THE VIRTUE TRIANGLE: PRACTICAL REASON, EXCELLENCE, AND NATURAL TELEOLOGY IN THE RECENT NEO-ARISTOTELIANS

DISSERTATION

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By Keith E. D. Buhler

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. David Bradshaw, Professor of Philosophy

Lexington Kentucky

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ABSTRACT: Recent Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists such as Philippa Foot and John McDowell, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre are united on several beliefs: the good person is the virtuous person; virtues are human goods; and human goods are in some way "natural". They are divided on other questions: is virtue "natural" to humans because humans are rational animals, distinct from others in the animal kingdom or because humans are organisms, fundamentally continuous with all others in the evolutionary tree of life?

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

The conversation has run aground of this difficult matter because, as Julia Annas explains, it reflects a broader perennial question about the relationship between normativity and nature, or between ethics and science. Humans exhibit normal biological processes as well as abstract and practical reasoning. So more generally, how are we to understand the relationship between rationality and biology?

My dissertation systematically analyzes a set of related concepts: nature, virtue, practical reason, and teleology. I discuss the arguments of several recent neo-Aristotelian writers and offer a novel account of how these concepts fit together. I bolster the argument that virtues are human goods pertaining to our nature as practical, rational primates. Even within the confines of scientific naturalism and agnosticism, I give reasons to believe that

Foot is right, contra McDowell, that scientific realists should (probably) also be teleological realists.

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

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

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By

Keith E. D. Buhler

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Dr. David Bradshaw

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Dr. Anita Superson

_____

Dr. Dan Breazeale

_____

Dr. Mark Kightlinger

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(Date)

For Lindsay Elizabeth, the life-bearer

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γένοι᾽ οἷος ἐσσὶ μαθών.

—Pindar, *Pythian* 2, line 72.

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1. Insert listoffigures
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Chapter 1

The Virtue Triangle

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

I. Introduction: Nature and Normativity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II. Two strategies

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

These two strategies represent two different kinds of potential normativity: biological or rational, animal or cultural, teleonomic or teleological, organic or social.[6]

These two strategies go under many names.[7] The basic difference between the two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1998).

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

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

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

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

The cost of organic naturalism seems to be a "non-scientific" picture of nature. Are "natural norms" natural objects like other natural objects? How do we know them – through normal scientific methods or not? The cost of social naturalism, as I shall explain in a later chapter, is incorrigible cultural relativism and an undesirable nature/human dualism.

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

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

III. My View

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

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

In particular, I defend the thesis that virtue is the acquirable excellence of rational practices and practical reasoning that enables and partly constitutes the realization of one's human life form. Virtuous traits are rational practices and emotions, and practical reasoning is the process of identifying the good. On this view of virtue, the definitive criterion by which to judge human beings is our success or failure in acquiring virtues such as mod-

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

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

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

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

IV. The Virtue Triangle

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

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

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

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"[16] 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"[17] was "the whole point of ethics." This third conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize. Moral rules or admirable character traits are the *content* of morality; but the telos of humanity is the *context* of morality. Telos makes morality make sense.

The project of rehabilitating natural teleology may seem overly optimistic.[18] 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"[19] 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

16. Ibid., 55.

17. Ibid., 55.

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

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

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

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

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

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

> 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.[21]

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.[22]

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.

V. Outline of Chapters

The dissertation is divided into several chapters. Chapter 2 argues that at least the organic parts of nature are intrinsically normative. Chapter 3 argues that since humans are natural

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

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

organisms, human nature is normative. Chapter 4 argues that human virtues of rational practice and practical reasoning are the natural excellences of human nature. Chapter 5 argues that practical reasoning is, in fact, a natural process for organisms like us by which we aim to identify and pursue human flourishing and the means thereto, including food, companionship, virtue, and wisdom. Chapter 6 argues that this process is naturalistically respectable.

Chapter 2

Natural Norms: Organic Life Forms and Functions

> 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

This chapter argues that there are such things as natural norms; at least *some* normativity is discoverable in natural life forms and functions themselves, and is not projected or invented in human evaluators. These natural formal and teleological facts are just as real as other familiar, scientific facts.

The major alternatives to naturalistic normative realism are normative anti-realism or reductionism. Although I shall here exclude non-naturalisic normative realism ex hypothesi, both normative non-naturalism and normative anti-realism are motivated by *the is-ought gap*. The is-ought gap begins with the belief that nature consists only of descriptive facts.[1] It follows that normative facts must either be real (but non-natural) or else not

1. The a picture of nature as a manifold of purely descriptive and non-normative facts, entities, properties, and laws is what McDowell calls "bald nature". A better term

real at all. If putative natural norms are not real, anti-realists argue they are either reducible to non-normative facts or else simply projected onto nature by humans – be they scientists or philosophers or regular folk. The controversy over normativity is an old one and is not likely to be settled here. My goal, instead, is to present a plausible case that is both intelligible to normative anti-realists and normative non-naturalists and that is persuasive to the undecided.

There are three sections in this chapter that build to my conclusion that there are real, natural, irreducible norms. The first section distinguishes the two kinds of is-ought gap that philosophers have taken to render ethical naturalism impossible. It explains how some notion of natural normativity makes ethical naturalism at least possible. The second section begins with a summary of Philippa Foot and Michael Thomspon's case for natural norms of two types: formal and functional norms. This section also includes a novel case for what I call "organic normativity", on the basis of generic propositions, that organisms have a real life form and a natural teleological process. The third section considers and rebuts anti-realist or reductionist interpretations of these natural phenomena. Admittedly, these phenomena can be acknowledged by both the realist and anti-realist. The anti-realist would want to offer a roundabout explanation of them, while the realist accepts the straightforward explanation.

The upshot of these considerations is this: if there are some natural norms governing organisms, then there might be natural *human* norms governing humans. The neo-Aristotelian might be able to explain ethical norms as extensions of, or tokens of, natural

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would be "Laplacian nature," since the notion that the cosmos is coldly factual, bald of values, and disenchanted from any supernatural esoterica, aligns more closely with Pierre-Simon Laplace's mathematical picture of nature. Laplace pictured nature as a set of cold, abstract, and necessary relations. Realism about natural normativity is incompatible with the Laplacian picture. But his picture is, I would dare to say, unscientific. At the very least, it is not *the only* scientific picture. Regardless, Laplacian nature emphatically does not include natural norms.

norms, which are both binding on human beings as practical rational animals and not merely invented by human individuals or human cultures. These norms would be natural without being crassly biological; they would be both biological and practical. Or so I shall argue.

II. The Is-Ought Gap Challenge

Rosalind Hursthouse says that ethical evaluations of humans and non-ethical evaluations of plants and animals "both depend upon our identifying what is characteristic of the species in question."[2] In other words, the normative evaluation depends on the descriptive facts of the species: its activities, its life form, and so on. Evaluating things on the basis of what they are is central to the kind of neo-Aristotelian naturalism.

For example, consider a few pretty uncontroversial normative propositions: '*you ought to be wise*' or *'It is good to be tolerant of people with different views'* or *'It is bad to bring a gun to school and start shooting people'*. Supposing these are true, *why* are they true? The non-naturalist has a good explanation (they pick out fundamental, non-natural, moral facts) and the naturalist anti-realist also has a good explanation (express the speaker's individual and cultural norms). The ethical naturalist's explanation is a bit trickier. He or she must show how such statements relate to the *natural* facts. The most straightforward path would be to argue that "you ought to be wise" is a normative truth derivable from some other fact that is natural. In general, ethical naturalism states that some ethical facts are grounded in natural facts or are identifiable with natural facts.

Insofar as neo-Aristotelians like Hursthouse and Foot proffer a form of ethical naturalism, a challenge must be stated. Philosophers have challenged to the very possibility of such ethical naturalism in this form:

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

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

If this challenge cannot be met, then ethical naturalism is futile. And it is difficult to imagine how the challenge could be met. Consider, for example, a candidate natural fact, such as the apparent goodness of pleasure. Perhaps, if pleasure *is* universally pursued, pleasure *ought* to be pursued. Hume is often credited with (or blamed for) insisting that an 'ought' can never be derived from an 'is.'[3] He says:

> 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."[4]

The point is that when it comes to human evaluations, 'is' statements may be interesting but they seem useless for practical purposes. A few simple examples: Just because "most men wear tuxedos to the Oscars" does not necessitate that, undecided men automatically know they ought to to wear a tux to the Oscars – (not without a prior normative premise that "One ought to do whatever most others do.") Just because all cultures have farmers or hunters does not mean that any one person ought to become a farmer or hunt. Likewise, even if all human beings and cultures exemplify a range of common facts or express range of common evaluative attitudes, the result would not necessarily be a normative ethics as much

3. Arnhart and MacIntyre argue that Hume himself allows for a kind of inference from "is" to "ought" in other places. (Cf. Larry Arnhart, "The New Darwinian Naturalism in Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 02 (1995): 389–400; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Hume on Is and Ought," *The Philosophical Review*, 1959, 451–68) I think Moore is the one to blame (or to give the credit).

4. *A Treatise of Human Nature* book III, part I, section I.

as a "descriptive ethics." (Descriptive ethics builds on and adds to evolutionary biology, psychology, sociology, human ethology, and anthropology by empirically studying what such-and-such a person or culture deems worthwhile or worthless and compares it to other persons or cultures or to other generations of the same culture.) The results of descriptive ethics might be a detailed and scientific description of human behaviors in their consistency and variation. It would not be a plan for how to live one's life. At least, it would not be a plan *without supplementary interpretation from normative ethics* prescribing that one should comply with the norms one's own culture, or prescribing that one should criticize the norms of one's culture, or prescribing some other response.

We should not overestimate the cultural variance. Even though habits and attitudes toward drinking alcohol vary dramatically from culture to culture and generation to generation, there seems to be a cross-cultural disapprobation for continual drunkenness, in even cultures (like the Bolivian Camba) that drink regularly and drink heavily. Thus, anthropologist Dwight Heath says: "It is important to realize that drinking problems are virtually unknown in most of the world's cultures, including many where drinking is commonplace and occasional drunkenness is accepted."[5] Insights about universal norms might be quite interesting. Nevertheless, their practical significance is not given; they can be put to use in more than one way.

So the first premise of the is-ought challenge sets out a criterion for ethical naturalism: the normative propositions that features as conclusions of ethical arguments must be derived from descriptive premises. The second premise seems to render hopeless the thought that we can evaluate things on the basis of what they are. Is neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism a non-starter?

The is-ought gap is fatal to *some* forms of ethical naturalism. Namely, those that

5. Dwight B Heath, "Sociocultural Variants in Alcoholism," *Encyclopedic Handbook of Alcoholism*, 1982, 426–40.

assume the bald picture of nature as purely descriptive. There is, however a second path.

The is-ought gap can be undercut in a different way by neo-Aristotelians. We can deny the assumption that nature is purely descriptive. (I shall consider the assumption in more detail in a later chapter.) For example, it might be that some normative propositions such as "you ought to be wise" are brutely normative *natural* facts. This might sound rather odd. The point is that to understand how one might undercut the is-ought gap: start with basic, scientifically respectable natural norms. From these, derive further ethical norms. If these were possible, the result would be both ethical and naturalistic.

In order to explicate this option, begin with Philippa Foot's notion of "natural normativity". Some features of nature are properties, she says, are instances of 'natural goodness' or 'natural defect.' About such qualities, she says:

> …we might equally have been thinking in terms of, say, strength and weakness or health and disease, or again about an individual plant or animal being or not being as it should be, or ought to be, in this respect or that. Let us call the conceptual patterns found there, patterns of natural normativity.[6]

Natural normativity is an indeterminate concept. It might include a variety of different kinds of normativity that are not obviously moral normativity, such as the proper, the healthy, the advantageous, the adaptive, the mature, and so on. This indeterminacy is a strength rather than a weakness. When Foot uses the term 'natural normativity' she means that normativity exists wherever organic life is found. Wherever evaluative properties like health and disease appear, there are real instances of natural goodness and natural defect, then some evaluative properties are *primary qualities of nature* just like weight, color, size, relations of time and space, and so on.

There is another sense in which 'natural normativity' is used by neo-Aristotelians like John McDowell. The neo-Aristotelians are of two minds about which sense is a more

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

promising foundation for ethics. Where they agree, though, is in thinking that natural norms overcome or rather undercut the is-ought gap. Call this the **Bald Nature Challenge**:

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

This argument like the first one sets out a criterion that ethical naturalism must satisfy. Namely, ethical naturalism must offer an account of some natural norms that are both real and brutely natural, not derived from other (descriptive) facts. The second premise says that all norms are non-natural and all nature is non-normative. So it seems to be impossible to be an ethical naturalist.

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

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

III. The Case for Natural, Organic Norms

The burden of proof is on the neo-Aristotelian to furnish examples of natural norms that would undercut the is-ought gap. As it turns out, there are several plausible ones. The two candidates for natural normative facts I shall defend are life forms or natural kinds, and teleological facts or natural function. Although these two kinds of facts are related, it is helpful to distinguish between formal and teleological normativity, between morphology and physiology, between structures and their functions – between what things *are* and what they *do*.

Nature is full of kinds; sunflowers are not oxygen; stars are not organisms; lead is not gold; water is not soil; and so on. Kind concepts allow us to both distinguish x from y and to gather together all the x's. Zebras and horses are both Equidae; lead and gold are both elements; ice and the sea and steam are all water. Thinking in kind categories is intuitive and natural.[7] Thinking in categories is probably a constitutive feature of thought.

Nature is also full of end-directed activity. Each thing does its own thing: sunflowers grow toward the sun, wolves hunt deer and deer flee wolves; hearts pump blood and eyes see; the sun warms the planet; phytoplankton oxygenates the atmosphere. Such processes are non-intentional end-directed processes. Non-intentional processes are sometimes called 'teleonomic.'[8] Teleonomic phenomena do not have a *director* but they do have a *direction.*

Kinds and their ends can be conceptually distinguished but not very far. Forms and functions, structures and activities, are two aspects of one thing. Is the hip bone shape adaptive for a purpose or is the purpose conducive to the development of such-and-such shape?

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

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

It is better to allow that the structure and function of natural organisms and at least some of their parts are an inseparable whole. Indeed, Lewens summarizes the folk biological conception of a "kind" by mashing together the concept of a life form or "essence" with the concept of a function or "telos": a kind is a "teleo-essence", a thing with an end.

My initial hypothesis, which will be explicated further, is that formal facts (natural kinds and their natural properties) and teleological facts (natural functions) are both instances of natural norms. We have not yet said anything about human ethical norms, which is our ultimate aim. Human ethical norms, if they can be said to be natural, will turn out to be formal and teleological facts about our life form identifiable as instances of a broader pattern of natural normativity. But the argument must proceed in stages; the goal for now is simply to defend natural normativity.

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

Foot's Case for Natural Normativity

Philippa Foot argues that human virtues are instances of a broader class of natural properties: 'natural goodness.'[9] Foot is well aware that her offering is likely to offend the ears of

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

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. 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. Many modern ethicists treat human valuations as unprecedented, almost miraculous, new appearance in the cosmos. Instead, we should expand the scope of our inquiry to examine the status of humans as natural entities.

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

In this Foot agrees with Thompson's groundbreaking work.[10] 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.[11] He says, "Vital description of individual organisms is itself the primitive expression of a conception of

10. 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.

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

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."[12] 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. We recognize things as alive before we learn about their shared traits; indeed, we can only ascribe a set of traits *living things* share if we are already in possession (absent that set of traits) of a concept of living things under which we gather a sample.

On these considerations, it is most reasonable to hypothesize that life is a fundamental concept, along with 'being', 'quantity' and others. Once we accept that intuitive conclusion, 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*."[13]. Since each particular species engages in its own characteristic activities: beavers build dams, and robins build nests. There are, then, life-form specific *successes* and *failures* to act. Each life-form is subject to its own normative appraisals: something would be wrong with beaver that built a tiny nest or a robin that tried to build a massive dam.

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

12. Ibid., 57.
13. Ibid., 27.

primary qualities of nature.

McDowell and others will object to this characterization of natural normativity. They think it "queer" that nature should exhibit such properties, and they find it easier to judge that human beings are the only evaluators. It might be that terms like 'good' and 'bad' are sui generis evaluative terms, and that evaluative properties are "in people's heads" as it were. But Foot's analysis of language about plants and animals indicates that such a conclusion is not the natural presumption.

A much more natural starting point is that to assume that such terms are used relative to natural kinds – and especially life-forms and their activities or functions. The natural goodness under discussion is not just a human ascription but seems to be something humans *recognize* in all living things. Certainly, some properties are human ascriptions only. Other properties are in the world and only show up in human ascriptions insofar as we accurately reflect the facts. Foot's point is that *some* instances of natural goodness seem much more plausibly instances of this latter kind. Despite For, there is "no change in the meaning of 'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will.'[14] The identification of what is *good for* a non-human organism is sometimes identical to the identification of what is *good for* a human being. Foot's theory explains this in the simplest way. Foot concludes that this point holds about"goodness and badness, and therefore about evaluation in its most general form."

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

14. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

articulates Foot's insight 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.[15]

There are two qualifications I should make about the scope of my thesis here. First, the 'good' in question here is a good-of-a-kind, the way that typical robins are blue-of-a-kind. The good-of-a-kind analysis works for all organisms and all biological species, which are most plausibly understood as natural kinds, rather than social groups, which are not. Folk ontology does tend to group nationalities and ethnicities as natural kinds along with leopards and bears; but my analysis trades on the concepts used in biology. Secondly, it would be a natural leap to assume that the good-for-us is an instance of the good simpliciter, but this is a different question altogether. Blackman argues that there *is* no good other than goods of kinds.[16] Others would argue that the good-of-a-kind is an instance of the good simpliciter. I wish to remain agnostic on this issue. While my thesis identifies what is good for us as an instance of something *truly good,* it remains agnostic about the broader metaphysical or cosmic significance of the fact. These are both interesting and important questions but they would take us too far afield of the main point.

