Chapter 1

The Virtue Triangle

"Not everything that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best." –Aristotle, *Physics* 194a 32–33.

Introduction

In this dissertation, I shall defend the claim that: **virtues are the acquirable excellent character traits (such as moderation, tolerance, and wisdom) that are naturally necessary for practical, rational animals, and which partly constitute human flourishing.**

The main elements of this thesis are virtue ('acquirable excellent character traits') human nature ('practical, rational animals'), human flourishing. All three are rooted in the notion of normativity, including natural necessity and natural human flourishing. Each of these elements will receive further definition.

The approach to ethics I shall defend is naturalistic: it appeals to natural life forms, functions, and "organic teleology" to find out what is good for human beings. That is not to suggest that what is good for human beings is obvious without the help of rational reflection; rather, it is to suggest that rational reflection and human biology have a common root. Being good requires "doing what comes naturally" – with the caveat that one must discover one's own nature, sometimes with great difficulty.

My hope in making these arguments is to offer arguments to both virtue ethicists and

metaethical naturalists. That is, I aim to persuade scientific naturalists to consider virtue ethics, and to persuade virtue ethicists to consider that the empirical sciences may have something to contribute to ethics. Hence, I explain three sorts of neo-Aristotelian naturalism in virtue ethics, critique the first two as inadequate by themselves, and defend the third. The first two are best represented, in my view, by Philippa Foot and John McDowell. To simplify things a bit, the Footian view aims provides a biological – even objective and scientific – basis for humanistic ethics; t he McDowellian view aims to provide a rational – intersubjective – basis for humanistic ethics. The third sort is represented by Alasdair MacIntyre, but has received attention recently from Christopher Toner, Micah Lott, Jennifer Frey, and others. This sort of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism promises a naturalistic, even scientific, foundation for normative virtue ethics as well as some detailed normative evaluations that promise to provide ethical guidance in life. As proof of concept, I advance the project a few steps by offering related accounts of virtue, reason, and flourishing.

My argument contributes to several lively and fascinating debates in ethics and metaethics. If what a human being naturally *needs* as a member of the species matches what a human being *ought* rationally to think and to do, then it follows that several ostensively distinct sub-disciplines are fundamentally connected. Positing a union between human needs and human ethics suggests close ties between the concepts of the human life form, flourishing, and moral goodness. Put differently, we might say that this kind of virtue ethics unites form, function, and excellence. Hence, these three concepts are not only individually interesting but interesting in so far as they constitute a single, three-part schema, which (for lack of a better term) I shall call the "virtue triangle."

I. The Virtue Triangle

Why are the concepts of the life form of rational animals, moral virtue, and natural flourishing *together* greater than the sum of their parts? In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre persuasively argues that there are three necessary "elements" to morality:[1] namely, a goal, a starting point, and the

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 54 ff.

means from the starting point to the goal.

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

The point of this simple reflection is that we ought to demand that any moral theory supply all three elements. MacIntyre explains that, in morality, the first element is "untutored human nature" (as it is). The second element is the moral human, humanity as it could be and should be. The third element is the set of traits, actions, emotions, habits, etc., needed to move from the first to the second points. Understanding "human-nature-as-it-is"[2] is a task for philosophers, as well as psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc. This would include a conception of the human species as rational animals as it is *prior* to deep self-reflection or moral effort. Understanding human nature "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos"[3] was "the whole point of ethics." This third conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize. Moral rules or admirable character traits are the *content* of morality; but the telos of humanity is the *context* of morality. Telos makes morality make sense.

A moral theory cannot simply offer one or two out of the three, and neglect the third. It needs *some* conception of individual or social well-being, *some* conception of what it means to be human (what kind of raw material are we working with?) and *some* conception of how one's moral

2. Ibid., 55.
3. Ibid., 55.

duties and other obligations or other motivating factors connect humanity as it is with humanity-as-it-could-and-should-be. Morality simply makes no sense without showing which qualities, actions, attitudes, resources, laws, etc. enable a human being to achieve his or her telos. A moral theory is bound to stultify if it leaves out any one of these three formal elements. The scandal of many modern moral philosophies is that they do just that.

The neo-Aristotelians such as Foot, McDowell, MacIntyre, and Hursthouse attempt to remedy this situation by providing accounts of all three concepts. In doing so, they agree in drawing from pre-modern sources (such as Aristotle and Aquinas) but dispute the proper strategy for updating their ethical theories in our modern context.

All three concepts need additional clarification, for they are liable to misunderstanding in our modern context. Hursthouse puts the point this way: "Three of virtue ethics' central concepts, virtue, practical wisdom and eudaimonia are often misunderstood. Once they are distinguished from related but distinct concepts peculiar to modern philosophy, various objections to virtue ethics can be better assessed."[4] Objections fired at neo-Aristotelian ethical theories often hit a bullseye but on the wrong target.[5] A large part of my job is to stake out a conceptual space for virtue, practical reason (including its excellence, which I take to be practical wisdom), and natural human flourishing (which I take to be closely related to eudaimonia). My task is also to defend the trilateral form that relates them in a dynamic schema.

Realism about Natural Teleology

All three elements of the "virtue triangle" are important. But the unifying concept of the schema is not virtue but telos. If we cannot even perform a menial, intentional action without a goal, then *a fortiori* it would seem we cannot perform our highest moral duties without a telos.

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

5. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011) gives a concise and clear account of all three.

Defining that telos is, of course, the rub. But it seems apparent that strict moral rules without any notion of the kind of life that is to be lived are bound to degenerate into a kind of pointless legalism. If the teleological notion of natural human flourishing in particular is central to the project of virtue ethics, it would seem that developing a plausible modern virtue ethical theory would require rehabilitating a notion of natural teleology in general.

The project of rehabilitating natural teleology may seem overly optimistic.[6] It may be felt, for instance, that teleology has simply been debunked by modern science and therefore has no place in a scientific worldview, that Francis Bacon was right that the search for final causes "defiled philosophy"[7] and so that any attempt to revive teleological virtue talk is antiquarian and nostalgic.

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

> That word "teleological" is the key to MacIntyre's solution, the loss of which is the cause of the catastrophe described in his science-fiction parable. Teleology is the study of final causes, goals, purposes, and aims: a style of explanation that saturates Aristotle's philosophy. After the combined impact of Newton and Darwin, however, this type of explanation seems mostly 'quaint' and once Aristotle's science seemed

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

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

> quaint, his ethics soon followed: when Newton demonstrated how motion can be better explained as resulting from the outcome of mechanical laws, and when Darwin posited natural selection as the "mechanism" for explaining an organ's functionality, the use of teleology in ethics was doomed…Emptying moral discourse of teleological concepts because of the perceived impact of Newton and Darwin has been for MacIntyre the catastrophe of our times.[8]

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

> Where Aristotle understood man as a creature with a definite function which he might fulfill or deny, modern morality sees man simply as a rational agent who has no true or definable purpose independent of his own will… By appealing to a telos, Aristotle was able to distinguish between the way we actually are and the way we should be. His conception of human beings as having a specific telos brought with it the possibility that we might fall short of the ideal… But with the rejection of Aristotelianism gain the rejection of any such distinction between what we are and what we should be. Post-Enlightenment man is seen as governed, not by a telos external to him, but simply by the dictates of his own inner reason… Thus the abandonment of an Aristotelian conception of the good has not only left us without standards by which to evaluate our moral arguments, it is also cast us adrift in the moral world.[9]

These reflections suggest that at least our conception of ethics needs to be teleological. As we have seen above, there are several ways to achieve this conception. Foot argues that teleology is genuinely natural to all living organisms; McDowell argues that it is not natural to all organisms but that it is to humans. Even MacIntyre's project is not *Aristotelian* but "neo-Aristotelian" in that he contrasts with Aristotle's project on several points.[10]

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8. Edward Oakes, "The Achievement of Alasdair Macintyre," *First Things*, 1996.

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

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

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

II. Chapter Outline

The arguments of the dissertation are divided into the following chapters.

1. Introduction
2. Natural Normativity
3. Practical Rational Animals
4. Excellence and Defect
5. Virtue and Vice
6. Practical Reason
7. Practical Wisdom
8. Conclusions

Chapter 2 defends the notion of 'natural norms' and the normativity of nature. Formal and teleological truths about natural entities – especially organisms – are expressible in generic propositions. Generic propositions have potentially ethical significance.

Chapter 3 defends a normative conception of human nature, extending the notion of natural norms to natural human norms. Humans are practical rational animals. As such, humans undergo a process of fully practical rational animals.

Chapter 4 proposes a formal criteria for virtue. It argues that the process of fully actuating our nature is fraught with peril; the qualities that enable the success of the process are liable to turn out to be natural excellences for creatures like us.

Chapter 5 provides the content of virtue answering to the formal criteria already set out. In the recent neo-Aristotelians, virtues are acquirable excellent character traits human beings need as practical, rational animals and which partly constitute natural human flourishing. Examples discussed include moderation, tolerance, and practical wisdom, which represent various kinds of virtues, namely 'self-regarding', 'other-regarding,' and 'object-regarding' virtues – those sensitive to the intrinsic worth of self, others, and objects such as art, truth, beauty, etc. Virtue is, among other things, necessary for the acquisition of more virtue, especially the virtue of practical wisdom.

Chapter 6 explores practical reason in more depth. Practical reason in my account defines human nature ('practical, rational animals), but does not yet supply a means to block cultural relativism. Practical reason is the capacity for resolving what to do. To borrow Alan Gibbard's elegant phrase, it is our capacity for "thinking how to live." Practical reason is not a "value neutral" process instrumentally achieving one's ends but also a process of determining which ends are worthwhile. It is argued that the excellence of practical reason is practical wisdom.

Chapter 7 explores practical wisdom, which is, among other things, the know how required to attain more practical wisdom in light of questions about individual death or species extinction. Realism about practical reason blocks cultural relativism about virtues, yet allows an acceptable pluralism consonant with tolerance and wisdom. Practical wisdom which is supremely important in that it is both an intellectual and a moral virtue. It is necessary for achieving other moral virtues and sufficient for achieving some other intellectual virtues. Hence, once a human being has reached a level of practical wisdom certain kinds of well-being are secured. Yet there is more to be reached. Flourishing for creatures like us is, among other things, the practical wisdom necessary to undergo the process of discovering human flourishing and the achievement of our humanity. We become what we truly are, even if our existence and identity end in death, and even if our species goes extinct.

Human misery and failure is not just pain nor death but to fail to fully realize one's humanity.

Chapter 8 draws conclusions and makes suggestions for further reasearch.

Chapter 2

The Normativity of Nature: Life-forms and Organic Teleology

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

–Mark Perlman, "The Modern Resurrection of Teleology in Biology", 6.

I. Introduction

Rosalind Hursthouse argues that ethical evaluations (of humans) and non-ethical evaluations (of plants and animals) "both depend upon our identifying what is characteristic of the species in question."[1] The notion that *normative* evaluations depend on *descriptive* facts about a species is a momentous one. If true, then descriptive propositions could serve as premises in arguments with normative conclusions; "is" statements would underwrite "ought" statements. This notion is central to ethical naturalisms of many varieties. But is the notion even intelligible?

This chapter addresses the "is-ought gap". I concede that one variation of the challenge blocks some kinds of ethical naturalism. But I argue that another variation of the challenge can be met and overcome. Namely, I defend natural normativity in the form of natural life-forms and organic teleology. There is a widespread opposition against scientific teleology; some parts of this

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

opposition withstands scrutiny, but some other parts turn out to be mere prejudice. Indeed, I invoke the help of the sciences themselves – especially life sciences such as biology and medicine – which indicate that teleological nihilism and teleoreductionism are by no means "*the* scientific doctrines". Rather, scientific realism about natural life-forms and teleological realism about natural functions is a scientifically respectable position.

The upshot of the existence of natural life-forms and teleology is that *nature is normative*, that there are some *natural norms*.. If nature is normative, it is at least possible that *human nature* is normative, even though humans are a unique kind of animal.

The Is-Ought Gap and Bald Nature

Many have posed a challenge to the very possibility of any sort of ethical naturalism. We can put the challenge in this form:

"No Ought From Is" Challenge

1. If ethical naturalism is possibly true, then "ought" conclusions can be derived from "is" premises.
2. But no "ought" conclusions can be derived from "is" premises.
3. Therefore ethical naturalism is not possibly true.

The second premise seems to render hopeless the thought, articulated by Hursthouse, that we can evaluate things on the basis of what they are. This is the major problem I shall address. This problem goes by many names, but the one I prefer is the "is-ought gap."

Simply put, the is-ought gap is the intuitive notion that one cannot learn anything about *what ought to be* simply by examining *what is*.[2] Even supposing we gathered a whole collection of reliable

2. Thus, Hume: "In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence." (*A Treatise of Human Nature* book III, part I, section I). Hume is often credited (or blamed) for this notion. Arnhart says Hume himself allows for a kind of inference

scientific truths about human bodies, cognitive-behavioral patterns and so on – from anthropology, psychology, sociology, and also biology, chemistry, physics – we would not seem to be a wit closer to establishing any ethical truths.

A detailed and scientific description of human nature could hope to supply a "descriptive ethics" that narrates what such-and-such a culture approves of or finds worthwhile compared to what they find worthless and reprehensible. At its best, a descriptive ethics might be able to identify universal moral approbations and disapprobations. For example,there seems to be a universal (cross-cultural) disapprobation for continual drunkenness. While habits and attitudes toward drinking alcohol vary dramatically from culture to culture, even cultures (like the Bolivian Camba) that drink regularly and drink heavily disapprove of continual drunkenness.[3] Such insights might be quite interesting, but the is-ought gap reminds us that they are a far cry from *ethical* insights.

The is-ought gap objection is fatal to forms of ethical naturalism with a conception of "bald nature"; I suspect the is-ought gap has not been adequately overcome by Peter Railton's and Richard Boyd's consequentialist theories. I do not have space here to explore the suspicion. The is-ought gap need not to the neo-Aristotelian type Hursthouse and others are pursuing..

Anscombe is not very optimistic about the project Thompson, Foot, and I are undertaking. She says:

> It might remain to look for 'norms' in human virtues: just as man has so many teeth, which is certainly not the average number of teeth men have, but is the number of teeth for the species, so perhaps the species man, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life-powers and faculties and use of things needed- "has" such-and-such virtues: and this "man" with the complete set of virtues is the "norm," as "man"

from "is" to "ought" in other places. But I shall not pursue the point here. Larry Arnhart, "The New Darwinian Naturalism in Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 02 (1995): 389–400

3. "It is important to realize that drinking problems are virtually unknown in most of the world's cultures, including many where drinking is commonplace and occasional drunkenness is accepted." Dwight B Heath, "Sociocultural Variants in Alcoholism," *Encyclopedic Handbook of Alcoholism*, 1982, 426–40.

with, e.g., a complete set of teeth is a norm.[4]

For there exists a second, and more promising way to underwrite "ought" statements from basic, fundamental, scientifically respectable *natural norms*. Call this the possibility of natural normativity.[5] Of course, the concept of natural norm is just as liable to be challenged as the notion of deriving an "ought" from an "is".

We can put this updated challenge, in the following form:

"Bald Nature" Challenge

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

This challenge parallels the first one. Everything depends on the second premise – on whether nature consists of *merely* non-normative facts. (That nature consists of merely "natural" facts is, of course, a tautology. But whether all natural facts are non-normative facts is the question at hand. Simply to *stipulate* that "natural facts are descriptive and not normative" is to beg the question with an exclamation point.) If there are no natural normative facts, then it follows that normativity is either real but *non-natural* or "naturalistic" but not real (i.e., not mind-independent). There would be no such thing as the paradoxical notion of a "prescriptive fact" or a "natural ought."[6] Hume (and others) assume this. But if the second premise is not true – if some facts are genuinely both natural and normative – then ethical naturalism is at least *possible*. (There will be other challenges to address, of course.)

4. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19 14-15.

5. The concept of 'natural normativity' is indeterminate, which means I run the risk of unclarity; that indeterminacy is necessary for us to discuss these issues without begging the question in favor of the view that all norms are unnatural and all nature is non-normative. If natural norms could be discovered, then it would be *at least possible* that the is-ought gap is not a fatal problem for all types of ethical naturalism.

6. Recall Mackie's beautifully expressed worry about notion of "to-be-pursuedness" built into things.

Of course, if we can deny the second premise, all that logically follows is that ethical naturalism *may* be possibly true. Denying the second premise requires finding a fact (or a kind of fact) that is genuinely both natural and normative. The candidates for natural normative facts I shall defend are natural formal and functional or teleological properties of organisms.[7] Hursthouse, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, MacIntyre, and Stephen Brown are united in the thought that some natural formal or teleological facts – whether that is Hursthouse's "characteristic", or a "life-form"[8] or "form of life"[9], or "human nature" – are inherently normative. Rather than "bridging" the gap between "is" and "ought", they defy the opposition. Stephen Brown, for instance, says that "naturalized virtue ethics assumes that living things have ends in reference to which they can be evaluated… a neo-Aristotelian account of teleology is plausible both from the view of common sense and from a more scientific vantage point."[10]

II. Normativity: Social or Organic?

The neo-Aristotelians are united in the affirmation that some natural norms can serve as a grounding for ethical facts. However, as I explained briefly above, there are two or three competing strategies as to which "norms" are up to the task.

The strategies go under many names.[11] The basic difference is whether we aim to discover

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

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

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

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

11. For example, Christopher Toner distinguishes between the "biological naturalism" of Thompson and Foot (and later MacIntyre) from the "second naturalism" or "excellence naturalism" or 'culturalism' of McDowell and (early) MacIntyre, each of which has its strengths and problems. McDowell explains the two in his "Two Sorts of Naturalism" essay; Fink explains two or three sorts in his Hans Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (August 2006): 202–21; and Chris Toner examines the same two sorts in his essay. Christopher Toner, "Sorts of

natural normativity more generally in all organic life, or to discover natural normativity more narrowly in *human nature* – society, culture, rationality, or practical agency. For example, Julia Annas distinguishes between the sort of naturalism that builds on the *biological* nature of humanity (at the expense of the odd normativity of our rationality) the sort that builds on the *rational* nature of humanity (at the expense of the mundane descriptivity of biology).[12]

My preferred terms to distinguish these two strategies are "Organic" and "Social". Each of these strategies has its attractions and its own challenges. Let's review each.

Social Teleology

On the narrower strategy, something about humanity is naturally and inherently teleological. For example, perhaps one of the natural functions of rationality is to construct goals for itself and legislate laws for itself.[13] On this view, ethical conclusions are irreducibly based upon human facts such as human rationality, human culture, or human excellence. Since these human facts are contrasted with broader natural facts, call this view "Practical" or "Rational" or "Social Teleology". Pretty clearly, human cognitive and and practical behaviors are inherently end-directed or teleological. We do not just act randomly. We do not only act according to the promptings of instinct (that too). Rather, we act *on reasons,* both individually and in groups. We act to achieve goals. Whether we arise from bed *in order to* give a talk, or drive to work *in order to* do a good job, or pursue a career *for* satisfaction and a profitable retirement, we are directing ourselves toward ends. In groups, too, we pursue shared goals, deliberate about *what is to be done*: Congress aims to pass just and beneficial laws. The school board aims to increase enrollment and balance the budget. Expanding our focus from

Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 220–50. Each of these will be discussed more in a later chapter.

12. Cf. Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?" in Stephen Mark Gardiner, *Virtue Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

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

individual actions or projects, we can put the point more strongly: all of human life is a practice.[14]

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre defends social teleology against its more biological, organic alternative. He emphasizes "second nature" far more than primary nature. That is, he finds a ground of normativity not in our life-form but in us: in our social identities, our culture, our rationality. For example, he says his:"[this account of virtue is] happily not Aristotelian [for] although this account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require any allegiance to Aristotle's metaphysical biology."[15] The "metaphysical biology" MacIntyre refers to here is that metaphysically realist view that formal and final causes inhere (and in fact constitute) biological species. That said, MacIntyre does most emphatically argue for a teleological form of ethics based on the normativity of *human* nature. He grounds teleology not in non-human nature but in human nature, specifically our practical, social nature. (He calls this notion "social teleology.")

This kind of social or rational teleology is certainly the safer of the two strategies, and is followed by McDowell, Hursthouse, and the early MacIntyre. Even Iris Murdoch assumed[16] that human life has "no external point or τελος", but that it has a point *from within.* It is impossible, in other words, to bring our own human life under the concept of an *event.* Human life must be brought under the concept of an intentional action or practice aiming at a goal.[17] This insight has important implications for ethics, as well as other fields: action theory, sociology, anthropology, philosophy of mind, and so on.[18] But the point here is that, since we act in groups and for reasons, teleology is a real feature of our social nature.

14. The teleological nihilism (of say, hardcore determinists) says that not even human practices are teleological. There are no "purposes" or natural ends anywhere in the world *including* in human actions. Even our practices, behaviors, and lives are purposeless, even to ourselves. I discuss teleological nihilism below. Cf. Daniel C Dennett, "Darwin's Dangerous Idea," *The Sciences* 35, no. 3 (1995): 34–40.

15. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 197.

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

17. I will summarize the MacIntyrean notion of 'practice' in a later chapter. Here I only mean a more general notion of an operation or activity.

18. Cf. Thompson, *Life and Action*.

Organic Teleology

On the broader strategy, something about organic life as a whole is both descriptive and normative. Call this view Natural Teleology or Organic Teleology. For example, perhaps one of the functions of *being alive at all* is that plants, animals, insects, and microbes perform whatever movements are necessary for them to survive, grow, and develop into the state of species-specific maturity. And not just animals, but all organic life. Chemist Michael Mautner interprets these common features as highly significant, saying "Molecular biology shows that all organic cellular life share a common feature, self-reproduction through gene/protein protein cycles."[19] So at least some natural entities – that is, all living organisms – have ineliminable, irreducible, normative properties. As Thomas Nagel puts it, with the existence of life in the cosmos arises the existence of beings "for which things can be good or bad."[20] Let's examine each one a bit more.[21]

This strategy is more ambitious and hence more risky. Not even all the neo-Aristotelians are optimistic about the strategy of grounding human ethics in this sort of natural normativity. Organic Teleology is the preferred strategy of Foot, Thompson, and the later MacIntyre. It seems to have won over Annas, Brown, and Barham, and a host of other philosophers and scientists.[22]

19. Michael N Mautner, "Life-Centered Ethics, and the Human Future in Space," *Bioethics* 23, no. 8 (2009): 433–40.

20. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 117.

21. There is a third strategy that is even more risky. Though I shall not pursue it, I should at least mention it. That is to defend the view that *all* of nature is teleological. Call this cosmic teleology. Cosmic teleology is the notion that everything – including stars and rocks – "has a purpose", as if the cosmos were somehow organized and *going somewhere*. Such natural normativity in the form of natural teleology does have its recent defenders. For atheistic version of cosmic teleology, see ibid., ; for non-human centered versions see John Leslie, *Universes* (Psychology Press, 1996) and Tim Mulgan, *Purpose in the Universe: The Moral and Metaphysical Case for Ananthropocentric Purposivism* (Oxford University Press, 2015). For Thomistic versions, see Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld Publications, 2009); and Peter Kreeft, *Summa Philosophica* (St. Augustine, 2012).

22. Keith Ward, "Kant's Teleological Ethics," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 85 (1971): 337–51; Arnhart, "Aristotle's Biopolitics"; Monte Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Philippe Huneman, "Naturalising Purpose: From Comparative Anatomy to the 'Adventure of Reason'," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37, no. 4 (2006): 649–74; Mariska Leunissen, *Explanation and Teleol-*

Initial Challenges

Each of these options faces its challenges. For example, even supposing that *human* or social normativity could preemptively undercut the is-ought gap, it is not obvious that there is such thing as a universal human nature from which we might derive normative conclusions. In the next chapter, I shall return to the Social Teleology strategy and explain why it is not false but inadequate, if taken by itself.[23] Organic Teleology is not enough either; but since the two types of teleology are not *contradictory*, it is possible to conceive of a "third type" of naturalism that combines them.[24]

On the other hand, supposing that organic teleology – the normativity of all organisms – *could possibly* underwrite normative conclusions about human ethics, how would we know these natural norms? Is belief in them scientific or not? For many, scientific naturalism just is the commitment to believe all and only the best deliverances of all the sciences.[25] And they think that the scientific picture of nature is the picture of "bald nature" (McDowell's phrase for non-normative nature) or the "Laplacian" picture.[26]

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ogy in Aristotle's Science of Nature (Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a detailed exposition of the full menu of philosophical options, cf.Mark Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology," *The Monist* 87, no. 1 (2004): 3–51.

23. As a preview, I shall argue that Social Teleology has two major theoretical costs: accepting an irreducible human/world dualism and accepting incorrigible cultural relativism.

24. The criteria for this third sort of naturalism would have to be an anti-dualistic reconciliation of first nature and "second nature", of biology and culture, of animality and rationality. I shall return to this theme in a later chapter. See also: Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism.; Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism..

25. Other ethical naturalists like Richard Boyd and Peter Railton would be quick to observe, at this juncture, that natural kinds themselves are part of the vocabulary of natural science. Cf. Richard Boyd, "Realism, Anti-Foundationalism and the Enthusiasm for Natural Kinds," *Philosophical Studies* 61, no. 1 (1991): 127–48; Richard N Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," *Contemporary Materialism*, 1988, 307; Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (1986). And indeed, part of my strategy for defending the truth and scientific credentials of Footian naturalism is to appeal to generic truths about natural kinds. But this objection is still considerable.

26. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 84. Plantinga explains that the bald, disenchanted picture of nature that excludes all consciousness – both divine and human – should not be pinned on Newton, who was a pious Christian, but fits better with Pierre-Simon Laplace.

III. An Initial Case for Natural Normativity

What are we to make of these two options? On the one hand, I think both Social and Organic strategies would work as groundings for ethical naturalism, and so wish to defend the pair against non-naturalism and rival naturalisms. On the other hand, Organic Teleology makes a stronger case, despite the additional theoretical risks. So, in the spirit of devil-may-care adventure seeking, I shall pursue the more ambitious strategy of defending natural normativity in all of organic nature, not just human beings. The primary objection to overcome is the **Bald Nature Challenge** on behalf of an allegedly scientific conception of nature that excludes teleology and other normativity from nature.

Since Foot and Thompson take this strategy, I will summarize and bolster their arguments, offering a more rigorous argument for the fundamental premise that some formal and teleological facts are normative, natural, brute facts.

Foot on Natural Normativity

Let's begin with Philippa Foot. Foot argues that human virtues are instances of a broader class of natural properties: 'natural goodness.'[27] To earn an audience for her argument, her first chapter (which she call a "fresh start") clears away some shaky assumptions inherited from Hume and Moore. Instead of treating human valuations as sui generis, a miraculous new appearance in the cosmos that only appears with the existence of humans, that we should expand our scope to examine our status as natural entities. She is well aware that her offering is likely to offend the ears of some listeners. Her defense is the thought (drawn from Wittgenstein) that crude beginnings are often a necessary first step on the way to something refined.

The kind of "shaky assumption" she means is this: Moore assumed that "good" was the ultimate ethical predicate under review. By contrast, she argues that statements like "pleasure is

27. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001); cf. Sanford S Levy, "Philippa Foot's Theory of Natural Goodness," in *Forum Philosophicum*, vol. 14, 1, 2009, 1–15.

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

In this Foot agrees with Thompson's groundbreaking work.[28] Thompson argues that the concept of "life" is not, as it may seem to some, a property of some beings where *being* is the fundamental concept; rather "life" is a fundamental concept.[29] He says, "Vital description of individual organisms is itself the primitive expression of a conception of things in terms of 'life-form' or 'species', and if we want to understand these categories in philosophy we must bring them back to that form of description."[30] When we observe and examine living things we rightly employ some shared categories and our conclusions rightly share a logical structure. What is that common structure? Thompson reviews and refutes a variety of crude definitions of life such as that anything that is alive reproduces, grows, metabolizes, etc. Such properties may be co-extensive with the property of being alive, but they are wildly insufficient for the task of *defining* life because such properties depend on a prior understanding of life. Thompson's alternative is that life is a fundamental concept.

Once we accept the intuitive conclusion that life is a fundamental concept (along with 'being', 'quantity' and others) then the argument gets interesting. For every individual living being is a

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

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

30. Ibid., 57.

member of a species or life-form. And living beings are not just *acted upon*; they *act*. Species have characteristic actions. Thompson says "action in this sense is a specific form of *life process*."[31]. Since a particular species engage in particular activities, there are life-form specific *failures* to act. Different life-forms are subject to different normative appraisals.

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

> …we might equally have been thinking in terms of, say, strength and weakness or health and disease, or again about an individual plant or animal being or not being as it should be, or ought to be, in this respect or that. Let us call the conceptual patterns found there, patterns of natural normativity.[32]

By introducing the term 'natural normativity', Foot is insisting on a point that is both interesting and controversial – controversial because it is interesting. If health and disease, natural good and natural defect, are really instances of natural goodness, then some evaluative properties are *primary qualities of nature*. The 'good' in question here is not a transcendent platonic form of good. It is rather the good-of-a-kind.[33] Still, McDowell and others will object to this characterization of natural normativity,

31. Ibid., 27.

32. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 38.

33. Blackman argues that there *is* no good other than goods of kinds. Reid D. Blackman, "Meta-Ethical Realism with Good of a Kind," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2015): 273–92. I shall not be discussing the good per se, but only the good-for-us. Obviously, it is sensible to assume that the good-for-us is an instance of the good per se, and so the metaethical question of whether anything is good-per-se is important. My thesis focusses on the good for us. While my thesis identifies what is good for us as an instance of something *truly good*, it remains agnostic about the broader metaphysical or cosmic significance of the fact. Blackman also disputes the kind

in part because they think it "queer" that nature should exhibit such properties, and partly because they think it more comfortable to assume that human beings are the only evaluators.

The response to this worry, in part, is to remember that the natural goodness under discussion is not just a human ascription but seems to be something humans *recognize* in all living things. Foot's point is that there is "no change in the meaning of 'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will.'[34] McDowell and those who would draw a sharp contrast between"moral" and "non-moral" uses of the term must explain why it makes sense to describe a healthy plant as "doing well." Not doing well *for my garden* but just doing well – living the way such plants are supposed to live. Hursthouse articulates Foot's basic point in this way:

> The starting point is an idea that she has never lost sight of, and which figures in her early attack on Hare. It is the idea that 'good', like 'small', is an attributive adjective. What that entails is that, although you can evaluate and choose things according to almost any criteria you like, you must select the noun or noun phrase you use to describe the thing you are calling good advisedly, for it determines the criteria of goodness that are appropriate. Hare can call a cactus a good one on the grounds that it is diseased and dying, and choose it for that reason, but what he must not do is describe it as a good cactus, for a cactus is a living thing. He can describe it as a good 'decorative object for my windowsill' or 'present to give my detestable mother-in-law', but not as a good cactus.[35]

IV. A Novel Case for Natural Normativity from Generics

What are the odds that "identifying what is characteristic of a species" can license normative judgments? The odds are quite good, I think. My case for natural normativity depends on two notions:

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of biological foundation of ethics I am trying to defend here. Nevertheless, his article is a good introduction into the sort of "kindism" being discussed. The good-of-a-kind analysis works for all organisms and all biological species, rather than social groups. *Why* this should work is a quite different matter.

34. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

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

the first is a minimal scientific realism.[36] The second basic notion is a little-utilized feature of language called "generic propositions," which I shall explain below. The case in brief is this:

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

The Special Logic of Generics

Michael Thompson is one of the first to work out "the special logic of judgments we make about living things, and then to indicate its application to ethics." Such judgments are variously called "Aristotelian categoricals"[37], "natural-historical judgements,"[38] "norms,"[39] "bare plurals."[40] I pre-

36. While scientific realism is not uncontroversial per se, my intended audience are committed scientific realists or sympathetic to realism. By minimal scientific realism, I mean something quite general, such as the belief that most sciences, when successful, describe the world. Thus, Anjan Chakravartty: "Scientific realism is a positive epistemic attitude towards the content of our best theories and models, recommending belief in both observable and unobservable aspects of the world described by the sciences. This epistemic attitude has important metaphysical and semantic dimensions, and these various commitments are contested by a number of rival epistemologies of science, known collectively as forms of scientific antirealism… Metaphysically, realism is committed to the mind-independent existence of the world investigated by the sciences. This idea is best clarified in contrast with positions that deny it. For instance, it is denied by any position that falls under the traditional heading of 'idealism'… Semantically, realism is committed to a literal interpretation of scientific claims about the world. In common parlance, realists take theoretical statements at "face value". According to realism, claims about scientific entities, processes, properties, and relations, whether they be observable or unobservable, should be construed literally as having truth values, whether true or false…Epistemologically, realism is committed to the idea that theoretical claims (interpreted literally as describing a mind-independent reality) constitute knowledge of the world." Cf. Anjan Chakravartty, "Scientific Realism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2015. McDowell, as a sort of idealist, will deny this minimal scientific realism in favor of something a bit more idealist, as we shall see.

37. Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

38. Thompson, "The Representation of Life"; Thompson, *Life and Action*.

39. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy.

40. Greg N Carlson, "A Unified Analysis of the English Bare Plural," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1977): 413–57. Carlson's essay is an early attempt to account for a variety of linguistic

fer the shorter and less adorned term 'generic.[41]

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

Generics in general: neither universal nor particular

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

> Start with this sentence: 'Buddhists are way into meditation'. This first sentence is, let us suppose, true. So far so good. But is it equivalent to 'for every x, if x is a Buddhist, x is way into meditation'? It does not appear to be. For the second sentence might be false (some Buddhists might not be way into meditation) even if the first sentence is, as we have supposed, true. The first sentence could be true, somehow, even if not all Buddhists are way into meditation (similarly, 'ducks lay eggs' may be true even if not all ducks lay eggs, 'mosquitos carry dengue fever' may be true even if only a very few mosquitos carry that virus, and so on). We are now positioned to observe one curious property of generics: they admit of exceptions.[42]

Thus, generics are statements of the form "S is F" or "S has or does F" where S is not an individual but a class or natural kind. The logical form of "all S's ϕ" does not predicate ϕ-ing to all members

forms under one concept of reference to kinds

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

42. Bailey, "Animalism," 869.

of the category S without exception, nor does it simply assert that some "S's ϕ", which is true but uninteresting. For example, consider the statement "all wolves hunt in packs." Logically, the proposition expressed in this statement is neither strictly universal nor strictly particular. It is not a strictly true universal judgment (for rabid wolves hunt alone, and injured, or very old wolves don't hunt at all). Furthermore, it is true but trivial that *some wolves hunt in packs*.

A generic is interesting because it is, or we treat it as, a truth about forms, or species. The subject of the statement is not all S's nor merely some S's, but the "infima species."[43] In this way, generics pick out what we might call formal facts, facts about the life form in question. Thus Sarah Leslie: "It is widely accepted that [definite] generics are singular statements which predicate properties directly of kinds. For example, "tigers are extinct" predicates the property of being extinct directly of the kind Panthera tigris, and would be true just in case Panthera tigris had the property of being extinct."[44]

Generics are not merely statistical regularities. The members of extinct species do not exhibit any properties at all, yet it is still true in some sense that *the species* is extinct. Likewise, all the living members of a species might fail to exemplify its formal attributes. Consider the fact that "California condors can fly for hours without resting."[45] In 1987 there were only 27 known condors alive. One could easily imagine a scenario in which every living member of such an endangered species were too injured, old, or diseased to exemplify this attribute. It would be strictly false of the individual condors that any of them could fly for hours; nevertheless the generic would still be true that "condors" (as a class) *can* fly for hours.

McDowell thinks that such exceptions are a "logical weakness" in deriving ethical conclusions from generics about human beings. He cites the example from Anscombe (and Aristotle) that "humans have 32 teeth", saying "there is a truth we can state in those terms, but from that truth,

43. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism," 222. "Infima species" is the narrowest cut in a genus-species tree, or the most determinate determinable.

44. Leslie, "Generics," sec. 1.

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

together with the fact that I am a human being, it does not follow that I have 32 teeth. (In fact it is false)."[46] McDowell accepts that generics are generally true. His objection to their application seems to be that the relation between a normative expectation and reality fails to reach deductive certainty. If this is his objection, it rather misses the point. Aristotelian-categoricals are not half-hearted universal judgments trying (but failing) to reach deductive certainty. They are judgments of a logically different kind. Far from being a logical weakness, generics are what enable us to capture truths about natural kinds that help explain statistical variation and inconsistency.

Prasada says that, "Much of our conceptual knowledge consists of generic knowledge — knowledge about kinds of things and their properties."[47] We can approach generics through a "formal, quantificational" semantics or through "principled connections". Principled connections support formal explanations, normative expectations, and a statistical expectation of prevalence. In other words, we explain that the dog has four legs *because* it is a dog (formal explanation); we expect that Fido should have four legs *unless something is wrong* (normative expectations); and we expect that if we counted up a population of dogs, *most* dogs would in fact turn out to have four legs (statistical expectation). Generic truths, once discovered, set a "normative expectation" by which we evaluate individual members on how well or badly they exemplify their life form.[48]

There is much to be learned about the linguistic features of generics. Leslie distinguishes between indefinite generics such as "tigers are striped" which admits of the specification "that tiger over there is striped" and definite generics such as "domestic cats are common" which does not admit of specification, "that domestic cat is common". Indefinite generics are trickier: "Ducks lay eggs" is a true generic," while "ducks are female" is false, yet it is only the female ducks who ever lay eggs. "Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus" is true, and "books are paperbacks" is false, yet less than one percent of mosquitoes carry the virus, while over eighty percent of books are paper

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

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

48. Ibid., 3.

backs."[49] Still, despite these unexplored frontiers, their use and acquisition is actually very familiar.

Generic truths are acquired via a normal scientific means of empirical observation, rational reflection, and discussion.To use a silly example, suppose that someone from a warm and land-locked country has never heard of penguins before. This person visits a zoo and sees penguins for the first time. He notices that these astonishing creatures are called 'penguins', and appear to be birds (for they have beaks, feathers, lay eggs, emit squawks, etc.). He reflects that most – if not all birds – have many of these macro features. Fascinated, he consults encyclopedias, biology or zoology textbooks, and consult zoologist friends. All these sources confirm the categorization. Although I am not aware of when the first penguin was studied by a modern naturalist, we can easily imagine that it was from observations and reflections such as these that penguins long ago earned an entry in the annals of scientific knowledge. The biological community gave them a scientific name ('sphenisciformes') and began to fill in gaps with a detailed description of their evolutionary history, characteristics, genetics, environments, diet, predators, and so on. The scientific conclusion, upon initial observation, bolstered by reflection, underwrites the initial hypothesis: penguins are indeed birds. This familiar scientific process may not be easy or free of dangers, but it is at least *a familiar scientific process*. Scientists are continually correcting formerly established generics (the notion that all mammals give live birth was thrown into crisis by the platypus) and working to distinguish between the normal and defective traits of a species.

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

49. Leslie, "Generics."

complicated, process of scientific reasoning. Michael Thompson points out that: there is a "general and thoroughgoing reciprocal mutual interdependence of vital description of the individual and natural historical judgment about the form or kind."[50] Put differently, Micah Lott says:

> At each stage of an empirical investigation, our observations are mediated by our current understanding of the life form whose members we are observing. At the same time, our observations of those individual members will in turn improve our understanding of the life form itself, which then makes possible even more accurate and extensive future observations.[51]

Again, the fact that generic truths are revisable is not a weakness but a strength of the case I am building. It may be, for all we know, that penguins can fly (in the air), that some species of penguin can fly, or that all penguins are really just defective birds. But the most reasonable belief thus far is the generic truth that penguins don't fly; that they are excellent swimmers, not defective flyers; and that these truths hold of penguins *as a kind* – a biologist or zoologist who discovered the first flying penguin would become (justifiably) famous because we would all be (justifiably) surprised.

Generics are teleological

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

To see this second kind of natural normativity, begin with the concept of a function. Eyes perform the function (in an organism) of seeing, hemlock trees perform the function (in an ecosystem)

50. Michael Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54 (2004): 52.

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

of shading rivers, and so on. Thompson, for example, cites the scientific observation that "flowers have blossoms of such-and-such type in order that such-and-such insects should be attracted and spread their pollen about."[52] Now, Mayr calls such processes "teleonomic" in order to leave open the question of whether they are genuinely teleological.[53] For my purposes, however, even teleonomic processes would count as instances of natural normativity. Barham clarifies the notion of natural teleology in this way:

> By "teleology," I have in mind such words and concepts as "purpose," "end," "goal," "function," "control," and "regulation," as well as the real-world biological phenomena to which these words and concepts refer. This means that the word "teleology" should always be construed here in its internal or "immanent" sense—purposiveness existing in living beings themselves—and never in its external or "transcendent" sense of an overarching cosmic principle.[54]

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

> Many objects in the world have functions. Some of the objects with functions are organs or parts of living organisms… Hearts are for pumping blood. Eyes are for seeing. Countless works in biology explain the "Form, Function, and Evolution of …" everything from bee dances to elephant tusks to pandas' 'thumbs'. Many scientific explanations, in areas as diverse as psychology, sociology, economics, medical research, and neuroscience, rest on appeals to the function and/or malfunction of things or systems.[55]

Generic propositions usefully capture the functional or teleological properties of natural organisms. As Chris Toner says, "natural-historical judgments readily admit of combination into teleological judgments."[56] This kind of combination of generic truths is very familiar. No sooner have I learned the formal facts about a penguin (that it is a bird, that it can swim, that it has a countershaded white

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

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

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

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

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

belly and dark back etc.) do I learn that *penguins are countershaded in order to avoid predators from above and below.*[57] Since an individual penguin may fail to be countershaded in the way that expresses its form, it would be defective. This defect is not a judgment made by scientists and "imposed" as it were, from the outside, on the penguin; but a normative fact about the penguin. As Hursthouse says, "Wolves hunt in packs; a 'free-rider' wolf that doesn't join in the hunt fails to act well and is thereby defective."[58]

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

Nevertheless, it is true that "eyes see". In discovering and expressing the simple generic truth that "eyes see", we abstract away from the processes of maturation and development to pick out a fact that is true of all eyes that are normal and have had enough time. This is a descriptive, judgment that is also a normative judgment – without changing our meaning we could say that fully developed eyes are *supposed to* see, *ought to* see – or just that *eyes see*.

V. Three Paths Forward

In my overall argument, generic truths are intended to serve as a counterexample to premise 2 of the **Bald Nature Challenge** above. That challenge asserted that no facts are genuinely both natural and normative. Generics are both genuinely natural and normative: natural, in that a large percentage of scientific knowledge consists of scientists predicating generic truths of natural kinds;

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

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

normative, in that the life-form in question is one which an individual may or may not "live up" to, and in that *some* generics pick out natural functional or teleological facts about life forms (that penguins are counter-shaded *to avoid* predators, that hearts are *for* pumping blood, etc.). On my view, accepting the straightforward, generic truths delivered by such sciences about forms and functions is quite simply the respectable thing to do.

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

Reject

The first path is to reject generic truths about species and their formal and functional characteristics. Probably, those who are tempted to reject natural teleology believe there are no *ends* (τελοι). Call this view teleological nihilism.[59] Teleological nihilism claims as its evidence "*modern science" as a whole.* Abandoning the search for natural teleology was a harbinger of modern science; Francis Bacon and others believed that the search for final causes corrupted science. So, if best science tells us that nature is *only* descriptive, natural normativity is dismissed out of court.[60] In fact, natural sciences and the experimental, empirical methods that advance them have progressed far more than anyone could have dreamed. In part, this success is the result of giving up magical thinking.

The proper reply to Bacon is that the teleological nihilism hypothesis has been tried and found wanting. Animals, plants, and all living things exhibit end-directed or teleonomic behavior: eyes see, hemlock trees offer shade to fish, stomachs digest, deer leap to avoid predators. Even when Kant denies natural teleology – the biological theory that the form of an organism causes the parts to grow and relate to each other in a particular way – he admits we *cannot help thinking so*.[61]

59. Also called teleological eliminativism.

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

61. Huneman, "Naturalising Purpose."

Things are even clearer when it comes to natural kinds and generic truths about species. If we accept scientific realism of any form, we cannot deny that some generics are true. It is probably true that if we accept *any* form of conceptual knowledge, we are probably implicitly already committed to the truth of some generics, for much of our conceptual knowledge consists in generics.[62]) Animals, plants, and all living things belong to species, and our knowledge of them consists of generic truths about not just individuals but that species. A species involves a defined range of potential attributes that normally come to be actualized over time. An individual hemlock tree may or may not shade any fish in any rivers, but it may in time; or it may never do so, but it is still a scientific insight that that is one thing 'hemlock trees' in general do.[63]

Hence, to reject *all truths* about natural kinds and natural functions, I contend, is untenable. If we suppose for *reductio* that no generic statements are true, then not only do we reject natural functional talk but natural formal talk. If all generics are false (or only conventionally true) then it is in some important sense false that 'wolves hunt in packs' and false even that 'penguins are birds'. It is false not only that "eyes see" but even that "humans are primates". Such denials are, I think, absurdities.[64] If we accept the truth of at least some generics, then Perlman's surprise is well founded: "It is surprising that analytic philosophers, with their strong focus on science, would reject a notion that is so central to some areas of science, most notably, biology and engineering sciences… Biology cannot, or at least in practice does not, eliminate functions and purposes."[65] The great cost of throwing out generics *as a class* is that we would seem to have to throw out many scientific statements in biology, organic chemistry, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics,

62. Prasada et al., "Conceptual Distinctions Amongst Generics."

63. Compare with Thomas Nagel's point that some "laws of nature would apply directly to the relation between the present and the future." Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* 93.

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

65. Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology," 6.

anatomy, and medicine.

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

Reduce

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

Now, arguing for or against teleoreductionism has become a cottage industry.[66] It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of the dialectic here. I will content myself to note, and critique, two popular forms of reduction: the first reduces biological functions to causal contributions to a system and the second reduces teleonomic biological functions to naturally selected effects. A proponent of the first reduction is Donald Davidson. A proponent of the second is Ruth Millikan. For example, Ruth Millikan argues that an organism's proper function simply cannot be "read off" its capacities at present but must be known via empirical history. Her theory entails the unpalatable conclusion that an organ that is otherwise physically identical to, say, a heart, that was magically apparated into existence would not have a "proper function". She bites the bullet on this.

James Barham argues that neither of these forms of reduction is very promising. Neither alternative is coherent, in his view. The problem with the "causal-role" reduction of teleonomic phenomena is that in order to even posit a hypothesis about how some parts of a system contribute to the achievement of its end or purpose, we must identify *in advance* which parts of the organism play a role in bringing about the end or purpose. But if we already know the causal contribution of

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

those parts, what more could we learn by positing the causal-role theory?[67]

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

Michael Thompson, too, insists that judgments about natural teleology are made true from the form of life under question, not from "hypotheses about the past."[68] James Barham points out that the problem with Aristotle's views of biology (say, believing that the seat of perception was not in the brain) was not that he lacked knowledge of evolution, but that he lacked adequate knowledge of physiology.

Accept as is

The third option is to accept that some natural facts are intrinsically normative, irreducible, natural facts. Although the very word 'teleology' is liable to sound quaint to modern ears, Barham has argued that 'teleological realism' is a rationally permissible view to take on biology. Indeed, it is making a come-back. For instance, Arnhart persuasively argues that teleology is assumed in medicine.[69] Zammito clarifies ongoing relevance in biology, since organisms seem to be intrinsically purposeful.[70] Fitzpatrick says that, "While neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory does soundly reject

67. Cf. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology., chapter 3.

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

69. Arnhart, "Aristotle's Biopolitics."

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

any appeal to teleology in the process of evolution itself, there is a large literature in contemporary philosophy of biology defending the legitimacy of employing teleological concepts in connection with adaptations."[71]

Thomas Nagel has offered one of the most recent defenses of scientific, natural teleology.[72] Michael Chorost's review of *Mind and Cosmos* reminds readers that natural teleology is not so scientifically heretical as it might first seem. He says:

> Natural teleology is unorthodox, but it has a long and honorable history. For example, in 1953 the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley argued that it's in the nature of nature to get more advanced over time. "If we take a snapshot view, improvement eludes us," he wrote. "But as soon as we introduce time, we see trends of improvement."…[73] Chorost argues that Nagel did not "go wrong" in his thesis but in presenting it philosophically without engaging the support from relevant scientific literature. He continues with a few more examples:

> paleontologist Simon Conway Morris, at the University of Cambridge, has argued that natural structures such as eyes, neurons, brains, and hands are so beneficial that they will get invented over and over again. They are, in effect, attractors in an abstract biological space that pull life in their direction. Contingency and catastrophe will delay them but cannot stop them. Conway Morris sees this as evidence that not only life but human life, and humanlike minds, will emerge naturally from the cosmos: "If we humans had not evolved, then something more or less identical would have emerged sooner or later.

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

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

72. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

73. Michael Chorost, "Where Thomas Nagel Went Wrong," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2013.

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

> about the possibility that 'moral evaluation' could be like this.[74]

Despite such legitimate worries, we have followed Foot in trying to earn a hearing for this notion by arguing that the "meaning of 'good' in so-called 'moral contexts' " does not have a special logic of its own. Rather, 'good' and 'defective' pick out natural properties of living things. The goodness of a cactus is relative to its cactus nature; the goodness of human beings is relative to their human nature. And that human nature is to be or have the potential to become practical, rational animals. Hursthouse continues:

> When we moved from the evaluations of other social animals to ethical evaluations of ourselves, there was an obvious addition to the list of aspects which are evaluated. The other animals act [as opposed to chemicals which are only acted upon]. So do we occasionally, but mostly we act from reason, as they do not, and it is primarily in virtue of our actions from reason that we are ethically good or bad human beings. So that is one difference that our being rational makes.[75]

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

Human Normativity

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

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

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74. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 38.
75. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 217.

Chapter 3

Practical, Rational Animals

"*Human nature is normative, such that to be morally good is to fulfill one's nature.*" – Chris Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism", 221.

I. Introduction

The last chapter argued that it is possible to express scientific knowledge of natural facts about organisms, such as facts about their life form and function, in generic propositions. (This was our minimal scientific realism.) This chapter addresses the status of humanity. I shall argue that humans are natural organisms. If humans are a species of natural organism, then they inherit the properties belonging to the genus. Hence, it is possible to express scientific knowledge of human organisms, including facts about our life form and functions, in generic propositions.

The generic proposition I shall defend is a particular conception of the differentiam of our species. In the old classificatory schemes, philosophers provided a genus and a differentiam. As Hans Fink explains: "The nature of x is both what is special about this x and what makes this x one of the x's as opposed to the y's. When x is defined per genus et differentiam both the genus and the differentiating characteristic and their combination could be taken to express what is the nature of

x…. Human nature is what differentiates us from the animals and the plants."[1] Specifically, the argument of this chapter is that the best way of characterizing the human life form is in a (somewhat modified) version of a traditional formula: a human being is potentially a practical, rational animal. Fink continues: "By nature we are rational beings. Our human nature, however, is also that in virtue of which we belong to the animal kingdom and to the living organisms. By nature we are mammals. We may thus use the concept of nature to differentiate rather than include, but also to include rather than differentiate. And we may use the concept of nature to express that differentiation and inclusion should not be seen as incompatible."[2] The generic proposition that humans are practical rational animals, I argue, captures the facts of our life form and can be demonstrated to be true from within the human point of view, and from outside it; an alien anthropologist studying human beings from its own non-human point of view could discover that humans are practical rational primates. What follows *ethically* from this is that the virtues are the qualities belonging to creatures like us. Virtues are the human specific goods-of-a-kind. Relatedly, the acquisition of virtues both causes and constitutes the actualization of our life form as practical rational animals. Truly exemplifying our life form constitutes our species-specific flourishing.

In brief, the argument is: (1) All natural organisms exhibit formal and functional (i.e., teleological) facts which are expressible in generics. (2) Human beings are natural organisms. (3) Human beings exhibit formal and teleological facts which are expressible in generics. (4) Human beings are practical, rational animals. (5) Humans are to become practical, rational animals. (6) The qualities human being acquire on the way to becoming fully practical, rational animals are virtues.

We already argued for (1). Let's start by supporting (2). Are human beings natural organisms? On the face of it, such an assertion would seem to be trivially true. Humans are animals — primates of the chordata phylum — who like every other organism live on the earth, enjoy a particular evolutionary history, and engage in activities such as eating, reproducing, sleeping, and

1. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," 207.
2. Ibid., 207.

moving about on the earth.

Nevertheless, as phrased, the second premise is ambiguous. Some readers might want to disambiguate it. Two possible responses deserve mention. The first sort of reader might want to be clear that by asserting that human beings are natural organisms, they intend to assert that human beings are *merely* natural. They intend, in other words, to smuggle in a crassly reductionistic conception of 'human animal' under the guise of an innocent truism. On this conception, humans are machines made of meat just the same way that all of nature is a machine and all animals are machines. Although human beings seem unique among the animal kingdom, this response glosses over the apparent uniqueness in the name of battling human exceptionalism.

A second way of clarifying the premise that 'human beings are natural organisms' is that human beings are exceptional, especially in being rational animals. This second sort of reader might want to be clear that human beings are unique among natural organisms. They intend to smuggle in a dualistic or supernaturalistic conception of 'human being'. On this conception, human beings are ghosts in machines, or made in the image of God, or (in an unforgettable phrase from novelist Walker Percy "angelic beasts" or "bestial angels").

Between these two ways of disambiguating the premise that human beings are natural organisms, I prefer not to disambiguate it. The first reason is that discussing such matters would take us into deep metaphysical waters, while our main goal is to identify, as far as we can, what exactly characterizes our life form only in order to explore whether this examination bears any relevance to the ethics of virtue and vice. A second reason is that such calculated indeterminacy, I hope, will allow for both kinds of readers to participate in the dialectic regardless of their metaphysical commitments.

Humans are natural organisms. According to the arguments above, all of organic nature is subject to evaluation according to patterns of natural normativity. Recall Hursthouse's statement that ethical evaluations of *human beings* "depend upon our identifying what is characteristic of the

species in question."[3] The 'characteristic', I take it, is a differentiam determining or defining the human life form, or nature, or archetype. By comparison to this life form, evaluations of individual human beings is possible. To take a small example, we identify speech disorders such as apraxia, muteness, and stuttering by comparison to a conception of what human speech is like. And "what human speech is like" is expressed in a series of generics: human speech consists of such-and-such range of individual sounds, such-and-such variety of pitches and voice, physiological and neurological properties of the tongue and the brain, syntactical and grammatical properties, and so on. So what generics pick out formal and teleological facts about human beings?

One sort of reader might object that such a search is futile. As Stephen Brown says, "Human nature is variability itself."[4] Other natural kinds — physical, chemical, organic kinds — exhibit relatively stable features: *All* metal is conductive, and *all* tigers are striped. But there is nothing true of *all* human beings. Any patterns can be subverted. A related point is that even if we found truly universal patterns within humanity, such would be irrelevant to ethics. As rational beings, we can stand back from putatively universal patterns and ask whether we ought to conform to them. In a word, perhaps human rationality frees us from the determinism of our life form. Hursthouse acknowledges this pair of objections:

> … ethical naturalism looks to be doomed to failure if it depends on identifying what is characteristic of human beings as a species, in the way their pleasures and pains and ways of going on are characteristic of the other species. By and large we can't identify what is characteristic of human beings as a species in this way–there is too much variety. And even if we could, it looks as though we would not allow anything we identified to carry any normative weight if we thought it was something we could change. So is ethical naturalism, after all, a non-starter¿"[5]

The search for true generics about human beings and the human life form is not futile. While the desired generics cannot *ignore* or *contradict* our status as physical, living, animals, they also cannot

3. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, chap. 9 abstract.

4. Donald E. Brown, "Human Nature and History," *History and Theory* 38, no. 4 (1999): 138–57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2678062.

5. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 222.

be *merely* descriptions of our genes, organ systems, 30 billion brain neurons, and so on. They must also capture what is ethical or potentially ethical about human beings as rational creatures. As an example, "humans are language-using primates" is the kind of generic we must defend as *both* "objective" and scientific *and* practical and ethical.

Offering an argument for the truth of the generic that 'humans are practical, rational animals' and addressing these objections will occupy us for this chapter and beyond.

Our task is to provide a conception of human nature that is both normative and descriptive. We must first uncover, if possible, a set of scientific generics about humanity, specifying what kind of natural creature human beings are and what kind of characteristic life they live – what kind of life they live "by nature". Such generics, it is hoped, will give us initial insight into the concept and content of virtue, excellence, wisdom, and flourishing, which are our main themes.

II. Animals of peculiar sort

All humans are animals. This is not a trivial point. To be an animal entails the presence of several other properties, some of which will be seen below to have potential ethical significance. However, humans are animals of a peculiar sort in that we exhibit a unique range of thoughts and activities. Attempts to characterize human nature, then, must not only cite our *physicality* – our relation to the physical world – but our *animality* – our relation to the living world as a whole. I will first discuss the properties entailed in the concept of 'animal' (which we share with other organisms) and then discuss the properties entailed in the concept of 'practical, rational' (which differentiate us from other organisms.)

To be an animal entails many things. For example, it entails a particular set of relations with respect to other animals and ecosystems. To be an animal is to belong to the "tree of life" — and to have a location in the broader story of life on earth. As Michael Mautner explains, all living things (on earth at least) share common ancestors and even share genetic material. He says:

> …phylogenetic trees indicate that all terrestrial life can be traced to a common ancestor. Organisms as different from us as yeasts share half; mice, over 90%, chimpanzees, over 95%, and different human individuals share over 99% of our genome. These scientific insights give a deeper meaning to the unity of all Life. Our complex molecular patterns are common to all organic gene/protein life and distinguish us from any other phenomena of nature.[6]

Suppose that the earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago; that life arose on earth 3.5 billion years ago; and that anatomically modern humans arose on the earth about 200,000 years ago or in the "Late Pleistocene of 120,000 years ago."[7] The first among our species lived in Africa. They emigrated from that landmass and settled in various parts of the globe. In contemporary classificatory scheme, we can locate humans within the phylum chordata, the class mammalia, the order of primates, the suborder haplorhini, the familiy hominidae, the genus homo, the species homo sapiens.

Secondly, unlike prokaryotic organisms (such as bacteria), all mammals come to be through process of fusing dimorphic gametes, such as ova and sperm cells, into a fertilized zygote. New fertilized zygotes, once generated, grow through a process of cell division found only in eukaryotic organisms, such as fungi, plants, mammals. Meiosis is a process of division leading to the creation of new cells that each contain the same genetic material as the original. In other words, the cell divides and transmits the genetic material in the zygote to the daughter cells. However, in all such organisms it is possible that errors occur in meiosis, which results in genetic defects. The ethical implications of genetic defect in humans is profound, since such defects may underly everything from developmental disabilities to common mental illnesses.

Thirdly, being an animal entails that an organism begins life as a tiny zygote and progresses through gestation to infancy, maturation, and adulthood, at which point it may reproduce itself before dying. All of these phases we notice in human animals as well. The human life cycle is characterized by various phases, including growth, language acquisition, puberty, physical maturity

6. Mautner, "Life-Centered Ethics, and the Human Future in Space," 434–5.
7. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 102.

and characteristic activities, aging, and death. Unlike other mammals, female humans go through menopause. Humans tend to thrive best in climates averaging between 42-80 degrees Fahrenheit[8], but some cultures live and thrive in extreme temperatures.

To zoom our perspective out a bit further, we can observe that human beings (like other species) not only have a natural history, and a characteristic natural life cycle, but also a natural destiny — such as extinction, or evolution into a new species, or indefinite preservation through sexual reproduction, or something else.

Now, apparently innocent descriptions of human animals are inseparable from ethological and anthropological descriptions, which can blend into the normative. The property of being an animal encompasses a whole range of biological and neurophysiological facts that obtain in each normal human being. For example, humans' heights range from 4'7" to 6'3" (plus or minus) and weights range from 120-180 pounds (plus or minus). When someone suffers from a growth disorders such as dwarfism (under 4'10" in human adults) or gigantism, we identify the disorder by reference to such generics.

Humans have 23 chromosomes in each somatic cell, with about 22,000 total genes. Humans have 32 teeth and an extremely diverse diet of carbohydrates, fats, fiber, minerals, proteins, vitamins, and water: they eat vegetables, red meat, fish, nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, mushroom, mollusks, herbs, and more. Genetically modern humans don't just hunt and gather but farm, store, combine, ferment, and cook food. They have opposable thumbs, are bipedal, and walk upright.

At this point in the description of the human species, the difficulty (I should say impossibility) of separating the biological, behavioral, and social conditions of being a human being becomes plain. Presumably, even an alien anthropologist who knew nothing of human language or "what it is like to be a human" would be able to notice, upon examination, that a human's laugh or cry is different from a hyena's laugh or a crocodile's tears. Part of the alien anthropologist's examination

8. Yuming Guo et al., "Global Variation in the Effects of Ambient Temperature on Mortality: A Systematic Evaluation," *Epidemiology (Cambridge, Mass.)* 25, no. 6 (2014): 781.

would be to examine the body, brain, and hands of human beings. For example, humans have large brains relative to other primates, with a neocortex and prefrontal cortex that correlate with abstract thinking, problem solving, society, and culture. And indeed, humans live in cultures and societies. They are language-users, communicating in signs and symbols. Their language is an extremely complex, open-ended system which is both recursive (able to nest propositions within propositions) and productive (able to create sentences by potentially limitless combinations of words). In virtue of language and their opposable thumbs, they are creative; they don't just live on the ground or under ground, but build houses and shelters, sometimes in new places, such as caves, trees, hills, mountains, etc. Also, they are self-reflective. They establish social relations upon biological grounds (some children growing up with natural parents) and upon normative grounds (some orphans growing up in orphanages created by philanthropists).

Practical Rationality

The generic I aim to substantiate is that human beings are animals of a peculiar sort: humans are practical, rational animals.

Practical reason (or practical rationality, which I shall use synonymously)[9] occupies a place of importance in the theories of many virtue ethicists. Specifically, the neo-Aristotelians have each thematized practical reason in their own way.[10]

What properties are entailed in the concept of rationality and practical rationality? Rational capacities are identified by the actions of rational creatures. John Haldane quotes the motto of the medieval scholastics: "acting follows being" and "things are specified by their power."[11] As a first

9. Warren Quinn uses 'practical reason' to mean the faculty and 'practical rationality' to mean the excellence use of the faculty. I prefer to treat 'practical reason' and 'practical rationality' as synonymous, contrasting them with 'practical wisdom', which is the excellence thereof. Cf. Warren Quinn, "Rationality and the Human Good," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 02 (1992): 81–95

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

11. John Haldane, "A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind," *Ratio* 11, no. 3 (1998): 262.

start, I would point out that we use terms like 'rational' or 'reasonable' or 'reason' as abstractions to describe a set of capacities we *just do* notice. For example, activities that get called 'rational' are activities such as to observe, to perceive as, and reflect; to remember, predict, and categorize; to decide, determine and pursue; to abstract, explain, and infer; to criticize, blame, and praise; to admonish, prohibit, and command; and so on. The alien anthropologist, if indeed it had enough of its own rationality to be able to have anthropological science, could observe these actions and infer the existence of the property of rationality.

We must beware a couple of misunderstandings. For some unwittingly entertain the assumption that "rationality" for Aristotle meant abstract thought, theoria, and contemplative science. The capacity for abstract or "theoretical reason" is certainly an important feature of human nature and stands out from the capacities of other organisms. But it is not merely *thought* but *thoughtful action* that I would like to emphasize.

Other members of the animal kingdom "think" in one sense of that term, but as far as we know, no other animal constructs theories about the cognitive capacities of the animal kingdom. Nevertheless, for our purposes, I would like to argue that being a potentially rational animal entails at least four other properties: speech, sociality, rational practice, and creativity. Let's consider each in turn, and show how they interconnect.

Speech

First, speech. We are animals who speak.[12] Aristotle observed that, "Man alone of the animals possesses speech."[13] Though other animals have speech and communication, nothing in modern science has superceded or contradicted the observation (obvious to anyone) that human speech is different. Other animals that communicate use non-grammatical closed systems with a small, finite

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

13. *Politics*, 1.1253a.

set of symbols.[14] Our language is unique: it is grammatical, open-ended, recursive, and productive.

