

Article

Practical Wisdom, Extended Rationality, and Human Agency

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Abstract: This paper defends a neo-Aristotelian conception of practical wisdom as a virtue that enables human agents to reflect on and direct their lives toward virtuous ends over time. This view is sometimes assumed to require a commitment to an intellectualist Grand End or blueprint view. On that view, practical wisdom would require philosophical insight and an implausibly well worked out set of weighted preferences. In this paper, I aim to show that particularists can and should take on much of what was thought to belong to the Grand End view. I argue for a conception of practical wisdom as a virtue of extended action that accounts for overarching ends without the need to appeal to an unrealistic, intellectualized blueprint for life. Further, on the view advocated here, as in Aristotle, practical wisdom is a virtue of substantial rationality and a different capacity from instrumental rationality in that it requires reflection on what constitutes a good human life. This is not high-minded philosophical reflection and is, in fact, something rather mundane that draws on the same rational capacities we deploy to assess the goodness of actions.

Keywords: practical wisdom; Aristotle; virtue; rationality; John McDowell

1. Introduction

In pursuing a viable notion of practical wisdom, neo-Aristotelians have been very concerned about setting a target that is not overly intellectual.¹ In light of that concern, neo-Aristotelians must either distance themselves from Aristotle or embrace an interpretation on which, despite some appearances, Aristotle is not pedaling a highly demanding intellectualist conception of practical wisdom. I am sympathetic to the concern to avoid excessive intellectual demands and to readings of Aristotle that moderate his apparent intellectualism. Yet, as I will argue here, those advocating a perceptual and particularist model of practical wisdom have omitted or downplayed essential aspects of practical wisdom that, correctly interpreted, need not be incompatible with their views. Practical wisdom involves reflecting on and acting to attain an overarching end through one's life rather than acting on a goal instilled through habituation and reacting to the situation as it presents an opportunity to pursue that goal. There is resistance to construing practical wisdom this way on various grounds, including the concern that a requirement to spend clockable hours thinking about what it is to flourish would put wisdom and therefore full virtue out of the reach of most people.

The concern with over-intellectualizing has led reflection and extended agency to be downplayed in some neo-Aristotelian literature in favor of situational sensitivity, which may be more punctuated and episodic. This tendency to downplay extended action may involve underestimating what we can do reflectively without appealing to a technical philosophical vocabulary and overestimating what is required to engage in successful reflection on and execution of an overarching end. I aim to put these ideas, reflection on the end and extended agency, within reach of a plausible and still broadly particularist conception of practical wisdom.

My first claim is that practical wisdom is a virtue of judgment for actions extended over time rather than momentary or episodic action. In defending this claim, I will draw on work that Sergio Tenenbaum has done on extended action in the domain of instrumental rationality [12]. Practically wise agents act over time with sensitivity to the value of their



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undertakings. The main obstacle in the way of this commitment is the thought that it requires a life plan that makes implausible intellectual demands and commits us to a distorting rigidity that can lead to normative errors. Tenenbaum's work on instrumental rationality as involving a virtue of flexible practical judgment gives us a model that helps us to see why the requirement for a life plan or decision procedure can and should be side-stepped in the case of practical wisdom, just as it can and should be set aside in the domain of instrumental rationality.

But wise agents are rational in a substantive sense that goes beyond instrumental rationality; they reason well toward the right ends. One might think that substantive rationality is nothing more than instrumental rationality directed toward the right ends. In that case, practical wisdom would be an honorific used to praise someone who has virtuous ends, but it would not attribute a capacity distinct from the cleverness of someone who is instrumentally rational. This leads to my second claim: practical wisdom is a rational power distinct from instrumental practical judgment—someone with practical wisdom reasons rightly about the end itself. Hence, wise agents do something that an agent who is only instrumentally rational does not do, exercising a distinct power. The life of virtue makes intellectual demands on us that are different from those made by instrumental rationality—the substantively rational agent has thought about their ends in a way that an instrumentally rational agent has not, even if they happen to choose a series of actions that appear to line up with what those of a wise agent. The actions of someone with practical wisdom come from insight into their ends that involves distinctive categories of practical thought. Yet these same categories are used in formulating moral judgments. Hence, I will argue that reflecting on what sort of life I think is best is no more or less demanding than formulating a view on whether I have acted well in each situation. Indeed, there is an inevitable connection between the two. They are the same capacity brought to bear on different scales of time: an episode of action versus a life. Someone who acts well in a particular situation acts in a way that someone dedicated to a life of virtue would act over the course of their life.