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

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

A Novel Case

A defense of natural normativity would render ethical naturalism possible. A defense of natural normativity would have to furnish instances of natural norms from widely agreed upon premises from common sense and science. My case for natural normativity depends on two notions: the first is a minimal scientific realism.[17] The second basic notion is a little-utilized feature of language called "generic propositions," which I shall explain below. The case in brief is this:

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

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

The Special Logic of Generics

Michael Thompson is one of the first to work out "the special logic of judgments we make about living things, and then to indicate its application to ethics." Such judgments have a variety of names in the recent neo-Aristotelian literature: the most common are "Aristotelian categoricals"[18] and "natural-historical judgements,"[19]; less common are "norms,"[20] or "bare plurals."[21] I prefer the shorter and less adorned term *'generic.'*[22]

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.

18. Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

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

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

21. 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

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

Generics are neither universal nor particular

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

> Start with this sentence: 'Buddhists are way into meditation'. This first sentence is, let us suppose, true. So far so good. But is it equivalent to 'for every x, if x is a Buddhist, x is way into meditation'? It does not appear to be. For the second sentence might be false (some Buddhists might not be way into meditation) even if the first sentence is, as we have supposed, true. The first sentence could be true, somehow, even if not all Buddhists are way into meditation (similarly, 'ducks lay eggs' may be true even if not all ducks 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.[23]

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 true statement, "wolves hunt in packs" as opposed to the clearly false statements "every particular wolf that has ever existed has hunted or will hunt in a pack." Rabid wolves hunt alone, and injured, or very old wolves don't hunt at all. Furthermore, it is true but trivial that *a large number of wolves hunt in packs*. The generic proposition is a unique logical expression, neither universal nor particular.

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."[24] In this way, generics pick out what we might call formal facts, facts about the life form

23. Bailey, "Animalism," 869.

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

in question. Thus Sarah Leslie: "It is widely accepted that [definite] generics are singular statements which predicate properties directly of kinds. For example, "tigers are extinct" predicates the property of being extinct directly of the kind Panthera tigris, and would be true just in case Panthera tigris had the property of being extinct."[25]

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 members of the species exhibit properties.[26] 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."[27] In 1987 there were only 27 known condors alive. One could easily imagine a scenario in which every living member of such an endangered species were too injured, old, or diseased to exemplify this attribute. It would be strictly false of the individual condors that any of them could fly for hours; nevertheless the generic would still be true that "condors" (as a class) *can* fly for hours.

McDowell thinks that such exceptions are a "logical weakness" in deriving ethical conclusions from generics about human beings. He cites the example from Anscombe (and Aristotle) that "humans have 32 teeth", saying "there is a truth we can state in those terms, but from that truth, together with the fact that I am a human being, it does not follow that I have 32 teeth. (In fact it is false)."[28] McDowell accepts that generics are generally true. His objection to their application seems to be that the relation between a normative expectation and reality fails to reach deductive certainty. If this is his objection, it rather misses the point. Aristotelian-categoricals are not half-hearted universal judgments; they are not universes

25. Leslie, "Generics," sec. 1.

26. We might say that at time t1 the species exhibited properties A and B, while at time t2 the species exhibits no properties.

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

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

with widely-acknowledge counterexamples. They are judgments of a logically different kind. Far from being a logical weakness, generics are what enable us to capture truths about natural kinds that help explain statistical variation and inconsistency.

Prasada says that, "Much of our conceptual knowledge consists of generic knowledge — knowledge about kinds of things and their properties."[29] We can approach generics through a "formal, quantificational" semantics or through "principled connections". Principled connections support formal explanations, normative expectations, and a statistical expectation of prevalence. In other words, we explain that the dog has four legs *because* it is a dog (formal explanation); we expect that Fido should have four legs *unless something is wrong* (normative expectations); and we expect that if we counted up a population of dogs, *most* dogs would in fact turn out to have four legs (statistical expectation).

Generic truths, once discovered, set a normative expectation by which we evaluate individual members on how well or badly they exemplify their life form.[30] The normative expectation cannot, it seems, be reduced to statistical correlations. Rather, statistical correlations can be a sign of (or can be an illusion of) a principled connection.

There is much to be learned about the linguistic features of generics, but none of the unexplored frontiers render generics useless for applications in neo-Aristotelian ethics. A few examples of what needs to be learned include the correlation between statistical prevalence and normative identity; many generic truths describe what is statistically prevalent but not all. What is the difference? Is one reducible to the other? Furthermore, Leslie distinguishes between indefinite generics such as "tigers are striped" which admits of the specification "that tiger over there is striped" and definite generics such as "domestic cats are common" which does not admit of specification, "that domestic cat is common". What is the difference here? Finally, indefinite generics are trickier: "Ducks lay eggs" is a true

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

30. Ibid., 3.

generic while "ducks are female" is false one, even though only female ducks lay eggs. And "mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus" is true even though less than one percent of mosquitoes carry the virus while "books are paperbacks" is false even though more than eighty percent of books are paper backs.[31] How do we sort through these correlations between generic connection and statistical prevalance?

These unexplored frontiers represent fascinating puzzles but do not render generics unsuitable for use in normative and ethical arguments. Nor should the presence of outstanding questions lead one to believe generic propositions are confusing or confused. Rather, their normal acquisition and usage is a very familiar, and perhaps inevitable.

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

31. Leslie, "Generics."

formerly established generics (the notion that all mammals give live birth was thrown into crisis by the platypus). Scientists also work to distinguish between the (statistically) normal and (statistically) abnormal traits of a species, and within abnormal traits distinguish good from defective traits.

This familiar process is certainly revisable. For example, an ethologist who discovers a wolf hunting 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."[32] 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.[33]

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

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

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

excellent swimmers, not defective flyers; and that these truths hold of penguins *as a kind* – a biologist or zoologist who discovered the first flying penguin would become (justifiably) famous because we would all be (justifiably) surprised. The surprise would not originate merely from something out of the ordinary — new and extraordinary creatures, both living and extinct, are discovered every year. The surprise would originate from the upending of a firmly established scientific fact.

Generics are teleological

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

To see this second kind of natural normativity, begin with the concept of a function. Eyes perform the function (in an organism) of seeing, hemlock trees perform the function (in an ecosystem) of shading rivers, and so on. Thompson, for example, cites the scientific observation that "flowers have blossoms of such-and-such type in order that such-and-such insects should be attracted and spread their pollen about."[34]

While some philosophers of science have thought that teleological normativity could be explained in terms of function, I would suggest that the reverse is rather true: the structure of a function is teleological. There are many senses of the term 'function', but the kind of biological functions under review are teleological, or least teleonomic, in that it is an arrangement of parts toward a particular purpose or end.

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

A functional process is not necessarily *willfully* undertaken. But it does have a beginning, an end (in time), and an end (telos). Clarifying that functions need not be intentional, we can understand the natural functions of organisms and organic systems as instances of natural teleology. James Barham explains the notion of natural teleology in this way:

> By "teleology," I have in mind such words and concepts as "purpose," "end," "goal," "function," "control," and "regulation," as well as the real-world biological phenomena to which these words and concepts refer. This means that the word "teleology" should always be construed here in its internal or "immanent" sense—purposiveness existing in living beings themselves—and never in its external or "transcendent" sense of an overarching cosmic principle.[35]

Ernst Mayr (following Colin Pittendridgh) calls a process "teleonomic" if it is not a process of intentional purposes.[36] He says, "I have therefore refrained from using anthropomorphic language, Particularly the terms of purpose and intention, when explaining teleonomic phenomena in animals and plants."[37]

Mayr further distinguishes between teleological (purpose-driven end-directed processes), teleonomical (non-intentional end-directed processes in living things) and "teleomatic" (non-intentional processes in non-living things). A teleomatic process is an "automatic" process governed by natural law:

> All objects of the physical world are endowed with the capacity to change their state, and these changes strictly obey natural laws. They are end-directed only in a passive, automatic way, regulated by external forces or conditions… All teleomatic processes come to an end when the potential is used up (as in the cooling of a heated piece of iron) or when the process is stopped by encountering an external impediment (as when a falling object hits the

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

36. Mayr, "The Idea of Teleology." Cf. Colin S. Pittendridgh, "Adaptation, Natural Selection, and Behavior" in Anne Roe and George Gaylord Simpsons (eds.), *Behavior and Evolution* (New Haven, 1958), 390-416.

37. Ibid., 123.

> ground). The law of gravity and the second law of thermodynamics are among the natural laws which most frequently govern teleomatic processes.[38]

For my purposes, however, even teleonomic programs would count as instances of natural normativity insofar as the development of an organism at one time is incomplete but will be complete in future. As Waddington puts it, "the end state of the process is determined by its properties at the beginning."[39] Normative, in my sense, is not the antonym of "descriptive"; normative is the antonym of descriptive *at present*. "The egg is not a chicken" is true at present. But "chickens start their life as eggs" is also generically true. Hence "the egg is a chicken" is a kind of teleological judgment about what it may, under proper conditions, become. As Chris Toner says, "natural-historical judgments readily admit of combination into teleological judgments."[40]

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. Mayr quickly rebuts many of the common objections (I should rather say prejudices) against teleonomic processes. For instance, teleological statements and explanations, he says, do not "imply the endorsement of unverifiable theological or metaphysical doctrines in science."[41] Rather,

> 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 psy-

38. Ibid., 125.

39. Conrad Hal Waddington and others, "The Strategy of the Genes. a Discussion of Some Aspects of Theoretical Biology. with an Appendix by H. Kacser." *The Strategy of the Genes. A Discussion of Some Aspects of Theoretical Biology. With an Appendix by H. Kacser.*, 1957, ix+–x262.

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

41. Mayr, "The Idea of Teleology," 122.

> chology, sociology, economics, medical research, and neuroscience, rest on appeals to the function and/or malfunction of things or systems.[42]

Mayr's highly suggestive alternative to conscious purposes is natural "programs". A program is "coded or prearranged information" that regulates an organism's behavior or development up to a pre-defined end-point.[43] Mayr's examples include the development of bones, organs, and shapes that come with physiological maturity, migration. Programs are "the result of natural selection". However, they contain information: "not only blueprints of the goal but also the instructions of how to use the information of the blue print."[44] The concept of a program, he assures us, is similar to concepts deployed by geneticists and computer programmers. The point is that the telos is not some mysterious spirit hovering above the organism, beckoning it to reach its full potential but coded into the organism from the beginning.

Regardless of the details of Mayr's proposal for explaining teleonomic processes, the mere fact that natural processes occur is indisputable. And (to return to the main point) such behaviors are expressed in generic propositions.

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."[45] 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.*[46] Since an individual penguin may fail to be countershaded in the way that expresses its form, it

42. Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology," 1–4.
43. Mayr, "The Idea of Teleology," 127–8.
44. Ibid., 128.
45. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism," 222.
46. 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.

would be defective. This defect is not a judgment made by scientists and "imposed" as it were, from the outside, on the penguin. It is rather a normative fact about the penguin. As Hursthouse says, "Wolves hunt in packs; a 'free□rider' wolf that doesn't join in the hunt fails to act well and is thereby defective."[47]

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*.

There is one objection that is easy to forestall. Someone might point out that genetic drift results in species evolving every which way, including the emergence of adaptive, maladaptive, and adaptation-neutral traits. This is true, so far as it goes, but not really an objection. Two replies are, I think, sufficient. First, it is an inextricable part of the scientific process to reason out which traits are instances of natural goodness and which are not. Just because one hundred percent of organisms eventually die doesn't mean that death is naturally good for them. Just because a high statistical number of organisms have a particular feature – a stripe or a scale or whathave you – doesn't necessarily mean that the feature is a formal one of the species. Rather, one must keep an eye open to larger

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

samples, possible counterexamples, and one must keep one's generics tentative until they are very well grounded. Similarly, part of the scientific process is reasoning out which traits are *adaptive*. Even the way the objection is phrased assumpes that some traits are adaptive – that is adaptive *survival and reproduction.* Allowing even this minimal sense of normativity concedes my point that the normativity is discovered by the scientist rather than purely ascribed by him or her. A second response is that the generics under discussion are not about species-qua-fluid-across-millenia but about species-qua-fixed or apparently fixed within a given period. The fluidity of species over time, like a slow-motion film with thousands of frames, requires countless generations. For all we can observe of most species in the course of a human lifetime (say) or even since the birth of modern science in the 16th century, the species-at-present are fixed enough.

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.

IV. Three Paths Forward

I have made a case for normative realism that identifies some normative properties (such as formal and teleological properties of organisms) as respectable natural properties. I call this

normativity ‘organic normativity’ and the resulting naturalism ‘organic naturalism’. This label distinguishes my view from an “enchanted” view of nature wherein even rocks, chemicals, and stars instantiate normative properties.

While my case is disputable, the natural phenomena in question are indisputable: first, that organisms *very strongly appear* to exist in natural kinds (birds are not bacteria and crystals are not organisms at all); secondly that organisms exhibit “teleonomic” or *apparently teleological* phenomena such as striving to reproduce.

My point has been that realism about kinds and teleological phenomena is the simplest explanation of these phenomena. There are three paths forward. The first, and most plausible, path is that we can simply accept normative realism.

Reject

The second, and least plausible, path is that we could embrace full-scale normative anti-realism and deny the objective reality of any such norms in nature (and indeed, even in human beings). This path requires us to explain away not only natural kind, teleonomic phenomena in nature, but the apparently teleological actions of human beings.

For example, we would have to deny that animals, plants, insects, all living things (and even ecosystems) exhibit end-directed or teleonomic behavior: eyes see, hemlock trees offer shade to fish, stomachs digest, deer leap to avoid predators. This denial is almost incredible. 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.[ˆ25.] 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*.[48] To categorically reject *all truths* about natural kinds

48. Huneman, “Naturalising Purpose..

and natural functions, I contend, is untenable. And some generics are, it seems, necessarily normative propositions.

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."[49] One might suppose that Perlman's qualification "or at least in practice does not" leaves open space for the normative anti-realist. I welcome the critic who would try to show that biology *can* eliminate functions; what I have tried to suggest, and what Barham argues in great detail, is that the attempt has been made and has failed. A few failed attempts at reduction does not prove that reduction is impossible. But it does make the more plausible view, teleological realism, a better candidate for the default view.

Despite my inability to see the plausibility of global normative anti-realism, I must acknowledge that it has impressive defenders who deserve a fuller response than I can give here. Since anti-realism is not likely to appeal to the scientific naturalists in my intended audience, I must let these comments suffice.

Reduce

The third path, and the most plausible rival to realism, is to develop a reductionistic account of apparently natural norms. This path accepts the appearance of such things as natural kinds, natural teleology, natural functions, etc., but *reduces* these phenomena to less spooky (read: more mechanistic) phenomena consistent with a conception of bald nature. For this section, I ignore natural kinds and focus simply on teleological normativity. So we can call reductionism of such natural norms "teleological reductionism" or "teleoreduction",

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

following James Barham.[50] Arguing for or against teleoreductionism has become a cottage industry.[51]

I do not think that teleological reductionism is as plausibility as teleological realism; I do not think it is very plausible in its own right. Nevertheless, the arguments for teleoreductionism are sophisticated ones and some of its proponents hold out hope for even better arguments to come. More to the point, some of its proponents affirm reductionism because of operating background belief that, globally, reductive physicalism is a victorious view, despite ongoing local skirmishes. My objections to teleological reductionism amount to the accusation of a non-sequitor. But I do not think these objections are likely to overturn someone's background beliefs. Since I agree pretty well with Barham's analysis, I will summarize his view of the dialectic:

> If someone were comfortable with a purely physicalist worldview that had no place in it anywhere for teleology in any form, then nothing I will say here would do much to discomfort that individual. All I claim is that, if one is already convinced of the rationality of taking at face value at least some of the teleological concepts that we employ both in everyday life and in biological discourse, then one is not required to relinquish that conviction on the basis of the notion that molecular biology and the theory of natural selection, either severally or jointly, have already settled the matter by providing us with a successful means of eliminating such concepts from biology.[52]

This seems right to me. I am content to defend the claim that naturalistic teleological realism (and more broadly normative realism) is a live option even for the non-reductive scientific naturalist. Hence, the remainder of this chapter will examine some reasons for preferring realism to reductionism when considering normative realism in isolation, even if these reasons are not enough to overcome someone's background commitment to the contrary.

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50. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011 chapter 3. My discussion will closely follow this chapter; however, Barham's discussion is far too rich to be summarized.

51. Cf. Perlman, "The Modern Philosophical Resurrection of Teleology., section III; and Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011, chapter 3.

52. James Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology" (PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame; Web, 2011) 110.

First, what does would it mean to "reduce" teleology? Barham's definition of teleoreduction, which I find adequate to my purpose, is this:

> To reduce a putative teleological phenomenon is to give an account of the phenomenon that is both empirically and theoretically adequate and that neither employs any teleological concepts nor presupposes any other teleological phenomena.[53]

The two primary candidates for teleoreduction are causal-role reductions and natural selection reductions. Causal-role or causal-contribution explanations (endorsed by Donald Davidson, Robert Cummins and others) reduce teleological relations such as "in order to" and "for" and "to the end of" to bare cause-effect relations. For example, the function of the heart is defined in reference to its role in the oxygenation of a vertebrate's blood. Slightly differently, natural selection stories (endorsed by Ruth Millikan and others) provide a causal-history explanation of a present day teleonomic function. Similarly, purely mechanistic natural selection pressures may result in the construction of a genetic "program" or action that has some adaptive or useful otucome without consisting of teleological process.

Both of these reductionistic efforts are subject to worries that, to my mind, render them less plausible than simply accepting the appearances. While philosophers may be able to patch up these accounts or offer fresh reductionistic alternatives in the future, for now, it seems that we should side with the most overall plausible explanation of natural phenomena of teleological normativity.

