Chapter 1

Virtue and Vice for Rational Animals

If riches are desirable in life, what is richer than Wisdom, who produces all things? … Or if one loves righteousness, whose works are virtues, she teaches moderation and prudence, righteousness and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful than these.

Wisdom 8:5-7

Introduction

My thesis in this chapter is the thesis of the dissertation as a whole: **virtue is the plurality of acquirable excellent character traits (such as moderation, tolerance, and wisdom) that are necessary for practical, rational animals because virtue partly constitutes natural human flourishing.**

This builds on the argument of the last chapter that human beings are rational animals, and hence experience life as a process of maturation toward an intrinsic life form. At the beginning of life, vulnerable human animals need many practical and physical necessities if they are to survive to maturity. Then, as they mature, the need for particular virtues and for virtue in general increases, especially for traits that enable one to engage in successful practical reasoning.

Once acquired, traits dispose the mature practical rational animal to do well at accomplishing the universal projects of human life (such as sustaining friendships) and to react well to the universal challenges of human life (such as the death of loved ones). The absence of virtues, and the presence of vices, corrupt practical reasoning and stultify the realization of our natural flourishing. Vices dispose us to succomb to common temptations and to fail at universal projects.

In this chapter, I present my own synthesis. I shall defend the resulting synthesis against various objections.

I. Excellence and Imperfection

Our prediction from the last chapter was that virtues would pertain to the three aspects of our nature identified in the generic: "humans are practical, rational animals." As animals we are inherently mortal, biological, beings whose life consists of a process of maturation, homeostatic maturity, aging, and death. Human being as rational *animals* by nature need to breathe, eat, sleep, and stay warm, deal with the urgings of our sexual nature, and so on. So our account of virtue will have to show how by reflection and deliberation, the virtuous person takes up his own biology and psychology into a space of reasons and construct a "pattern that, given the human situation, is likely to lead a good life."[1] As practical, rational animals, 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. Although we are pushed about by our biological instincts and by social pressures, we do not *simply* stumble around through life, but, in general, also sometimes act on reasons. We deliberate about future actions, and reflect on past actions. The success of our actions is not guaranteed, and the reasonableness of our reasons is not guaranteed. So, we may tentatively hypothesize that the qualities that enable us to pursue our ends *well* would be excellent qualities. The practical, rational agents who consistently succeed at pursuing and achieving their ends would be models of virtue. I shall have much more to say below about what ends people *have* or *ought to have* and about the

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

indeterminate concept of a human telos.[2]

Recall the criteria that are guiding our construction of an account of the excellence of rational animals: (1) Rationality is social, verbal, and symbolic (we learn to speak, to think, and to interpret from our family and community and culture). (2) Animality is social, physical, chemical, embodied (we must always care for the needs of nutrition, exercise, sleep, and our sexual nature). (3) Practical rationality is our active and proactive self-governance, including over all our thoughts and actions (we can affect but not choose the appearance, strength, size, etc. we start out with).

The excellences and imperfections intrinsic to our life form are likely to relate to these three attributes. Excellences would be those character traits that rational animals *need*, tout court. They need them to *become* rational animals, to actuate the form. Imperfections, by contrast, would be those that rational animals *need to avoid*, traits that partially inhibit or wholly prevent the actuation of human life. While I will discuss in detail the natural human telos in a later chapter, here I only assert that actualizing the potential latent in human nature is necessarily good for us.[3]

We can predict that evaluative features of a human being will be either beautific or miserable along these lines. (We are not yet speaking of moral blame, just evaluation-of-a-kind). A maximally miserable human being is one who has for whatever reason not become what human beings potentially can be and are by nature. He or she will be (a) physically imperfect (sick, weak, undeveloped, diseased), (b) rationally imperfect (ignorant, stupid, overly credulous and overly skeptical, unperceptive, angry) and (b) practically and socially imperfect (solitary, foolish, rash, unteachable, immoderate, highly valuing worthless things and disregarding the most valuable things). The maximally beautified human being is one who has for whatever reason become what human beings potentially can be and are by nature. He or she will be (a) physically excellent (healthy, strong, developed, well); (b) rationally excellent in knowledge, society (knowledgable, smart, properly trusting

2. Eudaimonists believe our telos to be human flourishing or happiness. Others believe it is something else, such as genetic proliferation, the creation of the self, or what have you. We shall return to this in a later chapter

3. Paul Bloomfield, "Virtue and Happiness," ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012.

and properly critical, perceptive, calm) and practice (sociable, wise, patient, teachable, moderate, valuing each thing according to its worth).

Of course, such a prediction has some serious problems. First, it does not distinguish between different kinds of excellence. Some of our attributes and actions may fail to be excellent without being our *fault*. So our account must allow us distinguish between various kinds of excellence. Consider the broadest set of things labelled 'good for humans'. All of the good things of human life enable the realization of a fully human life. But not all good things are subject to our control. The virtues are among those good things under our control – good dispositions we each choose to cultivate or fail to cultivate. Unlike other goods (say, wealth), virtues become *what we are*. On this point, Foot cautions against several species of terminological misunderstanding: *αρετή* for the Greeks refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice"[4]. 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.

