

Wisdom and Perspective

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WISDOM AND PERSPECTIVE*

In Ann Patchett's novel *Bel Canto*,¹ the Vice President of a small Latin American country and about fifty others are held hostage in the Vice President's mansion. They have been cooped up in the living room for months and many believe they will not survive the ordeal. When their captors finally let them outside for some air:

Vice President Ruben Iglesias, who thought he would not live to feel once again the sensation of grass beneath his feet, stepped off the shale stone walkway and sank into the luxury of his own yard. He had stared at it every day from the living-room window but now that he was actually there it seemed like a new world. Had he ever walked around his own lawn in the evening? Had he made a mental note of the trees, the miraculous flowering bushes that grew up around the wall? What were they called? He dropped his face into the nest of deep purple blossoms and inhaled. Dear God, if he were to get out of this alive he would be attentive to his plants (*ibid.*, p. 281).

Ruben Iglesias undergoes a change in perspective on his life as a result of the highly unusual circumstances in which he finds himself. Instead of valuing success in his career and working for the sake of that goal at the cost of many other possible pursuits, as he had done for many years, he begins to see the importance of stopping to smell

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¹ New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

the roses, in his case quite literally. Several of the other characters in the novel experience similar changes in perspective, as they come to appreciate the value of things they previously took for granted or did not have time to notice at all.

Though few of us have been in such a threatening situation, I suspect that most of us would recognize the experience of a perspective shift. Major life events trigger shifts in perspective and minor shifts in our attention to values happen frequently. In this paper I argue that shifts in evaluative perspective are vital for living a prudentially good life and that this fact has important implications for how we conceive of practical wisdom. One way to accommodate shifts in evaluative perspective would be to adopt an extreme form of pluralism according to which we pursue incommensurable values without any overarching plan or conception of a good life that brings these values into order. But dismissing the conception of a good life that is part of traditional philosophical accounts of living well is a drastic move and one that we have reason to avoid. I argue instead that consideration of perspective shifts ought to change the way we understand the notion of a conception of a good life, but that this notion should not be entirely abandoned. Since one vital role of practical wisdom has to do with the construction and application of our conception of a good life, this argument will enrich our understanding of practical wisdom as well.

I. THE VALUE OF SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

I suspect that many of us, reflecting on Ruben Iglesias's change of perspective, will think that this is a valuable experience, one that it would be good for many of us to have if we could have it without the risk of death. Acknowledging the beauty of our everyday surroundings and appreciating the wonders of nature are good things to do and sometimes an invaluable tonic for the materialistic or accomplishment-focused perspectives that can easily absorb us. Nevertheless, it would not obviously be a good thing for Ruben to keep his attention focused on his plants, to the exclusion of other interests and concerns, especially once he is released from being a hostage and his duties as Vice President resume. It is good to stop and smell the roses, but not so good to smell them all the time.

Ruben Iglesias is not the only example we can find to illustrate the value of shifting perspectives on life. Nor is it necessary to have one's life under the imminent threat of death in order to experience such shifts. There are many events that can cause us to see life in a different way, to change our priorities or our values, even if only temporarily. The death of a loved one can have this effect, as can other major life

changes such as being fired from a job, surviving a major illness, or having a child. Changing one's physical surroundings by traveling or getting out into nature can trigger changes in perspective, as can an encounter with great art. There are also ways one can bring about such a change intentionally, for instance by meditating or just going for a walk. Further, the two perspectives that Ruben Iglesias's case draws to our attention—one focused on career success and the other on natural beauty—are not the only two perspectives one can have. The unexpected death of an acquaintance can make us take the perspective of "living for the moment" in which short-term pleasures seem paramount, whereas the arrival of a child can make us take a perspective that emphasizes the long-term benefits of our actions to a wider circle of people.

None of the perspectives just mentioned is a paradigm of the rational or reflective perspective recommended for making normative judgments. Ruben Iglesias is not focused on evaluating his reasons for valuing nature in light of the facts. Rather, he is in the grip of a set of attitudes and dispositions to act. He is, I will say, absorbed in a particular *practical perspective*. From a particular practical perspective one set of values plays the role of a goal for action and appropriate feeling, and critical scrutiny of these values is suspended. From a *reflective point of view*, on the other hand, the point is to engage in critical scrutiny about some of our values. The result of taking a reflective point of view is not (at least not immediately) action or emotion, but considered judgments about our conception of a good life. To clarify, reflection here does not mean intellectual engagement in general. Being intellectually engaged, say, by a puzzle or a philosophical problem, is being in a practical perspective that highlights the value of truth, intellectual achievement or the like. The kind of reflection I mean to exclude from occupying practical perspectives is the much more specific kind of critical reflection that concerns the justification of one's values or projects.

In this section I want to make the case for the claim that shifts from one practical perspective to another, and between practical perspectives and reflection, are a valuable and important part of a good life. As we shall see, these shifts are important in two related ways: First, shifting perspectives is necessary for the full realization or pursuit of the values they highlight. Second, this realization of values informs our reflection about the shape our conception of a good life ought to have.