Causal-Role Reduction

Barham summarizes the causal-role positions in the recent literature on teleological and natural functions:

53. Ibid., 109.

> The first position, stemming from a seminal article by Cummins (1975), views being a function fundamentally as making a causal contribution (in the efficient-causal sense) to the maintenance of a larger system of which the function in question is a component part.[54]

In that seminal article, Cummins attacks the assumptions that "(A) The point of functional characterization in science is to explain the presence of the item (organ, mechanism, process or whatever) that is functionally characterized" and "(B) For something to perform its function is for it to have certain effects on a containing system, which effects contribute to the performance of some activity of, or the maintenance of some condition in, that containing system."[55]Essentially, this path explains a natural function as a relation between parts and wholes.

The natural function is not reducible to just any relation, nor even to any *causal* relation, for there are many part-whole relations that are obviously not functions. For example, the heart is not just the heart pumping part of the human body; it may also be correctly described as the "thumping sound" part of the human body. Obviously, making thumping sounds is not the function of the heart (it is at best a side-effect of its performing its function). Yet "heartsounds" and circulation are both effects of the heart's beat. So the question is how one can determine *before identifying the function* exactly which part-whole relation is the functional one?

It does no good to assert that part A has a causal role witin organism B *after one has already presupposed an irreducibly functional analysis*. The teleoreductionist is obliged rather to show how one can distinguish teleological and non-teleological part-whole relations in absence of or prior to such presuppositions. The teleological realist also affirms that hearts, say, play a causal role in the vertebrate's body. The teleological realist's point is that the heart is a part of the body with an irreducibly functional part – it pumps *in order*

54. ibid., 111.

55. Robert Cummins, "Functional Analysis," *The Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 20 (1975): 741–65 741.

to circulate blood. It is *the blood pump* of the body. The teleological realist is free to identify the function of a particular body part, and then to characterize the part-whole relation in irreducibly functional terms; the teleological reductionist cannot do likewise. Relatedly, we should note that the notion of a "role" seems to be teleological. The proposition that 'the heart plays a role within the organism's circulatory system' seems, on the face, synonymous with the proposition that 'the heart *has a function* within the circulatory system.'

Natural Selection Reduction

One alternative (or perhaps supplement) to the causal-role answer is by appealing to the historical genesis of the organ in question.

One strategy is to show how natural selection itself is a teleonomic or quasi-teleological process that can produce organisms with functional properties. So, to put the picture simply: define survival and reproduction as the goal-state of organisms (however this came to be); then, distinguish effects that tend toward the organism's survival and reproduction from those that do not or those that are irrelevant to that end. Circulation contributes to survival and hence is a more plausible candidate for the heart's function than making heartsounds. Simply put, we can describe the present state of the heart (including its causal-role in bodies) by referring to its historical genesis: the heart evolved *because* it tended to the survival of certain kinds of organisms.

The question is whether natural selection is even the right kind of explanation for, say, the pumping of the heart. Natural selection is not really a *selection* at all in the sense that *no one* is doing the selecting. Instead, natural selection is a scientific description of the process by which present day populations were preserved while others died out. So much is clear in outline, but the details matter. Specifically, natural selection explains heritable traits that (i) varied in the past and which (ii) played a role in the reproductive rates of the

population.[56] It does not (and is not even supposed to) explain the bare existence of an initial organism or population of organisms. Rather, the initial organism or populatuion is taken for granted, along with its complete set of reproductive and other traits. Natural selection comes in to show how the organism varies, passes on heritable traits, and gives rise to new phenotypes. Thus Barham says:

> …the functionally coordinated organism must already exist before it can be selected. On this view, we assume that the functional coordination of the organism is *prima facie* evidence of teleological determination, and since that functional coordination is presupposed by the theory of natural selection, the theory is in no position to reduce the apparent teleology in biology to mechanism.[57]

The worry is that the process natural selection is not the *right kind* of explanation to serve as a candidate for the reduction of apparently teleological activity within individual organisms.

When we are wondering how or why it is that the heart seems to have a definite function (to circulate blood) that is discernable from other side-effects (to make heartsounds), the question is about organismic behavior in general. Chemicals and compounds do not grow and develop and perform characteristic activities in the structured way that organisms do. My answer is that such normativity is a fundamental natural feature of organic life, a kind of brute natural law discovered a posteriori by the scientific method. The natural selection reductionist's answer that the the teleonomic function of hearts emerged out of a long history of phenotypic variation. My question is: so what? Mechanistic forces that are taking place between a population and its environment (droughts, famines) or within

56. Thus Godfrey-Smith's summary: Evolution by natural selection is change in a population due to: (i) variation in the characteristics of members of the population, (ii) which causes different rates of reproduction, and (iii) which is inherited. (Peter Godfrey-Smith, "Conditions for Evolution by Natural Selection," *The Journal of Philosophy* 104, no. 10 (2007): 489–516 515). This is only one of Godfrey-Smith's two descriptions: the more general description excludes particular real organisms in exchange for a useful degree of generality.

57. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011 125.

a population's genetics (genetic drift, normal reproduction) are compatible with a parallel teleological forces. Indeed, Barham suggests that the burgeoning field of evolutionary developmental biology might be able to supply some of the connections between these two kinds of process. He calls "phenotypic accommodation" the distinct process of "inherent compensatory or adaptive capacity of organisms" – or simply homeostasis.[58] The scientific hypothesis some are investigating[59] seems to be that these two processes are separately necessary but only jointly sufficient causes to explain the presence of a trait (like pumping hearts) in a population.

Another proponent of natural selection reduction strategies is Ruth Millikan.[60] This strategy:

> takes a present trait's being a function to be equivalent to its having been naturally selected due to the fitness advantage conferred on an organism by the physical effects of the ancestral trait of the same type from which the present trait-token is descended.[61]

The idea here is that ancestral organisms had such-and-such phenotypes which, after many generations of reproduction, conferred hearts upon present-day vertebrates. A consequence of Millikan's view is that an organism's "proper function" simply cannot be read off its present capacities; we can't just observe that hearts *seem to be for circulating blood* and infer from this observation that they are, indeed, for circulating blood. Rather, the proper function of a (present-day) heart can only be identified by its empirical history.

Two implausible corollaries are that if we discovered two heart-like organisms (suppose one is extraterrestrial) with distinct evolutionary parentages, then they would have to be classified as having different functions despite both circulating blood. More hypotheti-

58. ibid., 131.

59. James A Shapiro, "Revisiting the Central Dogma in the 21st Century," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1178, no. 1 (2009): 6–28.

60. Ruth Garrett Millikan, "In Defense of Proper Functions," *Philosophy of Science*, 1989, 288–302.

61. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011 9.

cally, "Swampman" arguments press a similar point. Suppose an exact material replica of Donald Davidson spontaneously emerged from a swamp; on Millikan's theory, even though the Swampman is equipped with a heart and lungs and legs and eyelids, none of these has *any* "proper function". Millikan bites the bullet on both of these implausible corollaries.

The point of these examples is not to challenge the details of empirical origin stories but to separate the *concept* of having a (present day) functional capacity from the *concept* of having an empirical, evolutionary history. These concepts come apart in several ways: Useless vestigial organs have an empirical history but no present day functional capacity; spandrals have a present-day functional capacity with no direct, primary selection history; the language capacities in say, the right hemisphere of the brain brain *can* be taken over by the left hemisphere in the case of injury or lobotomy, presumably because the brain is (present-day) adaptible and not because the brain function redudancy was selected for in every individual case. These counterexamples demonstrate *at least* function and history conceptually can come apart.

What is the alternative? In Barham's view, functions are "essentially modal, not historical, concepts"[62]. He quotes Fodor's vivid statement that: "my heart's function has less to do with its evolutionary origins than with the current truth of such counterfactuals as that if it were to stop pumping my blood, I'd be dead."[63] If we made contact with extraterrestrials whose blood-like liquid was circulated by a pump-like organ, how could we discern whether it was a heart? We could query about the historical genesis of the organ on that planet, but we would first rightly query: *what would happen if that organ stopped pumping?* If the Alpha Centaurians, too, would die without the beating of that organ, we would justifiably call the organ a 'heart' even though it had a very different history.

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62. Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011 139.

63. Jerry A Fodor, *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology* (MIT press, 2001) 86-7; cited in Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology," 2011 138.

Barham cautions against, "imagining that 'selection history' could confer normative value on a biological function in the same way that pedigree confers value on a horse, or provenance on a painting."[64] "History" is not a special power but is simply the set of physical interactions over time. The question about which set of physical interactions over time that produced X might be (and I think is) intimately related to questions about the function of X; the point is that they are two different questions. 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."[65] This seems right to me. It does not matter for present purposes *how* the function came to be, just whether or not it really *is* at present.] Barham is right to point 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 an adequate knowledge of physiology.

I can only conlude from this brief discussion that these reductionistic strategies are not very promising. 'Not very promising' is a far cry from 'hopeless'. There may one day be a successful reduction of teleonomic phenomena "that is both empirically and theoretically adequate and that neither employs any teleological concepts nor presupposes any other teleological phenomena." But today is not that day. The scientific perspective of empirical biology conforms most closely to the commonsense perspective that hearts are for pumping blood.

Coming to terms with teleology

The three paths I mentioned above are to accept, reduce, or reject natural normativity. I cited reasons to think rejecting and reducing are not promising paths. In closing, I would

64. ibid., 140.

65. 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.)

like to offer some reassurance to those who might be anxious about the prospect of accepting normative realism whole clothe. My reassurance boils down to the belief that appeal to natural normativity is a live *scientific* belief. While natural teleological realism is still controversial, it is not a controversy between science and philosophy but a controversy *within science*.

Thomas Nagel took a lot of heat for his recent philosophical defense of scientific, Darwinian, natural teleology.[66] However, Michael Chorost does not accuse Nagel of obscurantism but chastises him for *failing to cite the science*. 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."…[67]

Teleological realism in biology fell into disfavor with Francis Bacon's superstitious belief that the search for final causes corrupted science.[68] The proper reply to Bacon is that the teleological nihilism hypothesis has been tried and found wanting.

Modern science is no less teleological than it was in the 16th century; perhaps even more so. Arnhart persuasively argues that teleology is irreplacably assumed in medicine.[69] Zammito clarifies its ongoing relevance in biology, since organisms seem to be intrinsi-

66. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.

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

68. 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."

69. Arnhart, "Aristotle's Biopolitics."

cally purposeful.[70] Fitzpatrick says that, "While neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory does soundly reject any appeal to teleology in the process of evolution itself, there is a large literature in contemporary philosophy of biology defending the legitimacy of employing teleological concepts in connection with adaptations."[71] Darwin himself might have been a teleologist.[72] Whether Darwin's theory of natural selection *undermines* and debunks or *underwrites* and justifies the teleological view at least debatable.

V. Conclusion

While I conceded that the **Is-Ought Gap** could not be overcome, I suggested that it could be undercut. The goal of this chapter has been to meet the **Bald Nature Challenge** by proposing examples of scientifically respectable natural norms. The conclusion we have drawn is that indeed *some* facts – especially facts about living things – are both natural and (it is rationally defensible) irreducibly normative.

The natural formal and functional facts about organic beings and their parts and operations 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.

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

72. James G Lennox, "Darwin Was a Teleologist," *Biology and Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1993): 409–21; James G Lennox, "Teleology," *Keywords in Evolutionary Biology*, 1992, 324–33.

J. L. Mackie exploits the apparent silliness of the notion that "to-be-pursuedness" is built into things. We should not confuse ourselves with loaded rhetoric. We should not think of natural norms in explicitly contradictory or paradoxical terms. Instead, we should think of other perfectly ordinary natural relations such as causation. A natural norm is not a one-place predicate things but a relation between things. For example, one type of natural norm might be a relation between a living thing and another object, such as food, shade, or a predator. Given the kind of thing snakes are, and the kind of thing mice are, a mouse is to be eaten by the snake and the snake is to be fled by the mouse.

Of course, I have not yet tried to show *which* true generics about humans can serve as the basis for ethical theory. All I have tried to show is that *some* of these generics are true. By denying the consequent, we are not necessarily affirming the antecedent. That affirmation requires another step, namely, to apply the above argument to human beings.

Chapter 3

Practical Primates

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

I. Introduction

The last chapter defended the very possibility of an ethical naturalism, this chapter must go further and defend its plausibility. In order to show how moral norms are instances of natural norms, we had to defend the notion of natural normativity in general. This chapter extends the discussion of natural normativity to include "human norms".

I shall argue that certain generic propositions about human beings are both scientifically true *and* normatively or ethically significant. We must first uncover, if possible, a set of scientific generics about humanity. What is a human being? What kinds of activities does "the human" being do? What kind of life does it live? If we can uncover answers to such questions, in the form of Aristotelian Categoricals or generics, then they will give us initial insight into the concept and content of virtue, excellence, wisdom, and flourishing, which are our main themes.

Section 2 of this chapter develops the intuitive observation that human beings are natural organisms. That is, we are *animals* enjoying the properties common to the entire tree of life but also enjoying other, more peculiar, properties relating to our speaking, innovating, deliberating, and so on. Generics about human beings give us a conception of human nature that is seamlessly both normative and descriptive? If so, then 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 concepts that will be developed in the next chapter, such as human virtue, excellence, wisdom, and flourishing.

Section 3 focuses in more detail on the cluster of concepts implied in the notion of practical reasoning. It argues that a human being is a practical rational primate. This conception of human nature that is seamlessly both normative and descriptive. Human beings find themselves in a nexus of normativity that is both "natural" (i.e., automatic, default, not created by us) and normative (i.e., binding, non-optional). It argues that observing human behaviors both from "within" and "without" the human point of view allows us to see what is unique about human beings, their capacities, and ends. If, even with these differences, humans fit the larger pattern of natural normativity defended in chapter 2. By comparison to the human life form, evaluations of individual human beings is possible.

Section 4 addresses a few objections. I attempt to sympathetically articulate and provide a response to a series of worries philosophers have about the neo-Aristotelian project of grounding ethical evalutions in some normatively loaded conception of human nature. For example, some think that there are no such things as the sort of "natures" as I have described; others think that there are natures but that there is no human nature; others think that human nature comes with no built in teleological boundaries; others think that human nature comes with a few built in teleological boundaries are the ends of reproduction and survival. Each of these receives an initial rebuttal, though a few of them will require further

comment in a later chapter.

Section 5 begins to apply the foregoing account of human nature and natural human norms to ethics. Specifically, I shall argue that as practical, rational animals, a a basic human norm is that one *is to become a fully mature human being*. Practical primates have prima facie normative obligation to be what they are (to respect the conditions and criteria of their life form) and a prima facie obligation to become fully mature practical primates.

II. Animals of a Peculiar Sort

The previous chapter drew substantially from Philippa Foot to argue that *any* animal exists within a nexus of natural normativity. Since humans are animals, it would seem to follow that humans are subject to natural norms. Foot is well aware that the derivation of normativity from brute nature is likely to seem absurd, especially when it comes to human beings. She says:

> 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.[1]

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

1. Foot, *Natural Goodness* 38.

Are human beings natural organisms? On its face, calling human beings organisms or animals or primates appears to be an innocent truism. *Of course* humans share properties in common with every other organism: they enjoy a particular evolutionary history; they move about the earth engaging in activities such as reproducing, sleeping, feeding, dying, and so on. But some of objected to the suggestion that human beings are *mere* animals. We are different from other animals, and the significance of this difference is a matter of some controversy. Certainly, humans exhibit a range of actions such as language and complex social systems that other animals do not. As Hursthouse summarizes:

> 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.[2]

In light of the difference of being rational, the task in discovering true generics about human beings is capturing what is common, and what is unique, about humans.

My view is that human beings are animals of a peculiar sort where the peculiarities do not erase the commonalities. The traditional formula that humans are "rational animals" is close to correct. As such, both the *animal* part of that formula is essential and the *rational* part. To see why, let's first consider in a bit more detail what it means to be an animal, and why it matters. Then we will look at what it means to be the peculiar sort of animal we are.

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.[3] That story begins 3.5 billion years ago with the first living organisms, and our own part begins about 200,000 years ago with the emergence of anatomically modern humans. In contemporary classificatory scheme, we can locate hu-

2. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* 217.
3. 30

mans within the phylum chordata, the class mammalia, the order of primates, the suborder haplorhini, the familiy hominidae, the genus homo, the species homo sapiens.

Does this matter ethically? I think it can be demonstrated that the common history of living organisms (including humans) is not ethically irrelevant. At the very least, the bundle of properties intrinsic to our animality serves as a condition of our ethical life. At the most, our animality is (sometimes) a *criterion* of our ethical life.

One example that will suffice to illustrate the point is mortality. As a matter of plain scientific fact, we are finite and mortal like every other living organism or species. All life on earth undergoes a process from a humble beginnings in a single cell through infancy, maturation, and adulthood, at which point it may reproduce itself before dying. All of these phases we notice in human animals as well. The human life cycle is characterized by various phases, including growth, language acquisition, puberty, physical maturity and characteristic activities, aging, and death.

Now, all that is good in life depends on the prior state of being alive at all. Although death is "normal" at the end of the life cycle, it is a very basic normative fact that being alive is a good. This is a plausible candidate to explain, in part, what is so morally horrendous about murder. Where theft robs one of this or that particular good, murder robs one of life which is the condition of all other goods. In this way, mortality is a condition of ethical life; prima facie, one ought not behave in such a way as to make others die (or to put others at risk of dying) before their life cycle is complete.

My point is not that the status of mortality is uncontroversial. Whether mortality is condition or criterion of ethical life is a live controversy in bioethics: should we attempt (if possible) to overcome mortality?[4] Would doing so be a morally innocent intervention like body-building or a morally loaded intervention like genetically modifying embryos?

4. Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (2005): 3–14; Nick Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," *Bioethics* 19, no. 3 (2005): 202–14.

My point is that being mortal creatures whose very life is a fragile homeostasis is *at least* a condition that must be taken into account when living life or constructign an ethical theory.

What other conditions of animality are possible criteria of ethics? The whole range facts that characterize a human being and a human pattern of life. When I say "pattern of life" I do not just mean the crudely biological features of life; I mean the whole range of biological and neurophysiological facts by which a human being undergoes the process of living from birth to death.

We cannot, except via abstraction, describe the human species adequately without describing biology, ethology, psychology, and sociology. For example, it might seem a purely descriptive biological trivium that humans have 23 chromosomes in each somatic cell. But genetic defects in a person have enormous effects on that person's quality of life and on the community in which he or she lives. Apparently innocent "descriptions" of human animals are inseparable from ethological and anthropological descriptions, which which are both descriptive *and* normative.

Furthermore, a scientific account of humanity cannot leave out that humans have large brains relative to other primates, with a neocortex and prefrontal cortex that correlate with abstract thinking, problem solving, society, and culture. A scientific account cannot leave out that humans don't just suffer physiological responses like fear and excitement or arousal, they wilfully seek out such emotions for themselves through art and entertainment and wilfully cause them in others. Presumably, even an alien anthropologist who knew nothing of human language or "what it is like to be a human" would be able to notice, upon examination, that a human's laugh or cry is different from a hyena's laugh or a crocodile's tears.

Part of the alien anthropologist's examination would be to examine the body, brain, and hands of human beings. One of the first things we can imagine they would notice is that humans live in cultures and societies. They are not merely "social animals" like

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

Even before introducing the "human" point of view, we can describe "the human" form of life in some detail. My hope is that these generics are plausibly knowable from an "objective" or third-person point of view of scientific exploration, data gathering, inductive generalization. They seem to have at least *potential* ethical significance; even so, the most ethically significant fact about us is the peculiar differentiam of our species: practical rationality.

Peculiarities

This section attempts to explain what it means to ascribe 'practical rationality' of an organism.[5] Practical reason occupies a place of importance in the theories of many virtue ethicists. For example, Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre have each treated the theme.[6] In a later chapter, I shall say explore the neo-Aristotelian accounts of practical reasoning in

5. I shall use 'practical rationality' and 'practical reason' as synonymous. Warren Quinn uses 'practical reason' to mean the faculty and 'practical rationality' to mean the excellence use of the faculty. In a later chapter, I will contrast the faculty with 'practical wisdom', which is the excellence thereof. Cf. Warren Quinn, "Rationality and the Human Good," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 02 (1992): 81–95.

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

some detail. For now, I shall only offer an initial exploration. Jay Wallace gives an adequate general definition of practical reason: "Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do."[7]

When we take a wide view and observe human behavior in context of other animal behavior, observing ourselves both "from inside" and "from outside" the human perspective, we notice a range of properties not shared by other mammals: grammar and language, fire-making, cooking, sexual union for pleasure, abstract reasoning, science, philosophy, religion, mythology, agriculture. Is there any way to collect these idiosyncracies into one or a few generic categories? All of them depend, in one way or another, on activities we call "rational".

Predicating rationality is not just based, as Russell flippantly suggests, on the fact that "some people can do sums"[8] Rather, we predicate rationality on the basis of observing a range of activities such as: to observe, reflect, and perceive; 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. Abstracting to what all these disparate activities have in common gives us a sense of what practical reasoning can do.

Practical reasoning is the process of self-determining, of taking our actions "into our own hands" so to speak. Some of the above rational activities are intrinsically aimed at action, while others are not. But even the reflective activities (like reflection) can be and are put to use in practice. Hence, on my view, practical reason is constituted by at least four capacities that in turn constitute human nature: the capacity to speak, to live in society, to engage in rational practices, and to create or innovate. Let's consider each of these four

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

8. Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1903-1959* (Psychology Press, 1992), 73.

properties in turn.

First, take speech. Aristotle observed that, "Man alone of the animals possesses speech."[9] Nothing in modern science has superseded or contradicted the observation (obvious to anyone) that human speech is different from other animal noises. Other animals have speech and communication. The difference between non-human and human speech is not obvious to infant humans, who learn words by imitation just as well as they learn tweets, barks, and growls. Upon reflection, researchers have observed that animals communicate with non-grammatical closed systems with a small, finite set of symbols. Communication systems used by other animals such as bees or apes are closed systems that consist of a finite, usually very limited, number of possible ideas that can be expressed. In contrast, human language is open-ended and productive, meaning that it allows humans to produce a vast range of utterances from a finite set of elements, and to create new words and sentences. Our language is unique: it is grammatical, open-ended, recursive, and productive. We are animals who use signs and symbols to communicate self-reflective and abstract thought.[10]

Speech is inseparable from self-reflectivity and sociality. Through our animal senses comes a sensitivity to our surroundings, the ability to see the world, ourselves, the sun and stars, to hear our fellow creatures, and to take the whole cosmos into consciousness. But through speech comes a whole second cosmos of culture. Through speech comes intentionality in all its forms. Through speech comes communication ("pass the salt"), distinct languages and cultures (about 5,000 distinct languages), self-consciousness ("who am I?"), abstraction ("all grass is green"), science, philosophy, religion, mythology, technology and more. Perhaps even art and music arise from the rational capacity to direct our actions to create not only what instinct demands but whatever the imagination can invent.[11]

9. *Politics*, 1.1253a. Obviously, Aristotle and the the translator use 'man' in the gender inclusive sense.

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

11. Gordon H. Orians, "Nature & Human Nature," *Daedalus* 137, no. 2 (2008): 39–

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

The third feature of practical reason is the ability to engage in rational practices. All organisms initiate *action* in the most general sense that they move about and do things. And all higher mammals engage in complex (and often social) practices, such as communal hunting, grooming, and building. Humans exhibit unique behaviors: We do not act merely, but act *on reasons*. We are the only creatures that set goals, on purpose, far in advance of their fulfilment. We are the only creatures who undertake long, complicated sets of actions in order to achieve those goals. 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."[12] Goal-setting and recognizing practical reasons are inextricably tied. Practical reasons include our assessments of what is worthwhile. We also reflect on past actions and evalute them to decide whether it is advisable to do the same thing again or try something else. Practical reasoning includes not just deliberating about what to do but weighing the apparent reasons for and against a particular course of action. Hence, as I shall explain more later, it is under the category of 'rational practice' that I will include everything unique about humans having to do with

48. Orians says that "Americans spend more money on music than on sex or prescription drugs."

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

morality.

The fourth feature is rational creation or innovation. 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 to tell stories or write philosophy papers. 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.

The human differentiam of 'practical rationality' entails not only abstract reasoning but speech, sociality, rational practice, and creation. Such norms are not *only* accessible to us, but would be accessible to an "alien anthropologist" observing humanity from the "outside". 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.

III. Objections

The point of these reflections has been to bear out the truth of the following generic: *human beings are practical, rational primates.* This generic picks out our life form, our nature.

I must now clear up a few possible misunderstandings and address a few objections. The first misunderstanding that we should avoid is a misunderstanding about the concept of a nature. Chris Toner's epigraph states that *human nature is normative.* I don't instist on the term 'nature', as some object on aesthetic grounds; we could equally say that genetically modern homo sapiens sapiens are potentially a practical, rational primates. The important thing is not the term 'nature' or 'human nature' but the concept of a nature. What do I mean

by a nature or life form?

In the old classificatory schemes, philosophers provided a genus and a differentiam to pick out the unique "nature" of any life form or natural kind. Not every kind-concept corresponds to a real nature: *the set of medium sized objects immediately to my left* is not a natural kind, nor is *All human beings born in Ireland.* The kind-concepts under review are not just any generalizations but scientific and biological kinds that arise from inquiry and on which inquiry depends. We start out knowing nothing about an organism (say, some species of beatle) and come to discover not only that they exist but a whole set of properties: their genetic traits, their evolutionary history, their natural habitats, diet, predators, lifespans, and so on. In this way, a nature is a species, or a homeostatic set of properties, or a natural kind.

When such a kind-concept corresponds to a real natural kind or "nature", that nature is potentially discernible both by contrasting it with other kinds of things and by comparing it with instances of the same kind. 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. 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."[13]

As Fink points out, the concept of a nature gathers and divides. It gathers up all the members or putative members of a kind and divides the kind from other kinds. With this definition in view, we can see what the point of the old formula was, that man was a rational animal, or a featherless biped. There are many animals, but few (if any) other rational ones. There

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

may even be other rational creatures who are not animals (artificial intelligences, gods, intelligent Alpha Centurions, or what have you), but so far as we know, we are the only rational animals in the cosmos.

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

A second misunderstanding has to do with the predication of 'rationality.' Some unwittingly interpret "rationality" to mean only speculative reasoning, that is, abstract, formal thinking such as mathematical or logical thinking. This kind of abstract thinking Aristotle would call *theoria* or contemplative science. I do not think the best way to understand the old formula of "rational animals" is to take "rational" to mean "abstract thought" because a nature should capture *all* non-dysfunctional members of a species and only a relatively small minority of humans engage in that kind of abstract reflection that characterizes science, theology, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, and so on. Practical reasoning is a better candidate because all normal, functioning adult humans, regardless of cultures, intelligence quotients, or walk of life, engage in practical reasoning and deliberation. I want to make it indelibly clear that I am not supposing human nature to be rationality per se but practical rationality. It is not merely *thought* but *thoughtful action* that I would like to emphasize. (That practical reasoning is indeed a form of reasoning, and the difference, if any, between theoretical and speculative reasononing, is a theme of chapter 5.) That said, the capacity for abstract or "theoretical reason" is certainly an important feature of human nature and stands out from the capacities of other organisms. While other members of the animal kingdom

"think" in one sense of that term, as far as we know, no other animal constructs theories about, say, the cognitive capacities of the animal kingdom. My only point is to challenge the unwitting interpretation of "rationality" to mean abstract reasoning to the exclusion of any other capacity.

A third possible misunderstanding has to do with exceptions to the truth that human beings are practical rational primates. Certainly, not every human being is 'rational'. Bertrand Russell quipped that "Man is a rational animal — so at least I have been told. Throughout a long life I have been looked diligently for evidence in favour of this statement, but so far I have not had the good fortune to come across it."[14] The joke is funny because it turns an ambiguitiy in the predication of 'rationality'. If by 'rational' we mean a person is able to think reliably well and clearly without intervening bias and the commission of numerous fallacies, then the posession of rationality is rare indeed – not only would such a standard exclude children, the uneducated, the foolish, it would exclude many philosophers. If, however, by 'rational' we simply mean the *potential* to become successfully rational, then every normal human has it.

A second misunderstanding, more dangerous than the first, is to think that someone who cannot successfully think rationally is not even human. What about anacephalic babies, the genetically defective, the comatose, the mentally ill? Are they not really human? An uncharitable critic might accuse me of insinuating so. I deny the charge. In fact, it is a strength of my argument that I can make sense 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. Anacephalic babies will never exemplify their natural potential for practical reasoning, for they lack the subvenient brain structure necessary for rational consciousness. They are recognizably *human* (they are not opossums), just defectively so. Similarly, we may call humans "bipedal" by

14. Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1903-1959*, 72.

nature but recognize that a war veteran is still human even after he or she is no longer bipedal.

In describing what gives human beings special dignity, Robert George articulates a similar point:

> 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.[15]

The point is that even though injury, illness, genetic defect, radiation poisoning, coma, mental illness, and any number of other negatives may render a human being sub-rational or unable to direct his or her own life, it is still a member of the species.

A final possible misunderstanding needs a response here. There is no use criticizing my discerning between defective and "exemplary" or "normal" or "mature" instances of human beings. The same discernment process is part-and-parcel of the scientific method. Scientists do not judge the characteristics of a newly discovered species by examining its young. Similarly, if an alien anthropologist were to study 12-year-old humans, they would come to all sorts of conclusions about humanity in general. Their conclusions would be as weak as their sample. Alien anthropologists would need to look at mature human beings of both sexes, healthy and in the "prime" of life. Below a certain age range, humans tend to (but do not always) lack the brain development to fully represent characteristic behaviors; beyond a certain age range, and humans tend to (but do not always) suffer degenerations

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

of the joints, memory, health, and so on. A similar point can be made with regard to injury and illness.

I conclude that the ascription of practical reason to human beings is indeed true generically of the human life form, species, or nature. The rarity of successful realization of a capacity for practical reasoning does not tell against the truth of the generic, and neither does the existence of persons who may never actualize the capacity. Such exceptions rather support the thesis, for how else could we judge that a *genetic defect* except by reference to the genetic norm?

No Organic Natures

There are a few other objections a reader might have at this juncture. The first objection is simply that we cannot identify "human nature" with any scientific accuracy because there is no human nature. This objection has three iterations.

The first sort of critic might deny that there is any such thing as a human life form because there are no life forms at all. This is an objection to the very concept of a nature. Perhaps, instead of real life forms and natural kinds, we should be nominalist about divisions between various branches of the tree of life.

One iteration of this criticism is an alleged tension between the flexibility of species (as represented in evolutionary biology) and a fixed notion of human nature. In a seminal paper on natural teleology, Ernst Mayr says:

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

Arthur Ward is a recent critic who agrees with Mayr on this point. Ward argues that "natu-

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

ralists 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."[17] I have already pointed out that rejecting all organic natures and purposes is not necessarily the only rational, scientific option; indeed, such a rejection seems to me to be motivated by philosophical materialism far more than it is motivated by any respect for actual biological science.

Nevertheless, I cannot insist that accepting organic natures and purposes is the *only* rational, scientific option. Rather, to the idea that there are no natural kinds, I can only give a general and unsatisfactory response. This dissertation cannot chase down the (justifiably important) dispute about the status of 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.

No Natural Teleology

A second sort of critic accepts natural kinds but denies that these kinds have teleological features. For example, Bernard Williams: "The first and hardest lesson of Darwinism, that there is no such teleology at all, and that there is no orchestral score provided from anywhere according to which human beings have a special part to play, still has to find its way into ethical thought."[18]

He says elsewhere:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strictly speaking, evolutionary theory is a set of theses explaining the current multiplicity and shape of terrestrial life. It says absolutely nothing about teleological causes or properties.[20] There is room, in other words, within evolutionary theory for discussions about the evidence for or against non-mechanical teleological causation. Thomas Nagel is one who recently presented such a naturalistic theory of Darwinian natural selection combined with teleological causation.[21] 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

20. The biological claims include the following: The earth, which is very old, has given rise to simple life forms which have become over slow and gradual changes given rise to myriad life forms, some of which are very complex. The driving mechanism of this process is natural selecting acting on the genetic mutations of a given population. All of life originated from one original place and species. A philosophical claim, often appended to the biological ones, is that the process of natural selection is *unguided by any causes but material-efficient 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.

21. Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*. Briefly, he suggests that while physical laws work impersonally on entities at a given time, teleological laws might work impersonally on the same entities over time.

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. Rosalind Hursthouse correctly points out that Williams' worry is not actually rooted in the progress of modern science. Williams himself admits that "many of course have come to that conclusion before… that human beings are to some degree a mess… for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially."[22] If many have come to that (philosophical) conclusion before, without the benefit of modern science, why cite modern science as evidence for the philosophical conclusion? Hursthouse points out that we should interpret Williams' worry as an expression of moral nihilism and despair. It may be a rational despair, but the rationality or irrationality cannot simply be read off the biological facts. It is a non sequitur to amass scientific evidence for p and then to assert that q.

Williams believes that human nature is a complete mess because he believes no form of life is satisfactory. We might reverse the point and suggest that some human beings have exemplary lives and so human nature is not a complete mess. I do not wish to deny that human society is a repository of what Bertrand Russell calls "curelty, persecution, and supersition."[23] I do not wish to deny that all human beings eventually die. I only wish to point out that part of my task is to distinguish between general tendencies from genuine normative facts. My thesis in this section is that there are some genuine normative facts, some universal characteristics of human nature that can be hypothesized and confirmed. Below I shall make the case that specific ethical conclusions can be derived from natural

22. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 261, quoting from Williams.
23. Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1903-1959*, 72.

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.

Only Biological Nature

A third iteration of the "no human nature" objection is that if there is such thing as "human nature", it is nothing more or less than our biological and physiological makeup. Tim Lewens argues that "the only biologically respectable notion of human nature that remains is an extremely permissive one that names the reliable dispositions of the human species as a whole. This conception offers no ethical guidance…"[24]

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*.[25]

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

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

Williams objects that norms bestowed by the process of evolution would be those that lead us

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

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

to survive and reproduce. Along similar lines, Fitzpatrick articulates a worry that evolution has bestowed upon is a very specific, ordered power but it is not the power to flourish but the power to reproduce. He says:

> If, however, natural functions and ends in living things are structured by special relations established through the process of evolution through natural selection, i.e., non-incidental relations between traits and a special subset of their effects that figured into the selection process, then natural teleology will not ultimately or generally be about the welfare or flourishing of organisms.[26]

On Fitzpatrick's worry, the fact that there might exist natural human norms to reproduce is irrelevant to whether or not wilfully conforming to such norms would contribute to our welfare.

A third proponent of this worry is Stephen R. Brown. Brown's defense of virtue ethics is ambivalent. He seems to *wish* he could make the account genuinely normative but concedes that it is, in the end, merely descriptive discipline.[27] 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.[28] Brown thinks that human beings do have a characteristic form of life involving highly rarefied neurological and cognitive processes we do not observe in other animals; but, nevertheless, he thinks that biology reveals that species are the only natural kind, and species aim to survive and reproduce.

This objection is certainly relevant. Despite the varying details, what Lewens, Fitzpatrick, and Brown agree upon is that if such a thing as human nature or the human life form exists, and if such a thing as a natural teleological norm for humanity exists, then it is the norm to reproduce and propagate one's genotype.

