Chapter 1

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: How Should One Live?

"How should one live?" This question is central to neo-Aristotelian writers such as Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDowell, and others. The question is so important, I think, for at least four reasons.

First, the question implies that the questioner is aware of a dichotomy or distinction between *one one is in fact living* and *how one might live*. As a matter of fact, every capable adult is already living in a particular way. I take it for granted that most people learn to live in a particular way from their culture and family of origin, while also trying to satisfy more or less their own idiosyncratic preferences. But a normal part of human life is pausing to reflect on one's own motives, methods, means, and ends. A crisis can trigger such reflection:

what is wrong with my way of life, my values, my choices? And exposure to other people – be they friends, fictional characters, or historical figures – who seem extraordinarily happy can trigger such reflection: what do they know that I do not? What are they doing that I am not?

Secondly, the "how should one live?" question assumes that there are good human lives and bad human lives. I hope that it is uncontroversial to point out that some of the members of our race are fools. (I leave it to the reader to supply illustrations.) If there are ways one *definitely should not live*, then there is at least way or set of ways one *should* live. Even if it is difficult to answer the question of how one should live, we should not be fully skeptical that there is an answer (or a set of answers).

Thirdly, the question implies that the questioner is at the age of reflection. Young children do not wonder how to live. And, according to my account, practical reasoning is an essential part of maturation from child, to competent adult, to practically wise human being.

Fourthly, the question calls for a *certain kind of answer*, namely, a practically reasonable answer. Recall Jay Wallace's general definition of practical reasoning as "the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do."[1] Although sometimes we reflexively act without thinking, and other times contemplate without acting, ("four and four makes eight"), it seems obvious, on the face, that deliberation and resolute action are not like this. One resolves what to do by considering practical reasons. When a child asks a "how?" question about, say, how to open a jar, we offer a practical instruction: ("grip the base tightly, twist the lid to the left.") As adults, we ask "how?" questions about large, multifaceted projects: how to complete a company merger?; how to save for retirement?; how to raise a child? The "instructions" for such answers will be complex.

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

The "how should I live?" question is simply our most complex long-term project. The answer or answers cannot be an overly vague resolution (e.g., "help to improve the world"), nor mere specific platitudes (e.g., "do no harm"). Rather, a good answer will distinguish between overall good ways and overall bad ways to live and include a set of practical reasons, some general enough to give a trajectory to one's whole life, others specific enough to provide guidance through the day-to-day matters of human life.

In short, an answer to the "how should one live?" question requires practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is unique among virtues in several ways. First, it is perhaps the one *clearly non-optional* virtue. Everyone has the obligation to become practically wise, regardless of circumstances, social roles, aptitudes, cultures, and so on. The universality of the obligation arises from the mere fact that one is a practical, rational primate. Secondly, practical wisdom is also unique in that it enables one to acquire other virtues, such as courage or moderation, by providing its possessor with the insight and moral skill to develop specific good habits in the varied circumstances of normal life. Thirdly, practical wisdom is recursive: the practically wise person is the most well-equipped to root out folly and become more practically wise.

The neo-Aristotelian framework for doing ethics views ethical reasoning as a holistic process that must be sensitive to the whole range of practical reasons. According to such thinkers, there can be no adequate theory of ethics without a theory of practical rationality. According to the arguments of the last chapter, virtues are traits that enable one to live a distinctly human life, and that partly constitute that life. In this chapter, I shall argue that the practically wise person is engaged in "mapping the landscape of value"[2] – that is, developing the knowledge and good intentions needed to pursue what is truly worthwhile and avoid what may seem worthwhile but is actually worthless. If successful, I shall be lending support to age-old view that the skill of engaging practical reasoning – reliably and suc-

2. Ibid.

cessfully – is the virtue of practical wisdom. The practically wise person is one who *knows* the answer or answers, if there are any such answers. The one who answers this question poorly lives foolishly and, ipso facto, badly. He or she acts on bad reasons and fails to act on good reasons. The one who answers it well lives wisely, and ispo facto, well. Hence, it is essential to virtue that one be practically wise. Or so I shall argue.

Serious objections exist to this way of framing ethical reasoning. For example, how, exactly, is a *rational* calculative process central to *moral* virtue? Three challenges need a response. Each one challenges the notion that successful practical reasoning is essential to human virtue. I shall briefly state them here and respond below.

1. Procedural Reasoning: One challenge is the familiar notion that practical reasoning is a value-neutral procedure by which we line up means to our ends. On this view, moral reasoning is about the morally good and bad while practical reasoning is about something else entirely, such as the prudent or imprudent, the advisable or ill-advised. So how could an *intellectual* exercise be essential to *moral* virtue?

2. Reason, Practice, and Motivation: Another challenge comes from non-cognitivism (especially expressivism).[3] The worry is that practical reasons by themselves can't motivate us to act (without complementary psychological attitudes such as desires), while motivations to act cannot be rationally evaluated as true or false. This is really a pair of twin challenges: Is practical reasoning really *rational*? And if so, is it really *practical*? It seems to be either one or the other.

3. Overriding Reasons: A third challenge is a familiar distinction between "moral reasons" on the one hand and "prudential reasons" on the other, where moral reasons are overriding reasons. One is immoral if one fails to act on overriding moral reasons. But one is merely foolish if one fails to act on prudential reasons. If practical reasoning is a process

3. Non-cognitivism is motivated by metaphysical naturalism, which objects to normative realism about practical reasons. I shall address that objection in chapter 6.

of identifying or inventing what is advisable or ill-advised (but not ultimately binding), then how does this process relate to an appropriate sensitivity to what is morally permissible or impermissible (which is ultimately binding)?

My entry point on this complex matter is a sustained discussion of John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason" essay. Section 2 offers a qualified defense of his thesis that virtue is a form of practical knowledge, including an initial perceptual sensitivity to the salient facts of a situation with the skill to do what is required by those facts.

