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 among 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", but not to the neo-Aristotelian type Hursthouse and others are pursuing.[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".

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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.

4. 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.

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.

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.)

Of course, if we can deny the second premise, all that logical 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

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

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

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

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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 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).

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 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 account of virtue "happily not Aristotelian" for "although this account of the virtues is teleological, it does not require any allegiance to Aristotle's metaphysical biology."[15]

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.

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.

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", she argues 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 a practice, which is teleological and essentially so. This insight has important implications for ethics, as well as other fields: action theory, sociology, anthropology, philosophy of mind, and so on.[17] But the point here is that, since we act in groups and for reasons, teleology is a real feature of our social nature.

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."[18] least some natural entities – that is, all living organisms – have ineliminable, irreducible, normative properties. As Thomas Nagel

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

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

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

puts it, with the existence of life in the cosmos arises the existence of beings "for which things can be good or bad."[19] Let's examine each one a bit more.[20]

This 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.[21]

Initial Challenges

Each of these options faces its challenges. For example, if *human* natural 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.[22] In the next chapter, I shall return

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

20. 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).

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

22. Hursthouse's attitude toward the two strategies I am discussing appears to me ambivalent. Jennifer Frey also observes this: "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

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, even if organic teleology in non-human nature *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]

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,

remains unresolved in her own work." Cf. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012) 44, footnote 55.

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. Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism.. The criteria for this third sort of naturalism are sketched brilliantly by Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism.. Such third kind of naturalistic theory would be comprehensive. It would provide an anti-dualistic account of first nature and "second nature", of biology and culture, of animality and rationality.

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.

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 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.

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.

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 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

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.

31. Ibid., 27.

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 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 hold 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 this characterization of natural normativity, 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.

32. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 38.

33. Blackman argues that there *is* no good other than goods of kinds. 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 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. Reid D Blackman, "Meta-Ethical Realism with Good of a Kind," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (2015): 273–92.

The response to this worry, in part, is to remember Foot's point: "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: the first is a minimal scientific realism.[36] The second basic notion is a little-utilized feature of lan-

34. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

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

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 helpfully vague, 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

guage 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." That 'special logic' is variously called "Aristotelian categoricals"[37], "natural-historical judgements,"[38] "norms,"[39] "bare plurals."[40] I prefer the shorter and less adorned term 'generic.[41]

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. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19 14-15. 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" with, e.g., a complete set of teeth is a norm."

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 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.

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 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

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.

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*.

Scientists do not just gather existential or particular judgments about *many* members of a species – they make inductive inferences about *the species*. The statement that "wolves hunt in packs" is only interesting to scientists if it is an item of conceptual knowledge about wolves as a *kind*. 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.[43]

The point may be a bit obvious but, at the risk of tedium, it bears further explication. It would be radically unambitious science to confine ourselves to particular judgments like "Some reptiles lay eggs". We want to know – and can know – what is true of the class as a whole. And generics express these inductive inferences. Generics do not refer *distributively to all* members of a category nor merely to *some* but to the category itself. 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."[44] In this way, generics pick out what we might call formal facts, facts about the life form in question.

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

43. Leslie, "Generics," sec. 1.

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

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

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 mistakes the admission of exceptions for a "logical weakness" of generics. He cites the example from Anscombe (and Aristotle) that "humans have 32 teeth", saying "there is a truth we can state in those terms, but from that truth, together with the fact that I am a human being, it does not follow that I have 32 teeth. (In fact it is false)."[46] But McDowell rather misses the point. Aristotelian-categoricals are not trying and failing to reach deductive certainty; they are not half-hearted universal judgments. 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 et. al., say that generic truths, once discovered, set "normative expectation" by which we evaluate individual members on how well or badly they exemplify their life form.[47]

While there is much to be learned about the linguistic features of generics,[48] still, their use and acquisition is actually very familiar. Generic truths are acquired via a normal scientific means of empirical observation, rational reflection, and discussion.[49] This familiar scientific process may

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): 3.

48. 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 backs." Leslie, "Generics.

49. To use a silly example, suppose that someone from a warm and landlocked country has never heard of penguins before. This person visits a zoo and sees penguins for the first time. He notices that these astonishing creatures are called 'penguins', and appear to be birds (for they have beaks, feathers, lay eggs, emit squawks, etc.). He reflects that most – if not all birds – have many of these macro features. Fascinated, he consults encyclopedias, biology or zoology textbooks, and

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 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]

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.