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26. FitzPatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology." Cf. William Joseph FitzPatrick, *Teleology and the Norms of Nature* (Taylor & Francis, 2000).

27. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*.

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

My response is that human norms arise from our nature as practical, rational primates not just from our nature as primates. All three objectors commit a subtle fallacy by presuming that the norms that apply to all organisms apply to humans *and nothing else*. I can agree that, prima facie, human beings as a species are endowed by evolution with a natural norm binding them to reproduce. But I deny that *that is all*. The only way they can sneak in the view that *that is all* is by begging the question. My view, by contrast, is based on empirical observations.

I have been at pains to articulate the way in which we are animals – but animals of a peculiar sort: That is, practical, rational primates. If this generic about our life form is correct, it suggests a teleological combination like the ones expressed in chapter 2: an embryonic mammal *is to become* a fully grown mammal. A practical primate *is to become* a fully mature practical primate. In other words, one of the "norms" of practical rationality, we can venture, is that we *ought to be successfully practically rational*.

I began section 2 above with the innocuous question: "Are human beings natural organisms?" One sort of reader believes that human beings are *merely* natural; under the guise of merely asserting an innocent truism, this reader would insist that humans are machines made of meat, or "heaps of glorified clockwork"[29] in the same sense that all of Laplacian nature is a heap of glorified clockwork and all its myriad variegated objects are just parts of the heap. This first sort of reader can acknowledge that the human brain exhibits rarefied neurocognitive processes we do not observe anywhere else but would deny that human beings are different in kind.

A second sort of reader believes that humans are natural organisms and something more; under the guise of asserting an innocent truism, this reader would insist that human beings are organisms of an altogether different kind. A religious philosopher might argue

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

that human beings are endowed with the *Imago Dei* that makes us exceptional. But even non-religious philosophers might argue that human rational activities and pursuits represent a qualitative break in the animal kingdom. This sort of reader can acknowledge that the human body is a material organism like many others but would insist that the mind is something of a different order.

Rather than pick sides on this issue, I recommend a health agnosticism. If human beings were *merely* animals, and subject to *merely animal* natural norms, how would we know that? We would have to exercise our practical rationality (the same practical rationality that distinguishes us from the other animals). If we were animals of a peculiar sort, how would we know *that*? We could only justify such an assertion by appealing to observations of our peculiar behaviors. And that appeal is just what I have been making: humans are the only ones who speak, who associate in such complex societies, who plan their actions like this, and who innovate and create. Those observations are enough to render it plain, I think, that our natural telos is not likely to be restricted to only the animal nature we share with the rest of the living world.

If this is correct, then the insights of Lewens and Brown and Williams can be accommodated. For example, reproduction is certainly *one* of our natural ends. "Human beings reproduce" is an instance of a broader natural generic truth we can articulate by saying: "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 themselves reproduce. Nevertheless it may be true that humans reproduce (like every other organism). It seems to me that if, *as a species*, we ceased to reproduce, something would have gone wrong.[30] That any particula individual

30. 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

does not reproduce is not an automatic sign of defect.

Knowing from Inside

There is one further objection that requires full treatment in a later chapter. I will mention it here. The objection that human nature is *merely* animal and hence the human telos is *merely* survival and propogation of the genotype was supposed to tell against the organic teleology I have been defending. My response is that, in practical rational creatures like us, our biological norms are joined with other norms. In one sense, these objectors agree. They would concede that it is "obvious" that reproduction is not our only norm. But they think this fact is only "obvious" from within the practical point of view – the point of view from within human subjectivity. And once we have introduced the practical point of view, we have left biological naturalism behind. This is sometimes called "the Irrelevance Objection". I return to the Irrelevance Objection in chapter 6.

Our Nature is Unknown

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

This objection is in some sense true but misses the point. That humans are practical rational primates is not supposed to provide complete, comprehensive knowledge of our species. It is a minimal starting point of knowledge upon which to build. Knowing that snakes are legless reptiles is not an end to the scientific inquiry, but a beginning. Indeed, one cannot know about snakes unless one knows, roughly, what snakes are. So capturing the genus and differentiam of a kind of organism is in fact necessary for creating a conceptual

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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.

placeholder *on which to attach new knowledge*. Knowing what human beings are, however roughly, gives us a concept-category within which to fill in the depth and breadth of facts and information.

The main thesis of this chapter has been that the following generic is true: "human beings are practical, rational primates." This generic, I have argued, is defensible both philosophically and scientifically. It is discoverable both by humans examining our species from "within" the human point of view and by alien anthropologists examining our species from "outside" the human point of view (so long as they too were intelligent and rational). This generic picks out a property or set of properties we might describe as 'human nature.' If this is anywhere near to correct, then human nature is not a complete mystery. We know *enough* about it to build a neo-Aristotelian theory of ethics grounded in evaluations of human beings by reference to the human life form.

Synthesis

The thesis of this chapter has been the generic truth – or the Aristotelian categorical – that humans are practical primates. This generic, I have argud, captures a set of truths about the human life form and natural telos in the same manner as other respectable scientific statements, such as 'the platypus is an egg-laying mammal' and 'the baby chick becomes a rooster'. Every animal's nature or life form has genus and differentiam. For human beings, our differentiam is that we can engage in practical reasoning. Hence, our animality and our rationality both count. Being a primate entails that we are alive and share properties in common with all organic nature. Being a practical reasoning primate includes a set of capacities, including abstract thought but also more: speech, sociality, rational practice, and creativity. I also argued that the generic truth about humanity holds good in the face of important objections to the effect that we have no nature, or that our only nature is biological. I have not yet fully articulated what effect rationality has on our animal nature and rebutted

the objection that it renders irrelevant all the prima facie natural norms arising from our animal or biological nature. But I have argued that there is good reason to affirm a kind of prima facie natural normativity binding on human beings. Getting clear on the truly ethical significance of human norms is our next task.

IV. Natural Norms, Human Norms, Ethical Norms

On best evidence, human beings are practical, rational primates. What is the ethical significance of this proposition?

Firstly, on the basis of the previous chapter's arguments, there are natural norms arising from the conditions of our animal nature. Candidates to be an example of such norms can be expressed in generic propositions about human animals, for instance: "animals beings sleep daily". Accordance with such norms would be genuinely good for humans and deviation from them genuinely bad. Importantaly, such norms are not *only* accessible to us, but would be accessible to an "alien anthropologist" observing humanity from the "outside". This is the sort of naturalistic evaluation Foot, Hursthouse, and McDowell are aiming for. 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. Just as we can evaluate an individual wolf by reference to its life form, perhaps we can evaluate individual human characters and abilities, human actions and lives by reference to our life form. Some evaluations are not obviously ethical: starving to death, being born without limbs, being involuntarily infertile, seem to be bads-of-a-kind for creatures like us. They are not *moral* bads, but real misfortunes. The question to be pursued, then, is whether any natural human norms can be shown to be fully ethical norms.

This is the second bit of ethical significance. Things get really interesting (and rather more difficult) when we consider human beings not as mere brutes but as reflective

brutes. The difference between humans and wolves is that wolves are not rational animals. So, when it comes to humans, we continue to evaluate 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:

> … 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.[31]

So, the neo-Aristotelian hypothesis is that some such norms are candidates for classification as *natural ethical norms.* These are special instances of natural norms that apply to humans as a species of a peculiar sort. A candidate to be an example of such a norm "human beings reason about their decisions" or "human beings become wiser over time."

If such propositions can be demonstrated to be natural, human, ethical norms, then they would describe "the normal human" – not statistically normal, but the one in conformity with our species-type. Lest I seem to be sneaking in "purely" ethical norms, consider the possibility that whatever is *naturally good* for humans is ipso facto *morally good*: even innocuous, "merely biological" goods like sleep, air, and healthy food. "Human beings breathe, sleep, and eat" is not just a description but a normative generic. A human being who *could* eat but does not eat would be ipso facto defective.

If natural human norms are natural norms, then they would be momentous. Such norms would pertain to every individual human, regardless of culture and upbringing. The hypothesis to be developed is that the obligation to acquire virtues is just such a binding, natural, ethical norm. We are obligated to become what we truly are.

All I want to suggest for now is that our complete nature as practical, rational pri-

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

mates has *at least prima facie* ethical significance. A defeasible normative obligation to get good sleep can be overcome by citing a countervailing reason – such as the need to stay up and feed the baby or the need to stay on duty at one's late-night post – while still acknowledging that it is a normative obligation arising from our animal nature. The defeasibility of such norms brings up the "Irrelevance Objection." If norms can be overcome, what do they matter at all? Prima facie normative bindingnness is not *everything* but it is *not nothing*. I shall have to address the Irrelevance Objection fully in its own chapter.

For now, we must consider how putative human norms relate to virtue. The notion is that virtues are a specific type of quality belonging to creatures like us. Virtues are the human specific goods-of-a-kind. The virtues constitue a set of normative constraints on what one can/should be and can/should become arising from one's nature as a practical primate.

Relatedly, the acquisition of virtues both causes and constitutes the actualization of our life form as practical rational primates. Truly exemplifying our life form constitutes our species-specific flourishing. Virtues are commonly supposed to be "excellences" of human beings. Relative to what is such a quality excellent? The answer can only be that virtues are excellences relative to our nature or life form. They are the traits or qualities that enable us to actualize our life form, to fully express in a life what we are by nature. If what we are by nature is practical, rational primates, then virtues (we can further predict) will be traits pertaining to practical reason and animality.

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

rational primates. The conceptions of human nature (as practical reasoning animals) must be defined in relation to virtue (the excellences of rational practice and practical reason) and to human nature as it could be, our natural telos (to be excellent and mature practical, rational primates).

Becoming fully or fully actualized practical rational animals requires the actualization not only of our animal nature (through growth, maturity, reproduction) but our rational potential (through intellectual growth and knowledge, and practical wisdom that sublimates all of one's emotions and bodily desires and physical settings into a good life). In other words: 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."[32]

As a generic, the proposition that humans are practical, rational primates is both descriptive and normative. If practical rational animals is what we are (by nature), then the pattern of natural normativity would lead us to expect that becoming truly or fully practical rational animals is our natural telos. This thought, I think, explains why Peter Geach says "Men need virtues as bees need stings."[33] Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre echo this talk of "need" and "necessity" as well. (MacIntyre's most recent monograph is subtitlted,: "why human beings need the virtues."[34]) The kind of necessity being predicated here is the same kind of necessity with which a bee needs a sting or a knife needs to be sharp. It is a formal and teleological necessity.

A norm that obliges us to pursue a certain range of forms of life – and to avoid others

32. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.
33. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.
34. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

– is that we are practical rational primates. What are those forms of life? The qualities of excellence for practical rational animals would be the moral and intellectual virtues, including moderation and immoderation, justice and injustice, practical wisdom and foolishness, and so on.

To identify these virtues requires, in part, looking to exemplary humans. If "human" is a normative concept, then the exemplars from which to derive our notion of humanity would not be someone in process of fully actuating that life form or who has already failed to do. The exemplar from which to derive a concept of humanity would not be, for example, the criminally insane, or children, not the critically ill or the handicaped, but the fully mature, practical rational primates. The traits of such a person are liable to be admirable and praiseworthy for creatures like us.

The qualities human beings 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."[35]

Traits That Benefit

What we have said so far points in the direction of the hypothesis: virtues must be instances of natural goodness or natural excellence for practical, rational primates like ourselves. Virtues must be a subset of natural goods, or goods-of-a-kind for human beings. Furthermore, they must be recognizably good from the outside and the inside; that is, not

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

only should at least some virtues correspond to the standard list of qualities that are admired universally or near universally, such as courage and justice, but in order to block the charge of subjectivism, they should be plausibly recognizable by an alien anthropologist who could study the human life form and discover which traits actuate it.

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

Human virtues would also be those qualities that enable one to perform characteristically rational activities such as speaking, socializing, thoughtful acting, and creating. By nature, we are inherently self-aware language-users who grow up and live in a language-community with a history and tradition, and who are curious to know what is true about ourselves and our world. We are also extravagantly innovative, creating myriad tools, forms of art, and other products for our use and enjoyment. We are inherently conscious and self-conscious beings who speak, interpret, and create in the context of a linguistic community such as a family, society, and culture. And as *practical* rational animals, we are inherently goal-oriented and self-determining beings who are to some degree able to acquire new traits or lose them, able to achieve our natural ends or fail to achieve them, able to become aware of the "givenness" of our biology and work with or against it, and are able to treat an entire biological life not only as an event but as a project. Although we are pushed about by our biological instincts and by social pressures, we do not *simply* stumble around through life; at times we also act on *reasons*. That is, we deliberate about future actions, and reflect on past actions, and become puzzled about what is called for in the present. The success of our actions is not guaranteed, and the reasonableness of our justifications is not guaranteed.

Rather, we muddle through on the best evidence we have.

The criteria of a definition of virtue, then, is that the excellences intrinsic to our life form are those qualities that practical rational animals per se *need* to be what they are and to live life in such a way as to become what they can potentially become.

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

Intrinsic Goods

I need to make a few clarifying points. The first clarification is that virtues are intrinsic goods. They enable one to be a practical, rational primate, but they are more than instrumentally valuable. Virtues on my account will also turn out to be constitutive of humanity. It may seem to odd to categorize essential properties of humanity as morally praiseworthy traits. But the point is essential to my case. Virtues are not just "morally praiseworthy" qualities; they are *the human* qualities. Virtues are examples of *humanness* in its exemplary form.

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

> …must embody a normatively significant understanding of human life and action. For any conception of human form is a natural-historical account of 'how the human lives.' As with 'the tiger' or 'the mayfly,' a natural-history of 'the human' provides an interpretation of the characteristic and non-defective life-cycle of the species.[36]

Biological and Rational Goods

The particular virtues would be particular expressions of the kind of natural goodness appropriate to creatures like us. Lott continues: "And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty of practical reason."[37] So natural goodness in humans (and hence virtues) would be somehow related to the faculty of practical reason.

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

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

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

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

36. Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," 770–1.
37. Ibid., 770–1.

as one of the capacities of the human species comes the emergence of a new standard for evaluating a member of the species: namely, how *well* one can practically reason.

Practical reasoning is not just a process of deciding what to do by running a calculus or a two-column ledger; it requires sensitivity to a range of reasons, both external to oneself (facts and states of affairs) and internal to one's own psychology (desires, fears) and physiology (weakness, hunger), etc. Success, if such be possible, would mean taking up the basic facts of one's biology, psychology, and social anthropology into a space of reasons, and the basic facts of the situation in which one finds oneself, weighing and ranking reasons for action, and acting. And, having considered the whole range of facts and reasons, the virtuous person then constructs a "pattern that, given the human situation, is likely to lead a good life."[38]

I do not mean to suggest that such evaluations are quick and easy. Evaluating someone's ability to practically reason is no easy task. For Smith to evaluate Jones requires Smith to practically reason *about* Jones' practical reasoning. Any errors Smith makes *while reasoning* about Jones are liable to result in misjudgments *about Jones*. Even worse, practical reason is self-referential or recursive. That is, practical reason is the capacity by which the practical reasoning animal reflects upon the proper or improper uses of practical reason itself. For Smith to self-reflect – for Smith to evalaute *Smith*'s own practical reasoning' – requires Smith to *use* practical reasoning. Self-reflection is putting the microscope itself under the microscope.[39]

According to my hypothesis thus far, particular virtues enable the exemplification of our life form, and the excellence of practical reason enable us to pursue our ends *well*. The practical, rational agents who consistently succeed at pursuing and achieving their ends

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

39. I shall have much more to say about the labrynthine difficulties of practical reasoning in a later chapter.

would be models of virtue.

Unity of Virtues

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

Conclusion

We can put the argument of this chapter compactly like this:

Natural Human Norms Argument

P1. All natural organisms exhibit formal and functional (i.e., teleological) facts which are expressible in generics – these are natural norms. (Ethical Naturalism, from Chapter 2) P2. Human beings are natural organisms of a peculiar sort. (Assumption) C1. Therefore, human beings exhibit formal and teleological facts which are expressible in generics; there are *human* norms. (From P1-P2) P3. For any organism M, the excellences or virtues of M are the qualities that enable and partly constitute its being a fully mature M. P4. Human beings are practical, rational primates. (Human Nature) C2. For humanity, the excellences or virtues of a human being are the qualities that enable and partly constitute its becoming a fully practical, rational primate. (From P3-P4) P6. For humanity, virtues are rational practices and practical reasoning. C3. Therefore, for humanity, rational practices and practical reasoning enable persons and societies to become – and partly constitute their becoming – fully practical, rational primates.

Chapter 4

Virtue and Vice: Rational and Irrational Practice

> Men need virtues as bees need stings.
>
> —Peter Geach, *The Virtues* .

I. Introduction: Virtue as the Human Norm

The thesis of this chapter is that certain qualities are virtues and vices for creatures like us: rational practices and practical reasoning are excellent qualities of practical rational primates – while irrational practices and practical irrationality are natural defects.

I argue that virtues have (at least) eight common properties besides being by definition good for their possessor: namely, virtues are beneficial to all of the species (not just their possessor) and so break down the assume divide between altruistic or other-regarding virtues and egoistic or self-regarding virtues; virtues constitute excellent human *functioning*; they are especially beneficial in that they are corrective of tempting vices; virtues are not any positive traits such as those given by luck, nor are they necessarily even *acquired* at all – rather, virtues are *acquirable*; some virtues are are excellences of "rational practicing"; others are excellences of practical reasoning about one's whole life; finally, virtues

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

In section 3, I synthesize the views of Foot, McDowell, and MacIntyre discussed thus far and clarify their disagreements. In section 4 I address a few remaining objections to my account of virtue.