Section 3 highlights an ambiguity in McDowell's contrast between 'moral' and 'practical' reasons. He confuses the genus 'practical reasoning' for one species, 'moral reasoning' about one's obligations to others. I attempt to remedy this confusion by putting in historical context the relationship between 'moral' and 'practical' reasons. McDowell confuses two frameworks for approaching ethics: the 'quandary frame' and the 'character frame.'

Section 4 offers a more coherent alternative. It reprises the argument that human beings are practical reasoning animals by placing our distinctive activity in context of the general inclination of all living things to their own life and health. In this light, practical reasoning is a necessarily substantive form of reasoning about ends, rather than a merely instrumental one about means, because in order to have any reasons at all one must have a first principle of practical reason, namely, a general evaluative conception of what is to be pursued and hence how to live.

Section 5 returns to the challenges listed above, and discusses McDowell's responses as well as my own.

II. Virtue as Practical Reasoning

John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason" argues, among other things, that virtue is a particular kind of practical knowledge. Practical reasoning is both a rational process and also an initial, perceptual sensitivity that makes visible to us practical reasons. Even though he allows that practical reasons are ultimately intersubjective features of our social world, he argues that they are no more and no less objective than theoretical reasons. In this section, I trace his discussion in some detail, including his statements of various objections and responses to them.

What kind of knowledge is virtue, according to McDowell? It is a practical and dispositional *what to do*. It is not simply propositional. Rather, it is a non-codifiable perceptual sensitivity to salient facts along with a disposition that leads the virtuous knower to act properly – so long as no countervailing psychological factors interfere. Some objections to his thesis will be addressed as we proceed.

How does it make sense to conceive of virtue as practical knowledge? Consider a platitudinous value such as kindness. Suppose kindness is really a virtue. What does it mean to predicate kindness of someone? We cannot ascribe a virtue when one acts kindly once or twice, or does so consistently by pure luck. Justifying the ascription of a *virtue* requires that a person "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."[4] McDowell is gesturing toward three or four plausible criteria for the ascription of a virtue: *reliability* means the kind person must be *regularly* or *habitually* disposed to kind thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; *sensitivity* means that the kind person demonstrates an alertness to the fact that a friend is in need, a child is sad, an elderly parent is lonely; *practical knowledge* means the kind person knows what to do in such situations; and *intentional behavior* means

4. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 332.

that the person correctly feels the imposition to avoid cruel and indifferent behavior and to act on what the situation requires.

McDowell has made it plausible that sensitivity to reasons for behavior is at least necessary for virtue. But is it sufficient? He offers two answers: The first is that the presence of a virtue in someone exhaustively explains his or her behavior. For example, when the kind person sees that a situation requires kindness, "requirement imposed by the situation" must "exhaust his reason for acting as he does."[5] An ulterior interest (say, in a mercenary reward) would disqualify the action as a example of kindness. The kind person's action is explained by the simple fact that it would be a kind action.

Now, the kindness is not the only reason for action. There are many reasons for action and many situations where no single overriding reason is obvious. Rather, the question of what to do seems to generalize into a question of what is good or advisable, all things considered. McDowell concedes the point. He illustrates it with the example of a parent who is overly indulgent to child out of kindness. Certainly, the parent is sensitive to what kindness requires but not *sensitive enough* to fairness or to considerations of the child's health, and so on.

To accommodate this observation, McDowell generalizes this point to encompass all of virtue:

> 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.[6]

McDowell is saying that if the kind person's behavior arises from a response to the salient facts he is sensitive to, then the virtuous person's behavior *in general* is explained by just the

5. Ibid., 332.
6. Ibid., 333.

fact that it is virtuous. The virtuous person's behavior, then, arises from a general sensitivity to *what situations require.* Virtue is a "single complex sensitivity" that constitutes "a moral outlook" seems to require a meta-cognitive capacity to reflect upon the various requirements imposed by a situation, to rank and order them, and act accordingly.

I have a complaint about McDowell's clarification here, which I will explain in full below. In brief, it seems wrong to call the single sensitivity "virtue" when it includes considerations that do not seem intuitively moral at all, such as prudential considerations. For now, I must examine McDowell's response to the non-cognitivist critic who challenges the notion that practical reasoning can, by itself, motivate one to action.

III. Reason, Practice, and Motivation

The first challenge to his own thesis that McDowell addresses comes from non-cognitivism. Non-cognitivism builds on a Humean model of practical reasoning according to which "cognition and volition are distinct." Hume says that practical reasons cannot motivate, at least not by themselves.[7] If this were so, moral reasoning could not satisfy the "practical requirement" – it could neither move us to action nor explain *why* we acted. The non-cognitivst critic would be quick to present a counterexample of two persons in the same situation who are sensitive to an identical range of reasons for action but respond differently. If such a situation were to obtain, it would disconfirm McDowell's thesis that virtue is practical knowledge.

Expressivists are among the chief contemporary proponents of the Humean model. Indeed, a large part of the appeal of expressivism is that it can satisfy the *practical* dimension of practical reason (though at the cost of the "rational" part). Jay Wallace explains:

7. He says: "Reason is the discovery of truth and falsehood." (*Treatise of Human Nature*, Part I.1.)

> 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.[8]

The expressivist has a neat explanation of reasoning, action, and motivation. If reasons cannot motivate by themselves, then practical reasoners act when reasons co-exist with a conative mental state (such as a desire, interest, or attraction).[9] practical reasoners do not simply enjoy a "single complex sensitivity" to what situations require. Instead, the cognitive bit judges an object, while the conative state provides the movement toward the object. For 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). The expressivist would say that surely these two *together* – and neither in isolation – explains the behavior.

This challenge presents a pair of twin challenges: First, is virtue-knowledge *practical* – and if so, wouldn't it be impossible for an agent to perceive what a situation requires and still do wrong? Secondly, is virtue-knowledge *rational* – and if so, mustn't it be codifiable and consistent? The very notion of a unitary "practical reasoning" is a paradox.

