



Virtues, Principles, and Intuitions: Elements of an Explication of Phronesis

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Introduction

The present discussion comments on the roles of virtues, principles, and intuitions in the explication of *phronesis*. It is not intended to be a full-scale account of each of them; that would be an enormous project. Instead, it is meant to highlight the distinctive and interrelated roles of virtues, principles, and intuitions in practical wisdom. Of course, the discussion assumes that there *is* such a thing as practical wisdom but it does not *merely* assume that. The explication of the main points in the discussion will help show that there is indeed a strong case in favor of practical wisdom and that it is critically important for ethics.

Some of the most influential ancient and medieval conceptions of practical wisdom were connected with philosophical anthropologies that included a distinctive *telos* for human nature. It is a mistake to think of that *telos* narrowly, as though Aristotle thought that there is just one, specific way for a human being to lead a flourishing life or that all virtuous agents would have very similar characters. Even if there is a *telos* for human beings it is possible for it to be realized through different people leading a variety of diverse lives, having different interests, and exhibiting different characters. They would all need to have certain especially important virtues but those virtues could be exercised in a multiplicity of ways in different circumstances and contexts. In any event, I shall argue that there are good grounds for maintaining that there is such a thing as practical wisdom even if there is no specific *telos* for a human life. This would still mean that there are significant, objective differences between well-led lives and badly led lives, and between exercising virtues and exercising vices. Those facts do not require that there should be a specific, substantive *telos* for human beings.

Persons who acquire and exercise virtues find it pleasing to do so. There is, as Aristotle argued, an important respect in which virtuous activity is *naturally pleasing*. But that fact, too, is compatible with a diversity of ways of going about leading a life. We could say that human flourishing requires the well-ordered exercise of rational capacities and certain virtues. But, again, that allows for a very accommodative conception of what can count as a well-led life and a very accommodative conception of the exercise of virtues.

The virtues require practical wisdom. It is necessary for ethically sound judgment, reasoning, and choice. Practical wisdom is responsive to normative authority external to individual subjectivity even if it is not interpreted as being connected with or dependent upon natural law, divine commands, or a Platonist conception of moral realism. The key feature of practical wisdom is that it involves a sound grasp of the ethically relevant

features of situations, acts, and agents. The acquisition of such an understanding requires certain sorts of training of sensibility and habituating the agent to have certain patterns of desire and motivation. But the cognitive aspect of practical wisdom requires the agent to have attained a level of fluency with a repertoire of ethically relevant concepts. That is what makes it possible for the agent to recognize and discern the ethically salient features of a situation, action or agent.

I

Virtue and Engagement With the World

In the mid-twentieth century Philippa Foot argued that a case for ethical virtues could be made on the basis of them being *needed* for human beings to live well, and on virtues as *correctives* to certain human propensities and susceptibilities.¹ Her argument was connected with a critique of what she took to be highly implausible features of a putative decomposition into a factual (descriptive) element and a distinct attitudinal (prescriptive) element of meaning for moral terms. Foot argued that it is implausible that attitudinizing could be made sense of distinct from a fact-and-reasons-based grasp of the meaning of concepts such as *admiration, loyalty, courage, pride, gratitude, generosity, temperance*, and so forth. The intelligibility and appropriateness (or not) of attitudes depends upon facts about, and features of that which is the object of the attitude. Attitudes cannot—intelligibly—alight just anywhere, and they are not explicable in their own terms, without reference to that to which they are reactions and responses.

In more recent work John McDowell and others have elaborated arguments that complement the considerations that Foot highlighted though the focus and emphasis might differ. McDowell (e.g., in “Values and Secondary Qualities” and “Projection and Truth in Ethics”) has argued that the projectivist’s allegedly projected attitudes are not intelligible apart from features of the things onto which attitudes are projected.⁴ Those features are directly implicated in any attempt to make rational sense of the attitudes. Wiggins (e.g., in “A Sensible Subjectivism?” “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life”) argued that non-cognitivist accounts of ethical value are unsustainable and ethical value can be explicated in terms of property/response pairs, “mutually adjusted.”² In Wiggins’s analysis, too, the properties are crucial elements of any attempt to explicate the appropriateness of the attitudes. Again, the upshot is that prescriptivist, expressivist, non-cognitive analyses of moral semantics and their accompanying

¹ See Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978.

² David Wiggins, “A Sensible Subjectivism?” and “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life,” in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Second Edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

accounts of moral reasons are failures in ways that lend credence to a more cognitivist, even realist interpretation of the issues.

At the same time that there has been this outside-in emphasis McDowell has argued that:

although the point of engaging in ethical reflection still lies in the interest of the question “How should one live?”, that question is necessarily approached via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out.³

The main point of his insight comports with the notion that the virtuous agent is responsive to the world through a concern to attain a sound appreciation of ethical considerations. Virtue involves rational considerations and not just certain features of sensibility or tendencies to behave in specific ways. Yet, because there is no principle or criterion of right action separated out from the complex texture of practical wisdom “right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out.” There is no practical wisdom counterpart to the Principle of Utility or the Categorical Imperative. Yet, what needs to be grasped and appreciated is not subjective in a person-relative or non-cognitive way. What we find when we look “inside” the virtuous agent is a concern with what is outside the agent and that concern is informed by correct understanding. There are ways in which principles and intuitions figure in virtuous activity guided by practical wisdom but the intuitions are not foundational and the principles do not constitute the primary architecture of practical wisdom. That is one of the main points defended in the present discussion.