Secondly, such a prediction sounds awfully elitist. It does nothing, thus far, to correct the suggestion that those who are natively intelligent are *morally* superior to those who are natively un-

4. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 2; Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

intelligent; 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.

For now, we are trying to get clear on the idea that the human life form fixes natural excellence and defect or imperfection. (I like "imperfection" because it connotes immaturity as well as defect.) The concept of 'excellence' is relative to an object's nature and function; an excellent knife is one that *cuts well*; but an excellent guard dog is one that barks loudly, is hostile to strangers, and so on. 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 imposed on objects and that natural organisms (trees, dogs, humans) have no *inherent* function. Nevertheless, natural entities such as organisms have natural functions as well, as we have argued above. And, we argued, the teleological facts obtaining in organisms can be empirically discovered even remaining agnostic about its mechanistic 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.

Similarly, we can hypothesis that the "function" of a practical rational animal is to become a fully mature practical rational animal, and perform all of the activities characteristic of typical members of the species. Not all practical rational animals fully actuate the human life form. Such failures to realize one's life form may still be tragic even if they are not that rational animal's *fault*. For example, in extreme cases when a person's set of potentialities for rational activity (such as speech and abstract thought) is not realized because of genetic disorder, injury, or mental or physical illness,

we still have no trouble identifying that are *a human being* by virtue of having a *human nature*.

Natural Flourishing

'Telos' picks out the Greek concept of an end, purpose, direction, limit, fulfillment, destination. It is pretty clear that human beings set ends for themselves, undertake projects, chart courses in a particular direction, and so on. To say that there is a "given" telos for humanity is to suggest that there is at least one or a set of ends "built in."[5] Put crudely, there are some goals we *ought* to have regardless of our other goals; or perhaps more accurately, the concept of inbuilt teleology suggests that there are some ends we *simply have* by virtue of being human. The question then becomes how to coordinate our chosen ends and our "given" ends. This question is by no means easy. However, I shall take a stab at it.

One way that moral philosophers (divine command theorists and Kantians, for instance) answer the question of the relation between our inbuilt ends and our chosen ends is to suggest that our inbuilt ends are "categorical imperatives" — that is, imperatives that are obligatory and authoritatively binding regardless of our chosen ends. The divine command theorist sees laws of God being objectively binding on all human beings. The Kantian substitutes a divine law for an autonomous, self-given law that each rational agent necessarily imposes upon oneself. However, each of these theories makes the law a brute obligation, a necessity without further conditions.

The virtue theorists I am discussing — and in some cases defending — take a different approach. Rather than treating the moral law as a divine "positive law" or a law of practical reason as such, they treat moral laws such as they are as laws of nature. Of course, these are not "descriptive" laws of nature, like the law of universal gravitation. It is a brute prescriptive law arising from the nature of humans as such. Now, since humans are (as I shall argue) rational animals, my view aligns rather closely with Kant's. However, I take a different line of argument on the controversy Kant had with Reinhold and others about whether or not one can freely choose to disobey the moral law.

5. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), chap. 1.

Kant thought one could not, since he defined "freedom" as conformity to the moral law (rather than conformity to natural, selfish, law of inclination or egoism). My view is closer to Reinhold's on this point, in that I think that our natural law is objectively prescriptive and binding, and in some sense defines who we *already are*, but that it is given to us to fulfill. We must align our chosen end with our given end. Failing to achieve our given end is, by definition, human misery. So even if I am "successful" in achieving my chosen ends, I shall be necessarily miserable if my chosen ends are radically opposed to my given ends.

> According to Thomson, it is a moral defect not to care about justice. It might be objected that someone might still ask, "Why should I care about justice?" We need to give that person a reason to care and it doesn't seem to be enough to say that lacking justice is a moral defect. However, the same problem arises in any view. Why should I care about what's wrong? Why should I care about what I ought to do? Why should I care about what I have most reasons to do? In fact, why should I care about what I should care about? No view seems immune from this sort of worry.[6]

Acquirable

There are two corollaries to this initial, formal definition of virtues as those traits human beings as practical reasoners need.

First, I would like to underscore the importance of the term 'acquirable'. Virtues are the acquirable traits needed by creatures like us, by social rational animals. 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.[7] 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,

6. Gilbert Harman, "Judith Jarvis Thomson's Normativity," *Philosophical Studies* 154, no. 3 (2011): 441.

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

the child is going to suffer the negative consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is abused – emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually – by her parents, the psychological cost is meted out across the entire life and across generations. By the same token, when a mother eats healthily and takes her vitamins while pregnant, the child is going to reap the positive consequences for the remainder of his life. When a child is given love, approval, empowerment, discipline, by her parents, the psychological gains are meted out across the entire life and across generations. The original source of most people's life maxims are not their ethics professors, favorite novels, Holy Bibles, or therapists, but their parents or other guardians. This corollary might be obvious but we must never forget it. It is important to the argument because 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.