Through our animal senses comes a sensitivity to our surroundings, the ability to see the sun and moon which are millions (or hundreds of thousands) of miles away, to hear our fellow creatures, and to "take in" the whole cosmos into consciousness. But through speech comes a whole second cosmos of culture. Through speech comes intentionality in all its forms. Through speech comes communication ("pass the salt"), distinct languages and cultures (about 5,000 distinct languages), self-consciousness ("who am I?"), abstraction ("all grass is green"), science, philosophy, religion, mythology, technology and more. Perhaps even art and music arise from the rational capacity to direct our actions to create not only what instinct demands but whatever the imagination can invent.[15]

Sociality

Secondly, sociality. Humans are political animals, Aristotle famously quipped. But we ought not interpret this in any facile way to mean that human beings prefer to reside in groups or enjoy "getting involved in politics". Rather, we ought to interpret this as a generic truth about the constitutive formal features of a human being as such. This truth is best viewed in light of our animality and speech: for to be a human being is to be a creature produced by the sexual union of two other human gametes, and to be able to speak is to be enculturated in a particular natural language in a time in human history and a place on the globe.

We shall return to the importance of sociality in our discussion of traditions in a later chapter.

14. Communication systems used by other animals such as bees or apes are closed systems that consist of a finite, usually very limited, number of possible ideas that can be expressed. In contrast, human language is open-ended and productive, meaning that it allows humans to produce a vast range of utterances from a finite set of elements, and to create new words and sentences.

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

Rational practice

Third, rational practice. All organisms *act* in the most general sense that they move about and do things. But higher mammals engage in complex (and often social) practices, such as communal hunting, grooming, and building.

Humans exhibit something apparently unique, or they exhibit something rare to a unique degree. We do not just act but act on reasons. Micah Lott says: "Human form is characterized by practical reason. This is the capacity to act in light of an awareness of the ground of our actions, to recognize and respond to practical reasons."[16] We set goals. We undertake long, complicated sets of actions in order to achieve those goals.

Under the category of 'rational practice' I would like to include everything unique about humans that has to do with morality.

Creation

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

Michael Thompson summarizes:

16. Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form."

> "… we may view this line of thought as beginning with the idea… that will and practical reason are on the face of it just two more faculties or powers a living being may bear, on a level with the powers of sight and hearing an memory. The second crucial thought is that an individual instance of any of the latter powers — sight, hearing, memory — is intuitively to be judged as defective or sound, good or bad, well-working or ill-working, by reference to its bearer's life-form or kind or species."[17]

Potential

The point of these reflections has been to bear out the truth of the generic that human beings are practical, rational animals. The first is that I must hasten to add that "humans are practical, rational animals" is a generic and so it admits of exceptions.

Generics describe a life form well only when the sample includes exemplary instances of the species — not young, immature, ill, or injured instances. Especially in the case of young organisms we need to invoke the notion of *potential*. Even single celled organisms have the potential to reproduce and develop. Scientists do not judge the characteristics of a newly discovered species by examining its young.

The same point can be applied to those organisms, who by injury or illness, will never reveal the potentials inherit in their life form. Although that individual instance may be imperfectly actuating its species, it is still a member of the species.

The importance of this point blocks a monstrous thought that humans who are not rational are not *"really"* human. Anacephalic babies are not even potentially rational, for they lack the subvenient brain structure necessary for rational consciousness, yet they are recognizably *human* (they are not opossums), just defectively so. (A war veterans is still human even if he or she is no longer bipedal!) Injury, illness, genetic defect, radiation poisoning, and any number of other negative factors may render a human being sub-rational. Coma, mental illness, and other factors may render a human being non-practical (unable to direct his or her own life to a normal degree).

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

And an uncharitable critic might accuse me of insinuating that monstrous thought. On the contrary, one of its strengths of the fact that 'humans are practical rational animals' is a generic is that it blocks this kind of monstrous thought. For there are many people who are fully human by nature without being fully human by actualization — people who are in a coma, merely young, who have suffered a debilitating brain injury, or who have severe mental illness, and so. These are still human because they share the life form of humanity. Young humans are fully human — their youth and diminutive size is no tragedy for every organism begins its life young and matures. Injured and ill humans are fully human by nature; the tragedy of injury and illness is that such cannot fully participate in their own life form; they cannot engage in characteristic activities. We must be able to capture the thought that the mentally ill or the genetic defect sufferer is abnormal, and that children are undeveloped or immature, without slipping into the monstrous thought that they are not *human*. If people in comas, or the mentally ill, the genetically defective, are not even human then it would seem to be permissible to do all sorts of inhumanities. Robert P. George makes this point well:

> Various criteria for where the line should be drawn [between living things it is permissible to use and those it is not permissible to use] have been proposed: sentience, consciousness, self-awareness, rationality, or being a moral agent (the last two come to the same thing). We will argue that the criterion is: having a rational nature, that is, having the natural capacity to reason and make free choices, a capacity it ordinarily takes months, or even years, to actualize, and which various impediments might prevent from being brought to full actualization, at least in this life. Thus, every human being has full moral worth or dignity, for every human being possesses such a rational nature.[18]

The point of the argument above was that generic truths about humans do not inform us about what is universally distributed nor even what is statistically common but about the life form of the species.

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

Summary

Let's sum up what we've said so far and see how it applies to virtue. The argument of the previous chapter showed how the is-ought gap is not fatal for some forms of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. For on this sort of ethical naturalism, all generics can be used as premises in arguments with normative conclusions. Some true generics are about humans (there are some human natural norms). Therefore, some true generics about humans can be used as premises in arguments with normative conclusions.

As we said above:

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

Now, the true generic I have been trying to substantiate is (4) that human beings are practical, rational animals. This generic is of momentous importance. Each word "animal", "practical," and "rational" entails a cluster of concepts. To be an animal is to be alive, to be a natural organism, and so on. As Mautner continues: "Life is a process whose outcome is the self-reproduction of complex molecular patterns'. Importantly, Life is then a process that requires a constant flow of information, matter and energy."[19] That process of life on earth has been a continuous one, throughout time, since the first origins of life on the planet.

Furthermore, we are not just "living beings" but *animals.* We come to be in similar ways as other mammals, have similar needs for oxygen, food, society, warmth, exercise, and sleep. And to be a common life form entails that each of us begins life in roughly the same way, need the same range of nutrients to grow and survive, and deserve the same respect.

Finally, something changes when we examine human beings compared to all other animals or all other natural kinds.[20] We are not just animals but practical rational animals. This entails

19. Mautner, "Life-Centered Ethics, and the Human Future in Space," 435.
20. Katherine Hawley and Alexander Bird, "What Are Natural Kinds?" *Philosophical Perspec-*

the emergence of a new set of capacities: abstract thought, speech, sociality, rational practice, and creativity. So, we can predict that just as the scientist evaluates members of a species by how well or badly it exemplifies its particular life form, human beings are evaluable by how well or badly they exemplify their particular life form. We continue to evaluate humans on the basis of their species, but we evaluate not just their health and normal developmental stages, and their maturity, but their *actions*. Michael Thompson summarizes:

> … we may view this line of thought as beginning with the idea… that will and practical reason are on the face of it just two more faculties or powers a living being may bear, on a level with the powers of sight and hearing an memory. The second crucial thought is that an individual instance of any of the latter powers — sight, hearing, memory — is intuitively to be judged as defective or sound, good or bad, well-working or ill-working, by reference to its bearer's life-form or kind or species.[21]

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

> So, summing up, a good social animal (of one of the more sophisticated species) is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to (i) its parts, (ii) its operations, (iii) its actions, and (iv) its desires and emotions; whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group–in the ways characteristic of the species.[22]

This is pretty well comprehensive. The only points I would add have to do with adding specification to the "good functioning" or flourishing of individuals and social groups, which I will do in a later chapter.

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tives 25, no. 1 (2011): 205–21.

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

22. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 202.

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

III. Discussion

I would like to consider a couple of possible responses the reader might have at this juncture

No human nature

The first objection is simply that the search for human nature is hopeless because there is no human nature. This objection has three iterations. Let's consider each in turn.

No Natural Kinds

The first sort of critic might deny that there is any such thing as a human life form because there are no life forms at all. Perhaps, instead of real life forms and natural kinds, we should be nominalist about divisions between various branches of the tree of life. Evolutionary biology tells us that genetically modern humankind is the latest in a series of species. This is prima facie in tension with the notion of fixed, stable human nature. Ernst Mayr puts the alleged tension between the flexibility of evolutionary species and a fixed human nature in this way:

> The concepts of unchanging essences and of complete discontinuities between every *eidos* (type) and all others make genuine evolutionary thinking impossible. I agree with those who claim that the essentialist philosophies of Aristotle and Plato are incompatible with evolutionary thinking.[23]

Arthur Ward is one who agrees with Mayr here. He argues that "naturalists should reject the idea of 'human nature,' and indeed should reject that any organism or its parts or operations has a nature, purpose, proper function, or the like."[24]

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

24. Ward, "Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory," 1.

Natural Kinds, but no Natural Telos

Relatedly, the second sort of critic accepts natural kinds but denies that these kinds have teleological features. Even the singular noun phrase "human nature" is liable to sound mystical, like a platonic universal underlying all human beings. Bernard Williams summarizes the antiquated worldview that many are suspicious of:

> The idea of a naturalistic ethics was born of a deeply teleological outlook, and its best expression, in many ways, is still to be found in Aristotle's philosophy, a philosophy according to which there is inherent in each natural kind of thing an appropriate way for things of that kind to behave.[25]

Elsewhere, Williams says: "The first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no such teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play, still has to find its way into ethical thought."[26]

If humans are in fact a mess, then the true generics accurately picking out their characteristic behaviors would be messy; and the normative conclusions to be derived from them would be equally messy. Humans are occasionally irrational and always variable. Human beings posit themselves, create themselves, define their values, chart their destinies, and all in different ways.

Natural Kinds, and Natural Telos, but only Reproduction

A third iteration is that if there is such thing as "human nature", it is nothing more or less than our biological and physiological makeup. Tim Lewens argues that "the only biologically respectable notion of human nature that remains is an extremely permissive one that names the reliable dispositions of the human species as a whole. This conception offers no ethical guidance…"[27]

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

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

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

On Lewens' view, the only talk about our "nature" that would be scientific would be an indeterminate series of complicated stories about our genetics, evolutionary history, and neuro-physiology, perhaps even including cultural, geographical, and ecological settings. The problem, as we have seen, is that an empirical "scientific" conception of human nature has nothing to do with *ethics*. All of the complicated stories we could tell – if they are genuinely scientific – would be purely *descriptive*.[28]

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

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

This is also Fitzpatrick's main worry, not that we have evolved poorly, but that we evolved at all.[29] He argues that evolved organisms have a telos to reproduce, not to "flourish". ""If, however, natural functions and ends in living things are structured by special relations established through the process of evolution through natural selection, i.e., non-incidental relations between traits and a special subset of their effects that figured into the selection process, then natural teleology will not ultimately or generally be about the welfare or flourishing of organisms (FitzPatrick 2000)."

Stephen Brown is ambivalent but seems to think that ethics is, in the end, a descriptive discipline; even virtue ethics, after being appropriately "naturalized", does not *commend* the virtues so much as *detail* the traits which happen to be adaptive for creatures like us to survive and propagate our genotype.[30] Although the "characteristic form of life" of human beings involves highly rarified

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

29. FitzPatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology."

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

neurological and cognitive processes we do not observe in other animals, nevertheless, nature only reveals one kind of biological concept of nature: a species. And species aim to survive and reproduce.

Knowing from "Inside" Human Point of View

Another way of putting this same criticism is that there are no objective properties obtaining in each and every human *which can be known from the objective, external, scientific point of view.* Perhaps some universal intersubjective properties obtain, like a desire for belonging; but these can only be known "from within" the human point of view.

Even if "natural norms" such as those argued for in the previous chapter existed, this objection says, they would be irrelevant from the practical point of view.[31] For if objective norms may be known from an external, scientific point of view, even so, they are impractical; human rationality allows us to reflect upon them and decide whether or not to allow them to count as reasons for action. Alternately, if norms of practical reason are knowable from within the practical (subjective, internal, non-scientific) point of view, then they the objective facts of our nature are irrelevant. If by being practical reasoners we are free of the tyranny of biology, then biology is irrelevant to morality. Hursthouse assumes that knowledge of humanity "from the outside" is useless or futile. She says, "Ethical naturalism is not to be construed as the attempt to ground ethical evaluations in a scientific account of human nature."[32] She emphatically *does* mean to make evaluations of human beings can be made in a way analogous to the way we evaluate cacti or deer. In each case we rely on the notion of natural kinds and their appropriate way of behaving:

> [I]n relation to which they are evaluated as good or defective. The evaluations do not—as they might in a post-Darwinian age—evaluate members of species of living things simply as good, or not so good, or downright defective, as replicators of their genes.[33]

31. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012). Her dissertation is a full-scale rebuttal of this objection. I shall review her arguments in a later chapter.

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

33. Ibid., 257–8.

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

Our nature is unknown

A final iteration of this objection is that human nature is just mysterious. For all we can tell (without the benefit of divine revelation) humanity is an anomaly. Our origin is shrouded in mystery, our destiny undecided.

Human Nature response

These objections are formidable. However, responses are possible. Some of the responses I will offer now will require further comment in a later chapter. Let's consider each in turn.

No Natural Kinds response

To the idea that there are no natural kinds, I can only give a general and unsatisfactory response. This dissertation cannot chase down the (justifiably important) conversation about realism and nominalism in natural kinds. However, the arguments of the previous chapter, built on the assumption of a minimal scientific realism, is enough to secure a fairly solid grounding for the notion of natural kinds.

Natural Kinds, but no Natural Telos

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

Strictly speaking, evolutionary theory may be summarized in five theses explaining the current multiplicity and shape of terrestrial life: 1. The earth is very old; 2. Life has progressed from relatively simple to relatively complex forms; 3. Through slow and gradual changes, all the modern forms of live have appeared; 4. All of life originated from one original place and species; 5. Some mechanism such as natural selection drives the process of descent with modification.[34] The set of theses together explain biological processes of genetic mutation, reproduction, preservation, and proliferation. Thus, evolutionary theory, strictly speaking says absolutely nothing about teleological causes or properties.[35]

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

Thomas Nagel recently presented a persuasive (and controversial) case for what he calls "Darwinism plus" — that is, naturalistic Darwinian evolution plus natural teleological causation.[36] Teleological laws work impersonally on entities over time at the same moment that physical laws work impersonally on entities at a given time. I do not wish here to defend Nagel's view so much as to point out that teleological realism is compatible with evolutionary theory. Asserting that teleological realism about biology is incompatible with Darwinism does not make it so. Naturalistic teleological realism is certainly incompatible with a teleological nihilism distinctive of (certain brands) of metaphysical reductionism. If our knowledge of natural teleology is well-grounded enough then so much the worse for metaphysical reductionism.

There is another point to make. Williams despairs of finding human nature, including hu-

34. Cf. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 8–9.
35. Cf. ibid., 10.
36. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

man telos because he thinks such despair is demanded by biological science. But Hursthouse's response to Williams is that his worry is not actually rooted in the progress of modern science. And she is right. Williams himself admits that "many of course have come to that conclusion before… that human beings are to some degree a mess… for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially."[37] If many have come to that (philosophical) conclusion before, without the benefit of modern science, then it is a non sequitur to cite modern science as evidence for the philosophical conclusion. The argument, condensed into a caricature, is this: "modern science is very advanced. Therefore life is absurd."

Instead, Hursthouse points out, we should interpret Williams' worry as an expression of moral nihilism and despair. It may be a rational despair, but the rationality or irrationality cannot simply be read off the biological facts. Indeed, I shall pick up the theme of rational despair in a later chapter. For now I shall only say that Williams believes human nature is a mess *because* he believes no form of life is completely satisfactory for everyone. But cannot the ground and consequent be reversed? Doesn't that blade both ways? If one has hope that some form of life is or may be at least mostly satisfactory for at least some people, it makes sense to believe human nature even at its present state, mid-evolutionary process, is not *completely* a mess. If one looks to exemplary human animals who demonstrate how to live admirable and wise and just lives, even mixed with suffering or tragedy, then perhaps, even if their lives are not *completely* satisfactory, one has a sort of existential evidence that life can be *somewhat* satisfactory. And Hursthouse movingly praises hope as a virtue.

> Alternatively (or perhaps as well) we could stick with what we have—those facts about human nature and the way human life goes that support the claim that the virtues on the standard list benefit their possessor, and the reading of human history that ascribes our persisting failure to achieve *eudaimonia* in anything but very small patches to our vices. True, it is not easy to hold on to them sometimes; despair and misanthropy are temptations. But we should.[38]

For my part, I should not like to deny that human society and many, many human individuals are

37. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 261, quoting from Williams.
38. Ibid., 265.

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

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

Natural Kinds, and Natural Telos, but only Reproduction response

The third objection above is more relevant. Lewens, Fitzpatrick, and Brown urge that human nature, if it is anything, is simply to reproduce and propagate one's genotype. We are mammals, after all, and the telos of mammals is to reproduce. But this objection begs the question. We are animals, certainly. That is an empirical assertion, as I have been at pains to show. We exhibit quite a sufficient number of tell-tale properties shared by other mammals: a neocortex, hair, mammary glands, and hearts of a particular form and function. But we are also animals of a peculiar sort. That is, we are rational animals. From what we observe of ourselves both "from inside" and "from outside" we exhibit a range of properties not shared by other mammals: grammar and language, fire-making, cooking, sex for pleasure, abstract reasoning, science, philosophy, religion, mythology, agriculture. But to say that humans are *merely* mammals is an anti-empirical assertion that requires

denying all this. In light of our status as practical, rational animals, it seems obvious to most people that reproduction is not our only natural telos. Reproduction is certainly *one* of our natural ends. "Human beings reproduce" is an instance of a broader natural generic truth, "organisms survive and reproduce." Human reproduction as a generic pattern is compatible with exceptions: The celibate, the pre-pubescent, the single, the infertile couple, the homosexual couple, and others do not reproduce. Nevertheless it may be true that humans reproduce (like every other organism). It may even be true that if, *as a species*, we ceased to reproduce, something would have gone wrong. That individual members of the species do not reproduce is not an automatic sign of defect; that the entire species has ceased (by choice or by injury or illness) to reproduce might be a sign of defect.[39]

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

The idea that natural teleological facts about human nature can only be known "within" some particular point of view is an important one, and I shall have to address it in a later chapter. For now I shall only say that slippery spatial analogies like "inside" and "outside" admit of multiple senses: "inside" can and often does mean what can be known via introspection (e.g., the way I know what it feels like to be slighted or to be praised, the way I remember the color of my grandmother's house) and what can be known from accepting limitations of a first-personal or second-personal human point of view more generally (e.g., it appears that the sun orbits the earth rather than the

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

other way around; and I know when my mother is upset because I just "know" that look). Looking at things from the "outside" might mean what can be known via sensory perception or what can be known – if anything – by pretending to a neutral, objective, third-person, God's eye view. We can posit counterfactuals, as for example when we speculate what intelligent extraterrestrials would think of humans if they observed and studied our species, with fresh eyes, alongside every other. All that matters for my purposes now is that our species exhibits a range of peculiar activities that distinguish us from mammals, from animals more broadly, and from any other known natural entity in the cosmos – and that recognizing as much is an *empirical* matter. To deny our uniqueness is rationally possible, after a long inquiry. But to be blind to our uniqueness from the outset is to be subject, in all likelihood, to philistine reductionism that has little to do with genuine scientific thinking.

Our nature is unknown

The main thesis of this chapter has been that the following generic is true: "human beings are practical, rational animals." This generic, I have argued, is defensible both philosophically and scientifically. It is discoverable both by humans examining our species from "within" the human point of view and by alien anthropologists examining our species from "outside" the human point of view (so long as they too were intelligent and rational). This generic picks out a property or set of properties we might describe as 'human nature.' The final objection mentioned above is that we just do not know who or what we are. Our origin and destiny are mysterious. This is true. But it misses the point. That humans are practical rational animals is not supposed to provide complete, comprehensive knowledge of our species. It is a minimal starting point of knowledge upon which to build. Knowing that snakes are legless reptiles is not an end to the scientific inquiry, but a beginning. Indeed, one cannot know about snakes unless one knows, roughly, what snakes are. So capturing the genus and differentiam of a kind of organism is in fact necessary for creating a conceptual placeholder *about which to attach new knowledge*. Knowing what human beings are, however roughly,

gives us a concept-category within which to fill in the depth and breadth of facts and information.

IV. Conclusion

The sort of naturalism(s) represented by Foot, Hursthouse, and McDowell aim to ground evaluations of a member of a species on the life form of that species. The generic that 'a human being is a practical, rational animal' captures the life form of the species in a manner that is accessible to an "alien anthropologist" observing humanity from the "outside", from outside the practical point of view. The presence in humanity of such generically animal behaviors such as birthing, reproducing sexually, eating, sleeping, and dying betray a common root and identity with the animal kingdom and with the biological world as a whole; yet other human behaviors, especially language, deliberation, reflection, and intentional action betray a curious difference. As such, those qualities that enable human beings to be practical, rational animals are liable to turn out to be virtues. Those qualities of natural excellence enable the member of the species to actuate the potentials inherent in such a life form. Showing how such qualities as show up on "normal" catalog of virtues, and how perhaps even others, fall under the concept of natural excellence, is the task for the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Rational Practices (Virtue and Vice)

"Men need virtues as bees need stings."

–Peter Geach, *The Virtues*

I. Introduction: The Application to Ethics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
3. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.
4. Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."

Criteria

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

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

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

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

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

around through life; at times we also act on *reasons*. That is, we deliberate about future actions, and reflect on past actions, and become puzzled about what is called for in the present. The success of our actions is not guaranteed, and the reasonableness of our reasons is not guaranteed. Rather, we muddle through on the best evidence we have.

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

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

Practical reason

What difference does practical reason make? One of the objections which I stated above, but put off rebutting, was the objection that practical reason makes humans just too different from other organisms, and so renders the limitations of our animal nature irrelevant for the purpose of ethics. This is a very important objection and a later chapter attempts a satisfying response.

For now, I shall only concede that practical reason does make a difference between us and the non-rational or less-rational animals. This does not confute my general point. Indeed, it reinforces it. With the emergence of practical reason as one of the capacities of the human species comes the emergence of a new standard for evaluating a member of the species: namely, how *well* one can practically reason. We may add to our hypothesis that particular virtues enable the exemplification of our life form the additional point that the excellence of practical reason enable us to pursue our

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

ends *well*. The practical, rational agents who consistently succeed at pursuing and achieving their ends would be models of virtue. (I shall have more to say in a later chapter about what ends people *have* or *ought to have*.)

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

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

Beatific and Miserific exemplars

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

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

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

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

II. Defining virtue

We need an account of virtue that fits the criteria hypothesized above.

My account of virtue will now work carefully through the distinct accounts of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre. Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.[7] Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay.[8]

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the vir-

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

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

tuous person to "achieve those goods" of practices, to live a successful whole life, and to sustain traditions.[9] His robust concepts of virtue and practical reason overlap nicely with Foot's. I draw from *After Virtue*, where he builds his three stage account of virtue (relating to practice, then life, then tradition) from a careful study of the history of the concept within the broader western tradition. But I also draw from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animals*. John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.[10] 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"[11], and "Values as Secondary Qualities."[12]

My definition of virtue will include but improve upon theirs. It is this: virtue is the acquirable excellence of practical reasoning and rational practice.

A brief overview of points to be presented and defended:

1. Virtues are excellences of rational practice.
2. They are, by definition, good for their possessor; they are beneficial for humankind, both oneself and others.
3. They enable the actualization or realization of one's life form, including our animal nature as mortal creatures that need to eat, drink, stay warm, reproduce, and live an embodied existence in a particular time and place.
4. They are corrective, especially benefiting humankind at tempting vices.
5. Virtues are not just any excellent human traits, but the acquirable ones.
6. Some virtues are excellences in rational practice.
7. Some virtues are excellences in practical reasoning about one's whole life.
8. Virtues enable the health and progress of societies and traditions.

9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.
10. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
11. Ibid.
12. John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (Routledge, 1985), 110–29.

Virtues are Beneficial

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

MacIntyre agrees. For MacIntyre, virtues are acquired *human* qualities. Presumably, human qualities are opposed to analogous qualities of non-human animals. The flexible flagellum of a bacterium, the swiftness of a deer – formal or functional biological features that enable an animal to survive and thrive – are excluded from the class of virtues by definition.[14] Secondly, virtues enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods.* This clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. A virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills.

This assumption will bring some trouble for MacIntyre's initial definition in *After Virtue.* As we saw with Foot, it seems quite possible that people who have particular virtues can be, overall, wicked. (Can't the thief be courageous, the dictator magnanimous, the glutton affable?) It certainly seems that the answer is yes. Even indexing virtues to practices does not solve the problem; can practices be wicked? We might say this is this the problem of when virtues go bad. (We will address this problem in a later.) For John McDowell, the problem of virtues going bad does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue.

The point here is that McDowell likewise agrees that virtues benefit their possessor since they

13. Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."

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

enable one to live a good life. argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live. McDowell's theses are that: (1) "The point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live?' "[15] (2) Virtues are kinds of knowledge and *virtue* is a kind of knowledge; and (3) The question of how to live must be approached from "within" a moral outlook and approached "*via* the notion of a virtuous person."[16]

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

Actualize our life form

The second point in the neo-Aristotelian account of virtue is that virtues enable and partly constitute the realization of one's life-form. Just as sunflowers and wolves can be excellent or defective relative to its form of life, human beings can be excellent or defective relative to their distinctive form of life.

At this juncture, I would like to say a word about "excellence." The concept of 'excellence' is relative to an object's nature and function. The common example is that an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*. But more complex beings have more complex functions and therefore a more complex kind of excellence. An excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, but remains friendly to its owner, and so on.

Now, artifacts receive their function by design, and even natural entities (such as dogs) have artificial functions insofar a they are trained by human users. It is tempting to assume that *all* functions are artificial objects of human invention. On this view, natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function.

But I have argued above that natural entities such as organisms have natural functions,

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

namely to develop fully into what they are. We can empirically discover the telos of an organism by observing it and discerning between exemplary and non-exemplary members of the kind, remaining agnostic about its physical-mechanical or divine origin. That is, we can learn what acorns are by observing and reflecting upon their development from embryonic stages to maturity and the activities mature, typical members of the species exhibit.

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

Just as we cannot define a priori how tall redwoods grow or the lifespan of a star, we should not expect that we could define, a priori, what an exemplary human specimen would look like. Pretty obviously, some people are exemplary specimens of how *not* to live. To go beyond the basic assertion that some people are living perfectly horrible lives, we might need to gather a sample of persons who seem to us to be virtuous, discerning carefully between those that are actually virtuous and those that merely seem so.

What details can we expect to find? When we find fully mature rational animals, we are likely to observe that they do not just sit around "being human" all day; they perform "characteristic action" typical of the species, whatever that turns out to be. Aristotle famously concluded that the human function was discernible: the theoretical or speculative activity of the intellect was that characteristic action. His case for this conclusion rests on a host of assumptions moderns are not likely to grant. I will dispute Aristotle's conclusion (or this interpretation of Aristotle) in a later chapter. For now, I will only insist that we do not need to specify at the outset what activities are characteristic actions of practical rational animals; we can keep the notion indeterminate: our characteristic actions will involve practical reasoning and rational acting.

Beneficial for self and others

The third point to make on the theme that virtue is beneficial is a response to the question, "beneficial to whom?" Does a person possessing a virtue benefit the virtuous person or the society in which the virtuous person lives? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly *both*. Virtues, by hypothesis, are beneficial to humans as a kind, not just this or that individual.

For example, moderation with alcohol benefits oneself, one's family, one's community and so on. For other virtues, such as justice or charity, the answer is less clear. She says, "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."[17] Even so, she finds the alleged paradox between what we might wish to call "selfish" and "altruistic" virtues overblown. Certainly, sometimes life presents us with the opportunity to pursue only one of two contradicting or apparently irreconcilable goods; my own good *versus* your good. Sometimes, however, the cases in which virtuous deeds necessitate the loss of other goods are not so devastating as they might appear. It might be that, on occasion, it is better (say) for my family that I sacrifice my health in working hard to earn higher wages; while on other occasions it is better for my family that I sacrifice higher wages keep myself healthy. Even when there is a clear, irresolvable tension between my good and the good of the group (as when, say, I must sacrifice my life), we can make sense of the demand of morality by appealing to what is necessary *for humans* in general. As Geach says: "Men need virtues as bees need stings. An individual bee may perish from stinging, all the same bees need stings; an individual man may perish by being brave or justice, but all the same, men need courage and justice."[18] Geach further points out that the clear contrast between my "inclinations" (e.g., to self preservation) is largely an artifact of philosophical thinking; many people are *inclined* both to self-preservation *and* inclined to obey the moral law.

Supposing that virtues *benefit their possessor*, is it then egoistic or selfish to pursue virtue? Al-

17. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 3.
18. Geach, *The Virtues*, 17.

though it seems we only need virtue if we want to be happy, everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits because virtues help us become who we are. Such a pursuit is not selfish in the pejorative sense of the word; it is not 'egoism' for the charge of egoism assumes that the good for men is not *the good* per se. But we need not assume this. It may be that the good for men is the good. Pleasure is not the good, though it is *a* good. Moderation is a good as well. and a person who enjoys both the moderate pleasures of life and the moderation of pleasure and pain is both a better fellow and better person. As Foot argues: "Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror."[19]

In this connection, it is crucial to specify that virtues 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.[20]

Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. To use a well-worn example, it seems pretty uncontroversial to believe that friendship is a good for practical, rational, social animals. Suppose that *having friends* is dependent, in part, on *being friendly*. By 'being friendly' I mean not just being affable but having the traits that make one a good friend: being a good listener, showing genuine concern for others, being happy when a friend's life is going well and being sad when they are suffering. Having such traits not valuable *merely* because it will lead to the state of affairs "having friends". Rather, it is valuable because those traits make one a good human being. It so happens that, when two people have such traits, they will be good friends to each other. Good humans make good friends. And it is better, on balance, to have those traits whether or not friends are forthcoming. Fortune may place one in a lonely setting: military posts, solitary jobs, and so on. But as Judith Thomson says, a virtue is a trait such that, "whatever else is true of those among whom

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

we live, it is better if they have it."[21]

MacIntyre is also careful to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental goods. He does say that "enable their possessor to achieve … goods", which might sound as if he means virtue are mere *instruments* to goods. This would be a grave misunderstanding. Virtues *are* instrumental for MacIntyre, but they are not *merely* instrumental. They are both instrumental (to the achievement of certain goods) and also *partly constitutive of those goods.* Virtues are both means to an end and also ends in themselves.

The conflation of means and ends is liable to worry some critics. The worry is not trivial. But while we cannot pretend to have settled the notorious tensions between altruism and egoism, we must move on in the pursuit of a definition of virtue. Foot says: "let us say then, leaving unsolved problems behind us, that virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows."[22]

Corrective

The fourth point in our account of virtue is that virtues are corrective of common, tempting, human evils. It might seem odd that "evil" could be tempting. But examples are all too easy to supply. Obesity and malnutrition or starvation are both bad for human beings. Starvation is not usually voluntarily, and when it is, it is usually motivated by complex social and psychological factors. And obesity is not always voluntary. Nevertheless, some cases of obesity have straightforward causes. For example, many of us are who live in wealthy societies are tempted to eat a rich diet of flavorful, high calorie foods every day, and are tempted not to exercise. Under certain metabolic conditions, we will steadily gain weight and eventually become obese. The temptation to each rich, flavorful, high calorie foods is simply that such foods taste good. (Obesity is also motivated by physiological and psychological factors: many people like the feeling "full", and many people eat to reduce anxiety,

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

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

anger, or boredom. I am intentionally simplifying the example.) Habitually going in for overeating is an example of immoderation. Immoderation with respect to eating is bad for oneself. So at the point where the temptation to embrace the bad comes in, the possibility of virtue comes in as well. As Foot says, each virtue stands "at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good."[23]

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

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

Kant's error, according to Foot, is in failing to distinguish that which is "in accord" with virtue from that which is *virtuous* full stop. It may be, for example, that a novice tennis player makes an expert shot while remaining merely a novice. The hit is "in accord" with excellence but is not, in this case, an instance of excellence – only beginner's luck. In her self-love example, Foot points out that there is no virtue required to eat one's breakfast and avoid life-threatening danger, but there may sometimes be cases where self-love is a duty – even a difficult, painful duty. She says, "sometimes it is what is owed to others that should keep a man from destroying himself, and then he may act out of a sense of duty."[24] So the solution to the happy philanthropist problem is that if he really does have such a character as to be delighted helping others, he is morally praiseworthy

23. Ibid., 8.
24. Ibid., 13.

because he has worked to achieve that character. As she says:

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

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

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

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

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.