II. Virtue and Vice

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

I derive their views from a variety of sources. For example, Philippa Foot argues that virtues are the acquirable, beneficial, corrective excellences of practical reason.[1] Foot's concept of virtue and practical reason I derive not only from *Natural Goodness* but from her "Virtues and Vices" essay.[2] Alasdair MacIntyre argues that virtues are "acquired human qualities" that enable the virtuous person to "achieve those goods" of practices, to live a successful whole life, and to sustain traditions.[3] 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*

1. 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.

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

3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

Rational Animals. John McDowell argues that virtue is a kind of perceptual sensitivity to what is required to live well.[4] 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,"[5] and "Values as Secondary Qualities."[6]

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

The second stage will synthesize these views in order to endorse a single, unified view according to which virtues are excellences of rational practice and practical reasoning, while vices are constituted by irrational practices and defective practical reasoning. The third stage will explicate in detail how the emerging account satisfies the above criteria.

Beneficial

The first point about virtue is that virtues are beneficial to their possessor. Hursthouse calls this "Plato's requirement" on the virtues. There is something counterintuitive about the notion that X is a virtue that could, in the end, ultimately harm you. She says: "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms."[7]

As we have seen, this requirement fits Foot's account of natural normativity. As some traits make a 'good oak' or a 'good wolf, a good person exemplifies those good-

4. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
5. Ibid.
6. John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (Routledge, 1985), 110–29.
7. Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics."

making traits shared by all exemplary members of a natural species. Virtues are good-of-a-kind for creatures like us, namely, practical rational animals.

MacIntyre agrees. For MacIntyre, virtues are acquired *human* qualities.[8] Virtues enable their possessor to achieve particular *goods.* This clause assumes that virtues are beneficial. For MacIntyre, a virtuous trait *cannot* be directed at achieving ills. Assuming that virtues cannot go bad will bring some trouble for MacIntyre's initial definition in *After Virtue*. As we saw with Foot, it seems quite possible that people who have particular virtues can be, overall, wicked. (Can't the thief be courageous, the dictator magnanimous, the glutton affable?) It certainly seems that the answer is yes. Even indexing virtues to practices 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 more fully in a later chapter.

John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason" argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live. McDowell's theses are that: (1) "The point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live?' "[9] (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."[10] We will examine each of these theses below. Here, I want to note that McDowell likewise agrees that virtues benefit their possessor since they enable one to live a good life. The problem of virtues going bad does not arise, since he builds *knowledge* into his definition of virtue.

8. Presumably, the point of specifying "human" qualities here is to distinguish human excellence from analogous qualities of non-human animals. The flexible flagellum of a bacterium, the swiftness of a deer – formal or functional biological features that enable an animal to survive and thrive – are excluded from the class of virtues by definition. MacIntyre's earlier work repudiated Aristotle's "biological" basis for human virtue, but his later *Dependent Rational Animals* retracts the assumed divide between human and non-human animals. In this initial formulation, MacIntyre disagrees with Foot and agrees with McDowell.

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

10. Ibid., 331.

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

Beneficial to All

A natural query to Plato's requirement would be to ask *to whom* virtues are supposed to be beneficial. Does a virtuous person benefit or does the society in which the virtuous person lives? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly *both*. Virtues, by hypothesis, are beneficial to humans as a kind, not just this or that individual. Who is benefited more?

The answer is difficult to state systematically. This difficulty does not cause trouble for the account. By hypothesis, virtues are beneficial to *human beings*. One can approach the thesis that virtues are beneficial to human beings qua human from two angles.

Take moderation with alcohol. Such moderation benefits one's family, one's community and so on. The ravages of alcoholism on marriages, children, and extended families are widely known. So it would seem to be alturistic not to overdrink. Nevertheless, moderation with alcohol also benefits oneself. Indeed, parsing up the benefit seems foolhardy. (Who benefits more, your children or your liver?)

For virtues such as justice or charity, the answer might be less clear, but the lack of clarity does not damage the account. Foot says, "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."[11] 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

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

contradicting or apparently irreconcilable goods; my own good *versus* your good. Sometimes, however, the cases in which virtuous deeds necessitate the loss of other goods are not so devastating as they might appear. It might be that, on occasion, it is better (say) for my family that I sacrifice my health in working hard to earn higher wages; while on other occasions it is better for my family that I sacrifice higher wages to keep myself healthy. Even when there is a clear, irresolvable tension between my good and the good of the group (as when, say, I must sacrifice my life), we can make sense of the demand of morality by appealing to what is necessary *for humans* in general. As Geach says: "Men need virtues as bees need stings. An individual bee may perish from stinging, all the same bees need stings; an individual man may perish by being brave or justice, but all the same, men need courage and justice."[12] 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.

If people *need* the virtues and even "altruistic" or other-regarding virtues benefit oneself, is it then egoistic or selfish to pursue virtue? Not at all. Some critics have hastily posed an objection to the effect that we only need virtue if we want to be happy. Virtues are formal necessities, like bees need stings. If this is right, then everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits. The obligation arises not from a prior commitment to one's "happiness" (whatever that might be) but from the fact that one is a human being and virtues help us become who we are.

The pursuit of virtue, then, is not selfish in the pejorative sense of the word; it is not 'egoism' for the charge of egoism assumes that the good for men is not good for humans. But we need not assume this. It may be that the good for humanity in general is ipso facto good for me as a human.

Take an example: I would argue that various simple pleasures of life arising from

12. Geach, *The Virtues*, 17.

cooking and eating good food, or strolling through natural beauty, chatting with an old friend, are on balance good parts of life. They are not *the* only goods. If they were the only goods, one might go in for those pleasures and those pleasures alone. One might construct one's whole life around them. But having moderation is a good as well. So a person who enjoys both the moderate pleasures of life and the moderation of pleasure and pain is both a better fellow and better person. As Foot argues: "Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror."[13]

In this connection, we should recall the brief argument above that virtues are intrinsic goods. They are not just traits that *lead to good consequences* for organisms like us (that too). The recent revival of virtue consequentialism defines virtues as instrumental goods useful because they secure other, intrinsic goods.[14] Rather, virtues are themselves good for us. 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

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

else is true of those among whom we live, it is better if they have it."[15]

MacIntyre is also careful to distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental goods. He does say that "enable their possessor to achieve … goods", which might sound as if he means virtue are mere *instruments* to goods. This would be a grave misunderstanding. Virtues *are* instrumental for MacIntyre, but they are not *merely* instrumental. They are both instrumental (to the achievement of certain goods) and also *partly constitutive of those goods.* Virtues are both means to an end and also ends in themselves. The conflation of means and ends is liable to worry some critics. The worry is not trivial, but we must leave it aside for now. So long as the point is clear that, on my account thus far, virtues enable and partly constitute the realization of one's life-form. Just as sunflowers and wolves can be excellent or defective relative to its form of life, human beings can be excellent or defective relative to their distinctive form of life.

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."[16]

Excellent Functioning

The third point about virtue is that virtues cause and partly constitute the excellent functioning of a human being. They are not static states but lived or enacted character traits.

But what do we mean by "excellent"? The concept of excellence is relative to an object's nature and function. The common example is that an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*. But more complex beings have more complex functions and therefore a more

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

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

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, 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 the Aristotelian conclusion (or what is supposed to be his conclusion) in a later chapter. For now, I will only insist that we do not need to specify at the outset what activities are characteristic actions of practical rational animals; we can keep the notion indeterminate: our characteristic actions will involve practical reasoning and rational acting.

Corrective

The fourth point in our account of virtue is that virtues are corrective – that is, virtues become urgent in life at the same moment as common, tempting, human evils.

It might seem odd that "evil" could be tempting. But examples are all too easy to supply. Obesity and malnutrition or starvation are both bad for human beings. Starvation is not usually voluntarily, and when it is, it is usually motivated by complex social and psychological factors. And obesity is not always voluntary. Nevertheless, some cases of obesity have straightforward causes. For example, many of us are who live in wealthy societies are tempted to eat a rich diet of flavorful, high calorie foods every day, and are tempted not to exercise. Under certain metabolic conditions, we will steadily gain weight and eventually become obese. The temptation to 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, 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."[17]

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

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

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

17. Ibid., 8.
18. Ibid., 13.

> 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.

Two Objections Thus Far

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.[19]

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

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

> Indeed, many fundamental scientific laws (as well as some scientific truisms) and many fundamental moral principles have the property which we

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

> might call quasi-analyticity (see, e.g., Putnam 1962). Because of their conceptual and methodological centrality, even when we know that their justification is a posteriori rather than a priori, we find it extremely difficult to envision circumstances under which they would be disconfirmed. For as long as they occupy so central a conceptual and methodological role, they are immune from empirical revision, and principles incompatible with them are 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.[20]

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.[21]

The Great Platitudes are basic, common, and hardly disputable. But that does not mean they are tautologous. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[22] Great Platitudes are rather hard-won insights. It is only by reflection that humans have a nature, a species-specific kind of flourishing, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our life form while others are conducive to its stultification.

A second worry that needs addressing is this: Can virtue enable the more efficient achievement of ignoble aims? On the one hand, examples are easy to furnish: a prude might display moderation; a thief might display courage. It seems commonsensical that

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

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

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

whatever attributes we designate as 'courageous' can be found in agents pursuing bad ends. On the other hand, the Aristotelian line excludes such a possibility by definition. Jonathan Sanford's recent monograph, *Before Virtue*, argues that Aristotle's doctrine is "ethics insists it is impossible to exercise any virtue, with the exception of technical skill, wrongly."[23] 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.[24]

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

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

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

in the courage and the wisdom *in* the moderation.

A second response to the worry that one must be completely virtuous to be virtuous at all is that we do admire virtues when they all appear in a remarkably virtuous people and when only one or two appear in a partially virtuous person. Foot says:

> There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired. Yet the fact is that many of us look up to some people whose chaotic lives contain rather little of wisdom or temperance, rather than to some others who possess these virtues. And while it may be that this is just romantic nonsense I suspect that it is not.[25]

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 to be acquired is an age-old theme. In the first line of Plato's *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates a question "whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?"[26] 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[27] discusses the range of

25. Ibid., 17.

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

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

which positive traits count as virtues.

That said, my goal here is not to address *how* virtue is acquired. My only goal here is to argue that a trait must be *acquirable* to be a virtue. This point is in service of my conception that virtue is the excellence of rational practice and practical reasoning. Practical reasoning is the process of acquiring new traits one does not have but potentially can have (or of shedding old traits one has but can potentially lose). Since virtues are acquirable, they must be distinct from mere inborn strength, acquired skill, or other human excellences.

Even without stating *how* virtues are acquired, it is still essential to see that they must be *acquirable.* If we ignore this point, our account will be vulnerable to a misunderstanding, even by someone who concedes that a virtue is a natural excellence for practical reasoners, a good-of-a-kind for creatures like us. The misunderstanding is this: is *any* trait that benefits humans a virtue? Are traits such as physical strength, a powerful intellect, keen eyesight, and a reliable memory virtues? Is a contractor who excels at hammering 16d nails into 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)."[28] 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*.[29]

28. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

29. Julia Annas's argument that virtues are skills of a particular type takes advantage of the intuitive similarity between virtue and skill. Cf. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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"[30]. We should like to distinguish beauty, raw talent, strength, and other excellences that are not at all under our control from virtues – which are under our control, either partially or completely. Furthermore, even their list of "moral virtues" (*arete ethikai* or *virtues morales*) do not correspond precisely to *our* "moral virtues". The traditional list of cardinal "moral virtues" (including courage, moderation, practical wisdom, and justice) includes positive traits we might classify as "self-regarding" (e.g., moderation) as well as "other-regarding" (e.g., justice), and includes practical wisdom (*phronesis/prudentia*) which, if we mentioned it all, we would be inclined to classify as an intellectual virtue. Finally, not all of the items on our list of positive qualities (e.g., unselfishness) obviously correspond to one of the classical virtues. So, we ought not to assume that the terms 'excellence' or even 'moral excellence' can be a short-cut for understanding the concept of virtue. We must, instead, construct our account with care and attention.

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."[31] 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,

30. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 2; Cf. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."
31. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 5.

chances of success were low, etc.

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

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

Foot's comment is this:

> What this suggests is that a man's virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit; and small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.[32]

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

> A virtue such as honesty or generosity is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous, nor is it to be helpfully specified as a "desirable" or "morally valuable" character trait. It is, indeed a character trait—that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say "goes all the way down", unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It

32. Ibid., 5.

> 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.)[33]

There is a clear similarity, I think, between Hursthouse's notion of a multi-track disposition and McDowell's notion of perceptual sensitivity. To be sensitive to a range of requirements for action involves one's emotions, beliefs, habits, and so on.

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

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

Rational practice

My definition of virtue was this: virtue is acquirable excellence in rational practice and practical reasoning. Thus far I have defended the following notions: virtues are beneficial to humankind; that they enable the actualization of our human form of life; that they are corrective of tempting vice; and that they are acquirable traits such as actions and habits

33. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

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.[34]

We could use any number of illustrations of practices to unpack these four aspects. I shall use a practice in which I have personal experience: secondary school education. The practice of educating young people a complex social activity, aimed a certain goods, with a particular history and standards of excellence. A secondary school teacher is engaged in a series of activities aimed at giving children a body of knowledge and skills they need to transition to functional adults in society, whether by getting a job, starting a business, or

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

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.[35]

Practical Reasoning Through Life

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

35. 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.

ent 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."[36]

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.[37] 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."[38] 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."[39]

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."[40] Just as the

36. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 208.
37. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 15.
38. Ibid., 202.
39. Ibid., 204.
40. Ibid., 204.

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

The philosophical obstacle is the tendency to atomize "complex actions… in terms of simple components."[41] 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.'[42]

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.[43] 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

41. Ibid., 204.
42. Ibid., 206.
43. Ibid., 207.

be an essential constituent of this task."[44] MacIntyre's astonishing conclusion from these innocuous premises is this: "there is no such thing as 'behavior', to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs and settings… Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[45] 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."[46]

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.[47]

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

44. Ibid., 208.
45. Ibid., 208.
46. Ibid., 209.
47. Ibid., 211.

> 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.[48]

Clearly these are weighty matters. MacIntyre's discussion of narrative is highly interesting but can be left aside.[49] For we have arrived at a the supports needed for building the second stage of his account of virtue: the unity of many practices into a single whole. He says: "The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest."[50]

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.[51]

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

49. Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 216. Consider such fascinating statements as: "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' "

50. Ibid., 219.

51. Ibid., 220.

Social Reasoning

The eighth and final point about virtue is that virtues in enable the health and progress of societies. Virtues are personal but not individualistic; virtues are inherently human and humanity is inherently social.

MacIntyre captures this point in a creative way. The third stage of his virtue account situates what has come before in a broader social and historical context – namely, a 'tradition.' Making this point requires a brief introduction of MacIntyre's beguiling concept of a 'tradition', which we shall return to later.

What is a MacIntyrean tradition? An initial definition is this: A tradition is a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[52] Traditions derive from a source text and continue across generations via normal sociological channels (schools, friendships, political institutions, etc.). So, by MacIntyre's lights, history-writing is a tradition. It is rooted in source texts such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Gibbon and extending through Europe and the western world, consisting of a series of historical and historiographical arguments over not just "what happened" but how to conduct historical enquiry.

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

52. Ibid., 222.

has survived the death of many universities. A secular tradition such as Enlightenment liberalism emerged from the religious tradition of western Christianity; but a religious tradition such as Thomism emerged from the prior religious tradition, Augustianism.

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

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

Nevertheless, a member of a tradition cannot reason without the resources of that tradition. We can put the matter obscurely by asserting that, for MacIntyre, rationality itself is tradition-constituted. Insofar as practical rationality is the differentiam of human nature, and insofar as virtues all depend for their effective operation on the coordinating management of practical reason, tradition will again become an essential concept. Virtues as related to practices are individual but not individualistic, since practices themselves are social activities. Virtues as related to the whole of life are cultural but not culturally relativistic, for every culture ought to provide for its members some minimal goods.

This is all very provisional. The point is that virtues cannot be individualistic any more than a person can be a mere atomized indidividual. Rather, vices weigh down the whole tradition and virtues correct and potentially elevate it. MacIntyre says:

> Lack of justice, lack of truthfulness. lack of courage. lack of the relevant intellectual virtues–these corrupt traditions, just as they do those institutions and practices which derive their life from the traditions of which they are the contemporary embodiments.[53]

53. Ibid., 223.

III. Synthesis

Thus the first stage of my account of virtue is complete. I have endorsed eight basic truths about virtue, and flagged some issues to which we must return. Now, I must synthesize what has been said and respond to a few objections.

Thus far, virtue has come to light as the excellent traits belonging to a fully mature and exemplary practical, rational primate. Such a person does not necessarily enjoy all the blessings of good fortune, but he or she does take up all that is given in one's fate and put it to the best possible use. He or she avoids the common and tempting traps one faces along the way of a normal human life, taking up up all the intrinsic and natural urges of animality (hunger, thirst, the sexual drive, desires for shelter, comfort, and companionship) into practices that makes sense. He or she works to acquire those traits that benefit humanity, both oneself and others, and that enable him or her to engage in such practices as make sense for human beings. He or she also satisfies the requirements of the community, as far as possible proactively cultivating virtues in others when appropriate but without undue interference in their own practical reasoning.

Virtuous people's lives are remarkable not for what they are given: any celebrity or cad might be born wealthy or physically attractive or talented. Virtuous people's lives are remarkable for what they do with what they are given.

Insofar as one cannot but sleep sometimes, the question of whether or not to sleep at all is not an ethical question. It is simply not in my control. Insofar as one can either stay 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."[54]

While we may admire "winners" of the natural lottery for their extraordinary talent or beauty, we admire more the person who uses the attributes they were given well, who makes an investment of them that pays dividends. Compare, for example, the crowds cheering for Olympic runner Derek Redmond when he is winning the gold medal with the crowds cheering for Derek Redmond finishing last after his hamstring tore and his father helped him to cross the finish line. There have been many gold medal winning races that millions of people have witnessed and forgotten. But this race, when an otherwise naturally talented and well-trained athlete finished *last* that remains forever etched in the memory of millions more. It's not just the unbridled emotion Redmond displayed in that moment which so touches viewers; it's the obvious love from his father shown in supporting his son's commitment to finish the race, even dead last.