To take an example from Tenenbaum, someone who swims across shark-infested waters, risking their life to retrieve a floating five dollar bill, is probably instrumentally irrational. They may be temporarily blinded to the value that they put on their own life by their avarice [12] (p. 170). Here, avarice is conceived as an instrumental vice, one that undermines the achievement of an agent's ends irrespective of their value. But then again, as Tenenbaum admits, someone may have a fetish for five-dollar bills or no reflective preference between a tiny boost to their wealth and the value of their own life; so, they could, after all, be instrumentally rational, even if such cases are rare. But the swimmer is substantively irrational, as is clear to anyone who reasons correctly concerning the value of five dollars versus the value of one's life or anyone else's. Conversely, someone who stays out of the water for instrumental reasons, because they have a reflective preference for avoiding risk to their life over five dollars, draws on a different capacity from someone who stays out of the water because they have grasped the truth that their life has a value greater than the five dollars. The substantively rational non-swimmer has reflected successfully on the place of trivial amounts of wealth in human life and registers as an objective judgment of the relative lack of worth of five dollars against the risk of death. I contend that it is through reflecting on human life in a general but practical register that one can have thoughts of this sort about the relative value of different aims, as these judgments take place against the background of an idea of what it is to flourish as a human being and insight into this allows us to grasp ends as having a different value within such a life.

Practical wisdom is a virtue that lets an agent flexibly pursue worthwhile ends, provided the flexibility does not undermine achieving things that matter. In that way, it shares some features of Tenenbaum's understanding of instrumental practical judgment, which tells us that instrumental rationality takes the form of a virtue that allows us to act flexibly to bring about our ends rather than adhering to a calculus that dictates what we are to do moment by moment [12] (p. 180ff). This parallel is not surprising since both instrumental

and substantive rationality involve making judgments regarding how to juggle ends over time. But practical wisdom is distinctive in that it necessarily takes up a general practical–evaluative viewpoint on human life and thereby allows the agent to take up ends to be pursued for their own sake as components of their conception of happiness. Instrumental rationality is a derivative, incomplete reasoning ability that is not exercised on its own by good persons. It is derivative in that it captures what substantively rational agents do without attending to what makes their actions commendable and reasonable: their responsiveness to the good. In this, I follow the Aristotelian tradition, in which all human actions are good or bad. As Anscombe puts it, there are “neutral action descriptions”, but those descriptions are incomplete [13] (pp. 204–205). Hence, we can describe an action with attention only to whether it attains its end, indifferent to whether those ends are good or bad. Still, the action is either good, reflecting the competent exercise of human powers of reason and appetite, or it is not. If we are indifferent to whether our actions are good, we are ipso facto acting badly, even if we carry out our aims successfully.

It is part of fully developed human agency, then, to be able to direct oneself to virtue through one’s life. Another species of rational animal might lack that capacity and simply pursue one-off aims, or it might even be able to string together acts one by one that conform to some standard. Still, it is part of developed human agency to have a capacity for thinking about our lives as a whole, as an indefinite but finite future, and to be able to direct actions to virtuous ends through one’s life in fulfillment of an idea of flourishing. A good person does this, even when their lives might otherwise go better on some non-ethical measures, including desire fulfillment. Virtuous agents might forgo satisfying countless transient, trivial desires that count for nothing in their eyes as they pursue worthwhile ends. They are thereby substantively rational in pursuing the good.

In what follows, I will first review some of the reasons that practical wisdom as a virtue of extended action toward an overarching goal mostly fell out of the discussion among neo-Aristotelians. Much of the foundational literature on that topic aims at interpreting Aristotle. Still, it contains arguments that stand on their own, apart from concern with fidelity to Aristotle. These arguments have had a significant influence on neo-Aristotelian ideas of practical wisdom. I will, second, attempt to show that those concerns were predicated on assumptions that we can reject about what it would be to reason about ends and act on them over time. And third, I will talk about ways we can fall short of practical wisdom as a virtue of practical judgment, situating it as a mean between two vices, foolishness and goal rigidity.

2. Practical Wisdom as a Blueprint

The idea of practical wisdom as involving extended action toward an explicit end has seemed off-limits after Aristotle scholarship treating practical wisdom criticized the idea in prominent works by, for example, Sarah Broadie and John McDowell. McDowell labeled the view under consideration the “blueprint model” and Broadie called it “the Grand End view”. As Broadie describes the idea of a Grand End, it is an “explicit, comprehensive, substantial vision” that “guides its possessor in all his deliberations, and in terms of it his rational choices can be explained and justified” [14] (p. 198). This picture sets up requirements on what it takes to count as practically wise, namely, that the agent makes choices that are likely to bring about the Grand End, given what she knows, and that the Grand End is a true account of the good. Further, the agent knows all this and that their actions conform to a true model of the good life. McDowell gives us a similar picture of the blueprint view, which he characterizes as follows: “The idea of the ‘blueprint’ picture is that the content of a conception of the universal, doing well, is in principle available and assessable for correctness in abstraction from the judgments or actions, in particular circumstances that we want to see as applications of it” [15] (p. 44). McDowell emphasizes that the blueprint is something autonomously arrived at by the intellect “starting from some totality of indisputable goods and reasoning toward a way of living that combines them optimally” [15] (p. 55). On the blueprint view, as McDowell conceives it, this

universal conception of the good can be applied deductively or mechanically to arrive at a prescription of what we ought to do here and now.

