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Virtue, Reason, and Principle

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I

A common strategy unites much that philosophers have written about the virtues. The strategy can be traced back at least to Aristotle, who suggested that human beings have a characteristic function or activity (rational activity of soul), and that the virtues are traits of character which enable humans to perform this kind of activity excellently or well.¹ The defining feature of this approach is that it treats the virtues as functional concepts, to be both identified and justified by reference to some independent goal or end which they enable people to attain (human flourishing, rational perfection, participation in practices, 'narrative unity' in a life). Some recent philosophers seem to have hoped that by following this perfectionist strategy, we might attain a more convincing account of our moral practices than rule-based theories of ethics have been able to provide.²

But the hopes are not well-founded. The perfectionist strategy requires us to specify an independent goal or end which the virtues best enable us to attain, and if the strategy is to succeed the goal or end that it specifies must constitute an objectively good state for humans to be in — otherwise the claim that the virtues enable us to achieve this end or goal will not serve to justify or support them. The prospects for identi-

1 See in particular the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 7.

2 See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981); and James Wallace, *Virtues and Vices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1978).

fyng an independent goal or aim which is objectively good in this way, however, do not look very good. Those ends which are genuinely good states for humans tend to be too vaguely characterized to support the claim that the virtues best enable us to attain them (consider 'flourishing,' or 'rational excellence' in this connection); while those ends which are more determinate tend to be poor candidates for an objective human good (consider 'the narrative unity of a life spent searching for the human good,' proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre).³

If we abandon the perfectionist strategy, however, the question arises whether a philosophical study of the virtues has anything distinctive to contribute to our understanding of morality. In my view, the most promising way to return a positive answer to this question is to focus on the issues of practical reason and practical rationality. Thus it has seemed to many philosophers that an Aristotelian approach to the virtues yields a conception of practical reason and its corresponding excellence (*phronesis*, or practical wisdom) which does not fit readily into the Humean and Kantian categories that have become conventional in contemporary discussions. Among the most prominent of these philosophers is John McDowell. His suggestive recent work on the virtues aims in part to defend and develop a broadly Aristotelian account of practical reason and practical rationality as an alternative to the now-standard Humean and Kantian accounts.⁴ At the same time McDowell is explicit in rejecting the perfectionist strategy sketched above — indeed, he goes so far as to question whether Aristotle himself ever meant to follow that strategy.⁵ If McDowell is right about this, then the study of the virtues can contribute a distinctive perspective to our understanding of practical reason, even if we give up the unpromising perfectionist strategy.

3 *After Virtue*, ch. 15

4 McDowell's views are developed in the following series of papers (which I shall henceforth refer to by abbreviations of their titles): 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?' *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 52 (1978) 13-29; 'Virtue and Reason,' *The Monist* 62 (1979) 331-50; 'The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics,' reprinted in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980) 359-76; 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,' in Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich, eds., *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1981) 141-62; 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' in Ted Honderich, ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1985) 110-29; and 'Might There Be External Reasons?' in J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison, eds., *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press forthcoming).

5 See 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*.'

I shall take McDowell's work on practical reason to provide my starting point in this essay — both because McDowell has gone further than other philosophers in trying to explain and defend an Aristotelian conception of practical reason, as a live option in contemporary discussions; and because the account he provides is difficult enough to benefit, in my view, from critical reconstruction and analysis. But my aim in the essay is not simply to scrutinize McDowell's views. By looking in detail at his position, I think we can learn something more generally about the problems and the prospects of a broadly Aristotelian approach to practical reason.

My discussion of these issues divides into three parts. In the first part I set out the conventional Kantian and Humean positions on practical reason, and consider the arguments that McDowell brings to bear against these accounts. Here I maintain that Humean and Kantian accounts share a common commitment to the idea that the requirements of virtue can be formulated in terms of general principles or procedures for practical reflection, and I suggest that McDowell's alternative account is distinctive in rejecting this idea; but I conclude that McDowell's stated objections to principle-dependent accounts of practical reason are not compelling. Even if McDowell's specific arguments against Kantian and Humean approaches are unsuccessful, however, it may still be the case that his Aristotelian alternative is superior, and this is the possibility I turn to in the second part of the essay. I contend that there are two ways to develop McDowell's alternative account, one of which yields a version of rational intuitionism, while the other pictures practical reason as a form of connoisseurship; and I argue that the connoisseurship interpretation is the more promising one. In the conclusion, however, I try to show that the connoisseurship interpretation encounters two potential problems, when applied in the conditions that govern modern moral life; and I urge that it is too early to give up on principle-dependent accounts, in favor of McDowell's Aristotelian alternative.

II Reason, Desire, and the Conception of How to Live

Kantian and Humean positions in ethics traditionally differ on the question of whether reason can give rise to a motivation to act. The Kantian answers this question affirmatively, holding that pure reason can be practical in its issue, and that it is possible to explain motivation and action in terms of the grasping of reasons or justifications for action. The Humean, by contrast, returns a negative answer to the question. On this view, rational reflection cannot by itself give rise to motivation; rather, motivation has its source in the agent's prior desires, and practi-

cal reasoning (to the extent it exists) must always begin *from* those desires.⁶

It is important to bear in mind that both parties to this debate can and should acknowledge that desires always have a role to play in the explanation of motivation and action. That is, the Kantian no less than the Humean should maintain that motivation requires the presence of desires.⁷ Once this point is admitted, however, the Kantian will want to attach great significance to a distinction between two different kinds of desires. Some desires — what Thomas Nagel has called the ‘motivated’ ones⁸ — are such that they can appropriately be explained in terms of other propositional attitudes of the agent’s. This form of explanation is distinctive in that the propositional content of the states which explain the motivated desire also rationalize or justify the desire; and we may accordingly say that the defining mark of motivated desires is that they admit of a *rationalizing explanation*. Unmotivated desires, on the other hand, are simply desires that do not admit of such a rationalizing explanation.⁹

In these terms, a crucial point at issue between the Humean and the Kantian concerns the form taken by the rationalizing explanations of motivated desires. For their part, Humeans maintain that such explana-

6 I follow McDowell in distinguishing between practical reason and practical reasoning (see ‘Virtue and Reason,’ 349, n. 22): the former refers to the broader class of cases in which motivation and action are explained in terms of reasons; the latter, to the subset of these cases in which motivation and action are preceded by an episode of reasoning or deliberation. I assume that the Kantian and the Humean take divergent positions on the broader issue of practical reason, which determine correspondingly divergent positions on the question of practical reasoning.

Note also that the Humean claim that practical reasoning has its source in an agent’s desires needn’t entail that such reasoning is instrumental or maximizing. On this point see Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons,’ as reprinted in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981) 101-13 — discussed by McDowell in ‘Might There be External Reasons?’