The same principle applies to the various aspects of being a practical, rational animal we can mention. Aristotle taught that "affability" was a virtue. Some of us might chuckle to imagine that naturally phlegmatic people are somehow *morally* better than their melancholic counterparts. Surely something so little under one's control is not a basis for evaluation?

Aristotle is not completely wrong that sociable traits (which can to some extent be cultivated) are beneficial. But we must remember that the "moral" virtues are not, for Aristotle, obedience to categorical imperatives or divine commands but simply ways of developing one's emotions into the likeness of a true human being. Consider two person's who wilfully cultivate two quite different social attitudes: one is cold, unfeeling, humorless, or self-absorbed person, while the other is warm-hearted, empathetic, cheerful, and outwardly-focused. Social interactions are an optional part of most human lives. Hence, insofar as such attitudes might but under one's control rather than the result of natural lottery, we do judge (and we do seem *rightly* to judge) that the second set of attitudes are

54. *Hamlet* III.1

more optimal. Not everyone needs to be entertaining or well-connected, but basic skills in relating well to other persons in family and social situations are generically good. Like Derek Redmond, someone who is naturally disposed to be solidarity, melancholic, cynical, bitter, or otherwise negative is all the more admirable when he or she becomes and remains affable against the odds.

IV. 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 be-

ing 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.[55] 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

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

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

V. 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 irrational traits and practices that do not make sense, since they harm oneself and others. They are negative or destructive traits to which one is tempted somewhere in the common course of human life. (Pleasures tempt us to immoderation; the urges to do favors for friends or to slight enemies tempt us to injustice; danger, difficulty, and other kinds of resistance tempt us to cowardice and *acedia*; laziness, arrogance, and culpable ignorance tempt us to practical foolishness, and so on.) By correcting for tempting vices and common errors, virtues enable individuals to actualize their life form and become excellent specimens of the human race.

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

when it helps a society to successfully produce more virtuous, practical reasoners).

Several problems remain. The problems we flagged but which remain to be addressed are these: (1) What, if anything, is the human ergon? (2) What is the relation between practical reasoning and rational practice? I said McDowell mistakes the relation between virtue qua knowledge and virtue qua rational organization of one's psychology – including emotions, bodily urges, physical situation, unthinking habits, and so on? (3) Can virtue go bad? It seems that, without further guidance, otherwise virtuous traits might operate towards wicked ends, or co-exist with vices inside an (overall) miserable and vicious person. (4) 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 several of these problems is to argue that excellent practical reasoning in community is the guide to the execution of virtuous activity. That is our next task.

Chapter 5

Practical Reasoning

> There could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live.
>
> —Jennifer Frey, *The Will to Do Good* 79.

I. Introduction: Virtue and Reason

I began this inquiry with the picture of the virtue triangle. The point of that picture is to bring into clear view the necessary relation between virtue, human nature, and flourishing. It is my contention that the neo-Aristotelian must treat each concept, important on its own, within a dynamic unity. Virtue (excellent practical reasoning and rational practice) for human beings (practical reasoners) causes and partly constitutes flourishing (to be fully mature, practical reasoners).

So far, I have argued in chapter 2 that at least the biological parts of nature are normative. In chapter 3, I argued that human nature is normative – specifically, I defended the view that our life form is to be practical, rational animals. In that chapter, I briefly introduced the concept of practical reason to explain what behaviors and capacities distinguish

our species from others, according to the perspectives of both common sense and a more reflective, scientific thinking. In chapter 4, I gave an account of virtue consonant with the foregoing arguments. My account of virtue also underscored the crucial importance of practical reasoning, since virtues were defined as the habitual exercises of rational practice and practical reasoning about all of the animal and material conditions of human life.

Now I must make good on my claim that a satisfying neo-Aristotelian account of virtue must offer an account of practical reason that is persuasive in its own right and that is thoroughly naturalistic and thoroughly ethical.

I am well aware that my goal in offering an account of virtue and reason is ambitious. I shall be forced to only touch on issues that deserve a full treatment. However, one of the most impressive attractions of the recent neo-Aristotelian work is that it solves, in a fell swoop, multiple interesting puzzles in metaethics, ethics, philosophy of science, philosophy of action, and others. The problems surrounding practical reason are the problems of human nature. A solution that works, is highly desirable.

Developing my account of virtue and practical reason in discussion with John McDowell and Alasdair MacIntyre will occupy not only this chapter but the next two chapters as well.

I would like to provide a brief overview of the topics to be addressed.

1. What is practical reasoning – i.e., is it practical or rational or both? Can practical reasoning motivate one without the presence of other psychological states such as desires, inclinations, instincts, or prior commitments?
2. What are "practical reasons"? Are moral reasons one type of practical reason, along with prudential reasons? Philosophers are either dualists or monists or pluralists; I shall defend a pluralistic account.
3. Does practical reasoning make natural norms irrelevent for ethical purposes? I defend a naturalistic view according to which natural norms are intrinsically justifying and motivating.
4. Is practical reasoning objectively important? Philosophical options include objectivism, subjectivism of various kinds, and intersubjectivism. I first defend intersubjectivism and objectivism against individual subjectivism; and then de-

fend objectivism against intersubjectivism.

The remainder of this chapter is about problems 1-2, the nature of practical reasoning (the activity) and practical reasons (what the activity is about).

The Problem: Practice and Reason

My account of virtue has thus far depended quite a bit on mere assumptions and intuitions about the nature of practical reasoning and rational practice. My aim now is to give a clear and plausible account of these notions that is sensitive to objections and can overcome them. The first movement in my account of practical reason is to clarify exactly what are the stakes of this topic.

Perhaps the simplest way to state the problematic is like this: Is practical reason both *practical* and *rational*? If practical reason is really practical, then how is it rational? And if it is rational, how is it really practical? By some common assumptions, "rational practice" should be a contradiction in terms.

To see why, suppose that successful practical reasoning results by definition in a kind of knowledge. Knowledge is "theoretical" or "speculative" or "contemplative" in that successful knowers grasp *what is true*. But knowledge of what is true does not seem to be the kind of thing that can motivate one to act. Affirming the proposition, *Plato's* Republic *is lying on the table* does not lead one to read *Republic* without some intervening state, such as *I've been wanting to read Plato for awhile but could not find my copy.* So the first problem is that theoretical knowledge cannot (by itself) motivate to action, and practical reasoning results in such knowledge, so practical reasoning cannot motivate to action. It cannot be *practical*.

Alternately, suppose that practical reasoning is by definition a kind of disposition oneself to act in certain ways, to rank and organize one's various motivations, to pursue certain things, or to make certain decisions rather than others. Such a disposition would

clearly be practical. It would have the right kind of action-guiding force to explain why we act the way we do. But then a "disposition" is not a form of knowledge. We use the term 'disposition' in a variety of ways: one can be disposed (say) to repay one's debts, or disposed to shout when angry, or disposed to travel out of the country every summer. These dispositions seem better described as moral commitments, temperaments, or interests – not knowledge.

So either practical reasoning is not *practical* (action-guiding) or it is not *reasonable*. As McDowell discusses below, this dilemma rests on the familiar belief that cognition and volition are distinct. If "practical reason" is the name for a single capacity that is both cognitive and volitional, then in a very real sense, the challenge is to *defend the concept of practical reason itself*.

The Solution: Thinking How to Live

The solution to this problem can be approached via the question "how should one live?" The neo-Aristotelians, from Bernard Williams to Alasdair MacIntyre to more recent writers have almost universally fixed on this question as a crucial starting point for ethics. For example, John McDowell says that the whole "point of engaging in ethical reflection… lies in the interest of the question 'How should one live'?"[1]

The reason it is such a recurring theme in the neo-Aristotelian conversation is that it appears quite plausible that no mature adult can avoid asking this question. And, I shall argue, we approach the practical answers to practical questions by practical reasoning.

Recall Jay Wallace's general definition: "Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do."[2] My suggestion is that the capacity for resolving what to do is the source of "how?" questions and also the

1. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 331.
2. Wallace, "Practical Reason."

source of their answers. The answer to "how?" questions is an item of knowledge. For example, imagine that a child exercises practical reasoning when he asks: "How do I unscrew the light bulb?" The answer is an instruction ("twist left") or set of instructions, ("first, grip the light bulb; then twist left until it comes loose."). The instruction need not be put in the imperative mood: "twisting left unscrews a light bulb" is in the indicative mood (indeed, it is a generic proposition). The answer to a "how?" question is not just a proposition (that too) but an action, or rather an "actionable" proposition. The action and the abstract thought can be conceptually divided, but they are not divided *when we practically reason and live our lives*.

Similarly, the answer to the "how should one live?" question will be a plan, an actionable proposition. It will not just be a "philosophy" but a *life*. The virtuous person, McDowell argues, knows what to do. Hence, virtue is a kind of practical knowledge. So McDowell argues that the virtues are various "sensitivities" to the salient facts about how to live. Virtue is a kind of knowledge, namely *practical knowledge* (a "disposition to act well"). The answer to the question of how to live will be not just a proposition but a plan.

What is the process of resolving what to do? Practical reasoning taken broadly can potentially include a variety of related deliberative processes: (a) considering future actions to be done, (b) reflecting on past actions already done, and (c) evaluating events or objects as desirable or undesirable. What all these have in common is the the attempt to identify (or create) reasons to φ or not to φ. Practical reason is the process of identifying or coming up with *practical reasons*. Hence, the answer or answers to the "how to live?" question(s) will be a *practical* answer or set of answers, that is both an item of knowledge and also a plan or guide to living in the way specified by that knowledge.

Narrowly, we engage in such practical reasoning about very specific circumstances ("should I stay or should I go?"). More generally, we engage in practical reasoning about quite general matters ("how should one live?"). Much of one's daily life does not consist in

practical reasoning. With a general plan for how to live in place, and with no deep dilemmas, one can coast through a typical day by resting on habits, responding to stimuli such as hunger and thirst, and so on. Being asked to give a reason why one has that habit, however, will elicit a practical reason. Question: "Why are you going to that building?" Answer: "That's where I work." A proper answer need not cite one's desires or motivations; simply being the place where one works is sufficient (practical) reason to go inside.

This process is *practical* by definition. Practical reasoning is not something one does *before* resolving what to do, as one picks up an item in a store *before* purchasing it. Practical reasoning is the name we give to the process of *resolving what to do*, as checking out from the store is the process of purchasing it.

This process is practical *reasoning* by definition. Practical reasoning is thus like theoretical reasoning in at least one important respect: it is normative. Theoretical reasoning is a process by which I aim to determine *what to believe*. When I assess evidence for and against some proposition P, I am looking for *reasons* to believe P is true or false. The successful conclusion of a rational argument is the judgment that P or that not-P. (Or I may not have enough evidence to judge either way, in which case I may withhold judgment.) Similarly, when I consider a scientific hypothesis, I suppose that P and then conduct an experiment that will reveal reasons that confirm or disconfirm the supposition. To fail to believe P upon coming to know good evidence for it, or to believe P in spite of good evidence against it, is to make an intellectual error. If Q entails P and I already know and affirm that Q, then I *ought* to affirm that P. Similarly, if some reason to π entails a reason to φ, and I already know and am committed to π, then I ought to φ.

My contention is that our default view of practical reasoning creatures ought to be that practical reason is both rational and practical, a kind of knowledge that is, absent any other psychological state, motivating. If this is right, then the burden of proof lies with those who would artificially divide and separate the *knowing* and the *practicing*.

Another pre-analytic sign that there need not be a divide between knowing and practicing is the linguistic parity between π-type reasons and Q-type reasons. Both are a species of ""*reasons*"", though they differ in their use. For example, Philippa Foot says that reasons of type (A) are "Reasons for acting, which we may call practical reasons" and type (B) are "Reasons for believing, which we may call evidential or demonstrative reasons." She continues: □

> As philosophers, and therefore theoreticians, our job is of course to give the second type of reason, arguing for or against the truth of a variety of propositions that seem to involve special problems—like those, for instance, about personal identity or the existence of an external world. But among these many 'philosophical' subjects we find that of the nature of practical reasons, and in this special case we shall have to give reasons of type B for theses about reasons of type A.[3].

The difference between the two kinds of reasons is not obliterated by noticing their essential parity. Practical reasoning is essentially practical.

I should clarify one thing I am *not* saying: I am *not* saying that only practical reasoning is *active*. We must be careful with our words; both theoretical and practical reasoning are active in the sense that both require intentional effort and both light up the brain on an MRI scan. The difference between theoretical and practical reasoning is that where theoretical reasoning results in belief, judgment, speculation, and so on, practical reasoning *results in action*. And, I would suggest, this distinction must be built in to our definition of practical reasoning.

One does not practically reason about what to do *and then decide* to do it; there is no gap between the conclusion of a deliberation and a decision. To borrow Gibbard's unforgettable phrasing, practical reasoning is "thinking how to live."[4]

In the case of practical reasoning, then, reason and practice are not divisible. And

3. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 64–65.
4. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

so far as we know, there are no other purely theoretical reasoners. We can imagine angels, Artificial Intelligences, and Alpha Centaurians who think but do not act; but so far as we know, to be a reasoner at all is to be responsive to Sellars' "space of reasons", including both practical and theoretical reasons. This consideration is part of the reason why, in chapter 3, I insisted that practical reasoning, and *not* abstract theoretical reasoning, defines human nature.

Without being clear on the very notion of practical reason, one cannot understand any of what the neo-Aristotelians are up to. Practical reasoning is not a value-neutral procedure, as I shall argue below. It is inextricably bound up in the moral life. Jack Weinstein explains the relation between practical reasoning and morality in this way:

> The term practical rationality is derived from Aristotle's *phronesis*. It is to be distinguished from *sophia*, a more technical form of reasoning. Practical rationality leads to more approximate conclusions; it takes context and relative facts into account, and it usually leads to moral or political conclusions.[5]

Phronesis guides one in "answering" questions (or providing a range of strategies) to solve problems of action and appraisal. The difficulty separating "moral" and "non-moral" problems is no fault of the account, as I shall argue below. And the relative fuzziness of practical reasoning is no fault either. But this is to get ahead of the argument a bit.

With these basics in hand, let us turn to McDowell's argument that virtue is practical knowledge. First, I will summarize his argument about the nature of deductive (theoretical) reasoning and practical reasoning. Then, I will point out two weaknesses in his account that need supplementing. Third, I will attempt to provide what is lacking. My solution requires a historical and linguistic analysis of the words "moral" and "practical", a comparison of two putative kinds of practical reasons: "prudential" and "moral".

5. Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre* (Wadsworth, 2003), 60–61.

II. McDowell on Thinking How to Live

McDowell aims to support his own rendition of the old Socratic thesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge. Namely, virtue as a whole is a perceptual sensitivity to salient facts and what to do about them. And particular virtues are particular manifestations of that perceptual sensitivity.

To see why it makes sense to conceive of virtue as practical knowledge, suppose that some platitudinous value (say, kindness) is really a virtue. The kind person is reliably kind and is kind *on purpose*. A person who merely happens to be kind or who commits acts of kindness resulting from blind instinct does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. A person who is kind once, or even every now and then, likewise does not seem to merit the ascription of a virtue. Rather, a kind person is one who is regularly sensitive to a range of reasons for behaving in a particular way. The kind person, McDowell adduces, "has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behavior" and such "deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge."[6] The kind person *knows* what is called for, is intentional about avoiding cruel or indifferent behavior, and so on.

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

6. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 332.

with other forms of knowledge or other motivations?

He gives two answers: the first is that the when a virtuous person is sensitive to the "requirement imposed by the situation" that requirement must exhaust his reason for acting as he does."[7] It would disqualify the act as a candidate for an example of kindness if the agent performed it *because* it was kind *and because good repute was likely to follow*. If we run the same calculus on each particular virtue, we can hypothesize that virtuous agents' behavior in each case is explained by their sensitivity to those particular kinds of reasons. In turn, their behavior in general (when virtuous) is explained by their sensitivity in general. He concludes:

> Thus the particular virtues are not a batch of independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one's behavior. It is a single complex sensitivity of the sort which we are aiming to instill when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook.[8]

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

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

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7. Ibid., 332.
8. Ibid., 333.

> Expressivism in this form suggests a naturalistic interpretation of practical reason, one that may seem appropriate to the enlightened commitments of the modern scientific world view. It is naturalistic metaphysically, insofar as it makes no commitment to the objective existence in the world of such allegedly questionable entities as values, norms, or reasons for action.[9]

On this familiar view, "cognition and volition are distinct." Practical reasoners do not simply enjoy a "single complex sensitivity" to what a situation requires; they also need the presence of a conative mental state (such as a desire) as well. In McDowell's example, one is aware that one's friend is in trouble and that the friend is able to be comforted (the cognitive bit) and a desire (or motivation or inclination or settled passion) for helping one's friends (the non-cognitive bit). Surely these two *together* and neither in isolation explains the behavior. For suppose that two persons in the same situation are equipped with identical perceptual capacities and so sensitive to the same range of reasons for action, but only one of them does the right thing. If such a supposed situation were to obtain, it would disconfirm McDowell's conclusion.