III.1. Is Practical Reasoning Practical*?*

McDowell's response to the expressivist critic is this: one must already be sensitive to a particular range of requirements for action in order to even notice the salient facts (e.g.,

8. Wallace, "Practical Reason."

9. We all exhibit various dispositions to act in certain ways, to rank and organize our various motivations, to pursue certain things, or to make certain decisions rather than others. Such dispositions are clearly practical. They have the right kind of action-guiding force to explain why we act the way we do. On the other hand, there are dispositions. The term 'disposition' gets used in various ways: one can be disposed (say) to repay one's debts (a moral commitment), or disposed to shout when angry (a temperament), or disposed to travel abroad every summer (an interest). But is a "disposition" a form of knowledge?

that one's friend is in trouble). It is quite plausible to interpret the difference between the vicious and virtuous person as lying not just in their psychological reactions to what they notice about the world but *in the noticing itself.*[10] The morally calloused does not notice the fact that his or her actions are causing others pain. Better, the morally calloused person does not notice the fact *as morally salient*.

This response from McDowell is not conclusive, but it is a good start. It highlights, but does not alleviate, the deep disagreement between the Humean and the Aristotelian camps. He concedes the conditional that *if* two people are identically sensitive to a morally salient fact but act differently *then* virtue cannot simply be a sensitivity. But one person's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens.* So if virtue is to be identified with a single complex sensitivity, then a supposed situation in which two persons perceive a situation and its practical requirements identically but act differently cannot obtain.[11] Is there anyway to bridge the divide without begging the question in either direction? McDowell suggests we look to Aristotle.

Aristotle allowed that sometimes the "appreciation of what [a virtuous person] observes is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise."[12] It is possible that a virtuous person correctly perceives what a situation requires but fails to act correctly due to interference from psychological factors. Desires, fears, etc. might cause a "distortion in one's appreciation" of the relevant reasons.[13]

This Aristotelian reply is also not conclusive. McDowell cites an objection from Donald Davidson to the effect that a person might fail to perform the resultant right action *even without such interfering factors.* McDowell concedes. But Davidson's move changes the subject slightly, from virtue to continence. For Aristotle, continence (or self-control)

10. Margaret Olivia Little, "Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology," *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): 117–37.

11. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 333.

12. Ibid., 334.

13. Ibid., 334.

is not a virtue. Continence is is comparatively better than incontinence but not as good as virtue. If one can only do the right thing by gritting one's teeth and bearing it, one has not fully attained the relevant 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 by definition includes having the proper motivation as well, continence is only needed in the absence of a fully developed virtue. Put differently, the virtuous person is not just one who "balances" reasons to φ against countervailing reasons to π. The virtuous person is the one for whom simply identifying an overriding reason silences countervailing reasons. For example, *in this situation, courage requires that I run into danger.* The virtuous persons sees the danger (and 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.[14] The merely continent person has to "weigh" reasons; the virtuous person fluently *acts* on the best reason.

So the response to Davidson's objection is to suggest that when a continent person sees what is to be done but fails to do it (even absent interfering factors), the failure can be explained as a lack of virtue – as a lack of a fully developed sensitivity to what is required. The virtuous person, unlike the continent person, would not have to stop and "weigh". The virtuous person sees what is required and acts.

III.2. Is Practical Reasoning Rational*?*

McDowell's case that practical knowledge can motivate the virtuous person required addressing twin challenges. The other side of the paradox above challenged the *rational* credentials of the practical knowledge that is virtue. Pretty clearly, the paradigmatic case of knowledge is theoretical knowledge, i.e., *knowledge that p*. Such knowledge is categorical

14. Ibid., 335.

and propositional, and codifiable into systems of necessary relations. McDowell's critic then poses the following argument: knowledge is codifiable. Virtue is a kind of knowledge. Therefore, virtue-knowledge is codifiable. However, virtue-knowledge is practical knowledge or 'knowing-what-to-do', which is not codifiable. Therefore, virtue must not be knowledge.

The error in this objection, McDowell thinks, is not so much a problem with his moral theory but 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 but not necessarily Kant himself) 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."[15] This common belief McDowell wishes to refute.

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 turn out to be cases of a much messier process in which there is no such objective rule we can appeal to. For example, take the objective rule of extending a series of numbers two at a time. Suppose Smith instructs Jones to "add 2" to a number and continue applying the rule indefinitely. We tend to be confident Jones will "churn out

15. ibid., 337. 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. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" *The Monist* 67, no. 4 (1984): 498–513.

the appropriate behavior with the sort of reliability which a physical mechanism, say a piece of clockwork, might have." We tend to expect that Jones will produce "2, 4, 6, 8," etc. McDowell thinks this confidence is based on postulating 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.

McDowell's term 'form of life' is a term of art drawn from Wittgenstein (and quoted with approval from Stanley Cavell). The term seems to refer to that difficult-to-define process of acculturation or formation. For example, how do we learn reliably to use words and expressions in our native language? There is no clear mechanistic process that explains how a child learns to make exclamations – such as a pained "ow!" or an excited "ooh!". There is no clear mechanistic process by which we learn when to laugh at jokes or when to cry in pity. Instead of a mechanistic process, McDowell suggests that we children learn words and behaviors by "bildung" or formation. Similarly, he suggests, our shared rationality is not grounded in "external" objective rules but in a shared form of life or what he calls a "congruence of subjectivities."[17]

It is disconcerting to many to consider that nothing keeps rationality "on the rails" but a congruence of subjectivities. McDowell admits this is a disconcerting hypothesis; it induces "vertigo." But, he says, our response to such vertigo should not be to embrace a "consoling myth". That myth is the two notions that (a) rule-following is a psychological mechanism that – absent mistakes – guarantees consistency, and (b) 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

16. McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," 337.
17. Ibid., 339.

intersubjective form of life, then the corresponding model of practical rationality will become tenable. While I don't go in for McDowell's intersubjective account of rationality, my purpose here is to defend the view that both forms of rationality – the practical and the theoretical – are on par and stand or fall together. Hence, the practical knowledge that is virtue may not be codifiable, but it is still a form of knowledge.