An additional important point is that the virtuous agent is concerned to grasp things with a minimum of distorting rationalization, self-deception, and self-serving misrepresentation. Virtuous agents have an accurate, sound appreciation of ethically relevant features of situations, persons, and actions, and a durable concern to be responsive to that appreciation. They are responsive to the realities they encounter rather than projecting value onto the world. Gabriele Taylor writes of the virtuous agent, “There are...standards by reference to which she may, or may fail to correct her reasoning and attitudes.”⁴ “The fully virtuous comply with this requirement because they get their reasoning right, they possess practical wisdom, a kind of knowledge or sensitivity.”⁵ This is connected with the way that virtue is “naturally pleasing” in that a key aspect of the enjoyment accessible to the virtuous agent is that the virtuous agent is “at home” in the world.

³ John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *Monist*, 62, (1979), 331.

⁴ Gabriele Taylor, *Deadly Vices*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

Vicious agents have a need (consciously felt or not) to reinterpret the world in ways that comport with corrupt dispositions and wrong values. The virtuous agent's judgment can become steadily more informed, more textured, more discriminating, and more discerning while the vicious agent may need to engage in a great deal of psychological and moral editorializing, so to speak, to bring the world into conformity with their vices and self-conception.

Taylor argues that the most significant, damaging vices involve not only misrepresentation and self-serving rationalization but they can render the individual a moral solipsist. "Genuine self-love, since it rests on positive self-evaluation, demands that the person concerned should feel herself to be engaged with the world in ways which she considers to be worthwhile. It is these engagements rather than she herself which will absorb her attention."⁶ The practically wise agent is open to the world, willing to enlarge and deepen their moral education by further developing their understanding. The vicious person's preoccupation with self primarily concerns the ways that such a person needs to represent the world so that it is congenial to the agent's values and perceptions rather than seeking to attain an accurate conception of the world. Virtue and vice involve fundamentally different modes of engagement with the world, not just interesting interior differences in valuation. One of the most significant costs of vice, of lacking practical wisdom and the aspiration to acquire it is that it can progressively confine the vicious agent within a sphere of (perhaps quite urgent) rationalization, which can put knowledge of the world, other persons, and the self more and more out of reach.

Taylor writes:

The self-deception of the vicious, needed to protect themselves from disturbing realizations about themselves, has itself to be protected from discovery by others, and so plays a part in predisposing them towards aggression. It does so also in another way. The vicious' self-deception means that they present a false self to the world. In that sense they are hypocrites.⁷

And "further, what they do to themselves is reflected in what they do to others. Their layer of self-deception is corruptive of the self. The layer of protection against others is similarly corruptive of their relationship with others."⁸ Taylor writes of the vicious agent: "Since he feels only for himself, any personal relationship with another is doomed from the start. To acknowledge others, therefore, both awareness of their consciousness and

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

any feeling involved should at least occasionally be self-transcendent.”⁹ Of course, vicious persons have friendships and other relationships with other persons, some of them lasting. It is not as though vicious persons always find themselves isolated in a small sphere of self-centeredness. However, their friendships differ from those between virtuous persons and, so too, do many of their other relationships. The features of character that appeal to vicious persons, and what it is that they like and that they appreciate about others differs from the concerns and interests of virtuous individuals. Agents with vices will not value another person’s virtues; will not find the decency, honesty, and fairness of another person features to appreciate, encourage, and perhaps learn from. It will be a different set of characteristics that appeals to a vicious person and even (or perhaps most assuredly) when a relationship between vicious persons is durable, its lasting will not be based on the commendable, admirable features that make for a lasting friendship between virtuous agents. Vicious persons take pleasure in acts and activities that are corrupt, harmful, and objectionable. That they find them pleasing depends on the self-serving rationalizations through which they see the world, and those can be shared with other vicious persons. But then the ‘friendship’ is a relation between self-centered persons.

| The agent most fully engaged with the world and least preoccupied with the self is best able to enjoy activity and experience. Virtue requires that kind of engagement through requiring sound appreciation of the ethically relevant aspects of situations, actions, and persons. The virtuous agent’s activity provides reasons to continue exercising his or her capacities in accord with the conception of worth and desirability informing that activity. Taylor remarks that “[r]ational caring is a move against self-centeredness.”¹⁰

While a virtue is a state of an agent, and while that state involves dispositions of sensibility and other aspects of the person—some of which are elements of human subjectivity—a virtue is world-guided in the respect that it depends on the person having (or making progress striving to acquire) sound understanding of ethically relevant considerations. The ‘inside-out’ dimension of virtue requires being properly responsive to the ‘externalist’ dimension of virtue, the way in which cognition is integral to it. The substance of the way the virtuous person sees things depends on the virtuous person having a *correct* conception of things, on seeing them rightly.