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

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

9. Wallace, "Practical Reason."

in which two persons perceive a situation and its practical requirements identically but act differently cannot obtain.[10]

Is there anyway to bridge the divide without begging the question in either direction? McDowell suggests we look to Aristotle. Aristotle allowed that "appreciation of what [a virtuous person] observes is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise."[11] The point of such an allowances is that the break between the sensitivity to reasons (which is virtue) and a resultant wrong action occurs when other psychological factors interfere. What interference? McDowell mentions desires and also a "distortion in one's appreciation" of the relevant reasons.[12]

This reply from McDowell is *an* answer but it too is not conclusive. For Donald Davidson argues to the effect that a person might fail to perform the resultant right action *even without such interfering factors.* McDowell responds that the point is true, but it is not an objection. Aristotle's account of continence details that continence is not a virtue. Continence is better than incontinence, but not as good as virtue. The continent person is able to perform the right action because he recognizes it as right, *despite* countervailing pressures (from desires, say) to do the wrong action. Since a fully developed virtue definitionally includes having the proper motivation as well, continence is only needed in the absence of a fully developed virtue. Furthermore, the virtuous person is not always one who "balances" reasons for X against countervailing reasons for Y. The virtuous person is the one for whom simply identifying a reason ("in this situation, courage requires that I run into danger") silences countervailing reasons. The virtuous persons sees the danger (and perhaps feels rightly apprehensive) but also sees that courage in the face of this danger is required; the latter perception, according to McDowell, "silences" other pressures.[13] The

10. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 333.
11. Ibid., 334.
12. Ibid., 334.
13. Ibid., 335.

merely continent person has to "weigh" reasons; the virtuous person fluently and instantly *acts* on the best reason.

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

Making the case more plausible requires a second, deeper look at reasoning in general. Before I offer my response, I need to take this second look. The paradigmatic case of knowledge is theoretical knowledge, knowledge that P. But theoretical knowledge is deductive, categorical, and propositional. Deductive logic examines and codifies the necessary relations that obtain between such propositions. So one objection states that if virtue is knowledge, and the paradigmatic kind of knowledge codifiable, then it would seem to be necessary that virtue knowledge is codifiable. However, practical knowledge or 'knowing-what-to-do' is not codifiable. Therefore, virtue must not be knowledge. (The non-cognitivist critic also assumes this deductive model of practical reasoning.)

The problem with this objection, McDowell thinks, is not so much a problem with our moral theory but a problem with our conception of rationality. The problem stems from a "deep-rooted prejudice" that rationality is a rule-following procedure. If rationality is a rule-following procedure, then it follows that *either* practical rationality and morality are likewise rule-following procedures *or* that practical rationality and morality is not, ultimately, sufficiently *rational*. Some philosophers (often followers of Hume but not necessarily Hume himself) think that morality is a not rational domain but a domain of sentiments, desires, commitments, approvals, and so on. Other philosophers (often followers of Kant)

think that morality is a rational domain and hence must be a matter of identifying first principles and "applying" them to particular situations. But what they share in common is a belief that "rationality must be explicable in terms of being guided by a formulable universal principle."[14] This common belief McDowell wishes to refute. MacIntyre, similarly, denies the assumption that normative ethical rules can be derived from universal ethical principles the way we "apply" universal logical truths to particular logical conclusions via a middle term.[15]

McDowell's discussion here (drawing on Wittgenstein and others) is hard to follow. The point seems to be that even apparently obvious cases where the rational thing to do is to follow an objective rule (say, by extending a series of numbers) turn out to be cases of a much messier process in which there is no such objective rule by appeal to which we can explain rational thoughts or behaviors. If Bob instructs Charlie to "add 2" to a number and continue applying the rule indefinitely, we tend to be confident Charlie will produce "2, 4, 6, 8," etc., which will "churn out the appropriate behavior with the sort of reliability which a physical mechanism, say a piece of clockwork, might have." We postulate a "psychological mechanism, underlying his behavior, by an inference analogous to that whereby one might hypothesize a physical structure underlying the observable motions of some inanimate object."[16] The "ground and nature of our confidence" that we will reliably apply rules is not but a common form of life. The 'form of life' is a term of art here from Wittgenstein (and quoted with approval from Stanley Cavell) that refers to that difficult-to-define process by which we learn how reliably to use words in our native language, how to make exclamations like a pained "ow!" or an excited "ooh!", when to laugh at jokes, and when to cry in pity. Our shared rationality, McDowell suggests, is not grounded in "external" objective rules

14. Ibid., 337.

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

16. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 337.

but in a shared form of life or what he calls a "congruence of subjectivities."[17] McDowell admits this is a disconcerting hypothesis; it induces "vertigo." But, our response to such vertigo should not be to embrace a "consoling myth". That myth he says is the two notions that (a) rule-following is a psychological mechanism that — absent mistakes — guarantees consistency, and that there exist objective facts of the matter over and above the congruence of subjectivities. If we abandon these two notions and embrace the model of deductive rationality as grounded only in our intersubjective form of life, then the corresponding model of practical rationality will become tenable.

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

The 'practical syllogism' takes the following shape:

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

On the strictly deductive logical model, the role of the major premise is to provide rock solid universal ethical principles from which to derive particular moral duties. But McDowell resists this model. On the strictly non-cognitivist model, without universal ethical principles we are left with universal psychological states (consistent desires, plans, values, or norms).

17. Ibid., 339.

McDowell also resists this. On the non-codifiable model, what does the major premise do? Its role, he says, is to state a "certain conception of how to live… [namely] the *virtuous person's conception* of the sort of life a human being should lead."[18] It is clear upon reflection that this account is a sort of circular reasoning. For the virtuous person's conception of how to live is itself conditioned by what he called earlier 'the moral outlook'. That conception of how to live, in turn, conditions what particular saliences are noticed (what minor premises) and generates practical conclusions about what is to be done. What kind of life should a human being lead? The answer "cannot be definitively written down."[19] Furthermore, "Any attempt to capture it in words will recapitulate the character of the teaching whereby it might be instilled: generalizations will be approximate at best…"[20] The upshot of the combination of non-codifiability with a practical syllogistic form is that the virtuous person takes for a rule of life some conception of how to live but that this conception is part of what it means to be a virtuous person. (Hence the vertigo.)

We might wonder why we are bothering about formal syllogistic reasoning at this point. But this way of understanding the practical syllogism *does* do good job of providing a plausible explanation of moral motivation (reasons one might act in some way) and moral behavior (reasons one acted that way). To paraphrase McDowell: "Explanations of judgments about what to do are explanations of actions."[21] I can explain your behavior by understanding that you were concerned for your friend's welfare and reached out to help. Likewise, you can explain your decision to help by assuring me that you are concerned for your friend's welfare. For McDowell, the general structure of the practical syllogism is useful. He says "the rationality of virtue… is not demonstrable from an external standpoint."[22]

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18. Ibid., 343. Emphasis added.
19. Ibid., 343.
20. Ibid., 343.
21. Ibid., 342. Verbatim, he says: "The explanations, so far treated as explanations of judgments about what to do, are equally explanations of actions."
22. Ibid., 346.

In sum, McDowell thinks virtue is a kind of knowledge or sensitivity to salient facts which call for a certain response and which intrinsically motivate a suitably sensitive (read: virtuous) person to respond in that way, at least in the absence of interfering passions. The kind of "knowledge" that virtue amounts to is uncodifiable, but that does no harm to the account. Virtue-knowledge is rather a broad conception of how to live and a series of specific sensitivities to a range of specific practical reasons. Practical reasoning is *consistent*, moreover, but not by being "objective" (in the sense that even McDowell admits would be desirable) but by being rooted in our communal form of life in precisely the same way logical reasoning is.

While I find McDowell's view here illuminating on some points, it leaves much to be desired. My complaints are two: first, McDowell broadens the definition of "requirements for action" so broadly that it begins to strain common sense to call all these sensitivities "virtues." I have a friend who can pretty well diagnose a car engine by listening to the way it whines or hums or clicks. All I hear is noise. This friend is sensitive to a range of requirements for action that I am not sensitive to. He even knows what to do (oil change, new timing belt, etc.). Is his practical knowledge a virtue? A second and related complaint is that McDowell seems to switch from talking about moral reasons to talking about *any* practical reason without any mention of the switch. For example, he admits that virtue knowledge cannot be reduced to any one sensitivity to a range of requirements for action but the requirements of kindness (say) must be balanced against others. Kindness is not the whole of virtue, and knowing the kind thing is the thing to be done requires more than just the awareness of another's need. Rather, one might need to rank, order, and weigh three different kinds of reasons (kindness, fairness, appropriateness) or ten or fifteen before one resolved what to do. Is this overall process of weighing and ranking *moral reasoning*? He seems to be assuming that "moral reasons" is a name for the overriding sort of practical reasons. I wish to argue that this is a subtle mistake.

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

III. Why Act at All?

The question "how should one live?" assumes a distinction between the ways one *should* live and the ways one *in fact* lives already. The first task is to step back from this distinction and ask an even more fundamental question: Why do we act at all? Why do we live? Why do we pursue anything? Why do we wake up in the morning in pursuit of some end? The familiar frame is inadequate to answering this question. My alternative will be more adequate.

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

The familiar frame invokes a pair of reasons: prudential and moral reasons. The familiar frame also sometimes associates one of the pair with emotion and the other with reason. Hume, for example, might associate morality with emotions and sentiments and associate prudence with rationality. It is "rational" for me to cheat you out of your cash, but my sentiments of guilt and brotherly affection don't let me. But prudence is not necessarily linked with rationality. Kant would flip the pair and associate morality with rationality and prudence with emotion and self-love. The prudential movements arise from emotional, non-rational aspects of our psychology. Hursthouse explains this aspect of Kant's moral theory:

> And there is indeed much in Kant to suggest that, although he shares with Aristotle the view that we have not just one, but two principles of movement, in other respects his philosophical psychology is Humean. He seems committed to the view that our emotions or inclinations are no part of our rationality. They come from the nonrational, animal side of our nature; if they happen to prompt us to act in accordance with the judgements of reason about what ought to be done we are lucky; if they incline us against them we find life difficult, but their prompting us in the right direction is no mark or indication of their rationality. The emotions are not rational in any way.[23]

Within this familiar frame, one's morality lives and dies at the intersection of two competing kinds of reasons. The immoral person is the one who gives into prudential reasons while the moral person is the one who elevates moral reasons. But, on this view, when life does not present a moral dilemma, when the two kinds of reasons do not compete, morality is idle. One is free to live one's life in response to prudential considerations which are neither (morally) good nor (morally) bad.

The alternative to the familiar frame is that all practical reasons are properly in the domain of "morality". A classic article from Edmund Pincoff explains the two different views of ethics: "Quandary ethics" views morality as solving moral dilemmas while "Character ethics" views morality as resolving how to live.

23. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 109.

Quandary ethics is focused on the short-term resolution of immediate moral problems, either by dissolving moral perplexity or giving some (hopefully rational) basis for a particular decision or course of action. His examples are philosophers such as Hare, Toulon, and Brandt. These think that:

> The business of ethics is to clarify and solve "problems", i.e. situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do; that the ultimate beneficiary of ethical analysis is the person who, in one of these situations, seeks rational ground for the decision he must make; that ethics is therefore primarily concerned to find such grounds, often conceived of as moral rules and the principles from which they can be derived; and that meta-ethics consists in the analysis of the terms, claims, and arguments which come into play in moral disputation, deliberation, and justification in problematic contexts.[24]

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

> …thought of ethics as a branch of politics, which in turn he thought of as a very wide-ranging subject having to do generally with the planning of human life so that it could be lived as well as possible. Moral problems are given their due but are by no means stage-centre. The question is not so much how we should resolve perplexities as how we should live.[25]

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

> This question is posed in a characteristically modern way, presupposing a distinction between the moral and the non-moral that is not drawn, as such, by the Greek thinkers. But if one objects to that characterization, one can rephrase it: for example, What role does concern for others for their own sake play in here scheme of ends? What role does political justice play in her scheme of ends? And so forth."[26]

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

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

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

Foot makes a similar point:

> Many if not most moral philosophers in modern times see their subject as having to do exclusively with relations between individuals or between an individual and society, and so with such things as obligations, duties, and charitable acts… 'moral' and 'prudential' considerations [are] contrasted in a way that was alien to Plato or Aristotle.[27]

Let's return to McDowell. It might seem that McDowell is clearly an exmaple of Pincoff's character ethicist. But it is not so clear. Like the Quandary ethicist, McDowell represents the view of moral reasons as special, perhaps overriding, kinds of reasons pertaining to the rights, obligations, or duties of one individual in relation to others. Even in asking the "how do I live?" question, a Quandary ethicist is likely assuming that the answer will include a set of moral reasons weighed against or in opposition to non-moral reasons (such as prudential reasons). McDowell remains unclear on whether moral reasons are *one type* of practical reason, or whether any practical reason count as a "moral" reason (broadly construed).[28]

My alternative is this: there is only one kind of reason for action: practical reasons. And though there are distinctions between various kinds of practical reasons, the proper distinction is not between "moral" and "non-moral" or "prudential" ones. Certainly considerations about myself are conceptually distinct from considerations about my family, my friend, my society, or my species. And certainly there is a powerful social and psychological force to the distinction between moral and prudential, other-regarding and self-regarding,[29] altruistic and egoistic[30], benevolent and selfish, conscience and self-love.[31] But getting the

27. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 68.

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

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

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

31. Julia Annas, "Morality and Self Interest," ed. Paul Bloomfield (Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–21; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Macmillan, 1967), 462; Paul Bloom-

distinction right is crucial to understanding the kind of knowledge that virtue is.

The proper distinction, as Foot points out, is that some practical reasons have to do with "obligations, duties, and charitable acts" to others while some practical reasons have to do with obligations to oneself or to third-person objects such as the environment or abstract objects.

MacIntyre can help to articulate this insight. His earliest ethical work distinguished the significance of moral judgments compared to other kinds of judgments. In a careful critique of both intuitionists such as Moore and emotivists such as Stevenson, MacIntyre concluded that both (mistakenly) assume that moral judgments and moral terms have significance only in their referential meaning. The intuitionists, of course, concluded that moral terms refer to a non-natural property, while the emotivists concluded that moral terms do not refer to such a property and so do not refer at all. (Naturalists, later in the 20th century, argue that moral terms refer to natural properties.) MacIntyre's alternative denies the assumption entirely; moral judgments "have their own kind of logic" and their significance, like other kinds of judgments, comes from "exhibiting the logic of their usage."[32] The significance of moral judgments is that "they enable us to solve problems of appraisal and of action." Solving problems of evaluation (we might say) and action is their place in "a pattern of language and action…" He continues:

> Above all they arise out of the way in which we see the world and the way in which our language allows us to see the world. We cannot sufficiently emphasize the direction given to our appraisals by the language which happens to be available for our descriptions. It is as we see the facts that we judge the world.[33]

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field, "Virtue and Happiness," ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012; Yong Huang, "The Self-Centeredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2010): 651–92.

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

33. Ibid.

MacIntyre's point is that evaluative judgments are not *simply* useful in moral dilemmas or quandaries. Evaluative judgments appear at the earliest stages of childhood development in a pattern of usage that is inextricable from the human activities of reasoning, acting, and appraising. Evaluative judgments appear in the widest imaginable spread of human activities, from politics to playgrounds, from sociology to social life, from the practices of law and medicine to the professions of journalism and psychology, from the sciences to the arts. Even if this point be granted, moral dilemmas are not *unreal*. Moral dilemmas are a special version of our general "problems of appraisal and action." They may be particularly vexing, but they are no different from the general problems of how to live, how to be happy, what kinds of public policies to pursue, what apparently meaningful types of life are really meaningful.

We can state the picture in this way: evaluative judgments are the product of a process of evalutive reasoning. Evaluatve reasoning is *about* evaluative features of the world, even though evaluative reasoning simultaneously colors our appraisal of the world.

In my reading, MacIntyre's insight about evaluative reasoning and "moral judgments" is identical to my thesis that practical reasoning and practical judgments are not narrowly "moral" if by "moral" we mean only that which has to do with other-regarding duties. Instead of segregating "moral" judgments from a broader class of practical judgments, we ought to view all practical judgments together. Instead of puzzling over the illusory problem of how a special class of moral judgments function, we should simply reflect on the whole class of practical judgments that explain *why we act at all.*

A History of the Error

I have not yet explained as clearly as I might have the proper way to think about "moral" and "non-moral" prudential or practical reasons. To make this more clear, it is helpful to examine the history of our erroneous or rather our unclear way of thinking about these

distinctions.

As Nussbaum and others highlighted above, the Greek way of thinking did not sharply divide *ethos* from rhetoric, politics, or theoretical philosophy. At some point in the history of western moral philosophy, the topic of the "moral" began to separate off from the broader topic of the practical. Foot cites Mill as an early proponent of the distinction:

> J. S. Mill, for instance, expresses this modern point of view quite explicitly, saying in his essay *On Liberty* that 'A person who shows rashness, obstinacy, self□conceit . . . who cannot restrain himself from harmful indulgences' shows faults (Mill calls them 'self□regarding faults') which 'are not properly immoralities' and while they 'may be proofs of any amount of folly . . . are only a subject of moral reprobation when they involve a breach of duty to others, for whose sake the individual is bound to have care for himself.'[34]

Mill distinguishes folly from immorality by treating folly as a failure to provide goods for oneself. He treats imprudence as "bad" but not *morally bad.*

The same distinction shows up not only in distinctions between good and bad, but between a whole host of normative terms such as 'need' and 'ought' and 'should'. Elizabeth Anscombe explains:

> The terms "should" or "ought" or "needs" relate to good and bad: e.g. machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil. According to this conception, of course, "should" and "ought" are not used in a special "moral" sense when one says that a man should not bilk. (In Aristotle's sense of the term "moral" [ήθικός], they are being used in connection with a moral subject□matter: namely that of human passions and [non□technical] actions.) But they have now acquired a special so□called "moral" sense-□i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the "ought" sentences used in certain types of context: not merely the contexts that Aristotle would call "moral"□-passions and actions□-but also some of the contexts that he would call "intellectual."[35]

34. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 68.
35. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy."