

Moral Cultivation and Confucian Character

Engaging Joel J. Kupperman

Edited by

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SUNY
P R E S S



Anthropocentric Realism about Values

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For if the Good predicated in common is some single thing, or something separated, itself in itself, clearly it is not the sort of good a human being can pursue in action or possess; but the latter is just the sort we are looking for in our present inquiry.

—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6

The rules are the beginning of order, but the gentleman is the origin of the rules.

—Xunzi, “The Way of a Ruler”

It is a commonplace to observe that, in contemporary academia, there is no connection between being a person who studies ethics and being an ethical person. However, my sense is that Joel Kupperman is both. Indeed, I think if Kongzi were alive today, he would recognize Kupperman as the sort of “gentleman” (*junzi*) that he hoped to produce via his process of ethical cultivation. But a gentleman like Kupperman does not seek acclaim, and I will honor his preferences by praising his character no more.

Some Typologies

While I fall far short of Kupperman in the more important level of practice, I am pleased that I share many of his views at the level of theory:

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1 realism, particularism, pluralism, and fallibilism. (1) *Realism*: Values are,
2 in some sense, objective. This does not entail that they are objective
3 in the way that properties like mass or entities like zebras are. However,
4 neither are they purely subjective (in the way that my preference for
5 chicken over fish is subjective) or a result of mere intersubjective consen-
6 sus (in the way that “Three strikes and you’re out” is).¹ (2) *Particularism*
7 (or contextualism): Values are highly context-sensitive. If we ask, “Is it
8 permissible to lie?” the right response is to ask back, “About what? To
9 whom? In what circumstances?” and many other questions. Although
10 there is a strong presumption in favor of honesty, it is defeasible in many
11 situations, ranging from the trivial example of fibbing to a friend about
12 a surprise birthday party to the weighty example of Miep Gies hiding
13 Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis.² (3) *Pluralism*: There are a
14 variety of incommensurable kinds of value. As a result, there are a plural-
15 ity of worthwhile ways of life. It might be better for Bloggs to become
16 an FBI agent and for me to become a college professor (because of our
17 respective aptitudes, interests, and traits of character); but my life of
18 theoretical inquiry and teaching is not intrinsically better than Bloggs’s
19 life of practical action and intervention. The two of us can achieve dif-
20 ferent but equally valuable varieties of human flourishing and manifest
21 distinct but equally worthwhile forms of virtues such as benevolence and
22 integrity.³ (4) *Fallibilism*: Because there are evaluative facts that we can
23 be wrong about, and because value is so context-sensitive, and because
24 we cannot fully appreciate values in other ways of life that we have not
25 experienced⁴—for all these reasons, we must be continually mindful of
26 the possibility of error in our valuations.⁵

27 In this essay, I am going to focus on the first thesis: realism. Realism
28 can take different forms.⁶ (i) The default target of anti-realists often
29 seems to be Platonic realism. The Platonist holds that ethical values
30 are part of the fabric of the universe, and would be there whether any
31 human beings had existed or not. For the Platonist, values are not reduc-
32 ible to natural or physical properties, but they are similar to them in
33 that their existence does not depend upon human cognition or motiva-
34 tion. (ii) Anthropocentric realism is importantly different. In order to
35 understand it, consider the following non-moral concept: “poisonous.”
36 “The respiration of pure carbon dioxide is poisonous” is true for all
37 humans. But it is not true for plants. Furthermore, the very notion of
38 “poison” is meaningful only in the context of living organisms. From
39 the perspective of pure physics, nothing is poisonous. Nonetheless, it
40 is true or false that something is poisonous (for humans), whether a
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particular individual or a culture is aware of this fact or not. We might say that poisonous-for-humans is an anthropocentric quality. It is useful and meaningful only because humans exist, but since humans do exist there are objective facts about what is poisonous for them. Similarly, the anthropocentric realist about values claims that evaluative properties and judgments are meaningful and useful only because humans—with their distinctive needs, potentials and limitations—exist. Nonetheless, there are facts about values that do not depend upon the beliefs or endorsements of any particular individual or culture.

Kupperman draws the contrast between Platonic and anthropocentric realism in this way:

In sorting out the issues of value realism, we need to decide between two starting points. One is putative value facts. . . . If this is our starting point, then we will need to train, as it were, our value telescopes to find out whether there was something we were talking about. The other is our talk and thought about values, including the standards of evidence and logical relations that are implicit in these practices. If this is our starting point, then we will need to inquire into justification of judgments of value, and in particular whether there is justification for claiming that some judgments are authoritative (telling us what really is of value).⁷

Kupperman recommends that we reject the first approach, along with its associated “images of [values as] spectral furniture of the universe.”⁸ Instead, we should focus on

. . . the structure of our discourse about values, [which] includes standards (for being in a position to be confident of judgments of value) that sometimes are met. Hence, we are in a position to say that it really is the case that some things have high value and that others have low or negative value.⁹