One complaint against the Grand End or blueprint view is that it is untrue to Aristotle. Indeed, in the form set forth by Broadie and McDowell, it is hard to believe that anyone entertained such an interpretation of Aristotle. Broadie even admits that it is “an exaggerated model which goes beyond what anyone would squarely ascribe to Aristotle” [14] (p. 201). Instead, it is a tendency, undoubtedly inspired by a modern conception of rationality and a desire to assimilate Aristotle to that understanding of rationality as far as possible. But this fact makes the issue important in the attempt to work out a neo-Aristotelian conception of practical wisdom, where we are free to update Aristotle for the sake of a philosophically compelling account. Many neo-Aristotelians found the case against the Grand End view thoroughly sound so that it influenced what they regarded as a plausible view of practical wisdom. Still, I aim to show we can get back a great deal of what the Grand End view was after at, as it were, a lower price. In what follows, I am setting aside issues of textual fidelity to Aristotle and focusing on the philosophical objections to the view considered as a freestanding conception of a concept derived from Aristotle.

The first, as I have already mentioned, is the issue of demandingness. As Broadie puts it, on the Grand End understanding of practical wisdom, the practically wise agent would have to be a philosopher or have absorbed the teachings of philosophers [14] (p. 199). Most people, it seems, do not think about or apply the concept of *eudaimonia* or any concept resembling Aristotle’s notion, nor do they think about virtue. Rosalind Hursthouse joins in on this concern in a neo-Aristotelian context, arguing against what she calls “the Platonic Fantasy”. As she puts it, “Of course people can be virtuous, really virtuous, without having spent clockable hours thinking about *eudaimonia*, coming to the conclusion that it is a life lived in accordance with the virtues and working out an account of living well . . . ” [2] (p. 137). Since it is unreasonable to demand that agents engage in philosophical reflection and false that virtuous agents must have done that, possessing a blueprint or Grand End cannot be a requirement of practical wisdom.

A second objection is that it is normatively flawed, leading to false prescriptions. This is hinted at in Broadie’s account of the Grand End view. The idea of that view is that there is something that the virtuous agent is striving on every occasion to produce or a sort of action they are always seeking to enact [14] (p. 210). As Broadie puts it, “Practical wisdom is not the ability to select effective means to a goal which is rightly seen to be good no matter what” [14] (p. 240). The complaint, I take it, is that practical wisdom would not be a virtue if it worked according to the blueprint picture since it would require doing vicious things for the sake of bringing about something good. The practically wise agent must sometimes yield to circumstances and not pursue a good aim when it would require doing something unjust. McDowell and Hursthouse join in on a version of this complaint, arguing that even the best generalizations hold only for the most part [1] (p. 337); [2] (p. 58). Hence, no set of generalizations could capture unerringly good conduct, and there is no substantive aim the pursuit of which could justify our conduct in every case.

Third, there is an issue with the moral psychology of the blueprint view: the objection is that the blueprint model presents an incoherent picture of how good rational agents act. The complaint is not just that it happens to be descriptively false of good human agents that they apply a comprehensive set of rules and deduce the conduct that they should engage in; it is instead that it could not, in principle, go that way. The idea here is that it is not possible to have a comprehensively codified conception of an end that does not rely on non-codifiable knowledge of how to put that end into practice. We would have to envision a codification that goes implausibly far in the specification of how to apply the codification itself. Even if some generalizations about the good life are available, we will still have to possess some non-codifiable, evaluative sensitivities imparted by habituation and moral knowledge going beyond what can be captured in a system of rules gained through experience to acquire the competency to apply those rules. This is a central theme of Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* in her arguments to defuse the objection that virtue ethics

is insufficiently action-guiding. In part, the response is that it is as action-guiding as any theory can plausibly be.

Briefly, let us see the key features of the particularist alternative to the blueprint model. The key feature of such accounts is that the end depends on the agent's circumstances. The ends wise agents pursue are always something considerably narrower and more local than acting well or happiness. Broadie lists, as examples, "gaining a college degree, making a fortune, establishing useful contacts, moving to a place with good opportunities . . ." [14] (p. 234). The circumstances activate desires that are one of many concerns the agent has; the wise agent will act on that activated desire provided doing so does not, under those circumstances, conflict with other things desired: "the value of *O* under the circumstances (its worthiness to *be* an end) is judged and rejudged, and the rightness of these judgments depends on character". Likewise, for McDowell, the contrasting picture presents us with a view in which "there is nothing for the content of the universal end to be except a capacity to read the details of situations in light of a way of valuing actions into which proper upbringing has habituated one" [15] (p. 46). Yet, in McDowell's view, there is room for a universal end embodied in our correct readings of situations. He recognizes that the narrow ends of a practically wise agent must hang together. Still, he thinks that this can be captured in a conception that relies entirely on the right mute readings of situations: the actions that result from those readings instance a universal, namely, doing well.