7 The reason for this, in brief, is that motivation and intentional action are goal-directed phenomena, where such goal-directedness in turn requires the presence of desire; cf. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978), ch. V. McDowell accepts this point: see, e.g., his ‘Are Moral Requirements,’ 14-15.

8 *The Possibility of Altruism*, 29. McDowell refers to such desires as ‘consequential’ or ‘consequentially-ascribed’ desires: see ‘Are Moral Requirements,’ 15, 25.

9 For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires, and its significance for the dispute between Kantians and Humeans, see my paper ‘How to Argue about Practical Reason,’ *Mind* 99 (1990) 355-85.

tions always terminate with the citation of a basic evaluative premise, which cannot be explained or justified in rational terms, but which is fixed, rather, by some intrinsic or unmotivated desire. This is what the Humean means in saying that motivation always has desire at its source, and that practical reasoning necessarily begins *from* the agent's prior or given desires. Kantians, by contrast, deny these claims. They insist that pure reasoning or reflection — processes of thought that do not begin from the agent's prior desires — are sometimes sufficient both to produce motivation, and to explain rationally the motivated desires involved in such motivation.

The conventional debate about practical reason, then, does not concern the presence of desires, on occasions of motivation and action; rather, it concerns the form taken by rationalizing explanations of desires. Kantians, however, characteristically make a further claim as well. This is that distinctively moral motivations and actions are requirements of rationality, so that a person who reasoned correctly should be motivated to act *morally*. For instance, Kant himself took the categorical imperative to represent a kind of norm of reason, which if applied correctly would lead one to perform all the actions that are morally required, and only actions that are permissible from the moral point of view. If this is right, it evidently follows that persons who do not act morally must be guilty of a kind of irrationality, a failure to bring their thought and action into conformity with the requirements of reason. On a Humean position, by contrast, this will not necessarily be the case. The Humean represents practical reason as having its source in antecedent desires, and a person who lacks moral motivations might fail to have any other antecedent desires that could be advanced by becoming morally virtuous. Of course, the desires at the basis of moral reasoning might be extremely entrenched and widely distributed in human populations, as a matter of empirical fact. For his part, Hume seemed to think that an instinct to benevolence is knitted into the fabric of the human mind. More recently, T.M. Scanlon has represented moral reasoning as responding to a powerful and widespread desire that people have to justify their actions and policies to others, on grounds that no one could reasonably reject.¹⁰ Neither of these accounts, however, provides resources for saying that the agent who lacks moral motivations altogether is on that account irrational. On this point Humean and Kantian approaches diverge, even if — as in the case of Scanlon's contractualism

10 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism,' in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982) 103-28

— the basic pattern of moral reasoning that the Humean describes has a Kantian flavor.

In the terms of this conventional debate, McDowell's broadly Aristotelian position does not fit comfortably into either of the received Kantian or Humean categories. He rejects the Humean position on the issue of practical reason and motivation, but he does so without endorsing the Kantian claim about the rationality of morality.

Take first the issue of the rationality of ethics. In his paper 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?' McDowell avers that the person who does not act virtuously need not on that account be irrational.¹¹ I take this claim to be the denial of the characteristically Kantian position that moral action is a requirement of reason, such that the person who reasoned or deliberated properly would be led to act morally. For if that Kantian position were correct, then the person who is not morally virtuous would be guilty of a kind of irrationality. In a different paper,¹² McDowell supports and develops this position with an interpretation of the *ergon* or function argument found in Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. On this interpretation — which McDowell recommends as an appealing alternative to contemporary (Kantian) views — the point of the *ergon* argument is not to cite considerations which will rationally convince the amoralist to go over to the life of moral virtue. The thought that it must be possible to cite some such consideration, if morality is not to be revealed as a sham, is a Kantian prejudice, one that McDowell urges us to give up. What the amoralist needs is not rational argument, but a change in *character*, of the sort that can best be achieved through a program of moral training or habituation such as Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹³

11 'Are Moral Requirements,' 13, 24. Cf. 'Might There Be External Reasons?' §5, where McDowell represents the claim that the amoralist is necessarily irrational as 'bluff.' In the same section of this paper he allows that there might be a sense in which an amoral person could be considered irrational, associated with the normative claim that a virtuous agent is seeing matters 'correctly' or 'aright'; but he concludes that it would be best not to describe the amoralist in these terms, as the description encourages the mistaken inference that there is a process of reasoning or deliberation that could lead the amoralist to become virtuous.

12 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*,' esp. §§10-14

13 Cf. 'Might There Be External Reasons?' (esp. §4), where McDowell says that if a person has not been brought up to be virtuous, then it will generally be too late to reason with the person; what is required, to make such a person virtuous, is rather something like 'conversion.'

Now, it is plausible to suppose that the character one acquires, as a result of this kind of training or habituation, will largely be defined by a certain class of 'unmotivated' desires. These are the long-term or standing desires, the dispositional states that determine an agent's basic aims and goals, values and projects. They are 'unmotivated,' because they are not rationally explicable in terms of other propositional attitudes of the agent's. We do not account for their origin by adverting to any process of reasoning or deliberation that the agent goes through; rather, standing desires emerge gradually in the process of education and training, resulting from repeated performance of actions of certain general types.¹⁴

If this is right, however, then a natural view to take would be that these 'unmotivated' standing desires are the source of the agent's motivations, fixing the ends that practical reasoning and deliberation will aim at. That is, McDowell's rejection of the Kantian claim about the rationality of morality would appear to commit him to a Humean position on the question of practical reason and motivation. McDowell himself does not draw this inference, however. On the contrary, he offers a highly disparaging picture of the Humean approach to motivational psychology. In one especially memorable passage, for instance,¹⁵ he says that Humean accounts are wedded to a 'quasi-hydraulic' conception of the mind, which represents the will as the source of the forces that issue in behavior. The language here might seem to suggest that what is wrong with the Humean view is its (alleged) commitment to a mechanistic or causal account of the mind.¹⁶ But the suggestion is most likely inadvertent. McDowell's central complaint, repeated and developed in his other writings on ethics, is with the broader and more basic Humean claim that desires are the *source* of motivations: the idea that unmotivated intrinsic desires fix the necessary starting points for practical reasoning and deliberation.

The question is, how does McDowell support this complaint? What exactly is meant to be wrong with the Humean approach to practical

14 A good account of this process can be found in Myles Burnyeat's paper 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good,' in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, 69-92.

15 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,' 155

16 Michael Smith interprets McDowell's complaint this way (and deftly deflates the complaint so interpreted) in his paper 'The Humean Theory of Motivation,' *Mind* 96 (1987), 43-4. In 'Might there be External Reasons?' §6, McDowell states more clearly than in his earlier papers that he does not object to the claim that reason-giving explanations are causal, only to the rigid schema into which the Humean attempts to force all such explanations.

reason; and can McDowell reject this approach, without being led back to a Kantian position on the rationality of morality? McDowell's answer to these questions is strongly influenced by his reading of Aristotle.¹⁷ He argues, in particular, that there is a distinctive feature of virtuous motivations, emphasized by Aristotle, which cannot be accounted for within the framework of Humean and Kantian approaches.

Consider an ordinary case of virtuous action — say, stopping on one's way home from work to help a stranger push his car out of a snow bank. McDowell, as I understand him, admits that we can give a 'core explanation' of such an action that conforms to the Humean schema for explaining motivations.¹⁸ The question at issue is not whether there will be a desire present on this occasion of motivation — for reasons mentioned above, we must say that in intentionally stopping to assist the stranger the virtuous agent had a desire to help the stranger get his car out of the snow. The question is how we are to explain this motivated desire, and on this question McDowell admits that our original or core explanation will turn out to satisfy the Humean strictures. Thus we can account for the motivated desire to help the stranger by invoking (say) the agent's belief that the stranger needed assistance, plus a general or standing benevolent desire or concern¹⁹ to help people when they are in need of assistance (where this general disposition to benevolence is a result of the training or habituation of the agent's sentiments from youth).

Core explanations of virtuous action, then, conform to the Humean pattern. But McDowell contends that we cannot attain a complete explanation of virtuous action by attending to such core explanations alone, because of the *unity* of the virtues.²⁰ The standing concerns or desires that mark the termini of core explanations correspond to individual virtuous traits. But virtue is not just an unorganized collection of such virtuous traits; rather, individual virtuous traits can only count as virtuous at all if they are copresent with other virtuous traits, and if the whole collection of such traits is appropriately structured and organized. To return to our example, suppose that the person who stops to

17 My exposition in the remainder of this section relies mainly on 'Virtue and Reason,' which I take to contain the most developed statement of McDowell's objection to the Humean approach.

18 'Virtue and Reason,' 342-3

19 McDowell himself uses the expression 'concern'; I take it he means by this the kind of long-term or standing desire I characterized above.

20 'Virtue and Reason,' 332-3, 342-6

help the stranger in the snow had not been driving home from work at the time, but instead transporting a badly injured friend to the hospital. We could, it seems, give precisely the same 'core' explanation of the action of pushing the stranger's car, with a standing benevolent desire fixing the immediate end of the agent's action. But it would be an error to suppose that the action so explained is virtuous in this context, because the agent's obligation to help the friend ought to have taken precedence. Virtue requires a plurality of concerns or desires, structured in a certain way, and we will only comprehend why an individual action was virtuous if we can see the action in the context of the agent's other standing concerns, and appreciate why one concern rather than another was effective in motivating the agent to act.

It is at this point, McDowell suggests, that we need to go beyond the Humean approach to practical reason. He argues that we can only attain a complete understanding of virtuous action by appealing to the virtuous person's overall *conception of how to live*; for it is this conception that governs the relations among the agent's individual standing concerns, and renders intelligible why one such concern rather than another was effective on a given occasion, in motivating the agent to act.²¹ What finally explains virtuous action, it seems, is not the standing desire cited by a 'core' explanation, but the overall conception of how to live that structures and organizes the virtuous agent's individual concerns.

Of course, Humean and Kantian approaches to practical reason will have their own way of accounting for the virtuous agent's guiding conception of how to live. On a Humean approach, for instance, the conception of how to live would most naturally be interpreted as an unmotivated higher-order desire, which plays an executive or regulative role in rational reflection about what to do.²² Thus on a utilitarian account the higher-order desire that is meant to regulate the virtuous agent's practical reflection is a form of generalized benevolence, whereas a contractualist account would postulate a higher-order desire to act in ways that can be justified to others, on grounds that no-one could reasonably reject. On both of these accounts the higher-order desire regulates practical reflection by specifying a general procedure or pattern of reasoning that guides the virtuous agent's decisions about

21 'Virtue and Reason,' 343-6

22 A different Humean position would say simply that the agent should act on whichever first-order desire happens to be strongest, at the time of action. But I take it this would amount to a denial that there is anything like a conception of how to live that could guide or regulate the virtuous agent's choices.

what to do. Kantian accounts share this tendency to construe the virtuous agent's conception of how to live in terms of a general procedure or regulative pattern of practical reflection; only there is no need, on a strictly Kantian account, to postulate an unmotivated higher-order desire corresponding to the cited procedure. Kant's own categorical imperative procedure, for instance, is meant to have rational authority in regulating our decisions about what to do, quite independently of whether we happen to have a higher-order desire to submit to that procedure.

Clearly McDowell needs to reject these interpretations of the conception of how to live, if he is to succeed in staking out an alternative to Humean and Kantian approaches; but his objections to them, and his own alternative interpretation, require careful reconstruction. With apparent reference to the Humean interpretation, McDowell concedes that the conception of how to live is what he calls an 'orectic' psychological state,²³ which presumably means that it is desire-like in some respects. But he nevertheless does not think the conception of how to live can be construed as an 'over-arching' or higher-order desire, as the Humean would try to interpret it, because the desires involved in virtuous action are not 'independently intelligible.'²⁴ Now it is not always clear what exactly McDowell has in mind when he objects that Humean accounts postulate an independently intelligible desire at the source of the virtuous agent's motivation and action. McDowell sometimes seems to have taken the Humean to be claiming that all motivation has the *same* desires at its source, so that it would be a sufficient refutation of the Humean to show that the virtuous person's higher-order desires are simply not shared by the non-virtuous agent.²⁵ But this claim is not sufficient to refute a minimally sophisticated version of the Humean position; the basic Humean thesis is that motivation has its source in desire, and this is distinct from, and weaker than, the claim that all motivation has the *same* desires at its source.

At other points, and more subtly, McDowell attributes to the Humean the view that the higher-order desires which originate motivation must at least be externally intelligible — intelligible, that is, to those who do

23 'Virtue and Reason,' 345, 346

24 'Virtue and Reason,' 345-6; 'Are Moral Requirements,' 18-20, 22-3; 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*,' 372-3. McDowell attacks the idea of an 'over-arching' desire at the root of virtuous action, in place of the conception of how to live, in 'Virtue and Reason,' 343.

25 See, e.g., 'Virtue and Reason,' 346; 'Are Moral Requirements,' 19-20, 23, 25-6.

not share the desires themselves.²⁶ But it is not obvious what the force of this claim is meant to be, as a criticism of the Humean view. Presumably a desire will be intelligible to a person just in case that person can anticipate the objects and activities that the desire would lead one to pursue, and understand sympathetically why those objects and activities might be found desirable. Now McDowell seems correct to suppose that the desires that turn up in Humean accounts of moral reasoning are not likely to be externally unintelligible, in this sense. Humeans tend to select desires such as generalized benevolence, or the contractualist desire to act in ways that can be justified to others, in part precisely because they are fairly widely distributed, and because they pick out ends that people tend naturally to respond to under normal educational circumstances. But if McDowell finds this aspect of Humean accounts implausible, he needs to explain more specifically why the postulated desires do not provide an adequate basis for moral reasoning; it is not enough simply to observe that Humean accounts tend to represent the moral motives as widespread and accessible. And even if such an explanation should be forthcoming, so that the higher-order desires that regulate moral behaviour are shown to be neither widely distributed nor intelligible to those who lack them, this would not undermine the more basic Humean strategy of accounting for moral reasoning in terms of such higher-order desires. Higher-order desires might remain the regulative starting-points for moral deliberation, even if they are neither widely distributed nor easily intelligible to those who are not themselves virtuous already.

There is, however, one further way we might interpret the notion of independent intelligibility, which suggests a more reliable contrast with Humean and Kantian interpretations of the conception of how to live. Thus both Humeans and Kantians maintain that the virtuous agent's conception of how to live is independently intelligible, in the sense that it can be formulated as a general procedure or principle for practical reflection, independently of and prior to particular circumstances of action and decision. Take the categorical imperative procedure, for instance, or the contractualist appeal to justification on the basis of hypothetical agreement: these forms of practical argument mark out the kinds of reasons that should regulate the virtuous agent's decisions quite independently of the details of any particular situation that might confront a virtuous agent. To say that the conception of how to live is independently intelligible, in this sense, is just to say that it is specifiable

²⁶ See, again, 'Virtue and Reason,' 345-6.

in terms of general principles or procedures; and practical reasoning which is regulated or governed by such a conception of how to live will therefore be reasoning in accordance with such general principles or procedures. We may put this by saying that, on Humean and Kantian accounts, moral reasoning on the basis of a conception of how to live is *principle-dependent*.

Here, I think, we have a genuine point of contrast with McDowell's understanding of the conception of how to live; for on McDowell's interpretation the virtuous agent's conception cannot be captured in terms of general principles or procedures, capable of being specified in advance of the circumstances of action. Rather, McDowell follows Aristotle in supposing that the requirements of virtue resist codification in any exhaustive and exceptionless set of rules or principles.²⁷ Moral reasoning in accordance with the conception of how to live, on McDowell's conception, therefore cannot be construed as principle-dependent reasoning. This raises two questions: why does McDowell reject the idea that the requirements of virtue can be given an adequate specification in terms of general principles or procedures? And how are we to understand the alternative that he offers to principle-dependent conceptions of moral reasoning? I shall address the first of these questions in the remainder of this section; the second question will be taken up in the section to follow.

Perhaps McDowell's most frequently stated objection to principle-dependent accounts of the conception of how to live is that they are committed to a simplistically mechanistic picture of moral reasoning. Thus he complains that the general principles or procedures which figure in Humean and Kantian accounts would be 'mechanically' applicable to cases, in a way inadequate to the complexity of a 'reasonably adult moral outlook.'²⁸ Hence, McDowell seems to suggest, a tolerably sophisticated conception of how to live cannot be formulated in terms of such antecedent principles or procedures. Taken at face value, however, this objection rests on something of a caricature of Kantian and

27 'Virtue and Reason,' 340-2; cf. 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*,' 12, 14; 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' 122. In these passages McDowell is echoing Aristotle's famous claim that generalizations in practical philosophy hold only for the most part; see, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b 12ff.

28 'Virtue and Reason,' 336; cf. the reference to 'the inexorable workings of a machine,' on 339. Indeed, mechanistic images and terminology recur frequently in McDowell's characterization of the views in moral psychology that he opposes: for two other examples, see 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,' 155; and 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' 122.

Humean approaches; for there is no reason to think that antecedent moral principles or procedures of justification would need to be mechanically applicable to cases in the objectionable way McDowell describes. For example, the more sophisticated recent interpreters of Kant agree in emphasizing the complexity of the processes whereby the categorical imperative procedure is brought to bear in the moral life.²⁹ Thus, the identification of an agent's maxim is anything but a mechanical procedure; and the implementation of a universalizable maxim, in specific historical and cultural circumstances, requires extensive reliance on forms of perception and intelligence that cannot in their turn be understood as involving the mechanical application of antecedent procedures and principles. The categorical imperative procedure may tell you that you ought to be kind or helpful; but this will not take you very far if you lack the powers of judgment and imagination to determine what would be the truly kind or helpful action, in a given situation and culture.³⁰

The literal charge of mechanical applicability thus does not seem to hold against the more interesting variants of Kantian and Humean strategies. But perhaps, in making this charge, McDowell has something different in mind. His complaint might be an expression of skepticism about the whole idea that general principles or procedures could ever be adequate to the task of determining all of our particular duties or requirements in life. If such skepticism is justified, then the role of judgment and perception in moral decision cannot be restricted to the application of general principles, or to the implementation of general procedures of reflection and justification; judgment and perception must be more fundamentally or extensively implicated in determining what we are to do.

The problem, however, is that McDowell has given us no reason to accept such general skepticism about the adequacy of principle-depend-

29 See, for example, John Rawls, 'Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy,' in Eckart Förster, ed., *Kant's Transcendental Deductions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1989), 81-113 (especially §1); Otfried Höffe, 'Kants kategorischer Imperativ als Kriterium des Sittlichen,' as reprinted in his *Ethik und Politik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979), 84-119; and Onora O'Neill, 'Consistency in Action,' reprinted in her *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 81-104.

30 Similar remarks apply, I think, to the version of contractualism proposed by Scanlon in 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism,' which I have presented as a version of the Humean position. The charge of mechanical applicability might have more force against utilitarian versions of the Humean position, though even here I think the objection requires careful handling.

ent conceptions to determine our particular moral duties and requirements. General skepticism of this sort might seem reasonable, if one thought that the conception of how to live should amount to a comprehensive individual conception of the good, capable of filling out in detail one's view of the valuable or desirable life; for it is indeed questionable that one's comprehensive conception of the good might be specifiable, even in outline, by reference to any general principle or procedure of reasoning. But it would be a mistake — one perhaps encouraged by talk about the 'conception of how to live' — to think that the principles or procedures which figure in Kantian and Humean accounts are meant to play this role. On their most plausible construal, such principles or procedures are not ways of giving content to a comprehensive individual conception of the good, but function as moral *constraints* on individuals in the conduct of their lives — they represent what Kant called 'supreme limiting conditions' on one's pursuit of ends. There is no general reason to suppose that even a thoroughly 'adult' conception of such moral constraints could not be spelled out in terms of general principles or procedures.

Beyond the specific objection on grounds of mechanical applicability, there is a more general tendency in McDowell's work to associate Kantian and Humean strategies with discredited foundationalist approaches in philosophy. Thus he suggests at one point that principle-dependent conceptions of practical reasoning rest on a broader philosophical prejudice, to the effect that rational processes must be capable of being exhibited as 'automatically compelling, without dependence on our partially shared "whirl of organism."' ³¹ McDowell is apparently assuming here that the attempt to characterize moral reasoning in terms of general principles or procedures represents an effort to step outside our actual moral practices, and to legitimate them by constructing a rational justification for morality from the ground up, as it were. Indeed, this interpretation of Kantian and Humean approaches may explain why McDowell's criticism of them slides so easily between the idea that moral reasoning is principle-dependent and the different idea that it must be externally intelligible. For if the motivation of

31 'Virtue and Reason,' 340. On the point at issue see, more generally, the whole of §4 of that paper: though there are many things going on there, at least one of them is an attack on the idea that philosophical thought about our moral practices 'should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life' (341). As an objection to the kinds of principle-dependent accounts I have sketched, this complaint assumes that those accounts have foundationalist aspirations, and that is the assumption I am challenging.

principle-dependent accounts is the desire to provide a foundationalist justification of moral practices, the principles appealed to would have to be ones that those external to moral practices understand and respond to. At any rate, McDowell finds this foundationalist motivation deeply suspect, and suggests that once we have weaned ourselves from it (with the help of Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following), there will no longer be any temptation to adopt a principle-dependent conception of moral reasoning.

Here again, however, McDowell's argument against principle-dependent interpretations of moral reasoning rests on something of a misconception. Take Scanlon's version of contractualism, on which moral reasoning is represented as appealing to a higher-order desire to act in ways that can be justified to others, on grounds no-one could reasonably reject. What motivates this account, I think, is not a wish to provide an external justification of moral practices, but the desire to *interpret* those practices in a way that displays the nature and appeal of moral reasons. To challenge that account it would be necessary to find fault with the details of Scanlon's interpretation, and to offer a better interpretation in its place; but the invocation of general anti-foundationalist considerations will not by itself tell against the account. Even strictly Kantian approaches do not necessarily seem vulnerable to such anti-foundationalist considerations. Granted, the Kantian position, as I have represented it, does attempt to show that moral requirements are requirements of reason, and that they in some sense make claims on all of us. But this attempt need not take the form of going altogether outside moral practices, by (say) reducing moral motivations to considerations of enlightened self-interest. Rather, in its more sophisticated versions the Kantian position can be seen as offering its own interpretation of our moral practices, an interpretation on which *sui generis* moral motivations are revealed to be patterns of reflection to which we are all potentially responsive.³² This is an ambitious undertaking, perhaps even a unpromising one, but it does not necessarily rest on a dubious desire to provide an external foundation or justification for moral practices.

32 In this connection, see Nagel's remarks about the 'method of interpretation,' in *The Possibility of Altruism*, 4, 18-23. Cf. 'Might there be External Reasons?' §5, where McDowell attributes to moral philosophers the desire to discover a 'knockdown' argument which would enable them to 'force' those indifferent to morality into caring about ethical ends. My point is that this characterization simply does not apply to sophisticated proponents of the Kantian approach, such as Nagel, who are under no illusions about the efficacy of their interpretations as instruments of moral reform or persuasion.

I hope I have now said enough to raise some doubts about the cogency of McDowell's stated objections to principle-dependent accounts of moral reasoning. To represent moral reasoning in terms of the following of general principles or procedures is not necessarily to characterize it as a mechanical or mindless process. Nor is it necessarily to suppose that our moral practices require an external foundation or justification. Rather, I have suggested that Humean and Kantian appeals to principle-dependent conceptions of practical reasoning should be seen as interpretations of our moral practices, which aim to illuminate the nature and appeal of distinctively moral reasons. Even if McDowell's conception of these accounts is something of a caricature, however, it might still be the case that his own understanding of the virtuous agent's conception of how to live represents a superior interpretation of our moral practices. This is the possibility that we now need to assess; but to do so it will first be necessary to get clearer about what McDowell's alternative is.

III Intuition and Connoisseurship

To this point I have represented McDowell's account of the conception of how to live in negative terms, as resting on a rejection of principle-dependent conceptions of the requirements of virtue. McDowell does not seem to think that the practical reasoning of the virtuous agent can be represented accurately as an appeal to general principles or procedures, capable of being formulated independently of particular situations of virtuous action. At the same time he evidently believes that the virtuous agent's individual decisions about what to do are deliverances of practical reason. This leaves open the question of how we are to understand, more positively, the distinctively rational processes that lead to and support the virtuous agent's decisions.

McDowell himself does not give us much help in answering this question. His account clearly requires that reason have a positive role to play in leading a virtuous life; but like Aristotle before him, McDowell tells us very little about what this form of practical reasoning is like, beyond saying that it does not involve the application of general principles or procedures. To give the account some definite contours, and to see more precisely how it differs from Humean and Kantian strategies, it will therefore be necessary to go somewhat beyond the literal text of McDowell's various papers. In what follows I want to suggest that there are two different ways in which McDowell's broadly Aristotelian account of practical reason might be developed: one of these yields a kind of rational intuitionism, and I shall contend that this way of developing the account is not very plausible. A second and more promising possibility delivers a conception of moral reasoning as a form of connoisseur-

ship; after sketching this interpretation, I shall return, in the final section of the paper, to consider its merits as against the principle-dependent interpretations of moral reasoning offered by Humeans and Kantians.

To begin, note that principle-dependent accounts of moral reasoning provide terms for justifying individual virtuous decisions. Faced with a decision about what to do, the virtuous agent appeals to the antecedent principles or procedures, and deliberating in accordance with these principles or procedures yields a reason for choosing one alternative over the others that are available. Now one way to develop an alternative to such accounts would be to deny that the virtuous agent has *any* reason or justification for her individual virtuous decisions and choices. Rather, it might be that the virtuous agent, when faced with a decision, immediately sees or grasps what would be the right thing to do, without needing to offer any further reason or justification for her decision. Of course, it will always be open to the virtuous agent to defend her decisions about what to do by saying (for instance) that she has chosen to do the right thing, or that she has done what is for the best, on the whole. But these locutions do not need to be taken as providing an independent justification or rationale for her decisions. Rather, they may simply reflect the fact that the virtuous agent has direct insight into the requirements of virtue, occasion by occasion, where this insight does not admit of discursive justification.

To develop McDowell's account in this way would be to turn it into a kind of rational intuitionism: moral reasoning would be construed as involving an element of quasi-perceptual intuition, where the virtuous agent's intuitive responses are taken to be constitutively rational ones.³³ And there is much in McDowell's writings that could be taken to support this interpretation. Thus, it is a prominent refrain in McDowell's work on ethics that the experience of the virtuous life is marked by certain distinctive ways of perceiving one's circumstances of action. He writes: 'a conception of how to live shows itself, when more than one concern might issue in action, in one's seeing, or being able to be brought to see, one fact rather than another as salient.'³⁴ This perception of certain features of situations as salient is in turn explained as follows: when the virtuous agent determines that a certain concern is to be acted on, in a

33 I have in mind here a form of intuitionism which holds that virtuous agents have a direct, non-inferential, quasi-perceptual grasp of the right or correct thing to do in particular circumstances of action (i.e. what Sidgwick called the 'perceptual' phase of intuitionism: see *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. [Indianapolis: Hackett 1981], Book 1, ch. 8).

34 'Virtue and Reason,' 344

given situation, the claims made by competing concerns are ordinarily *silenced*, in the sense that they are not taken to provide the agent with *any* reason for action.³⁵ To have the conception of how to live characteristic of virtue, then, is to have a special perceptual sensitivity to the features of situations that present us with concrete moral requirements. This element in McDowell's account echoes Aristotle's tendency to resort to perceptual terminology when talking about practical wisdom, and suggests that it is indeed appropriate to construe his account of moral reasoning along intuitionist lines.³⁶

If this perceptual component is to be integrated into an account of practical reason, however, then it needs to be maintained that the virtuous agent's capacity for immediate intuition is a distinctively rational capacity. How are we to construe this further claim? The most appealing way to do so, I should think, would be to say that the virtuous agents' intuitive responses about what it is right to do are constitutively rational responses. That is, McDowell might deny that rational processes are exclusively processes that are controlled by or justifiable in terms of further reasons or justifications; rather, rationality might be said to consist in part in a disposition to offer certain direct, intuitive responses to practical situations, where these responses do not admit of any further justification. This would give to the intuitive responses of virtuous agents a role perhaps analogous to that which Wittgenstein assigns to agreement in judgments, as a condition of communication by means of language.³⁷ The community of the virtuous would be construed as sharing a Wittgensteinian *Lebensform*; and the immediate judgments of the virtuous about what it is right or good to do would be constitutively rational, because they are among the conditions that make moral discourse within such communities possible.

35 See 'Virtue and Reason,' 345-6, also 334-5; and compare 'Are Moral Requirements,' 26-9; 'The Role of *Eudaimonia*,' 372-3.

36 Cf. the references to *aisthesis* in Aristotle's discussion of *phronesis* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The dimension of informed perception in a broadly Aristotelian approach to practical reason is also stressed in David Wiggins, 'Deliberation and Practical Reason,' in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, 221-40. Whether Aristotle himself took practical reason to include a dimension of perceptual intuition is a more complicated question, whose resolution requires (at least) an interpretation of Aristotle's notoriously obscure remarks about *nous* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

37 See, e.g., Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, eds., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell 1953), §§241-2.

Having sketched this intuitionist reading of McDowell's account, however, I think it has to be admitted that it does not represent the most promising way of developing his ideas about practical reason. This is not to say that McDowell would not want to treat the community of the virtuous as sharing a kind of Wittgensteinian *Lebensform* (whatever that might involve); nor is it to deny that rational moral discourse must rest on something like agreement in judgments. The problem is that, on the intuitionist interpretation just sketched, the appeal to agreement in judgments that are not themselves rationally justifiable occurs altogether too swiftly. The intuitionist interpretation says that the virtuous agent simply and immediately perceives what is the right thing to do, in each of the circumstances that confront her, without being able to offer any rational support or justification for these intuitive judgments. But in complicated normative questions about the conduct of life we reasonably expect people to have *something* to say in defense of their beliefs about the moral correctness, or rightness, of acting in certain ways. Thus, in the case sketched earlier we expect the virtuous driver to be able to give some account or justification as to *why* it is right to help someone out of a snow bank if one is on one's way home to watch the news, but not the right thing to do if it means breaking an engagement to drive a friend to the hospital — even if she cannot appeal to a general procedure or principle, equally applicable in other cases that might arise.³⁸ At the least, she ought to be able to point to some morally significant distinction between the two cases which justifies their differential treatment. Her inability to provide any account of this kind would impugn her pretension to have a conception of how to live capable of guiding her conduct rationally through the complexities of life.³⁹

38 It is of course not required that the virtuous agent actually have this justification running through her head at the time when she acts, only that she be able to provide it if asked. Thus we may suppose that in the heat of action, the virtuous agent will often be able to perceive immediately what it is that she is required to do. This would support McDowell's account of the phenomenology of salience and silencing, without requiring us to give these phenomena an intuitionist interpretation.

39 Cf. McDowell's remarks about danger, in 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' 119. There McDowell suggests that the normative aspect of our responses to danger — the idea that those responses are *merited* by the things we take to be dangerous — shows itself in our ability to give an account of what makes certain sorts of situations dangerous (what he refers to as an 'explanatory theory of fear'). At the end of the same article, however, McDowell denies that the account provided need take the form of a set of general principles (122-3). This lends support to the connoisseurship interpretation of his views on practical reason, which I shall develop below.

Now I suspect that McDowell himself would not want to resist this conclusion. Virtue, he would say, involves a perceptual sensitivity to the morally relevant features of situations; but this perceptual sensitivity should not be construed as a constitutively rational capacity for unerring insight into the right or the good. Nor should the possession of this perceptual sensitivity be taken to preclude the provision of reasons or justifications for the virtuous agent's individual decisions about what to do.⁴⁰ On the contrary, it would be natural to suppose that the perceptual sensitivity precisely discloses to the virtuous agent the particular reasons or justifications in favor of doing what virtue requires, occasion by occasion. What is distinctively rational about this perceptual sensitivity, one might even say, is that it enables the virtuous to discern such reasons or justifications in the particular situations that confront them. At the same time the emphasis on perception in this account serves to underline the fact that moral reasons or justifications are not grasped by appeal to any antecedent procedure or set of principles, as principle-dependent accounts of moral reasoning would require. Rather, practical reason enables the virtuous agent to see what her reasons or justifications are in a way that is *essentially* bound up with a perception of the particular features of the situations in which those reasons or justifications obtain.

Interpreting McDowell's account along these lines yields a picture of practical reason as a form of connoisseurship. For connoisseurship is precisely the ability to appreciate heterogeneous, case-specific reasons for choice or preference by means of informed judgment or perception rather than the application of general principles or procedures. Thus a connoisseur (of wine, for example) is able to make discriminations which have normative force, between better and worse wines. But these discriminations cannot be understood as involving the application of general principles or procedures, for there is no such procedure or set of principles which explains what makes for a good wine, in all cases. Nor would it be accurate to describe the connoisseur's discriminations as the deliverances of intuition, since the connoisseur can provide, in every case, a justification as to what makes a particular wine good or

40 Thus there are several points at which McDowell commits himself to the availability of arguments or justifications for the virtuous agent's decisions: see, e.g., 'Are Moral Requirements,' 21-2; 'Virtue and Reason,' 342; 'Might There be External Reasons?' §4. These passages suggest that the arguments available to the virtuous agent have a 'rhetorical' character, and so fall short of 'rationally necessitating' their conclusions; I take it the import of such remarks is to reiterate McDowell's view that moral argument and justification cannot be reconstructed as an appeal to antecedent principles.

bad. Furthermore it is plausible to regard the capacity to make these discriminations, and to provide the corresponding case-specific justifications, as a kind of rational capacity, insofar as it represents a refinement of critical discernment and intelligence.

Applying this connoisseurship model to the case of virtue seems to me to provide the most promising way of working out McDowell's conception of the role of practical reason in the virtuous life. The model itself offers a legitimate paradigm of one kind of rational capacity, whose application to the understanding of virtue results in a conception of practical reason that differs interestingly from both Humean and Kantian approaches. Moreover, this conception of practical reason preserves and explains several claims that have often been taken to distinguish an Aristotelian account of the moral life. It represents practical wisdom as a kind of refinement of judgment, involving a capacity to discern the particular features of situations that provide case-specific reasons for action — just as the wine connoisseur has an especially refined capacity to identify the qualities which make particular wines good or bad. Second, and perhaps more important, a connoisseur is someone whose judgments and discriminations set the final standards for deciding normative questions in his area of expertise.

Thus there is no independent set of rules or procedures which could be applied by anyone to determine the quality of an arbitrary bottle of wine; rather, a good wine simply is a wine that connoisseurs agree in finding case-specific reasons to approve of. This echoes Aristotle's own tendency to characterize virtuous actions by reference to the ideal of the virtuous agent, as those actions that the *phronimos* would choose, performed as the *phronimos* would perform them.⁴¹ Such passages suggest very strongly that the concept of the virtuous agent is *basic*, in the context of an Aristotelian approach to ethics; and the connoisseurship interpretation of practical reason helps us to understand why an Aristotelian might take the concept of the virtuous agent to be basic in this way. Given the absence of a principled specification of the requirements of virtue, it is not possible to characterize virtuous action except by reference to what the person of practical wisdom would do in particular situations.⁴²

41 Cf. 'Virtue and Reason,' 331, 347.

42 McDowell is of course not the only philosopher to have emphasized the elements of non-principle-dependent, case-specific judgments in Aristotle's account of *phronesis*; for another recent example, see Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987), ch. 1.

IV Conclusion

The connoisseurship interpretation thus captures many distinctively Aristotelian claims, and it does so in a way which allows us to make sense of McDowell's contention that the Aristotelian account of practical reason is distinct from both Kantian and Humean approaches. The question remains, however, whether the connoisseurship model offers a more plausible interpretation of the role of reason in the moral life than principle-dependent accounts can provide. This is not a question that I can hope to settle in the space of the present essay. But in conclusion I would like at least to identify two potential problems for the connoisseurship interpretation of practical reason. One problem concerns the applicability of the connoisseurship model, in contemporary circumstances of moral discourse; the other concerns the sufficiency of the connoisseurship model even in those circumstances where it can be said to apply. I do not see these problems as decisive objections to McDowell's neo-Aristotelian conception of moral reasoning; they challenge neither its intelligibility, nor its legitimacy as a model or interpretation of one kind of rational process. My aim, rather, is to locate two respects in which the model of connoisseurship seems potentially inadequate to the predicament of morality in our culture, in the hope that doing so will help to make clear the continuing appeal of the principle-dependent conceptions of moral reasoning that McDowell rejects.

The first problem stems from disagreement. It seems to me that the connoisseurship model will plausibly be construed as a model of rational processes only in conditions in which there is a high degree of agreement among the connoisseurs. Of course this is not to say that there can never be disagreement among connoisseurs which does not impugn the rational status of their judgments or preferences. But such disagreement must be distinctly limited: if there were extensive lack of convergence among connoisseurs of wine as to which wines are good and which bad, then it would be correspondingly implausible to suppose that their judgments are rationally well-supported, or that they represent a normative ideal of correct discrimination. If this is right, however, it suggests that the connoisseurship model will only yield a compelling account of practical reason in cultural conditions in which there is widespread agreement among the virtuous as to what virtue requires, in particular situations of action.⁴³

43 I am not suggesting here that correctness of judgment is *constituted* by convergence or agreement in judgment, on the connoisseurship model; but that a degree of

Perhaps such conditions obtained in the historical communities in which Aristotle himself lived and wrote, but they are notably absent today. Confronted with a great diversity of cultural influences, in a context of vast discrepancies of wealth both within and between political communities, we seem to live in an era in which virtue itself has become problematized, and which is correspondingly open to competing interpretations of what morality requires of us. In conditions such as these, the connoisseurship model seems an unpromising way to make out the claim that questions about what to do are susceptible of rational resolution. Individuals may take themselves to have case-specific moral reasons for the particular actions they perform (such as commitment to a certain kind and level of charitable activity, or a decision to make a professional sacrifice in order to help a friend), and discerning these reasons will require various rational capacities for intelligence, imagination, reflection, and so on. But other connoisseurs of the moral life are apt to be moved by case-specific reasons for acting in quite different and incompatible ways, and this will undermine the normative dimension of practical reason: the idea that the exercise of judgment enables its possessor to discern the uniquely *correct* or *right* thing to do, in particular circumstances of action. The connoisseurship model, in short, does not seem to be applicable to the case of practical reason in conditions of extensive disagreement among the virtuous.

Perhaps McDowell could respond to this difficulty by acknowledging a plurality of moral sub-communities, constituted by agents who largely agree as to what virtue requires of them.⁴⁴ The connoisseurship model might then account for the reasoned identification of correct action within these sub-communities, even if it cannot provide a means for resolving disagreements between members of different such communities. Developing his account along these lines, however, will only make more acute a second difficulty which McDowell's approach faces, stemming from its apparent elitism. Restricted in its applicability in this way, the connoisseurship interpretation implies that virtue is *esoteric*, in the sense that the rational capacities to grasp and appreciate the virtuous agent's decision are the exclusive possession of those who have themselves been inducted into a particular sub-com-

convergence among the connoisseurs is at least a condition for the truth of the claim that their powers of judgment enable them to see matters correctly, or aright.

44 Cf. 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' 127, n. 35, where he suggests that the requirement of convergence or agreement in an account of correct judgment should be 'radically relativized to a point of view.'

munity of virtue.⁴⁵ Thus an agent who is not already a member of such a sub-community will lack the qualities of refined judgment that are necessary in order to grasp the case-specific reasons in favor of the actions that virtue is taken to require, within the sub-community — just as a person inexperienced in wine will be unable to appreciate what makes a particular claret distinguished.