Virtue requires practical wisdom and there is a crucial sense in which practical wisdom is world-guided and world-oriented in a way that vice is not. While practical wisdom is to be described and characterized in terms of how the virtuous agent sees and responds to things it is not an overlay of principles or a valuative projection laminated onto the world. It is acquired through, and exercised in certain types of engagement with the world, and that engagement cannot be assimilated to voluntarism or expressivism. It

⁹ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰ Ibid., 152.

involves a kind of seeking to understand that is not part of the vicious person's engagement with the world.

The points we have noted in McDowell and Taylor's views comport with Foot's claims regarding the virtues as (i) needed and as (ii) correctives. (Aquinas's view that *temperance* is the virtue of the concupiscible appetites and *fortitude* is the virtue of the irascible appetites makes a similar general point. That is, we need virtue to restrain ourselves we are too easily attracted to something and succumb to powerful inclinations; and we need virtue to impel us, to keep us engaged and willing to act when fear or apprehension would keep us from seeing through with action that is worthwhile.)¹¹ The needfulness of the virtues is explicable in terms of factual considerations about what human beings are like and what is required for them to lead lives they—correctly—find worthwhile and desirable for their own sake. The case is similar with regard to virtues as correctives. Various human inclinations, propensities, susceptibilities lead people away from ethically good action and from leading their lives in prudent manners. Even if there is considerable dispute regarding metaethical issues it is likely that there is substantial amount of (plausible) agreement regarding many ethical matters and judgments concerning well-led versus badly led lives. One does not have to be a virtue-theorist to agree that simply succumbing to whatever is one's strongest desire or passion, or seeking revenge out of spite, or taking pleasure in humiliating others are ethically bad practices. There will be plenty of disagreement but we should not overlook a wide area of ethical agreement on many important issues. Many of the more widely shared ethical judgments can be seen to have rationales that involve considerations of need or considerations concerning their corrective significance. In fact, ways in which many virtues have corrective significance are often more *prima facie* plausible than, say, attempts at consequentialist rationales for the relevant practices and actions.

In addition, a person who has acquired virtues can, upon reflecting on them, see how they involve more than simple dispositions to act in certain ways. The person can see how affect, attention, perception, reactive attitudes, and strategies of weighing considerations are involved. Even with respect to something such as benevolence, which may seem to be primarily a matter of sensibility, there is a critical role for judgment and for appreciating multiple aspects of situations and actions. There is an essential role for fluency with a repertoire of relevant concepts as well as reacting in certain ways and having certain affective responses. The acquisition of fluency and the development of one's reactions are elements of a single, multi-aspect process. One's subtle, discerning grasp of ethically relevant concepts depends substantially on the type of awareness and sensitivity one has.

Additionally, one's capacities for practical rationality involve more than the ability to engage in certain forms of reasoning. McDowell writes, "One's formed practical

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Q. 141.

intellect—which is operative in one’s character-revealing behavior—just is an aspect of one’s nature as it has become.”¹² In addition, “[t]he concept of second nature registers that we do not need to conceive practical reason as subject only to formal constraints.”¹³

What it is for the practical intellect to be as it ought to be, and so equipped to get things right in its proper sphere, is a matter of its having a certain determinate non-formal shape, and a practical intellect’s coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities: a process that takes place in nature.¹⁴

That is one of the chief respects in which well-ordered practical rationality is to be explicated in terms of the *content* of the person’s view and not only in terms of certain ways of *reasoning*. Some aspects of moral thought that are often characterized in terms of reasoning are actually better described in terms of integrative, synoptic *judgment*. I suggest that intuitions have a place in such judgments. We can see this by considering some crucial aspects of the acquisition and exercise of virtue and practical wisdom.

II

The Complex Texture of Virtue

The acquisition of practical wisdom requires certain sorts of training of sensibility and habituating the agent to have certain patterns of motivation along with acquiring conceptual fluency. Jointly attention, receptivity, and conceptual articulateness make it possible for the agent to recognize and discern the ethically salient features of a situation, action or agent. As mentioned above, the development of sensibility and conceptual fluency depend on and support each other. Also, while some aspects of moral thought are often characterized in terms of *reasoning*, and reasoning from principles, in many cases the person’s grasp of the situation and insight into what would be appropriate may be better described in terms of integrative, synoptic *judgment* in which there is a role for intuitions. Rather than reasoning from principles to a specific course of action the virtuous agent recognizes what are the relevant considerations and makes a specific determination of what is to be done. To show this we need to consider some key aspects of the acquisition and exercise of virtue.

¹² John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Eds. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, W. Quinn, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

It is important to recognize that virtues are neither acquired nor exercised one at a time, as though compartmentalized and independent of each other. It is often the case that a particular virtue will have especially pronounced importance in a situation.

Circumstances may clearly make demands upon courage, for example, or honesty. Even so, there are important relations of mutual support among virtues and the degree to which a virtue is developed can depend upon other virtues. This is not to say that an agent has each virtue to the same degree or that each is implicated in an action to the same extent—whatever that might mean.

