



## Questions of Character

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199357703.001.0001>

Published: 2016

Online ISBN: 9780199357734

Print ISBN: 9780199357703

### CHAPTER

## 10 Virtue, Desire, and Silencing Reasons

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199357703.003.0010> Pages 158–168

Published: November 2016

### Abstract

This chapter takes an approach to construing virtue on which virtue is closely aligned with desire. He begins by asking how virtuous people recognize moral reasons for action. In an influential essay under the title “Virtue and Reason,” John McDowell claims that they do so with the help of a perceptual capacity that does not include desire. This chapter builds a case in opposition to McDowell, arguing that a Humean view captures the phenomenology of moral deliberation better. It claims, *pace* McDowell, that the salience of moral reasons to the virtuous person is akin to the salience of food to the hungry: desire directs a virtuous person’s attention toward moral reasons much as desire directs the hungry person’s attention toward food. The chapter considers and dismisses a few possible objections to the desire theory of virtue: morality is objective; morality requires people to act in consistent ways; and moral reasons silence other reasons.

**Keywords:** [moral reasons for action](#), [moral deliberation](#), [John McDowell](#), [desire theory of virtue](#), [moral reasons silence](#)

**Subject:** [Moral Philosophy](#), [Philosophy of Mind](#)

## 1. Introduction

This chapter is about how virtuous people recognize moral reasons for action. My opponent is John McDowell, who argues in “Virtue and Reason” that virtuous people recognize moral reasons using a perceptual capacity that does not include desire (McDowell 1998c). His arguments are influential against Humean views on which desire makes us see considerations favoring its satisfaction as reasons.<sup>1</sup> I will show that a Humean view better explains the phenomena McDowell cites against it than his own view can.

First, I will present McDowell’s position, on which moral reasons are grasped through perceptual capacities that do not include desire. Second, I will show how the salience of moral considerations to the virtuous, like the salience of food to the hungry, exemplifies the emotional and attentional effects of desire. Third, I will describe how Humean views can account for virtuous people’s ability to consistently recognize and follow uncodifiable rules of commonsense morality. Fourth, I will explain why moral considerations can silence other considerations when virtuous people deliberate: knowing that one won’t get something prevents one

from weighing it in deliberation. I will conclude by arguing that animals can be virtuous by having the right desires.

## 2. McDowell on Perception of Moral Reasons

This section lays out McDowell's view of how virtuous people recognize moral reasons using a distinctive sensitivity or perceptual capacity that does not involve desire.

McDowell writes:

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reliably kind behavior is not the outcome of a blind, non-rational habit or instinct, like the courageous behavior—so called only by courtesy—of a lioness defending her cubs. Rather, that the situation requires a certain sort of behavior is (one way of formulating) his reason for behaving that way, on each of the relevant occasions. So it must be something of which, on each of the relevant occasions, he is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge, and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity. (1998c, 51)

He takes perceptual capacities like this to explain how virtuous people recognize moral reasons in deliberation and act on them.

McDowell rejects Humean accounts of how virtuous people recognize moral reasons, writing that explaining the virtuous person's recognition of reasons in terms of a "non-cognitive extra that would be analogous to hunger" (70) is "highly implausible" (71). On this Humean view, "What a virtuous person really perceives is ... a straightforward fact about the situation at hand, which—as the objection requires—would be incapable of eliciting action on its own" (57). The motivational force comes from a further hunger-like non-cognitive attitude, not the perceptual state, which cannot cause action. One perceives that others will suffer unless helped. Being kind, one desires that others not suffer. The motivational force that drives one to help is provided by the desire, and merely channeled in a particular direction by the perceptual state, which carries the information that a sufferer could be helped. This view allows an unkind person to have the same perceptual state without being moved to help, because the desire is missing.