Kupperman is one of several Western philosophers to offer versions of anthropocentric realism.¹⁰ However, given Kupperman’s interest in Chinese thought, I am particularly intrigued by the possibility that the Confucian Xunzi may also be seen as an anthropocentric realist.¹¹

In contrast with most earlier Chinese philosophers, Xunzi is at pains to insist that Heaven is morally indifferent. Heaven does not



1 reward the virtuous (with long lives or good harvests) or punish the
 2 vicious (with illness or natural disasters): “The activities of Heaven are
 3 constant. They do not persist because of sage-king Yao. They do not
 4 perish because of tyrant Jie.”¹² In fact, Heaven endows humans with a
 5 nature that is largely self-centered and will lead us into conflict with
 6 one another if unchecked:

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8 Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but
 9 do not get the objects of their desires, then they cannot but
 10 seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or
 11 limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with
 12 each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be
 13 chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished.¹³

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15 Furthermore, ritual activities such as funerals do not, Xunzi insists, influ-
 16 ence Heaven or any spiritual entities. “One performs the rain sacrifice
 17 and it rains. Why? I say: There is no special reason why. It is the same
 18 as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway.”¹⁴
 19 But if Heaven is morally passive, where do human values and ethical
 20 practices come from? Xunzi explains that they are artificial constructs
 21 invented to meet human needs:

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23 In ancient times, the sage-kings saw that because people’s
 24 nature is bad, they were deviant, dangerous, and not correct
 25 in their behavior, and they were unruly, chaotic, and not
 26 well-ordered. Therefore, for their sake they set up ritual and
 27 standards of righteousness, and established proper models and
 28 measures.¹⁵

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30 For example, mourning rituals express and shape the feelings of loss that
 31 accompany the death of a loved one, and standards of righteousness pro-
 32 vide guidelines for how to distribute goods so that everyone has enough.
 33 Despite the fact that ethics is artificial, it is objectively justified because
 34 it achieves the goal of bringing humans into a harmonious relationship
 35 with each other and with their environment:

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37 For Heaven can give birth to creatures, but it cannot enforce
 38 distinctions among creatures. Earth can support people, but it
 39 cannot order people. In the world, the ten thousand things
 40 and human beings all must await sages, and only then will
 41 they be appropriately divided up.¹⁶

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Although Xunzi regarded the rituals as artificial, he seems to have thought that the particular formulation of them by the former sage kings was the one best version. For example, Xunzi states that,

[f]or the ritual sacrifices, one engages in divination and determines the appropriate day. One fasts and sweeps out the site, sets out tables and food offerings, and has the “announcement of the assistant,” as if the deceased were attending a banquet. The impersonator of the dead takes the goods and from each of them makes a sacrifice, as if the deceased were tasting them.¹⁷

Xunzi says of specific practices such as these: “Is not ritual perfect indeed! It establishes a lofty standard that is the ultimate of its kind, and none under Heaven can add to or subtract from it.”¹⁸ Consequently, someone like me, who does not honor his ancestors in the particular way described above, would be dismissed by Xunzi as one of those “foolish, ignorant, perverse men” who has not learned the proper way to express sufficient love and respect for his predecessors.¹⁹ From a contemporary perspective, this seems like a significant limitation of Xunzi’s thought. Surely my own “rituals” for honoring my deceased parents (visiting their grave, putting flowers on it, pretending to tell them what has happened in our family since my last visit, etc.) are just as good. As a pluralist, Kupperman will certainly agree that (contrary to Xunzi) there are multiple sets of rituals that can serve the same functions of shaping and expressing human emotions. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Kupperman and Xunzi share the general view that values depend for their existence on human needs, capabilities and practices, but are nonetheless “real” (not simply a matter of individual or cultural opinion). Now, Kupperman has written a very fine article on Xunzi’s conception of human ethical cultivation, in which he notes that Xunzi is similar to Jean Piaget in holding that humans must go through distinct levels of development in order to become mature ethical agents.²⁰ However, to the best of my knowledge, Kupperman has not commented on Xunzi’s meta-ethics. Consequently, I will be interested to see whether he finds my interpretation of Xunzi as an anthropocentric realist about values plausible.

Just as moral realism comes in more than one form, so does anti-realism. (a) Moral relativism is the view that the truth of moral claims depends upon the perspective from which they are evaluated. This perspective can be either that of an individual (subjectivism) or that of a group (cultural relativism). (b) Non-cognitivists typically regard moral claims as expressing and encouraging attitudes of some kind. Since they

1 are expressions rather than descriptions, moral claims are neither true
 2 nor false. (c) Error theorists agree with realists that moral language is
 3 intended to be descriptive, but they argue that there are no objective
 4 values for our moral terms to refer to.

6 Theory	7 Moral Statements Are . . .	8 Level of Objectivity
9 Realism	10 descriptive and can be true or false.	11 Platonic 12 Anthropocentric
13 Relativism	14 descriptive and can be true or false.	15 Intersubjective (cultural 16 relativism) 17 Subjective
18 Non-cognitivism	19 expressive rather than descriptive, 20 so neither true nor false.	
21 Error Theories	22 descriptive but none are true.	