Unified Plurality

The second corollary is that excellences of our practical rationality and even of our animality have a common foundation in practical reason. This is a partial solution to the age-old conundrum about the unity of virtues. Are there many virtues or just one? And if there are many, are they unified or a fundamental plurality? We should expect, on the basis of our nature as rational animals, that all virtues will be united in our rationality, and that our various concepts of virtue will be united in an appropriate concept of rationality. This is just what we will defend in a later chapter. If human nature is as "rational animals" then the unity of virtues as each depending on practical reason.[8]

II. Initial Objections

Our dialectic thus far has defended two major claims: first, that some natural facts are normative facts; and secondly, that some such facts are natural human facts. These natural norms are ex-

8. Ibid.

pressible in generic propositions of the familiar sort, such as 'acorns become oak trees' and 'human beings are practical rational animals'. The "nature" – or set of in-built potentialiaties – of genetically modern humans is fixed enough to justify such generics. The current task is to see whether any of this has genuinely ethical significance for us.

Polyanna Objection

The major obstacle for this chapter is what Micah Lott calls the "Polyanna Problem."[9] To see this problem, supposing that the other two objections have been overcome: human norms are discoverable and demonstrable both practical and relevant. Still are such norms merely "protonormative"[10] or fully *ethical*? Are we obligated to fulfill all such norms? Just some? How are they to be distinguished from unethical, vile behaviors also statistically common among human behaviors? Empirically, some acorns become fully grown, mature oaks, but other acorns become stulted, sickly specimens. Most acorns never become anything other than acorns before they disintegrate into dust in the soil. So statistical majorities will not do the trick. Likewise, norms can be discovered for both good and evil: Some animals protect their young while other animals abandon or even consume their young. Some humans are kind and gentle while others are vicious and cruel. Anscombe anticipates this worry when she says:

> The search for "norms" might lead someone to look for laws of nature, as if the universe were a legislator; but in the present day this is not likely to lead to good results: it might lead one to eat the weaker according to the laws of nature, but would hardly lead anyone nowadays to notions of justice.[11]

Can we move from vague statements such as "human beings are language users" to particular moral statements: 'Human beings make and keep promises'?

9. Micah Lott, "Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form," *Social Theory and Practice* 38, no. 3 (2012): 407–31.

10. Arthur Ward, "Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory" (PhD thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2013), chap. 2.

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

The Polyanna Problem is the temptation to wink at the evils of human behavior in the effort to paint a portrait that is falsely full of sweetness and light. Put differently, even if human norms are discoverable, will they be *good*? Will they not be a mixed bag of good and apparently evil norms? Will we not need something else, such as conscience, or divine revelation, over and above these human laws, by which to judge which ones are normative for us?

Empty Definition Objection

Another objection is that the very definition of virtue as a *beneficial* or "positive" character trait is circular and therefore empty. To see the problem, 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, is this a trivial truth? An analytic truth? The affirmation that 'courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good' would appear to amount to the life-altering revelation that 'good things are good'.

Virtue is Optional Objection

Another objection is that virtues are good but 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.

Relativism Objection

Another objection has various expressions. One is that virtues (which are defined as good) can be used for evil, as when a criminal requires great courage to undertake his or her vile derring-do. Another expression is that "virtues" can only be defined by each cultural group within their own terms, and that there is no way for us to judge the conflicting "virtues" of another group. So

Aristotele and Nietzsche (despite their other differences) both seem to agree in finding magnanimity a virtue and humility or meekness a vice where St. Paul and Aquinas agree in finding humility or meekness a great virtue.

III. Response to Objections

Response to Polyanna Objection

The response to the Polyanna Objection is that virtue ethicists do not *ignore* vice, the dark side of human nature, or human evil. Rather to the contrary, the whole project of identifying virtues and successful, virtuous agents, is the process of sifting through the various examples of human lives in hopes of finding a pattern that is recognizably *good*.

Thomson explains that normativity consists in evaluations and directives. Evaluations say that "There is such a property of being a good K if and only if K is a goodness-fixing kind."[12] Directives say that "For it to be the case that A ought to V is for it to be the case that there is a directive kind K such that: A is a K, and if a K doesn't V, then it is a defective K."[13]

Virtues are just those traits needed by our goodness-fixing kind.