A related query is this: what, if anything, guarantees that the moral person's behavior is intelligibly the same from case to case? If moral knowledge were rational, then it would be consistent from case to case and situation to situation; but if, as McDowell has been arguing, both deductive reasoning and practical reasoning are not rule-following mechanisms, then how do we explain the virtuous person's reliably correct behavior?

His answer invokes Aristotle's notion of a practical syllogism. 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 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 solid universal ethical principles from which to derive particular moral duties. McDowell resists this model. On the strictly non-cognitivist model, there are no universal principles but only universal psychological states, such as consistent desires, plans, values, or norms. McDowell also resists this. Instead, the role of the major premise is to articulate a "certain conception of how to live… [namely] the *virtuous person's conception* of the sort of life a human being should lead."[18] 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

18. Ibid., 343. Emphasis added.
19. Ibid., 343.

the teaching whereby it might be instilled: generalizations will be approximate at best…"[20] If the kind of conception of a good life that the virtuous person has is approximate and non-codifiable, it becomes hard to see why we are bothering with formal syllogistic reasoning at this point. McDowell's response is that understanding virtue-knowledge within a the practical syllogism *does* a 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 so offered to help. Likewise, you can explain your decision to help simply by citing the fact that your friend was in need. So the general structure of the practical syllogism is useful.[22]

In sum, McDowell thinks virtue is a kind of knowledge or sensitivity to salient facts which call for a certain response and which – absent interfering passions – intrinsically motivates the virtuous person to respond in that way. 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 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. Furthermore, the kind of "knowledge" that virtue amounts to is uncodifiable, but that does no harm to the account. Virtue-knowledge

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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. It is clear upon reflection that this account contains some circularity. He says "the rationality of virtue… is not demonstrable from an external standpoint." (ibid., 346.) 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. 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 – and thus ensues the vertigo.

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 – precisely the same way in which logical reasoning is. Both are "intersubjective" and rooted in our form of life, but both are as objective as need be.

III.3. Moral and Practical Reasoning

While I shall discuss what I think McDowell gets wrong below, on my view, he gets this much right: practical reasoning is indeed by definition a form of *reasoning*. It is like theoretical reasoning in that it is normative.

Broadly, we can say that theoretical reasoning is a process by which I aim to determine *what to believe* – to answer the question "What should I 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 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.

So far as we know, all theoretical reasoners are also practical reasoners. We can imagine creatures such as angels, Artificial Intelligences, and intelligent aliens who might think without acting; but so far as we know, to be a reasoner at all is to be responsive to what Sellars called the "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. If this is right, then the burden of proof lies with those who would artificially separate the *knowing* and the *practicing*.

That said, my complaint with McDowell's account is that he confuses moral and practical reasons. Suppose 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. By McDowell's lights, my friend is "sensitive to a range of requirements for action" and knows what to do – e.g., oil change, new timing belt, and so on. It seems to follow that my friend is "virtuous". It strains common sense to call any and all such sensitivities "virtues."

Relatedly, McDowell admits that one might need to rank, order, and weigh a dozen different kinds of reasons (kindness, fairness, appropriateness) before one resolved what to do. He seems to switch from talking about moral reasons to talking about *any* practical reason without any mention of the switch. By failing to render a clear distinction between moral and other practical reasons, I believe McDowell falls prey to a habitual way of framing moral discussions that is a subtle mistake.

Call this habitual way of framing moral discussions the "quandary frame." I borrow the term 'quandary' from a classic article by Edmund Pincoff. Pincoff contrasts "quandary ethics" with another way of framing ethical discussions which he calls "character" ethics. On this frame, 'moral' considerations contrast with prudence and any other kind of practical consideration. 'Moral' considerations most commonly refer to "other-regarding" considerations (opposed to self-regarding ones),[23] altruistic (as opposed to egoistic),[24] considerations

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

24. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Macmillan, 1967), 462; Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in *Morality and Self Interest*, ed. Paul Bloomfield (Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–21.

of benevolence (as opposed to selfishness),[25] or conscience (as opposed to self-love).[26]

The contrast between moral and all other practical reasons gives rise to a distinctive way of approaching ethics. On quandary ethics:

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

According to Philippa Foot, the quandary frame is the most way most modern philosophers approach ethics. She says:

> 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.[28]

Relatedly, Martha Nussbaum says:

> This question [of how 'moral' ends figure among other ends] 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."[29]

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25. Paul Bloomfield, "Eudaimonia and Practical Rationality," in *Virtue and Happiness*, ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012.

26. Yong Huang, "The Self-Centeredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2010): 651–92.

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

28. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 68.

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

Kant and Hume agree on the quandary frame, despite their significant substantive disagreements. They both present morality as a kind of crisis strategy. On any given normal day, agents are free to pursue their own self-interested inclinations – get a good job, save for retirement, eat healthy foods, exercise, make friends, and so on – so long as they commit no wrong. So long as life presents no moral dilemmas, moral reasoning is idle.

The alternative to quandary ethics is what Pincoff calls "character" ethics (of which I take neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to be a token) 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.[30]

The Greek way of framing moral questions viewed *all* practical ends as 'moral.' MacIntyre provides the clearest summary of the older use of 'moral':

> 'Moral' is the etymological descendant of 'moralis'. But 'moralis', like its Greek predecessor *ethikos* – Cicero invented 'moralis' to translate the Greek word in the *De Fato* – means 'pertaining to character' where a man's character is nothing other than his set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead on particular kind of life… The early uses of 'moral' did not contrast with 'prudential' or 'self interested"' nor with 'legal or 'religious'… The word to which it is closest in meaning is perhaps most simply 'practical.'[31]

MacIntyre is analyzing etymology of the term 'moral', but his point is not merely etymological; it is conceptual. When quandary ethicists conceive of 'moral reasons' as a special overriding type of practical reason concerned with duties to others (contrasted with self-regarding prudential reasons), they fall under the illusion that moral reasons may not be

30. Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," 553–4.
31. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 38.

practical and that practical reasons may not be moral. By contrast, the character ethicist views life as presenting the variety of possible ends that could clash or harmonize that all need to be accounted for.