McDowell claims that desire is not part of the capacity to perceive salient reasons, writing that "the most natural way to press the objection is to insist on purifying the content of what is genuinely known down to something that is, in itself, motivationally inert ... and then to represent the 'perception' of a salience as an amalgam of the purified awareness with an additional appetitive state" (70). He rejects this option unless the appetitive state is an entire conception of how to live, which he repeatedly distinguishes from ordinary desires. On his view, "perceptions of saliences resist decomposition into 'pure' awareness together with appetitive states" (71).

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McDowell's other work further develops arguments against Humean views on which desire is essential for practical reasoning and action. In "Noncognitivism and Rule-Following," he criticizes "a philosophy of mind that insists on a strict separation between cognitive capacities and their exercise, on the one hand, and what eighteenth-century writers would classify as passions and sentiments, on the other" (1998b, 200). He criticizes Hume as a proponent of this view (213). McDowell's "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" also rejects the Humean view that virtuous agents' reasons come from "first, a neutral conception of the facts, available equally to someone who sees no reason to act in the way in question, and

second, a desire, which combines with that conception of the facts to make the action attractive to its possessor” (1998a, 82). He argues that they instead come from “special ways of seeing situations” (84).

### 3. Desire and the Recognition of Reasons

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This section responds to McDowell by arguing that a Humean view better explains what it is like for the virtuous person to recognize moral reasons.

McDowell does not illustrate the phenomenology of recognizing moral reasons in detail, so I will compare how a hungry person who sees some ripe strawberries thinks about eating them with how a kind person who sees a pedestrian whose leg has been broken in an accident thinks about helping him. Since McDowell specifically rejects explaining recognition of moral reasons using a hunger-like mental state, this example lets us test his claims. While it is obvious that both hunger and kindness can motivate action, they have broad phenomenological similarities. Hunger and kindness similarly affect how agents direct their attention, feel pleasure, and are affected by vivid representations of food or suffering. This phenomenological evidence suggests that a desire that others not suffer drives the kind person’s recognition of reasons to help someone, just as a desire to eat drives the hungry person’s recognition of reasons to eat something.

First, hunger and kindness similarly direct attention.<sup>2</sup> The hungry person’s attention will be directed toward the strawberries, just as the kind person’s attention will be directed toward the injured man. If it is obvious how to get the strawberries and eat them, perhaps by buying them, the hungry person will quickly think of that. And if it is obvious how to help the injured man, perhaps by calling an ambulance, the kind person will quickly think of that. In more complicated situations where the hungry person has to find cash or the kind person has to find a pay phone to call the ambulance, they will attend to possible ways to find cash or pay phones. Hunger and kindness direct attention away from things irrelevant to the objects of desire. Neither hungry people nor kind people in these situations will attend to whether birds are singing or whether their hair looks nice. Full people and callous people, who lack the relevant desires, attend to different things. Full people might ignore the strawberries or reflect on the evolutionary processes that created them, while callous people might ignore the injured man or consider robbing him.

Second, similar kinds of information create pleasant and unpleasant emotions in hungry and kind people. The hungry person will become impatient if the line to buy the strawberries moves slowly, while the kind person will become impatient if she has to turn her phone on to call the ambulance and it takes a long time to start up. The hungry person will feel displeased if the strawberries can only be bought with a currency she does not have, just as the kind person will feel displeased if her phone is not getting reception and she cannot make the call.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, a full person won’t feel any particular emotion upon learning that the strawberries are not for sale, and a callous person won’t care whether her phone gets reception at that time, unless it is important for some selfish purpose.

Third, the more vividly the strawberries’ deliciousness is represented, the stronger all these effects on the hungry person’s perception and motivation will be, just as the more vividly the pedestrian’s suffering is represented, the stronger these effects on the kind person’s perception and motivation will be. If the hungry person can directly see the luscious redness of the strawberries, that will be more attention-grabbing, productive of emotion, and motivating than if they are in packaging that does not allow for clear vision. (Food sellers often try to motivate customers to make purchases by making delicious aspects of the food vivid to them.) Hearing the injured man’s piteous moans will affect a kind person even more strongly than seeing him moaning outside a window that blocks the sound. Even with one’s beliefs about the situation fixed, more vivid sensory representations will, in Hume’s words, make one’s passions more violent. These

changes in the vividness with which the strawberries or the pedestrian are represented, however, won't make much difference to the full person or the callous person.