Granted, in the process of moral education a young person is often encouraged to focus on one or another specific feature of action or the situation. It may be a 'lesson' in patience or considerateness or generosity or gratitude, and so forth. An individual may have certain propensities or susceptibilities that warrant attention. And in much of moral life one or another specific feature of a situation is most pronounced. But even in those cases, highlighting some single virtue often involves a measure of artificiality in the respect that moral reality is typically complex, with more than just one or another moral consideration being directly relevant. Accordingly, seeing the situation rightly involves more than responsiveness of just one specific type. Or, a sound and appropriate response, say, in terms of compassion or gratitude or fairness is very likely to involve other dispositions and modes of receptivity and responsiveness. Yet, it is not so difficult to think of ways in which judgment and action even in the most 'obviously' single-factor situations can be misguided or inappropriate on account of the failure of supporting virtues. I suspect that in a great deal of the discussion of virtue, and perhaps especially in literature critical of virtue-centered ethics, there is a—mistaken—tendency to focus on one virtue at a time, treating them somewhat too mechanically rather than organically. This could involve underestimating the complexity that is often involved in responding to a situation and thinking of a virtue too narrowly, as just a disposition to behave a certain way.

To be sure, some individuals have one or another virtue or vice in an especially pronounced manner, and it can become emblematic of an individual's character. But that may be because we are most interested in that person in some specific context or in relation to some particular episode, and even in that context or episode a virtue is not present or exercised in a stand-alone way. Suppose someone is notably generous or notably supportive. In the absence of other virtues the person can fairly easily make errors of judgment and act inappropriately and fail to be generous or supportive. If the individual avoids such failures it is almost certainly because of the other virtues that person has.

One of the reasons I say that a virtue involves a *repertoire* of concepts is that, while a virtue has a focus of a specific sort, that focus is not a fully isolable feature of a situation or action. We talk about this or that virtue or vice and about this or that aspect of an action or situation but each of those objects of attention is actually best understood through a grasp that includes appreciation of numerous other aspects. The virtuous

agent's mode of attention and the relevant weighing of ethically relevant considerations typically involve multiple considerations; that is one of the most significant features of practical wisdom. Courage requires judgment concerning which dangers and risks are worth facing as well as managing fear. Generosity involves weighing considerations of how much to give, to whom, and with what purposes in mind. Loyalty may involve several values such as fairness, compassion, generosity, and honesty. The complexity of a situation can require subtle, discerning awareness and the ability to recognize the relations between numerous considerations. Often, those relations are grasped by the practically wise in intuition.

If moral life generally involves making judgments and choices in which more than just one value at a time is involved then possessing a virtue will not be a stand-alone, independent feature of character unconnected with other dispositions and modes of awareness, response, and judgment. There isn't courage—full-stop—which is then conjoined with perseverance and wisdom. There isn't generosity—full-stop—which is then conjoined with compassion and justice. The acquisition (and not just the exercise) of virtue involves attention, discernment, judgment, and motivational dispositions responsive to a potentially complex texture of ethically relevant considerations. Even modest reflection reveals that while there is a point to distinguishing virtues and highlighting their distinctive features, there is an important sense in which each is an aspect of *practical wisdom* as a comprehensive virtue, the exercise of which involves grasping the significance of many kinds of considerations and involves a complex fabric of sensibilities, awareness and discriminations, and motivational dispositions. One of the most significant features of practical wisdom is the developed ability to recognize the several ethically relevant features of a situation and the ways they relate to each other.

A respect in which many consequentialist moral theories are very implausible is that the notion that there is some single value-consideration to be maximized or even a couple of such considerations is just cartoonishly unrealistic. Moral life and experience are often very complex in the respect that generally, several values bear on a situation or a decision and before deciding what to do one needs to get those values and their relations to each other into view. Even familiar, commonplace moral matters generally involve numerous value-considerations and the issues are more a matter of "what values are at issue" than they are a matter of "how can the presence of feature *f* be maximized." Even when feature *f* is importantly connected with 'doing the most good' the notion of the 'most good' is likely to be complex rather than one-dimensional. And there are ethical matters involved in *how* to do it. (The view that moral decision-making should focus on bring about a certain type of state of affairs or a certain feature of states of affairs is actually highly implausible. Considered in any context other than classifying types of moral theory at a quite abstract level, for example, considered as a guide to actually making a decision and acting, it offers precious little meaningful guidance.)

In acquiring a virtue it is to be expected that attention will be focused on specific kinds of considerations and that one may need to overcome certain distractions or impediments. In learning temperance a person may need to be resolute about not indulging certain specific appetites and might need to remind oneself about why a certain sort of discipline is important. In learning gratitude one may need to overcome a particular type of tendency to selfishness or inconsideration and in the process of learning the agent will acquire an appreciation of relations with others that goes much further than remembering to say ‘thank you.’ Even when some element of moral education primarily concerns one particular virtue the education can be effective only if it also enlarges and refines judgment and shapes attitudes and responses that are not confined within narrowly defined limits.

One way to see this is to take note of how the acquisition of a particular virtue can involve addressing a cluster of aspects of temperament and character. It might be more difficult to overcome fear and become courageous if the agent is selfish and ungenerous as well as fearful. It might be especially difficult to acquire temperance if the agent is dishonest as well as prone to over-indulgence; she may deceive herself about how much progress she is making. And so forth. Various aspects of the agent’s character—some needing to be changed, others needing strengthening, relations between them requiring revision— are likely to figure in the process of acquiring a virtue.