19 Moral anti-realism (particularly in its relativist form) seems to have
 20 become the dogma among many college students and their professors.
 21 Consequently, my two-part project in this paper is to challenge one of
 22 the standard arguments for anti-realism and to sketch an argument for
 23 a particular form of anthropocentric realism.

26 The Argument from Disagreement

28 The argument from cross-cultural disagreement is the anti-realist argu-
 29 ment most likely to captivate students taking their first philosophy
 30 course. However, it is an argument that is both easy to misunderstand
 31 and difficult to establish. Indeed, I have sometimes been surprised to
 32 discover that even some philosophers are persuaded by what are demon-
 33 strably inadequate formulations of this argument. Consequently, it is
 34 best to begin by reviewing why it is fallacious to go directly from the
 35 premise that there is ethical disagreement to the conclusion that there
 36 are no objective ethical facts. Pick any topic (T) about which there is
 37 disagreement. Indeed, let there be sustained and seemingly intractable
 38 disagreement over T: each party to the disagreement is firmly convinced
 39 of his own views, and his efforts to convince the other parties seem to
 40 fail repeatedly. Can we infer directly from this sort of disagreement to

the conclusion that there are no facts about T? We cannot. At least, 1
we cannot make this inference without succumbing to an extreme and 2
ultimately self-undermining ant-realism about all facts. Consider evolu- 3
tionary theory. I assume that most of my readers believe that it is true and 4
applies to humans. However, 40 percent of the current U.S. population 5
believes that “God created human beings pretty much in their present 6
form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.”²¹ This percentage 7
has varied since Gallup started asking the question in 1982, but it has 8
always been at least 40 percent. Consequently, if persistent disagree- 9
ment over T shows there is no fact about T, we must conclude that 10
there is no fact about whether evolutionary theory is true. I anticipate 11
at least three rebuttals to this argument. (1) “Whether people believe 12
it or not, evolutionary theory has been proven to be true.” However, 13
“prove” is a weasel word, whose ambiguity allows it to suggest more 14
content than it actually has. If we take “proof” to be synonymous with 15
strict logical deduction, then no scientific theory is ever proven. (This 16
is a commonplace of the philosophy of science, in which it is recognized 17
that scientific theories are interesting and informative precisely because 18
they go beyond the evidence that supports them, and hence cannot be 19
deduced from that evidence.) In contrast, if “prove” means something 20
weaker, such as convincing everyone of a conclusion, then the Gallup 21
poll shows that evolution has not been proven in this sense. 22

This leads to a second potential rebuttal. (2) “Although not every- 23
one accepts evolutionary theory, the only reason that people reject it 24
is ignorance of the evidence.” This reply does not hold water, because 25
a number of people who have been exposed to the evidence, including 26
some with legitimate scientific credentials, reject evolutionary theory.²² 27
I assume this will induce the following counterargument: (3) “Only a 28
dogmatic bias prevents those who have been exposed to the evidence 29
from accepting evolutionary theory.” But we could say the same thing to 30
explain why a man as obviously intelligent as John C. Calhoun defended 31
slavery, or why well-educated and seemingly informed attorneys in the 32
Justice Department of the Bush administration endorsed torture. The 33
anti-realist will insist that there is still some difference between the case 34
of the informed Creationist and Calhoun, but we see now that disagree- 35
ment (even seemingly intractable disagreement) is insufficient by itself 36
to establish that there is no fact about a topic. It is the precise nature 37
of the disagreement that establishes this (if anything does).²³ 38

While we cannot *logically deduce* anti-realism about values from 39
simple disagreement about them, some have argued that the *best explana-* 40

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1 tion for the nature and extent of ethical disagreement is that there are
2 no objective facts that we are disagreeing about.²⁴ However, no one has
3 ever developed this argument in anywhere near enough detail for it to
4 be compelling. In order to establish that the ethical disagreement we
5 find is best explained by there not being ethical facts, it is inadequate
6 to trot out vague anecdotes about how “some people think infanticide
7 is perfectly fine.” One must look in detail at what people believe, giving
8 thick descriptions of their practices, their own accounts of those prac-
9 tices, and their sociohistorical contexts. Only then can one even begin
10 the process of arguing for an explanation for their beliefs.²⁵

11 I cannot prove that it is impossible to construct an inference to
12 the best explanation argument for anti-realism. However, I would like
13 to identify a few hurdles that any such argument must overcome. First,
14 as Hume noted long ago, superficial disagreement over ethical matters
15 may mask a fundamental agreement. “The Rhine flows north, the Rhone
16 south; yet both spring from the *same* mountain, and are also actuated,
17 in their opposite directions, by the *same* principle of gravity.”²⁶ Similarly,
18 a positive evaluation of perseverance in the face of danger (courage)
19 may manifest itself very differently in a culture at war as opposed to
20 a culture at peace. Second, there may be a variety of legitimate ways
21 to express the same underlying human value. Herodotus was impressed
22 with the starkly different attitudes of the Greeks (who cremated the
23 remains of their parents) and of the Callatians (who supposedly ate the
24 bodies of their deceased parents). Each was horrified at the practices
25 of the other.²⁷ However, both rituals express the human sense that we
26 must honor the memory of our parents by disposing of their remains in
27 a respectful way. Third, the variety we find in ethical views may be best
28 explained by pluralism about values. Not all values can be instantiated
29 in any one form of life, so individuals and cultures must choose which
30 values to promote. There is much to commend in the sort of intimate
31 community life portrayed in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. Everyone
32 knows everyone else, everyone trusts everyone else, everyone cares for
33 everyone else. However, a community like this requires a great deal of
34 homogeneity. As Wilder suggests with the suicide of “Simon Stimson,”
35 many would find this life claustrophobic. Conversely, the fragmented life
36 of our modern cities provides much more room for individuality, but also
37 a much greater danger of alienation.²⁸

38 Fourth, let us not forget that a thoughtful examination of cultural
39 disagreement may lead to what seems like deeper (and nonrelative) ethi-
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cal insight. Although I cannot vouch for its accuracy as anthropology, 1
Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" is useful as a model of what it would 2
look like to use thick description of another culture as the basis for a cri- 3
tique of one's own. Many of Montaigne's contemporaries had concluded 4
that the natives of "Antarctic France" (what is now Brazil) were "sav- 5
ages," because they practiced cannibalism. However, Montaigne arrives 6
at a more nuanced view through a discussion of the role of cannibalism 7
in the native culture as a whole. He notes that "Their warfare is wholly 8
noble and generous, and as excusable and beautiful as this human disease 9
can be," because (unlike European warfare) it is not motivated by greed, 10
the desire for conquest, or religious intolerance. Rather, participation in 11
warfare seems to be voluntary, and "its only basis among them is their 12
rivalry in valor." Prisoners of war are treated generously, "so that life 13
may be all the dearer to them," but are also warned of the fate that 14
awaits them. "All this is done for the sole purpose of extorting from 15
their lips some weak or base word. . . ." However, the natives display 16
"the grandeur of an invincible courage," because there is "not one who 17
would not rather be killed and eaten than so much as ask not to be."²⁹ 18
When the time comes, prisoners are quickly executed, and their bodies 19
eaten as a symbolic indication of conquest. Montaigne concludes with 20
a nuanced evaluation of his own culture in comparison with that of the 21
cannibals: "I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such 22
acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should 23
be so blind to our own." Mentioning such cruel tortures as racking 24
and live dismemberment, which Europeans of his era had subjected one 25
another to "on the pretext of piety and religion," Montaigne opines, "I 26
think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him 27
dead."³⁰ Montaigne's exploration is intriguing precisely because he does 28
not throw up his arms and announce, "Who's to say?" but instead looks 29
for a deeper insight.³¹ 30

Finally, it is worth noting that cultures are not as dissimilar as 31
some would have us believe. Much of twentieth-century anthropology 32
has stressed cross-cultural variety, to the point of sometimes suggesting 33
that there is no such thing as human nature. This has been valuable as 34
a corrective to the ethnocentrism that civilizations sometimes succumb 35
to.³² However, many of the paradigmatic studies that claimed to show 36
practices and beliefs radically different from those in the West have 37
been discredited. Margaret Mead's account of how adolescent sexuality 38
in Samoa is unfettered, relaxed, and happy has been shown to be, at 39

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1 best, dubious. Benjamin Whorf's claim that the Hopi language lacks
 2 any way of expressing discrete units of time is demonstrably false. Colin
 3 Turnbull's report of the complete lack of compassion among the Ik tribe
 4 turned out to be fiction. Bronislaw Malinowski's alleged counterexample
 5 to the Oedipus complex among the Trobriand is also quite questionable.
 6 Even the favorite cocktail party example of cultural difference, the claim
 7 that Eskimos have 22 words for snow, has turned out to be a myth.³³
 8 In contrast with these approaches, anthropologist Donald E. Brown (a
 9 recovering relativist himself) argues that we find a set of characteristics
 10 that are nearly universal among human societies, including the use of
 11 narrative and poetry, facial expressions such as smiling and crying, mari-
 12 riage, incest taboos, rituals to mourn the dead, prohibitions against theft
 13 and the wanton use of violence, and many others.³⁴