It is helpful to observe that, 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.'[32]

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.*

While I don't intend to suggest that there is something automatically laudable about the older Aristotelian emphasis, my contention is that the modern emphasis on "relations between individuals or between an individual and society" fails to capture much of what is interesting about the "how should one live?" question. The modern distinction obscures the real ethical situation.

To return to McDowell, I can now put my complaint in clearer relief: is he a quandary ethicist or character ethicist? In my view, McDowell's view represents a mixture (indeed, a confusion) of the two. Like the character ethicist, he emphasizes the "how should I live?" question and invokes practical knowledge as an important part of the answer. However, like the quandary ethicist, he represents moral considerations pertaining to the rights, obligations, or duties to others (such as kindness) as a special, perhaps overriding, kind of reason. He does not seem to notice that broadening the virtuous person's perceptual sensitivity to

32. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 68.

what a *any* situation requires renders his account ambiguous. Are moral reasons are *one type* of practical reason, or can any practical reason count as a "moral" reason (broadly construed).[33]

IV. Practical Reasoning as Pursuing the Good

The remedy for this confusion is to return to and defend a more consistent account of practical reasons. Gladly, this account will reinforce what we have argued above about the natural normativity in the human life form and all organic life. This section builds on the work of Philippa Foot and on Jennifer Frey's recent discussions of Anscombe and Aquinas.

On the Aristotelian-Thomistic account, practical reasoning is by definition an end-oriented activity that aims at the perceived good of one's form of life. The primary question is not "why should one respond to moral reasons instead of prudential ones?" but "why do we act at all?" and "how can we act well?" Asking this question, and answering it, is a practically rational activity that defines the human life form. Certainly, some practical reasons have to do with "obligations, duties, and charitable acts" to others; but others pertain to obligations to oneself and even to third-person objects such as the environment, possessions, and perhaps even abstract objects.

Considered thus broadly, the normativity of practical reasoning is clear: some reasons for acting are good while others are bad. Errors of morality, then, belong to a wider class of practical errors. As Foot says: "I want to show that judgments usually considered to be the special subject of moral philosophy should really be seen as belonging to a wider class of evaluations of conduct with which they share a common conceptual structure."[34]

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

34. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 66–67.

On this frame, any reason to φ or not to φ is a practical reason, and successfully sorting through all such reasons is practical wisdom. Unsuccessfully doing so is imprudence or practical folly, which is a vice that inhibits one's ability to live a human life.

Defending the Aristotelian account requires us to revisit in more detail some of what was argued above in chapter 2. Recall the observation that all organisms act toward ends, with or without reflection. Frey summarizes Aquinas in this way:

> All living things are a self-sustaining system of powers that functions to bring the living thing into being and to sustain its being. The movement of any part of a living thing, at any particular moment, is necessarily explained by reference to the movement of the whole thing towards a single end: the coming to be, maintenance, or reproduction of that very form of life.[35]

As I argued above, all living things exhibit teleological movement. They grow into maturity, which is the exemplification of their form of life. This form of life is what Aquinas calls a thing's "nature": wolf hunts in packs by nature, trees extend roots into the ground by nature, reptiles warm themselves in the sun by nature, and so on.

To quote John Haldane, "things are specified by their power."[36] The sunflower has no conscious sense with which to incline toward sunlight. When it comes to higher organisms, insects and mammals and so on, organisms have "appetite". They move consciously sense and move toward certain objects and avoid others: The antelope pursues healthy grass and flees a lion. The animal can only experience what is good or bad for it as a particular object.

While normativity is a feature of all living beings, human beings are also aware of it. Humans grow, reproduce, and enjoy conscious experiences like other animals and also

35. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 68.

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

know that they do so. Obviously plants and animals do not "naturally incline" toward their good by reflecting or choosing it. Frey points out:

> Aquinas would agree with us that it is a category mistake to say that a sunflower wants to grow towards the light, if by this we mean that the flower somehow registers a positive feeling or has an inner impression towards the light, which "causes" it to move toward the light. The plant does not apprehend or desire anything; thus Aquinas is very careful to say that it does not have a power of appetite. In fact, Aquinas is at pains to note that a plant has no window onto the world at all – it just has conditions in which it characteristically comes into being, maintains, and reproduces itself.[37]

Lower organisms naturally incline toward their own good. Higher organisms perceive objects but do not perceive them *as* falling under universal categories. By contrast, a human being can recognize universals. Human beings are specified by their "power" or capacity to engage in cognitive and deliberative activities. While animals can not only sense but *perceive*, humans have the capacity of "intellection," the power of abstracting formal properties from what is perceived. An animal can *sense* an informed, organized object; an animal can be affected by the object. But the human animal can *acquire information* from the organized object. Animals may perceive something *as* dangerous or *as* desirable. Human beings perceive *that* a the dangerous thing is a predator or the desirable thing *is food*.[38]

The extra ability to perceive under universal categories brings with it the human capacity for taking up natural inclinations or aversions in a deliberative act. Natural inclinations may be underwritten or overridden. Confronted with a delicious and healthy salad sitting on someone else's plate, I will recognize it as *not mine* and hence choose not to reach for it. Confronted with a lion in a zoo, I choose not to flee, for I recognize it *as not dangerous*. Frey summarizes:

37. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 69–70.