The first point is nicely illustrated by the case of Juan and Linda

from Peter Railton's well-known paper.² Juan and Linda are a happily committed couple who live in two different states. Linda is depressed and Juan knows that an extra visit from him would help. So he goes, even though the money he spends on this visit could be much more helpful to others if he were to give it to Oxfam. Because Juan is a "sophisticated consequentialist," Railton argues, he will not try to perform the most beneficial action, rather, he will act on the disposition he has cultivated for consequentialist reasons, namely his love for Linda. According to Railton, "in thought and action we shuttle back and forth from more personal to less personal standpoints and both have an important role in the process whereby identity, meaning and purpose are generated and sustained" (*ibid.*, pp. 164–65). Juan's moral point of view is consequentialist: he thinks that he ought to do whatever will produce the best consequences for all concerned. But Juan also thinks that a world without loving relationships would be unbearable and so he fosters dispositions in himself that allow for real loving relationships even though they may cause him to violate his own criterion of right action. In order to have a truly loving relationship (to meet that goal of his) Juan must be able to shift to a perspective from which Linda's happiness is most important.

Railton's move to sophisticated consequentialism is supposed to explain the way in which consequentialism is less alienating than critics have charged.³ His own view is that this move does not result in multiplying perspectives or points of view for the subject. Rather, he seems to think that there is one unified point of view that comprehends both the value of maximizing objective goods and the value of Linda's happiness. But I think this is only partly true. While Railton may be right that the philosophical perspective from which Juan grasps the consequentialist criterion of right action and the justification for his partial dispositions toward Linda, the perspective from which he decides whether to take the flight is not all encompassing in this way. When he decides to take the flight his love for Linda takes over and he does not, as Railton says, "even try to do the most beneficial thing" (*op. cit.*, p. 159). A comprehensive reflective point of view may be available to Juan, but he cannot stay in this perspective and hope to achieve the values that it recommends. When he makes

² "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, XIII (1984): 134–71.

³ For such criticism see Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in Williams and J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (New York: Cambridge, 1973), pp. 108–18; and Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," this JOURNAL, LXXIII, 14 (August 12, 1976): 453–66.

decisions about how to treat Linda he cannot *at the same time* and in every case be wondering whether his life is morally defensible. If he does this he has retreated to the kind of consequentialism that is truly alienating and he has missed out on an important element of a good human life.

One might think that it is only if the reflective point of view in question is consequentialist that one needs to become absorbed in particular practical perspectives.⁴ But this is not the case. To see that the point has broader scope, consider the case of someone who takes up a reflective perspective that is, more or less, virtue ethical, centered around the nature of a flourishing life for a person. Let us imagine that Ruben Iglesias is such a person. From a reflective point of view, Ruben has a comprehensive conception of a good human life that includes a variety of worthwhile goals, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of his nature. This conception of the good life includes judgments about the reasons for developing particular virtues and pursuing particular ends such as friendship, health, and mental cultivation. From the reflective point of view, Ruben can see that the justification for pursuing the particular ingredients of his conception of the good life has to do with what it is for him to flourish as a human being.

Now if Ruben is going to have the kinds of attachments to his wife and children that are necessary for his flourishing, his attachment to them needs to transcend this perspective. He needs to be devoted to them in a way that has nothing to do with his flourishing. Of course virtue ethics does not claim that people should value friendship and other important ends *for the sake of* their own flourishing; on the contrary, part of what it is to have the virtues relevant to friendship, for example, is to love friends for their own sakes. But virtue ethics also typically maintains that developing the virtues is part of what it is for an individual to flourish. So, far from eliminating the divide between perspectives, virtue ethics appropriately highlights the existence and importance of multiple perspectives. The perspective from which Ruben can grasp a comprehensive conception of the good is

⁴ An implication of the discussion here is that a person may have more than one reflective perspective. A person might have a consequentialist moral perspective that is reflective in the sense that it requires a stepping back from particular commitments in order to think about the justification of one's moral commitments, and a reflective perspective on what it is for her own life to go well that is not particularly consequentialist. On my view, the reflective perspective on how to live encompasses the moral because moral principles and values are one important set of commitments that matters to how well our lives go. The claim is not crucial, however, for the point that multiple practical and reflective perspectives are necessary for living well.

not the perspective from which he can realize the particular values that comprise this conception. To be an effective and dedicated politician, he has to be devoted to his job so that at certain times it seems the most important thing in the world to him. Similarly, to be a good father, he must respond lovingly, without stopping to reflect or think about the reasons for which being a good father is valuable. Moreover, the pattern of dispositions to action and emotion that make Ruben thrilled to be in politics is not likely to be the same one that makes him a devoted father. To gain all that he can out of these parts of his life, he needs to shift between different practical perspectives.