14 Are the similarities that we find among cultures best explained by a
 15 Mengzian or a Xunzian account of human nature? Consider the fact that
 16 we find some form of the institution of marriage in every human culture.
 17 Mengzi would say that, as part of our shared human nature, we all find
 18 certain things ethically shameful: even a beggar will be offended if you
 19 offer him a handout with contempt (*Mengzi* 6A10). However, our innate
 20 sense of shame is merely incipient, like the sprout of a plant (2A6).
 21 Like a sprout, our incipient sense of shame can either mature or wither,
 22 depending upon both our social environment and our individual effort
 23 (6A8, 6A9). If our sense of shame is allowed to follow its natural course
 24 of development, we will disdain to furtively satisfy our sexual desires
 25 (3B3). Consequently, marriage rituals exist because they provide a social
 26 sanction for our sexual desires, allowing us to satisfy them without shame.
 27 In contrast, Xunzi would argue that we innately have the desire for sex
 28 but not even the incipient sense of shame. For us to come to regard the
 29 furtive satisfaction of sexual desires as shameful, our emotions must be
 30 reshaped, as arduously and artificially as "steaming and bending" a piece
 31 of lumber that is as "straight as a plumb line into a wheel."³⁵ This trans-
 32 formation is justified, Xunzi would argue, because unrestrained sexual
 33 desires would lead us to harm one another. The fundamental differences
 34 between the views of Mengzi and Xunzi is reflected in their metaphors.
 35 Mengzi's favorite metaphors for ethical cultivation are agricultural (like
 36 nurturing the sprout of a plant until it grows into maturity). In contrast,
 37 Xunzi prefers technological metaphors, which involve reshaping a passive
 38 and perhaps recalcitrant material (like grinding metal or carving wood).
 39 Mengzi would no doubt have said to Xunzi what he said to Gaozi (who
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proposed that “to make human nature benevolent and righteous is like making a willow tree into cups and bowls”):

Can you, sir, following the nature of the willow tree, make it into cups and bowls? You must violate and rob the willow tree, and only then can you make it into cups and bowls. If you must violate and rob the willow tree in order to make it into cups and bowls, must you also violate and rob people in order to make them benevolent and righteous? If there is something that leads people to regard benevolence and righteousness as misfortunes for them, it will surely be your doctrine, will it not?³⁶

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully adjudicate the disagreement between Mengzi and Xunzi. However, I think it is clear that Mengzi, like Xunzi, fails to do justice to pluralism: there are a variety of distinct but equally adequate forms of marriage ceremonies, funeral rituals, etc.³⁷ Kupperman’s comments on this general topic are, as usual, judicious. He encourages us to

reject two extreme (and I think untenable) sorts of positions. One is to insist that a worthwhile account of human nature must be definite and hold true of people at all times and in all social conditions. The other tempting extreme is to hold that there could not be such an account or anything even remotely like it. Human nature is various, and that is the last word on the subject. . . . It is not unreasonable, though, to think it possible to arrive at an account of human nature that is largely true. This would be an account that captured ways in which a great many people, in various cultures, tend to think and behave at most times.³⁸

Whatever our specific view on human nature, it seems quite clear that we do not find human cultures as wildly divergent as some advocates of the argument from disagreement suggest. In addition, no one has yet given a sufficiently detailed account of why the disagreement we do find is “best explained” by anti-realism. The argument from disagreement is at best a promissory note that anti-realists have yet to make good.

The Case for Anthropocentric Realism

The Why Question

As I explained earlier, Xunzi argues that “rituals and righteousness” are artificial constructs that are objectively justified by their role in rescuing humans from their natural state of selfishness and intemperance, which (if unchecked) will lead to mutually destructive competition for scarce resources. This line of argument is anthropocentric, because it attempts to provide a justification for values that is objective, yet ultimately grounds value in human needs and agency. As Eric Hutton has noted, there are plausible ways of interpreting Xunzi and Aristotle according to which there are some broad similarities between their approaches. However, the differences between them are also quite significant. The emphasis in Xunzi is on the “the Way of human community, where this is understood as organized society.”³⁹ In contrast, Aristotle “seems to concentrate more on the notion of *eudaimonia* [living well] as the individual’s good.”⁴⁰ In the remainder of this paper I shall offer an anthropocentric argument inspired by Aristotle’s account of human practical reasoning.

In attempting to understand Aristotle’s justification for ethics, readers often focus on the controversial “function argument” of *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7. Here, Aristotle suggests that just as what it is to be a good sculptor depends upon the function of a sculptor, so does being a good human depend upon the function of a human. Aristotle identifies this with what is distinctive of humans as a species, and thinks this is our rationality. For a contemporary audience, this argument is problematic on several grounds, which we do not have to rehearse here. However, readers often overlook the fact that the function argument is a detour (one of Aristotle’s famous digressions) from an alternative justification for ethics based on practical reasoning (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.1–5). Indeed, Thomas Aquinas focuses on this alternative account in his own discussion of the human good (*Summa Theologiae* II-I, Q. 1).⁴¹

For Aristotle and those who follow him, the primary ethical question is whether our actions and motivations are rational. Words like “rational,” “logical,” and “reasonable” sometimes arouse negative reactions, especially when applied to actions and motivations. As a pop song from the 70s whines,

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful,
a miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical.