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

> Rational animals, like any animal, have a natural inclination towards their good as a whole, and like lower animals this power is actualized through their apprehension of things in the world. But Aquinas argues that a rational animal relates to the world through the application of universal concepts, and thus it is inclined to pursue or avoid things under an intellectual, universal apprehension of them. Thus, Aquinas says that the will is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the "universal good," rather than the particular good.[39]

We have been speaking of the human capacity for recognizing and pursuing particular ends as good. We need to expand our scope to include the whole of life, the conception of our human good that constitutes the answer to the "how to live?" question. McDowell agrees with this in his discussion of the practical syllogism. Every rational practice is undertaking in pursuit of some particular end *in context* of a total conception of what is good in general. Frey continues:

> Consequently, we can say that rational animals have an understanding of different levels of ends, and at least a vague sense of how they are supposed to hang together as a whole. This conception of how it all hangs together is what Aquinas calls the ultimate end – a rational animal's general, conceptual understanding of how to live or go on. Aquinas thinks that any sane, mature adult will necessarily have cobbled together some such conception. Aquinas calls this conception "the universal good", and he argues that it is the will's proper object. Everything that is willed is willed under this rational aspect of good, as to be pursued because *in accord with my general conception of the good.* In fact, Aquinas thinks there could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live.[40]

Frey's argument here is that the question of 'how to live' is a question about my good as a human being; answering that question requires practically reasoning, which is a distinctively human activity. And since every "sane, mature adult" engages in this activity, every sane mature adult has a general notion about the answer. The crucial insight is that without such a general notion, we *would not engage in rational action at all*. Frey continues:

39. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 75.
40. Ibid., 78–79, italics in original.

> No human action is intelligible without attributing to the agent herself some conception of this end, no matter how inarticulate, unsystematic, or unreflective it might be. Aquinas takes it for granted that in coming to be a human being—i.e., being raised in a community of other human beings, coming into the possession of concepts, a language, and coming to have a world—one comes into some such conception, and thus comes to act voluntarily.[41]

Where does the process of rational action begin? We can again compare practical reasoning with demonstrative or theoretical reasoning. Aquinas points out that the first thing rational beings apprehend is simply "existence" or "being" – infants perceive that some things are there and others not there. They eventually come to perceive objects *as* objects, as individual objects, and to name and categorize them with language acquired in a social setting. Likewise, the *practical rational* animal first apprehends simply "good" or "desirable" — infants perceive that some things are to be pursued and others avoided. Hence, to be *theoretically* rational is to judge a proposition p as true or false, as best one can, according to the rational assessment of the reasons for affirming or denying p. Similarly, to be *practically* rationally is to judge a practical reason φ as good or bad, in accord with the rational assessment of the reasons for pursuing or avoiding φ.

Aquinas puts the comparison this way:

> …as "being" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension simply, so "good" is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after." Hence this is the first precept of practical reason, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."[42]

The use of 'good' here, it bears repeating, not a special moral sense of good, but simply means 'desirable'. Good means 'to be pursued.' An entity is 'good' when it is considered

41. Ibid., 87.
42. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, n.d. IIa. Q.94. Art. 2.

as an object of inclination. Without such a general principle, practical reasoning and rational practice are unintelligible.

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

> Practical reason is the movement of thought towards, rather than away from, material particulars…. practical reasoning is a movement from general knowledge of what is good and how to live, towards the production of the kind of life that is essentially characterized by such knowledge. When it is done well, what is understood is the same as what is produced: human form or human life.[43]

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

> For practical reason, the starting points are the most primitive human goods that the will is naturally inclined to seek: life, knowledge, family, friendship, play, political community, and so on. These are the ends that all human beings want for their own sake, as intrinsically valuable to them. And they want these things in a rational way—viz., because they have a conceptual apprehension that they are constitutive of their general good.[44]

To sum up the account thus far, all organisms incline toward the good of their life form, including those basic goods that enable the full actualization thereof. Various organisms express this inclination in various ways. For lower organisms, consciousness plays no part in this process; for higher organisms, conscious does play a part. For humans, the essential difference is a sensitivity to the space of reasons, both evidential and practical. 'Practical reasoning' is the name for the whole complex process of perceiving certain salient facts as reasons to pursue or avoid some course of action, and comparing and ranking competing

43. Frey, "The Will and the Good," 2.
44. Ibid., 88.

reasons in light of an overall conception of a good human life, and acting accordingly. None of this is intended to deny that evaluative practical reasoning arises in a the normal process of socialization. Rather, that our conception of how to live would arise that way is what we would predict for rational primates who speak and live in society.

V. Objections

We are now in a position to respond to the **Procedural Reasoning** challenge stated above. According to this challenge, reasoning is not about ends but only about means. Practical reasoning is a procedural or instrumental process.[45] The critic alleges that one may criticize only criticize Smith as "irrational" when he fails to use the necessary means to his or her own ends, but one may not criticize Smith's *ends themselves* as irrational. For example, if we define practical reasoning as the process by which one adjudicates the means to *one's own health*, then *any* unhealthy action (e.g., eating delicious but less-than-healthy food) would be ipso facto irrational. Isn't it problematic to build into the definition of rationality any specific, ready-made ends?

The first response to this challenge is that, even on the procedural view, practical reasoning *must necessarily have a certain intelligible structure*. The advocate of the procedural view, no less than the advocate of the substantive view, needs a sufficiently general starting point for procedural reasoning to even get off the ground. Frey's candidate for that starting point is the maximally general conception that "good is to be done and evil avoided", or that "one must pursue the human good." Her argument was that by definition when practical reasoners act at all, they act in pursuit of a particular object falling under a universal category. In order to construct *any* practical syllogisms as we do, one needs a

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

sufficiently broad "major premise."

A second response is that Frey's view does not build in very *specific* ends. The built-in end is quite general: it is some conception of how to live in a way that is good for practical, rational primates like us. This substantive good is general enough to accommodate a variety of controversial details about what one ought to do or not do. In other words, the substantive view of practical reasoning allows for the possibility that, in a disagreement, one party may be reasoning more accurately than the other in identifying what is to be pursued or avoided, while both parties are basically rational.