Attention is feature of virtue that merits fuller consideration than it often receives.¹⁵ Virtue depends on the agent acquiring habits of attention by which he or she is alert to ethically relevant considerations. The person lacking virtue and the vicious agent do not notice the same things the virtuous agent notices but then decide to act wrongly rather than virtuously. Non-virtuous agents do not ‘read’ and appreciate the relevant considerations in the way the virtuous agent does. They may not notice them at all. Or, they may attend to the situation but do so through a distorted, corrupt or ethically perverse perspective. Whether the metaphor is ‘reading’ or ‘not being tone-deaf’ or some other perceptual or quasi-perceptual formulation the point is that without the attention that makes responsiveness to ethical considerations possible, the agent will not acquire habits and dispositions that are reliably virtuous. Attention is not something *in addition* to the agent’s sensibility and conceptual fluency. It is a way of describing an important aspect of how the agent encounters the world, one without which the agent cannot have a reliably effective disposition to be responsive to ethical considerations.

Without the relevant forms of attention an agent certainly will not acquire practical wisdom. The agent will lack the conceptually structured awareness of what needs to be discerned and appreciated in order to judge correctly. I am not suggesting that the virtuous agent has a kind of preoccupation with moral considerations. The relevant form

¹⁵ The role of attention was influentially discussed in Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

of attention is more a matter of the agent having a realized ability to notice ethically relevant features, make ethically relevant discriminations, and a durable willingness to be responsive to them. The person who is alert to many ethically relevant considerations but is not responsive to them can be particularly disturbing. That is someone who is not ethically oblivious but he chooses to enact wrong values and pursue ethically problematic ends. This person has awareness but lacks depth of concern. Such a person might be especially capable of cruelty, manipulation, and deceit because of the ability to discern many of the sorts of things that are likely to matter to others while lacking the kind of ethical commitment through which those matters would effectively concern the agent.

III

Principles and Intuitions

One potentially misleading aspect of ethical theories in which a fundamental criterion or principle of right action has a key role is that any candidate for that criterion or principle is almost certain to either (i) fail to register the realities of the texture of ethical considerations or (ii) implausibly assimilate that texture into some single main thread—some single consideration that purports to have ethical priority in a completely general way. To be fair, a criterion such as Kant’s Categorical Imperative is employed to test the validity of specific maxims, and the maxims can concern a wide range of ethical considerations. Likewise, Mill’s Principle of Utility need not be interpreted in such a way that reasoning about utility involves a shallow, narrow conception of happiness. Nevertheless, the very notion that some single master principle or criterion should capture and express what is ethically essential—in all cases, in all respects—seems less and less cogent the more we consider the diversity, complexity, and angles of interrelation of ethically relevant considerations.

There is though, room for generalizations and for principles in practical wisdom. By a generalization I mean something such as, “fairness concerns seeing to it that each person’s legitimate claims are fulfilled” or “generosity concerns willingness to give to others in ways meant to promote their welfare” or “courage concerns the management of fear and judgments concerning what risks are worth facing.” A generalization does not tell us what we are to do but it says something important about particular virtues or generally ethically sound ways of acting. By a ‘principle’ I mean a prescriptive rule such as, “Unless there are specific, compelling reasons to be deceitful, tell what you believe to be the truth” or “it is always wrong to treat a person as a mere object or thing, even when a person deserves censure and punishment” or “persons who have well-served us, especially in times of need and distress, are owed gratitude.” These may not tell us precisely what we are to do but they are, as it were, determinables, which are to be specified in determinate ways in accord with the circumstances.

The excellent judgment integral to practical wisdom is vitally important to being able to make those specific determinations. One of the chief exercises of synoptic, integrative

judgment of the practically wise person is in discerning the value-considerations relevant to a situation and appreciating what is most salient in their interaction. That may involve arriving at specific determinations of relevant principles. In ascertaining those, the virtuous agent has the proper focus for decision and action.

What Aquinas says about how ethical requirements can be determinations of natural law is helpful. He asks whether every human law is derived from natural law and he notes that “something may be derived from the natural law in two ways: first, as a conclusion from principles; secondly, by way of a determination of certain common notions.” In explicating the second way he says that it “is likened to that whereby, in the arts, common forms are determined to some particular. Thus, the craftsman needs to determine the common form of a house to the shape of this or that particular house.” And, “that *one must not kill* may be derived as a conclusion from the principle that *one should do harm to no man*; while some [ethical requirements] are derived therefrom by way of determination: e.g., the law of nature has it that the evil-doer should be punished, but that he be punished in this or that way is a determination of the law of nature.”¹⁶

The notion that a great deal of moral judgment and decision takes the form of determination or specification for which practical wisdom is required does not require a theory of natural law. The thought that goes from acknowledgment of what values are at stake to a specific conception of how they figure in the situation is a form of determination. Moral judgment and decision might be much simpler if they were matters of derivation rather than determination but it is in the latter that the person’s understanding, insight, experience, and awareness are jointly involved in appreciating what is required.