And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so 1
 happily, 2
 oh joyfully, oh playfully watching me. 3
 But then they sent me away to teach me how to be sensible, 4
 logical, oh responsible, practical.⁴² 5
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So it is perhaps worth explaining that the starting point of this approach 7
 is nothing sinister or esoteric; it is the simple recognition that “Why 8
 are you doing that?” is always a legitimate question to ask of a human 9
 being. Sometimes this question is looking for a causal answer. “Why are 10
 you sweating so much?” “I just came from the gym.” But Aristotelians 11
 are particularly interested in cases where the question seeks a justifica- 12
 tional answer (the “final cause”): “Why are you going to the gym?” “I’m 13
 training for a marathon.” So practical rationality is really just concerned 14
 with justificational answers to the question “Why are you doing that?” 15

This might seem to land us in relativism, though. Our answer to 16
 “the why question” depends upon what our goals are, and these are 17
 often assumed to be subjective. Such was the opinion of David Hume, 18
 who famously denied that our actions and motivations can be rational 19
 or irrational: 20

’Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the 22
 whole world to the scratching of my finger. ’Tis not contrary 23
 to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least 24
 uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me. ’Tis 25
 as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg’d 26
 lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection 27
 for the former than the latter.⁴³ 28

This is a provocative suggestion, but why should we assent to it? If I did 30
 prefer “my own acknowledg’d lesser good to my greater,” it would seem 31
 natural (both as a matter of common sense and of ordinary language 32
 usage) to say that I was being “foolish,” “stupid” and, yes, “unreasonable.” 33
 However, Hume is confident about his claim because it follows from his 34
 particular philosophical psychology. The contents of the human mind, 35
 Hume asserts, consist solely of “impressions” and “ideas.” Impressions 36
 are “all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first 37
 appearance in the soul.”⁴⁴ Ideas, in turn, “are deriv’d from impressions, 38
 and are nothing but copies and representations of them.”⁴⁵ Truth and 39
 falsehood consist in the agreement or disagreement “of ideas, consider’d 40

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1 as copies, with those objects, which they represent.”⁴⁶ Given these
2 assumptions, Hume’s conclusion follows fairly directly:

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4 Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or
5 disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can
6 never be an object of our reason. Now ‘tis evident our pas-
7 sions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such
8 agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities,
9 compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other
10 passions, volitions, and actions. ’Tis impossible, therefore, they
11 can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary
12 or conformable to reason.⁴⁷

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14 In other words, only certain kinds of “ideas” can be true or false, because
15 only they, being copies (of either sensory impressions or other ideas), can
16 correspond or fail to correspond to their objects. A “passion,” as Hume
17 calls any motivational state, “contains not any representative quality,
18 which renders it a copy of any other existence.”⁴⁸ Therefore, no passion
19 (and by the same reasoning, no action) can be rational or irrational.
20 Unfortunately for Hume, no informed philosopher today would accept
21 his philosophical psychology.

22 Even if we did find plausible Hume’s account of impressions and
23 ideas, his claim about the nonrationality of passions and actions is
24 stipulative and arbitrary. Motivations and actions cannot be rationally
25 assessed, Hume claims, because reason is solely the discovery of truth
26 and falsehood, and neither motivations nor actions can be true or false.
27 Admittedly, if I “prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratch-
28 ing of my finger,” my *preference* is neither true nor false. But it is ques-
29 tion-begging to assume that rationality is only about truth and falsity.
30 Consequently, unless we accept Hume’s outmoded account of impressions
31 and ideas, or his unwarranted stipulation that reason is only about truth
32 and falsity, he has given us no reason to deny that the statement “You
33 ought to prefer your greater good to your lesser good” is true.

34 Although we lack a good argument *against* it, we might still wonder
35 why we need to make objective evaluative assessments of practice.
36 (I don’t have a good argument against square dancing either, but it’s
37 clearly not necessary and I don’t want to do it.) My answer is that
38 objective evaluative assessments are indispensable to anything recogniz-
39 able as human agency. One type of such evaluation is captured by the
40 Hypothetical Imperative: if you choose goal, G, then you ought to take

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the most efficient means, M.⁴⁹ For example, if Bloggs (a novice runner) 1
 chooses to run in a marathon, then Bloggs ought to train four days a 2
 week for 18 weeks prior to the event. This statement is surely not a 3
 pure description of what Bloggs *will* do: Bloggs might choose to run 4
 in a marathon, but fail to train adequately. One might object that, if 5
 Bloggs doesn't train adequately, he really didn't "choose" to run in the 6
 marathon. Admittedly, if Bloggs didn't train for the marathon at all and 7
 didn't even show up, we could legitimately question whether he had 8
 actually chosen to participate. But there might be plenty of reasons to 9
 think that Bloggs *had* chosen to participate in a marathon (he signs up 10
 for the marathon, he trains intermittently, he shows up and runs in it) 11
 even if his preparation was inadequate. Perhaps Bloggs wants to run in 12
 a marathon but doesn't care if he does well? But it seems quite possible 13
 that someone like Bloggs wants and hopes to do well in the marathon, 14
 but succumbs to weakness of will by skipping too many practices and 15
 eating badly. So if Bloggs chooses to run in a marathon (really chooses, as 16
 would be evident not just from his words but from some of his actions), 17
 and if he wishes to do well in it, and if he is a novice runner of average 18
 health, then he ought to train for four days a week for 18 weeks prior 19
 to the event. 20

