readers could rightly demand more details. People and societies disagree; does my account offer any judgment on who is right, or who is close? My goal here is to lay the foundations, not to build the whole structure. Nor should we be dismayed at wide and often stubborn disagreement between varying traditions as to which exemplars best represent fully mature, practically wise human beings. The inquiry is a difficult one, and perhaps requires that the inquirer attain to practical wisdom before being able to properly judge the merits of each case. I only insist, here, that we do not need to specify at the outset anything

18. Geach, *The Virtues*, 12–13.

19. Many polyglots are known to have mastered upwards of 20 languages. Some, such as Sir John Bowring, knew as many as a hundred.

more than that the characteristic actions of practical rational primates will involve the kinds of virtuous actions and excellent practical reasoning that I am developing.

That said, it is much easier to spot weak and sickly specimens of a species. In plants, a well-trained botanist can diagnose *something wrong* with even an unfamiliar species via tell-tale signs such as spots, colors, and sickly shapes. Similarly, a competent adult can diagnose *something wrong* with a hopelessly addicted drug-user whose habit is ruining his or her life, or with an incorrigible fool whose life is tragically cut short by his or her own recklessness.

A related point is that virtues are corrective. As Foot argues, virtues become urgent when common vices become tempting: they stand "at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good."[20]

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

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

Consider Kant's problem of the happy philanthropist. This problem is the troubling and dissonant conclusion that if a very generous philanthropist gets great pleasure out of

20. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 8.

helping others then such actions display no moral worth. Surely a commonsense moral judgment would accord moral worth to the very fact that the philanthropist *enjoys* doing what is good. The philanthropist doesn't grit his teeth and do good. Gritting one's teeth and doing good is what Aristotle would call mere *continence*; the virtuous philanthropist enjoys the activity in accord with virtue. Ease or fluency in performing virtuous activity is baked in to the definition of the virtuous person.

Kant's error, according to Foot, is in failing to distinguish that which is "in accord" with virtue from that which is *virtuous* full stop. It may be, for example, that a novice tennis player makes an expert shot while remaining merely a novice. The hit is "in accord" with excellence but is not, in this case, an instance of excellence – only beginner's luck. In her self-love example, Foot points out that there is no virtue required to eat one's breakfast and avoid life-threatening danger, but there may sometimes be cases where self-love is a duty – even a difficult, painful duty. She says, "sometimes it is what is owed to others that should keep a man from destroying himself, and then he may act out of a sense of duty."[21] So the solution to the happy philanthropist problem is this: if the philanthropist really does have character such that he is delighted helping others, he is morally praiseworthy *because he has worked to achieve that character*. As Foot 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.[22]

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.

Commonsense would judge that a philanthropist who persists in virtue even when he does not enjoy giving is also praiseworthy. Foot explains this too. She allows that it

21. Ibid., 13.
22. Ibid., 14.

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.[23]

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.

I would like to respond to two possible worries some readers may have. The first worry is that defining virtue as "beneficial" or "positive" by definition is circular and therefore empty. Suppose we define "boldness" as *doing hard things* and "courage" as doing hard things when it is good. Boldness is, so to speak, value neutral. One can be bold in wrongdoing or bold in doing well. If courage is just boldness in doing good, then the affirmation that 'courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good' would appear to amount to the trivial revelation that 'good things are good.' And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial.

This is an important objection, but it misses the point. These ethical propositions are not tautologous but are so widely and commonly accepted as to be easily mistaken for tautologies. If we define "kindness" simply as "a disposition of treating others *in a good way*" then it appears that "it is good to be kind" amounts to the same tautologous proposition "it is good to be good." But kindness is *not* best defined simply as *something good*. Instead, we must realize that some ethical propositions are synthetic, yet so widely believed and so widely affirmed that they appear to be tautologous. Some philosophers argue that this

23. Ibid., 14.

widespread, near universal belief is a sign that these propositions are self-evidently true. For instance, Russ Shafer-Landau says:

> It seems to me self-evident that, other things equal, it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent…[24]

Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is a content-less tautology.[25] That kindness is good is rather a hard-won insight. Only by reflection can we know that humans have a nature and a species-specific kind of flourishing. Only by reflection can we learn which character traits are conducive to the realization of our life form while others are conducive to its stultification. (I return to this issue in chapter 5.)