The case of virtue ethics makes it easy to see how even deep reflection on the good life for us is not a point of view we can occupy all the time. In short, taking a reflective point of view on our values is not the same as being engaged by them and we cannot be fully engaged by everything that has value for us at once. Thinking abstractly about what has value and what ends are important to human life, we may very well be able to acknowledge intellectually all the various important ends and values. My point is not that there are truths about value that are impossible to articulate or grasp in any way from the reflective point of view.⁵ But engaging in the pursuit of ends or obtaining an emotional grasp of certain values is not an abstract intellectual exercise. It is here in the everyday business of living that we need shifts in perspective.

One conclusion we might draw from the distinction between reflective and practical perspectives is that the practical perspectives are an unfortunate but necessary compromise that psychologically limited beings like us must make. The reflective point of view is the one from which we see the truth about what has value, but we can only pursue these values if we forget this reflective point of view and allow those values to reign over us temporarily. But this conclusion ignores what I take to be a very important fact about practical perspectives, namely, that it is from within these perspectives that we learn about what has value and that some of what there is to learn can only be learned by being absorbed by the values in question. This brings us to the second claim I wanted to make about shifting perspectives, which is that practical perspectives inform the reflective perspective in an important way. Because being absorbed in a practical perspective with our undivided attention is sometimes necessary for achieving the values inherent in it, practical perspectives are a source of information about the valuable goals of human life.

⁵ I am grateful to Jimmy Lenman for helpful discussion on this point.

The informative function of shifts in perspective is made evident by the phenomenon of being in a rut. It seems that we can get stuck in a practical perspective in such a way that we are prevented from achieving a good life. When this happens, we need to discover or be reminded of other important values and goals. Sometimes a reflective point of view from which we see the real value of each thing and do not get carried away by any one thing is helpful. (This reflective point of view helps us put things in the right perspective by revealing that what we are distressed about is not important enough to warrant our reaction.) But sometimes a completely different practical perspective that immerses us in other values is more valuable than measured reflection.⁶ Practical perspectives inform our reflection because it is (at least in part) by being a friend, daughter, sibling, or parent that we discover what is valuable about these relationships. It is by absorbing ourselves in a hobby or career that we experience the value of accomplishment. It is by losing ourselves in the moment that we experience the value of pleasure, peace of mind, or fun.

Another kind of example will help to illustrate the importance of this kind of absorption to the informative function of practical perspectives. Some activities such as rock-climbing, playing the violin, or solving a philosophical problem, absorb us and demand all of our attention. Would the rock-climber be better off if she were not so limited that climbing rocks required all her attention? Would she be better off if she could climb rocks while composing a shopping list, talking to her children, planning her garden, and reflecting on the meaning of life? There may be times in life when such multitasking is desirable, but think of what is missed if we are always multitasking in this way. "Being in the moment," although now a cliché, does have much to recommend it. Experiences such as the awe of nature, the physical exhilaration of dance, sex, or sport, or the mental exhilaration of a great conversation are not experiences we can really have while wondering what the value of them is and how they fit into our lives.

Moreover, examples such as these reveal that it would not be desirable, even if it were possible, to occupy many practical perspectives at once. While it is true that some values can be pursued or appreciated together to mutual advantage, not all practical perspectives are mutu-

⁶ Another character in Patchett's novel, a reserved and responsible businessman, discovers the joys of romantic love when threatened with the possibility of imminent death. This new perspective could not have resulted from reflection because he did not know that romantic love was something he was missing; the new perspective teaches him something vital about life that he could not have discovered by thinking about it.

ally supporting in this way. Trying to enjoy sex while appreciating the beauty of nature may very well frustrate both aims and a great conversation can distract one from an appreciation of art if the conversation is about something else (or sometimes even if it is not).

To sum up, we cannot at the same time occupy the reflective point of view and be fully absorbed in a practical perspective, nor can we occupy many practical perspectives at once. If a good life includes the realization and appreciation of many different values in addition to deep reflection, then shifting perspectives is necessary for a good life. Eliminating these shifts would leave us with vastly diminished resources for learning about what has value and for achieving the ends that we know are valuable. If this is right, then it seems that we need to be able to negotiate changes in perspective and this leads us to the domain of practical wisdom.