If this example (or any other instance of the Hypothetical 21
 Imperative) is true, then there is at least one objective evaluative claim. 22
 Let us consider a potential objection: "The 'ought' in this example is a 23
 subjective evaluation, not an objective one, because Bloggs's choice to 24
 run in a marathon is a matter of personal preference. Surely you don't 25
 think that Bloggs is objectively obligated to run in a marathon?" This 26
 objection fails to distinguish between the Hypothetical Imperative and 27
 its constituent propositions. The consequent of the hypothetical ("Bloggs 28
 ought to train four days a week for 18 weeks prior to the event") is 29
 not objective, because it only follows from the truth of the antecedent 30
 ("Bloggs chooses to run in a marathon"), which is dependent upon a con- 31
 tingent and subjective choice. However, the truth of the hypothetical as 32
 a whole is neither contingent nor subjective. If training four days a week 33
 for 18 weeks is in fact the best means for a human of Bloggs's physical 34
 condition to prepare for a marathon, then the complete hypothetical, "If 35
 Bloggs chooses to run in a marathon, then he ought to train four days 36
 a week for 18 weeks prior to the event," is true, and true independently 37
 of what any individual believes, true independently of what any group 38
 of people believe, and true independently of whether Bloggs does in fact 39
 choose to run in a marathon.⁵⁰ Instances of the Hypothetical Imperative 40

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1 are central to our ordinary agency and practical reasoning. Consequently,
 2 we are committed to objective evaluations.⁵¹ Although this is a very
 3 specific and limited conclusion, it is nonetheless important. Once we
 4 acknowledge the necessity of even one objective evaluation, we see that
 5 there is nothing in principle implausible or philosophically promiscuous
 6 about accepting them.

7 Although he does not use the phrase “Hypothetical Imperative,”
 8 Hume was aware that this principle was a *prima facie* counterexample
 9 to his claim that motivations and actions are never irrational. He grudgingly
 10 admits that “by an abusive way of speaking, which philosophy will
 11 scarce allow of,”⁵² we might say that an action or motivation is unreasonable
 12 “when founded on a false supposition, or when it chuses means
 13 insufficient for the design’d end.”⁵³ Hume’s response was to attempt to
 14 naturalize the Hypothetical Imperative by making it descriptive rather
 15 than prescriptive:

16 The moment we perceive the falsehood of any supposition,
 17 or the insufficiency of any means our passions yield to our
 18 reason without any opposition.⁵⁴

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 21 It is easy to miss what a stunning (and implausible) suggestion this is. If
 22 Hume is correct, there has never been anyone who, like Bloggs, planned
 23 to run in a marathon, but then skipped practice too many times; there
 24 has never been anyone who knew that having “just one more cigarette”
 25 would sabotage her efforts to quit smoking, yet smoked it anyway; there
 26 has never been anyone who continued to love someone after her illusions
 27 about him were shattered. Would that people were as practically
 28 rational as Hume assumes!

29 Although instances of the Hypothetical Imperative are objective
 30 evaluations, the “ought” of the consequent only applies to someone who
 31 satisfies the antecedent of the conditional. If I don’t plan to run in a
 32 marathon, I have done nothing wrong by failing to train for one. Some
 33 philosophers would concede that there are facts about what we ought to
 34 do given what our goals are, but no facts about what our goals ought to
 35 be. In other words, one might concede that there are objective answers
 36 to the why question when it comes to means, but no objective answers
 37 when it comes to goals. I shall approach the issue of whether there
 38 are any objectively valuable goals in two steps. First, I shall argue that
 39 there are goals that actually motivate some human beings that can be
 40 seen to be rationally indefensible. Second, I shall propose some goals

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that are not only defensible, but could only be challenged via moot or fantastic objections.

Four Inadequate Answers to the Why Question

Let us imagine that Bloggs seems to dislike his job as an attorney. We ask him, “Why are you working as an attorney when you don’t enjoy it?” Bloggs can refuse to answer, but he cannot deny the legitimacy of the question. Perhaps he will respond, “I make more money as an attorney than I could make any other way.” We persist by asking, “Why do you need so much money? There are other jobs that would give you enough to survive comfortably.” Bloggs replies, “I need money for the sake of money.” This fails as a rational justification, because money is only a means to other ends. If money were intrinsically valuable, then the best strategy would be to collect something like Confederate currency; it is much easier to get than U.S. dollars. Of course, you cannot buy anything with Confederate currency. But this just shows that what makes money desirable is the things other than money that you can get with it. Despite this fact, there are many people who, like Bloggs, act as if money were an intrinsically valuable goal: they struggle to accumulate far more money than is needed to ensure their physical comfort and security, without any clear conception of some other goal their money will help them achieve. But insofar as people do act like Bloggs, we can see that their behavior is irrational.