One worry here is that though the universal instanced in actions that embody the good in response to individual situations may make those responses "hang together" as McDowell puts it, the hanging together is something recognized retrospectively as I think about how my past actions reflected my conception of living well, rather than an intention I was enacting in actively living based on my conception of living well in pursuing some substantive aim. Particularists run the risk of presenting the practically wise agent as passively reacting to the situation in light of their upbringing rather than pursuing the good actively over time. Broadie contends that the situation presents ordinary ends that can be immediately recognized: "anything that a person finds desirable without having to think about it" [14] (p. 233). And this is what practical wisdom goes to work on. We should note that the notion of "the situation" gives of broader and narrower construal, just as does our idea of goals. Broadie advocates for narrower goals, but to take one of Broadie's examples, "making a fortune", this is a rather grand end and could well be the work of a lifetime. Indeed, the goal resembles one of the lives discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* I.5, the money-maker (*krematistēs*). My situation may be construed broadly, where I look at a long tract of time, say, my lifetime, and then deliberate about goals that could be pursued over that tract. For most of us, making a fortune would surely be a complex endeavor that would require much calculation and structuring of our activities over time, setting aside many other things we might do and rather single-mindedly pursuing that one end. Perhaps Broadie had in mind making a fortune only in situations where I could readily make a windfall. Otherwise, it seems arbitrary of Brodie to cut the reasoning off precisely *there* as the limit of what it is reasonable to demand of someone intellectually.

This vagueness carries over into McDowell's understanding of the universal, the concept of living well, on his interpretation. The content of the universal is nothing but what is instanced in individual "mute readings" of situations. Still, the agent surely has some articulate grasp of what he is doing in the situation. If that is the case, and the temporal scope of "the situation" is as flexible as it appears to be in Broadie's examples, then taking the scope to an indefinite horizon of the agent's life, we appear to have a complex, articulate end (e.g., "make a fortune"). That articulate end pushes us in the direction of having more articulate and longer-term aims, which I think the particularist is indeed entitled to, though they have in some ways concealed the prospects and the moral psychology of doing so.

3. Extended Action and Phronēsis

Critics of the Grand End view have overreacted to concerns about intellectualism. As a result, they omit or, at any rate, sideline an essential dimension of human agency. This dimension of human agency involves reflecting on the sort of life I want to lead and acting to fulfill that idea. Critics of the Grand End view are too quick to inflate that reflection into a high-minded philosophical reflection on eudaimonia, whereas it is much more common and mundane. In Augustine's *Confessions*, he recounts an episode from his younger life, aged 31, walking along the streets of Milan and preparing to give a eulogy on the emperor in which he will tell lies (as a rhetorician must). He describes himself as "panting with anxiety and seething with feverish corruptive thoughts". Augustine then encounters a drunken beggar who is making merry. This encounter prompts reflection in Augustine: "There was a vast distance between us: he was the happier, not only inasmuch as he was flooded with merriment while I was torn with cares, but also because he had earned his wine by wishing good-day to passers-by, while I was seeking a swollen reputation by lying" [16] (p. 143). The reflection compares the life he is leading with the life the drunken beggar is leading. It is not especially technical or philosophical. It seems the sort of reflection that anyone trying to figure out their path in life and having second thoughts about their chosen career path might exhibit. In this reflection, he brings into question whether his central goal ("seeking a swollen reputation") embodies the sort of life he wants to be living, and he has thoughts about the presumed necessary means to that end ("by lying"). Augustine ranks his chosen goal lower than that of the drunken beggar on grounds that appear to include that his life was more anxious and less merry and required him to lie. In contrast, the drunken beggar attained his central end of carefree drunkenness by doing something innocent, wishing people a good day. Of course, Augustine does not immediately abandon his career and commence drinking and begging on the street; instead, this is the beginning of a chain of reflections that does lead to his abandonment of the life of seeking honor as a rhetorician and moving toward his final, central preoccupation with the contemplation of God. Augustine's reflections here embody what David Reeve nicely calls "nascent deliberation", which occurs in someone who has not arrived at a well-worked out, final determination of what they are doing. Instead, they must go through a dialectical process to find that out.² My point is that reflections of this sort are not out of reach of non-philosophers. I want to argue that this sort of reflection is requisite for someone to have practical wisdom. It is grander than the situational responsiveness in which critics of the Grand End view locate practical wisdom.