The soundly virtuous agent’s appreciation of a situation informs motivationally relevant dispositions. The ‘reading’ of the ethically salient considerations provides the practically wise agent with reasons to act a certain way. While a virtuous agent’s understanding might include numerous rules and generalizations concerning ways of being responsive to specific kinds of considerations the judgment of what has ethical salience is more integrative than discursive. These judgments might provide premises of practical reasoning. In many cases they do so by formulating what has ethical priority in the situation. Often, this requires insight and discernment and is more than just a matter of noticing what anyone could notice by paying attention. What is included in the *kind* of attention is crucial to what is noticed and how significant it is taken to be.

In a description of the situation the agent may distill its complexity into just one or a couple of especially important considerations concerning, say, justice or courage or compassion. However, that is often the result of an appreciation that is much more complex. For the person who has acquired fluency with relevant concepts and is

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 95. Art 2.

attentive and responsive to the various features of the situation the judgment of the situation may seem intuitive. A practically wise agent is capable of reflective, non-inferential ethical judgments that identify the ethically most salient features of a situation. This is not a foundational intuition, not an ethical ‘basic report,’ so to speak, but more of a culminating judgment in that making the judgment depends upon the agent’s reflective appreciation of ethical matters. If it is intuitive it is intuitive in a way that depends on what may be a complex understanding and awareness rather than being a simple, building-block intuition by which complex understanding might be supported. (It is analogous to the informed, veteran-theater-goer’s judgment that a particular production is expertly directed or to the experienced primary school teacher’s judgment that different children in the class will be helped most by somewhat different approaches to persuading them to learn their lessons.)

Some parts of Robert Audi’s discussion of intuitionism are helpful here. He argues that intuitions meet a “*comprehension requirement*” and a “*pretheoreticality requirement*” (among other requirements). The former says that, “intuitions must be formed in the light of an adequate understanding of their propositional objects...”¹⁷ and the latter says that intuitions “are neither evidentially dependent on theories nor themselves theoretical hypotheses.”¹⁸ He notes that

This point does *not* entail that intuition has a complete independence of theory: an intuition may be defeated and abandoned in the light of theoretical results incompatible with its truth, especially when these results are supported by other intuitions. This is a kind of negative epistemic dependence of intuition on theory: the justification of the intuition does not derive from the impossibility of such untoward, hypothetical results, but it can be destroyed by them if they occur.¹⁹

Audi also distinguishes between a “*conclusion of inference*” and a “*conclusion of reflection*.” In the latter “[o]ne has not added up the evidences and formulated their implication; one has obtained a view of the whole and characterized it overall.”¹⁴ Audi remarks, “Granted, if I *articulate* my noninferential grounds, they will then be available to me as premises.....But surely my having a ground that is *expressible* in a premise does not imply that I must *use* that ground *in* a premise in order to form a belief on the basis of that ground.”²⁰

¹⁷ Robert Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics,” in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Mark Timmons, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 113.

As an interim conclusion Audi writes

If anything has emerged from this study as common to all the ways of knowing that deserve to be called intuitive, it is reflection, above all reflection on the concepts figuring in, and on the necessary implications of, the moral or other propositions whose status is supposed to be knowable through intuition. The reflection may be as brief as simply focusing clearly on the proposition, or it may require many sittings, possibly spread over many years. It turns out, however, that what is knowable in this reflective way—or can be at least justifiably believed in this way—need not be strongly axiomatic, in a sense implying that there cannot be epistemically independent grounds for it. What can be justifiably believed “in its own terms” is not thereby precluded from being justified by premises.²¹

The practically wise agent will be able to articulate what sorts of considerations are elements of his judgment. “Elements” is not shorthand for “what function as premises.” The agent is not confined to a kind of inarticulate conviction; the intuitions in question are judgments, typically dependent upon an articulate grasp of numerous concepts and the potentially complex manner in which they apply. Multi-aspect conceptualization rather than identification of just one feature may be involved in making the judgment. What emerges from reflection is a specific mode of responsiveness.

The virtuous person’s understanding is steadily enlarged and deepened by experience and reflection. Even the individual of sound judgment and wide experience can encounter circumstances requiring new thought in ways that depend on well-formed habits but also extend them. In addition, we should expect to encounter situations involving what are, for us, new ways of ethical considerations being interrelated. Wisdom and experience might be needed to see that that is the case but the agent will recognize that prior judgment and responses may not be fully adequate to the challenge of the circumstances. For example, the situation may be an occasion for the agent’s understanding of fairness or generosity to be broadened and developed.

IV Rationality and Second Nature

The practical wisdom informing the virtuous agent’s second nature involves a stable, guiding concern to be attentive to, and responsive to the complex texture of ethical value both cognitively and motivationally. There is an important explanatory role for

²¹ Ibid. 118-119.

states of character through which the agent engages with the world with durable forms of awareness, commitment, and interest. A practically wise person's states of character are not brittle, mechanical dispositions, nor are that person's conceptions of ethical matters expressible in fixed, unrevisable rules. The agent recognizes that moral education is never complete and that there is no point at which refinement, extension, and revision of one's understanding become impossible or needless. The practically wise agent may refer to numerous rules of principles but the agent's morality will not be a code based upon some fundamental principle. In application the principles themselves will generally need to be further specified.