How do we sort through and filter out the kinds of lives that are miserable, pitiable, undesirable? In some cases, it is easy. In other cases, it is quite as difficult to know who is living a successful life as it is to live one's own life well. Hursthouse provides some clear thinking on this difficult topic. Sometimes, we have to find out what a virtuous person does to know what is right. And while we can't be guaranteed that our assessment of who is a virtuous person is infallibly correct, it is sometimes the best we can do:

> In response, it is worth pointing out that, if I know that I am far from perfect, and am quite unclear what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances in which I find myself, the obvious thing to do is to go and ask one, should this be possible. This is far from being a trivial point, for it gives a straightforward explanation of an important

12. Thomson, 21-22 %
13. Thomson 209 %

> aspect of our moral life, namely the fact that we do not always act as 'autonomous', utterly self-determining agents, but quite often seek moral guidance from people we think are morally better than ourselves. When I am looking for an excuse to do something I have a horrid suspicion is wrong, I ask my moral inferiors (or peers if I am bad enough), 'Wouldn't you do such-and-such if you were in my shoes?' But when I am anxious to do what is right, and do not see my way clear, I go to people I respect and admire: people who I think are kinder, more honest, more just, wiser, than I am myself, and ask them what they would do in my circumstances. How, or indeed whether, utilitarianism and deontology can explain this fact, I do not know, but, as I said, the explanation within the terms of virtue ethics is straightforward. If you want to do what is right, and doing what is right is doing what the virtuous agent would do in the circumstances, then you should find out what she would do if you do not already know.[14]

Response to Empty Definition Objection

Another objection was that virtues are defined as beneficial traits. This is an important objection but at the same time, it misses the point. It is a synthetic truth discoverable 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 our stultification. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[15] All truths are true, in part, in virtue of the words used. But not all truths by definition are empty and content-less; rather, the stuff of life from which we derive our conceptual definitions or which we must fit into our conceptual definitions is a contentfull task. Let's consider this objection in another way.

Some ethical propositions are widely believed to be true.[16] Some philosophers argue that

14. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 35.

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

16. It is good to be kind; cruelty is bad. Pleasure is 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. "Do good and avoid evil" (called the first principles of practical reason). Moderation is good (called the foundation of all ethics). "Drunkenness" or alcoholism are shameful. The Golden Rule (called the only objective rule in both religious and atheistic moralities). Injustice is bad. We ought to care for children and respect elders. Generosity is admirable.

this widespread, near universal belief is a sign that these propositions are self-evidently true:[17]

> 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.

Saying "it is good to be good" is a tautology. And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial. But 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 good disposition to treat others well" 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*. Kindness, it seems to me, and to many others upon reflection, is a special sort of quality we can recognize and name but not ultimately define. Cruelty, likewise, we "know it when we see it." There is more to our recognition of cruelty than the arbitrary application of "a bad disposition to hurt others." We know that a troubled child who takes to torturing animals for fun is acting cruelly. We try to help him or her to satisfy curiosity (or get attention, or whatever) through other means. We help them stop nursing a disposition to cruelty.

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

> Indeed, many fundamental scientific laws (as well as some scientific tru- isms) and many fundamental moral principles have the property which we might call quasi-analyticity (see, e.g., Putnam 1962). Because of their con- ceptual and methodological centrality, even when we know that their justifi- cation 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-analyticallyineli- gible). 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

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

> crises which precipitate them. The principle that torturing children is wicked and the fundamental laws of quantum mechanics are both candidates for quasi-analyticity.[18]

These ethical propositions do not seem to be tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. Some Platitudes are small, others great. "It is polite to say please" is a Platitude. But "treat others as you would wish to be treated" is a Great Platitude.

The core principles of "common morality" that have acheived an astonishingly wide consensus in bioethical discussions are good examples of Great Platitudes.[19]

Debunkers and Defenders

Some philosophers take their task to be to debunk the Great Platitudes. They wish to explain them away, to explain *why* they are false and *how so many people fall in for them*. The platitudes are either *false* ("know your place" taken as a justification of socio-economic or gender inequality is false) or as trivial; *of course* "murder is unjust" is true because, 'murder' is defined as 'unjust killing.'

Other philosophers take their task to be to *underwrite* the great platitudes. They wish to explain them, to explain why they are true and how it is we learn them, preserve them, and (most crucially) live well by taking them as sound practical advice. Both philosophers are sophisticated; but one is sophisticated in attacking and explaining away the Great Platitudes while the other is sophisticated in defending and explaining them.

As examples of the Debunkers, consider J. L. Mackie and Alan Gibbard. Mackie claims to be running counter to the great tradition of European moral philosophy.[20] Gibbard's metaethical works aim to capture our common sense belief that morality is objective but without the Platonism. He says, "It might be thought ordinary conceptions of rationality Platonistic or intuitionistic. On the Platonistic Picture coma among the facts of the world are facts of what is rational and what

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

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

20. John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin UK, 1977).

is not. A person of normal mental powers can discern these facts. Judgments of nationality are thus straightforward apprehensions of fact, not through sense perception through a mental faculty analogous to sense perception…"[21]

As examples of Defenders, consider G. E. Moore, Robert Adams, and Frank Jackson. Moore's grandiloquent denouncements of moral philosophy are not, as one might expect, the harbingers of a revolutionary transvaluation of values; by the end of *Principia Ethica* he has given a sophisticated 300 page articulation of the yawningly common judgment that beauty, friendship, and knowledge are goods. Robert Adams' metaethical work aims to capture the common sense belief that morality is objective… by providing a systematic defense of Platonism. Plato sees goodness as becoming like god: "Fleeing [evil] is becoming like god so far as one can, and to become like god is to become just and pious with wisdom.[22] And Adams defends this resemblance relation as well. But not all Defenders are non-naturalists. Frank Jackson's influential account of functionalism[23] aims to naturalize "mature folk morality" without necessarily invalidating all of it.