In his reflections about his past, Augustine uses a past progressive: he says, "I was seeking a swollen reputation." He is identifying an activity that, for his earlier self, stretched forward through an indefinite stretch of future time. It is conceived as what his life was then about rather than some momentary or episodic aim. Rhetoric was then his central preoccupation, being sought by way of giving a clever, though possibly outright false speech flattering the Emperor. This central intentional action—seeking honor by giving speeches—organizes young Augustine's life, even if he has other interests that he is pursuing along with that central aim. He does various specific things, such as writing speeches, walking to venues, and delivering the speeches, as a means to or constitutive fulfillment of this end. I think this is the sort of thing that a Grand End can be: a focal intentional action that one is committed to indefinitely into the future against the background of an indefinite but finite human life. This idea fits well with Aristotle's talk of different lives and his emphasis on praxis. My commitment to a life of a certain sort is a commitment to something that I am doing, even without a highly developed plan worked out in advance. It is the commitment to a life of certain forms of activity in which I am engaged, and at least if I am thinking about my life in the right way, I will reflect on that intentional action. If I am deploying my rational powers well, I will be concerned with whether what I am doing is good or whether I am doing the right thing, and not simply as a means.

But how articulate does this grasp need to be, and what sorts of reasoning must one undertake to get to practical wisdom? First, wisdom comes by degrees, and there is no

bright line, but the short answer is: enough to get it right, lighting on some worthwhile aim that does not require vicious acts. Augustine took a step toward wisdom in seeing the drunken beggar as better than his ambitious young self. The recounting of his encounter with the beggar presumably verbally unpacks his mute reactions at the time: a surprising degree of admiration for the beggar and revulsion at himself. These are highly sophisticated, conceptually laden reactions that he could subsequently discuss as he does and, let us assume, accurately. Here, the unmodified particularist can accommodate at least part of what I am seeking. These responses are remarkable in that they are reactions to devoting oneself, indefinitely into the future, to sorts of activity: Augustine's revulsion is to himself regarded as devoting his life to rhetoric and most of all to gaining a reputation in rhetoric, his admiration is for the beggar viewed as engaged in a simpler, less morally compromised life. Augustine may have *seen* all that then and had these complex feelings about the situation. But when he does so, that vision has a peculiar structure that extends indefinitely far into the future to grasp the value of a life of that sort. This is not a prediction; instead, the judgment takes in at a glance what it is to live a life of that kind. This is what I want to bring out as something that should be taken up into the particularists' picture. The responses grasp my sense of what it is to pursue a life of that sort from an evaluative perspective. And that sort of evaluative response constitutes a judgment on what life is worth living; as such, it is a reaction susceptible to being made more articulate and explicitly criticized. Crucially, the responses are mediated by categories deployed in moral judgments: the category of the human form of life that I deploy in assessing whether I or anyone has acted well. It also appeals to a concept of a human life, conceived as an indefinite but finite period through which I can act. That concept is part of how we think of our form of life, as we take ourselves to have, normally, a stretch of our lives in which we are competent agents through which we will live, acting toward some set of ends. Both concepts are, I claim, following Aristotelian naturalists such as Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson, categories of practical thought [18,19].

Augustine's reflection could then be spelled out as a sort of syllogism. A good human being does not lie. The life of a rhetorician requires lying; therefore, the life of a rhetorician does not benefit me. In the background, Augustine aims to be good. As he embarked on being a rhetorician, he either did not know or did not care that it required lying. Perhaps he conceived of goodness strictly in terms of achieving a reputation at rhetoric, and through living that life for a stretch, he attained greater clarity about what it means to live that way. As Talbot Brewer has argued, this insight gained is more than a further specification of a pre-existing idea, as though his latter aims were a specification of a very general goal he had set out in advance [20] (p. 83). Instead, it is a dialectical process of taking up an aim and developing a clearer and deeper understanding of what it is to live that life. If so, there is a dialectical structure to the elaboration of the goal that itself offsets some of the intellectual burdens that might be thought to attend to reflecting on what it is to live well. Living with attention to the goodness of what I am doing is itself a sort of reflection. So, reflection should not be conceived as happening all at once before embarking on life but as a dialectically revised working out of what is good that occurs through the experience of oneself as an agent that results in increased clarity and depth concerning what is good.

Against the background of a developing conception of what it is to live well, I take up one or more ends that are better than everything else and for the sake of which we do other things, or it could be that there is an array of worthwhile undertakings that can be taken up in some coherent combination in my life. Say I have ends of writing philosophy papers, raising my children, and composing music, which are equally important to me. *Eudaimonein*, acting well, for me, will consist in doing these things well, in part through maintaining a balance between them. Realizing this, I divide my time roughly between them. I raise my children by selecting healthy foods, cooking them dinner, and discussing their school day. I am also, though not just right now, writing a paper and working on a new composition. These are indeterminate ends that stretch out indefinitely into the future. At some point, of course, my children's need for my attention will wane; perhaps a new

interest will call out to me, but at the time, I am living with a conception of my life and eudaimonia, though certainly not necessarily so-called. All three of my focal undertakings weave together into what I am doing currently and take to be inherently worthwhile, my praxis.