Foot offers two additional considerations that support this Aristotelian account. When she wrote her famous "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives", she argued that moral reasons are not overriding, categorical imperatives contrasted with every other kind of reason. She explains that, at the time, she had not discovered a way of showing "the rationality of acting, even against desire and self-interest, on the a demand of morality."[46] What changed her mind was an argument from Warren Quinn to the effect that if practical reasoning is to be important at all it must be *by definition* the pursuit of some good. Quinn says:

> Practical thought, like any other thought, requires a subject matter. And for human beings the subject matter that distinguishes thought as practical is, in the first instance, human ends and action insofar as they are good or bad in themselves… Practical thought deploys a master set of non-instrumental evaluative notions: that of a good or bad human act, a good or bad human life, a good or bad human agent, and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts.[47]

What Foot found so compelling is the change to "seeing goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of the thing

46. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 63.

47. Warren Quinn and Philippa Foot, *Morality and Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 223.

itself." To one who objects, she points out that:

> Many of us are willing to reject a 'present desire' theory of reasons for action because we think that someone who knowingly puts his future health at risk for a trivial pleasure is behaving foolishly, and therefore not well. Seeing his will as defective, we therefore say that he is doing what he has reason not to do. Being unable to fit the supposed 'reason' into some preconceived present-desire-based theory of reasons for action, we do not query whether it really is a foolish way to behave, but rather hang on to the evaluation and shape our theory of reasons accordingly. And it is exactly a generalization of this presumption about the direction of the argument on which I am now insisting. For what, we may ask, is so special about prudence that it alone among the virtues should be reasonably thought to relate to practical rationality in such a way?[48]

Foot and Frey are arguing that goodness is a "necessary condition of practical rationality." Rational action is action in pursuit of some end. And "some end" is something pursued as desirable or something to be avoided as undesirable. But pursuing something *as desirable or undesirable* is already a substantive evaluative judgment. Therefore, any rational action necessarily includes a substantive evaluative judgment.

If we accept this point, and I do not see how to avoid it, then we are already committed to a minimally substantive view of practical reason, rather than a merely procedural one. The alternative to aiming at the apparent good is not aiming at some value-neutral "end" or goal; the alternative to aiming at the apparent good is *not acting at all*.

V.1. On Motivation

While I gave McDowell's reply above to the Humean critic, I would like to return to the subject of motivation here. While I cannot adequately engage the vast body of literature here, it will be useful to briefly situate my neo-Aristotelian account within the debate between motivational internalists and externalists.

48. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 63.

In brief, the motivational internalist argues that any practical reasons "out there" that are practical reasons *for me* necessarily connect up with my motivational structure.[49] The motivational externalist, by contrast, argues that there might be practical reasons "out there" such that I *ought* to be motivated by them, even if I am currently not.

The danger of internalism is that it seems to allow that the amoralist who is *not motivated* to be moral is off the hook. By contrast, the externalist argues that the immoralist has *reasons* to φ even if he or she has no (current) *motivation* to φ.

On my view, motivational internalism gets this much right: one necessarily acts on what one judges is the thing to do. However, the internalist too narrowly defines a "motivational structure". If by "motivational structure" we mean my present set of broad psychological inclinations, then it is possible that we may not have the right motivational structure that would lead to moral action. But if by that we simply mean *my overall practical disposition toward the worthwhile, desirable, and good*, then it is quite uncontroversial to assert that one only goes in for φ-ing when φ-ing seems to be worthwhile, because to be a practical agent just means to be oriented to pursue the good and avoid the bad. Whatever may appear to me to fall under the description of 'good' I will, ipso facto, be oriented toward (whether I pursue it or merely approve of it and admire it). Whatever may appear to me to fall under the description 'bad' I will, ipso facto, oriented away from it (whether I avoid it or merely disapprove of it).

What motivational externalism gets right is that there might be reasons to φ that I am not aware of and (hence) am not motivated by. For example, perhaps it is true that one ought to save for retirement, but I may fail to do so because I am unaware of that reason or am ignoring it in my attention to other reasons.

Seen in this light, it is obvious that on my neo-Aristotelian account practical reasons

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

can and do motivate us. We can put the matter more strongly: According to Frey's argument above, practical reasons are the *primary* meaning of the term 'motive.' Motivation is (I argue) a fundamentally rational state. It is true that sub-rational animals, plants, and insects are moved about by impulses such as hungers, thirsts, loves, fears, etc. And it is true that human animals are likewise moved about by such impulses. But for rational animals, there is an additional source of motion, namely practical reasons.

In this connection, Aquinas makes a helpful distinction between the "actions of a human" and "human actions." The action of a human is any motion, such as mumbling in your sleep, scratching an itch, or idly tapping a foot. But a human action is by definition an action in pursuit of a goal which is perceived as a good. A human being without any practical reasons would not do immoral deeds; he or she would not do anything at all. Like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, the person who does not engage in practical reasoning or identify any practical reasons would simply waste away and die.[50]

Hence, my contention is that our default view of practical reasoning creatures ought to be that practical reason is intrinsically capable of motivating. The process satisfies the practicality requirement 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. If there is no gap between the conclusion of a deliberation and a decision, then (to co-opt Gibbard's unforgettable phrasing) practical reasoning is "thinking how to live."[51]

50. Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (Best Classic Books, 1966).
51. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

V.2. On Overriding Reasons

A final challenge that needs a response is this: moral reasons are sometimes treated as "overriding" or "verdictive" reasons that settle the question of what to do. Given the choice between, say, making a bit of easy money by fraud or making the same amount through honest but hard work, the prohibition against fraud is supposed to settle the matter. On my account, do prudential practical reasons weigh just as heavily moral ones?

My answer is that the practical consideration that one ought never commit fraud is, in such a case, certainly overriding. However, sometimes prudential considerations are overriding, too. To take a different example, suppose Smith comes into a bit of money from an inheritance, and thus has a choice between spending it (innocently) on world travels or allocating it to a solid retirement plan. Even if Smith clearly needs more money in his retirement, the quandary ethicist would have no *moral* recommendation, because neither choice is obviously immoral in the sense that it violates one's duties to others. The character ethicist would: the practically wise person takes the longer-term benefit of saving over the short-term benefit of traveling to be overriding.