It does no good to object that the Great Platitudes are *evil* or *oppressive*, binding women to social subjugation or condemning the poor to poverty. Rather, the corrections to the errors of European (and more broadly, western) moral philosophy are contained *within the resources* of western moral philosophy. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" tells more powerfully against sexism or classism than any revolutionary ideal.

Virtue not Optional Response

Another objection was the virtues are either optional or intolerant. This objection, as stated, misses the point. By arguing that virtues – whatever they may turn out to be – are those qualities needed

21. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 155.

22. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997) *Statesman* 176a5-b2; John M Armstrong, "After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004): 171–83.

23. Frank Jackson, "From Metaphysics to Ethics" (Clarendon Press, 1998).

by practical reasoners, we are not arguing about the *concept* of virtue but that *very qualities themselves*. Any culture, business, family, civilization, will thrive insofar as it is virtuous and disintegrate insofar as it fails. Virtue is necessary because it is human. Justice, prudence, and courage are "needed in any human-scale enterprise"[24], from motherhood, to a successful career, to farming.

Put negatively, the thesis of this chapter is that vices necessarily contribute to misery, unhappiness, and human stultification and stagnation. Human nature is the starting point, flourishing is the goal, and the moral and intellectual virtues are the means by which we move from start to goal. Vices are those qualities that partly constitute human misery. Many kinds of living conditions are miserable; excessive cold or heat; starvation; illness; mental handicap; injury; extreme isolation and loneliness, and so on. But these kinds of circumstances are not *always* and *necessarily* miserable. Rather, being a lying, treacherous, scheming, envious, whining, daydreaming moral agent is truly miserable, even such happens to have a comfortable bed to sleep in and enough money to get through life. Such a person is despicable, a worthy specimen of human failure.

Some vices, especially intellectual vices, are especially despicable. Not everyone has equal amounts of intelligence conceived as raw mental horsepower. Some children even at a young age excel at doing "mental math" or memorizing geographical names, while others never acquire the knack for it. However, not all unintelligent people are stupid in the deplorable sense: stubborn, unteachable, slow to learn and resenting every bit, arrogant, smug, self-satisfied, and willfully ignorant. Such persons demonstrate intellectual vices noxious to all their fellows except those equally debased, and especially noxious to those unfortunate enough to be their teachers, parents, or guardians. And such intellectual vices are in a special way exemplary of human failing.

Response to Beneficial by Definition

The second objection, building on the above response, is about the very definition of virtue as a *beneficial* or "positive" character trait. To see the problem, suppose we define "boldness" as *doing*

24. Geach, *The Virtues*.

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, is this a trivial truth? An analytic truth? The affirmation that 'courage (doing hard things when it is good) is good' would appear to amount to the life-altering revelation that 'good things are good'.

This is an important objection but also misses the point. It is a synthetic truth discoverable only by reflection that humans have a nature, a telos, and that some character traits are conducive to the realization of our telos while others are conducive to our stultification. Peter Geach argues that just because an ethical conclusion is virtually un-revisable doesn't mean it is content-less.[25] All truths are true, in part, in virtue of the words used. But not all truths by definition are empty and content-less; rather, the stuff of life from which we derive our conceptual definitions or which we must fit into our conceptual definitions is a contentfull task. Let's consider this objection in another way.

Some ethical propositions are thought to be self-evidently true: it is good to be good. This is a tautology. And most (if not all) tautologies are trivial. Other ethical propositions are not tautologous but are so widely and commonly accepted as to be easily mistaken for tautologies: it is good to be kind; cruelty is bad. Pleasure is 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. "Do good and avoid evil" (called the first principles of practical reason). Moderation is good (called the foundation of all ethics). "Drunkenness" or alcoholism are shameful. The Golden Rule (called the only objective rule in both religious and atheistic moralities). Injustice is bad. We ought to care for children and respect elders. Generosity is admirable.

Of course, if we define "kindness" simply as "a good disposition to treat others well" 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*. Kindness, it seems to me, and

25. Ibid., Chapter 1.

to many others upon reflection, is a special sort of quality we can recognize and name but not ultimately define. Cruelty, likewise, we "know it when we see it." There is more to our recognition of cruelty than the arbitrary application of "a bad disposition to hurt others." We know that children who tortures animals for fun is acting cruelly. We try to help him or her to satisfy curiosity or get parental attention through other means. We help them stop nursing a disposition to cruelty.

These ethical propositions do not seem to me tautologies. Call these non-tautologous but basic ethical propositions Platitudes. Some Platitudes are small, others great. "It is polite to say please" is a Platitude. But "treat others as you would wish to be treated" is a Great Platitude.

Some philosophers take their task to be to debunk the Great Platitudes. They wish to explain them away, to explain *why* they are false and *how so many people fall in for them*. The platitudes are either *false* ("know your place" taken as a justification of socio-economic or gender inequality is false) or as trivial; *of course* "murder is unjust" is true because, 'murder' is defined as 'unjust killing.'

Other philosophers take their task to be to *underwrite* the great platitudes. They wish to explain them, to explain why they are true and how it is we learn them, preserve them, and (most crucially) live well by taking them as sound practical advice. Both philosophers are sophisticated; but one is sophisticated in attacking and explaining away the Great Platitudes while the other is sophisticated in defending and explaining them.

As examples of the Debunkers, consider J. L. Mackie and Alan Gibbard. Mackie claims to be running counter to the great tradition of European moral philosophy.[26] Gibbard's metaethical works aim to capture our common sense belief that morality is objective but without the Platonism. He says, "It might be thought ordinary conceptions of rationality Platonistic or intuitionistic. On the Platonistic Picture coma among the facts of the world are facts of what is rational and what is not. A person of normal mental powers can discern these facts. Judgments of nationality are thus straightforward apprehensions of fact, not through sense perception through a mental faculty

26. Mackie, *Ethics*.

analogous to sense perception…"[27]

As examples of Defenders, consider G. E. Moore, Robert Adams, and Frank Jackson. Moore's grandiloquent denouncements of moral philosophy are not, as one might expect, the harbingers of a revolutionary transvaluation of values; by the end of *Principia Ethica* he has given a sophisticated 300 page articulation of the yawningly common judgment that beauty, friendship, and knowledge are goods. Robert Adams' metaethical work aims to capture the common sense belief that morality is objective… by providing a systematic defense of Platonism. Plato sees goodness as becoming like god: "Fleeing [evil] is becoming like god so far as one can, and to become like god is to become just and pious with wisdom.[28] And Adams defends this resemblance relation as well. But not all Defenders are non-naturalists. Frank Jackson's influential account of functionalism[29] aims to naturalize "mature folk morality" without necessarily invalidating all of it.

It does no good to object that the Great Platitudes are *evil* or *oppressive*, binding women to social subjugation or condemning the poor to poverty. Rather, the corrections to the errors of European (and more broadly, western) moral philosophy are contained *within the resources* of western moral philosophy. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" tells more powerfully against sexism or classism than any revolutionary ideal.

Objection: Are virtues inborn?

I have emphasized throughout that virtues are acquired. I would like to state an objection to this part of the thesis. My response will be to concede some ground before holding the line.

To state the objection, first distinguish between what is "given" and what is under the control of a normal, functional, adult human being. Simply put, one's nature is given, and one's choices throughout life are controllable. But what is given in 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

27. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 155.
28. Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato Statesman* 176a5-b2; Armstrong, "After the Ascent."
29. Jackson, "From Metaphysics to Ethics."

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 the Given. For example, suppose Chivo grows up on a poor farm in rural Mexico in a large, Catholic household with pious parents. He learns not to lie, not to steal, to work hard on the farm, to be kind to his siblings and to have a good time with them. He is inculcated with honesty, respect for property, industry, gentleness, and affability. Perhaps Krishna does not attend school, or only does for a few years. But he learns from his famiily the social and trade skills needed to become a fully functioning member of his rural community. What effect would practical reasoning have on Krishna's life? It seems the answer is 'not much'. Socially, he is poor enough that he is not obligated to make many decisions about travel or entertainment. Religiously, he cannot choose (for many years at least) whether or not to join in the religious rituals of his family. Intellectually, he cannot choose to read many books or write ethical treatises, for farming occupies him for virtually all the daylight hours.

Compare Chivo with June. June grows up in a wealthy urban skyrise in Los Angeles with two secular parents and no siblings. She is taught not to lie, not to steal, and to do well in school, to respect her parents and friends but not to be too frivolous. She is inculcated with honesty, respect for property, studiousness, seriousness, and dignity. She becomes successful in grade school, high school, and college, and becomes a successful lawyer with enough disposable income to travel the world, enjoy aesthetic pleasures and a thriving social life. What effect would practical reasoning have on June's life? It seems the answer is 'a great deal.' She is a member of the "creative class" who earns her wages with her expertise in legal history, ratiocination, and rhetoric.

The moral differences between Chivo and June, such as they are, are given by their parents and cultures and socio-economic statuses and genders, etc. It seems that virtues can be defined as qualities that are not acquired *by the individual*'s effort but are *inculcated* by the individual's tradition.

Answer

The cardinal virtues are especially important because they are necessary for success in any worthwhile human endeavor. Chivo and June 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 everyone has equal opportunity to acquire them — moral education is helpful; virtuous parents and teachers are helpful; social conditions wherein vice will not be gratuitously rewarded or virtues gratuitously punished are helpful. Yet every human being has equal responsibility to acquire them.

One of the points we must concede is that farmers, socialites, and lawyers etc. need different levels of theoretical knowledge. Not everyone needs to be "learned." But the concession proves a deeper point: It takes practical wisdom to decide whether or not one can and should – in one's own circumstances – pursue theoretical knowledge. I shall return to this below.

Objection: Is the pursuit of virtue egoistic?

Supposing that virtues *benefit their possessor*, is it then egoistic or selfish to pursue virtue? Although it seems we only need virtue if we want to be happy, everyone has an obligation to develop virtuous traits because virtues help us become who we are. Such a pursuit is not selfish in the pejorative sense of the word; it is not 'egoism' for the charge of egoism assumes that the good for men is not *the good* per se. But we need not assume this. It may be that the good for men is the good. Pleasure is not the good, though it is *a* good. Moderation is a good as well, and a person who enjoys both the moderate pleasures of life and the moderation of pleasure and pain

IV. How Many Virtues? Two Examples: Moderation and Tolerance

Objections: How many virtues?

Virtues are those excellent traits that humans as practical reasoners need to realize our natural telos. And, we have argued, human nature is an intelligibly determinate concept: rational animals. Still, we might wonder how many virtues there are? It seems that our neo-Aristotelian writers vary widely on this point, from one, to a limited set, to a virtually unlimited set.

Foot and Geach use as examples the four "cardinal" virtues which are delivered by tradition. (Hursthouse also defends the "theological virtue" of hope and Geach defends even a kind of faith as non-theological virtues. Nevertheless, Geach argues that love can only be a religious virtue.)[30]

McDowell's account makes it seem like there is only one virtue (knowledge). Each individual virtue is "a sort of perceptual capacity", a "specialized sensitivity" to a particular range of reasons for action (say, the feelings of others), and all virtue is sensitivity to reasons. There is only one "moral outlook."[31]

MacIntyre, by contrast, not only includes in his broad historical list the virtues of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Greek tragic poets, the New Testament, Aquinas, Jane Austen, Benjamin Franklin, and Jane Austin, but he adds (apparently ad lib) new virtues like "integrity or constancy"[32] and "an adequate sense of tradition"[33]

Aristotle's list of virtues includes twelve moral virtues, each of which is defined by a moderate state between two possible extremes with respect to a given feature of human life, such as fear, pleasure, or wealth.[34] He builds into the definition of some of the virtues (e.g., magnanimity)

30. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, chap. 11; Geach, *The Virtues*, chap. 4.

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

32. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 203. "There is at least one virtue recognized by the [Aristotelian] tradition which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life – the virtue of integrity or constancy."

33. Ibid., 223.

34. 1. Courage in the face of fear; 2. Temperance in the face of pleasure and pain; 3. Liberality with wealth and possessions; 4. Magnificence with great wealth and possessions; 5. Mag-

the notion that not *all* human beings as such require it (since not all are extremely wealthy public servants).

Is there any sense to be made here? If human nature is stable, yet human reason is flexible enough to admit of variation (both progressive and regressive), then we ought to expect a stable set of qualities that count as virtues that is flexible enough to admit of variation.

The 'cardinal' or classical virtues to which those in the Aristotelian tradition (including recent neo-Aristotelians) give preeminent place are courage, justice, moderation, and practical wisdom. The four cardinal virtues are not only "delivered by tradition" but can be most easily ratified by anyone willing to do the critical analysis.

Roughly, justice is every member of the community doing their business and each person giving and receiving his due. Since every human being exists in society, the presence or absence of justice in the members of the community will sustain or destroy that community.

Courage is the proper boldness in doing the right thing despite opposition. Courage is not simply a military virtue appropriate to police officers, firefighters, telephone wire repairmen, etc.

Moderation is pursuing the right amount of pleasure in the right way at the right time, and avoiding the wrong amount and the wrong way and the wrong time. The dangers to health and happiness of excessive pleasure are obvious to anyone who has had the (mis)fortune to earn or inherit enough time and money to overindulge. Many celebrities who have worked their way to the top of the entertainment industry find that they lack the moderation by which to successful navigate the temptations associated with wealth and time.

Practical wisdom is excellence in knowing what to do in a given situation. Practical wisdom is I think rightly the most important virtue in the sense that it is a hub from which the other virtues emerge as spokes. Even the theoretical or intellectual virtues Zagzebski writes about depend for

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nanimity with great honor; 6. Proper ambition with normal honors; 7. Patience in the face of irritation; 8. Truthfulness with self-expression; 9. Wittiness in conversation; 10. Friendliness in social conduct; 11. Modesty in the face of shame or shamelessness; 12. Righteous indignation. He adds five intellectual virtues.

their cultivation on a person willing to invest the time and energy into theoretical learning.[35] But I shall return to this theme in a later chapter.

Beyond these, our definition of virtue is flexible enough to include a variety of positive character traits. Strictly speaking, however, the core virtues are those *all human beings need* since they benefit people along the lowest common denominator. We might call 'virtues' those positive traits that are appropriate for various life stations, ages, genders, professions, social roles, and so on. But if we are being strict such traits (regardless of how we label them) will be sharply distinguished from the cardinal virtues. They are the base of a triangle.

V. Moderation and Tolerance

Consider two test cases: moderation is one of the classical virtues. Is the specific content of this virtue compatible with, even supported by, my account thus far?

Begin with Aristotle's justly famous statement of virtue as a mean between extremes:

> Let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health (for to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things); both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.[36]

(The first sentence appeals to a fact about "the nature of such things", presumably, the general features of living beings. This is Aristotle's positing of natural normativity.) To be immoderate is

35. Cf. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

36. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2014) *Nic. Ethics* Book II.2.

to eat or drink so much or so little that it destroy's one's health. Specifically, indulging in "every pleasure and abstaining from none" is a defective choice or defective habit for creatures like us. We can even venture, with the help of health science, a rough approximation of the number of calories (1700-2600) human beings formally need, and an ideal diet of the kinds of foods and drinks through which to intake those calories (variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, fats, nuts, legumes, and so on).

Aristotle continues in the same section:

> We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent…

VI. Conclusion

This chapter attempted to define virtues as those acquirable traits that are excellent for practical, rational animals like us. Our nature is normative, such that fulfilling it is morally good. We distinguished various kinds of excellence that are emphatically *not* within the purview of one's practical reasoning. Vices are those traits that we are either given through bad upbringing and bad education and (more to the point) those traits that we acquire ourselves. Virtues are those traits that we are given through good upbringing and education and that we acquire with moral effort, sometimes great moral effort. It remains to give a few examples of various virtues, to block the looming worry about cultural relativism, and to explain how they are unified in a concept of practical reason. That is the task for the next chapter.

Conclusion

Virtues are excellent character traits all rational animals need. The virtuous person takes up all that is given and puts it to good use in the resistance to evils and the pursuit of and sustainance of goods, both in individual life and communal life. The virtuous person discriminates between what is

morally significant and insignificant, discriminating in what is significant between what is beneficial and harmful to the actualization of rational animals like us.

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

Even if this account of neo-Aristotelian virtue is plausible, several questions remain. Let us to queue up the questions to be addressed in a later chapter.

Setting up Remaining Chapters

1. **What is our telos?**. The first point is that virtues bring about (and partly constitute a "pre-payment" on) human flourishing. So we would need to say more about our telos and what it would be like to have it realized. Although it seems to be merely pleasure or worldly success, and though I shall define it more later, I mean generally "well-being", true happiness, human success as such.
2. **Can virtues be put to bad use?** Virtues are necessarily good for human beings as such. But some of the qualities the moral tradition picks out as virtues can be conceived as being put to bad use. So can virtues remain virtues while in bad use? Although it seems that virtuous traits cannot be put to bad use, some virtues admit of misuse since the absence of practical wisdom renders traits (like moderation) that really are virtues ineffective at the realization of our human telos. This will require a discussion of practical wisdom.
3. **Are the virtues human or cultural?** Virtues must be derived from human nature and exemplify excellence in human nature. But still must all such human actions and excellence be mediated by culture, by "second nature"? Although it seems they are cultural, they are 'human traits' in that they express human nature. MacIntyre does not basis virtue enough in metaphysical biology; Foot bases it too much in metaphysical biology; McDowell bases virtue in reason but does not explain the relation of reason to metaphysical biology. Foot is closest to my view, but I supplement her view with arguments to the effect that normativity (including teleology) is built-in to nature as a whole, not just humanity.
4. **Can the virtuous person be irrational?** Relatedly, virtues are supposed to be actions "in accord" with reason and in accord with human nature. This suggests that the virtuous person cannot be irrational. Although it seems that the virtuous person can be irrational, the virtuous person is by definition rational either (in the primary sense) by

reflectively endorsing their own reasons for action in every or almost every significant life pursuit or (in a derivative but no less real sense) by acting in accordance with good reasons, either on good advice from another or on their own, unreflective, habitual, reasons. Practical wisdom, then, has pride of place. There are other virtues besides practical wisdom; Socrates was wrong there. And Maggie Little is wrong to suggest that virtue is knowledge *and nothing more*.[37] But it is correct that wisdom has pride of place. Courage without wisdom ceases even to be courage. This will also require a discussion of practical wisdom. And to that task we now turn.

37. Margaret Olivia Little, "Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind," in *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Russ Shaffer-Landeau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2007), 252–64 It is not totally clear to me from this essay whether she means to suggest this point or not; but the suggestion is there and she does nothing to counteract it.