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.

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) 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 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 phenom-

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.

> ena 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 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]

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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.

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.

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; 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]

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

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."

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

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, anatomy, and medicine.

By all means, let us be scientific. But let us be careful not to become anti-scientific in the *name* of science. An analogy might help: suppose a marine biologist studying dolphin behavior came to believe dolphin's have language. One could imagine other biologists accusing her of "projecting" an exclusively human phenomenon – communication by language – on non-human nature. They could ridicule her "magical thinking" but they would miss a fascinating repository of scientific

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.

insight. "Listening to science" does not mean as some would have it listening to the preferred interpretations of philosophers with a view to defend. If it means anything, "listening to science" *just means* listening to actual scientists, such as biologists and others who tell us that teleological functions are real and who treat them as if they were irreducible.

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

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

phenomena is that in order to even posit a hypothesis about how some parts of a system contribute to the achievement of its end or purpose, we must identify *in advance* which parts of the organism play a role in bringing about the end or purpose. But if we already know the causal contribution of those parts, what more could we learn by positing the causal-role theory?[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

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.

medicine.[69] Zammito clarifies ongoing relevance in biology, since organisms seem to be intrinsically purposeful.[70]

Thomas Nagel has offered one of the most recent defenses of scientific, natural teleology.[71] 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."…[72]

If scientists can countenance natural normativity via natural teleology as respectable, we philosophers not do the same? 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.

Conclusion

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

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.

71. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

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

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.[73]

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

73. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 38.

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.[74]

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.

74. 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 Mary 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 neurophysiology, perhaps even including cultural, geographical, and ecological settings. The problem, as we have seen, is that an empirical "scientific" conception of human nature has nothing to do with *ethics*. All of the complicated stories we could tell – if they are genuinely scientific – would be purely *descriptive*.[28]

Relatedly, nature has bestowed upon us what Williams calls "ill-sorted bricolage of powers and instincts":

> The second and more general reason 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". Stephen Brown ambivalently agrees that ethics is a descriptive discipline in the end; 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 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.

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. 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).

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

Natural Kinds, Natural Telos, More than Reproduction, but Known from "Inside"

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]

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

31. Frey, "The Will and the Good." 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.

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 human telos because he thinks such despair is demanded by biological science. But Hursthouse's response to Williams is that his worry is not actually rooted in the progress of modern science. And

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

she is right. Williams admits that "many of course have come to that conclusion before" (the conclusion 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: "modern science is very advanced, therefore life is absurd." Hursthouse points out, his worry is an expression of moral nihilism and despair. While I shall take up the topic of rational despair again 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 is not completely a mess. 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 "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

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

halting but admirable efforts toward justice and social harmony. 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 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

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.

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]

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

59. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

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).

60. Ibid., 223.

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

Furthermore, some of our attributes and actions may fail to be excellent without being our *fault*. So our account must allow us distinguish between various kinds of excellence. Consider the broadest set of things labelled 'good for humans'. All of the good things of human life enable the

realization of a fully human life. But not all good things are subject to our control. The virtues are among those good things under our control – good dispositions we each choose to cultivate or fail to cultivate. Unlike other goods (say, wealth), virtues become *what we are*.

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

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

Not obligatory

A related worry is that acquiring virtues might be good but is not obligatory. They are not "perfect duties" in Kant's sense. Since clearly not all ethicists are virtue ethicists, it would seem a bit overreaching to assert that the pursuit of virtue is obligatory on every ethicist. Also, since not all people are westerners or neo-Aristotelians, it would seem cultural imperialism to assert that the pursuit

of virtue is obligatory on everyone in the world. Nevertheless, if it is possible to discover human virtues (like moderation and practical wisdom), then it is possible to discover virtues the acquisition of which is incumbent upon everyone regardless of their level of academic knowledge or the content of their metaphysical commitments.

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

Since, for the first decade or two of life, we are not primarily responsible for our own traits, the first corollary is high importance of moral and intellectual education. In many respects, our individuality depends on fate and luck. But in some very key respects, the acquisition of virtues and vices with which we begin adult life depends upon our education.[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 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

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

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 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;

62. *Hamlet* III.1

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.