A normal human life presents practical reasoners with many situations in which reasons pertaining to moral virtue (narrowly defined) play little or no part. One must be sensitive not only to such reasons but to the broad range of practical reasons. All practical reasons must be ranked and weighed before a final, verdictive reason emerges. Any *reason to φ* is a practical reason that can feature in an overall account of *what to do*. What Anscombe calls "the verdictive ought" is simply what Foot calls the thing to do "all things considered."[52] It often happens that one's individual practical reasons conflict. McDowell is incorrect to persist in labeling the broader process of adjudicating such conflicts as "virtue." He ought to call it practical wisdom. The practically wise person is the one who

52. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 57.

coordinates all other virtues and executes them to good ends.

Finally, some might object that the neo-Aristotelian view of practical reason defines away the possibility of immorality. If everyone who acts is "aiming at the good", doesn't this exculpate an agent's apparently immoral motives or ends? For example, someone might say, 'It's ridiculous to think that I always pursue the good, because I sometimes do wrong.' This objection misses the point. Of course practical reasoners sometimes do the wrong thing. The proper response is that we perceive the bad *as good*. If the immoral person acts wrongly, then he or she has misjudged the good. On the neo-Aristotelian view I am developing, immoral acts are rational mistakes.

But it remains true that if the immoral person *acts at all* then, according to the argument, he or she must be pursuing some apparent good by definition. To be practical rational necessarily means to pursue something *as good*, as desirable. Just as an epistemic agent might hold a false belief p without affirming the false *as false*, a practical agent might pursue a bad thing without pursuing it *as bad*. Rather, the immoral person fails in their practical reasoning to correctly rank and order specific goods. The imprudent person, for example, judges that it would be better to eat, drink, and be merry today rather than plan to avoid future ills. The cruel person judges that it would be better to cause suffering than to be kind.

Someone might say, "But sometimes I perceive the bad *as bad* and pursue it anyway." My view is that we are able to sometimes include an end we know to be bad into an overall set of practical reasons, which we still judge is the thing to do, all things considered. One might judge, for example, that smoking cigarettes is bad and still do it because one judges (with some regret) that the gains outweigh the risks.

I do not wish to suggest that identifying the thing to do is a smooth and easy project. It is no more or less difficult than the project of identifying what to believe is true.

The defendant of the procedural view is liable to point out, reasoning about ends

is even messier than such theoretical reasoning. Indeed it is. But we must do it. People regularly argue, debate, and reason about ultimate ends. Suppose Smith says to Jones, "I'm concerned about you. You haven't returned my calls. You lost your job, and you are not eating. What's wrong?" It would be no consolation for Jones to respond, "Nothing's *wrong*. I'm destitute, alone, and unhealthy, but that is what I am *aiming* for." Smith would rightly judge that something had gone wrong such that Jones adopt such unhealthy and ridiculous aims.

McDowell cited a feeling of 'vertigo' we feel when we do not perceive any objective basis for our rationality. Similarly, Wiggins suggests that there are psychological, not philosophical, reasons behind the attempt to reduce the process of practical reasoning to something mathematical and formal:

> I entertain the unfriendly suspicion that those who feel they must seek more than [the Aristotelian view of practical reason] provides want a scientific theory of rationality not so much for a passion for science, even where there can be no science, but because they hope and desire, by some conceptual alchemy, to turn such a theory into a regulative or normative discipline, or into a system of rules by which to spare themselves some of the agony of thinking and all the torment of feeling and understanding that is actually involved in reasoned deliberation.[53]

Any attempt to configure the process by subjecting to a set of ready-made rules or criteria will make it easier to understand only at the cost of falsifying it.

Even if we accept that practical reasoning is non-codifiable, it can be done well or poorly. We are morally responsible for doing it well. Jack Weinstein explains that:

> 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.[54]

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

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

Phronesis guides one in providing a range of answers to the question "How should one live?"

The upshot is that the foolish person – the habitually, incorrigibly foolish person responsible for his or her own folly – is, ipso facto, a bad practical rational primate. He or she is failing to do *the thing to do*.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has defended in detail a neo-Aristotelian conception of practical reasoning where practical wisdom an essential part of living a fully virtuous life. The process of practically reasoning defines the life form of practical, rational primates, and hence, successful or failure in this activity determines one's level of virtue or vice.

I defended McDowell's thesis that virtue is a form of practical knowledge that includes a sensitivity to the salient facts of a given situation, and that practical reasons are intrinsically capable of motivating. Nevertheless, I took issue with McDowell's clarification that the virtuous person is sensitive not only to what is kind (or just, etc.) but to the whole range of practical reasons. I criticized the quandary frame and defended an alternative framing ethical discussions.

On my account, the structure of practical reasoning is akin to theoretical reasoning. Where theoretical reasoning is by definition a normative process where the true is to be believed and the false to be disbelieved, practical reasoning is by definition a normative process in which good is to be pursued while evil is to be avoided. These "first principles" are known by all functioning human adults. And while particular rational inquiries aim at identifying good reasons to believe or disbelieve a claim, particular particular practical inquires are aimed at identifying basic goods intrinsic to human life. I argued that the procedural view of practical reasoning is itself committed to certain substantive normative

judgments, such as that one ought to do whatever will bring about one's chosen ends; but more to the point, I argued that the substantive view of practical reasoning is more plausible: we reason about apparent goods and bads and act accordingly. Nevertheless, my account leaves room for the commonsense insight that success in practical reasoning (like theoretical reasoning) is by no means guaranteed.

Success in identifying how to live and what to do requires a complex process of adjudicating between all the available goods known to one, sorting them, ranking them with care and wisdom, and forming them into a complete life plan. The virtuous person knows what to do. Hence, virtue is a kind of knowledge, namely *practical knowledge* (a "disposition to act well"). When practical reasoning is well-functioning, it constitutes part of the natural excellence of creatures like us. The vicious person is hindered by practical error — or perhaps ignorance — of what to do.

A good answer to the question "how should one live?" will be not just a proposition but a plan. Even more exactly, the virtuous person does not simply *have a good plan* but enacts a good life plan. The answer to the "how should one live?" question is not just a philosophy but a life.