Other virtues exhibit desire's effects just as kindness does. Just people notice that particular courses of action would involve acting unjustly and are more displeased when they more vividly imagine themselves doing these actions. Honest people will notice that particular utterances would be lies, while truly dishonest people may not care enough to notice. When other moral considerations give honest people no choice but to lie, the experience of telling the lie is unpleasant for them, while it is not for dishonest people.<sup>4</sup>

Alison Hills's chapter in this volume argues that cognitivist views like McDowell's do better in allowing the virtuous person's moral understanding to "mirror the world" in representing the moral facts and the relations between them. First, if we believe that we should avert suffering, our beliefs mirror the moral fact that suffering should be averted. Second, if we believe that we should avert suffering, so we should end the Iraq War, so we should vote for Democrats, our beliefs mirror the structural relations between moral facts. As a cognitivist about moral judgment, I agree with Hills that true moral belief should be in the picture.<sup>5</sup>

But if virtuous character is constituted by desire, its motivational structure can still match the moral facts. If I desire that suffering be averted, my desires match the moral facts. And if I want to vote for Democrats, because I want the Iraq War to end, because I want to avert suffering, the structure of my desires matches the structural relations between moral facts. This matching is desiderative rather than alethic, since desires cannot be true as beliefs are. But desires can move us to think, feel, and act in ways that favor their objects. These properties may be even better than truth for constituting virtuous dispositions that properly fit the world.

p. 162 McDowell's defenders might suggest three differences between how hungry and kind people see reasons. First, kind people see suffering as bad and are averse to it, while hungry people see food as good and positively desire to eat it. This is why kind people would be relieved to learn that the injured person was just an actor pretending to be injured, while hungry people would be disappointed to learn that the strawberries are fake. And it is why kind people do not create suffering to relieve it, while hungry people would be delighted to quickly create strawberries and eat them. This difference in types of desire also gives rise to different pleasant and unpleasant emotions—disappointment in one case versus horror in the other. But these differences do not suggest that the kind person has a completely different type of mental state. The family of desires includes members that generate somewhat different emotions, like thirst and sexual lust. Kind people's attitudes toward suffering are aversions. Aversions typically direct attention, generate hedonically charged emotions, and respond to vividness, just as desires do.<sup>6</sup> Examples include fear of bodily injury, disgust at excreta, and fear of snakes. These aversions lead us to see their objects as bad, as the kind person regards suffering. Following Richard Brandt, Humeans can regard character traits as constituted by desires of either the positive or aversive kind. All these desires can make reasons phenomenologically salient and lead us to recognize and act on them (Brandt 1970).

A second difference may be that full bellies and rising blood glucose levels stop hunger, while it is harder to identify similar physiological factors that stop kindness. Since hunger existed in psychologically simpler beings for a very long time, a physiological regulation system evolved around it, while nothing similar has happened with kindness. Many human desires, like those for money and victory, lack such physiological regulation systems. Athletes and chess players don't say things like "I just won. I'll probably want to win again in four hours, but I'm fine with losing until then." So even if kindness is unlike hunger in this regard, it is still a member of the Humean family.<sup>7</sup>

A third difference concerns the objectivity of morality, which differs sharply from the subjectivity of deliciousness. Morality is typically understood as applying to all agents, while foods are delicious only to those who desire them. I agree that morality is objective while deliciousness is subjective. But this claim

does not seem to be supported by any robust feature of moral phenomenology, and does not support a psychological distinction between the processes by which morality and deliciousness are detected. I see the objectivity of morality as grounded in the structure of moral concepts themselves, not in any phenomenological difference from deliciousness. If there is a phenomenological difference that supports the objectivity of morality, “Virtue and Reason” leaves it unnamed.

p. 163 Even if McDowell were to tell us more about how his perceptual capacity explains the full phenomenology of kindness, the Humean account would be more elegant. Humeans explain how the kind person recognizes reasons using an appetitive state (desire) and pure awareness (representations of the non-normative facts). McDowell instead invokes motivation from a perceptual capacity that does not include desire. But he still invokes desire to account for hunger. So a Humean theory that does not invoke his distinctive perceptual capacity for perceiving reasons without desire provides a simpler total account of our practical phenomenology and behavior. To explain how we recognize reasons when presented with representations of the non-normative facts across the whole range of cases, he uses desire for cases like hunger and a special perceptual capacity for cases like kindness where Humeans use desire for all cases. We should invoke additional entities or processes only to explain additional data. Desire explains the phenomenology of recognizing reasons so well that we do not need McDowell’s perceptual capacity.

## 4. Uncodifiability and Consistency

This section describes how Humeans can account for the uncodifiability of commonsense morality and our ability to consistently follow its norms.

McDowell (1998c) advances a particularist view on which any moral theory composed of just a few simple principles will not fit the rich and complex picture of morality that virtuous people see, using their capacity to recognize moral reasons. He rejects the view that “the virtuous person’s views about how, in general, one should behave are susceptible of codification,” arguing that “to an unprejudiced eye it should seem quite implausible that any reasonably adult moral outlook admits of any such codification” (58). I do not know whether McDowell is claiming that Humeans cannot explain this, but I will argue that they can.

The uncodifiability of commonsense morality arises from the complexity and multiplicity of our moral desires. We find it morally desirable for a variety of outcomes to obtain, and for ourselves to be in a wide variety of relations to these outcomes, giving us a complicated moral outlook. Codifying sexual desirability is difficult for similar reasons. Many different desires sexually attract us to people, and they often point in different directions, giving us a complicated sexual outlook. Just as we desire a wide variety of morally significant events to happen and desire to be in diverse agential and causal relations with them, we desire our lovers to have a wide range of physical and psychological properties and relations to us and other things. I could not produce a set of rules to rank the desirability of all people to me, or pick out which action I find intuitively right in each situation. It is similarly difficult to give a full and substantive account of what makes food delicious or art beautiful. In all these areas, neatly codifiable rules will not fit our intuitive evaluations because our desires are so many and so complex.

p. 164 McDowell also argues that his distinctive perceptual capacity explains how we can consistently act morally when so many different ways of acting are available. Following Wittgenstein, he notes that while we find it natural to continue the sequence 2, 4, 6, 8 ... after 1,000 with 1,002, 1,004 ..., there are infinitely many possible continuations, including 1,004, 1,008... A perceptual capacity that leads us to see the former pattern as more natural could explain why we see continuing with 1,002 as the natural thing to do. Similarly, on his view, virtuous people’s judgments of when to act are grounded in their common and stable “conception of the sort of life a human being ought to lead” (66–67). This conception arises from “the virtuous person’s distinctive way of viewing particular situations” (71).

Desire can also explain such consistent behavior, whether or not the behavior fits our conception of how we ought to live. Desire moves people to pursue food, sex, drugs, and procrastination in consistent, patterned, predictable ways even if they judge this behavior inconsistent with the lives they ought to lead. If desires conflicting with our values explain consistent patterns of behavior that conflict with how we think we ought to live, desires according with our values will explain consistent patterns of behavior that accord with how we think we ought to live. Desires explain behavior, and stable desires will explain consistent behavior. In explaining how virtuous people consistently act morally, invoking common and stable desires seems no worse than invoking a perceptual capacity.

## 5. Silencing Reasons

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This section addresses how considerations can be silenced in practical deliberation. McDowell claims that the phenomenology of silencing can only be explained if recognizing moral reasons is part of a perceptual capacity independent of desire. I will explain why McDowell sees silencing as troublesome for Humeans and provide a Humean account of silencing on which our knowledge that we won't act to attain something prevents us from weighing it in deliberation.

McDowell regards Humean views as unable to fully explain how considerations tempting virtuous people away from virtuous action can be silenced. He illustrates his objection with Aristotle's distinction between virtue and continence, discussing the temptation to run away in the face of danger. The continent person weighs the reasons to behave courageously against the reasons to run away and behaves courageously because he regards the reasons to do so as superior. The truly virtuous person is different:

The distinction becomes intelligible if we stop assuming that the virtuous person's judgment is a result of balancing reasons for and against. The view of a situation that he arrives at by exercising his sensitivity is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation (the present danger, say) but as silencing ↴ them. Here and now the risk to life and limb is not seen as any reason for removing himself. (1998c, 55–56)

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The virtuous person sees things this way despite desiring to survive as much as anyone else does. McDowell claims that on Humean views, the virtuous person would just be weighing escape against courageous action. But instead of weighing the reasons favoring both options, and choosing courageous action as the continent person does or running away as the incontinent person does, the reason to escape is silenced and not weighed in the virtuous person. The question of how this kind of silencing is psychologically possible, McDowell claims, "clearly is answerable, if at all, only by supposing that the incontinent or continent person does not fully share the virtuous person's perception of the situation" (56). McDowell thus takes the phenomenon of silencing to demonstrate the inadequacy of Humean views, and the need for a further perceptual element in the recognition of reasons.<sup>8</sup>

McDowell challenges Humeans to explain why we do not have the experience of balancing the silenced consideration against other things we desire. It instead seems to be excluded from deliberation. We might feel wistful about it if it is a good thing we can't achieve, or resigned if it is a bad thing we can't avoid. We will still be pleased if other things favor achieving the silenced consideration and we can act on it. But it won't seem like a reason for acting. If treating the recognition of reasons as an effect of desire entails that we must experience all considerations as having weights corresponding to our desires for them, silencing is a counterexample to the Humean view. I agree with McDowell that considerations are often silenced rather

than weighed in deliberation. So I will present a Humean explanation of why these considerations are silenced.

Considerations are silenced when knowing that we won't pursue them prevents us from weighing them. Consider the phenomenological similarities between silenced considerations and goals we won't achieve because of external obstacles. In a case of silencing, I might not be able to go to a fun party because the university requires me to administer an exam that evening. While I could blow off my exam—proctoring responsibility if I really wanted to, leaving my confused students with no exam to take, I know I am responsible enough not to do that. Since I know that my motivational structure does not allow me to go to the party, I can only regard it wistfully. I will appreciate its value, but not weigh going as a course of action. I will feel similarly about the party if I learn about it while I am on another continent and there is no way to travel there in time. The limits of early twenty-first-century transportation, not my motivational structure, stop me from attending parties on other continents. But either way, I can only regard the party wistfully, and I won't weigh it in deliberation.

p. 166 Moral and prudential considerations can be silenced too, suggesting that considering them involves the same mental state types as considering other reasons. Many people recognize that eating meat causes animal suffering, and recognize ↵ that animal suffering is bad, but continue to eat meat without any experience of weighing. When I was like this, I did not weigh the welfare of animals against the deliciousness of sausage, even when thinking of the animal suffering involved. I was like the person who Aristotle describes as not weighing danger in his deliberation, with the moral valence reversed. When longtime smokers are reminded of the dangers of smoking before they smoke, a similar thing can happen—they will be resigned to the bad consequences of their actions, rather than actively weighing them. Since silencing can go both ways, we should not treat recognition of moral reasons as involving a mental state with special silencing power that desires lack. Treating all recognition of practical reasons as coming from desire explains why moral, prudential, and immoral reasons can silence each other.

Considerations are silenced when we know we won't attain them, either because of the uncooperative world outside or contrary motivations within. Some considerations we could attain are silenced rather than weighed because we know we won't pursue them, not because some non-Humean component of reasoning silences desires opposing moral action. Humean views can easily accommodate our not weighing something in deliberation because we know that things outside us make it unachievable. I suggest that they can similarly accommodate our not weighing something because we know that things inside us prevent us from achieving it. Silencing fits neatly into a Humean picture of motivation and deliberation. In using additional deliberative processes to explain it, McDowell unnecessarily complicates psychology.

## 6. Mammalian Moral Psychology

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I will conclude by returning to McDowell's distinction between the virtuous person and the lioness defending her cubs. Kindness and courage, on McDowell's view, do not come out of "blind, non-rational habit or instinct" as the lioness' behavior does. On my view, kind humans and courageous lionesses both act out of desire, the same kind of mental state that motivates hungry humans and lionesses to eat. Does this psychological similarity between humans and lionesses mean that humans are merely animals, incapable of moral agency and virtue?

I draw the opposite conclusion: animals with the right desires have morally virtuous character.<sup>9</sup> There is much debate about what kinds of desires are required for virtue. On Thomas Hurka's (2003) view, they need to desire morally good things and be averse to morally bad things. On Julia Driver's (2001) view, they need to have mental states that systematically produce good consequences. On either view, having the right desires is sufficient for virtuous character, and an animal with the right desires would be virtuous.<sup>10</sup>

Ordinary folk accept this conclusion, rejecting the philosophical dogma that animals cannot be moral agents. Read news stories about the mother dog who ↪ rescued her puppies from a burning building, or watch videos about animals helping each other, and you will often see the commenters pouring out moral praise for the animals (and wishing that more humans had moral character as good as these animals).<sup>11</sup>

Aristotle wrote before we understood our evolutionary kinship with the beasts. Contemporary philosophers do not have his excuse for thinking that human motivation involves fundamentally different psychological processes than animal motivation. Our models of human and animal motivation should be as similar as the data allow, respecting the continuities that one would expect to find across mammalian psychology. Where behavior and phenomenology differ, we should posit differences. But otherwise, we should prefer psychological models that treat humans and animals as similarly as possible.

The common mother of the dog, the lioness, and I walked the earth in very old times. But a mother's desire that her offspring be safe and content may be older still. And if it is, maternal love may well be the oldest of the virtues. I am not above praising a dog for his loyalty or a lioness for her maternal love. They are my brother and sister, descended from a common mother who lived long ago. I am capable of many of their vices, and they are capable of many of my virtues. We are kin.

## Notes

1. "Virtue and Reason" is widely cited for its arguments against Humean views. See, for instance, Rosati 2006; Miller 2008; and Kukla and Lance 2009. For Humean responses, see Blackburn 1998; Schroeder 2007; and Arpaly and Schroeder 2013. My forthcoming *A Treatise of Humean Nature* develops a broad psychological picture answering objections of this kind.
2. This property of desire is discussed in Sinhababu (2009).
3. These hedonic effects are grounded in neural connections between regions where desire and pleasure are localized. See Schroeder 2004.
4. An extreme case is provided by psychopaths, who frequently tell lies without feeling any negative emotions about doing so. For the classic study, see Cleckley 1988. More recent research is covered in Prinz (2007).
5. The Humean, cognitivist, and externalist picture I favor is defended by naturalistic realists like Railton (1989). Chapter 4 of *A Treatise of Humean Nature* describes how feelings generated by desire cause us to form moral beliefs.
6. For more on the psychology and neuroscience of positive desire and aversion, see Schroeder 2004.
7. Cases of empathy fatigue among professional caregivers might suggest that kindness is in fact like hunger in this regard, supporting the analogy between them. I thank Iskra Fileva for noting this.
8. McDowell expresses this point about the norms in "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?": "the dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale that always tips on their side. If a ↪ situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations that, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether—not overridden—by the requirement" (1998a, 91).
9. Arpaly and Schroeder write, "having the right desires is what makes a person morally virtuous," and nothing in their view prevents this from extending to animals too (2013, 16).
10. For a defense of this conclusion, see Rowlands 2012.
11. For representative examples, see "Incredible photos of heroic mother dog carrying her ten-day-old puppies from a blazing home to safety," <http://bit.ly/XyzNJT>; "Hero Dog Tries to Help Wounded Dog—Chile," <http://bit.ly/TqV9>. The highest-rated comment is: "It's official. Dogs have more morality now than humans."

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