A second worry is that this account of virtue sets the bar for virtue too high. I agree with Foot on this point. She denies the suggestion that *only* those who are completely virtuous are virtuous at all. There is at least one virtue that always operates as a virtue, namely, practical wisdom. While it might make some sense to speak of "foolish courage" (recklessness) or "foolish moderation" (prudishness) it makes no sense to speak of "foolish wisdom." Knowledge may and does contribute to wicked actions, but wisdom (by definition) entails a proper application of knowledge. Since wisdom always operates as a virtue, we admire wisdom perhaps most of all.[26] Secondly, we do admire virtues when they all appear in a remarkably virtuous person and when only one or two appear in a partially virtuous person. Foot says:

> There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired.

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

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

26. As we shall see in McDowell's discussion of virtue-as-knowledge in chapter 5, it might be that when we admire a person's courage or moderation, we are often admiring the wisdom *in* the courage and the wisdom *in* the moderation.

> 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.[27]

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

3. Acquirable

A fourth attribute of virtues is that they are acquirable. MacIntyre above defined virtues as *acquired* human qualities. (I would only modify this definition to "acquirable," because not everyone has all the virtues and some people never acquire some virtues.) *How* virtue is to be acquired is an age-old theme.[28] Even without stating *how* virtues are acquired, it is still essential to see that they must be *acquirable.*

On my view, we are ultimately responsible for our 'moral' traits. We can voluntarily lose them or attain them by sustained intentional effort. For example, Foot thinks virtues are revealed not only by a person's abilities but by his or her *intentions*. What are intentions? She argues that the 'will' or practical reason must be understood in its broadest sense, "to cover what is wished for as well as what is sought."[29] Considered thus broadly, practical reason (or the will) contrasts with one's fortune and luck. Call "fortune" all those features

27. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 17.

28. 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?", John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997), *Meno* 70a. While Plato gives hints as to his answer, Socrates himself punts on the question of how virtue is acquired and directs Meno to what virtue is. Moral philosophers have continued to try to answer this question for the last 2,400 years. That said, my goal here is not to address *how* virtue is acquired. My only goal here is to argue that a trait must be *acquirable* to be a virtue.

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

of one's life and character that are fixed prior to or independent of practical reasoning. Most basically, all of us are practical rational primates by fortune. We all exist in a time and place in history, with a genetic identity derived from our parents, and grow up in a culture and tradition we receive from our parents, guardians, friends, and so on. As we become adults, we become gradually more responsible for our own character, our decisions, and our habits. So perhaps practical reasoning is the process of deciding what to do with one's fortune: what long-term projects to pursue and which objects are worthwhile to obtain, and how to react to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."[30] We ultimately decide whether to become – or not to become – fully human.

Saying that virtues are acquirable by intentional effort is not sufficient. We do not judge a person to be virtuous even if he or she is a well-intentioned nincompoop who always harms when "helping." 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* – the exculpation might be called for when circumstances were not favorable, chances of success were low, etc. Instead, a virtuous action is one that aims at the right thing in the right way, and flows out of a person's acquired character. 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 *A Single Pebble*, a John Hersey novel in which a man saves a boy from drowning:

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

Foot's comment is this:

30. *Hamlet* III.1

> 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 are often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.[31]

I find this analysis convincing. The outward behavior (the swift response) discloses not only the savior's intentions and attitudes but something even deeper, such as settled dispositions that can be betrayed in the smallest facial expressions or the most "instinctive" gut reactions. To capture a similar point in a slightly different way, consider Hursthouse's argument that virtuous dispositions are "multi-track" dispositions. She says:

> A virtue such as honesty or generosity is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous, nor is it to be helpfully specified as a "desirable" or "morally valuable" character trait. It is, indeed a character trait – that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say "goes all the way down", unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker – but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. (Hence the extreme recklessness of attributing a virtue on the basis of a single action.)[32]

There is a clear similarity, I think, between Hursthouse's notion of a multi-track disposition and McDowell's notion of perceptual sensitivity. To be sensitive to a range of requirements for action involves one's emotions, beliefs, habits, and so on. Virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is the process of acquiring new traits one does not have but potentially can have (or of shedding old traits one has but can potentially lose).

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31. Ibid., 5.
32. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

I have asserted that virtues are in principle acquirable for human beings. As stated, this assertion presents us with numerous puzzles. For example, some skills are acquirable but do not seem to be moral virtues. And some excellences seem to be instances of non-moral natural goodness but are not acquirable. How then can we distinguish moral excellence from skill or strength (which are mostly acquirable rather than inborn) as well as from physical beauty or natural intelligence (which are mostly inborn rather than acquirable)?