About such an esoteric interpretation of virtue, however, the question arises as to whether virtue so interpreted has any relevance at all to the lives of those who are not themselves virtuous already. Especially if we acknowledge a plurality of sub-communities of virtue, it will look as if the powers of practical reason internal to those sub-communities are particular refinements of human ability that have no more claim on people generally than (say) the capacity to appreciate wines, or twelve-tone music, or good darting matches on British television.⁴⁶ And yet it is a familiar and reasonable aspiration of morality to provide a more comprehensive framework for regulating human behaviour, imposing requirements even on those who are not already virtuous. Aristotle's own moral theory seems to speak to this aspiration. In particular, the perfectionist strategy which I discussed at the start of this paper helps to explain how a conception of virtue which would otherwise be esoteric makes claims on all (male, non-slave) humans. It does so, Aristotle suggests, because the refinement of judgment of the *phronimos* represents the unique realization or perfection of our essential rational nature. But as I noted earlier, McDowell explicitly rejects this perfectionist strategy, and denies that Aristotle himself meant to adopt it. Without it,

45 In this connection see again McDowell's remarks about the 'external intelligibility' of the virtuous agent's conception of how to live (discussed in Section II above).

46 In 'Might there be External Reasons?' McDowell contends that an amoral agent may have an 'external' reason for acting as the virtuous agent does. As he develops this point, however (see especially §6), it turns out to involve an extremely weak notion of an external reason. On McDowell's view, the claim that the amoral agent has an external reason to act virtuously is simply a reflection of the virtuous agent's confidence in her own ethical outlook, a confidence which is supported by distinctively ethical arguments. This sort of confidence, however, might equally be sustained by members of a number of different moral sub-communities (or by the aficionado of music of the second Viennese school, to take McDowell's own example of a non-ethical case). To say that one has an external reason, in this sense, is to say no more than that there is a way of acting or judging which is in conformity with the (possibly esoteric) standards of some community. Even if we allow McDowell this way of speaking, however, the question remains as to the authority of an esoteric conception of morality to govern the lives of those who are not themselves virtuous already. This is the question I am raising in the text.

however, the connoisseurship interpretation is apt to seem a rather pale vindication of the role of reason in the moral life. It avoids the instrumental implications often associated with the Humean conception of practical reason, but it does not do enough to avoid the subjectivism and relativism that are frequent corollaries of such a conception.

This suggests that the question we need to ask about the connoisseurship model is not so much whether it applies to the case of virtue, but whether it is by itself a sufficient substitute for principle-dependent conceptions of practical reason. Recall that even on a principle-dependent account, there will be room to acknowledge the powers of refined judgment that are central to the connoisseurship interpretation. This is in effect the point I made in Section II above, when I argued that general principles or procedures would not necessarily be mechanically applicable to cases. Principle-dependent interpretations hold that the basic patterns of moral reasoning can be formulated in general terms; but the application of general principles or procedures in particular cases will require a capacity for discerning the case-specific features of situations that make some ways of acting in accordance with the procedures or principles better than others. An account of virtue should take this into account, by making room for connoisseurship in its ideal conception of the morally admirable agent, and by holding that moral education has as part of its task the cultivation of these powers of connoisseurship. But this does not exclude the possibility that we can formulate general principles or procedures which provide the governing framework for all moral reasoning and deliberation.

The issue, in these terms, is whether we should rest content with a conception of moral reasoning as connoisseurship, or whether we should seek to supplement it with a principle-dependent interpretation of the basic patterns of moral reflection. Once the question is put in this way, however, I think the continued attractions of principle-dependent accounts will be apparent. First, the construction or formulation of principles or procedures of rational justification in the ethical life seems well suited to the conditions of fragmentation and disagreement that so characterize the contemporary ethical world. The primary task of practical reason in such conditions, one should have thought, is to provide a framework or context within which disagreements can be pursued and, as far as possible, rationally resolved; and the search for general principles or procedures of moral reasoning, if it could be completed, would deliver precisely such a framework.⁴⁷ The identifi-

47 This is, I take it, one source of the continuing appeal that utilitarianism has for many

cation of general principles or procedures of moral reasoning should also go some way toward addressing the problem of the authority of morality to govern or regulate our lives. Following the Humean strategy, we might try to show that the principles speak to some basic concern or desire — such as the desire to be able to justify oneself to others on grounds no-one could reasonably reject — that is widely distributed and deeply entrenched in human psychology, as a matter of empirical fact.⁴⁸ And it could potentially be interpreted in Kantian terms, as an extension or development of forms of reasoning to which we are all susceptible, whatever our antecedent desires. In this case moral reasoning, far from being esoteric, would represent a kind of justification which anyone is capable of grasping and responding to.⁴⁹

Whether accounts of this kind can be made plausible is of course not a question that I can answer in this paper. It is enough to observe that principle-dependent strategies have some attraction, as against the Aristotelian alternative that I have extracted from McDowell's work; and that McDowell himself has said nothing that would call those strategies seriously into question (as I argued in Section II). There is a tendency among recent advocates of an Aristotelian conception of ethics to play Aristotle off against a rather crude and unappealing interpretation of modern conceptions of morality — especially Kantian conceptions.⁵⁰ At the same time those working within the Kantian tradition in particular have been developing increasingly sophisticated and attractive accounts of what a Kantian account might look like, which are hardly vulnerable to all the standard objections.⁵¹ McDowell has done us the

people, though I myself find Kantian strategies, or Scanlon's quasi-Humean contractualism, to be much more promising.

48 This is Scanlon's suggestion, in 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism.'

49 Thomas Nagel aims to establish this conclusion, in *The Possibility of Altruism*.

50 Though there is not the space to argue the point here, I believe this is a common failing of the following works: Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,' reprinted in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell 1978), 157-73; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1984); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986); Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character, and Morality' and 'Moral Luck,' both reprinted in his *Moral Luck*, 1-39; also his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985).

51 In addition to the works cited in n. 29 above, see, for instance, Barbara Herman, 'On the Idea of Acting from the Motive of Duty,' *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981) 359-82; Christine Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason,' *The Journal of Philosophy* (1986) 5-25; Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*; and the papers collected in

service of sketching an interpretation of the Aristotelian conception of practical reason which relates it to a broader paradigm of a rational process, and distinguishes it from prevailing Kantian and Humean approaches. But the final assessment of his Aristotelian conception is going to require a much more serious engagement with Kantian and Humean alternatives than McDowell and other neo-Aristotelians have so far essayed.⁵²

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Otfried Höffe, ed., *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten: Ein kooperativer Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1989). Because of its obvious Kantian inspiration, Scanlon's contractualism might also be considered in this connection; certainly it seems to me more promising than utilitarianism as a way of developing a Humean alternative to the connoisseurship model.

- 52 Conversations with Samuel Freeman, Michael Smith, and especially Wolfgang Mann were helpful in clarifying the ideas developed in this paper. I have also benefited from the very useful comments of two anonymous referees for *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Work on the paper was supported by a grant from the Research Foundation of the University of Pennsylvania.