I am drawing on Sergio Tenenbaum's understanding of extended rationality by foregrounding the exercise of my rational powers in intentional action over time. His view interprets instrumental rationality with a focus on pursuing indeterminate or vague ends over an extended period. Key to Tenenbaum's view is a commitment to a non-supervenience view of rationality. Rationality or irrationality over time is not a function of choices made moment by moment. Instead, one can make rational decisions at each moment across a period and yet have acted irrationally at the end of that time, namely, if you do not fulfill your ends.

We act rationally on such a view, not through maximizing the fulfillment of our preferences moment by moment, but only when we non-accidentally realize one of our ends without impeding the realization of any other valued end. Conversely, irrationality is a top-down matter; there need not be any point over some time in which I have acted irrationally for me to have acted irrationally during that time. For example, in balancing my ends, I repeatedly opt to work on a musical composition instead of a paper with a looming deadline. There is not necessarily anything irrational about any of those decisions taken individually; I have opted to devote more time to something I enjoy. But if I get to the deadline and the paper is unfinished, I will have acted irrationally since I failed to achieve one of my ends. Instead of employing a decision procedure that would tell me what to do at any point, Tenenbaum thinks we need to cultivate instrumental virtues and practical judgment to be instrumentally rational. I want to argue similarly about moral virtue and practical wisdom while acknowledging its distinctive features.

Extended rationality shows that the rational pursuit of ends over time must be thought of in terms of developing judgment and correlative virtues rather than principles or a decision procedure applied moment by moment. By contrast, consider John Cooper's version of the Grand End view. He recruits John Rawls' notion of a rational life plan to explicate Aristotle's understanding of eudaimonia. In that view, the end consists of "a list of different first order ends taken together with ordering principles or an assignment of weights to the ends . . . which would allow for the independent value of several different activities and interests, each with its own time and place and pursued with the vigor appropriate to it" [21] (p. 97). This view indeed invites the objections enumerated above. It fails even as a conception of instrumental rationality. This view would give us a mistaken idea of what it is to pursue an end over time, even if we are indifferent to its goodness. All three objections I enumerated above can be applied to Grand End theories like Cooper's from the perspective of instrumental rationality. It is, after all, quite a demanding theory. Although I will not fully lay out the arguments for these points, Tenenbaum argues that decision theoretical views like Cooper's are more appropriate for Vulcans, with extensive deliberative and computational powers, than for humans (demandingness). Further, they involve us in an artificial rigidity that would prescribe (from an instrumental perspective) the wrong actions (normativity), and they get the moral psychology of instrumental rationality wrong since there is a need for some practical judgment in the application of even very specific and strict policies.

But the most crucial point I want to take from Tenenbaum is that our ends are not pursued in the way that the unmodified Grand End theorist suggests, as a rational life plan. I do not have a fully worked out picture of how my children should be: I hope they are healthy and morally good. Is there an ideally raised child or an ideally written philosophy paper? Surely not. I also do not have a fully worked out comparative account of the time that should be devoted to raising my children versus my other pursuits. I am sure that if I were pressed moment by moment to say the *right* way to spend my time, my children would always come first. Still, as Donald Winnicott impressed upon us, this is probably self-defeating: good-enough parenting is better than what might be conceived of as ideal

parenting (i.e., maximizing the time and effort I spend on them). As Tenenbaum points out, in the wild, we move from pursuing one end to the next without engaging in comparative deliberation or applying a previously worked-out schema. To the extent that we rely on intermediate policies such as “I will write seven hours a day”, this is the result of our limitations [12] (p. 188). Fully instrumentally virtuous agents would pursue their various ends with maximum flexibility without compromising their pursuit of any of their ends.

I am interested in borrowing some of these insights and applying them to substantive rationality in an Aristotelian context while not collapsing substantive into instrumental rationality. A central problem that arises is how to think about the pursuit of an end that is conceived in terms of *praxis*: on an Aristotelian conception of the good, there are activities I aim at doing that are regarded as constitutive of eudaimonia rather than as results or products that I am aiming at. I am aiming at a life of a certain sort. The elements of my example vision of happiness are ends that stretch indefinitely into the future. My happiness consists in doing them, not in anything resulting from them. In that respect, they are elements of a conception of my life as I wish it to go. Although, at some time, my children will be autonomous adults, I will never be entirely done with parenting them in offering them what support and encouragement I can. Likewise, with writing philosophy papers, it might seem that end is the papers, and that is certainly the case if I look at my undertaking to write each paper. Still, overall I am not setting out to write just one paper and be done, but rather to engage in writing as an activity that is stretching forward, a life of investigating various philosophical topics.

My reflection builds on my character, of course, and my character influences my reflections. First, it informs my picture of what it is to live a good human life such that I start from some inclinations; if I am virtuous, say, I will start with a disposition to contribute to my society through raising good children and teaching and writing. Just as the particularists argue, my conception of the good is not developed whole cloth out of the intellect. Yet it does not happen without the intellect either. In being inclined to a certain sort of life, the intellect is active in conceiving a human life as the target of my inclination. I can then judge the beggar’s life superior to that of the rhetorician and possibly say something about why. In saying this, I am taking the concept of a human life to play an important role in practical cognition, and this is consistent with the view Aristotelian naturalists like Michael Thompson and Philippa Foot have argued: that practical thinking, including moral judgment, takes place against the background of an understanding of the human form of life.

So, the life of virtue, as I am suggesting we conceive of it, is a life that consists of undertaking focal, ongoing activities that make some valuable contribution to others in ways that are just. I am arguing that reflecting on how to lead such a life is not an erudite exercise of a philosophical intellect but rather mundane, drawing on the same capacities we deploy to evaluate actions and placing our focal activities against the background of what it is to live well as a human being. Because it does not rely on the sort of decision procedure that the unmodified Grand End view appeals to, it escapes the objections raised against that view. But it does accord a more significant role to the intellect in reflecting on and pursuing a general goal conceived as lifelong. In this regard, the conception of practical wisdom that I am advocating acknowledges a sort of agency that we have, that we saw Augustine exercising, in reflecting on and selecting a life to be living. This sometimes requires not responding to opportunities for virtue that we might find on separate occasions. We might husband our resources and hold out for an occasion on which we can execute a long-term goal. That cannot mean not paying back a debt, but it might mean not throwing a party that would please a friend for the sake of saving money to take a university course. The longer-term prospect of being able to do something of some value to me and others is sufficient in such a case to outweigh something I could do at the moment that would be virtuous as well. I can opt for a course of action that has a long-term realization and, in doing so, exercise agency to shape my life as a whole rather than taking it occasion by occasion.

Returning to Broadie's examples of gaining a college degree or making a fortune, I think the particularist risks distorting the rational pursuit of such ends; they are not just one-off pursuits for which I see a propitious occasion. Rather, I pursue a college degree with a view to a life of a certain sort; it is governed by an explicit, even if indeterminate, end. On the other hand, perhaps I pursue a general degree thinking, "we'll see what happens after I finish". Nothing, in my view, is opposed to a certain open-endedness, especially as we embark on life. But even in this case, I am looking beyond the degree itself to a vague life-with-degree that has something that I am currently aiming to live with.

4. Vice and Phronetic Reasoning

I can be deficient in directing my life. This can happen through character defects, as seen in weakness of will or vice. But it can also happen through failing to care about what I do with my life, engaging in the relevant attention, which involves reacting to what I am doing against the background of what sort of life I am leading, what it is to live well as a human being, and some degree of explicit reflection concerning what to do with my life against that background. In my view, this level of general practical reflection is a necessary component of the development and excellent deployment of my rational powers found in a virtuous agent. In this regard, I agree with Aristotle when he says:

... everyone who can live in accord with their own choice should set for themselves an aim (*skopos*) for living well, whether that be honor or reputation or wealth or education, toward which he will look in carrying out all actions, as indeed not to put one's life in order toward some goal is a mark of great folly (*aphrosunē*).³

This passage has been recruited in favor of the unmodified Grand End view as an interpretation of Aristotle (e.g., [23]). But there is another way of reading it that is more moderate, that does not saddle Aristotle with an overly demanding, rigid, and unrealistic view while preserving the commitment to an overarching *skopos*. I think the charge is that there is something distinctively deficient about someone who does not have ongoing commitments in life. Their existence would be strangely punctuated, moving from one momentary involvement to another. It would also lack an evaluative perspective on what is worth doing, or if there were such a perspective, it would be in a theoretical register, not brought to bear on one's own life. It is interesting that even taking up what Aristotle himself regards as a mistaken *skopos* is for him sufficient to avoid the charge of being *aphrosunē*. In this, we see his division of labor between character and the virtues of the rational part of the soul. Someone can be vicious without being *aphrosunē*, in which case one has bad character, though the problem is not or not solely with the exercise of one's intellectual powers. The vicious non-fool certainly would not count thereby as having practical wisdom. The point is that the vicious agent who directs their life toward reputation or money-making has tried to take their life into account against a background of their conception of how human life should go. They have engaged in what I will call phronetic reasoning but not (yet) successfully.

This account may suggest the picture I want to argue against, in which phronesis is simply instrumental rationality in service of the right ends, since it looks like the problem with the vicious non-fool is that vice presents the wrong goals for the intellect to go to work on. But my claim is that the vicious non-fool, like the wise agent, engages in a distinctive sort of reasoning. The fool envisioned in the passage above fails to set their life in order around a *skopos*, but they may still engage in successful instrumental reasoning. In other words, the fool could still be clever, attaining what they aim at in episodes of their life in which they pursue what strikes them as worth pursuing at that time. The vicious non-fool, on the other hand, exercises a distinct capacity from instrumental rationality but fails in successfully exercising that capacity, perhaps partly through vice.