II. LIVING WELL AND THE CONCEPTION OF A GOOD LIFE

Before I say more about the implications of my discussion for an account of practical wisdom, it is worth considering an alternative response to these observations about shifting perspectives. In the above discussion I have assumed that appropriate reflection is a part of a prudentially good life and this assumption might now seem dubious. Why not just abandon the kind of reflection that interferes with our genuine immersion in values? Though too much reflection or reflection at the wrong time frustrates our living well, not to reflect at all would also be a mistake. When we reflect on what it is for our lives to go well we form a conception of a good life. Because our various commitments provide support for each other, a conception of a good life that locates these commitments on the same map ensures that the commitments we have do not undermine each other and can be pursued together in the same life. A reflective conception of a good life, then, situates our individual commitments in a justificatory framework. This framework serves at least two important purposes. First, it makes it more likely that the values we have can be pursued together in the same life. Second, it meets our need for our own reflective approval of how our lives are going. Without such a conception we would have no sense of how our various commitments function together as an evaluative standard and no reason for confidence in the justification of the individual commitments we have. A reflective perspective on our own good gives us a reasonable set of standards that make possible the satisfactory review of our own conduct that is part of what it is to live well.⁷

⁷ The view that a satisfactory self-survey is an essential component of living well is compelling and widely held. Hume suggests that bearing one's own survey as an

A conception of a good life is more than just a jumbled set of value commitments. The conception of a good life imposes some structure and order on these commitments. In particular, a conception of a good life locates the various value commitments one has and reveals how they are related with respect to mutual support and relative priority. Further, our conception of the good life will include a judgment about the relative importance of the plural values that constitute it. This is not to say that our values will be ranked on a cardinal scale, but insofar as some things are clearly more important to us than others this fact will be reflected in our conception of a good life.

A conception of a good life is structured, then, in the sense that it locates the components of a good life with respect to each other in some way, but it need not have a particular structure such as the structure of a life plan, nor should the structure be rigid and immutable.⁸ Conceptions of a good life cannot be too rigid or detailed because these conceptions are also informed by experience gained from living life when we are not reflective. As we have seen, nonreflective experience is a crucial component of a good life and a vital source of information about what it is to live well. Our conception of how to live, then, must be flexible and open to change.

A conception of a good life that serves these goals requires reflection about the nature and justification of a conception of a good life. As we have seen, we cannot engage in deep reflection all the time, nor is a good life one in which we are always disposed to engage in such reflection.⁹ Given this, we need to know when is it appropriate to be

important goal in human life when he embarks on a brief exhortation to virtue at the end of the *Treatise*—see *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (New York: Oxford, 1978, second edition), pp. 619–20. Other philosophers who share this assumption include Rüdiger Bittner, *What Reason Demands*, Theodore Talbot, trans. (New York: Cambridge, 1989), p. 123; Thomas E. Hill, “Pains and Projects,” in his *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), pp. 173–88; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971), p. 422; and Charles Taylor, “Responsibility for Self,” in Amelie Rorty, ed., *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: California UP, 1976), pp. 281–99.

⁸ For an interesting discussion of the idea that the plan model is not the only way of conceptualizing a life, see Michael Walzer’s *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1994), pp. 23–24. In a later chapter titled “The Divided Self,” Walzer distinguishes “divided selves,” which he thinks most of us are, from pathological “utterly fragmented selves” (p. 98). As will become more clear in this paper, I am very sympathetic to the idea that we are divided selves. By distinguishing order or structure on the one hand from constancy, inflexibility, or detail on the other my account of the good life is meant to be one that is accessible to divided selves. I first read about this discussion in Walzer in Carl Elliott’s *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: Norton, 2003), which also contains an interesting discussion of the plan model of a good life (p. 299).

⁹ Henceforth, I will use “reflection” to refer to this kind of deep, critical reflection. The claims I make about reflection in my sense should not be taken to be true of a broader conception one might have that would include any kind of cognitive process.

reflective. Here we find that traditional accounts of practical rationality are not very helpful. Philosophers have tended to recommend that in a reflective moment we deliberate, make a life plan, think about our conception of the good, or decide which ends to endorse, and then we put this plan, these decisions, or these choices into action.¹⁰ The direction of rational authority is top down: the plans, choices, and judgments we make when we are reflective determine the rationality of the choices, actions, and feelings we have in practice. Of course, such accounts acknowledge the distinction between reflection and practice. But these accounts of practical rationality aim to characterize the rationality and the reflective point of view by articulating the principles or standards that govern practical reason. They do not take movement between reflection and other perspectives, nor certainly movement between perspectives that are not reflective, to be part of the province of a theory of practical reason.

Aristotelians have been better about not assuming a top-down picture.¹¹ Nevertheless, even Aristotelian conceptions of wisdom could benefit from an acknowledgment of the role of shifting perspectives in a good life. The ideal of the unity of the virtues in the practically wise implies that everything we need to grasp in order to act well can be appreciated from the reflective point of view and this is an assumption that is challenged by the preceding account of the value of perspective shifts. Sabina Lovibond's characterization of practical wisdom, for example, includes both a grasp and an ordering of all that matter in life.¹² If I am right that we learn about values from our engagement in practical perspectives, then an overarching point of view that specifies the relative value of each constituent of the good life may not be the right goal. While there is a sense in which we can

¹⁰ According to one very popular view of practical reasoning, instrumentalism, our ends are given by our desires and reasoning tells us how to pursue them. On this view it is also true that the scope of reasoning is limited to a particular perspective: the perspective of matching means to ends.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, for instance, emphasizes the fact that practical reasoning for Aristotle is not a science and that it is concerned with "insight through experience"—see her *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge, 1986, revised edition), p. 299. Sarah Broadie argues against the top-down or, as she calls it, the "Grand End" picture of practical wisdom in her *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford, 1991), pp. 198–202. See also John McDowell, "Deliberation and Moral Development," in Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting, eds., *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (New York: Cambridge, 1996), pp. 19–35.