In a general sense we can say that anyone is capable of acquiring practical wisdom in that it is accessible to those with the characteristically human capacities of practical rationality. However, the virtuous person's character and understanding are not a result of a natural process all human beings undergo unless something impedes it. They depend upon acquisition through learning, guidance, rebuke, activity, and critical reflection. "This makes it obviously wrong to expect right reason to be capable of issuing commands to just anyone, whatever his motivational make-up."²² McDowell writes

In acquiring one's second nature—that is, in acquiring *logos*—one learned to take a distinctive pleasure in acting in certain ways, and one acquired conceptual equipment suited to characterize a distinctive worthwhileness one learned to see in such actions, that is, a distinctive range of reasons one learned to see for acting in those ways.²³

Persons typically find it pleasing to act in ways oriented and motivated by their states of character. To so act is pleasing because it is acting in accord with the way one's inclinations, concerns, and desires are disposed. The continent agent and the agent striving to be virtuous will experience conflict and regret when acting badly but part of what it is to be vicious is to regard one's values as acceptable or even noble (see Himmler's speech to SS officers at Poznan in October 1943). This might involve shutting out intimations of doubt about one's values and making a conscientious effort to sustain commitment to what are, in fact, ethically corrupt values and aims. It can involve forcing strained interpretations onto concepts in order to preserve an idiom that—by the way it *sounds*—suggests virtue but has been grotesquely corrupted. The vicious agent is acknowledging the importance of preserving the right-sounding vocabulary but is betraying it.

Though vices can become as firmly a matter of second nature as virtues this is not to say that persons with vicious states of character are incorrigible and utterly incapable of ethically reorienting themselves. There can be a measure of plasticity of character even

²² John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 179.

²³ *Ibid*, 170.

in a person mature in years. However, it is not as though there remains—separate from character—a capacity for rational agency capable of a kind of independent judgment of states of character and effectively motivating reform of them. Moreover, the kind of openness to reflection, criticism, and guidance that is needed for the enlargement of practical wisdom and the development of virtue is not typically among the characteristics of vicious persons.

On the issue of moral vice Kant wrote:

When we present examples of honesty of purpose, of steadfastness in following good maxims, and of sympathy and general benevolence even with great sacrifice of advantages and comfort, there is no man, not even the most malicious villain (provided he is otherwise accustomed to using his reason), who does not wish that he also might have these qualities.²⁴

Much depends on the way that *right reason* is built into the notion of being “accustomed to using his reason” but Kant’s moral philosophy seems to require that there should be an effective capacity for rational agency independent of the person’s second nature, a view different from what is defended here. Kant’s view requires that there should be an ability to judge rightly and to be motivated rightly such that the dual capacity is not impacted by the agent’s empirical character. Granted, the view defended here is not the view that rational capacity is, so to speak, *fully assimilated* to states of character or the agent’s developed second nature. That would seem to rule out reasoned development of states of character and reorientation of ethical outlook. However, by looking at the different ways that virtues and vices inform the way a person exercises rational capacities we can see that the notion of ‘second nature’ has a role in constituting the individual as an agent rather than just being a set of circumstantial facts about the person unrelated to the dispositions shaping the way the agent’s rational capacities have been realized.

In fact, when we think about what we aspire to in regard to what we wish to be like much of that thinking is done in terms of what states of character we wish to acquire, have more fully, finally be freed from, and so forth. We do not have the option of somehow engaging the world in a manner independent of states of character. And, besides, lacking them would not render us at greater liberty or offer us agency uninfluenced or ‘uncontaminated’ by features external to it. Instead, we would be disoriented and disabled in a fundamental way. With regard to practical rationality second nature just is the specific way in which the capacities constitutive of primary nature have become disposed. For them to have no (more or less) determinate

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1976, 73.

dispositions would be for our capacities for practical reasoning and judgment to be undeveloped. Second nature is not a nature *in addition* to primary nature.

In addition, elements of second nature can be voluntary even if they have not been chosen. One's voluntary activity can lead to formation of dispositions though the person never intended to acquire those specific dispositions. Elements of second nature can reflect aspects of temperament one did not choose though the individual can be responsible for how those aspects are reflected in actions and reactions. There are aspects of character for which we can be expected to *take responsibility* though we are not responsible for the fact that we have them. For example, a person can be accountable for managing a volatile temper or especially strong impulses or desires. It might be that the effort results in changed dispositions; perhaps not. We might regard the agent with a measure of sympathy for having to contend with the challenge of that temper or those impulses and, in at least some cases, not holding the person as responsible as someone not similarly challenged. But there aren't states of character over here, and capacities for agency over there, as though they could figure in action independent of each other.