The sort of reasoning that goes into practical wisdom is, of course, distinctively evaluative, such that the vicious non-fool has a view, though false, of how human life should go. The vicious non-fool has a view, though false, of the sorts of things that are

worth pursuing that a clever fool lacks. The distinctiveness of phronetic reasoning comes from deploying categories of practical thinking that are not used in instrumental reasoning. A practical concept of the human being is at issue in my practical reasoning, as is a practical notion of human life. I am thinking about what befits the sort of thing I am to do throughout my life. That is what Augustine was thinking about as a young, vicious non-fool. It is true that in attributing instrumental reasoning to ourselves or another, we invoke human form: reasoning to an end is a characteristically human activity. In attributing instrumental reasoning, I attribute an activity to a form of life that is capable of that activity. But insofar as instrumental reasoning is indifferent to the ethical valence of ends, instrumental reasoning does not involve these categories in its content. In instrumental reasoning, one engages in thinking that requires some distinctively human powers, but my thinking does not itself make a judgment about human powers. On the other hand, when I assess an action or practical reasoning, I am at least implicitly advertent to what it is to live well and reason well as a human being. As a power of practical cognition, the goal of phronetic reasoning is to arrive at a true view of a focal intentional action that is worth doing for itself as constituting happiness and to lay out a path to do enough of that. I represent that activity as something that is not merely preferred but as at least one path to the fulfillment of a good human life.

This conceptual framework accommodates intuitions such as Tenenbaum's about the swimmer. A clever fool could, in principle, dive in to retrieve five dollars, but it would be surprising since even fools tend to prefer their own lives to five dollars. A vicious person, here exhibiting the substantive vice of avarice, could see diving in as the thing to be done—from his viewpoint, only fools would cower on the shore—though it would be an extreme case of avarice indeed. It would be out of the question for a phronetic agent under all but the direst circumstances: that five dollar bill, say, is the only way to save a friend's life from an avaricious bandit holding him at gunpoint.

The phronetic agent, then, exercises her intellect to arrive at a view of what it is to live well as a human being. We should acknowledge that the intellect is involved in at least sophisticated mute reactions as well as in explicit reasoning. Both will be engaged in the kind of general reflection that leads to a choice of ends against the background of a good human life. This involves developing a sense of the relative place of activities and goods in human life. Here, "place" is used in a sense given to it by Henry Richardson in a discussion of desire, where it defines a desire's role in relation to the organism's good [24]. We do not need a very elaborate or fully articulated conception of the human good to realize that a life in which the pursuit of petty cash is placed above risk to life and limb is deranged. A very articulate, general conception of how life should go may be rare, but partially developed views with an articulate sense of what matters in life is not. A picture of what it is to realize our powers of thought and desire is implicit in what we admire, which is often challenged as admired people disappoint, putting reflective pressure on what we find admirable, that pushes us to clarify what we indeed take to be a good human life. If we follow that impetus, we are on a path to wisdom.

Practical wisdom can be seen as a mean state, between foolishness on the one extreme and goal rigidity on the other. Goal rigidity is a substantial vice of someone who has thought about and may have correctly specified the end but needs to reckon with the demands of the current situation. This vice may have been exhibited by the wayward seminary students in Darley and Batson's Good Samaritan study who passed by a stranger in need on the way to give a talk under various conditions of hurry, being directed to give a talk across campus [25]. There might be a sort of goal-rigidity on their part rather than a lack of benevolence; indeed, this may be a vice of judgment that a subset of high-achieving people, including theologians, are especially prone to. Hence, there is a substantial analog to the instrumental vice of rigidity that Tenenbaum identifies. The goal-rigid agent is living a close analog to the Grand End view, with the acknowledgment that the Grand End view is still a philosophical fiction that no one could fully embody.

The ideal virtue of practical wisdom that I have been trying to pinpoint here features the situation sensitivity that the particularists made central to their account, but also makes room for active agency over time in service of a goal that is pursued and seen as good in light of its recognized place within a flourishing human life. The practically wise agent attains truth about what is to be done through good character and some explicit practical reflection. A practically wise agent gets it right and keeps their life on track while not being so rigid about the path as to overlook what needs to be done here and now.

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Notes

- ¹ Here, I am thinking primarily of John McDowell [1] and Rosalind Hursthouse [2–4]. Similar concerns feature in less avowedly particularist accounts, such as those of Martha Nussbaum [5] and Nancy Sherman [6]. In more recent literature, this motive seems at least among the reasons for turning to a skill model. It gains part of its appeal in drawing parallels between practical wisdom and tacit intelligent competencies involved in skillful action. The approach thereby lightens the burdens for explicit reflection; see Annas [7,8], Stichter [9,10], and Swartwood [11].
- ² Reeve sees this as precisely what Aristotle is after in his ethical treatises. I am arguing here that this dialectical process occurs in non-philosophers without adverting to a technical philosophical apparatus (cf. p.15ff, [17]).
- ³ [22], 1214b6–11, translation my own.

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