REASON AND REGRET

by

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ABSTRACT

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I defend a realist, Aristotelian theory of moral normativity on which moral virtue is the natural conclusion of the successful exercise of practical reason. More specifically, I argue that the avoidance of regret is a constitutive feature of practical rationality, and that because we are social beings, moral virtue serves as a general strategy for the minimization of regrets, and especially of serious regrets. Because I draw on aspects of John McDowell's Aristotelian moral realism, I begin with an examination of his view, and a discussion of why he thinks that virtuous conclusions require the prior possession of virtuous dispositions. McDowell argues that statements of the form “we need moral virtue in view of x” can only sway the already-virtuous, since it is possible, through incorrect habituation, for us to come to value things that do not require virtue. I argue, however, that once we understand the avoidance of regret as a requirement of practical rationality, and sociability as an innate characteristic humans share, we can see that even the unvirtuous require moral virtue. While this does not mean good reasoning alone can make us virtuous—since seeing the world as the virtuous person does requires habituation—it does suggest that we all share the capacity to appreciate the necessity of such habituation.

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1. Introduction

> "[W]e need to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to be adequate students of fine and just things, and of political questions generally." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b4-6)[1]

John McDowell argues that the emphasis on habituation we find in this passage is the key not only to understanding Aristotle's ethics, but the nature of practical normativity itself (1994, p. 84). For McDowell, habituation (as in the formation of character, or upbringing)[2] is the only way we can come to recognize genuine reasons for action constituted by considerations relating to justice, temperance, courage, and the other virtues. Of course, not just any cultivated disposition, or "second nature," will do, and our ethical beliefs should amount to something more than the unreflective acceptance of tradition.[3] McDowell suggests that we can both refine and justify our ethical beliefs in reflection, which he holds must be "Neurathian," or coherentist, in character.[4] That is, our web of ethical beliefs can only be altered bit by bit, much like a ship that must be repaired while already at sea, and breaking out of our web of belief into some kind of radical, presuppositionless ethical reflection is impossible.

It is tempting to read McDowell as presenting successful ethical inquiry as something available to all practically rational agents. On such a view, ethical reflection not only plays the role of justifying the ethical beliefs of the virtuous, but can also bring one who starts with immoral or unvirtuous dispositions to see that they are mistaken.[5] This temptation is encouraged by McDowell's discussion of the role of our shared innate endowment, or "first nature," in practical reasoning. In particular, he notes that first nature can figure in ethical reflection in the form of generalizations

1 In citations of texts by Aristotle and Nietzsche, I use Bekker and section numbers, respectively.
2 McDowell sometimes prefers the German term *Bildung* to the more familiar terms for which I opt here (see ibid.).
3 The first-person collective is meant, here and elsewhere in this paper, to represent the standpoint of a generic practical reasoner (who, importantly, we cannot presume to be virtuous).
4 See his 1998b, pp. 36-38. McDowell's remarks on Neurathian reflection depart from Aristotle, but are meant to be faithful to the spirit of his ethics—and especially parallel Aristotle's remarks on progressing from the "that" to the "because" (i.e., moving from carrying out a practice to understanding its justification).
5 In what follows, I understand "ethics" as practical reasoning broadly construed—so we can say, for instance, that Nietzsche had an ethics. "Morality," on the other hand, is just those virtues (or principles) that embody a certain kind of regard for others—e.g., justice is a regard for (especially political) fairness.

(e.g., “We need justice if we are to avoid intractable conflict”). But lest we think we can derive moral conclusions on the basis of such generalizations, McDowell emphasizes that these statements about why we need virtue might not appeal to those who are not already virtuous. For when we are incorrectly habituated, we might even come to prize that which can successfully be pursued without virtue. As a result, any attempt to derive moral claims from practical reasoning that is abstracted from the prior possession of virtuous dispositions is bound, McDowell claims, either to fail, or amount to nothing more than a “bluff.”

But the prospects for an argument for moral virtue along these lines are better than McDowell suggests. I argue, here, for the general necessity of moral virtue as a fact that is available to all practically rational humans, independent of their already having virtuous dispositions. Drawing on McDowell's picture of ethical reflection, I show that consideration of the relationship between practical rationality and our innate sociability reveals moral virtue to be something that we all need, and have reason to pursue. More specifically, I present the avoidance of regret as a constitutive feature of practical rationality, and argue that because we are social beings who are liable to seriously regret the results of unvirtuous living, we require moral virtue. In the Aristotelian picture I outline here, my emphasis on our shared and innate practically rational and social nature represents a departure from McDowell. It is also a way to respond to his worries about arguments for morality. By focusing on general features of our first nature that are compelling for all human practical reasoners, I avoid the pitfalls McDowell associates with the attempt to give generalizations about our shared first nature a central role in the explanation of moral requirements.