Taking seriously who one is as an agent involves recognizing oneself as responding to various kinds of action-guiding considerations and in ways that involve different degrees of imperative, those differences being grounded in one's character. Bernard Williams wrote:

The recognition of practical necessity must involve an understanding at once of one's own powers and incapacities, and of what the world permits, and the recognition of a limit which is neither simply external to the self, nor yet a product of the will is what can lend a special authority or dignity to such decisions...²⁵

Thinking realistically about what we take to be practically necessary involves the effort to form an accurate conception of what merits our attention and concern, what motivates aspiration, elicits disgust, and so forth. We need to see the content of that conception as content of character, reflecting one's notion of what one "has to" do. The more honestly we acknowledge those aspects of ourselves as agents the better able we will be to exercise self-determination. Reflecting on our past, considering what to aspire to, and reflecting on what sorts of persons we are and think we should be—those all involve the idiom of states of character. How to become more virtuous in a specific respect cannot be realistically considered except through an honest grasp of one's states of

²⁵ Bernard Williams, "Practical Necessity," in *Moral Luck*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 130-131.

character and their role in becoming *like that*, whether '*that*' refers to the virtue one aspires to or to the way one actually is at present.

One might cast the language of aspiration in terms of striving to act in a more *principled* way or striving to act in a manner that is more faithful to certain *principles*. But that is shorthand for an engagement of several aspects of a person's capacity for rational action. It tells us something about the value that the person regards as especially important. However, the principle (and the value) will only figure more effectively in the person's activity through the way that attention, discernment, ability to integrate valuative considerations, responsiveness and effective volition figure in the person's life. One's ability to make principled action a feature of oneself can depend on numerous aspects of one's character and the honesty with which the agent acknowledges those aspects.

V

Principles and Moral Education

This suggests that with regard to moral education focusing on states of character may be more important than inculcation of principles. Education in principles may have little efficacy unless rooted in states of character including dispositions concerning judgment and motivation. Attention, judgment, and affective engagement (receptivity, endorsement, commitment) are crucially important to moral life. The exercise of virtue involves multiple capacities, dispositions, and abilities. It might be second nature to someone to act on certain principles but, as just remarked, in order to be *like that* much besides the understanding of the principles is required.

Practical wisdom is required for knowing when a principle applies, why it applies, and how it is to be apply. Even a principle of truth-telling needs to be made determinate in the appropriate way, given the circumstances. What truth-telling requires can differ in different situations and judgment is needed to make the appropriate determinations. Moreover, as indicated above, when multiple values figure in a situation (and that is probably the vast majority of situations) judgment is required for weighing their relevance and integrating them. No codification of principles, even a very lengthy one, could be adequate to the complexity of moral reality without allowing for extensive determination or specification of the principles.

In the process of moral education rules have an important place early on, for the way they highlight certain kinds of moral matters. They can have an important place later on as well, inasmuch as a mature agent, one with some richness of experience, may have a grasp of numerous principles relevant to moral life. However, in general, as attention, discernment, and judgment become more informed and more responsive to the complexity of ethical reality the agent becomes better able to make judgments based

upon understanding that involves calibration that is not captured by a set of principles. What the emphasis on principles may overlook is the importance of *responsiveness* as a key element of moral judgment and decision. They enable the agent to ascertain the relevance of principles, to see that *this* is what is ethically required in these circumstances.

As practical wisdom develops and deepens the agent can come to appreciate the reasons for ethical principles requiring what they require but also come to appreciate how agents' states of character and their ability to arrive at relevant determinations of principle are critically important to the actual enactment of principles. The relevance of a principle may be fairly evident and not require much reflective consideration. Or, its relevance may only become clear after the agent has taken into account numerous, diverse aspects of the situation and their interrelated significance.

The ethically virtuous agent may seem to be someone who regularly acts in a principled way and someone for whom the ethical significance of circumstances is grasped by intuition. However, the intuitions of the practically wise person are neither psychologically nor epistemically prior to conceptually informed judgment that involves calibrated attention and discerning responsiveness. Such intuitions are what is made possible by practical wisdom, rather than making it possible. Likewise (and relatedly) if there is a sense in which fidelity to certain principles is an important element of practical wisdom it is because that fidelity is an aspect of the wisdom, not the basis of it. A habit of principled conduct can lead to a firm commitment but the ethical excellence of the commitment will still depend on the agent's ability to judge well, to appreciate the distinctive features of particular situations, and on the relevant types of concern and attention.

Perhaps a study of the operations of mind would show that what I have referred to as "intuition" actually involves numerous steps of cognitive process. Even if it does, in the process of moral experience and moral education the agent is learning to "size up" situations, to take in various aspects of them and make judgments that reflect appreciation of what is ethically most significant in them in integrative judgments rather than through a sequence of reasoning. In many cases those judgments are not a matter of a step-by-step process *as far as the virtuous agent's self-awareness can report*. The judgments are not a matter of first thinking this and then thinking that and finally, reaching a conclusion. That an especially generous benefactor, especially in a time of extraordinary need is owed gratitude is not a matter of discursive thinking. I am not suggesting that every ethical judgment of practically wise persons is intuitive. However, a mark of practical wisdom is that, in many situations requiring ethical judgment the practically wise person is able to make a judgment that captures the relevant features of the situation in an integrated manner, highlighting what is ethically most salient without being led to that as a conclusion of a process of inference.