Empty tautology

Before stating the next part of my account of virtue, I must pause to address two objections to what we have said so far. The first worry is that defining virtue as "beneficial" or "positive" by definition is circular and therefore empty. Suppose we define "boldness" as *doing hard things* and "courage" as doing hard things when it is good. Boldness is, so to speak, value neutral. One can be bold in wrongdoing or bold in doing well. If courage is just boldness in doing good, then affirmation that

'courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good' would appear to amount to the trivial revelation that 'good things are good'. And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial.

This is an important objection, but it misses the point. These ethical propositions are not tautologous but are so widely and commonly accepted as to be easily mistaken for tautologies. Of course, if we define "kindness" simply as "a disposition of treating others *in a good way*" then it appears that "it is good to be kind" amounts to the same tautologous proposition "it is good to be good." But kindness is *not* best defined simply as *something good*.

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

> It seems to me self-evident that, other things equal, it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent, and to sell another's secrets solely for personal gain.[25]

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

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

> Indeed, many fundamental scientific laws (as well as some scientific tru- isms) and many fundamental moral principles have the property which we might call quasi-analyticity (see, e.g., Putnam 1962). Because of their conceptual and methodological centrality, even when we know that their justification is a posteriori rather than a priori, we find it extremely difficult to envision circumstances under which they would

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

> be disconfirmed. For as long as they occupy so central a conceptual and methodological role, they are immune from empirical revision, and principles incompatible with them are ineligiblefor empirical confirmation (let's call them quasi-analytically ineligible). As Putnam indicates, quasi-analyticity and quasi-analytic ineligibility can be altered only by pretty serious conceptual and theoretical "revolutions," whose directions are all but impossible to anticipate prior to the innovations or crises which precipitate them. The principle that torturing children is wicked and the fundamental laws of quantum mechanics are both candidates for quasi-analyticity.[26]

These ethical propositions do not seem to be tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. "It is polite to say please" is a Platitude. Some Platitudes are small, others great. For example, "treat others as you would wish to be treated" is a Great Platitude. The core principles of "common morality" that have achieved an astonishingly wide consensus in bioethical discussions are good examples of Great Platitudes.[27]

The Great Platitudes are basic, common, and hardly disputable. But that does not mean they are tautologous. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually unrevisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[28] Great Platitudes are rather hard-won insights. It is only by reflection that humans have a nature, a species-specific kind of flourishing, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our life form while others are conducive to its stultification.

Can virtue go bad?

A second worry that needs addressing is this: Can virtue enable the more efficient achievement of ignoble aims? On the one hand, examples are easy to furnish: a prude might display moderation; a thief might display courage. It seems commonsensical that whatever attributes we designate as 'courageous' can be found in agents pursuing bad ends. On the other hand, the Aristotelian line excludes such a possibility by definition. Jonathan Sanford's recent monograph, *Before Virtue*, argues

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

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

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

that Aristotle's doctrine is "ethics insists it is impossible to exercise any virtue, with the exception of technical skill, wrongly."[29] Foot attempts to do justice to both these concerns. The analogy is to poisons or solvents:

> It is quite natural to say on occasion 'P does not act as a poison here' though P is a poison and it is P that is acting here. Similarly courage is not operating as a virtue when the murderer turns his courage, which is a virtue, to bad ends. Not surprisingly the resistance that some of us registered was not to the expression 'the courage of the murderer' or to the assertion that what he did 'took courage' but rather to the description of that action as an act of courage or a courageous act. It is not that the action could not be so described, but that the fact that courage does not here have its characteristic operation is a reason for finding the description strange.[30]

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

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

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

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

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

> There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired. Yet the fact is that many of us look up to some people whose chaotic lives contain rather little of wisdom or temperance, rather than to some others who possess these virtues. And while it may be that this is just romantic nonsense I suspect that it is not.[31]

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

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

Acquirable

The fifth attribute of virtues is that they are acquirable. How virtue is acquired is an age-old theme. In the first line of Plato's *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates a question "whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?"[32] While Plato gives hints as to his answer, Socrates himself punts on the question of how virtue is acquired and directs Meno to what virtue is. Moral philosophers have continued to try to answer this question for the last 2,400 years. A recent volume edited by Mark Alfano[33] discusses the range of which positive traits count as virtues.

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

31. Ibid., 17.
32. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997), *Meno* 70a.
33. Mark Alfano, *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (Routledge, 2015).

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

Even without stating *how* virtues are acquired, it is still essential to see that they must be *acquirable*. If we ignore this point, our account will be vulnerable to a misunderstanding, even by someone who concedes that a virtue is a natural excellence for practical reasoners, a good-of-a-kind for creatures like us. The misunderstanding is this: is *any* trait that benefits humans a virtue? Are traits such as physical strength, a powerful intellect, keen eyesight, and a reliable memory virtues? Is a contractor who excels at hammering 16d nails into wooden frames to be admired for his *virtue*? Is the quarterback who can make accurate throws under pressure virtuous?

I think categorizing such traits as virtues is a mistake, but it is an understandable mistake. Homer's list of virtues included such items. Homeric virtues included beauty, skill in war, and other socially valuable traits. As MacIntyre says, "The word *arete*, which later comes to be translated as 'virtue', is in the Homeric poems used for excellence of any kind; a fast runner displays the arete of his feet (*Iliad* 20. 411) and a son excels his father in every kind of arete-as athlete, as soldier and in mind (*Iliad* 15. 642)."[34] Even if we grant that such traits are goods-of-a-kind (and they seem open to dispute), they do not seem to us particularly *moral*.[35]

A caution about terminological misunderstanding from Foot is relevant here. She points out that: *αρετή* for the Greeks refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice"[36]. We should like to distinguish beauty, raw talent, strength, and other excellences that are not at all under our control from virtues – which are under our control, either partially or completely. Furthermore, even their list of "moral virtues" (*arete ethikai* or *virtues morales*) do not correspond precisely to *our* "moral virtues". The traditional list of cardinal "moral virtues" (including courage, moderation, practical wisdom, and justice) includes

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. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*.

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

positive traits we might classify as "self-regarding" (e.g., moderation) as well as "other-regarding" (e.g., justice), and includes practical wisdom (*phronesis/prudentia*) which, if we mentioned it all, we would be inclined to classify as an intellectual virtue. Finally, not all of the items on our list of positive qualities (e.g., unselfishness) obviously correspond to one of the classical virtues. So, we ought not to assume that the terms 'excellence' or even 'moral excellence' can be a short-cut for understanding the concept of virtue. We must, instead, construct our account with care and attention.

So how, if at all, should we pick out that moral virtue from other expressions of human excellence? At first glance, the answer seems to be something about the *will*; Foot thinks virtues are revealed not only by a person's abilities but by his or her *intentions.* But what are intentions? Foot argues that the 'will' must be understood in its broadest sense, "to cover what is wished for as well as what is sought."[37] Intentions are not the *only* thing we judge, for a well-intentioned nincompoop who always harms when "helping" is rightly judged as deficient in virtue. Neither do we only judge the result of a person's action, for we sometimes exculpate a failing performance in part because the person *meant well*, though it also perhaps it the exculpation is called for because circumstances were not favorable, chances of success were low, etc.

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

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

Foot's comment is this:

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

> What this suggests is that a man's virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit; and small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.[38]

I find this analysis convincing. The outward behavior (the swift response) discloses not only the savior's intentions and attitudes, but something even deeper; settled dispositions that can be betrayed in the smallest facial expressions or the most "instinctive" gut reactions. To capture a similar point in a slightly different way, consider Hursthouse's argument that virtuous dispositions are "multi-track,"[39] 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.)"

MacIntyre also argues that virtues are *acquired* human qualities. (I would only modify this this definition to "acquirable", because not everyone has all the virtues and some people never acquire some virtues.) He does argue, with Aristotle, that virtues are "natural" for humans. More exactly, Aristotle taught that virtue is *in accordance with* nature but not *by nature*. That is, virtues are not *natural* in the sense that natural attributes such as hair color are 'automatic' but they are natural in the sense that they are *proper* to human beings, they are formal features of practical, rational animals. Virtuous traits are a "normal" psychological outgrowth of cultivating excellence within particular human practices.

38. Ibid., 5.
39. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

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

Rational practice

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

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

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

> [1] a complex social activity that [2] enables participants to gain goods 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.[40]

We could use any number of illustrations of practices to unpack these four aspects. I shall use a

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

practice in which I have personal experience: secondary school education. The practice of educating young people a complex social activity, aimed a certain goods, with a particular history and standards of excellence. A secondary school teacher is engaged in a series of activities aimed at giving children a body of knowledge and skills they need to transition to functional adults in society, whether by getting a job, starting a business, or advancing to higher stages of education. Secondary education might have other de facto purposes as well. Many parents send their children to school to socialize them in a community of peers and authorities, or to afford them opportunities for recreation, art, clubs, or simply to get a break from parenting. For the sake of simplicity, I shall focus on what seems to me the primary goal of education, which is education (in knowledge) and training (in skills) needed for becoming a legal adult.

Secondary education in the U.S. is a practice with a history (or a set of histories) from the present time back to when Americans completing high school (rather than beginning work on a farm or in town by the age of 16) was the exception rather than the rule. It has standards, both legal standards and "best practices" passed from mentor to student teacher. It pretty obviously has standards of excellence according to which most educators are average, some poor, and some excellent. An educator who wants to join that profession will be enculturated with that history, taught those standards, and given a chance (usually by trial and error) to become a good teacher.

Lutz' first condition is met, since [1] teaching is an inherently complex *social* activity, in that teachers cannot be teachers without students, and (usually) do not teach in isolation but in community with colleagues and administrators and parents. [2] Secondary education qua practice enables teachers to gain the goods "internal to the practice", namely students who are educated enough to be ready for legal adulthood – for a job or college. [3] Good teachers are those that demonstrate the ability reliably to produce educated students, sometimes in the face of incredible obstacles. And [4] good schools and good teachers usually have a *history* and social context that is being "extended" across generations. Good schools recruit and train good teachers, good teachers train the next generation of good teachers, and so on.

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

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

By contrast, goods of effectiveness are those that might fit with the practice but are not *necessary* for achieving the end of that practice: high pay, an excellent teacher lounge, a short commute to work, and so on. Mere efficiency in attaining such external goods does not entail the presence of a virtue. In fact, the desire to pursue such goods *instead of* the goods of excellence is not a neutral desire — it is a *temptation.* Virtues are needed to overcome those temptations and to succeed according to the standards of the practice itself.[41]

Excellence in practical reasoning about the whole of life

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

41. 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.

Practical reasoning is not a simple process different from other kinds of reasoning or practice; it is the whole complex process by which we undertake to direct our own lives.

This is the seventh point about virtue: some virtues are excellences of practical reasoning that enable one to live a good life. The presence of a sufficient number of virtues results in a good life. Hursthouse points out that we do not just admire those who survive but who exemplify a *human* form of life: "The human virtues make their possessor good qua human being, one who is as ordinarily well fitted as a human being can be in not merely physical respects to live well, to flourish – in a characteristically human way."[42]

I shall again turn to MacIntyre and *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's first stage defined virtue in relation to practices. His second stage goes further to include the whole of life.[43] 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."[44] The example given shows how justice demands an ordering of the various goods of excellence within each practice. MacIntyre undermines the notion that the virtues which enable success in practices can be sufficient for an account of virtue in general. He argues that we need to "envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity, whose character provides the virtues with an adequate telos."[45]

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

The two kinds obstacles MacIntyre cites are (a) social and (b) philosophical." The social obstacle is the fragmentation of modern life: "work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms."[46] Just as the temporal segments of life are fragmented into bits (one thinks of the inherently patronizing talk of "senior citizens" compared

42. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.
43. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 15.
44. Ibid., 202.
45. Ibid., 204.
46. Ibid., 204.

from the older, inherently reverent talk of "elders"), so also the various projects and pursuits of life are partitioned, labelled, and cordoned off. On this fragmented view of life, the self's social roles are so many conventions masking the "true" underlying nature of the self. This presents a puzzle: how could virtues arise to the level of excellent dispositions for *humans as such*? They would have to be dispositions applicable in personal, private, business, spheres, in young and middle and old age, etc.

The philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions… in terms of simple components."[47] 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.'[48]

The first fact to notice is that each of these answers picks out different aspects of the agent's action: intentions, intended consequences, unintended consequences, etc. And, importantly, each of these answers places the simple atomic action within a narrative history: situated in an "annual cycle of domestic activity", in a hobby, in a marriage, and so on – each with its own history and "setting." The second fact to notice is that the answers to a similarly simple question "Why is he writing a sentence?" might be situated in different time horizons: immediately, he is writing to finish his book; but also he is contributing to a philosophical debate; but also he is trying to get tenure.[49] 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."[50] 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

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

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."[51] MacIntyre scholar Stanley Hauerwas explains the significance of this conclusion: "the central contention in *After Virtue* is his remark that "the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action."[52]

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

> But if this is true of conversations, it is true also *mutatis mutandis* of battles, chess games, courtships, philosophy seminars, families at the dinner table, businessmen negotiating contracts- that is, of human transactions in general. For conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general. Conversational behavior is not a special sort or aspect of human behavior, even though the forms of language-using and of human life are such that the deeds of others speak for them as much as do their words. For that is possible only because they are the deeds of those who have words.[53]

Hauerwas continues:

> This may seem a small philosophical point, but much revolves around it: His understandings of the centrality of practical reason, the significance of the body for agency, why the teleological character of our lives must be displayed through narrative, the character of rationality, the nature of the virtues, why training in a craft is paradigmatic of learning to think as well as live, his understanding of why the Enlightenment project had to fail, his particular way of being a historicist, and why the plain person is the necessary subject of philosophy.[54]

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre's discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.[55] For we have arrived at a the supports needed for building the second stage of his

51. Ibid., 208.
52. Ibid., 209.
53. Ibid., 211.
54. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," *First Things*, 2007.
55. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 216. Consider such fascinating statements as: "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially,

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."[56]

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

> The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices. but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good. by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good.[57]

The virtuous person lives the human life. For "human life" cannot be defined in a value-neutral way, to which "good life" must be appended. Rather, "human life" is by definition the exemplary sort of human life. Our definition of 'human' must, Micah Lott says:

> embody a normatively significant understanding of human life and action. For any conception of human form is a natural-historical account of 'how the human lives.' As with 'the tiger' or 'the mayfly,' a natural-history of 'the human' provides an interpretation of the characteristic and non-defective life-cycle of the species. And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty of practical reason.[58]

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but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' "

56. Ibid., 219.
57. Ibid., 220.
58. Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," 770–1.

Virtue enables the health and progress of societies

The eighth and final point about virtue is that virtues in enable the health and progress of societies. MacIntyre's first stage defined virtues in relation to practices; his second stage argued that virtues enable us to coordinate various practices and pursuits – including relationships with friends, family, fellow citizens, and strangers – into a coherent quest to live our lives well. The third stage of his virtue account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context – namely, a 'tradition.'

Making this point requires a brief introduction of MacIntyre's beguiling concept of a 'tradition'. What is a MacIntyrean tradition? An initial definition is this: A tradition is a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[59] Traditions derive from a source text and continue across generations via normal sociological channels (schools, friendships, political institutions, etc.). So, by MacIntyre's lights, history-writing is a tradition. It is rooted in source texts such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Gibbon and extending through Europe and the western world, consisting of a series of historical and historiographical arguments over not just "what happened" but how to conduct historical enquiry.

What traditions are not

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

This obscurity is, I think, intentional. A tradition like history-writing is *embodied* in institu-

59. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

tions such as western universities but it is not simply a university. History-writing has survived the death of many universities. A secular tradition such as Enlightenment liberalism emerged from the religious tradition of western Christianity; but a religious tradition such as Thomism emerged from the prior religious tradition, Augustianism.

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

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

What reality does this flexible concept of tradition capture that these other concepts don't?

What traditions are

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

Virtue and tradition

- The point of connecting virtue to traditions is that virtues are needed to preserve (healthy) traditions and to enable progress in (unhealthy) ones.

- He 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.[60]

- Virtues enable societies to flourish (especially by producing more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Summary of virtue

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III. Discussion

With my account of virtue complete, I must respond to a few objections.

Not good fortune

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

This neat distinction served its purpose but it masks an important objection. To state the objection, first distinguish between the features of one's life and character that under the control of a normal, functional, adult human being, and those that are not. Call the set of features over which human beings are not in control their "fortune". One's fortune is simply given. Each human being is given a practical rational animal nature by fortune. But fortune consists of more than that. The life of a child includes (at least) one's genetic identity, one's time and place in history, one's culture and tradition, one's parents or guardians. If virtues are first inculcated in a child by tradition and only later acquired by an individual's own initiative, then it seems the dichotomy breaks down. It seems, in short, that the virtues one acquires or fails to acquire are part of fortune. If Jim and Jane grow up in very different cultures with very different kinds of parents and very different opportunities, it

60. Ibid., 223.

would each is given his or her virtues and vices "up front", with little to no chance for acquiring new virtues or shedding vices.

Furthermore, some of our attributes and actions may fail to be excellent without being our *fault*. So our account must allow us distinguish between various kinds of excellence. Consider the broadest set of things labelled 'good for humans'. All of the good things of human life enable the realization of a fully human life. But not all good things are subject to our control. The virtues are among those good things under our control – good dispositions we each choose to cultivate or fail to cultivate. Unlike other goods (say, wealth), virtues become *what we are*.

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

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

Not obligatory

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

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

Since, for the first decade or two of life, we are not primarily responsible for our own traits, the first corollary is high importance of moral and intellectual education. In many respects, our individuality depends on fate and luck. But in some very key respects, the acquisition of virtues and vices with which we begin adult life depends upon our education.[61] The beginning of human life, like the beginning of any organic life, is the foundation for all that follows. When a mother drinks heavily or uses cocaine while pregnant, the child is going to suffer the negative consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is abused – emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually – by her parents, the psychological cost is meted out across the entire life and across generations. By the same token, when a mother eats healthily and takes her vitamins while pregnant, the child is going

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

to reap the positive consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is given love, approval, empowerment, discipline, by her parents, the psychological gains are meted out across the entire life and across generations. The original source of most people's life maxims are not their ethics professors, favorite novels, Holy Bibles, or therapists, but their parents or other guardians. This corollary might be obvious but we must never forget it. It is important to the argument because we should never give into the temptation to think that the cultivation of virtue is simply a business for adults (least of all adult professional academics) to argue for and against. It is the business of societies and families to do or fail to do every day.

Virtues enable societies to flourish (especially by producing more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Summary

The practical animal "takes up" all that is intrinsic to being an animal – hungers, thirsts, sleepiness, sexual urges, a desire for shelter and comfort – and lives a life with them. A practical animal takes up all that is given in the natural lottery – strengths, weaknesses, defects, injuries, sicknesses, and talents – and must put it to use in living a life. Insofar as one cannot but sleep sometimes, the question of whether or not to sleep at all is not an ethical question; it is not in my control. Insofar as one can either stay or go, pursue or avoid, harm or help, such decisions are ethical decisions and the question of how to live is an ethical question. One must decide which larger, longer-term projects to pursue and which objects are worthwhile to obtain; and one must, along the way of these long-term pursuits, decide rather extemporaneously how to react to the vicissitudes of circumstance. Each of us must decide how to react to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."[62]

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

62. *Hamlet* III.1

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

The same principle applies to the various aspects of being a practical, rational animal we can mention. Aristotle taught that "affability" was a virtue, where many of us might chuckle to imagine that naturally phlegmatic people are morally better than their melancholic counterparts. Surely something so little under one's control is not a basis for evaluation? We should first remember that the "moral" virtues are not, for Aristotle, obedience to categorical imperatives or divine commands but simply ways of developing one's emotions into the likeness of a true human being. In this light, it does seem to me common for people to judge their fellows on the basis of *willfully chosen* habits of relating to others – the cold, unfeeling, humorless, or self-absorbed person is not being judged for losing any natural lottery but for allowing him or herself to become a poor companion. The warm-hearted, empathetic, cheerful, and outwardly-focused person is rightly judged for cultivating sociable attitudes and habits. While not everyone needs to be entertaining or well-connected,basic levels of relating to other persons in family and social situations is not an optional part of human life but part of our very nature. And like Derek Redmond, someone who is naturally disposed to be solidarity, melancholic, cynical, bitter, or otherwise negative is all the more admirable when he or she becomes and remains affable against the odds.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning. Virtues benefit their possessor but not egoistically; they are good for humans as a kind.

Vices, by contrast, are corruptions of life that are all too common. They are negative or destructive traits to which one is tempted somewhere in the common course of human life. Pleasures tempt us to immoderation; the urges to do favors for friends or to slight enemies tempt us to injustice; danger, difficulty, and other kinds of resistance tempt us to cowardice and *acedia*; laziness, arrogance, and culpable ignorance tempt us to practical foolishness.

By correcting for tempting vices and common errors, virtues enable individuals to actualize their life form and become excellent specimens of the human race.

Furthermore, virtues are distinguished from other forms of excellence in that they are acquirable. Acquiring them is a matter I did not discuss, but presumably it involves education. Insofar as virtue is a kind of practical knowledge — a disposition or sensitivity — it can be taught and learned.

Finally, virtues enable societies to flourish (especially by producing more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Two problems that remain are these: first, without further guidance, some virtues seem to be able to "go bad"; that is, otherwise virtuous traits might cease to be operative as virtues. Secondly, when we pay attention to the social context of humanity, we realize that certain virtues and vices can be given to one by "fortune". The solution to both of these problems is to argue that excellent practical reasoning in community is the guide to the execution of virtuous activity. That is our next task.

Chapter 5

Practical Reasoning

"There could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live."

–Jennifer Frey, *The Will to Do Good*, 79.

I. Super-Intro

The arguments of the last chapter sought to establish that virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning proper to the human life form. Our practical rationality defines our nature, including the key features of speech, sociality, abstract thinking about philosophy, science, mathematics, psychology, and so on, and practical action. We focused on the 'rational action' member of that conjunction. Now we must attend to 'practical reasoning'. If our nature is to be practical, rational animals, we should expect that the virtues are not only morally praiseworthy excellent practices but also a certain kind of excellence with respect to thinking and reasoning. These are the two sides of the same paradox about our human nature. We are "embodied minds in action"[1] or

1. Robert Hanna and Michelle Maiese, *Embodied Minds in Action* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

"psychological animals."[2]

The three themes of this dissertation have been the three points on the "virtue triangle": virtue, practical reason, and natural teleology. I have argued that we must develop an account of virtue in dynamic relation to practical reason and to natural teleology. I must make good on my claim that a satisfying neo-Aristotelian account of virtue cannot be completed without thorough attention to practical reason. This will require several chapters.

The goal of my account of practical reason is ambitious. I shall aim to offer a definition of practical reason that is plausible in its own right and that answers, or renders moot, a cluster of related worries about virtue, moral realism, moral motivation. One of the greatest attractions of the neo-Aristotelian account is that it so impressively solves a host of puzzles in a single, coherent answer. Nevertheless, when undertaking such an ambitious argument, we must not underestimate the possibility of mis-step. I shall be forced to touch on issues that need fuller treatment. The problems surrounding practical reason are the problems of human nature, individually and socially.

1. What is practical reason? Is it knowledge or a practical disposition? It is the capacity for engaging in the process of identifying reasons for action, namely, identifying what is objectively good and bad. It is a form of knowledge. And it does motivate, by definition.

In developing an account of practical reason, the first problem we must address is this: Is practical reason both *practical* and *rational*? This problem has two aspects. First, if practical reason is really practical, then how is it rational? And if it is rational, how is it really practical? In other words, suppose that practical reasoning is by definition a kind of knowledge. Knowledge is theoretical, it aims to grasp what is true. So the first aspect of the problem is that theoretical knowledge cannot (by itself) motivate to action. Alternately, suppose that practical reason is by definition a kind of practical motivation or disposition to act in certain ways rather than others. Such motivations have action-guiding force and would explain why we act the way we do. The second aspect of the problem is that such dispositions are not forms of knowledge. So either practical reasoning is not *practical*

2. Bailey, "Animalism."

(action-guiding) or it is not *reasonable*. In a very real sense, the primary challenge is to *defend the very concept of practical reason*. Even if we can answer these problems, others will surface.

4. Is practical reasoning substantive or procedural? Is it end-directed or only means-directed? It is end-directed by definition. It aims at the good. The natural norm of reason is specific to pursuing the good. For example, practical reasoning is commonly supposed by some philosophers to be a means-oriented activity, not end-oriented. We reason about how to get what we desire or how to achieve our goals, but do not reason our way to our desires and goals themselves. We simply *have* desires and goals.
5. Are moral reasons one type of practical reason? Philosophers are either dualists, monists, or pluralists about practical reason. I defend a pluralistic account.

Another problem is the relation between two commonly recognized sorts of practical reasons: prudential and moral.[3] Are these really distinct? If so, what is the distinction? If not, is one a species of the other or are both species of another genus? In other words, do we help others because it is ultimately in our best interests (egoism) or do we help others because we can genuinely suppress our own interests (altruism)?

6. Is practical reasoning valuable, important, and objective? It is valuable, indispensable. And objective. It aims not at "values" but at practical reasons, goods that are to be pursued. A related problem is the status of practical reasons within (a broadly-construed) naturalism. Are such reasons objects in the world or objects, so to speak, "in our heads"? When I take it as a reason to buy my friend lunch because he just lost his job, how are we to understand the proposition "My friend just lost his job"? It is clearly descriptive fact or state of affairs, but it also seems to become something else when I take it as a reason for buying him lunch.
7. Does practical reasoning make natural norms irrelevant — since reflecting on natural norms makes them mere data in the rational reflective process, not determinate, binding norms. Another problem is the "irrelevance objection" to neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. Briefly, this objection states that "natural norms" specific to the human species may push us in a particular direction but that they cannot justify an action as moral because ethical reflection allows us to step back from such natural norms and decide against them.
8. Is practical reason naturalistic? Yes, on an unrestricted conception of how to live. Or are reasons only "in here" in us, psychological and rational, in which case humans are not natural? Or are reasons for acting "out there" in the world, not physical and not natural, in which case nature is normative? If so, is this naturalism? Is this view objective

3. Timothy Chappell, "Kalou Heneka," in *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, vol. 21 (Routledge, 2013), 158–76.

idealism? Is practical reason natural?

9. Is practical reasoning intersubjective only, or also objective? It is intersubjective and objective. Is it like logic, response-independent, or like etiquette, response dependent? We reason within a tradition but traditions can be, as a whole, true or false, good or bad.

The final set of problems pertains to practical reasoning in social groups or "traditions." It is an empirical datum that 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. But even if practical reasons are not easily reducible to response-dependent features of each individual reasoner, we still have to ask whether they are response-dependent features of practical-rationality-traditions or whether they answer to response-independent normative facts.

In other words, although there is one human nature, expressed variously in different cultures, languages, customs, and thoughts – are we forced to give up on the idea of *one human rationality*, albeit expressed variously? Is there, at bottom, a plurality of *rationalities*? Is practical reason intersubjective, like etiquette? My case for this very difficult conclusion rests on the belief, virtually incorrigible, that practical reason is *important*. It is of unquestionable intrinsic value to human beings. Furthermore, insofar as virtue is relative to rationality, rationality itself must be fixed to preserve moral realism. A practical reason can and does motivate one, all by itself; in conjunction with or absent other immediate inclinations or desires. Practical reason, furthermore, motivates when one judges that a course of action or an outcome is good in itself, that it is *desirable* in the sense that it is to be desired whether one presently desires it or not.

II. Introduction to this chapter

In developing an account of practical reason, there are two related problems we must address. Is practical reason both *practical* and *rational*? If practical reason is really practical, then how is it rational? And if it is rational, how is it really practical? In other words, suppose that practical reasoning is by definition a kind of knowledge. Knowledge is theoretical, it aims to grasp what is true. So the first problem is that theoretical knowledge cannot (by itself) motivate to action. Alternately, suppose that practical reason is by definition a kind of practical motivation or disposition to act in

certain ways rather than others. Such motivations have action-guiding force and would explain why we act the way we do. The second problem is that such dispositions are not forms of knowledge. So either practical reasoning is not *practical* (action-guiding) or it is not *reasonable*. In a very real sense, the primary challenge is to *defend the very concept of practical reason*. Even if we can answer these problems, others will surface. I will summarize and address each new problem as it arises.

III. Practical Reason and knowledge

We can set up the discussion in this way: how should one live? McDowell says that the whole "point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live'?"[4] No mature adult can avoid asking this question. The answer or answers to the "how to live?" question(s) will be a *practical* answer or set of answers. It will be an item of knowledge and also a plan or guide to living in the way specified by that knowledge.

As a first pass, we use Jay Wallace's definition as a starting point: "Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do."[5] We engage in such practical reasoning about quite general matters ("how should one live?") and about more specific circumstances ("should I stay or should I go?") and everything in between. Practical reasoning taken broadly includes a variety of related deliberative processes, including considering future actions to be done, reflecting on past actions already done, evaluating events and objects as desirable or undesirable. What all these have in common is the the attempt to identify (or create) *practical reasons* – that is, reasons to ϕ or not to ϕ.

Practical reasoning is thus like theoretical reasoning in at least one important respect: it is normative. Theoretical reasoning is a process by which I aim to determine *what to believe*. When I assess evidence for and against some proposition P, I am looking for *reasons* to believe P is true or false. The successful conclusion of a rational argument is the judgment that P or that not-P. (Or I may

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

5. R. Jay Wallace, "Practical Reason," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014.

not have enough evidence to judge either way, in which case I may withhold judgment.) Similarly, when I consider a scientific hypothesis, I suppose that P and then conduct an experiment that will reveal reasons that confirm or disconfirm the supposition. To fail to believe P upon coming to know good evidence for it, or to believe P in spite of good evidence against it, is to make an intellectual error. If Q entails P and I already know and affirm that Q, then I *ought* to affirm that P. Similarly, if some reason to π entails a reason to ϕ, and I already know and am committed to π, then I ought to ϕ.

My contention is that the linguistic parity between π-type reasons and Q-type reasons is not accidental. Both are a species of *reasons*, though they differ. Philippa Foot says that reasons of type (A) are "Reasons for acting, which we may call practical reasons" and type (B) are "Reasons for believing, which we may call evidential or demonstrative reasons." She continues: □ >As philosophers, and therefore theoreticians, our job is of course to give the second type of reason, arguing for or against the truth of a variety of propositions that seem to involve special problems—like those, for instance, about personal identity or the existence of an external world. But among these many 'philosophical' subjects we find that of the nature of practical reasons, and in this special case we shall have to give reasons of type B for theses about reasons of type A.[6].

The difference between the two kinds of reasons is not obliterated by noticing their essential parity. Practical reasoning is essentially practical. We must be careful with our words; both theoretical and practical reasoning are *active* in the sense that both require work and both light up the brain on an MRI scan. But where theoretical reasoning results in belief, judgment, speculation, and so on, practical reasoning *results in action*. And, I would suggest, this distinction must be built in to our definition of practical reasoning. (This point needs some defending, but for now I am only aiming to articulate it.)

One does not practically reason about what to do *and then decide* to do it; there is no gap between the conclusion of a deliberation and a decision. To borrow Gibbard's unforgettable phrasing,

6. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 64–65.

practical reasoning is "thinking how to live."[7] To be a reasoner is to be responsive to Sellars' "space of reasons", including both practical and theoretical reasons. The difference, as Jennifer Frey points out, is this that theoretical reasons give us good reason to believe what is true or false while practical reasons give us good reason to act or not act. She says: "The practical order is not essentially the order of reality and truth, but the order of action and the good. It is not the order of the explanation of form, but the order of the exemplification or realization of form."[8]

Considering practical reason as a whole in this way helps us to understand the neo-Aristotelians. Jack Weinstein says: 'The term practical rationality is derived from Aristotle's *phronesis*. It is to be distinguished from *sophia*, a more technical form of reasoning. Practical rationality leads to more approximate conclusions; it takes context and relative facts into account, and it usually leads to moral or political conclusions."[9]

McDowell practical reasoning as knowledge

With these basics in hand, let us turn to John McDowell's argument for the old Socratic thesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge.