One reason these puzzles arise is that there exists a terminological disconnect between the older understanding of morality and the usual modern understanding. (I shall attempt to disentangle the various senses of the term 'moral' in chapter 5.) On the one hand, as Foot explains, *ἀρετή* (excellence) for the Greeks refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice."[33] Likewise, MacIntyre says, "The word *arete*, which later comes to be translated as 'virtue,' is in the Homeric poems used for excellence of any kind; a fast runner displays the arete of his feet (*Iliad* 20. 411) and a son excels his father in every kind of arete-as athlete, as soldier and in mind (*Iliad* 15. 642)."[34] There are many traits (we might call them *skills*) that are beneficial to their possessor and others. Even if we grant that skills are goods-of-a-kind and that a virtue is a good of a kind, skills do not seem to us particularly *moral*.[35] On the other hand, even the traditional list of "moral virtues" (Greek: *arete ethikai*; Latin: *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

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

34. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

35. 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).

it at all, we would be inclined to classify as an intellectual virtue. Finally, not all of the items on a comprehensive 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.

The first step toward untangling this puzzle is to observe that skills are indexed to practices and social roles. Virtues are indexed to our life form. Skills are only needed by those who undertake those practices, but virtues are needed by all. A quick wit is necessary for being a comedian; courage is needed for being a human being. Keen eyesight and reliable memory may contribute to a pleasant life and success in various pursuits, but the cardinal virtues are necessary for success in *any* worthwhile human endeavor.

This response poses a new problem: Suppose Smith and Jones have grown up in very different cultures with very different kinds of parents and very different opportunities. Both are, so to speak, front-loaded with virtuous or vicious habits. Do they then have no chance to acquire new virtues or shed vices? Or even if traits that are initially inculcated in a child by parenting, education, and tradition may be modified later, doesn't their initial reception break down the dichotomy between what is in one or out of one's control?

It is true that for the first decade (or two?) we are not primarily responsible for our own training and formation. However, unless illness or injury interrupt it, part of the normal process of childhood development is the gradual transferring of responsibility from caretakers to child. Without having to pin down exactly when one becomes an adult fully responsible for oneself, we can put it this way: one is morally responsible for the character and mind one has *by the end* of life, rather than the beginning. Virtues and vices are first inculcated in a child by fortune and tradition and only later modified by that individual's own initiative. On a related note, MacIntyre agrees with Aristotle that virtues are "natural" for humans. More exactly, Aristotle taught that virtue is *in accordance with* nature but not *by nature*. That is, virtues are not *natural* in the sense that natural attributes such as

hair color are 'automatic' but they are natural in the sense that they are *proper* to human beings, they are formal features of practical, rational animals. Virtuous traits are a normal psychological result of cultivating excellence within particular human practices.

It is quite possible that Smith received many of the benefits of good fortune while Jones suffered terrible fortune. Let us grant the earlier points, that (1) they do not need the same set of skills if they won't perform the same social function and that (2) they both need the same "moral skills" essential to any human life, such as relating to their friends and family, cultivating their talents, facing challenges bravely and negotiating difficult decisions with wisdom. Are they equally responsible to acquire all the same virtues? As a matter of fact, few people acquire all or even many of the virtues. But all who are capable of practical reason can and must acquire some. Still, are all virtues acquirable by all? I think an adequate answer to begin with is the motto, '*as many as possible and as much as possible.*'

Let me unpack this. It is not necessarily the case that every person can acquire every virtue equally. Aristotle taught that "affability" was a virtue. Modern readers might be inclined to smile at the notion that inborn friendliness and cordiality make one somehow *morally* better than their melancholic counterparts. I do not think he was completely wrong in judging this trait to be humanly important. Social interactions are an optional part of most human lives, and even if we do not typically classify affability as a *moral* virtue we do tend to admire those who have a proper amount of affability and blame those who are excessively aloof or excessively cloying. If affability is indeed a human norm, are some human norms merely commendable but not obligatory – not "perfect duties" in Kant's sense?

The answer requires some sensitivity to circumstance. A family suffering from undernourishment needs to practice moderation in a very different manner than a wealthy family experiencing surplus. Nevertheless, if it is possible to discover fundamental human virtues (like moderation and practical wisdom), then it is possible to discover virtues the acquisition of which is incumbent upon everyone regardless of their circumstances. Indeed,

practical wisdom is needed by all to help identify which virtues and skills are needed in their circumstances. It would be practical folly to take adverse circumstances as an excuse not to acquire any particular virtues.

Relatedly, I want to preempt the suggestion that those who are, say, natively affable or intelligent are *morally* superior to those who are natively solitary or unintelligent. Just as some are natively more physically healthy than others, we can affirm that nature distributes a diversity of gifts. There is no "fault" in being less fortunate. We have to remember the lesson that Anscombe taught us: the peculiarly "ought" in virtue ethics is not the same as the verdictive, divine law "ought."[36] We ought to become as virtuous and wise as possible because that is our natural end. The failure to do so is a natural evil. For neo-Aristotelians, virtues are not obedience to categorical imperatives or divine commands; they are ways of developing one's emotions into the likeness of a true human being.

But again, at some point of natural maturation we become responsible for acquiring whatever virtues we lack, even within the limitations of our own aptitudes. And most people in the world will not write books, and so the excellence intrinsic to academic practices are not necessarily *human* virtues; however, every human being in the world is a practical, rational primate and has biological parents and so needs the excellence intrinsic to the practice of human life. Even orphans and street urchins live in some form of community.

I must return to the problem of Smith and Jones above. Smith's good fortune consists not only in the enjoyment of positive external circumstances but the acquisition of some moral virtues from a young age. Jones is less virtuous even before they both reach an age of self-responsibility. How is this fair? First, fortune is certainly not fair. This kind of unfairness cannot be totally eradicated. Secondly, even if some good traits may be inculcated at a young age, rational adults must take responsibility for rendering them secure. Likewise, even if some negative traits may be inculcated at a young age, rational adults

36. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."

must take responsibility for changing them.

We may praise or appreciate those who enjoy good fortune; but we *admire* those who have taken what gifts of fortune they have and put them to good use. We especially admire those who have overcome misfortune to acquire excellence and wisdom against the odds. Compare, for example, the crowds cheering for Olympic runner Derek Redmond when he is winning the gold medal with the crowds cheering for Derek Redmond finishing last after his hamstring tore and his father helped him to cross the finish line. There have been many gold medal winning races that millions of people have witnessed and forgotten. But this race, when an otherwise naturally talented and well-trained athlete finished *last* that remains forever etched in the memory of millions more. It's not just the unbridled emotion Redmond displayed in that moment which so touches viewers; it's the obvious love from his father shown in supporting his son's commitment to finish the race, even dead last. Likewise for Smith and Jones. Suppose that by the time Smith comes of age he or she is moderate, courageous, and relatively wise while Jones is immoderate, cowardly, and foolish. At some point, both agents take their own character in hand and practically reason about how to live. Jones would be all the more admirable if he or she became virtuous against the odds.

We can make a final comment about a case like Smith and Jones where their respective levels of virtue and vice are unequal even from a young age. Rather than resolving us of responsibility for our own character, this possibility underscores the importance of moral and intellectual education. In some very key respects, the acquisition of virtues and vices with which we begin adult life depends upon our education.[37] 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,

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

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 follows all the doctor's orders 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 even across generations. 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.

By calling virtues *acquirable* I mean to argue that certain fundamental moral and intellectual virtues as obligatory on all adequately mature and functional human adults – such as those given emphasis by the Aristotelian tradition, such as courage, justice, moderation or self-control, and practical wisdom. But my account makes space for the commonsense thought that some traits (say, affability) are not obligatory for *everyone* to acquire equally. Furthermore, it may very well be that particular virtues – like skills – are especially necessary (or especially optional) for people in particular social roles or stages of life. Nevertheless, practical wisdom is one virtue that is especially important, because it is obligatory on all potentially practical rational primates – namely, all human beings – and because practical wisdom enables one to adjudicate which and to what extent the other virtues are needful in one's own case.

4. Rational and Practical

The fourth attribute I would like to discuss is this: virtues are those traits that enable excellence in rational practices and practical reasoning. The remainder of this chapter focuses on these two related concepts. In this pursuit, I shall first summarize MacIntyre's notion of "practice," which is both an interesting concept in its own right and also crucial to MacIn-

tyre's account in *After Virtue*.

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

> [1] a complex social activity that [2] enables participants to gain goods 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.[38]

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

38. Christopher Lutz, "Alasdair MacIntyre," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015.

seems to me the primary goal of education, which is education (in knowledge) and training (in skills) needed for becoming a functional, legal adult.

Secondary education in the U.S. is a practice. It has a history (or a set of histories) dating back to the colonial era, with a significant shift in the 1910-1940s when secondary schooling became the rule rather than the exception. The practice has its own standards, both legal 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.

One other feature of MacIntyre's concept of practice deserves comment. He defined virtues with reference to goods *"internal to"* practices, and later refashions the contrast between 'internal' and 'external' goods into one between 'goods of excellence' and 'goods of effectiveness.'[39] What is the point of this distinction?

39. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Macintyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (University of Notre Dame, 1998), 55.

The "goods of excellence" of a practice are those that *necessarily* contribute to success within a given practice. In secondary education, success is defined by, say, graduation rates, retention of information, high test scores, acceptance to good colleges, low drug use, and so on. The profession-specific virtues needed include understanding (to stay patient with struggling students), affability (to keep rapport), articulateness (to present material effectively), and so on. More general virtues needed include honesty, integrity, courage, faithfulness, and so on. Without these, *teaching* may be possible but *teaching well* is impossible.

By contrast, goods of effectiveness are those that might fit with the practice but are not *necessary* for achieving the end of that practice: high pay, an excellent teacher lounge, a short commute to work, and so on. Mere efficiency in attaining such external goods does not entail the presence of a virtue. In fact, the desire to pursue such goods *instead of* the goods of excellence is not a neutral desire — it is a *temptation.* Virtues are needed to overcome those temptations and to succeed according to the standards of the practice itself.[40]

It is important to hold in mind both *practices* and *practical reasoning*. The virtuous agent does not merely act well (without reasoning) nor merely reason well (without acting). I would suggest that McDowell is wrong to assert that *all* of virtue is by definition a kind of practical knowledge or disposition. Rather, *some* virtues are excellences in practical reasoning but others are excellences in rational practice. (I offer a full critique of McDowell's conception of moral and practical reasoning in chapters 5 and 6.) Acting takes a moment of time; the cultivation and maintenance of habits takes a longer period of time; but living a good life takes a lifetime. So it is impossible to give an adequate account of virtue without

40. 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.

considering one's life as a whole. Practical reasoning is the name we give to that whole complex process by which we undertake to direct our own lives.

Turning again to *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's first stage defined virtue in relation to practices. His second stage goes further to include the whole of life.[41] 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."[42] 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."[43]

Envisaging human life in this way faces serious obstacles. Answering them requires doing a bit of philosophy of action. The two kinds of obstacles MacIntyre cites are (a) social and (b) philosophical. The social obstacle is the fragmentation of modern life: "work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms."[44] Just as the temporal segments of life are fragmented into bits (one thinks of the inherently patronizing talk of "senior citizens" compared from the older, inherently reverent talk of "elders"), so also the various projects and pursuits of life are partitioned, labeled, 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, and business spheres, in young, middle-aged, and old age, etc.

The philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions… in terms

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

of simple components."[45] 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.'[46]

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. The action is 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.[47] 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."[48] MacIntyre's astonishing conclusion from these innocuous premises is this: "there is no such thing as 'behavior,' to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings… Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[49] MacIntyre scholar Stanley Hauerwas argues that the central point in *After Virtue* is "the concept of an intelligible action is a more

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

fundamental concept than that of an action."[50] This is such a significant insight because it shows how individual actions, like individual words, are intelligible in the context of larger discrete units of action, such as practices and projects. And, in some sense, the actions one performs within a practice 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 word and sentence and speech within the conversation 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.[51]

Clearly these are weighty matters. Though more could be said, we have arrived at the supports needed for building the second stage of his account of virtue: the unity of many practices into a single whole. He says: "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest."[52]

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

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50. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," *First Things*, (2007). Web. The quotation is from citing MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 209.

51. Ibid., 211.

52. Ibid., 219.

> The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices. but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalog 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.[53]

The virtuous person is sustained by his or her virtues on the quest toward the good. Vices not only render difficult or impossible in the achievement of the good; vices can obscure one's assessment of what is good and what is evil.

I can concede that the "quest" of a Stalin or a bin Ladin began with good intentions. It is even important to note that the wicked tyrant cannot achieve the most horrifying evils and could not come about without the presence of auxiliary virtues, such as courage and resolve. Just as a den of thieves cannot survive without at least some honor, a wicked regime cannot survive without at least some loyalty and patriotism. Socrates says that the same foolishness and vice that is laughable in the weak is dreadful in the powerful. The more thoroughly vicious characters cause less damage because their evil remains petty.

5. Traditional and Social

The fifth and final attribute of virtue is this: virtues enable the health and progress of whole social traditions. In other words, virtues are personal but not individualistic. Rather, virtues are instances of natural goodness for *humans* – and humanity is naturally social. This is just what we should expect if, as I argued in chapter 3, the practical rationality that characterizes the human primate is defined in part by sociality: humans are born into families and learn

53. Ibid., 220.

to speak the language of their society. Making this case will require a detailed discussion of MacIntyre's concept of tradition and practical reasoning.

MacIntyre's crucial third stage of his *After Virtue* account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context. For MacIntyre, a tradition is, roughly, a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[54] I have argued that practical rationality is the differentia of human nature. Insofar as virtues depend for their effective operation on the coordinating management of practical reason, it is of utmost importance that an individual learn how to practically reason well. This happens, or fails to happen, in traditions.

Human beings develop their capacity to recognize practical reasons within a family and society with its own idiosyncratic political, religious, and philosophical worldview. So, quite plausibly, our initial de facto set of beliefs, desires, and dispositions reflect the substantive commitments of our group. As MacIntyre says:

> We, whoever we are, can only begin enquiry from the vantage point afforded by our relationship to some specific social and intellectual past through which we have affiliated ourselves to some particular tradition of enquiry, extending the history of that enquiry into the present …"[55]

The tradition of inquiry we inhabit gives us not only abstract standards of reasoning but also facts, connections, concepts, and the very language we speak. Rationality, for MacIntyre, is inclusive of all the resources by which we judge truth and falsity. Rationality itself as tradition-constituted and tradition-constituting. The resources I receive from my tradition are resources I may prune, discard, modify, or add to. What tradition we are a part of makes a great deal of difference to how we conduct moral inquiry.

We can make initial sense of the notion that virtues enable the health and progress

54. Ibid., 222.

55. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (University of Notre Dame, 1988), 401.

of traditions by saying that vices weigh down a whole tradition and virtues correct and potentially elevate it. MacIntyre says:

> Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness, lack of courage, lack of the relevant intellectual virtues – these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments.[56]

Thats said, even if we accept, in outline, the thesis that virtues sustain and even correct traditions, the problem of relativism rises. What counts as virtuous is at least partially related to one's culture, for every culture purports to provide for its members some minimal goods. The correct identification of these goods requires practical wisdom. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre explicitly retracts his earlier belief that virtues exist without a unity under prudence or practical wisdom.[57] Christopher Lutz argues that the consequences of this retraction are crucial to refuting the charge of relativism.

> …the relativism of *After Virtue* cannot be overcome unless its definitions of the virtues are extended to embrace the Aristotelian and Thomistic doctrine of the unity of virtue. MacIntyre's rejection of the unity of virtue in *After Virtue* has grave implications for the rest of his virtue theory because the rejection of the unity of virtue divorces the intellectual moral virtue of prudence from the passional moral virtues of courage, temperence, and justice… Prudence becomes cleverness…The strength of MacIntyre's account of practices is that the pursuit of excellence in a practice entails the pursuit of virtue, but if practices can be evil, and virtues can 'enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to' such an evil practice, and virtues can be anything at all.[58]

By contrast, if virtues are unified, then even though virtues exist only in the context of practices, "no genuine practice can be inherently evil."[59] Rather, we can make practical rational

56. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.
57. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* preface, p. x.
58. Christopher Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lexington Books, 2004), 98–101.
59. Ibid., 102.

mistakes in judging *apparent goods* as genuine goods. The qualities needed for achieving the spurious goods internal to that "practice" would not be virtues but only *apparent virtues*.

One pointed illustration is eugenics. Eugenics certainly seems to bear the markings of a genuine practice. Its apparent good is the purification of the gene pool for future generations. However, genuine virtues militate *against* the achievement of that goal. For example, Lutz cites a story of a virtuous, compassionate doctor found himself unable to pursue the program of euthanizing mentally-disabled children.[60] We might also recall Huck Finn's internal struggle with his "conscience" in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck decides to turn Jim in to the slave owners. He writes a letter outing Jim, and says: "I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now." Yet for all that, after vividly confronting Jim's humanity and goodness, he feels the loyalty of their friendship and wavers:

> It was a difficult situation. I picked up the letter, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I knew had to make a choice between two things, and the outcome of my decision would last forever. I thought about it a minute while I held my breath. And then I said to myself: "All right, then, I'll GO to hell" – and tore it up.[61]

The humor of this passage stems from the tension between the *apparent good* of treating Jim as legal property and the *actual good* of treating Jim as an end in himself, as a free man just like any other. Huck's virtue (in this case, loyalty or friendship) *cannot* be put to use in the service of a corrupting practice like slave-trading. Just as vice subverts institutions and their worthy practices, virtue "subverts" vicious institutions and unworthy practices. Virtue marks the difference between the coward who disobeys his commanding officer's orders because the obedience would put him at risk of painful death and the courageous person who disobeys his commanding officer's order because obedience would require wrongdoing.

60. Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe* (Schocken Books, 1979), 186–7.

61. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Lathifa, 2014), Chapter 31.

Without prudence to discriminate between the two cases, we lack any resources by which to discriminate courage and cowardice, between a virtuous resistance and vicious resistance.

The threat of cultural relativism is not fully absolved by arguing that individual virtues can subvert the errors in a tradition. What if one's tradition is deeply flawed? What if one's tradition is fundamentally mistaken that its vices and errors undermine the possibility that individual virtues can get a foothold?

This question requires more reflection on the notion of practical reasoning. In the next chapter, I offer a full account. Here, I must dispense with one common view that I believe is mistaken. That common view sets up an opposition between tradition and rational criticism. On this view, one is either a conventionalist or a subversive. (Define a subversive as one who goes against (a particular society's) standard, traditional, ideology – the "default" view.) The danger of militating against one's tradition is that the default view is plausible to most people, and so the critic necessarily finds him- or herself in the minority view. On this opposition between tradition and critical reflection, philosophers are often stereotyped as the subversive type. Philosophers are not necessarily all subversives; but many subversives have been philosophers. Nevertheless, I think this whole way of considering the matter is a mistake.

The first reason is that a tradition is not opposed to rational or critical reflection – rather a member of a tradition cannot reason without the resources of that tradition. When we criticize our own tradition from within, we use what good we enjoy to increase the good. Secondly, it is idle to speak being "for tradition" or "against tradition," for "tradition" says contradictory things. Social Group Alpha passes along belief A from generation to generation. If A is false, then rational reflection will turn a philosopher into an anti-traditional subversive; but if successful, the philosopher might persuade Group Alpha to believe B instead, and culturally unify with Social Group Beta. In this case, B will be passed along from one generation to the next. So the very same philosopher will become a traditionalist. These

labels are about as helpful as asserting that one is a "newspaperist" who believes whatever is written "in the newspaper." The question is, *which one*? Traditions, like newspapers, are a medium, not a message. The only thing to do, then, is to examine the message — the content of the tradition.

Still, how is it possible that virtues can sustain what is good in tradition and enable the successful pruning and improving of the same? MacIntyre's answer is that we can rationally adjudicate between traditions (from within a tradition). We can rational criticize our own tradition with the resources available to us. The result may be that we endorse the truth of the fundamentals thereof, or "switch" from our primary tradition to a rival.

The means we have of "switching" traditions are these: first, one undergoes an epistemological crisis in which one identifies the inadequacies of a primary tradition. MacIntyre derived this lesson from his own experience. As a member of the modern tradition of inquiry, he reflected on it. He gradually discovered its inadequacies and searched for resources from his rivals. His attempt to trace the root of the mistake about moral judgments lead him to a mistake at the heart of Enlightenment modernity. As a social, political, and moral project, the Enlightenment has been, MacIntyre argues, a failure by its own standards. Not only is moral discourse largely devoted to moral disagreement, but it is largely soaked in despair of ever reaching agreement. Moral discourse with its interminable moral disagreement retains the rhetorical *trappings* of rationality and objectivity while denying rationality and objectivity. Neither side wants to give up the *appearance* of having a dialectical case for its value theory.

One of his most memorable and oft-cited images compares modern moral discourse to the hypothetical state of scientific discourse in a post-apocalyptic catastrophe where decaying fragments of intelligible moral discourse survive, none of which (in isolation) suffices for the rebuilding of the original, vital discourse.

There are many modern philosophers who have gone into similar crises and become

distrustful thought, language, and rationality itself; they join the "masters of suspicion." The term comes, I believe, from Ricoeur, who said: "Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud."[62] Rather than join the school of suspicion, MacIntyre took a surprising course. Moved by Thomas Kuhn's influential work on the structure of revolution between various paradigms in the natural sciences,[63] he speculated that a similar structure might obtain in moral revolutions?[64]

After recognizing the failures of one's own tradition, MacIntyre points to a second step: to "exercise… a capacity for philosophical imagination"[65] and identify the resources of a rival tradition. We must empathetically engage with our rivals as if we are learning a "second first language." He says:

> For each of us, therefore, the question now is: To what issues does that particular history bring us in contemporary debate? What resources does our particular tradition afford in this situation? Can we by means of those resources understand the achievements and successes, and the failures and sterilities, of rival traditions more adequately than their own adherents can? More adequately by our own standards? More adequately also by theirs?[66]

This step of learning a second tradition as a "second first language" in turn compelled MacIntyre to recover the tradition of virtues. But virtues are not free-floating moral concepts; they are embedded in a specific, living, moral tradition – the Aristotelian tradition. And the Aristotelian tradition includes a particular notion of practical rationality.

MacIntyre argues that we should "return" to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue and

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62. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. D (Savage (Yale University Press, 1970).

63. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1975).

64. His 1977 essay on epistemological crises was his own version of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* – we might call this essay MacIntyre's "Structure of Ethical Revolutions." Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist*, 1977, 453–72

65. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* .

66. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 402.

practical reason because it is more adequate than its rivals. We must beware one misunderstanding. Any talk of "returning" is liable to sound nostalgic. Martha Nussbaum misunderstands MacIntyre's argument along these lines.[67] In her review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, she cites with an age-old dilemma between the social stability afforded by tradition and critical reflection:

> 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 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.[68]

Aristotle's solution is that it should be *hard but not impossible* to change societal structures. Strangely, Nussbaum takes MacIntyre to be reversing Aristotle's balance. She thinks MacIntyre is emphasizing social stability at the cost of "recoiling from reason." But MacIntyre is emphatically not defending "traditionalism" per se. His definition of tradition is *progressive*. Tradition is an ongoing, socially-embedded argument over time, which necessarily entails that moral inquiry 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.

MacIntyre elevates the ability to critically reflect on one's own tradition and make necessary changes to the level of a virtue, the importance of which "is perhaps most obvious when it is least present." What is that virtue?

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

68. Ibid.

> [It is] 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 act*. 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.[69]

None of this so far has gone to answer the question: what if one's tradition is wrong? How could I, a member of an embodied tradition, ever get far enough "outside" it to criticize it? This question is notoriously difficult. The explanation for the difficulty, if not the solution, is this: We can only think *about* rationality *with* rationality. We can only reflection upon our thinking process by observing rationality *from outside* from *within* rationality. The matter is so complicated because any argument is self-referential or iterative. When two parties share an identical conception of rationality, then arduous debate is unnecessary; when two parties do not share identical conceptions, arduous debate about a particular issue is liable to shipwreck on the rocks of metaphilosophical disagreement. As the Greek proverb asks, "if we choke on food, we drink water to wash it down. If water chokes us, what shall we drink?"

There can be no quick, ready-made answer to the question of how to acquire practical wisdom. Answering it is inextricably bound up in the slow and dangerous process of acquiring the virtue of practical wisdom. We must be alert to the contours of our own tradition and bold in considering its weaknesses and failures. We must also exercise philosophical imagination in learning the contours of rival traditions. Success is not impossible, but neither is it guaranteed. The only hope is to practically reason, and to take care to do it well.

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69. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

6. Conclusion

Thus far, virtues have come to light as excellent traits belonging to a fully mature and exemplary practical, rational primate. The virtuous person does not necessarily enjoy all the blessings of good fortune, but he or she does take up all that is given in one's fate and put it to the best possible use. Virtuous people's lives are remarkable not for what they are given – any celebrity or cad might be born wealthy or physically attractive or talented – but for what they do with what they are given. And practical reasoning is not a simple process different from other kinds of reasoning or practice; it is the whole complex process by which we undertake to direct our own lives.

Hursthouse points out that we do not just admire those who survive, but those who exemplify a *human* form of life: "The human virtues make their possessor good qua human being, one who is as ordinarily well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way."[70] This seems right. The exemplary human being avoids the common and tempting traps one faces along the way of a normal human life, taking up all the intrinsic and natural urges of animality (hunger, thirst, the sexual drive, desires for shelter, comfort, and companionship) into practices that make sense. He or she works to acquire those traits that benefit human beings, both oneself and others, and that enable him or her to engage in such practices as make sense for human beings. The definition of "making sense" is admittedly variable according a person or tradition's conception of practical reason. And the notorious difficulty of adjudicating conflicting conceptions has been briefly noted. While I do not pretend to have offered a resolution of that difficulty, I have offered two responses: first, an explanation of why it is difficult; and second, a formula from MacIntyre that might promise to help a practical reasoner resolve it by carefully working out a comparison between one's own conception

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

(with its resources and flaws) and a rival conception (with *its* resources and flaws). The virtuous and wise person also navigates his or her tradition, both sustaining its goods and correcting its flaws. The virtuous person also takes care pro-actively cultivating virtues in others when appropriate but without unduly short circuiting his or her own practical reasoning. On the account thus far developed, these generics pick out what we are; our moral task is to *become* what we are.

We flagged three problems but did not fully address them above: (1) What, if anything, is the human function (ergon)? (2) I said McDowell mistakes the relation between virtue qua knowledge and virtue qua rational organization of one's psychology – including emotions, bodily urges, physical situation, unthinking habits, and so on – so what is the relation between practical reasoning and rational practice? (3) Can virtue go bad? It seems that, without further guidance, otherwise virtuous traits might operate towards wicked ends, or co-exist with vices inside an (overall) miserable and vicious person. The solution to each of these problems requires a clearer account of practical reasoning. That is my next task.