2. Habituation, Reflection, and Suspicion

Because, in developing my proposal, I draw on aspects of McDowell's Aristotelianism, I begin with a more detailed discussion of his picture of practical normativity. After an overview of some key aspects of McDowell's view, I examine his account of the role generalizations play in ethical

reflection; his reasons for rejecting the idea of an argument for virtue; and the negative consequences of that rejection.

2.1. Habituation and Reflection: McDowell's Aristotelianism

Since McDowell's theory of practical normativity is not unique in emphasizing habituation and reflection, a contrast can help bring out what is distinctive about his Aristotelianism. As a foil, consider neo-Humean views that hold that determining what we have reason to do is a matter of figuring out what follows from the contents of our motivational set via deliberation.[6] Since habituation plays a decisive role in shaping our motivations, the neo-Humean, too, may attach great importance to it. But unlike neo-Humeans—who are subjectivists about reasons and hold that there are no motivation-independent ethical truths—McDowell rejects subjectivism. McDowell maintains that there is such a thing as *correct* habituation, whether or not our actual habits are the correct ones, and regardless of whether we recognize what the correct habits are. So, when correct habituation opens our eyes to reasons for acting, those reasons have specific moral and prudential contents, and we are to understand those reasons as having been already and anyways there, prior to our gaining proper sensitivity to reasons (McDowell, 1998c, p. 189).

One might wonder, given the centrality of correct habituation for McDowell, how we can have any idea whether our ethical beliefs and habits (as opposed to some others) are the correct ones.[7] This is where reflection comes in. Through reflection on our ethical beliefs, we can gain justification for holding those beliefs, as well as improve our beliefs so that they are more approximately correct (p. 189). Because this reflection is coherentist (or Neurathian) in nature, we can never hold all our ethical beliefs in abeyance, but must always take some values for granted

6 In his 1998a McDowell presents and critiques Bernard Williams's neo-Humean internalism (p. 97). For a more recent similar view, see Street (2010). Although Street substitutes talk of judgments about reasons for talk of motivation and deliberation, the view has broad similarities to Williams's.

7 Here and elsewhere, I treat ethical beliefs, habits, and associated dispositions as more or less interchangeable. These things can sometimes come apart in philosophically significant ways, like akrasia; but discussion of these issues lie outside the scope of this paper, and the existence of these phenomena does not, I think, militate against the argument I make here.

when we reflect. To see how this works, imagine a person who is reflecting upon her commitment to the virtue of temperance. To see the value of this virtue, she need not suspend all her practical commitments and reconstruct an argument for temperance out of natural facts and requirements of practical reason. Instead, by drawing out the relations between temperance and the other virtues she is committed to, she might notice that, e.g., temperance helps support her commitment to the virtue of justice by keeping her clearheaded (and so less susceptible to unfair biases).

Coherentist reflection of this kind might seem to compromise McDowell's commitment to moral realism. We might be concerned that, since we can plausibly reach coherence without having a distinctively moral outlook, McDowell's picture of reflection gives license to all sorts of immoralism. One might be reminded, here, of neo-Humean views that embrace a coherentism on which it is possible to have reason to be immoral. For instance, Sharon Street's Humean constructivism holds that we have reason to be immoral if we would make immoral judgments in a state of ideal coherence (Street, 2010, p. 371). But this would be a misreading. For McDowell, the justification and improvement we achieve in reflection are not relativized to an agent and her motivational set. Instead, justification is to be understood as justification of agent-independent correct ethical beliefs, and improvement as improvement of our overall web of belief toward those beliefs.

2.2. An argument for morality?

It is because McDowell holds that reflection allows us to improve our ethical beliefs that one naturally comes to the thought that practical rationality might lead one toward the correct moral conclusions, independently of one's already being virtuously habituated. This would make it possible for agent who starts out with immoral dispositions to come to see in reflection that their dispositions are incorrect. For purposes of illustration, consider a character from the history of ethics: Hume's sensible knave, a person who takes care to *appear* moral, but is really only

concerned with his narrow self-interest (*EPM* 9.2). If moral conclusions follow from practical rationality, then even a sensible knave with deeply-ingrained immoral dispositions could come to see on reflection that his practical outlook is mistaken (i.e., that he is wrong about much of what he takes as reasons for action). Becoming fully virtuous—acting virtuously in the way a virtuous person would[8]—would surely require some training on the knave's part, but as a practical reasoner, he would nevertheless have the capacity to see the necessity of virtue.

McDowell ultimately rejects the idea that practical reason can yield moral conclusions independently of one's having good dispositional starting-points. He considers it a "fantasy" that we should ever find a "knockdown argument" for morality: that is, an argument that "would force anyone capable of being influenced by reasons at all into caring about the sorts of things one ought to care about." (1998a, p. 103) But why does he dismiss the prospects for such an argument, when his picture of ethical reflection seems to encourage the idea that good practical reasoning is moral reasoning? To answer this question, it will be helpful to look at one of the ways McDowell allows that our shared first nature can figure in ethical reflection.

McDowell describes a kind of reflection in which we can reassure ourselves of the value of virtue by calling attention to how our ends (whatever they may be) are well-served by our virtuous habits. By way of illustration, McDowell offers the example of courage, writing that "human beings need courage if they are to stick to their worthwhile projects, in the face of the motivational obstacle posed by danger." (1998c, p. 191) In other words, we can see that it is a general empirical fact that the we tend to face dangers that threaten our projects by undermining our motivations, and that courage can help us overcome these threats to our projects. I will call this form of reasoning *natural generalization*. While natural generalization can reassure us of the value of the virtues in ethical *reflection*, it is important to note that in situations where one is deciding how to act (i.e., in *deliberation*), the courageous person does not stand ready to question whether courage would help

8 Cf. *NE* 1105b7: "But the just and temperate person is not the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who also does them in the way in which just or temperate people do them."

or hinder their other projects: instead, they simply act as courageous people do. In this way, practical reasoning has a two-level (reflection-deliberation) structure in which “the general human need for courage stands at one remove from the rational will of a person engaged in courageous behaviour.” (ibid.)

It is tempting to think that we could argue via natural generalization for moral virtue as a whole by drawing attention to general reasons that we need virtue, as in: “humans need moral virtue if they are to achieve well-being.” Problems lurk here, but notice that it seems to make sense to say that our well-being is well-served by moral virtue insofar as virtue helps us be prudent, cultivate friendships, etc. This argument does not appear to presuppose any particular kind of habituation, and thus has the potential to appeal to all practically rational humans. We should wonder, though, what exactly is meant by “achieving well-being.” It is indeed this ambiguity that renders the argument problematic.

To see why, consider a version of this argument for moral virtue due to Stephen Hendley. Hendley claims that in reflection, we can identify as a matter of empirical fact not only that human well-being requires moral virtue, but also what human well-being consists in (2009, p. 519). Hendley takes his method of the identification of human well-being from Philippa Foot, who in her book *Natural Goodness* claims that the functional purposiveness of living beings can provide a natural basis for judgments of goodness. According to Foot, we can make metaphysically non-problematic judgments about non-human animals on the basis of their apparent ends (usually survival and reproduction), as when I ascribe goodness to a deer on the basis of its excellence in species-typical capacities that help it survive and reproduce (Foot, 2001, pp. 28, 31-2, 34). Just as a good deer is one that has the stealth to flee from predators and the benevolent impulse to care for its young, a good human is one that secures flourishing (comprising things like meaningful work and friendship) through virtues like justice and benevolence (pp. 86-94).

Hendley is optimistic that we can synthesize the best parts of McDowell's and Foot's views,

but I am afraid this optimism rests on an underappreciation of McDowell's critique of Foot. McDowell claims that a notion of goodness as functional purposiveness lacks the tight link to motivation and action that habituation has (McDowell, 1998c, p. 171). While nonrational beings instinctively work toward the satisfaction of species-typical functional aims, rational beings can step back from what is species-typical and ask why it should be taken as law. To illustrate this point, McDowell considers the hypothetical example of a rational wolf (pp. 170-2). If nonrational wolves are governed by instinct, and thus inclined toward pursuit of species-typical aims, the rational wolf is free to consider possibilities other than what would normally be dictated by his first nature. So, while the rest of the pack instinctively engages in pack-hunting, the rational wolf might instead decide to strike out alone; he might even act against the pack and steal the bounty of the hunt from his fellow wolves. We should therefore reject the idea that the innate dispositions of wolves can provide norms that are compelling for the rational wolf. Rather, rational wolves (like humans) can only come to see considerations as reason-generating by being made sensitive to them through habituation. Likewise, even if we can know, as an empirical consideration, that moral virtue helps humans achieve some specification of well-being derived from species-typical aims, it is always open to us to ask why we should accept those aims as our own (and so normative for us). Thus, while reflection on natural generalizations can help reassure us of our reasons for being virtuous, our coming to see those considerations as reasons in the first place must be accomplished via habituation.

2.3. Conversion

We can now see why McDowell considers the idea of an argument for morality a “fantasy.” Because ethical reflection must always operate on preexisting dispositions, and can never call them all into question at once, correct habituation is not something we can *all* reason toward. For someone without at least approximately virtuous dispositions might fail to see any practical value in

a piece of reasoning that would provide reassurance to the virtuous. We might all agree that “justice helps humans secure values like community and friendship”—but what is this to one who has resolved to live in a manner akin to a lone wolf? The result, here, is that even if most humans meet a basic standard of practical rationality, *good* practical reasoning is in some sense the province of the already-virtuous. Given this, it is not surprising that McDowell claims that the appropriate method of winning over someone with sufficiently wayward dispositions is not a process of reasoning, but instead something resembling “conversion.” (1998a, p. 102) “Conversion” is meant to function as “the idea of an intelligible shift in motivational orientation that is exactly *not* effected by inducing a person to discover, by practical reasoning controlled by existing motivations, some internal reasons that he did not previously realize he had.” Such conversion involves reshaping someone's basic dispositions to approximate those deemed correct through a process that is probably closer to therapy than reasoning.

There is something unsatisfying about this combination of views. Even though McDowell holds that only certain dispositions are *correct* ones, he nevertheless allows that there is a sense in which one can rationally act immorally. Indeed, he admits that because we lack an argument for morality, “irrationality” is the wrong charge to make of one who lacks moral virtue (1998a, p. 107). Plausibly, then, a sensible knave could act rationally so long as he has deliberated correctly and identified what follows from his motivational set. Granted, there will be a sense in which that motivational set is *wrong* (because unvirtuous), but it is hard to see the force of this charge of wrongness outside of the practices of the already-virtuous. As a result, McDowell's picture of moral virtue seems an apt target for Nietzsche's criticism that “morality is just a *sign language of the affects*.” (*BGE* §187) According to Nietzsche, among the moral, ethical reasoning is not a matter of reasoning toward *correct* principles, but finding post-hoc rationalizations meant to justify the expression of underlying psychological drives. “Correctness,” then, is just a label we apply to whatever moral view we want to vindicate, whether or not that view is one that can speak to those

who share our contingent dispositions. Because McDowell makes moral virtue a rational conclusion only for those who are already virtuous, we might suspect McDowell is like those philosophers Nietzsche criticizes for seeking to "prove," when in reality "the results which were *supposed* to emerge from their most intense contemplations were in fact already firmly established." (§188)

We have seen how the failure of a certain sort of argument—Hendley's argument from natural generalization—seems to suggest there is a gulf between the reasoning of the virtuous and the unvirtuous. Perhaps there is more to be said in favor of such a gap in practical reasoning, if one presses the case that a kind of practice-internal objectivity is sufficient to underpin our moral practices. But we need not try to convince ourselves that we can be satisfied with a picture on which we cannot reason with, but only "convert," those who lack virtue. For although Hendley's argument fails, there is another way to make the case for morality via natural generalization.

3. Regret, Sociability, and Immoralism

Hendley is right to suggest that we can see that we need virtue because of the kind of beings we are. But if we are to argue for morality on this sort of basis, we must attend to McDowell's insight that natural generalizations can only be rationally compelling when that for which we need moral virtue has sufficient weight for us. While a functional explanation of human well-being will not mean much to those who lack virtuous habituation, there are nevertheless some things that rationally compel all practical reasoners. In particular, all practically rational people act according to certain laws and requirements of practical rationality. Among such candidate "laws" are the hypothetical imperative and the guise of the good.[9] But if such laws have force for all those who are practically rational, on their own, they do not obviously generate substantive moral requirements. For instance, we can satisfy the hypothetical imperative, which tells us that willing an end means also willing the means to that end, and be purely instrumental reasoners. I want to claim that there is another

9 The guise of the good being, roughly, the view that intentional action aims at something taken to be (at least in some respect) good.

requirement of practical rationality, the *avoidance of regret*, that can play a role in helping us see the necessity of moral virtue for beings like us. In particular, I argue that because we are social beings, moral virtue is an indispensable general strategy for the avoidance of regret. But first: what is regret, and why should we avoid it?

3.1. Regret

It is a basic fact about humans that, as rational beings, we act for what we take to be reasons. It is similarly basic that when we act on putative reasons, we can later reflect on and reassess these reasons. That is, we can question ourselves regarding whether what we once took to be a reason is actually a reason. When we are in accord with our earlier judgments, we *affirm* our course of action and the reasons for which we undertook it; when we reject our earlier judgment, we *regret* our course of action and *dissent* from what we previously took to be reasons for action.

This particular combination of affective regret and reassessment of putative reasons is close to what some in the literature on regret have called "self-recrimination," or self-blaming.[10] But because my emphasis is specifically on the reevaluation and rejection of putative reasons, I will call the sort of judgment I have in mind "rational regret." Regarding the emotional element of rational regret: I want to remain ecumenical about what affective regret consists in, because many different accounts of regret are compatible with the story I am telling here. We might, for instance, characterize affective regret as a non-cognitive phenomenological "feel," or as a cognitive judgment that some unpursued alternative is to some extent valuable or desirable (or perhaps simply desired). These two views (i.e., cognitivist and non-cognitivist) might even be combined.[11] However, if the details of the account of affective regret can remain fuzzy for my purposes, it is important that affective regret captures instances in which we have a reflexive regretful emotional response to

10 See, e.g., Amélie Rorty's (1980) account of agent regret (p. 499), or Robert Sugden's (1985) account of regret in rational choice theory (p. 95).

11 For an account that combines the two, see Priest (2019, but cited from manuscript, pp. 4-5). A more cognitivist account is Bagnoli (2000), who characterizes regret as an emotion that has as its proper object "a *valuable unchosen and not necessarily overriding alternative*." (p. 178)

some occurrence.

Rational regret's main element—a revisionary judgment about our putative reasons—can precede, follow, or even co-occur with a corresponding instance of affective regret. I might, for instance, suddenly feel a longing to see a friend that I miss, and then judge that I should have put more effort into keeping in touch. Conversely, I may arrive at this judgment in deliberation, and only then begin to experience the phenomenon of affective wistfulness. And if I suddenly remember a friend I have not seen or thought about in a long time, my judgment about my reasons and the corresponding emotion of longing may strike at the same time.

As practically rational agents, we aim to do only what we have reason to do, and so we aim to avoid rational regret (in what follows, I shorten this to simply "regret"). Some regrets merit more serious consideration than others. For instance, it may not matter much to me that I regret having chosen to get a salad rather than a soup with my lunch, while regretting my choice of career may be very distressing indeed. We can see, then, that the weights of our reasons for avoiding particular regrets mirrors the structure of our putative reasons for pursuing those particular courses of action. Because there is little reason to prefer salad over soup with lunch (or vice-versa), I have little reason to give the potential anticipated regrets much weight; and because there are significant reasons to pursue some careers as opposed to others, I should give serious weight to anticipated regrets of this sort. We might think of there being a scale of regrets that extends from *trivial* to *serious* matters. *Trivial* regrets paradigmatically treat of mundane matters that are easily forgotten, the minute workaday choices that we generally find ourselves able to make without much thought. *Serious* regrets, in contrast, typically deal with matters that demand our continued attention, especially major personal choices (e.g., what career to pursue, whether to buy a house, whether to get married) and major moral choices (e.g., whether to live a life of material comfort or donate one's resources to a worthy cause, whether to stay home and care for one's mother or join the French Resistance).[12]

That the avoidance of regret is a constitutive feature of practical rationality can be brought

12 The last example comes from Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946/2007).

out by considering its indispensability for practical agency. If we resolve *never* to regret our actions, however they may ultimately turn out, we are charting a course for ruin. Since a putative reason that turns out *not* to be a genuine one was never really a reason to begin with, forgoing retrospective assessment of our putative reasons for action is liable to make us insensitive to our prospective reasons for action. That is, without a backward-looking corrective to our deliberation and reflection upon reasons, our abilities of forward-looking practical reasoning would be underdeveloped, with the likely result that we repeat our mistakes again and again. Conversely, it is possible to be *too* focused on regret. Cognitively speaking, our practical reasoning will grind to a halt if we scrutinize even our most inconsequential decisions at length; and affectively speaking, an emotional disposition toward excessively negative feelings about all our decisions can blind us to the positive aspects of what we achieve. Just as a healthy amount of consideration of our prospective reasons is vital, so, too, is retrospectively keeping a handle on (but perhaps not obsessing over) what we previously took to be reasons—and thereby considering our regrets.

These last points about regret's practical indispensability are worth drawing out in more detail via example. Imagine a man who is just a bit too credulous, and not especially thorough when it comes to financial matters. After a conversation with a charismatic scammer, this man “invests” a large sum of money in a Ponzi scheme. Now, if all goes well in the wake of this man's getting entangled in the scheme, he will reflect upon and regret the experience, and conclude that he should be a bit less credulous and a bit more thorough in financial matters. Forgoing this reflection, the man may find himself getting burned again: if not by the very same sort of scam, then perhaps by

some other sort of dubious investment that he might have avoided if he had taken the time to do a bit of research. On the other extreme, the man could obsess over his getting ripped off at too much length, and resolve to trust no one in pecuniary matters, and never to invest money in anything. This overcorrection would cost a great deal, and perhaps seriously hamper the man's ability to accrue retirement savings. But, of course, there is a happy medium between these extremes, an amount of rational regret that will lead the man to avoid careless risks while retaining the advantages of normal financial planning. In this case, we can say that the man has developed a general practical strategy for avoiding the misfortunes that prompted his reflection.

Since we have reason to avoid regret—for in regretting we judge ourselves to have failed to act on what we had reason to do—when we can, we should try and find general strategies of this sort for regret-minimization.[13] I propose moral virtue serves as such a strategy (and one that is much more general, and move involved, than the strategy the man came up with). We can put this in the form of a natural generalization: in view of our innate sociability, one of the most reliable general ways for us to avoid serious regret is through moral virtue.[14] No one can avoid regret completely; and probably, there is not even a sure way to avoid serious regrets. But there are certainly some strategies that will do a better job at minimizing regrets (and especially serious regrets) than others. Because we are social beings, morally virtuous habituation is a particularly good way of limiting our regrets; in contrast, immoral alternatives will generally lead to more and more serious regrets.

3.2. Sociability

13 There may be some controversy as to whether we really do always have reason to avoid rational regrets. For instance, if I pursue a poor strategy in a chess game (e.g., bringing one's king out at the start of the game), I may judge that I do not have reason to pursue that strategy in future games, but still be glad I had the experience of this losing game to learn from. However, such a case is an attenuated sort of rational regret. For in rationally regretting an action, we judge ourselves not to have reason to have so acted (both going forward and in the individual instance). While attenuated rational regrets surely have some ethical significance, I am more concerned with examples on the model of the Ponzi scam victim. Surely, if he invested a significant sum in the scheme, the scam victim would not really be *glad* for the experience in any sense; instead, he would really rather have avoided the ordeal in the first place. On a similar note: here and later in this essay I discuss “serious” regrets, which are cases where we judge ourselves to have had especially significant reason not to have acted as we did. These are especially far from the attenuated sort of case (and especially relevant to the argument for moral virtue I make here). I am thankful to Bill Bristow for raising this concern.

14 I address concerns to the effect that this is an appeal to instrumental rationality in §3.3.

To bring out the links between regret, sociability, and moral virtue more clearly, consider Aristotle's claim in the *Politics* that "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god." (*Politics* 1253a25)[15] Aristotle teaches us that our sociability lies at the very heart of who we are as humans. Unlike some beings, we are not wholly self-sufficient in the absence of others. We generally need other humans to attain even the basic goods necessary for survival and reproduction (e.g., food, shelter, and company). While this is especially true in youth, even in adulthood, our projects almost always involve some sort of dependence upon others. We accomplish far more in teams than we ever could alone. Even supposed lone geniuses—scientists, philosophers, artists—can generally only accomplish as much as they do in supportive social environments. And beyond all they give us indirectly, family, friendship, and community are key to our maintaining a sense of well-being and life's worthwhileness. Our need for others is so basic to who we are that an asocial life, or a socially deprived life, is surely more likely to meet with serious regrets than a life lived in community with others.

Aristotle follows his remarks on our essential sociability by noting that "justice is the bond [or custom] of men in states, for the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in political society." (*Politics* 1253a35)[16] Justice, and moral virtue more generally, are what enable us to live together so as to secure the social goods we need to live well. Without justice, both in political institutions and in virtuous individuals, it is questionable whether a "political society" that fully satisfies our social needs is possible. To defect from moral virtue, or otherwise fail to realize those virtues, is to risk alienation from others. And even if the unvirtuous might live social lives of one or another description, the virtuous are generally better poised for a fuller expression of their social natures.

15 While I think starting with Aristotle helps us get a plausible picture of moral psychology here, the full vindication of these claims is of course an empirical question. For a philosophical moral psychology that draws heavily on the empirical results of neuroscience, see Patricia Churchland's 2011 *Braintrust*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

16 That this sort of justice is to be a virtue (and not just a feature of political institutions) is made clear by the preceding sentence: "Wherefore, if he have not virtue, he is the most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony."

To appreciate this last point, consider some of the respects in which a social life without virtue might be lacking. Take T.M. Scanlon's point that we are generally disposed to find it important to be "in unity with our fellow creatures," and that friendship as we usually understand it requires a non-instrumental appreciation of our friends as persons (1998, pp. 163-5). Without virtue, which unites people in common concern for one another, social life can never be unified, and must always remain somehow Hobbesian in that moral requirements will appear as constraints that hold back our naturally selfish violent impulses.[17] Similarly, friendship without virtue is but a pale, anemic copy of the real deal, which involves genuine, non-instrumental appreciation of each other's interests. (It is not for nothing that Aristotle calls friendships of virtue the most enduring (*NE* 1156b19).) Because they must go without experiencing *genuine* community, and *genuine* friendship —both of which require some measure of moral virtue—the unvirtuous risk serious regrets even when they are in some sense social.

There is also something to be said about the importance of *social purpose* in human life. We moderns may not follow Aristotle in thinking that life has a natural goal (or telos), but we nevertheless tend to seek a sense of meaning in life. Because of our innate sociability—our need for others as well as our appreciation of our common humanity—social meaning tends to have a particularly strong resonance for us. That moral commitment in particular is apt to lend life a sense of meaning is attested to by the importance many people place upon dedication to moral causes, whether that take the form of donations to charity, activism on behalf of a political cause, or a personal dedication to the flourishing of one's friends and family. The unvirtuous may share with us an impulse to find meaning in the social, but without moral virtue, they run the risk of regretting that they are unable to find this kind of meaning in life.

The specific ways in which social regrets arise are significant. In the first instance, social regret might result from our failing to attain something we took to be valuable. For example, having

17 Of course, one lesson we should take from McDowell and Aristotle is that we are neither virtuous nor vicious by nature, but only become one or the other through training.

a falling out with a friend whom we hold dear may lead us to regret decisions we made in the course of that friendship. I want to suggest, however, that our sociability is so innately and integrally a part of who we are that regrets relating to social matters may arise even for those who spurn social values. In spite of one's prizing narrow self-interest above else, one might nevertheless be unexpectedly struck by regrets of a social nature. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych is a memorable example of this. After a superficial life driven by material pursuits, Ivan finds himself deathly ill. In near-constant pain, Ivan, who had always been more focused on card games and career advancement than on genuinely social concerns, realizes that his immediate family views him as an inconvenience, and comes to regret a life he now finds meaningless.[18] Because we are social beings, there are many similar situations in which social regret can insinuate itself indirectly into our lives. We might find that, without the aid of others, we cannot accomplish some project we value, and so come to regret our narrow focus on self-interest. Or we may experience an affective loneliness that leads us to judge that we were mistaken about what we took to be reasons for pursuing narrow self-interest. In such cases, reflexive affective regret can prompt the rejection of putative reasons for asocial behavior, and, when all goes well, lead one toward a moral reconsideration of one's practical outlook.

3.3. Immoralism

For all that I have just said, we must grant that living immorally might sometimes, by its own lights, be a risk that is worth undertaking insofar as it pays off in the desired way. One might find community in a band of thieves, or, like Hume's sensible knave, successfully transgress against others to promote one's narrow self-interest (at least for a little while). Even the virtuous person may feel tested in the “tight corner,” when they are asked to make significant prudential sacrifices

18 The moral dimension of Ivan's regret is brought out powerfully in chapter 11: “It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false.” (1886/2001)

for the sake of moral goodness. Should we really suppose, then, that we can offer those who doubt the value of virtue something more than a "conversion," and that practical rationality can lead *all* people to moral conclusions?

In both cases, it is important to understand McDowell's two-level view of the role natural generalizations play in ethical inquiry. To the virtuous person, skeptical doubts about morality will be absent in typical cases of deliberation: as McDowell notes, for the virtuous person, unjust courses of action do not present themselves as providing even pro tanto reasons, since the virtuous person has been habituated so as to overlook them as meriting consideration (1998b, pp. 48-9). But in those cases where all our moral commitments are seriously called into question, we can see another case for moral virtue through reflection. For the already-virtuous, this will likely amount to reassurance: a reminder that, in the long run, our social (and, indeed, moral) nature means that the route that requires sacrifice nevertheless forms part of a way of living that serves our other practical commitments, and will minimize our regrets.

Things are a bit more difficult with immoralists who have, through long habit, come to ignore or contravene their reasons for virtuous action. But even if a sensible knave cannot immediately come to see the world as the virtuous person would (with considerations of justice, temperance, etc. appearing to provide reasons), we can nevertheless show him that moral conclusions follow from his being innately social and having practical rationality as an aim (assuming he does).[19] While the knave may be able to succeed in his knavery in the short run, his purported reasons for action are likely to lead to regret in the longer term, and so are not really reasons at all. Carefully concealed immoral behavior runs the constant risk of being found out, and so exposing the knave's cunning ruse. Perhaps more to the point, a life centered on narrow self-interest is a life that ignores our social nature, or at least a dimension of that shared nature. The camaraderie of thieves may ultimately be the company of ostensible friends who can never really

19 Although my discussion of immoralism centers around the Hume's sensible knave, the arguments should apply equally to one who *openly* practices immoralism.

trust one another, and in any case, a friendship that does not include *moral* concern for one another does not fully merit the name “friendship.” More generally, life that is essentially dedicated to one's self-aggrandizement—as opposed to, say, some kind of social purpose rooted in genuine concern for others—is a life that is liable to leave one feeling hollow. In short, we can make the case that a life without moral virtue is one that is exposed to regret—a regret that might even strike one *in spite* of one's being trained to live outside virtue. For even if the innately social dispositions of the unvirtuous are not wholly expressed at present, in the fullness of time, these underlying dispositions are likely to bring out reversals in practical judgment. When these reversals happen, regrets point one toward the revision of what one previously accepted as putative reasons, and toward moral virtue.

There is a temptation to take our argument to the knave as an appeal to instrumental rationality. This risks getting moral virtue wrong, since behaving morally only out of concern for oneself is not *really* behaving morally. But this fails to appreciate the two-level structure of practical reasoning. *Reflection* on the relationship between regret, virtue, and human sociability can call the necessity of moral virtue to our attention (if we are unaware of it), or reassure us about our virtuous commitments (if we are already virtuous). But when we act virtuously, the *deliberation* that leads to virtuous action does not proceed toward it by reasoning about how we can avoid regret. Rather, virtuous acts are done for precisely the sorts of reason a virtuous person would do them. For instance, a benevolent person provides resources to someone in need just because that person is in need, and not because doing so will help him avoid regret.

Of course, the unvirtuous are not yet in a position to act morally for the reasons a virtuous person would, and must first be pointed in the right direction by considerations of regret (and perhaps also imitation of the virtuous person). But even here, the appeal is not instrumental, for if our reasons for avoiding regret are not specifically moral, neither are they prudential. General concerns about the avoidance of regret are basic concerns about whether we are practically rational,

for the avoidance of regret is tightly bound up with acting for reasons in general (as opposed to responding to mere instinct).[20] In any case, the real purpose of reflecting on potential regrets for the unvirtuous is course correction, which will set them on the path toward virtuous habituation and, later, actually (and not just apparently) virtuous action.

The case may be more difficult with certain immoralists. Some may be so completely formed by immoral upbringing that virtuous habituation would be extremely difficult or impossible for them to achieve. Others may be so committed to the pursuit of narrow self-interest that their social impulses are deadened. Such cases are not, I think, counterexamples, but tragedies. People for whom it is "too late" are bound to live lives that risk the ruin of serious regrets. To find oneself without community, and bereft of genuine friendship, is a reality that some can train themselves to cope with, but it is hard to imagine humans who can embrace such a way of living if the alternative had been possible for them. Granted, there may be a small minority of humans with innate endowments that dispose them away from morality (e.g., Nietzsche's "higher types"). But we should at least not overestimate the incidence of such cases. Because second nature plays such a central role in shaping our practical outlooks, we must remember to ask regarding those who appear to be immoral by nature whether their immoral inclinations are as deeply rooted as they seem. In the end, I suspect we will find that the genuine incidence of such cases is low enough that it has little to no practical relevance for us.[21]

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20 To be sure, to resolve to live without regrets does not sink one to the level of merely instinctual action, since action on putative reasons—any putative reasons!—can count as intentional action. But if we do not seriously take care to act on *actual* reasons, we surely come up far short of practical rationality. And following a line of argument from §3.1, a life without regrets would forgo many opportunities to correct what we previously mistakenly took as reasons.

21 Another sort of case suggests I may be moving too quickly here. Consider white racists in the Jim Crow-era South. For such a person, it seems that immorality may be the very key to sociability, and that trying to practice moral virtue might actually pose greater risks, even in the long run. I have two responses for cases of this sort. First, note that from the standpoint of the virtuous, the costs of practicing virtue are not to be spared. Indeed, to the virtuous, friendships built on immoral foundations are not friendships in the most significant sense. So, even if turning one's back on one's own community will surely seem regretful in some sense, for the virtuous, this move will not typically provoke serious regrets. Secondly, there is the question of how to appeal to one who is not already sensitive to virtue's racial-egalitarian aspects. It seems to me that the most auspicious starting point here would be to point out basic mistakes about matters of fact. Racism in the US was of course long predicated on bogus race science and supported by a wide variety of related myths that are not especially difficult to debunk. There is surely more to be said on this topic, but I think this provides a start that can be generalized to other cases of the same type. I am thankful to Blain Neufeld for raising these concerns.

4. Conclusion

McDowell sometimes refers to his picture of reasons as “naturalized platonism.” (1994, p. 91) On his view, although reasons are *sui generis* (and so platonistic), our access to reasons is relatively unmysterious insofar as it is a matter of correct habituation (and so naturalized). Prompted by a recoil from the divided view of practical rationality McDowell holds, I have shown how a reexamination of the nature of practical reasoning can lead us to an Aristotelianism on which the basis for moral reasoning is shared by all who are practically rational and so aim to avoid regret. Because, on this picture, that in view of which we need moral virtue is a constitutive feature of practical rationality, we might think of this as a kind of “naturalized constitutivism.” This constitutivism is naturalized in that the basis for morality is not *pure* practical reason, but what satisfies the aims of our practical reason given the particular sorts of natural beings we are.

There is a question, however, of whether my view is really an Aristotelian one. McDowell argues that, vis-à-vis Aristotle's thoughts on habituation, his writings on first nature play a comparatively peripheral role in his understanding of practical normativity. He notes that there are only two points in which Aristotle suggests first nature constrains what the good life is for humans: namely, that “a good human life must be an active life of that which has *logos*”; and “human beings are naturally social.” (1998b, pp. 35-6) But I have shown that, on the right understanding, it is precisely these points that play a key role in pointing ethical inquiry toward moral conclusions: part of an active, rational life is the avoidance of regret, and, in view of our social natures, moral virtue is indispensable to satisfying this constraint of practical rationality. My optimism about our addressing skeptics and immoralists may seem to exceed Aristotle's—who, after all, limits his target audience to those who already have approximately virtuous dispositions. But this is not the case. On the picture I have outlined here, being an “adequate student” of virtue takes much more than just

seeing that one needs to be virtuously habituated. To really grasp the finer details of a treatise like the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one must already have some firsthand understanding of virtue. Aristotle's audience is limited, then, because he is a teacher for advanced students, not beginners. We can accept all this and still see that, as rational agents and social animals, the unvirtuous, too, have the capacity to appreciate the necessity of morally virtuous habituation.[22]

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