The virtuous person, McDowell argues, knows what to do. Hence, virtue is a kind of practical knowledge. For in many cases, the answer to "how?" questions is an item of knowledge. "How do I unscrew a light bulb?" is a request for an instruction ("twist left") or set of instructions, ("first, grip the light bulb; then twist left until it comes loose."). So McDowell argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live. Virtue is a kind of knowledge, namely *practical knowledge* (a "disposition to act well"). The answer to the question of how to live will be not just a proposition but a plan.

To see why it makes sense to conceive of virtue as practical knowledge, suppose that some platitudinous value (say, kindness) is really a virtue. The kind person is reliably kind and is kind *on*

7. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009).
8. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 2.
9. Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre* (Wadsworth, 2003), 60–61.

purpose. A person who merely happens to be kind or who commits acts of kindness resulting from blind instinct does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. A person who is kind once, or even every now and then, likewise does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. Rather, a kind person is one who is regularly sensitive to a range of reasons for behaving in a particular way. The kind person, McDowell adduces, "has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behavior" and such "deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge."[10] The kind person *knows* what is called for, is intentional about avoiding cruel or indifferent behavior, and so on.

One inadequacy with this view is that there are a variety of reasons for action. Rather obviously, the question of what to do is in many cases not simply a question of what is kind, or fair, or just. McDowell has supported the notion that this kind of knowledge ("sensitivity to reasons") is necessary for virtue, but not that it is sufficient. For it might be that one is sensitive to what another would feel but still fail to act rightly. He gives the example of an overindulgent parent who is far *too* sensitive to the feelings of the child, or rather *not sensitive enough* to other considerations, like the considerations of fairness or child's health. How does the moral knowledge that is virtue combine with other forms of knowledge or other motivations?

He gives two answers: the first is that the when a virtuous person is sensitive to the "requirement imposed by the situation" that requirement must exhaust his reason for acting as he does."[11] It would disqualify the act as a candidate for an example of kindness if the agent performed it *because* it was kind *and because good repute was likely to follow*. If we run the same calculus on each particular virtue, we can hypothesize that virtuous agents' behavior in each case is explained by their sensitivity to those particular kinds of reasons. In turn, their behavior in general (when virtuous) is explained by their sensitivity in general. He concludes:

> Thus the particular virtues are not a batch of independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities

10. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 332.
11. Ibid., 332.

> among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behavior. It is a single complex sensitivity of the sort which we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook.[12]

In other words, the virtuous person is sensitive to a whole range of reasons; since reason A and reason B might commend different acts, part of virtue must be the meta-cognitive capacity to reflect upon all those reasons available to one, to rank and order them.

IV. Is practical knowledge practical?

This thesis that virtue as the sensitivity or set of sensitivities to requirements for action is not liable to persuade some. An objection familiarly attributed to Hume says that practical reasons by themselves cannot motivate, at least not by themselves. If this were so, moral reasons could not satisfy the "practical requirement". Expressivists are among the chief contemporary proponents of this objection. Expressivism is motivated in large part by the attempt to satisfy the *practical* dimension of practical reason (at the cost of the "rational" part).

> Expressivism in this form suggests a naturalistic interpretation of practical reason, one that may seem appropriate to the enlightened commitments of the modern scientific world view. It is naturalistic metaphysically, insofar as it makes no commitment to the objective existence in the world of such allegedly questionable entities as values, norms, or reasons for action.[13]

On this familiar view, "cognition and volition are distinct." Practical reasoners do not simply enjoy a "single complex sensitivity" to what a situation requires; they also need the presence of a conative mental state (such as a desire) as well. In McDowell's example, one is aware that one's friend is in trouble and that the friend is able to be comforted (the cognitive bit) and a desire (or motivation or inclination or settled passion) for helping one's friends (the non-cognitive bit). Surely these two *together* and neither in isolation explains the behavior. For suppose that two persons in the same

12. Ibid., 333.
13. Wallace, "Practical Reason."

situation are equipped with identical perceptual capacities and so sensitive to the same range of reasons for action, but only one of them does the right thing. If such a supposed situation were to obtain, it would disconfirm McDowell's conclusion.

McDowell's criticism of this objection is this: in order to even notice the salient facts (that one's friend is in trouble) one must already be sensitive to a particular range of requirements for action. The difference between the vicious and virtuous person lies not just in their desires and reactions to what they notice about the world but in the noticing itself. The morally calloused chauvinist does not notice the fact that his or her actions are causing others pain. Better, the calloused person does not notice it *as morally salient* fact.

This response from McDowell is not conclusive, but it is a good start. For it highlights the deep fault line between the Humean and the Aristotelian camps. It is true that if two people are identically sensitive to a morally salient fact but act differently that virtue cannot simply be that sensitivity. But one person's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens.* So if virtue is to be identified with a single complex sensitivity, then a supposed situation in which two persons perceive a situation and its practical requirements identically but act differently cannot obtain.[14]

Is there anyway to bridge the divide without begging the question in either direction? McDowell suggests we look to Aristotle. Aristotle allowed that "appreciation of what [a virtuous person] observes is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise."[15] The point of such an allowances is that the break between the sensitivity to reasons (which is virtue) and a resultant wrong action occurs when other psychological factors interfere. What interference? McDowell mentions desires and also a "distortion in one's appreciation" of the relevant reasons.[16]

This reply from McDowell is *an* answer but it too is not conclusive. For Donald Davidson argues to the effect that a person might fail to perform the resultant right action *even without such interfering factors.*McDowell responds that the point is true, but it is not an objection. Aristotle's ac-

14. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 333.
15. Ibid., 334.
16. Ibid., 334.

count of continence details that continence is not a virtue. Continence is better than incontinence, but not as good as virtue. The continent person is able to perform the right action because he recognizes it as right, *despite* countervailing pressures (from desires, say) to do the wrong action. Since a fully developed virtue definitionally includes having the proper motivation as well, continence is only needed in the absence of a fully developed virtue. Furthermore, the virtuous person is not always one who "balances" reasons for X against countervailing reasons for Y. The virtuous person is the one for whom simply identifying a reason ("in this situation, courage requires that I run into danger") silences countervailing reasons. The virtuous persons sees the danger (and perhaps feels rightly apprehensive) but also sees that courage in the face of this danger is required; the latter perception, according to McDowell, "silences" other pressures.[17] The merely continent person has to "weigh" reasons; the virtuous person fluently and instantly *acts* on the best reason.

So McDowell's thesis is that virtue is a kind of knowledge, namely, a perceptual sensitivity to a range of facts that are conceptually defined as reasons for action. The hypothetical counterexample presented by his Humean critic is one wherein two agents are "sensitive to" or "notice" identical reasons for action but do not actually *act* identically. McDowell's response is that while noticing a requirement for action is necessarily motivating *to some extent*, other psychological factors may interfere with the resulting correct action. Nevertheless, the case is not yet settled.

V. A second pass at knowledge

Making the case more plausible requires a second, deeper look at reasoning in general. Before I offer my response, I need to take this second look. The paradigmatic case of knowledge is theoretical knowledge, knowledge that P. But theoretical knowledge is deductive, categorical, and propositional. Deductive logic examines and codifies the necessary relations that obtain between such propositions. So one objection states that if virtue is knowledge, and the paradigmatic kind of knowledge codifiable, then it would seem to be necessary that virtue knowledge is codifiable. However, practical

17. Ibid., 335.

knowledge or 'knowing-what-to-do' is not codifiable. Therefore, virtue must not be knowledge. (The non-cognitivist critic also assumes this deductive model of practical reasoning.)

The problem with this objection, McDowell thinks, is not so much a problem with our moral theory but a problem with our conception of rationality. The problem stems from a "deep-rooted prejudice" that rationality is a rule-following procedure. If rationality is a rule-following procedure, then it follows that *either* practical rationality and morality are likewise rule-following procedures *or* that practical rationality and morality is not, ultimately, sufficiently *rational*. Some philosophers (often followers of Hume but not necessarily Hume himself) think that morality is a not rational domain but a domain of sentiments, desires, commitments, approvals, and so on. Other philosophers (often followers of Kant) think that morality is a rational domain and hence must be a matter of identifying first principles and "applying" them to particular situations. But what they share in common is a belief that "rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle."[18] This common belief McDowell wishes to refute. MacIntyre, similarly, denies the assumption that normative ethical rules can be derived from universal ethical principles the way we "apply" universal logical truths to particular logical conclusions via a middle term.[19]

McDowell's discussion here (drawing on Wittgenstein and others) is hard to follow. The point seems to be that even apparently obvious cases where the rational thing to do is to follow an objective rule (say, by extending a series of numbers) turn out to be cases of a much messier process in which there is no such objective rule by appeal to which we can explain rational thoughts or behaviors. If Bob instructs Charlie to "add 2" to a number and continue applying the rule indefinitely, we tend to be confident Charlie will produce "2, 4, 6, 8," etc., which will "churn out the appropriate behavior with the sort of reliability which a physical mechanism, say a piece of clockwork, might have." We postulate a "psychological mechanism, underlying his behavior, by

18. Ibid., 337.

19. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" *The Monist* 67, no. 4 (1984): 498–513.

an inference analogous to that whereby one might hypothesize a physical structure underlying the observable motions of some inanimate object."[20] The "ground and nature of our confidence" that we will reliably apply rules is not but a common form of life. The 'form of life' is a term of art here from Wittgenstein (and quoted with approval from Stanley Cavell) that refers to that difficult-to-define process by which we learn how reliably to use words in our native language, how to make exclamations like a pained "ow!" or an excited "ooh!", when to laugh at jokes, and when to cry in pity. Our shared rationality, McDowell suggests, is not grounded in "external" objective rules but in a shared form of life or what he calls a "congruence of subjectivities."[21] McDowell admits this is a disconcerting hypothesis; it induces "vertigo." But, our response to such vertigo should not be to embrace a "consoling myth". That myth he says is the two notions that (a) rule-following is a psychological mechanism that — absent mistakes — guarantees consistency, and that there exist objective facts of the matter over and above the congruence of subjectivities. If we abandon these two notions and embrace the model of deductive rationality as grounded only in our intersubjective form of life, then the corresponding model of practical rationality will become tenable.

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

The 'practical syllogism' takes the following shape:

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

20. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 337.
21. Ibid., 339.

to technical problems would be instantiate justice in my classroom.)

3. Therefore, Z would be good to do, desirable, worthwhile, etc.

On the strictly deductive logical model, the role of the major premise is to provide rock solid universal ethical principles from which to derive particular moral duties. But McDowell resists this model. On the strictly non-cognitivist model, without universal ethical principles we are left with universal psychological states (consistent desires, plans, values, or norms). McDowell also resists this. On the non-codifiable model, what does the major premise do? Its role, he says, is to state a "certain conception of how to live… [namely] the *virtuous person's conception* of the sort of life a human being should lead."[22] It is clear upon reflection that this account is a sort of circular reasoning. For the virtuous person's conception of how to live is itself conditioned by what he called earlier 'the moral outlook'. That conception of how to live, in turn, conditions what particular saliences are noticed (what minor premises) and generates practical conclusions about what is to be done. What kind of life should a human being lead? The answer "cannot be definitively written down."[23] Furthermore, "Any attempt to capture it in words will recapitulate the character of the teaching whereby it might be instilled: generalizations will be approximate at best…"[24] The upshot of the combination of non-codifiability with a practical syllogistic form is that the virtuous person takes for a rule of life some conception of how to live but that this conception is part of what it means to be a virtuous person. (Hence the vertigo.)

We might wonder why we are bothering about formal syllogistic reasoning at this point. But this way of understanding the practical syllogism *does* do good job of providing a plausible explanation of moral motivation (reasons one might act in some way) and moral behavior (reasons one acted that way). To paraphrase McDowell: "Explanations of judgments about what to do are explanations of actions."[25] I can explain your behavior by understanding that you were concerned

22. Ibid., 343. Emphasis added.
23. Ibid., 343.
24. Ibid., 343.
25. Ibid., 342. Verbatim, he says: "The explanations, so far treated as explanations of judgments about what to do, are equally explanations of actions."

for your friend's welfare and reached out to help. Likewise, you can explain your decision to help by assuring me that you are concerned for your friend's welfare. For McDowell, the general structure of the practical syllogism is useful. He says "the rationality of virtue… is not demonstrable from an external standpoint."[26]

VI. Why do we do anything?

This discussion from McDowell is helpful but leaves much to be desired. McDowell argued that the virtuous person is not only sensitive to one kind of requirement (say, kindness) but sensitive to a wide range of reasons that must be ranked, ordered, and weighed before he or she can act on the practical conclusion. It is necessary to broaden the notion of perceptual sensitivity. However, he also assumed that "moral reasons" is a name for the overriding sort of practical reasons. I wish to argue that this is a subtle mistake.

In order to supply some of what is missing, what is required is a step back to examine the natural of practical reasons themselves and how they relate to practical reasoning in general. I would like to argue that there is one genus of reasons for action: practical reasons. There are many species of practical reason, but proper distinction is not between "moral" and "non-moral" but between various kinds of moral reasons.

The familiar way of framing the "how should one live?" question is this: There are two sorts of motives that drive everyone: prudential reasons and moral reasons. Prudential reasons incline one to look out for oneself. One is naturally, selfishly inclined to pursue one's own happiness or well-being. On the other hand, moral reasons drive one to look out for others. One is morally constrained to do one's duty, sometimes in accord with, but often against one's inclinations. Kant (or the stereotypical figure in the literature whom people call "Kant") presents morality as a particular set of reasons (all deriving from the moral law) that obligate one to do what is right, whether or not it is prudential. Otherwise, so long as one is doing one's duty, one can answer the "how should

26. Ibid., 346.

one live?" question with a list of prudential considerations: get a good job, save for retirement, eat healthy foods, exercise, make friends, and so on.

Within this familiar frame, morality becomes especially pressing at the moment of moral dilemmas. Edmund Pincoffs distinguishes two broad conceptions of philosophical ethics he calls "Quandary Ethics" and "Character Ethics." Quandary ethics is focused on the short-term resolution of immediate moral problems, either by dissolving moral perplexity or giving some (hopefully rational) basis for a particular decision or course of action. The Quandary ethicists are those Pincoffs quotes at the beginning of his article (such as Hare, Toulon, Brandt). They think that:

> The business of ethics is to clarify and solve "problems", i.e. situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do; that the ultimate beneficiary of ethical analysis is the person who, in one of these situations, seeks rational ground for the decision he must make; that ethics is therefore primarily concerned to find such grounds, often conceived of as moral rules and the principles from which they can be derived; and that meta-ethics consists in the analysis of the terms, claims, and arguments which come into play in moral disputation, deliberation, and justification in problematic contexts.[27]

Like the Quandary ethicist, McDowell represents the view of moral reasons as special, perhaps overriding, kinds of reasons pertaining to the rights, obligations, or duties of one individual in relation to others. Even in asking the "how do I live?" question, a Quandary ethicist is likely assuming that the answer will include a set of moral reasons weighed against or in opposition to non-moral reasons (such as prudential reasons).

But are moral reasons are *one type* of practical reason, or does any practical reason count as a "moral" reason (broadly construed)?[28] Suppose a greeting card or an internet meme recommends that you "live well, love hard, and laugh often." Is this platitude aiming to provide you with a moral reason, a practical reason, a prudential reason, an aesthetic reason, or something else?

27. Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind*, 1971, 552. Cf. MacIntyre, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?.

28. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, chap. 13, "Are Moral Reasons Overriding?"; Cf. also John McDowell and IG McFetridge, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 52 (1978): 13–42.

By contrast, character ethics is focused on the long-term goal of living well by executing worthwhile goals in every day life. Aristotle is an example of a Character Ethicist. Aristotle:

> …thought of ethics as a branch of politics, which in turn he thought of as a very wide-ranging subject having to do generally with the planning of human life so that it could be lived as well as possible. Moral problems are given their due but are by no means stage-centre. The question is not so much how we should resolve perplexities as how we should live.[29]

As Martha Nussbaum points out, a Quandary ethicist might ask "how do specifically moral ends and commitments figure among the ends that [a moral agent] pursues?" Nussbaum clarifies:

> This question is posed in a characteristically modern way, presupposing a distinction between the moral and the non-moral that is not drawn, as such, by the Greek thinkers. But if one objects to that characterization, one can rephrase it: for example, What role does concern for others for their own sake play in here scheme of ends? What role does political justice play in her scheme of ends? And so forth."[30]

McDowell is trying to straddle the line between the two ways the Quandary and the Character ethicist thinks about practical reasons. What is needed is distinguish our sense of 'moral' from the older sense. Foot makes a similar point:

> Many if not most moral philosophers in modern times see their subject as having to do exclusively with relations between individuals or between an individual and society, and so with such things as obligations, duties, and charitable acts… 'moral' and 'prudential' considerations [are] contrasted in a way that was alien to Plato or Aristotle.[31]

Certainly considerations about myself are conceptually distinct from considerations about my family, my friend, my society, or my species. And certainly there is a powerful social and psychological force to the distinction between moral and prudential, other-regarding and self-regarding,[32] altruistic

29. Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," 553–4.

30. Martha C Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 174.

31. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 68.

32. Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (1995): 83–101.

and egoistic[33], benevolent and selfish, conscience and self-love.[34] But getting the distinction right is crucial to understanding the kind of knowledge that virtue is.

MacIntyre's earliest ethical work distinguished the significance of moral judgments compared to other kinds of judgments. In a careful critique of both intuitionists such as Moore and emotivists such as Stevenson, MacIntyre concluded that both (mistakenly) assume that moral judgments and moral terms have significance only in their referential meaning. The intuitionists, of course, concluded that moral terms refer to a non-natural property, while the emotivists concluded that moral terms do not refer to such a property and so do not refer at all. (Naturalists, later in the 20th century, argue that moral terms refer to natural properties.) MacIntyre's alternative denies the assumption entirely; moral judgments "have their own kind of logic" and their significance, like other kinds of judgments, comes from "exhibiting the logic of their usage."[35] The significance of moral judgments is that "they enable us to solve problems of appraisal and of action." Solving problems of evaluation (we might say) and action is their place in "a pattern of language and action…" He continues:

> Above all they arise out of the way in which we see the world and the way in which our language allows us to see the world. We cannot sufficiently emphasize the direction given to our appraisals by the language which happens to be available for our descriptions. It is as we see the facts that we judge the world.

MacIntyre's point is that moral judgments are not *simply* useful in moral dilemmas or quandaries. They appear, at the earliest stages of childhood development, in a pattern of usage that is inextricable from the human activities of reasoning, acting, and appraising. Evaluative judgments appear in the widest imaginable spread of human activities, from politics to playgrounds, from sociology to social

33. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton University Press, 1978).

34. Julia Annas, "Morality and Self Interest," ed. Paul Bloomfield (Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–21; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Macmillan, 1967), 462; Paul Bloomfield, "Virtue and Happiness," ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012; Yong Huang, "The Self-Centeredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2010): 651–92.

35. Mark C. Murphy, in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 118, quoting p. 73 of MacIntyre's master's thesis *The Significance of Moral Judgments*.

life, from the practices of law and medicine to the professions of journalism and psychology, from the sciences to the arts. Even if this point be granted, moral dilemmas are not *unreal*. Moral dilemmas are a special version of our general "problems of appraisal and action." They may be particularly vexing, but they are no different from the general problems of how to live, how to be happy, what kinds of public policies to pursue, what apparently meaningful types of life are really meaningful.

History of error

To make this case, it is helpful to examine how historically we came to make the familiar, but faulty, distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. Foot cites Mill as an early proponent of the distinction:

> J. S. Mill, for instance, expresses this modern point of view quite explicitly, saying in his essay *On Liberty* that 'A person who shows rashness, obstinacy, self-conceit . . . who cannot restrain himself from harmful indulgences' shows faults (Mill calls them 'self-regarding faults') which 'are not properly immoralities' and while they 'may be proofs of any amount of folly . . . are only a subject of moral reprobation when they involve a breach of duty to others, for whose sake the individual is bound to have care for himself.'[36]

Mill distinguishes folly from immorality, where folly is failure to provide goods for oneself. As Elizabeth Anscombe had observed in 1958, the distinction between moral and non-moral *reasons* shows up in a similar distinction between two different kinds of 'ought' or 'should', or 'need':

> The terms "should" or "ought" or "needs" relate to good and bad: e.g. machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil. According to this conception, of course, "should" and "ought" are not used in a special "moral" sense when one says that a man should not bilk. (In Aristotle's sense of the term "moral" [ήθικός], they are being used in connection with a moral subject-matter: namely that of human passions and [non-technical] actions.) But they have now acquired a special so-called "moral" sense--i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the "ought" sentences used in certain types

36. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 68.

> of context: not merely the contexts that Aristotle would call "moral"--passions and actions--but also some of the contexts that he would call "intellectual."[37]

The peculiarly *moral* 'ought' means came to mean a final, verdictive ought – like the kind of "thou shalt" language used in the Ten Commandments. But *this* kind of ought, Anscombe thinks, only makes sense in the mouth of a believer in divine law.

This conceptual history illuminates that moral and non-moral reasons each exemplify, in their own ways, a broader conceptual structure of practicality. We identify *reasons to act*. MacIntyre further summarizes the conceptual roots of the terms 'moral' and 'ethical'.

> 'Moral' is the etymological descendant of 'moralis'. But 'moralis', like its Greek predecessor *ethikos* – Cicero invented 'moralis' to translate the Greek word in the *De Fato* – means 'pertaining to character' where a man's character is nothing other than his set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead on particular kind of life… The early uses of 'moral' did not contrast with " 'prudential' or 'self interested' " nor with " 'legal or 'religious'… The word to which it is closest in meaning is perhaps most simply 'practical'."[38]

MacIntyre came to the same conclusion, partially through his study of ethics. As a young philosopher, he was troubled about emotivism in particular and modern metaethics in general. Emotivists, intuitionists, naturalists, and error theorists all seemed to assume that moral terms are *referential.* If moral terms within moral judgments are supposed to pick out a property in the world, then either we must identify that property or (if we cannot) conclude that moral terms are literally meaningless. He argued that this assumption is a mistake. Instead, he concluded that the significance of moral judgments is that "they enable us to solve problems of appraisal and of action."[39] Instead of referring (or failing to refer) to a special 'moral property', all evaluative reasoning is practical reasoning. We employ moral judgments when we must evaluate something or when we must reason about what to do. Moral reasoning is not a special, mystical discipline divorced from prudential, instrumental,

37. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."
38. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 38.
39. Murphy, 118, quoting MacIntyre's master's thesis *The Significance of Moral Judgments* p. 73.

and other kinds of practical reasoning. Hence, there can be no adequate theory of ethics apart from a theory of (practical) rationality.

The point about this tangled relationship between practical reasons and moral reasons is not merely of historical or etymological interest (though of course, the narrow sense of the word 'moral' in discourse today is clear enough). The point is that qualities such as benevolence and generosity we tend to call human "moral goodness" are of a type with a *broader category of goodness*. Foot explains: "I want to show that judgments usually considered to be the special subject of moral philosophy should really be seen as belonging to a wider class of evaluations of conduct with which they share a common conceptual structure."[40]

The upshot: Practical reason as substantive process willing the good

Let us return to McDowell's response to the Humean critic who is not satisfied that moral reasons are intrinsically motivating. McDowell admitted that the virtuous person is not just sensitive to one or two sorts of requirement for action as final verdicts; the virtuous person is sensitive to the broad range of often competing reasons that must be ranked and weighed before a final verdict is reached about what is to be done. This move was correct, in my view. What was incorrect was the persistence in labeling the broader sensitivity as "virtue", which suggests that one is only considering "moral reasons" in the narrower sense of that term. This subtle mistake leaves McDowell's case open to the hypothetical counterexample that an immoral person might be sensitive to a wide range of reasons, including narrowly "moral" reasons (read as one's duty to others), while doing the wrong thing or doing nothing at all.

How can we fill in the gaps in his account? The alternative that is needed is to recapture the holistic view of practical reasoning as the activity that defines human life form. Gladly, this account of practical reason is plausible in its own right and reinforces what we have argued above about the generics that describe all organisms and human beings. For help, I will turn to Jennifer Frey's

40. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 66–67.

recent discussions of Anscombe and Aquinas. In short, I shall defend the Aristotelian-Thomistic account in which practical reasoning is an end-oriented activity that aims at the perceived good of one's form of life. As Frey stated in the epigram above, "There could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live."

The first point in this case is that all organisms act toward ends, albeit unreflectively. Frey summarizes Aquinas in this way:

> all living things are a self-sustaining system of powers that functions to bring the living thing into being and to sustain its being. The movement of any part of a living thing, at any particular moment, is necessarily explained by reference to the movement of the whole thing towards a single end: the coming to be, maintenance, or reproduction of that very form of life.[41]

We have argued above that the growth into maturity of an organism is growth into the exemplification of its form of life. This form of life is what Aquinas calls a thing's nature. Hence, a wolf hunts in packs by nature, trees extend roots into the ground by nature, reptiles warm themselves in the sun by nature, and so on.

In plants and animals, the "natural inclination" toward their good is not reflective or intentional, and Aquinas did not make this mistake. Frey says:

"Aquinas would agree with us that it is a category mistake to say that a sunflower wants to grow towards the light, if by this we mean that the flower somehow registers a positive feeling or has an inner impression towards the light, which "causes" it to move toward the light. The plant does not apprehend or desire anything; thus Aquinas is very careful to say that it does not have a power of appetite. In fact, Aquinas is at pains to note that a plant has no window onto the world at all—it just has conditions in which it characteristically comes into being, maintains, and reproduces itself.[42]

Plants merely grow and reproduce; while animals grow, reproduce, and enjoy conscious experiences, such as sensory perceptions of material objects and of their own hungers, thirsts, pains,

41. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 68.
42. Ibid., 69–70.

and so on. When it comes to human beings, however, we observe a difference. Human beings grow, reproduce, and enjoy conscious experiences like other animals but human beings also *know* that they do so. To quote John Haldane again, "things are specified by their power."[43] And we observe our "power" or capacity to engage in cognitive and deliberative activities. Simply put, we are able to reason, to reason theoretically and practically.

Reasoning is a distinctly human activity. While animals can not only sense but *perceive*, humans have the capacity of "intellection," the power of abstracting the forms themselves from percepts. An animal can *sense* an informed, organized object; an animal can be affected by the object. But the human animal can *acquire information* from the organized object. The ability to perceive something *as*, or even to perceive something big and brown with a smudge on its nose, does not imply the ability to perceive that thing as a cat.[44]

When it comes to inclination or "appetite", animals pursue and avoid objects. The antelope pursues healthy grass and flees a lion. The animal can only experience what is good or bad for it as a particular object. Animals incline toward their own good. They also have sensory perception of beings. But animals do not perceive beings *as* falling under universal categories.

By contrast, a human being can recognize universals and hence can take up its natural inclinations to pursue or flee as reasons in a deliberative act. The natural inclinations may be underwritten or overridden. Confronted with a bit of healthy food on someone else's plat, I may choose not to eat it, for I recognize it as *not mine*. Confronted with a lion in a zoo, I may choose not to flee, for I recognize it as *not dangerous*.

Frey summarizes: >Rational animals, like any animal, have a natural inclination towards their good as a whole, and like lower animals this power is actualized through their apprehension of things in the world. But Aquinas argues that a rational animal relates to the world through the application of universal concepts, and thus it is inclined to pursue or avoid things under an

43. Haldane, "A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind," 262.

44. John Haldane, "On Coming Home to (Metaphysical) Realism," *Philosophy* 71, no. 276 (1996): 287–96.

intellectual, universal apprehension of them. Thus, Aquinas says that the will is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the "universal good," rather than the particular good.[45] ### How to live

We have been speaking of the human capacity for recognizing and pursuing particular ends as good. We need to expand our scope to include the whole of life, the conception of our human good that constitutes the answer to the question "how should one live?" McDowell gets this part right — every rational practice is undertaking in pursuit of some particular end *in context* of a total conception of what is good in general. Frey says:

> Consequently, we can say that rational animals have an understanding of different levels of ends, and at least a vague sense of how they are supposed to hang together as a whole. This conception of how it all hangs together is what Aquinas calls the ultimate end—a rational animal's general, conceptual understanding of how to live or go on. Aquinas thinks that any sane, mature adult will necessarily have cobbled together some such conception. Aquinas calls this conception "the universal good", and he argues that it is the will's proper object. Everything that is willed is willed under this rational aspect of good, as to be pursued because *in accord with my general conception of the good.* In fact, Aquinas thinks there could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live.[46]

Again:

>no human action is intelligible without attributing to the agent herself some conception of this end, no matter how inarticulate, unsystematic, or unreflective it might be. Aquinas takes it for granted that in coming to be a human being—i.e., being raised in a community of other human beings, coming into the possession of concepts, a language, and coming to have a world—one comes into some such conception, and thus comes to act voluntarily.[47]

45. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 75.
46. Ibid., 78–79, italics in original.
47. Ibid., 87.

Substantive and procedural

Some philosophers object to this "substantive" conception of practical reason. They think that practical reasoning is "procedural."[48] This objection misses the point. What we are presenting is the intelligible structure that the procedure must necessarily have. The "substance" I am defended is not a specific good or set of goods. It is highly general. The point is that without a sufficiently general starting point such as "good is to be done and evil avoided", no other procedural reasoning can get off the ground.

Foot is persuaded that we must assume a definition of practical reasoning that is substantive, rather than merely procedural. Practical reasoning does not just aim at means to ends, nor does it merely aim at "ends"; it aims at *the apparent good*.

> This now seems to me to be the correct way of meeting the challenge that I myself issued in 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' and at that time despaired of meeting: namely, to show the rationality of acting, even against desire and self-interest, on a demand of morality. The argument depends on the change of direction that Quinn suggested: seeing goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of the thing itself. Nor is this a quite unfamiliar way of arguing. Many of us are willing to reject a 'present desire' theory of reasons for action because we think that someone who knowingly puts his future health at risk for a trivial pleasure is behaving foolishly, and therefore not well. Seeing his will as defective, we therefore say that he is doing what he has reason not to do. Being unable to fit the supposed 'reason' into some preconceived present-desire-based theory of reasons for action, we do not query whether it really is a foolish way to behave, but rather hang on to the evaluation and shape our theory of reasons accordingly. And it is exactly a generalization of this presumption about the direction of the argument on which I am now insisting. For what, we may ask, is so special about prudence that it alone among the virtues should be reasonably thought to relate to practical rationality in such a way?[49]

If goodness is a "necessary condition of practical rationality" then we are already committed to a

48. For a discussion of this distinction, see: Brad Hooker and Bart Streumer, "Procedural and Substantive Practical Rationality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 57–74.

49. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 63.

substantive view of practical reason, rather than a merely procedural neo-Humean view.

Evil?

Some will object to the notion that practical reason is definitionally the knowledge of ends as good. Doesn't this just define away immoral acts, immoral motives, and immoral ends? Not at all. But the objection calls for an important clarification.

To be practically rational is to judge the good, just as to be rational is to judge true and false. But the process must start somewhere. Aquinas points out that the first thing rational beings apprehend is simply "existence" or "being." Infants perceive beings and, eventually, naturally come to perceive objects *as* objects, as individual objects.

Likewise, the first thing practical rational animals like us apprehend is "good." We are not here defining "good" as a special moral property but simply as the general property of desirableness. Aquinas says:

> Now as "being" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so "good" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after." Hence this is the first precept of practical reason, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."[50]

The use of 'good' here, it bears repeating, not a special moral sense of good. Rather, it is the conception of an object of inclination, that which is to be pursued. Without such a general principle, practical reasoning and rational practice are unintelligible.

Given this basic and abstract formulation of the structure of practical reasoning, we can further specify good ends. Just as the basic structure of reasoning begins with the apprehension of being in general and then on to particular beings, concepts, and categories, practical reason begins with the apprehension of good in general and then determines particular goods.

50. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1200 IIa. Q.94. Art. 2.

> Practical reason is the movement of thought towards, rather than away from, material particulars…. practical reasoning is a movement from general knowledge of what is good and how to live, towards the production of the kind of life that is essentially characterized by such knowledge. When it is done well, what is understood is the same as what is produced: human form or human life.[51]

Such basic goods are apprehended as contributing to a distinctively human life form.

> For practical reason, the starting points are the most primitive human goods that the will is naturally inclined to seek: life, knowledge, family, friendship, play, political community, and so on. These are the ends that all human beings want for their own sake, as intrinsically valuable to them. And they want these things in a rational way—viz., because they have a conceptual apprehension that they are constitutive of their general good.[52]

Immoral acts, on this view, are rational mistakes. The immoral person is pursuing *something* and so in this sense is practically rational, since to be practical rational necessarily means to pursue something *as good*, as desirable. But the immoral person fails in their practical reasoning to correctly rank and order specific goods. The imprudent person, for example, judges that it would be better to eat, drink, and be merry today rather than plan to avoid future ills. The cruel person judges that it would be better to cause suffering than to be kind.

Remedying McDowell's account

The upshot of these reflections is this: If a person does anything at all, then that person is engaging in practical reasoning. The "final verdict" and the verdictive ought is simply what Foot calls the thing to do "all things considered."[53] Apparent counterexamples that one might furnish to disprove the point actually serve, with sufficient clarification, to reinforce it. For example, someone might say, "It's ridiculous to think that I always pursue the good, because I sometimes do wrong." Sometimes we do the wrong thing. The proper response is that we perceive the bad as the good. Someone

51. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 2.
52. Ibid., 88.
53. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 57.

might say, "But sometimes I perceive the bad *as bad* and pursue it anyway." The response is that we sometimes take a bad or dismotivating reason into an overall reason to do something, all things considered.

What motivational internalism gets right is the affirmation that one necessarily acts on what one judges is the thing to do. The motivational internalist urges that any practical reasons "out there" that are practical reasons *for me* necessarily connect up with my motivational structure.[54] Defined widely enough, I can agree to this way of stating things. If by "my motivational structure" we simply mean my overall disposition toward the good. I am oriented to pursue good things, and avoid bad things. Whatever may appear to me to fall under the description of 'good' I will, ipso facto, be oriented toward (whether I pursue it or merely approve of it and admire it). Whatever may appear to me to fall under the description 'bad' I will, ipso facto, oriented away from it (whether I avoid it or merely disapprove of it).

What motivational externalism gets right, that there are reasons "out there" that *would* motivate one if one knew about them. There might be reasons to ϕ that I am not aware of and thus am not motivated by. For example, perhaps it is true that one ought to save for retirement, but I may fail to do so because I am unaware of that reason or am ignoring it in my attention to other reasons.

It seems to me that a good deal of the internalism/externalism literature is consumed in disambiguating these unhelpful labels. The mare's nest, as I have shown above, is due to the fatal ambiguity of the phrase 'moral reasons'. In the Quandary ethicist's sense, moral reasons (i.e., facts about what is good for others) are simply one type of practical reason; but in the proper sense sense, *any* practical reason (i.e., objective normative and evaluative facts about what is worth pursuing and worth avoiding) can be seen as a "moral reason". To avoid this mess, a safer and clearer strategy is simply to recapture the insight that the concept of a practical reason is the concept of *what to*

54. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, 2007, 292–98.

do all things considered. The thing to do all things considered has its "practical" or motivational component "built-in" so to speak. While it often happens that one's practical reasons conflict or are indeterminate, nevertheless, a set of practical reasons can constitute the *overriding* practical reason: *the thing to do*, all things considered. So, the final or verdictive ought belongs only to the ought that is the conclusion of the total process of practical reasoning.

Seen in this light, it is obvious that practical reasons can and do motivate us. Or rather, practical reasons *are the only thing that motivate*. Practical reasons are the *primary* meaning of the term 'motive'. Other psychological states such as hungers, thirsts, loves, fears, *move* me to action the same way that such states move non-rational organisms. For rational animals, only reasons *motivate* me to act, since motivation is (I argue) a fundamentally rational state. Aquinas distinguishes between the "actions of a human" and "human actions." The action of a human is any motion, such as mumbling in your sleep, scratching an itch, or idly tapping a foot. But a human action is by definition an action in pursuit of a goal which is perceived as a good. A human being without any practical reasons would not do immoral deeds; he or she would not do anything at all. Like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, the person who does not engage in practical reasoning or identify any practical reasons would simply waste away and die.[55]

reasoning about ends

Reasoning about ends may be a difficult and messy business. But we do it. It is an empirical fact that we reason – indeed, disagree and debate – about ultimate ends. Suppose Betty says to her friend, "I'm concerned about you. You haven't returned my calls. I heard you lost your job and your spouse left. Now I see you're gaining weight. What's wrong?" It would be no consolation for her friend to respond, "Nothing's wrong. Yes, yes, all that is true: I'm destitute, alone, and unhealthy. But that's what I was *aiming* for." Betty would rightly think, "Well, then… you are a fool." Betty would rightly wonder "what is wrong such that you have taken as your aims such unhealthy and ridiculous goals?"

55. Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (Best Classic Books, 1966).

Jay Wallace rebuts the charge that if reasoning about ends is not a mathematically-precise procedure, then it must not really be rational:

> Practical deliberation about ends is not an easy or well-defined activity. There are no straightforward criteria for success in this kind of reflection, and it is often unclear when it has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. These considerations encourage the Humean assumption—especially widespread in the social sciences—that there is no reasoning about final ends. On the other hand, how is one supposed to clarify one's largest and most important ends, if not by reasoning about them in some way? Rather than exclude such reflection because it does not conform to a narrowly scientific paradigm of reason, perhaps we should expand our conception of practical reason to make room for clarificatory reflection about the ends of action.[56]

Warren Quinn, likewise argues that we reason about goods:

> Practical thought, like any other thought, requires a subject matter. And for human beings the subject matter that distinguishes thought as practical is, in the first instance, human ends and action insofar as they are good or bad in themselves […] practical thought deploys a master set of non-instrumental evaluative notions: that of a good or bad human act, a good or bad human life, a good or bad human agent, and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts.[57]

There are many reasons for action. But the concept of a reason for action is the concept of pursuing what is good or what is best, all things considered. Practical reason runs into quandaries because there are so many reasons for action, and they sometimes conflict. Some have to do with what is best for me, what is best for others, what is best for me and what is best for me later, what is permissible and what is required, etc. Although we may want to reserve the word 'moral' for other-regarding reasons, it is important to keep in mind that our goal of living well demands sensitivity to a whole range of reasons, regarding self, other, world, and so on.

Although this process is messy, it is fundamentally so. Any attempt to configure the process by subjecting to a set of ready-made rules or criteria will make it easier to understand only at the cost of losing grasp of the process. Wiggins suggests that there are psychological, not philosophical,

56. Wallace, "Practical Reason," sec. 6.
57. **???**

reasons behind the attempt to reduce the process of practical reasoning to something mathematical and formal:

> I entertain the unfriendly suspicion that those who feel they *must* seek more than [the Aristotelian view of practical reason] provides want a scientific theory of rationality not so much for a passion for science, even where there can be no science, but because they hope and desire, by some conceptual alchemy, to turn such a theory into a regulative or normative discipline, or into a system of rules by which to spare themselves some of the agony of thinking and all the torment of feeling and understanding that is actually involved in reasoned deliberation.[58]

Virtue as skill

Julia Annas' presentation of virtue as as a skill illuminates this same point, I think, beautifully. She says, "I should develop an account of virtue in which I show have central to the idea that the practical reasoning of the virtuous person is analogous in important ways… to the practical reasoning of someone who's exercising a practical skill."[59] What she calls the "skill analogy" might be taken as problematic since it drains the peculiarly *moral* quality out of virtue. The opposite is true: The skill analogy fills the project of living daily life with the potential for virtue. The virtuous person is *good at* and not just *good* — good at helping others, good at thinking ahead, good at human life. The vicious person, by contrast, is not just bad but *bad at* the essential elements of human life. Of course, being born with a paucity of natural talents is not a matter of immorality or is being born with an abundance of natural talents a matter of moral worth. Rather, the admirable person makes *good use* of his or her fortune, and the despicable person makes bad use of it. The admirable person is all the more admirable when he or she proves skillful of making good use even of very bad fortune; and the miserable person is all the more pitiable when he or she wastes even of very good fortune.

58. David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975): 29–51.

59. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 3.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to secure a definition of practical reason which captures both the *practicality* and *rationality* of our human capacity to resolve what to do and how to live. I argued, with McDowell, that the virtuous person is sensitive to practical reasons, i.e., the salient facts of what is required in a given situation. I argued, against McDowell, that so resolving the "how should one live?" question is not just what virtuous people do, but what all mature, functional adults do. Everyone undertakes a complex process of adjudicating between all the available goods known to one, sorting them, ranking them, and forming them into a complete life plan. Practical reasons are intrinsically capable of motivating. Nevertheless, there are many practical reasons calling for action, and they sometimes conflict. So success in identifying how to live and what to do requires care, wisdom, attention, and education. Success or failure in this project is defined according to how successfully one "maps the landscape of value."[@] Success is defined as practical knowledge of what to do; failure is defined as practical error — or perhaps ignorance — of what to do.

The mere capacity to reflect on our natural inclinations is a "natural power" of human nature. We are practical rational animals by definition. Or rather, we have the potential to become such with time (no infants have this capacity). The first principle of practical reason, that good is to be done and pursued while evil is to be avoided, is known by all functioning human adults. And some more particular practical reasons are obvious enough to be known by all or almost all. My account leaves room for the commonsense insight that our potential to become successful practical reasoners is greatly helped by education.

While there is much more to be said to fully defend this account against reasonable objections, I believe I have provided the outlines of a theory of practical rationality that can potential form a satisfying account.

A select list of what "more" there is to say includes addressing the practical reason subjectivist who would argue that the Frey's "practical order" is not really an order "out there" in the world

but an order “in here” in the human minds and human psychology. That is the task for the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Natural reasoning: naturalism strikes back

I. Introduction

Thus far, I have argued that practical reason aims at real practical reasons and goods "out there" in the world. Those goods are goods for humankind, goods for creatures like us, such as food, friendship, and knowledge. I have argued that virtues are "merely" human, but also argued that that human nature is normative; therefore, the proposition that virtues are normative is deduced from the major premise. There are still problems to be solved; specifically the relation between reason and nature.

We want to understand the process of practical reasoning in light of our animal nature and our place in the biological and physical order. The relation between reason and nature is an almost intractable problem not only for philosophers but also for natural scientists, social scientists, and others. Every major philosophical tradition, from Platonic rationalism, to Humean empiricism, to Hegelian objective idealism, has an important and sophisticated stance on this relation. A coherent neo-Aristotelian account is not likely to win over committed adherents of other views. Our goal, rather, is to develop a plausible account that accrues sufficient plausibility points to be a respectable item on the menu of options.

In the sort of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism I have defended thus far, the general problem is this: Are humans just another instance of biological organisms, like chimpanzees and dolphins, subject to evaluation by the same patterns of normativity? Or are humans a different, even sui generis, type of organism? Or rather, even if humanity is quite different from other species on account of exemplifying (apparently sui generis) powers of rational practice and practical reasoning, how are we to analyze that difference? If we say that the difference is only a matter of degree, we run afoul of the claims defended earlier, that human beings are distinctively practical rational animals. If we say that this difference is a difference in kind, we seem to leave some sorts of naturalism behind. Is there a third way? A third way might somehow reconcile these apparently mutually exclusive options, or break down the dilemma. For example, objective idealism or neutral monism are attempts to do this. But it is not clear how the third way would work.

Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists I am reviewing each choose one or the other of these three responses to this general problem. Recall the two sorts of naturalism laid out above: organic naturalism and social naturalism. Organic naturalism admits a fundamental distinction in kind between living beings and non-living stuff. It argues that there is a clear biological basis of natural normativity. (The whole cosmos including all matter and energy is not teleological, but the whole of the organic realm is). By contrast, social naturalism admits a fundamental distinction in kind between rational, social agents and everything else, whether living or non-living. It argues that normativity is exclusively located in the rational capacities of human individuals and social groups.

This internecine controversy presents us with two different ways of thinking about teleology in particular and normativity in general. The ethical naturalists are split as to "how we can reconcile two seemingly opposed forms of teleology—that of life, on the one hand, and that of rational choice on the other."[1] In a word, where is the space of reasons? The organic naturalist says that the space of reasons is the whole space of natural organisms; the social naturalist says that the space of reasons

1. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 14.

is "an acquired and normatively autonomous second nature"[2] belonging to human beings alone.

The fault line is clear. But one further expression of the differences between these two sorts of naturalism deserves comment. Namely, the disagreement also extends to two conceptions of how broadly to conceive of scientific inquiry. The organic naturalist thinks that natural norms can be discovered and articulated (by scientists and philosophers) as part of the normal scientific enterprise. The social naturalist thinks that natural norms cannot be so discovered; they can only be known "from within"; that is, natural norms are inherently tied to the very scientific enterprise which is undertaken by scientists and philosophers.

The task now is to explore the internecine controversy between these two sorts of naturalism. Now, 'naturalism' is a word of many meanings. The root of its extreme ambiguity lies in the ambiguity in the word 'nature'. To square our account of virtue as practical reasoning and rational practice with ethical naturalism requires that we thematize the concept of nature in its own right. I shall articulate two broad conception of nature: the restricted and unrestricted conceptions. I shall argue that an unrestricted conception of nature is the more plausible of the two. And also, happily, the unrestricted conception allows the organic naturalist to preserve the insights of the social naturalist without thereby falling into crass scientism.

II. Biology and rationality

Irrelevance

We can break ground on this tough topic presenting two problems that philosophers have had with neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. The challenge is to overcome both of these while preserving the ethical import of practical reason we have established thus far. The first problem is called the "irrelevance" objection and the second is "pollyanna problem". Let's state each problem in a bit more detail.

2. Thompson, "Reconciling Themes" 245

The irrelevance objection states that the natural norms are ethically irrelevant. Jennifer Frey places this objection in context of the is-ought gap: "The irrelevancy objection is a more sophisticated presentation of the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy.' But rather than crudely rejecting any move from 'is' to 'ought', it merely blocks the inference at one crucial juncture—the inference from the 'is' of the species, to the 'ought' that governs the rational will."[3] McDowell is one philosopher who articulates the irrelevance objection. For McDowell, the 'is-ought' gap is a real problem insofar as biology seems irrelevant to particular moral obligation. McDowell concedes, if only hypothetically, the existence of the sort of natural norms posited by the organic naturalist. Each organism pursues its own species specific goods, such as food, shelter, comfort, survival, and reproduction. But when it comes to rational animals, such norms are not binding upon us. As animals, people find themselves subject to hunger, thirst. These merely biological urges are morally neutral with respect to the question of whether I should eat or not. Morality impinges on me to eat certain things at certain times and in ways. A vegetarian might feel an ethical obligation not to eat meat even if the look and smell of it is appetizing; a glutton might feel an ethical obligation not to snack between meals even if he or she feels hungry. His discussion of the "rational wolf" illustrates this point. A wolf is "supposed to" hunt in packs because that is a formal property of its life form or nature. But a rational wolf, a wolf endowed with *logos*, would be just as free as human beings are to step back from such natural norms and either endorse or reject them.

The organic naturalist's attempt to collapse genuinely normative obligations into natural norms seems to him a commitment to "philistine scientism", that is, an over-zealous application of empirical methods to ethical matters. He would strenuously object to sentiments like that expressed by E.O. Wilson: "the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized" (Wilson 1975, 562). Instead of such crass scientism, what McDowell thinks is needed is the kind of self-reflection discussed above. We must understand the good of human life, commit to pursuing it, and resist temptations to deviate from that pursuit. This self-

3. Ibid., 14.

reflective practical reasoning may not stay within the lines of orthodox "empiricism" but, McDowell would say, so much the worse for empiricism.

Pollyanna

A related objection has been leveled against Foot's and Michael Thompson's sort of organic naturalism by Chrisoula Andrea, Elijah Milligram, and Scott Woodcock.[4] The objection states that an empirical assessment of human natural norms would have to include norms that are rather obviously vicious.

When I built my inductive case for the generic that "the human being" is a practical rational animal, perhaps I was winking at the dark side of human nature. After all, human beings lie, murder, cheat, steal, rape, wage unjust war, and so on. Parents abandon or abuse their children. If we gather a robust sample of such behaviors and count them all as natural norms. Are we obligated to fulfill all such norms? Just some? Anscombe anticipates this worry when she says:

> The search for "norms" might lead someone to look for laws of nature, as if the universe were a legislator; but in the present day this is not likely to lead to good results: it might lead one to eat the weaker according to the laws of nature, but would hardly lead anyone nowadays to notions of justice.[5]

Expanding the scope of observation to include plants and non-human animals makes matters even worse: Empirically, some acorns become fully grown, mature oaks, but other acorns become stultified, sickly specimens. Most acorns never become anything other than acorns before they disintegrate into dust in the soil. Some animals protect their young while other animals abandon or even consume their young.

4. Chrisoula Andreou, "Getting on in a Varied World," *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 1 (2006): 61–73; Elijah Millgram, "Reasonably Virtuous," *Ethics Done Right: Practical Reasoning as a Foundation for Moral Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)*, 2005, 133–67; Scott Woodcock, "Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles' Heel," *Dialogue* 45, no. 03 (2006): 445–68.

5. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14.

On the one hand, to ignore all instances of human vileness could only reflect a prior bias in favor of the light and sweet and sympathetic side of humanity. And where would this bias come from? It could only come from prior *ethical* beliefs, beliefs that are already normatively loaded. I presented the search for generics as "scientific" and objective and open to all the evidence. On the other hand, to include these phenomena in the inductive sample of "human" behaviors leads to a deeper problem. Selfish traits such as cruelty and deception sometimes secure good outcomes for their possessors: the unjust person may "play a crucial role in human survival and reproduction."[6] So some traits that are clearly vices from an ethical standpoint would turn out to be instances of natural goodness. After all, my presentation of human nature was supposed to provide an objective basis for showing how instances of natural goodness are virtues. If some putative vices are instances of natural goodness, then, absurdly, they too would be virtues.

These objections together constitute pincer problem. The teleology of life (organic teleology) seems to force us to categorize injustice as a virtue or else to appeal to the practical, evaluative point of view; but the teleology of rational choice (social teleology) seems to force us to abandon the relevance of the teleology of life. Caught in this pincer, neo-Aristotelians must either bite the bullet and abandon organic naturalism, or embrace the absurd (or patently immoral) conclusion that some vices are good for us. Is there any way to escape the dilemma, or reconcile it?

The attempt to reconcile the two can twist one into knots: Rosalind Hursthouse seems to vacillate between the two. She explicitly endorse's Foot's naturalism (of first nature) but also seems to endorse McDowell's "naturalism of second nature." She says, "Ethical naturalism is not to be construed as the attempt to ground ethical evaluations in a scientific account of human nature."[7] She claims that her account is, like McDowell's, still loosely naturalistic. She still bases ethical considerations on our nature as rational agents, i.e., "human nature" or "second nature". But then hasn't she thereby rejected Foot's view? Jennifer Frey also observes:

6. Andreou, "Getting on in a Varied World," 71.
7. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* especially chapter 10.

> On this issue, Hursthouse seems to be speaking out of both sides of her mouth. She wants to acknowledge to Aristotelian critics like John McDowell that naturalistic considerations do not convince anyone to change their basic moral beliefs or motivate them to action. But at the same time, she thinks that she can approach the Humean or the Kantian and argue for "the rational credentials" of our moral beliefs based upon a "scientific" and "objective" naturalistic account. It is unclear how she is supposed to satisfy both parties at once, and the tension remains unresolved in her own work.[8]

Julia Annas says, of Foot's view:

> What is so helpful for ethics from this kind of biological naturalism is that we find that the normativity of our ethical discourse is not something which emerges mysteriously with humans and can only be projected back, in an anthropomorphic way, onto trees and their roots. Rather, we find normativity in the realm of living things, plants and animals, already. It is part of the great merit of the work of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse to have stressed this point. Like many important philosophical points, it is obvious once pointed out…" (Annas 1996).

It seems that the pincer forces us to give up what is "so helpful for ethics" about Foot's naturalism and either take recourse to McDowell's sort or else give up on naturalism altogether.

III. The solution in brief

There is no consensus as to *the* neo-Aristotelian solution to these problems. Nevertheless, some recent work from Micah Lott, Jennifer Frey, and Christopher Toner has revealed *a* potentially satisfying solution.

First, I will lay out four requirements for a successful answer. Second, I will criticize McDowell's alternative as inconsistent in that he denies dualism at one moment but affirms it at another. Third, I will argue for an alternative solution that escapes the pincer.

The solution consists of two interrelated claims, one about what "natures" are and another about how such natures can be discerned. The first claim is that nature refers in an unrestricted way to anything that is, rather than in a restricted way to only a subset of things that are (such as

8. Cf. Frey, "The Will and the Good. 44, footnote 55.

spatiotemporal material things). The second claim is that we can discern the very same formal nature of a thing in two complementary ways; both from "within" the practical point of view of rational reflection and from "outside" such a view, in a more external, objective sense. Both kinds of knowledge lay hold of identical facts. And both kinds of knowledge are broadly scientific, unless we employ an unjustly narrow concept of science that excludes formal disciplines such as mathematics, logic, computer science, and so on.

Let us try to substantiate these claims.

IV. Requirements for a successful theory

Begin with Chris Toner's excellent (2008) article "Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory.[9] In this article, Toner argues that (what I have called) organic naturalism a la Foot, Thompson, etc. has not yet adequately responded to McDowell's criticism. To do so would require satisfying four criteria. These four criteria set out in advance the shape that "naturalism must deliver if it is to support a revived Aristotelian virtue ethics…"[10] Gladly, our account thus far has satisfied three of the four. Let us list the four criteria for a successful neo-Aristotelian naturalism and comment on each one.

1. *Natural norms must be intrinsically able to motivate the bearer of the nature.* The "natural norm" must be intrinsically able to motivate. The natural human norms pertaining to our nature are examples of practical reasons. And I have already presented an argument above that practical reasons are, by definition, able to motivate us. The process of practical reasoning (about practical reasons) is the process of adjudicating between various norms, desires, inclinations, urges, and so on.
2. *Natural norms must be intrinsically able to justify themselves to the bearer of the nature.* The natural norm must be something that justifies itself, either to all rational agents as such or to all moral agents. The norm need not, Toner admits, automatically persuade a Callicles to repent of his wickedness. However, it must be able to motivate. He says:

> This is why I say "intrinsically able to motivate or justify" rather than "intrinsically motivating or justifying": the natural norm is such that it can motivate or convince

9. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism."
10. Ibid., 222.

> persons, provided they are not in too dysfunctional a state. In the same way a rose is such as to be intrinsically able to convince us of its being red. Its failure actually to do so in my case because I am color-blind or jaundiced does not impugn this intrinsic ability. Natural norms can motivate and convince because they are neither "mere facts" about the way a given species does go on nor "brute desires" a given species happens to have as a result of its evolutionary history.[11]

We have argued above that virtues are intrinsically able to justify themselves to the bearer of a practical rational nature. Toner mentions that "The requirements of the virtues can be articulated into what Hursthouse calls "v-rules" (do what is just, what is courageous, and so forth)."[12]

3. *Natural norms must be anchored in and express universal human nature.* In chapter 3 I defended a definition of "universal human nature," that we are practical rational animals. And I argued that the natural norm that one ought to become a fully mature practical rational animal (whatever that turns out to mean) is an example of a norm "anchored in" and expressing this nature. More specifically, all the virtues of rational practice and practical reasoning are examples of such norms. For, as Toner says:

"the possession and exercise of the virtues is essential to human flourishing as dependent rational animals. Thus natural norms or the requirements of the virtues, in articulating what we need (to have, to be, to do) to flourish, are anchored in and express universal human nature."[toner2008sorts 242]

4. *First and second nature must be related so that the second is a natural outgrowth of the first, and so that that in our given makeup is (first) natural which does tend toward an ethically mature second nature.*

This fourth criterion is the aim here. Even though McDowell is critical of Foot's biological or organic naturalism, he does not wish to fall into a dualism between biology and rationality. Rather, he believes that it is possible to "formulate a conception of reason that is, in one sense, naturalistic: a formed state of practical reason is one's second nature, not something that dictates to one's nature from outside."[13] Note that he links the epistemological point with the metaphysical one: the dictates of practical reason come from "inside" one's rational point of view; yet reason is "naturalistic" in the sense that it expresses one's nature.

11. Ibid., 235.
12. Ibid., 242.
13. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism."

The problem with McDowell's view is not just that it fails to be "naturalistic", as some have alleged. Rather, the problem is that McDowell vacillates between two contradictory concepts of 'nature': an unrestricted monistic one and a restricted dualistic one. Both concepts of nature have their conceptual costs; both have their defenders; and both are certainly defensible. Nevertheless, one must choose on or the other. McDowell, instead, defends the restricted, dualistic view of nature while insisting that his concept of nature is the unrestricted, monistic one. The resulting concept of nature is incoherent. A second problem corresponds to the first: McDowell's concept of science is too restrictive; although he disputes the "philistine scientism" of his opponents, he seems to me to endorse just enough philistine scientism to deserve his own criticism. He is a scientific realist on one page and anti-realist on another. A third problem is that, even by McDowell's lights, there *do* seem to be primary qualities of nature such as "danger" and "safe" that are relational and actionable like moral qualities such as good and bad.

First, I will summarize McDowell's view of the relation between reason and nature and explain it in context of his broader project in *Mind and World*. Then, I will flesh out

V. McDowell on first and second nature

In this section, I must try to get a clear handle on McDowell's paradoxical view of nature, practical reason, and the scientific picture of the world. On the one hand, he shares an opinion with non-naturalist realists, naturalistic subjectivists, and moral anti-realists that practical reasons, norms, or instances of natural goodness are not "out there" in the objective world. On the other hand, he does not think that goodness is *purely* subjective, originating in moral evaluators and projected outward by them onto the world. Together, these compel him to object to the Footian sort of organic naturalism I have been defending.

An initial quotation from McDowell expresses his relation to Foot:

> Philippa Foot has long urged the attractions of ethical naturalism. I applaud the negative part of her point, which is to reject various sorts of subjectivism and super-

> naturalist rationalism. But I doubt whether we can understand a positive naturalism in the right way without first rectifying a constriction that the concept of nature is liable to undergo in our thinking. Without such preliminaries, what we make of ethical naturalism will not be the radical and satisfying alternative to Mrs Foot's targets that naturalism can be. Mrs Foot's writings do not pay much attention to the concept of nature in its own right, and this leaves a risk that her naturalism may seem to belong to this less satisfying variety. I hope an attempt to explain this will be an appropriate token of friendship and admiration.[14]

As this quotation makes clear, McDowell shares Foot's rejection of "subjectivism and supernaturalist rationalism". The key point is that he disputes her "concept of nature". McDowell's classifies his own view as a "sort of naturalism" – namely "relaxed naturalism."[15] McDowell invokes Aristotle's notion of ethics, by which he hopes to rethink our conception of human nature and nature as a whole. He says, "the rethinking requires a different conception of actualizations of our nature."[16] Second nature is that space in which human beings are initiated into particular ways of behaving and knowing.

For McDowell, nature consists of Lockean primary qualities, which are response-independent as well as dispositional properties which are response-dependent. "Values" are the latter sort. There is no such thing as "to-be-pursuedness" existing as a Lockean primary quality in first nature. Whereas Foot thinks that normative facts are response-independent features of (first) nature, McDowell finds this view impossible to entertain. He says that naive realism about value is "impossible – at least on reflection – to take seriously…"[17] The first reason McDowell can't take naive realism seriously is the impossibility of explaining "how something that is brutely *there* could nevertheless stand in an

14. John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 167.

15. This distinction is by now familiar. For the sake of completeness, I will mention a few of McDowell's other names for his view: 'liberal' naturalism' (John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996) 89, 98); 'acceptable naturalism' (McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* 197). Like Thomas Nagel, he also finds friends in Plato and Aristotle, calling his view 'Greek naturalism' (McDowell, *Mind and World* 174), 'Aristotelian naturalism' (ibid., 196), 'naturalism of second nature' (ibid., 86), or 'naturalized platonism' (ibid., 91). Cf. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism. 204; and Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

16. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 77.

17. Russ Shaffer-Landeau and Terence Cuneo, eds. (Blackwell, 2007), 137.

internal relation to some exercise of human sensibility."[18] In this McDowell agrees with Mackie: the "central doctrine of European moral philosophy" is a mistake;[19] it is wrong to think that some things *merit* certain responses by virtue of what they are and what we are. A second worry is that the doctrine of objective value, where normative facts are primary qualities of nature, has been discredited or outmoded by modern science. The modern scientific picture of nature is "disenchanted" from such intrinsic values as meaning and morality. He says, "The most striking occurrence in the history of thought between Aristotle and ourselves is the rise of modern science."[20]

McDowell's alternative

If McDowell is right that the modern scientific worldview prohibits believing that values are objective primary qualities, a natural move would be to embrace a form of error theory or expressivism or subjectivism. Subjectivists of the sort discussed above (such as J.L. Mackie, Alan Gibbard, and Simon Blackburn) believe that normativity is "projected" by philosophers and scientists onto the natural facts. But McDowell resists this move. He says that Mackie's error theory gets right the common sense view that "ordinary evaluative thought [is] a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world."[21] Secondary qualities are "subjective" in that they cannot be adequately conceived "except in terms of certain subjective states"[22] but not in that they are therefore illusory. A secondary quality is not "a mere figment of the subjective state that purports to be an experience of it."[23]

What is the alternative to the apparently exhaustive dualism of seeing values (or norms) as *either* facts of nature like primary qualities *or* unreal, illusory, and purely subjective. His answer is that values are "secondary qualities" or "dispositional properties" of nature. His essay "Values and Secondary Qualities" argues that values are like colors and unlike shapes.[24] We might paraphrase

18. Ibid., 143.
19. John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin UK, 1977).
20. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 174.
21. Shaffer-Landeau and Cuneo, 137.
22. Ibid., 139.
23. Ibid., 139.
24. Russ Shaffer-Landeau and Terence Cuneo, eds., "Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology"

this thesis by saying that natural norms are qualities *in the world* (not just in our heads) but they are not Lockean "primary qualities." They are, rather, Lockean secondary qualities. Knowledge of such qualities is intersubjective, grounded in a form of life, grounded in our communal rationality itself. He says a secondary property ascription is true "in virtue of the object's disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance."[25] Experience of secondary qualities is a (sense) perceptual experience. This a Lockean doctrine. Redness is not *merely* a microscopic texture property (say, the texture that scatters all light waves except red ones) because microscopic textures don't *look red* and things that *look red* appear so to observers with no knowledge of such textures.

Colors are response-dependent, while other properties (say, 'squareness') are response-independent. Color-properties must be defined partly by their "objective" or response-independent aspects and partly phenomenologically. Shape-properties, by contrast, can be defined by their objective or mind-independent aspects. It makes no sense to speak of what *redness is* apart from perceptions of red *in perceivers*. Similarly, it makes no sense to speak of "dangerousness" apart from a subject who is potentially vulnerable. So, perhaps, it also makes no sense to speak of "rightness" apart from a subject who potentially judges the value of a thing.

Yet by the same token right and wrong are not *purely* invented. The property of "being such as to look red" may or may not be *have ever been perceived as red* by any observer (if, for example, the appropriate conditions have never obtained). So a Lockean secondary quality may be response-independent in some sense, but it is not *redness as such*. It is the dispositional property that is disposed to present us with a appearance of a particular phenomenal character. So values (like colors) are dispositional properties.

Goodness, badness, and other values are therefore grounded in "second nature."[26] The space of reasons in which our rational capacities operate makes us sensible to those dispositional

(Blackwell, 2007), 137–45. I shall cite this anthology. The essay is also printed in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, chapter 7.

25. Shaffer-Landeau and Cuneo, 138.

26. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 188 and following.

properties of primary nature which become, for us, values such as goodness and badness. We will explore McDowell's view of second nature a bit more in a later chapter. Suffice it for now that "second nature" is a distinctly human phenomenon. We partially re-enchant nature by bringing primary facts into the space of reasons when they weren't there before.

Discursus on McDowell's project

McDowell's anti-dualist position here (as elsewhere!) is liable to puzzle or frustrate some philosophers. He is not a realist; but he is not an anti-realist.

To make his view here more comprehensible, it is advisable to briefly give some context on McDowell's metaphilosophy. McDowell is a proponent of "therapeutic philosophy." He says he is influenced by two main sources: the "Socratic tradition" and Wittgenstein.[27] From the Socratic tradition he draws a way of thinking in which dualisms do not even arise. And from the later Wittgenstein he draws a way of doing "therapeutic" philosophy[28] – philosophy that 'leaves everything as it is'[29]. That is, McDowell believes many philosophical puzzles arise not from puzzling reality but from errors in *our own thinking*, so we need "therapy": dualisms need to be *exorcized*. He is an "anti-anti-realist". He is always fighting on two fronts, attacking a position without thereby supporting its apparent opposite.

His objection to Foot and his quasi-subjectivist alternative is consistent with his solution to the mind-body problem. For example, in *Mind and World* he attempts to dissolve the "vacillation" between naive empirical realism and "Rampont Platonism" by arguing that even primary qualities are not given to us in experience without the involvement of spontaneous conceptual capacities. He wants to accept the modern scientific picture of nature as "bald nature", a mechanical "realm of law", disenchanted from values, teloi, and other esoterica. But he does not want to accept that

27. McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, preface.

28. Cynthia Macdonald and Graham Macdonald, *McDowell and His Critics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

29. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations.* Section 124.

human rationality is mechanical. Instead, he argues that humanity exists in a space of reasons where we recognize reasons for belief and reasons for action. McDowell here invokes Aristotle's notion of ethics, by which he hopes to rethink our conception of human nature and nature as a whole. He says, "the rethinking requires a different conception of actualizations of our nature."[30] Second nature is that space in which human beings are initiated into particular ways of behaving and knowing by *Bildung* — that is, by education, formation, or cultivation.[31]

Practical wisdom is a virtue that the young human being does not have, and the ethical demands of practical wisdom are not even perceptible to her. But she has the potential (within her nature) to develop the answerability to them. And ethical thinking is inculcated in a young person, and then later examined, but only examined from within ethical thinking. Human beings are intelligibly initiated into this stretch of the space of reasons by ethical upbringing (Bildung) which instills the appropriate shape in their lives. So initiated, practically wise behavior is not just a new kind of behavior but the maturation and development of a new kind of faculty in the human animal. The circularity of this inculcation and new second natural faculty is not accidental: Since practical wisdom is responsive to reasons, it becomes a prototype "for the…faculty that enables us to recognize and create … intelligibility."[32] "[The ethical demands of reason] are essentially within reach of human beings. So practical wisdom is second nature to its possessors."[33]

Seen in this light, McDowell's position is comprehensible. Indeed, we should expect that he would dispute both Foot's brand of moral realism and also its apparent opposite, subjectivism and anti-realism.

30. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 77.
31. Bildung=formation, education; bild=form, image.
32. Ibid., 79.
33. Ibid., 84.

VI. Objections to McDowell's solution

The problem is not idealism

Some have objected to McDowell's view of mind and world as being insufficiently naturalistic. James Lenman is one example: "McDowell is certainly pervasively inspired by Aristotle and he describes himself as a naturalist. See especially his 1995. But I suspect many philosophers would find his use of the term 'naturalist' here somewhat Pickwickian."[34] I think McDowell's ingenious alternative to "strict naturalism" is flawed, but the flaw is not an idiosyncratic definition of naturalism. The flaw is a contradiction by sleight of hand. This section attempts to demonstrate that the problems with McDowell's ingenious alternative to empirical naturalism is not that it ends up being a form of non-naturalistic idealism but that it incoherently both affirms and denies empirical naturalism. Fink[35] expertly exposes McDowell's sleight of hand here, so this section will trace his argument in some detail.

To see the dilemma McDowell faces, consider that there are at least two kinds of conceptions of nature: (1) "Restricted nature" picks out some subset of all things that are natural, leaving everything else 'non-natural', unnatural, or supernatural. Fink provides a list of eight different intuitive ways of contrasting (a restricted conception of) nature with what is non-natural. For instance, 'nature' could mean the world unaffected by human intervention (e.g., the arrangement of trees in the Yukon is natural) or "the empirical world as opposed to the intelligible world of the abstract, logical, or mathematical" (e.g., formal sciences contrast with sciences of nature.)

Fink's ninth conception of nature is the unrestricted conception. All the other eight contrast a concept of nature where 'nature', by definition, leaves nothing out. Is just a multisyllabic synonym for "all." As Fink says:

34. James Lenman, "Moral Naturalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014.

35. "Three Sorts of Naturalism."

> It would express the idea that there is one world only, and that that world is the realm of nature, which is taken to include the cultural, artificial, mental, abstract and whatever else there may prove to be. There are no realms above or beyond nature. To be is to be in nature and to be in continuity with everything else in nature. Even the greatest and deepest differences are differences within nature rather than differences between nature and something else.[36]

The question for McDowell is whether nature is best understood as some subset of reality or reality itself. Some might insist that we can clear up this mare's nest by mere stipulation. But Fink disagrees:

> This is a terminological issue, but it is not easy to resolve simply by choosing one's definition of 'nature' and then sticking to it. No account of naturalism should forget the fact that 'nature' is, as Raymond Williams puts it, 'perhaps the most complex word in the language' (Williams 1981: 184), or as Hume puts it, a word 'than which there is none more ambiguous and equivocal' (THN: III.I.II.). In this section I shall try to give a somewhat systematic overview of some of this complexity that simply cannot be reduced by philosophical fiat…Indeed, it is a deep root of ambiguity that we can talk about the nature of art, law, language, culture, morality, normativity, history, civilization, spirit, mind, God, or nothingness even if we otherwise regard these as non-natural, that is, as not belonging to nature as a realm. There is no contradiction in talking about the nature of the unnatural, the super-natural, or the non-natural, just as it is an open question what the nature of the natural is.[37]

Both idealism and empiricism are forms of restricted naturalism. Calling idealism a form of naturalism may sound outrageous to the more empirically minded. But the argument is sound. Fink first derives Plato's *Laws* a Greek trichotomy from between events that come about by nature (*physis*), chance, and art. 'Nature' and 'chance' explain why plants grow, why the sun moves, and so on. 'Art' explains why houses have roofs, why humans wear clothes, and anything else that we do and that nature and chance could *not* have done. The "natural" pair in this trichotomy consists of the first two: that which comes about, so to speak, on its own, *prior to* and *independent of* intelligent intervention from humans or gods. This conception of nature excludes not only the supernatural but also the cultural, the fictional or imaginative, and so on. The Athenian does not accept this

36. Ibid., 206.
37. Ibid., 206.

"dangerous" conception of nature. Rather, he argues that "soul is necessarily prior in origin to things which belong to body, seeing that soul is older than body."[38] Fink comments on this passage:

> The Athenian doesn't just leave the concept physis to the 'men of science'. He does not first accept their conception of nature and then confront them with the claim that there is something extra-natural—the soul or the gods— which they have disregarded and which is in fact prior to nature. No. Like McDowell the Athenian is eager to have nature on his side. He therefore challenges the scientists' right to restrict the term 'nature' to the soulless, partly necessary and partly accidental combinations of the elements.

The Athenian proves his desired point – that soul is "older than" and prior to body – by first defining 'soul' as self-movement, and the cause of motion in other things. Material bodies either do not move at all or they are moved by something else. Since all material things are either moved (by another moving thing) or unmoved, material things cannot be the first principles of motion. But since soul *is self-motion*, it is the first principle of motion. Or rather, the first *ensouled* body is able to move itself, and therefore to move other material things.

Fink's comment is that "This, I take it, is pretty rampant Platonism but clearly presented as an account of the soul as natural because primary in existence… mind is prior to world."[39] This brings us back around to idealism as naturalism. If soul is the primary sense of nature, then body is "second nature". Mind is the primary thing, the first thing, the paradigmatic thing, against which mere body is contrasted.

Fink bolsters this point with a quotation from Aristotle showing that Aristotle is aware of the competition between the matter-form divide. "Some identify the nature or substance of a natural object with the immediate constituent… e.g., wood is the 'nature' of the bed… [others] that 'nature' is the shape or form."[40] His comment on this passage is:

38. Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato*, *Laws* 891cff.
39. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," 215.
40. Ibid., 216, quoting from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2014) *Physics*: 2, 1 (192b7ff).

> Like in Plato, we find here both a definition of the word 'nature' (an inner source or cause of being moved and being at rest) and two competing conceptions of what that source is, namely matter and form (the material and the formal cause in Aristotle's sense). Aristotle himself finds it most satisfying to regard the formal (and the teleological or final) cause as the nature of x.

We can now see the crucial point about 'naturalism.' Classical materialism is one paradigmatic form of 'naturalism.'[41] By Fink's lights, classical materialism is a form a restricted naturalism for it affirms that whatever is material is part of nature, and so that the label 'not-natural' applies to whatever is not material (or not obviously material, such as ghosts, souls, and fairies). But *the idealist, too, can rightly lay claim to the title of naturalism* – and not in a "Pickwickian" sense. Idealism and materialism turn out to be *identical* in one respect: they offer a "restricted conception of nature" and relegate to a "secondary" status everything that is not "natural" in the privileged sense. Idealism and materialism of course *contrast* – indeed, *compete* – in that they fight each other for the right to call *their* preferred side of the matter-form divide the *first* and *natural* side.

The upshot of the distinction between restricted and unrestricted conceptions of nature is that no single philosophical view has copyright on the terms 'nature' and 'naturalism.' Indeed, the age-old ideological struggle between materialism and idealism is a struggle over such a copyright.

Such a struggle cannot be settled by presumption. Nevertheless, the temptation on either side to beg the question and accuse the other side 'non-naturalism' is overwhelming. The materialist presumption is what McDowell calls "philistine scientism."[42] Fink says, "McDowell has convincingly shown that what Bernard Williams calls the absolute conception of reality is merely restricted, bald naturalism ideologically presented as absolute (MVR: 112–31, esp. sect. 5)."[43]

Wilfred Sellars provides a pure specimen of such question-begging: "I mean that naturalism takes nature in a definite way as identical with reality, as self-sufficient and as the whole of reality. And by nature is meant the space-time-causal system which is studied by science and in which our

41. Roy Wood Sellars, "Why Naturalism and Not Materialism?" *The Philosophical Review* 36, no. 3 (1927): 216–25.

42. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 346.

43. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," 219.

lives are passed."[44] Note that the first sentence explicitly endorses an unrestricted conception of nature while the next sentence secretly slides the ball into the other cup, explicitly endorsing an incompatible restricted conception of nature. The second sentence merely *assumes* that the "space-time-causal system which is studied by science and in which our lives are passed" is "identical with reality". But that is the question at hand. One cannot assert that the sentence "nature is the space-time-causal-system" with exclamation points and pretend to have answered it. Nobody (not idealists or supernaturalists) dispute that "Nature (unrestricted nature) is all there is"; they only dispute the implicit assumption, that the space-time-causal-system is all there is.

Now, the idealist can likewise beg the question by presenting spiritual or conceptual version of nature as absolute. My point here is not to criticize one or the other view. My point is that the only remaining route is to return to the unrestricted conception of nature. As Fink puts it, "Nothing less than a naturalism that deserves to be presented as absolute could help break the spell of bald naturalism without merely replacing one restricted sort of naturalism with another and thus keeping the oscillations going."[45] Culture, art, human intervention, rationality, and so on are part of the all. Fink quotes Dewey to make this point:

> Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth, geographers and geologists, to make this fact evident, in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish. (Dewey 1958: 3–4, italics in original)

Fink's comment is this:

> On this conception the aesthetical (and the ethical) are not independent of nature, but they are not somehow based on nature or supervening on it either; rather, they simply are nature in some of its manifest operations. To think otherwise is both to mystify the aesthetical (and ethical) and to trivialize nature. The man- made, the artificial, the cultural, the historical, the ethical, the normative, the mental, the logical, the abstract, the mysterious, the extraordinary, are all examples of ways of

44. Sellars, "Why Naturalism and Not Materialism?" 217.
45. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," 219.

> being natural rather than examples of ways of being non- natural. Nature is never *mere* nature. That which is *more* than *mere* is nature, too.[46]

Where the materialist and idealist are fighting over the definition of primary nature, the unrestricted conception refuses to fight. instead embracing both body and mind, brain and consciousness, matter and form, in a comprehensive view.

McDowell does reject the restricted conceptions of nature offered him by the philistine scientism and by Kantian idealism. He rejects one sort of idealism[47] and rejects one sort of empiricism. Nevertheless, he is of two minds. Unrestricted naturalism has its attractions. The cost, however, is that one no longer has the right to criticize opponents on the basis of their positing something real over and above nature – such a criticism is meaningless once we have defined 'real over and above nature' as a contradiction in terms. This is a cost McDowell does not wish to pay. Instead of explicitly admitting that he embraces the unrestricted conception without qualification, he puts the ball in one cup and then moves it around to the other side, pretending the ball was in the other cup all along. He keeps his conception of nature restricted (anti-supernatural) while *calling* in unrestricted (neither idealist nor physicalist). McDowell as a hero of anti-dualism has allowed himself merely to *name and claim* an unrestricted conception of nature while fully developing and endorsing a restricted conception of nature.

James Barham captures the dualism into which McDowell unwitting falls:

> the philosophical literature tends to work with a scientifically outdated image of living things as rigid "machines." This results in a picture in which only human beings (or at most the higher animals) can be properly ascribed purposes and agency in the full normative sense. From this perspective, we appear to be faced with an unappealing choice between eliminating teleology and normativity from our picture of nature altogether and understanding these phenomena as they are manifested in our own human form of life as floating free from any grounding in the natural world.[48]

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46. Ibid., 217.
47. Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*.
48. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 1.

Practical reasons as primary qualities

The second problem facing McDowell's alternative is that even by McDowell's lights, there *do* seem to be primary qualities of nature such as "danger" and "safe" that are relational and actionable like natural goodness and natural defect.

McDowell playfully presents an "epistemology of danger" or a "theory of danger."[49] This moral epistemology helps explain why his view is not a variant of "projectivism." His theory of "danger" is this: Just as there is *something* about red things *themselves* that makes them give us redness experiences, likewise there is something about the dangerous animal itself that gives us fear experiences. That quality may not be *the form of red* or *the form of danger*, but it is also not *nothing.* The "theory of danger" is intended to capture this "something" with the important notion of *merit*. Red objects *just appear as red* to us under the proper circumstances. They *just do* dispose us to have red experiences. But dangerous objects *merit* appearing fearful and dangerous. They *merit* that we have a fear experience. To describe a bear (say) as "dangerous" to rabbits is to say something about bears and about rabbits in their context on planet earth. The rabbit need not engage in concept-use or perceptual judgment – seeing the bear *as dangerous* – rather the rabbit merely needs the instincts and perceptual capacities to see the bear. His response is not reducible to a response to the bear's size or fur or any other obvious empirical quality; the rabbit is responding to the danger. Likewise, when we see certain kinds of food as "disgusting" (rotten banana peels, say) we need to assume that we are projecting disgust onto the food; it is more plausible, by McDowell's own lights, that we are being sensitive to what such foods *merit*, given the kind of foods they are and the kind of animals we are.

This is McDowell's own example but he does not seem to notice that it can be used against his thesis. If "danger" is a Lockean primary quality, then "desirable" might be as well. Practical reasons for human beings include facts such as human natural norms and also relational facts obtaining.

49. Shaffer-Landeau and Cuneo, 142–3.

Science as knowledge of primary and secondary qualities

A third problem corresponds to the first; McDowell's concept of science is too restrictive. Or rather, it is inconsistent. Call the two conceptions of science "restricted" and "unrestricted". Restricted science is what McDowell calls "philistine scientism", an overzealous attachment to the empirical methods of inquiry that ignores or denies the formal methods (logical, mathematically, computational, etc.).

McDowell wants to denigrate one kind of scientific realism (say, realism about evaluative judgments of health and sickness) while endorsing another kind of scientific realism (about shapes, sizes, weights, and other primary qualities.) That is, he denigrates the desire to find goodness in (primary) nature as a kind of neurosis or anxiety arising from the philosophical vertigo we experience upon becoming inculcated with "the scientific worldview."

I would suggest that "the scientific worldview" is capacious, including the best deliverances of our best sciences, including the deliverances of biology, logic, and so on. It is hard to be asked to reject "science" (scientific knowledge from biology) on behalf of "science" (scientific knowledge from physics). One begins to suspect, as John Dupre argues, that the request is that we reject genuinely scientific hypothesis from biology on behalf of philosophical materialism. Just because such materialism "dresses itself in the mantle of science" and browbeats opponents with negative labels doesn't mean that its restricted conception of science has earned copyright on the term.

VII. The solution to the Irrelevance and Polyanna problems

We have thematized the concepts of nature and science and defended an unrestricted conception of both. It remains to address the irrelevance and pollyanna objections.

Recall that "Irrelevance" states that natural norms exist but do not matter for practical rational animals because we are free to reflect upon them and either endorse or reject them according to moral norms, which would not be natural norms. Relatedly, Pollyanna states that a total set of

natural norms includes both good and bad norms. So either we have to accept that some natural defects are also virtues, or we stand in need of specifically moral normativity to sift out vices, which again raises the problem of the irrelevance of natural norms.

Frey puts the dilemma succinctly: "The problem our dilemma poses is how we can reconcile what on the surface appear to be quite different sorts of teleology: natural and practical."[50] The solution, in brief, relies on the account of practical reason defended above. Practical reasoning allows us to apprehend one and the same identical object apprehended in two different ways. That is, our natural human life form as practical rational animals, including the natural norms binding on us, can be apprehended both "externally" by the alien anthropologist who does not bear that life form and "internally" by human beings who do bear that life form.

If both forms of knowledge grasp the same object, then the dilemma between reason and nature is solved. The knowledge of natural norms is not irrelevant to ethics, and the special sifting process whereby we classify some behaviors as accidental to or contrary to our human good is a natural process.

Frey provides a summary:

> the ethical naturalist must be able to show how these two seemingly opposed teleologies (the natural teleology of life and the practical teleology of action) and these two seemingly different senses of good (the good we can derive from an account of what simply is and the good as practical goal) can be unified into one and the same account. That is, we need an account of natural normativity that will show us how the relation between a general judgment articulating some fact about a life form (a judgment about a fact that is potentially known from the outside) and a judgment concerning a particular bearer of that form in a particular situation, can take the form of a practical inference whose conclusion is an action that exemplifies that very same form of life.[51]

50. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 63.
51. Ibid., 65.

Natural norms are relevant

I argued above that practical reasoning is not one of many ways of being motivated but is the very capacity to be motivated by reasons. Plants and animals are inclined or motivated to their good by instinct or irrational appetite. They cannot pause to reflect on whether they should follow through on the instinctual flight from predators or pursuit of food and shelter. Humans are inclined by their good *both* by instinct (and emotion, desire, etc.) *and* by reason.

I also argued above that the object of human practical reasoning is a quite general conception of what is good. By 'good' we don't mean a non-natural property apprehended theoretically but the something intrinsically practical: the choiceworthy, the desirable, the to-be-pursued. As Frey clarifies:

> Although natural inclinations depend upon conceptual apprehension, we should not be tempted to think that they are objects of contemplation. These goods, as first principles of practical reason, are apprehended as ends—as objects of pursuit rather than as objects of contemplative knowledge.[52]

What is good in this sense for human beings is specific to our species. The primary good of a kind for us is the human life form. The derivative goods for us are any and all things necessarily related to the human life form. In virtue of what we are, it is good for us to achieve humanity, to become fully human. We aim to become what we are. That is, we aim to become in actuality what we we already are potentially. Some of these goods are basic human goods toward which we are naturally inclined: food, shelter, companionship, knowledge, etc. They are starting points without which human beings would not be motivated to do anything at all.

Their status as basic goods is not to be interpreted as unrevisable. The normal process of practical reasoning about what to do can and sometimes does overrule the basic inclination toward a basic good in pursuit of some alternative good. The point is that this overruling judgment is not something over-and-above the practical pursuit toward the good but another expression of the

52. Ibid., 88.

same pursuit. For example, some people overrule their inclination toward the basic good of human companship by becoming a solitary monastic but they only do so in pursuit of *other* goods judged to be *better*.

As Frey says:

> all practical reasoning is ultimately reasoning for the sake of attaining or maintaining these ends. Consequently, all practical reasoning is ultimately for the sake of living the sort of life that pertains to man. Indeed for Aquinas, there could be no practical teleology without natural teleology, since there would be nothing to reason towards if the will were not by nature inclined towards the exemplification of human form.[53]

Practical reasoning is the process whereby we determine the "sort of life that pertains" to creatures like us, then all particular practical reasonings about what to do in a given situation come to light as parts of this whole. This fits with the account of virtue defended above. There we saw that excellence in practical reasoning and rational practice aims at doing well with one's whole life. In other words, every short-term choice fits into a broader context of life projects such as what career to pursue, whether or not to marry, what friendships to maintain, and so on. And every long-term project fits into a broader context of one's answer to the maximally general question "how should one live?"

The possibility of vice

The natural inclination toward the good in general and a few basic goods does not guarantee success or exclude the possibility of mistakenly pursuing bad things. For we do not *know* a priori what we are by nature. The human life form must be discovered; basic goods for human beings must be discovered – and they usually are at some point in the course of a normal life. More particular or less basic goods must be discovered with great effort. Mistakes are possible. However, correction of such mistakes is also possible. Once we have a well-supported hypothesis about our form of life,

53. Ibid., 66.

we can begin to sift through many available natural objects, traits, states of affair, and so on to see which, if any, actuate it.

I said that mistakes are *possible*. It is better to say that the possibility of mistaking something bad for humans as good is essential to a correct neo-Aristotelian account of practical rational animals. Two sorts of error would exclude the possibility: First, we might make the mistake of concluding that whatever human beings happen to do, whatever behaviors can be empirically observed, are characteristic "human" behaviors. Second, we might make the mistake of concluding that nothing human beings do is characteristic human behavior; wearing clothes, building houses, working for social justice, and educating young people would all be rendered accidental to human nature.

To put the point differently, if we hypothesize that all people automatically have detailed knowledge of what is good for them, it becomes impossible to explain why many of us have vices, are ignorant of how to live, and sometimes wilfully create for ourselves truly miserable lives. On the other hand, if we hypothesize that no one has any knowledge of any goods, even a general conception of how to live, then it becomes impossible to explain why some people are so intuitively judged to be virtuous.

An adequate account must allow for Hesiod's insight: "Vice in abundance is easy to get; / The road is smooth and begins beside you, / But the gods have put sweat between us and virtue."[54] Many people are irrational. Many people are not virtuous. But that is just to say that many people are imperfectly human, and not just by bad luck or misfortune; they are imperfectly actuating the human life form by making bad choices, being ill-informed, being lazy, being greedy.

Rationally sifting between apparent norms is natural

The first part of my solution to the Irrelevance problem showed how natural human norms function for us as practical norms. Now I must reaffirm how practical norms are naturalistic, according to

54. *Works and Days* 287-9, quoted in *Republic* II, 364c.

the conception of nature already defended.

McDowell aims for this conception of practical reason when he says it is possible to "formulate a conception of reason that is, in one sense, naturalistic: a formed state of practical reason is one's second nature, not something that dictates to one's nature from outside."[55] But, as I have argued, that he does not quite succeed in achieving it. The reason is that McDowell shares with non-cognitivists an implicit nature/human dualism whereby human rationality (in the space of reasons) is entirely of a different order than organic and inorganic nature (in the realm of law). The alternative I have been defending dissolves this dualism.

Toner says: "the virtues are seen as acquired traits that fit human beings for the exercise of practical rationality toward which their shared nature directs them (thereby rejecting McDowell's sharp separation of first and second natures)."[56] This view is more adequate because, as Toner explains:

> The acquisition of the virtues not only prevents emotions from interfering with practical reasoning but also, in McDowellian terms, "opens our eyes" to new sorts of reasons for action, not visible to the immature, that make the good of others part of our good. So… MacIntyre links first and second natures much more closely than does McDowell.[toner2008sorts 243]

Human beings are *animals* after all, with animal sensations and emotions and urges, the "sharp separation" between biology and rationality not only cuts humans apart from the rest of the cosmos, but cuts human beings down the middle. McDowell's concept of human nature is not that we are practical rational animals; his unwitting concept of human nature is we are *practical reasoners* full stop. This error infects his definition of virtue as well. He believes that all virtues pertain to practical reasoning (or "sensitivity") where I argued that some virtues pertaining to practical *reasoning* while others pertain to rational *practice*.

This form of ethical naturalism is satisfyingly adequate to the task. It captures the normativity of ethical reasons and aligns these reasons with the facts of nature.

55. McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism."
56. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism," 243.

If my view needs a name, I should like to call it Recursive Naturalism. It is recursive in two ways: first, the normativity of human rationality is both an *instance* of nature and is *about* nature, including about itself. Second, the object of practical reason is both to discover *the thing to do* and, recursively, to become more practically reasonable. Practical reasoning, when successful, sifts between excellent and defective expressions of our life form and correctly judges the kind of person one ought to become.

VIII. Corollaries and transition

A two corollaries of this solution to the irrelevance problem is that the early stages of human life are especially important for creating the conditions in which eventual human success is possible and even likely. The evidence we already have from tradition and social science confirms this corollary. Just as health leads to more health (a healthy organism can eat, digest, and exercise better than its sick counterpart), virtue leads to more virtue, vice leads to more vice. A diligent person is liable to develop patience and moderation; a lazy young person is liable to become impatient and immoderate. We ought to take care, at the earliest ages, to diligantly cultivate virtues in ourselves and others. The earlier we invest in virtue, the greater leverage we have in reaping maximal dividends across a whole lifetime and even across generations.

This corollary provides the transition to the next chapter. The cultivation of virtue is a social and communal exercise, not merely an individual one. Introducing the social or group dimension to our account will bring to the surface new problems. As Christopher Toner says:

> whether the MacIntyrean sort of naturalism is acceptable ultimately depends on answers to some rather large questions involving the nature of rationality (for example, whether it is tradition-constituted in something like the way MacIntyre says).[57]

To that task we must now turn.

57. Ibid., 248.

Chapter 7

Reason and Tradition

I. Introduction

My account of virtue, thus far, argued that virtue is excellence in rational practice and practical reasoning. Insofar as virtue is necessarily related to practical rationality, an account of practical reason was needed. I argued that practical reasoning is the capacity for identifying and acting on practical reasons. As practical reasoners, we observe some facts as practical reasons. I briefly argued that "practical reasons" are simply perceived goods and undesirable. Just as reason is by definition the faculty for judging true and false, practical reason by definition assesses worth and worthlessness, desirable and despicable. A practical reason can and does motivate one, all by itself; in conjunction with or absent other immediate inclinations or desires. Practical reason, furthermore, motivates when one judges that a course of action or an outcome is good in itself, that it is *desirable* in the sense that it is to be desired whether one presently desires it or not.

I also, briefly argued that this capacity *really* gets at worth, at what some "objective value." (While I do not think this term expresses my view charitably, it is a common term.) A better way of phrasing it would be to ask whether there is any reason to do anything at all. Put this way, it is more clear that every sufficiently matured human organism naturally has reasons to do some things,

to pursue some ends, and reasons not to do some things, to avoid other ends. I also defended the defeasible presumption that practical reason is *important*. It is of unquestionable intrinsic value to human beings.

Reasoning in tradition

My account of the relation between reason and nature aimed to solve the problem of irrelevance by showing that practical reasoning is *about* natural norms intrinsic to the form of human life. This process of deciding what to do and how to live is just as messy and non-codifiable as the process of deciding what to believe and what is true. But this brought to the surface a new problem about practical reasoning in social groups or "traditions."

It is an empirical datum that 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. But even if practical reasons are not easily reducible to response-dependent features of each individual reasoner, we still have to ask whether they are response-dependent features of practical-rationality-traditions or whether they answer to response-independent normative facts.

In this chapter, I must address a broader concern. Is practical reasoning intersubjective and objective or merely intersubjective? We defended McDowell's argument to the effect that that practical reasoning is a legitimate form of reasoning. Practical rationality is rational. So the objectivity of one stands or falls with the objectivity of the other.

Pretty clearly, some normative systems are constructed by the societies that endorse them. Etiquette is the typical example. Other examples include (some of) the rules of grammar, the rules of spelling and typography (Nagel). Is practical rationality a system like this? If so, then it would seem that a plurality of practical rationalities are incorrigible. There are many etiquettes and many systems of spelling. Likewise, there would be not one human nature and human rationality but a

plurality of human natures and *rationalities*? On the other hand, if practical reason is universal and objective like logic, then it can be universal across cultures and traditions, but it might seem to be bound to conservatism, parochialism, and intolerance. So the question to be addressed is how our account can preserve the notion that reason is objective but satisfy the need for a liberal pluralism.

Arguments

My thesis is that there is one human nature, expressed variously in different cultures, languages, customs, and thoughts – and there is only one practical rationality, albeit expressed variously and perhaps imperfectly in various cultures. My answer arises from an examination of McDowell and MacIntyre's concept of tradition.

McDowell's account provides an excellent starting point but needs supplementation. He argues that reason is *at least* intersubjective and depends on a shared form of life. Furthermore, he imputes a psychological resistance or "vertigo" to those who would search for response-independent objectivity. As a consequence, his account wallows in relativism, to which his only counsel is quiet acceptance. MacIntyre, by contrast, gives a robust account of how the intersubjectivity of practical reason does not necessarily exclude objectivity. Response-independent objectivity is essential to the ability to make progress within a tradition, to criticize one's own tradition and to assess the relative merits of rival traditions.

Any discussion of practical reason in traditions is bound to be notoriously difficult. The explanation of that difficulty, I argue, is that 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. These complications should lead us to predict that conceptions of rationality will differ more than other difficult concepts. If two parties share an identical conception of rationality, then a long and arduous debate is not necessary; if two parties enjoy differing conceptions that differ in a sufficient number of respects, a long and arduous debate is not likely to resolve the difference. 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?" My aim is not to provide a knock-down argument for my view of communal practical reasoning. It is merely to provide a recursive theory of communal practical reasoning adequate (or almost adequate) to the task of both capturing what is common in differing conceptions of rationality. The hope is that this would enhance the possibility of criticizing rivals, rationally resolving disagreements with others, and making progress within one's own group.

II. McDowell on intersubjective practical reasoning

We begin with McDowell's account of practical knowledge. He argued that identifying acting well demands "a moral outlook."[1] McDowell therefore thinks such knowledge is not "objective" in the sense that we can check our moral outlook against an independent order of normative facts. When confronted with the notion that the external stance is impossible, we feel a "vertigo". We feel anxious that nothing keeps our thinking "on the rails." We must simply accept that we cannot think from a third-person, detached, "sideways on" point of view; we can only think from within our point of view. Instead of searching for an independent normative order of objective practical reasons that *ought* to motivate one, he offers a different "cure": "The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up on the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life."[2] This is part of the movement toward his thesis that that virtues are ethical qualities that only make sense 'from within', that they lend a certain kind of perceptive ability to their bearers. Though he acknowledges that we *desire* an external, scientific, sideways on, third-person, "objective" stance from which to identify the rules of rational thinking, but denies that such a stance is possible.

One might object to McDowell's cure on the basis that it makes fruitful moral disagreement impossible. Suppose two practical reasoners, Jane and Joan, start out a discussion with two incom-

1. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
2. Ibid., 341.

patible moral outlooks. Jane criticizes Joan's actions by criticizing her conception of the good life relative to Jane's own conception. But Joan criticizes Jane's actions and her conception of the good life relative to Joan's. Neither can "fact check" the other's conception against the moral facts. So, unless they already implicitly share an underlying conception, adjudication would not seem to be possible.

McDowell points out the familiar case of a discussion or disagreement that end at loggerheads, with both parties asking "But don't you see?" Although it is tempting to want to resolve such loggerheads by appeal to a third-personal point of view standing outside either of our forms of life, McDowell thinks it must be resolved, if at all, from firmly within our form of life. That is not to say that persuasion is not possible. He reassures us that the "Don't you see?" question "can often be supplemented with words aimed at persuasion."[3] Rather, persuasion will consist in "bring[ing] someone to see it as one wants", in one or both parties appreciating reasons they may not have seen before. It sometimes takes efforts to make someone see (to make oneself or others see) "the right way to handle a given situation."[4]

McDowell's position is a form of constructivism. Jay Wallace explains the distinct approach of constructivism about practical reason:

> [The constructivist] approach denies that practical reason is a capacity for reflection about an objective domain of independent normative facts; but it equally rejects the expressivist's naturalistic suspicion of normativity. According to the constructivist, practical reason is governed by genuine normative constraints, but what makes these constraints normative is precisely their relation to the will of the agents whose decisions they govern. The principles of practical reason are constitutive principles of rational agency, binding on us insofar as we necessarily commit ourselves to complying with them in willing anything at all. The realm of the normative, on this approach, is not pictured as a body of truths or facts that are prior to and independent of the will; rather, it is taken to be 'constructed' by agents through their own volitional activity.[5]

3. Ibid., 342.
4. Ibid., 342.
5. Wallace, "Practical Reason," sec. 2.

MacIntyre on Tradition

Let us turn to MacIntyre. MacIntyre is most known for his defense of virtue. But the dominant theme of MacIntyre's writings over the decades has actually been practical rationality.[6] *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* treat rationality as the ground of ethical reasoning, while *After Virtue* and *Dependent Rational Animals* treat ethical reasoning as practical reasoning. As we have seen above, MacIntyre and other neo-Aristotelians such as McDowell, Foot, Hursthouse, and Bernard Williams[7] "morality" should not be seen as a special domain of practical life but the whole practical domain.

One of MacIntyre's enduring themes is that we all inhabit a "tradition." We briefly discussed his definition of a tradition above: "A living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument…"[8]. The content of a tradition is partly self-reflexive: it is "… an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."

Nevertheless, the concept is liable to fatal misunderstanding. I should be cutting off the Hydra's immortal head if I were to explain it well here. What does it mean to assert that "we all inhabit a tradition"? Most trivially, it means each of us are embodied, live in a time, place, and social setting, and speak a given language. More interestingly, it means that one's 'rationality' is something we which is constituted by one's tradition. Each of us (intellectuals at least) owe our conceptual resources to a tradition. 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 …"[9] The tradition of enquiry 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 true and false. Rationality itself

6. Weinstein, *On MacIntyre*, 60.
7. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Chapter 1.
8. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.
9. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 401.

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.

Tradition and rationality are bound up together. He invoked the concept of tradition-constituted rationality to explain why practices can vary between people and traditions that both claim to be rational and believe the rival to be not just mistaken but irrational. This is why *practical rationality* is so important for MacIntyre's theory of *virtue.* For MacIntyre, virtues are relative to practices; practices are relative to traditions; traditions are relative to conceptions of rationality.

By presenting rationality and tradition as almost the same concept, MacIntyre both elevates the concept of tradition and threatens the concept of rationality. Since traditions vary, is there any way to avoid the conclusion that rationalities vary – and do so without hope of reconciliation? His answer to this worry is, I believe, the crux of his whole theory of ethics.

MacIntyre's answer is that we can rationally adjudicate between traditions (from within a tradition). We can justify or "switch" from our primary tradition. 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; and secondly, to "exercise… a capacity for philosophical imagination"[10] 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? It is insofar as the histories narrated in this book lead on to answers to these questions that they also hold promise of answering the questions: Whose justice? Which rationality?"[11]

10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* .
11. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 402.

Three rival versions

MacIntyre picks up the theme of tradition-constituted rationality. His most thorough treatment of the theme of rival traditions is the (1990) Gifford Lectures.[12] There he presents 'genealogy,' 'encyclopedia', and a third version he simply calls 'tradition' but I will call 'Thomism.' These three rivals are defined by their respective attitudes toward the past. Genealogists (such as Nietzsche and Foucault) use the past to subvert and "debunk" the present. Stephen Lutz summarizes the three uses the "Nietzschean research program" has for history:

> (1) to reduce academic history to a projection of the concerns of modern historians, (2) to dissipate the identity of the historian into a collection of inherited cultural influences, and (3) to undermine the notion of "progress towards truth and reason" (3RV, pp. 49-50). In short, genealogy denies the teleology of human enquiry by denying (1) that historical enquiry has been fruitful, (2) that the enquiring person has a real identity, and (3) that enquiry has a real goal. MacIntyre finds this mode of enquiry incoherent.[13]

By contrast, encyclopedists use the present to denigrate and "debunk" the past. The encyclopedist par excellence is the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, about which one reviewer said:

> The *Britannica* represents the idea of an impersonal, universal, tradition-free conception of rational enquiry into morals, telling a story of the progress of reason in philosophy and the sciences through an appeal to timeless, universal principles of rationality. The encyclopedic tradition holds moral enquiry to be about an autonomous, distinct realm of human life, which can and must be understood solely in its own terms.

Genealogists think, in advance, that no one in the future will use the present as a foundation.Encyclopedists think, in advance, that no one in the future will ever be able to transcend the present; they think we have *arrived*. Now, modernity is an encyclopedic tradition. It was the tradition MacIntyre was raised

12. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

13. Lutz, "Alasdair MacIntyre."

in. It is the tradition I was raised in, as (I presume) were my readers. So, by MacIntyre's lights, we are "encyclopedists." Our source texts are Hume, Kant, Newton, Locke, and others. Ours is an argument extended through time and socially embedded in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and parts of western Europe.[14]

MacIntyre followed his own advice. As a member of the modern tradition, 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. It is worth quoting in full:

> Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe…Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance… all these fragments are reembodied in a set of practices which go

14. Modernity has political, scientific, religious, and philosophical aspects; it is indeed *encyclopedic*. The intellectual tradition of modernity arises alongside the rise of the modern state. We do well to remember that almost all the luminaries of Enlightenment philosophy also wrote on politics: Mill's ethical writings are almost always written with an eye to reforming civil law; Kant wrote the three *Critiques* but also the *Perpetual Peace*; John Locke wrote about perception and understanding but also treatises on government.

> under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all."[15]

The picture here captures the state of moral discourse. But an obvious symptom of the decay of moral discourse and social unity is interminable ethical disagreement.[16] An explanation of this disagreement is that we are trying to get by using the scraps of a previous and whole moral tradition. MacIntyre thinks this version of rational enquiry, like genealogy, incoherent by its own standards. Nevertheless "it still exercises an extraordinary influence on contemporary thought and on university curricula."[17] The problem with modernity is not merely academic. The social and political fabric is woven from the thread of morality, so many of the ills of modern life can be traced to our inability to share a substantive conception of the good and the good life.

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."[18]

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[19] he speculated that a similar structure might obtain in moral revolutions?[20] This in turn lead MacIntyre to recover the tradition of virtues. But virtues are not free-floating moral

15. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1.

16. Ibid., 6.

17. Terry Pinkard, "Review of Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, by Alasdair MacIntyre," *Ethics* 102, no. 1 (1991): 162–64.

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

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

20. 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

concepts; they are embedded in a specific, living, moral tradition – the Aristotelian tradition. And the Aristotelian tradition includes a particular notion of practical rationality.

Clarity

What constitutes a tradition? MacIntyre's account is not clear. John Haldane (among others) questions MacIntyre's ability coherently to identify what a tradition is. What is tradition A? How do we differentiate it from B? Are two traditions separate and hence identifiable only if they are *incommensurable*? How much difference constitutes separation? MacIntyre's examples sometimes lead us to believe that a tradition can be anything from a religion (Judaism) to a discipline (moral inquiry) to a philosophical school (Thomism). But even so, how much overlap is compatible with difference? Jewish and Christian traditions share a common origin and bear considerable overlap in authorities, scriptures, and doctrines.

MacIntyre's definition makes answering these questions difficult. He characterizes a tradition as "separate and unified when its members or texts have a core set of shared commitments to beliefs, when the tradition is situated in a particular context in a particular set of institutions and when the tradition has an identifiable linguistic difference when compared to other traditions."[21] But is there any universal procedure for identifying such linguistic and institutional differences?

The right response to this call for clarification, I think, comes from Weinstein. We should not expect, by MacIntyre's lights, that there is an automatically objective, view-from-nowhere by which we can define tradition itself. Rather, MacIntyre concludes that "the concept of a tradition, together with the criteria for its use and application, is itself one developed from within one particular tradition-based standpoint. This does not preclude its application to the very tradition within which it was developed."[22] MacIntyre grants that his self-definition of his own tradition arises, in part, from his criteria of that tradition. Traditions change over time. They progress (according to their

21. Weinstein, *On MacIntyre*, 83.

22. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 295.

own unchanging standards) toward unchanging goals or else they abandon old standards. This is liable to frustrate some readers. But the alternative is worse. The alternative is a denial of pluralism that liberalism holds dear. For it is intellectual imperialism to assume that I have the *real* scoop on every other tradition. It assumes I have the right to define and critique all other traditions *in my own terms.* Even though MacIntyre thinks his own tradition correct, and others incorrect, this is not imperialistic. For he is willing to reflect on his own tradition, examine its resources and inadequacies, and engage through philosophical imagination with rivals.

In short, by MacIntyre's lights he does not need a definition of tradition that is any more cut and dry than it is. Forcefully to disagree with this conclusion requires his interlocutor to produce an alternative theory of practical rationality. But that alternative will either aim to be *not* tradition-constituted but universal (which is the encyclopedic tradition) or it will admit is tradition-constituted but the "best so far" (which is MacIntyre's own view).

We can think of this worry about MacIntyre's theory more generally as a problem of thinking about thinking. MacIntyre is a theorist of virtue and practical rationality. Hence rationally to assess his theory requires thinking through our own theory of rationality. The errors we make in *thinking things through* are not likely to be solved by *thinking them through*. The Greek proverb is: "If water chokes us, what shall we drink?" The Latin proverb (from a very different context) is "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" — who will guard the guards themselves? I believe the answer to the rhetorical question is *no one at all* can guard the guards; if water chokes us, there is *nothing at all we can drink to wash it down*. Likewise, if something is deeply wrong with the way we think, how can theorizing about rationality right the wrong?

Some of the errors MacIntyre diagnoses in thinkers who belong to encyclopedic tradition will be invisible to those thinkers unless they themselves earnestly examine the problems of the tradition. Even if MacIntyre's diagnosis is *correct* – especially if it is correct – the readers who especially need to hear it will find the diagnosis unintelligible, even irrational. Insofar as the "patient" finds any parts of his theory intelligible, they will seem radical, disastrous in their social implications, and

destructive of the very nature and purpose of education. The reason these appearances will be insuperable to MacIntyre's patient is because the patient is, by his lights, self-deceived. He or she simply denies being part of a tradition, and hence denies having a particular (rather than universal) tradition-bound conception of rationality, and hence denies having a particular, tradition-bound conception of the good (perhaps the good is unbounded freedom to follow the moral law, or to pursue happiness,, and justice unfettered equality). Modernity is the "tradition-less tradition" and hence *must* deny tradition to be consistent with itself.

The solution to this paradox is not to browbeat people into admitting that they inhabit a tradition. Rather, he directs the arguments (of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) and others at interlocutors who are already undergoing epistemological crisis. This "patient" comes to MacIntyre with manifesting symptoms. MacIntyre offers one possible diagnosis, and the patient's job is to investigate further. The patient needs philosophical imagination to even *consider* the possibility of another truth. The patient needs patience, intellectual courage, and self-reflection. The patient needs to sit in front of the proverbial mirror and mouth the words, (a) "I am part of a tradition" and (b) "my tradition might be inadequate," and (c) "that other tradition might have the resources more adequately to address the intellectual and practical problems that I now see are insuperable to my tradition." The critic who would escape the battery is more likely to flee rather than engage; but the critic who would escape by engaging and overcoming is liable to meet her match.

"Traditionalism"

MacIntyre argues that we should "return" to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue and practical reason because it is more adequate than its rivals. We must beware one misunderstanding. Any talk of "returning" is liable to sound nostalgic. MacIntyre is emphatically not defending "traditionalism" per se.

At the risk of sounding paradoxical, we might put it this way: MacIntyre's positive ethical positions are *traditional* but not *nostalgic*. In fact, his definition of tradition is *progressive*. Tradition is

an ongoing, socially-embedded argument over time, which necessarily entails that moral enquiry is dynamic – even *modern*. To be traditional is not to be past-oriented; to be traditional is to be staunchly future-oriented, since the business of life is not only the pursuit of our telos but the transmission of everything valuable and precious to the next generation.

One critic who misunderstands MacIntyre along these lines is Martha Nussbaum.[23] She begins her review of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* with an age-old dilemma between the social stability afforded by tradition (with its danger of hidebound error) and the social volatility endemic to critical reflection (with its opportunity of progress toward truth). She alludes to this dilemma as articulated by Aristotle:

> In the second book of the Politics, Aristotle asks whether it is a good thing to encourage changes in society. Should people be offered rewards for inventing some change in the traditional laws? No, he writes, because this would lead to instability and unnecessary tampering with what is working well. Should we, on the other hand, listen 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.[24]

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

Putting it starkly, of the two it is better to gamble for progress toward truth at the risk of instability than to gamble for stability at the risk hidebound error.

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

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

24. Ibid.

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

> the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one. This virtue is not to be confused with any form of conservative antiquarianism; I am not praising those who choose the conventional conservative role of *laudator temporis 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.[25]

Strangely, Nussbaum takes MacIntyre to be reversing Aristotle's balance. She thinks MacIntyre is urging for betting on social stability even if it means sticking closer to existing tradition (and hence surpassing or intentionally avoiding critical reflection) than is compatible with unfettered progress.

This is not an objection to MacIntyre — it is a misreading. MacIntyre explicitly rejects any kind of conservative traditionalism that amounts to fideistic belief in the rightness of one's own tradition. Indeed, he anticipates this misreading of his theory. He says:

> We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate.[26]

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

25. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.
26. Ibid., 222.

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

A more plausible interpretation of MacIntyre is to side with Aristotle that the risk of complacent error is greater than the risk of instability. For hidebound error is likely to perpetuate itself across generations, while the instability arising from a cacophony of disagreement is likely to be short-lived.

Nussbaum does not see that MacIntyre's proposed solution is not a sort of *anti-progressive* longing for the past. It is radically progressive. His solution is not to reverse progress but to replace the Enlightenment's standard of progress with a more tenable alternative. Ironically, it appears to me that Nussbaum is too conservative in her defense of the Enlightenment's standard of progress; MacIntyre is the progressive here. Rather than accusing MacIntyre of being too conservative, Nussbaum should focus on his critique of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre's critique may be wrong, but it is with that critique that she should take issue. She should not accuse him of failing to "make progress… [in] arts and sciences" but of "tampering with what is working well." MacIntyre's theory of rationality may be wrong, but it is not wrong along the lines that Nussbaum attacks.

Criticizing 'tradition' or defending 'tradition' is almost always ill-advised for the simple reason that 'tradition' says different things. While Enlightenment thinkers used 'tradition' as a catch-all word for people who disagreed with them, the Enlightenment tradition itself represents a commitment to experimentation, thinking for oneself, natural science, and so on. The practice of using experiment to test the theories of physical science is a tradition of scientists and "natural philosophers", dating back at least to the 13th century: "From this objection — should you care to try / You can be set free by experiment / Which is the source for the rivers of your arts."[27]

27. Dante, *Paradiso* Canto II, lines 94-96

III. Discussion

On the account I have developed in this dissertation, virtue is human excellence in rational practice and practical reasoning. While I have offered a defense of a neo-Aristotelian view of practical reason, there are many rivals to such a view. MacIntyre's concept of tradition was supposed to explain not only *why* rival views exist but to criticize them. MacIntyre would have us believe that 'rationality' is not a disembodied set of timeless and universal procedures of thinking. My rationality includes whatever standards of reasoning I accept, and all the other resources (facts, authorities, memories) I use to judge true and false.

Let us now assess what has been said so far in light of a few objections. We can only mentions few of the many objections to MacIntyre's concept of tradition.

Relativism

Once the concept of tradition is clarified as far as possible by MacIntyre's own lights, how can he avoid the charge of relativism at this level? According to MacIntyre's account, members of traditions can leave their primary tradition after undergoing an epistemological crisis. Remember that varying traditions can disagree about a proposition P. Perhaps tradition A finds P true and B finds it false, on best evidence and sufficient reflection. But incommensurable traditions disagree about the standards (say, S1 and S2) by which to judge the truth and even the rationality of other traditions. So A finds P true and rational (by S1) while B finds P false and irrational (by S2). They genuinely disagree. And A judges B to be irrational (since they deny that P) while B returns the favor (since A affirms that P).

Let's put these abstractions into an example. Consider Annabelle. Annabelle is a member of tradition A. Suppose that by A's standards of rationality, S1 contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense. And suppose that A teaches that P. Finally, suppose that P entails both (Q and ~Q). Annabelle discovers a problem with her tradition. She cannot deny P nor can she affirm

the contradiction. After some searching about, she concludes she cannot solve the problem and cannot even discover the rational resources with which to solve them. Being passingly familiar with tradition B, she becomes curious why her friends who belong to that tradition deny P and exercises her philosophical imagination to begin to see B "from within." Tradition B is compelling, since it denies that P. She "converts" traditions. However, there is a problem with tradition B, and that is that the standard of rationality of B (S2) allows its adherents to affirm a contradiction. So now, even though Annabelle left A to avoid having to affirm a contradiction (by her standard of rationality S1) now that she has joined B she no longer sees it as irrational to affirm the contradiction (by her new standard of rationality S2). This is surely an odd conclusion.

A second variation on the same problem is this: how would a born-and-raised member of tradition B, affirming S2, ever come to epistemological crisis? Discontentment with contradictions is not available to B members *ex hypothesi*. They do not see affirming a contradiction as irrational. Their tradition can bear a hundred instances of (Q and ~Q).

The odd conclusion of this thought experiment is a dilemma: either such nonsense is possible, or embracing the law of non-contradiction is a universal standard of rationality in every tradition. The latter option seems to indicate that traditions A and B are *not* actually incommensurable, since they share one rather substantial presupposition. The flow of members from one to the other is intelligible. The former option allows A and B to be incommensurable, but seems to freeze members in their own tradition. Members of A would have no (rational) justification for joining B, while members of B would have no (rational) justification for leaving B. So either all traditions are the same (in which case MacIntyre's definition is unclear) or some people are in principle locked in their own tradition (in which case one kind of relativism is final).

While "tradition" and "tradition-constituted rationality" were supposed to solve the conundrums MacIntyre faced, the cure may have been worse than the disease.

MacIntyre's denial of relativism boils down to two claims: the first is that even enquirers situated within a tradition can achieve *truth*, because truth is distinct from *rationality*; the second

claim, which is related, is that enquirers can overcome the rational limitations of their tradition.

MacIntyre accepts – indeed, argues for – a certain truth within relativism. That truth is that every enquirer seeks the conclusion of the enquiry at a particular time and place, within a particular social setting, within a language, and within a tradition. Following Lutz, we can say that MacIntyre accepts "relativity". Relativity (a term borrowed from Michael Krausz[28]) is a thesis about *the condition of enquiry.* It is not a thesis about the *conclusion of enquiry.* Lutz approves of Mark Colby's statement that "argumentative situatedness is inescapable."[29] However such relative situatedness is compatible with objective or absolute or mind-independent or tradition-independent *truth*.

Returning to Rorty's claim, we can say that MacIntyre agrees that "nothing can be said about… rationality" except what is taken as rational in a given society and tradition; where he disagrees is in equating rationality with *truth.* From the historically- and socially-situated position of enquiry, a philosopher (he argues) may indeed find truth. It is impossible to achieve objective or absolute or tradition-independent *rationality* but it is possible – indeed, it is the hope and telos of enquiry – to achieve objective *truth.* This may seem a paradox.

The primary kind of truth we seek in enquiry is "the adequation of the mind to reality."[30] This is the understanding of truth inherent in the Aristotelian tradition.[31] Aristotle says, "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what

28. Michael Krausz, "Relativism and Foundationalism: Some Distinctions and Strategies," *The Monist*, 1984, 395–404.

29. Christopher Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Lexington Books, 2004), 89.

30. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Q.16 and *De Veritate* Q.1, A.1-3. "Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus."

31. On the correspondence theory of truth, Marian David says: "The main positive argument given by advocates of the correspondence theory of truth is its obviousness. Descartes: 'I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendentally clear that nobody can be ignorant of it…the word "truth", in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object' (1639, AT II 597). Even philosophers whose overall views may well lead one to expect otherwise tend to agree. Kant: 'The nominal definition of truth, that it is the agreement of [a cognition] with its object, is assumed as granted' (1787, B82). William James: 'Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their "agreement", as falsity means their disagreement, with "reality" ' (1907, p. 96). Indeed, The Oxford English Dictionary tells us:"Truth, n. Conformity with fact; agreement with reality'".

is not that it is not, is true."[32] Aquinas calls this the adequation of the intellect to the object.

However, 'truth' is ambiguous across at least two senses: a metaphysical, substantive sense and an epistemological, logical sense. The metaphysical sense of truth is simply reality. "Truth" is being itself. The logical sense of truth (which MacIntyre alludes to here) is the adequation of the intellect to those beings. Logical "truth" is knowing the (metaphysical) truth.[33]

If we understand MacIntyre to be arguing or assuming that (logical) truth is adequation of mind to reality, we can make sense of his endorsement of "relativity". Rationality is something more pragmatic than truth, something more like "warranted assertability."[34] That is, the theories we rationally construct are, for us, the "best theory so far."[35] It is no contradiction or paradox to assert that our rationality is the best thus far but that others in the future (or the past, or in rival traditions) might be *closer* to the truth.

The second point is that enquirers from within various traditions can (and often do) come to realize that their tradition is incoherent by its own standards and from this epistemological crisis come to find the resources of a rival tradition superior to their own; Aristotelian (and specifically Thomist) moral enquiry is, he argues, more rationally justified than encyclopedic or genealogical enquiry *by their standards* and *by its own standards*.

In this way, MacIntyre escapes (one iteration) of the charge of relativism. The truth can be known from within the confines of our tradition and perspective.

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32. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics Metaphysics* 1011b25.

33. The third semantic sense of 'truth' would, naturally, be the accurate relation between the content of one's assertions and the beings about which one is making assertions. Semantic "truth" would be veridical statements about the metaphysical truth.

34. John Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1941, 169.

35. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

Evil practices

One of the worries that arose in chapter 4 was the worry about whether virtues can go bad. I offered one brief response there. I also briefly discussed the problem in regard to practical reason where I argued that even though practical reason by definition aims at the good, it can err. This, more adequate response, depends on the unity of virtues under prudence or practical wisdom.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre explicitly retracts his earlier belief that virtues exist without a unity under prudence.[36] The consequences of this retraction, Christopher Lutz argues, are crucial to refuting the charge of relativism. If virtues are unified, then even though virtues exist only in the context of practices, "no genuine practice can be inherently evil."[37] Rather, practical reason can judge *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*.

Now, such a definition certainly seems ad hoc. But Lutz provides a persuasive illustration: 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 doctor who had the virtue of compassion found himself unable to pursue the program of euthanizing mentally-disabled children.[38] 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

36. Ibid. preface, p. x.

37. Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 102.

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

> 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.[39]

The humor of this passage arises, in large part, because of 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. 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.

Some might worry that the distinction between apparent goods and actual goods brings with it more problems than it solves. It is certainly a distinction that leaves many questions unanswered. My first reply is that such a distinction is inevitable and necessary in our practical reasoning. Assume for a reductio that "there is no real distinction between apparent and real goods." Then either *nothing* is "actually good" (everything that appears good is just an apparent good) or that *nothing* is "actually bad though it appears good" (everything that appears good is a real good). But I take it as axiomatic and irrefutable that some things are actually good (life, pleasure, happiness, friendship). And some things that appear good are not good: obeying unjust laws, enjoying the misfortune of an enemy, etc. Therefore there is a real distinction between apparent and real goods.

A second reply, however, requires conceding that MacIntyre's theory leaves us unsatisfied. That is, it might be that the unsatisfying aspects of his theory track those aspects of morality that are unsatisfying. The admitted indeterminacy of MacIntyre's account reflects the real indeterminacy of our moral lives. Consider two phenomena: some individuals and cultures persist in behaviors

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

(that I believe) are wicked and unjustifiable – slavery, child prostitution, ritual human sacrifice, or what have you. It needs to be explained, from within my tradition, how it could be that otherwise decent and normal human beings could persist in such vileness. The other phenomena is this: some individuals and cultures repent and change (what I believe are) their wicked ways. Some make moral progress. The paradox is that while we cannot expect magical linear moral progression from wicked to good everywhere, neither can we despair of any person or culture making moral progress. It just seems a brute datum of observation that some are stubbornly stuck in their wicked ways, and some are admirably firm in their benevolent resolve. How do we explain this paradoxical phenomenon?

MacIntyre's account offers an explanation of why vices sometimes persist within pseudo-practices, institutions, and traditions from generation to generation; on the other hand, it explains why practice-enabling virtues sometimes emerge to disrupt a pseudo-practice, a wicked institution, and a corrupt or at least incomplete tradition. The fact is that "many kinds of activities can be, and in fact are considered to be, practices. Some of these may conflict radically, owing to errors and insufficiencies in rationality."[40] Errors in rationality explain errors in traditions and hence false ascriptions of the title 'virtue.' Rationality answers to truth, to the world as it is, not merely to the pragmatic truth to "dialectical success."[41] Hence, virtues answer to *what is really good*. They do not merely answer to "what-counts-as-good-for-us", which property is relative to each tradition.

In this way, MacIntyre escapes this iteration of the charge of relativism, while still explaining why rival traditions differ – and sometimes radically differ – in their evaluations and opinions. Incomplete traditions can, and do, undergo crisis. Particular persons within that tradition discover and asseverate on inadequacies within the tradition, leading to an epistemological crisis. In response, others within the same tradition may become willing to examine the resources of rival traditions and either quit their primary tradition or re-fashion it, re-make it, update it, and make real moral and intellectual progress.

40. Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*, 103.
41. Ibid., 104.

Why be moral?

A third reply is in order here. D'andrea[42] points out a critique Philippa Foot has leveled against MacIntyre: after all the informative and wide-ranging historical analysis, MacIntyre's account does not solve the "problem posed by Plato, and never solved … that of showing the rationality, for any man, of a thorough-going acceptance of the restraints of justice."[43] The challenge of a Nietzsche or Callicles or Thrasymachus lies in their acceptance that the good life for humans *requires* some virtues or requires virtue in some sense but their rejection of the "robust concept of justice with its corresponding constraints on action."[44]

One response is this: the question "why be moral?" is never asked in the abstract. For example, in describing the "self of the heroic age" MacIntyre says, "In heroic society there is no 'outside' except that of the stranger. A man who tried to withdraw himself from his given position in heroic society would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear."[45] Even though virtues in twenty-first century North America are not what the same as Homer's day, there is a parallel to be drawn.

Philosophers often ask "why be moral?" hypothetically. They ask it *as if* speaking on the skeptic's behalf, or as if *they* were skeptics. But hypothetical moral skeptics will not do. We must consider a concrete character, real or fictional. Once we look for a real or fictional skeptic, a problem arises. By MacIntyre's lights, sincere "why be moral?" skeptics are political or social outcasts. For millions of people who are full-fledged members of their tradition, the "why be moral?" question will not usually arise. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, politicians, businesses, and non-profit organizations all have a hand in giving each member of the community the tradition out of which

42. Thomas D D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006).

43. Philippa Foot, "Review of After Virtue," *Times Literary Supplement*, 1981, 1 097. This is the "problem of immoralism" she tries to address in the final chapter of her *Natural Goodness*.

44. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*, 430.

45. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 126.

the community arises and within which abstract philosophical or pseudo-philosophical worries such as "What does it all mean?" do not arise because they are satisfactorily answered.

By contrast, the emergence of the doubt as to whether one should be moral, and the crystallization of the doubt into an articulate challenge, is *a political failure*. The *polis* to which the moral skeptic belongs has failed him. The moral skeptic, likewise, has failed the *polis* which belongs to him or her. So MacIntyre's theory makes room for people who are not actually skeptical (to whom an answer to Foot's challenge is not required) and people who are actually skeptical but do not belong to their society (to whom an answer to Foot's challenge would be meaningless).

MacIntyre's theory makes room for one more group: moral skeptics *are* members of their own tradition but are seeing the problems within their own tradition and who are troubled by a "border tradition". This type of skeptic sees the resources of a rival tradition and compares such favorably with the resources of his own tradition. The skeptic is, in a word, entering epistemological crisis.

Specifically, it might be that the moral skeptic has been raised outside of the Aristotelian tradition and is noticing the inadequacies of his or her own tradition, and is entering epistemological crisis. MacIntyre's response is to invite him or her to do the hard work of resolving that crisis by examining, from within the context of a primary tradition *and* a "second first" tradition, the problems at hand and the available solutions, working toward an ever greater understanding of the truth.

In short, MacIntyre's theory gives an account of two contradictory phenomena. It explains how a moral skeptic might arise within a community and how that skeptic might be moved to a more adequate grasp of the truth; and it explains why, in healthy, unified, moral societies, *so few people become moral skeptics*.

Concluding remarks

It should not surprise us that rival traditions disagree, and that even among virtue ethicists rival lists of virtues arise. Aristotle and Nietzsche (despite their other differences) both seem to agree in finding magnanimity a virtue and humility or meekness a vice where St. Paul and Aquinas agree in finding humility or meekness a great virtue. Nevertheless, practical reasoning can find out which of these ought, on balance, to accept. The fact is that people can and do sometimes identify inconsistencies with their own tradition, identify the resources of rival traditions, and switch traditions. Some of these switches have to be explained as errors; while others have to be explained as improvements.

Reasoning about basic goods is a starting point. Human beings need oxygen and food by nature. These are biological necessities. Biologically, we are animals evolved from simpler animals.[46]

But we are also social and practical-reasoning animals by nature. Our advanced practical reasoning sets us apart. We have the burden and responsibility to set the course for our own lives, and to care for the dependent among us who are not yet practical reasoners, who are temporarily disabled, or who are permanently infirm. Any tradition that does not do justice to these realities will be defective. Any practices that militate against our distinctively human life are bad practices. Whatever virtues are included on the list had better not exclude virtues that make human life possible; it had better not exclude (as Aristotle did) women and manual workers from the very possibility of developing virtues. Tradition and rationality are not ultimately at the mercy of perspective but can be rationally adjudicated.

Even after clarifying MacIntyre's optimism about the possibility of ethical truth, his answer to relativism is sufficient but still somehow indeterminate. The indeterminacy is partly due, as I have suggested, to his appeal to practical rationality. While this appeal seems to me to solve some problems, there is one lingering problem it does not solve. From my perspective (or my tradition), *every legitimate tradition* affirms the law of non-contradiction. But that is just to say that if Walt Whit-

46. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* x.

man or Nagarjuna denies the law of non contradiction, then I will necessarily judge them to be irrational.[47]

Perhaps a qualified acceptance of MacIntyre's claim about tradition-constituted rationality is that when a tradition does not *seem* share this standard of rationality (the value of logical consistency) I should not be too quick to judge that I have really understood their meaning. Perhaps when I ask them if they affirm (S is P and S is not P) they have a slightly different concept in mind for "not" or for "and." Or perhaps they are speaking of an entity instantiating a property and not instantiating that same property at the same time but in ever so slightly different respects. Walt Whitman may be saying he contradicts himself in ever so slightly different respects in order to grasp apparently paradoxical truths that can be predicated of a transcendental modern man. Or perhaps they are denying both P and not P in favor of some other, different articulation of the predicates a given subject instantiates. In the case of any of these alternatives, the principle of charity recommends I extend my interlocutor the benefit of the doubt before concluding that the appearance of irrationality reflects real irrationality.

MacIntyre thinks that "human beings need the virtues" because they are intrinsically good and useful for transforming communities and persons.[48] He began by defining virtue in reference to practice. But moral enquiry itself is a practice that takes place within a tradition. At the practical level of daily life, a small community (such as a family or town or university) does well to organize themselves around a common vision of what is good and a common conception of what qualities will help everyone to attain that good. It can and should be undertaken by regular folk, not just specialists in philosophy. And the goal of such enquiry is discovering what is really admirable and pursuing it, becoming more admirable moral agents through the acquisition of virtues. Virtues are

47. Laurence R. Horn, "Contradiction," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014, 2014. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then, I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes.) (Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself');"Everything is real and not real. / Both real and not real. / Neither real nor not real. / That is Lord Buddha's teaching." (Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā 18:8), quoted in Garfield (1995: 102).

48. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

acquired traits that enable the achievement of goods internal to the practices, those traits that sustain traditions, and those traits by which we overcome perennial temptations to lead lives that are divided, deviant, or contrary to our true nature. Furthermore, at the theoretical level of philosophical ethics, the concepts of virtue, practical wisdom, and happiness supply for moral theory what many modern moralities have not: a clear, coherent, useful, and justifiable theory that grounds a rational pursuit of the good life and resolvable moral disagreements.

Wisdom

The final chapter must pick up the concept of wisdom. Wisdom crowns my account, for its possession allows the virtuous person to identify rational practices, and to solve the problems of practical reasoning in tradition by adjudicating between rival traditions. To that task we now turn.