¹² *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002), pp. 27–29. I take Lovibond's account of wisdom to be sympathetic to mine insofar as she emphasizes what she calls "the openness to the layout of reality" (p. 24) or what I would call an openness to evaluative perspectives.

acknowledge a plurality of values from the reflective point of view, this point of view may not be the one from which we have the kind of appreciation of values that allows us always to act in a way that is conducive to a good life.

In the remainder of this essay I argue that the top down picture of practical rationality is incomplete and that this matters for how we characterize the virtue of practical wisdom and the reflective agent.¹³

III. WISDOM AND PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS

We need to be able to shift from one practical perspective to another, and to take a reflective point of view on our life as a whole when appropriate. Importantly, we need to be able to make these shifts without the top down application of a comprehensive reflective model. First of all, the choice to shift perspective cannot be the result of applying the reflective model to practice in any rigorous sense because one of the things that needs to be judged is when to occupy that reflective point of view. In other words, we cannot decide when we need to shift perspectives by becoming reflective and judging that our model of a good human life implies that we ought to make a change. This mode of change assumes that we have already decided to become more reflective. The basis for this original shift in perspectives cannot be a direct application of a reflective model.

Second, even when it comes to shifts between practical perspectives, we cannot always decide about these shifts by occupying a reflective perspective and standing in judgment. This is because of the way in which practical perspectives have us in their grip. To be in a particular practical perspective is to have your emotional responses and dispositions to act accord with the values that define that perspective. Practical perspectives also shape the everyday practical reasoning, planning, and decision making that we do on the basis of (temporarily) fixed goals or values. Practical perspectives have a certain life of their own, an inertia that is the result of these emotional and dispositional patterns. When Juan is living his life, being a good husband and not engaging in reflection about the permissibility of his projects, his love for his wife makes certain courses of action seem obvious and it crowds out other options and other ways of responding to her distress. The

¹³ Practical rationality and practical wisdom are not the same thing, but I take it that the capacity for practical reason is one part of practical wisdom. The claim here that wisdom does not always require being rational or reflective (where this implies a detached perspective) does not mean that the calm, cool, deliberative moment is never the right perspective to have. The capacity to disengage from our passions and deliberate calmly is an important one, but I will argue that it is not the only capacity that comprises practical wisdom.

reflective perspective is not always available to us when we could most benefit from a shift in perspectives. So, we need to be able to judge that we should try to see things differently without already having taken up a reflective stance. One could, of course, stand perpetually ready to engage in deep reflection, always aware of the way in which one's practical commitments are contingent on reflective approval, always ready to evaluate one's commitments from the reflective point of view. But a person who lives this way does not gain what there is to gain from being absorbed in practical perspectives.

Reflecting on our examples, it might seem that shifts in perspective are caused by changes in external circumstances. In Ruben Iglesias's case the shift is forced by drastic changes in his circumstances. In many other cases, shifts in perspective seem to be the natural result of ordinary shifting circumstances: the rock-climber does not have to make an effort to focus her attention on the rocks and forget about her job. Similarly, coming home from the office tends to shift a person's attention away from values associated with his job and toward the values associated with family and with being a parent or partner.

This explanation makes it seem that shifting perspectives is not something we do, but something that happens to us. And this may make it seem unlikely that there is anything to say about how we shift perspectives without taking up the reflective point of view and even less likely that shifting perspectives has anything to do with wisdom. It is true that perspective shifts can be caused by external changes, nevertheless, dismissing the role for agency and the virtue of practical wisdom is unwarranted. We can see why if we think about two kinds of failure with respect to perspective shifts. First, there are cases in which people's perspectives do not change, despite the change in external circumstances. Some people who come home from work do not stop thinking about the office. And some people who hike, play music, or sit on the beach watching the sunset never become fully absorbed by the experience. Second, there are cases in which perspective shifts occur inappropriately. Sometimes a shift in perspective is really a way of avoiding or retreating from something important. People sometimes become reflective when they ought to be enjoying the moment due to fear or self-doubt, and others avoid reflection when it would be appropriate due to a desire to avoid a difficult decision.

What takes wisdom is shifting perspectives at the right time, in the right way and for the right reasons. The wise person is open to perspective shifts and the reasons for them and, consequently, shifts perspective when it is appropriate to do so. We can understand what it is to be open to shifts in perspective as a capacity to grasp reasons or values, quasi-intuitively, without engaging in any reflection on how

they are justified. This openness to reasons and values is a capacity that can be more or less developed. It can vary in its tendency to grasp the right things and in its tendency to grasp them at the right time. The fact that our power to grasp reasons and values can be better or worse makes room for the virtue of wisdom. The wise person grasps the right reasons and values at the appropriate time and changes her perspective accordingly.

This notion of shifting perspectives for the right reasons creates a problem because the obvious way to understand the notion of *right* here is by appeal to a person's reflective conception of the good life. Now there are some ways in which a person can appeal directly to her conception of a good life in order to effect changes in her perspective without actually having to take up that point of view when a change in perspective is needed.¹⁴ For example, from a reflective point of view, recognizing our tendency to get stuck in a certain practical perspective, we can engage in self-manipulation or pre-commitment to effect changes at a later point in time when we are no longer being reflective. Consider the person who recognizes her tendency to bring her work home with her and plans to have a long bath and a cocktail when she gets home to put her in a different frame of mind. In this case the plans she makes while reflective have some influence on perspective changes later.

Self-manipulation and pre-commitments are sometimes foiled, however, as for example when we cannot see the reason for following the plan we adopted from a reflective point of view once we are out of that point of view. Moreover, these strategies are not available for every kind of desirable shift. Sometimes the conditions that give us a good reason to change our perspective are not predictable and are not anticipated from the reflective point of view. The wise person, therefore, must sometimes make such shifts using only the resources available from within a particular practical perspective, without referring to her reflective conception directly. And this presents a problem given that it is from the reflective point of view that we consider and evaluate reasons.

The answer to the problem consists in two claims: first, other normative considerations are available from within particular practical perspectives. While it is true that a fully reflective perspective intrudes upon an engaged practical perspective, a person within a practical perspective is not entirely blind to considerations that present reasons for shifting out of that perspective. Competing values are less salient but

¹⁴ I thank Elijah Millgram for alerting me to this possibility.

not necessarily entirely absent from within a practical perspective and therefore the wise person can recognize the force of other values from within a practical perspective.

The second part of the answer is that we can grasp and act on these normative considerations without occupying a reflective point of view. The wise person does make an appraisal of the reasons there are for shifting perspectives, but this appraisal is not made by applying a decision procedure or model to the circumstances. Rather, the wise person has an openness to the intuitions, feelings, and perceptions that draw her attention to the relevant reasons without engaging her capacity for deep critical reflection. Being open to reasons from within a practical perspective means being able to appreciate what is at stake in considerations that are not at the center of attention from that perspective. Since considerations may appear to us as reasons without bringing along the justificatory background that makes them reasons, our acknowledgment of these reasons need not invoke a reflective conception of the good life nor require that we take up a reflective point of view. This appreciation of reasons is not an explicit rational acknowledgment but something more like an intuition or impression.

Such judgments about reasons for shifting perspectives, based as they are on an intuitive grasp of reasons, need not take us to the reflective point of view. In order to see how this is so, let us consider an example of a particular type of judgment, one that has a natural role in shifts of perspective, namely, judgments about the character manifested by occupying a particular perspective. Consider Gus who is very devoted to his dog. Gus believes that his relationship to his dog is valuable and important. Caring for another entirely dependent being has taught him compassion and has allowed him to extend his sympathetic capacities.¹⁵ Observing the dog's way of being in the world has also encouraged him to enjoy life in ways he did not before. While Gus's relationship with his dog is, by and large, healthy, he has a tendency to become obsessed with concerns about his dog's welfare to the point of distraction. During one of these times, Gus worries so much about Max at work that he cannot get anything done and he declines invitations he would like to accept because he is so worried about leaving Max alone. We might say that if Gus were wise, he would recognize that being stuck in this perspective where Max has taken complete priority is obsessive, self-indulgent, or melodramatic. He

¹⁵ Lori Gruen argues that because animals are so different from us, our relationships with them help to develop and extend our capacities for sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

may think his perspective is obsessive because it is preventing him from achieving many of his goals. He may think it is self-indulgent if he recognizes that he is using it as an excuse to avoid social engagements or challenges at work that he finds intimidating. Or, he might assess his occupying this perspective as melodramatic if he realizes that he is really looking for attention and that his concerns for Max have not translated into any actions that are particularly good from the dog's point of view.

Here it is natural to say that it "registers with" or "dawns on" Gus that he is being obsessive. Or we might say that Gus grasps, quasi-intuitively, or impressionistically that his attention to his dog has become pathetic or unhealthy. In these cases the wise Gus is *open* to the reasons for shifting from his "dog-centric" perspective and they come to him through intuition and feeling rather than explicit thoughts about reasons.¹⁶ His judgment that his perspective is obsessive, melodramatic, or the like is based on his not fully reflective grasp of these reasons.

Similarly, Juan recognizes that letting his personal perspective crowd out the global perspective from which his wife's needs diminish in importance would be uncompassionate or blind. He can see this from the perspective in which his wife's needs matter most and it is what keeps him from becoming obsessively devoted. Losing the personal perspective altogether, though, would be insensitive or unloving and this can be grasped from other points of view. Notice that these virtue evaluations capture the ways in which perspective shifts are valuable and that the same considerations might represent themselves in terms of the values that are at stake. To call something obsessive is, in part, to say that you have focused on it to such an extreme extent that it is preventing you from achieving the other things you value. To say that you are being insensitive, blind, or narrow-minded is, in part, to say that your current perspective prevents you from noticing other ethically salient features.

A wise person shifts perspective when there is reason to do so. Because the resources for shifting perspectives must be ones that are available from within a particular engaged practical perspective, the wise person must have the ability to appreciate reasons for shifting perspectives that do not require reflective engagement or explicit rational thought. The practically wise person, then, is open to normative considerations that are not the focus of her current practical

¹⁶ I am grateful to Jennifer Whiting and George Sher for very helpful discussion here.

perspective and she is able to make judgments on the basis of these considerations about her current perspective.¹⁷

IV. WISDOM AND RATIONALITY

The wise person, according to Aristotle, is able “to deliberate well about what is good and expedient...about what sort of things conduce to the good life in general.”¹⁸ If shifting between the reflective point of view and different practical perspectives that focus our attention on different values is part of a good life, then wisdom includes the capacity to make such shifts appropriately. I have argued that appropriate shifts do not employ inferential practical reasoning. Given the close relationship between wisdom and practical reason, this may be quite jarring. In this section I take up some objections to the association of wisdom with the quasi-intuitive process I have described.

First, some might be concerned that the admission that judgments about shifting perspectives are not directly inferred from one’s conception of a good life introduces too much looseness into the picture of practical wisdom. After all, if the guidance provided by the conception of a good life is indirect, the mapping between that conception and how one actually lives will admit of gaps. Notice, though, that these gaps cannot be eliminated if we are going to learn what practical perspectives have to teach us. There is no way of life at which we can aim that is a perfect mapping of reflection onto practice. Or, at least, such a life would not really be ideal. A neatly mapped life in which we realize our ideal conception of how to live well is a life in which we are always somewhat detached, always ready to check ourselves against an ideal model; it is a life in which we do not get lost in experience and therefore do not learn from it.

A more serious concern has to do with the justification of the intuitive grasp of reasons that provides the basis for judgments about the need to shift perspective. That is, one might be concerned that if these judgments about one’s practical perspective are not made in accordance with a rational process, if they are not directly inferred from one’s conception of a good life, then they will not be justified at all. But this concern ignores the justificatory force that such impressionistic judgments do have. Our ordinary normative judgments, made

¹⁷ As we have seen, a wise person also has a conception of her own good. Even with this addition, the account here is not a complete account of practical wisdom. A complete account would also seem to include, at least, moral knowledge, which I have not discussed.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W.D. Ross, revised by J.O. Urmson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Volume II, Jonathan Barnes, ed. (Princeton: University Press, 1984), 1140a26–29.

without full reflection, have some authority in virtue of the fact that our reflection on the good life must be informed by experience.¹⁹ The authority of these judgments increases as they become integrated into a more reflective point of view and become part of a refined set of judgments, but the process of justifying our conception of a good life and our particular normative judgments is a dialectic process that takes seriously the verdicts of critical reflection and the teachings of experience.

Judgments about the character traits or value commitments that are manifested in occupying a particular perspective, must at some point be grounded in a reflective conception of a good life. Nevertheless, making the judgment that in some particular circumstances one is being self-absorbed or uncompassionate does not require taking up a reflective point of view from which one understands the justification for thinking that these are vices and their place in a larger system of values commitments. Given these facts about normative judgments (and judgments about the character traits manifested by occupying a practical perspective in particular), we can see that recognizing reasons to shift perspectives does not require any explicit attention to one's reflective conception of a good life. Rather, we make judgments about such reasons rather automatically, without the aid of critical reflection. Granted, these "automatic" or impressionistic judgments about reasons would not have much force if they were entirely divorced from reflection and justification, however, this is not the case. Intuitive judgments about reasons are tied to reflection and justification, albeit indirectly.

Finally, one might be concerned about the fact that the aspect of wisdom I have described does not seem to involve any rational process. If we have a picture of practical rationality according to which reasoning proceeds from premises about values, goals, or desires via practical syllogisms to conclusions about actions or intentions, then the non-inferential aspect of practical wisdom I have described will appear to be irrational or at least nonrational. Since wisdom and practical rationality are closely related, this seems undesirable.

The first thing to say in response to this problem is that while practical wisdom and practical rationality are closely related, we need not take them to be one and the same. If we understand practical

¹⁹ The claim that these unreflective judgments have some authority relies on a coherentist account of justification together with a norm of practical rationality that recommends learning from experience. An intriguing, related argument for the claim that we must trust our own judgments of self-evidence can be found in Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990), pp. 177–79.

wisdom, as Aristotle did, as including an understanding of the good and an ability to procure it, then we might say that wisdom includes but is not limited to practical rationality. The capacity for practical reason, on this view, is a capacity to meet means to ends, to draw out the conclusions of practical syllogisms or the implications of commitments. This capacity, the capacity to follow a rational procedure, is just one of the capacities possessed by the wise.

The second strategy of response is to reduce the worry that the noninferential capacity I have described is nonrational by making an analogy to theoretical rationality. In matters of theoretical rationality we can see a need for a quasi-intuitive grasp of principles that is not itself supported by the application of an inferential process. Lewis Carroll's dialogue between the tortoise and Achilles shows that there must be rules of inference that have a different status from the premises or axioms to which the rules apply.²⁰ One way of putting the point is that for us to be able to reason our way to conclusions, there must be some rules of inference that we grasp without reasoning to them.²¹ The fact that a noninferential capacity to grasp principles is necessary for theoretical rationality should make us more comfortable with the idea that a noninferential capacity to grasp reasons is a part of practical wisdom.

This picture of practical wisdom as including a noninferential capacity stands in contrast to conceptions of practical rationality according to which rational choices include only the choices made in explicit accordance with a life plan or a coherent system of values. The practically wise person does need to have a larger perspective that encompasses all her values. She needs some conception of the human good that includes all the subsidiary goods, virtues, and vices in order to have a basis for judgment that sticking with one perspective would be insensitive, narrow-minded, self-indulgent, or the like. But many of the choices that require wisdom are not inferences from this ideal conception. Having a reflective conception of a good human life is one part of wisdom, but another important part of wisdom is being able to set this conception aside, to allow one's reflection to be informed by experience and at the same time to maintain the capacity to see one's weakness or vice from within the experience. Furthermore, given the impossibility of occupying numerous practical per-

²⁰ "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles," *Mind*, iv, 14 (April 1895): 278–80.

²¹ Similarly, Goodman's paradox might be taken to show that we must accept or endorse the principle of induction in order to get off the ground, epistemologically. I thank Christopher Hookaway for drawing my attention to this point and Roger Crisp for helpful discussion of the Lewis Carroll example.

spectives at once, and given the importance of being open to the lessons of experience, a reflective conception of a good life is unlikely to be the kind of detailed plan or map that would allow direct inferences about what to do in any circumstances.

The preceding discussion also points to an advantage of my account of practical wisdom which is that it makes wisdom more accessible than some critics have charged. Julia Driver, for instance, accuses Aristotelian virtue ethics of being overly intellectual in its emphasis on practical reason and wisdom.²² If practical wisdom is as I have described it, then, there is at least one important part of it that is importantly unlike a technical skill or highly intellectual capacity. Instead, practical wisdom's intellectual demands on us are like those of the other virtues: it requires that we make judgments (about character or values) that are informed by a conception of what is good for a person, but it does not always require (in fact, it may sometimes preclude) a full and reflective knowledge of this conception while we are making such judgments.

V. CONCLUSION

The person with practical wisdom should have a conception of the good that guides her in reflective moments. But this conception of the good is also shaped by the person's engagement with the world, the experience and practice that come from occupying practical perspectives. An important part of wisdom, then, is the capacity to use what we learn from experience and to judge when our being engaged in a particular way manifests a problem with our character or with our ability to pursue other values. Such judgments are, in turn, informed by a reflective conception of how to live, but the wise person makes these judgments without directly appealing to her ideal.

Pluralism about the good life is a compelling view, but we do not yet have a clear understanding of how we pursue a plurality of values in the same life in a reasonable or reflective way. The excellent but relatively small body of work on practical wisdom tends to emphasize the perceptual capacities that are involved in practical wisdom in order to distinguish it from alternative conceptions of practical rationality.²³

²² In her *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Cambridge, 2001).

²³ For examples of this work see note 11. Much of the work in the recent resurgence of virtue ethics focuses on articulating the nature of an ethical theory that takes virtue to be the central concept rather than on providing individual characterizations of virtues. See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford, 1999), and Christine Swanton's *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford, 2003). This is not a criticism of these virtue ethical theories; articulating a vision for virtue ethics is a vital task. If virtue ethics is to progress, however, the details of a virtue as important as practical wisdom must be given and this essay is one step on that path. One philosopher who has also taken a step along this path

There is a good reason for this as Aristotelians writing about practical wisdom have had to distinguish and defend their conception of wisdom from favored instrumental accounts of practical reason and from conceptions of practical reason that imply the commensuration of values within a single metric. We are now at a stage in the dialectic at which we can turn our attention to characterizing wise choices in the context of pluralism in more detail without having to begin from a defensive posture. I hope to have demonstrated that one way to do this is to illuminate the nature of practical wisdom by investigating some neglected details of the nature of a good life.

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(albeit in a different direction from mine) is John Kekes who gives a comprehensive account of what he calls moral wisdom in his *Moral Wisdom and Good Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995).