In reality, Bloggs is more likely to give a different answer, such as, “I work as an attorney because I hope to get a big case that will make me famous.” Fame is one of the most valued goods in our celebrity-obsessed culture, so we know that people have motivations like the one Bloggs expresses. Indeed, there are people who seem to want fame at any cost. In 356 BCE, Herostratus set fire to the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) simply because he believed that this gratuitous act of destruction would ensure his eternal fame. (Obviously, he was right.) However, it seems plausible to diagnose such an extreme craving for attention as a mental illness, perhaps brought on by a lack of personal validation earlier in life. If Herostratus had the talent and opportunity to be admired as a talented poet or skillful general, he would have preferred that to the choice he made. So suppose we press Bloggs further, asking, “Do you just want to be famous, or do you want to be famous for being good at something? If I offer you a choice between being famous because your incompetence

1 resulted in an innocent person going to prison, or being famous because
2 of your skillful handling of a challenging case, which do you prefer?”
3 Presumably, Bloggs would greatly prefer to be famous for being a skilled
4 attorney. We might describe this by saying that what Bloggs really wants
5 is not simply fame, but prestige.

6 Prestige is very plausible as a part of the reason why we do what
7 we do. All of us want to be admired for our good qualities. This is
8 not inconsistent with humility. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, humility is
9 not about smart people pretending they are stupid, or attractive people
10 pretending that they are ugly.⁵⁵ Humility is about recognizing that our
11 excellences are simply small parts of the big picture. Thus, I am entitled
12 to enjoy the prestige that comes when students tell me they have got-
13 ten a lot out of my classes, or when colleagues tell me that they found
14 something insightful in one of my papers. I just need to remind myself
15 that my class is a very small part of any student’s life experience, and
16 all of my scholarship does not amount to a single brushstroke on the
17 canvas of world civilization. As these examples suggest, one has to be
18 prestigious *for* something good. Thus, while it is not completely inac-
19 curate to state that one’s goal is prestige, it is incomplete. Furthermore,
20 fame and prestige are problematic goals, because they are so dependent
21 upon the whims of others. Bloggs will undoubtedly get a certain amount
22 of prestige as an attorney. However, many other people share the view
23 expressed by one of Shakespeare’s characters: “The first thing we do,
24 let’s kill all the lawyers.”⁵⁶ The same will be true of any career Bloggs
25 chooses.⁵⁷

26 In our initial account of Bloggs, we stipulated that he does not
27 enjoy being an attorney. Some would say that this shows he has already
28 failed in his choice of goals, because pleasure is the only reasonable goal
29 of human action. We can certainly agree that it should be part of our
30 goal. But pleasure is similar to prestige in that both are incomplete goods.
31 Just as one must get prestige *for something*, so must one take pleasure *in*
32 *something*. There is the pleasure I get from scratching an itch. There is
33 the pleasure I get from watching Bergman’s *Hour of the Wolf*. There is
34 the pleasure I get from making love with my wife. There is the pleasure
35 I get from watching *The Simpsons*. There is the pleasure I get from a
36 good workout at the gym. There is the pleasure I get from a fine meal
37 at a gourmet restaurant. There is the pleasure I get from a greasy bacon
38 double cheeseburger at a diner. There is the pleasure I get from writing
39 this academic paper. There is the pleasure I get from talking and play-
40 ing with my children. Notice that the singular word “pleasure” masks a
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huge diversity in states of consciousness, which sometimes have little in common besides the fact that we feel positively about them. There is really no such thing as pleasure simpliciter; there is only the pleasure-of-X or the pleasure-of-Y.⁵⁸

“Be that as it may,” the hedonist replies, “our goal is still to maximize pleasure in some form.” There are at least three arguments against the hedonist, though. (1) All of us can imagine pleasures that we would prefer not to have. David Cronenberg’s 1996 film *Crash* explores the possibility of people who are sexually aroused by viewing and participating in fatal or crippling car crashes.⁵⁹ I think most of my readers would be horrified to discover that they had developed such a fetish (and would seek therapy to overcome it should it develop) even if it turned out to be an intense source of pleasure. If this example seems too fanciful to have any bite, use your own imagination, and be honest with yourself about your gut reaction to certain pleasures. (2) Kupperman discusses another counterexample to the thesis that pleasure should be our only goal: the happy clam.⁶⁰ Imagine our mental life reduced to its most basic functions, such as the pleasures of relieving hunger and eliminating waste (like a mollusk perhaps experiences). Let us stipulate that we will have no awareness of the kinds of pleasure that we have lost, so we will have no occasion for regret. Since we will only know about the simple pleasures we still have, they will seem the peak of delight to us. Nonetheless, almost all of us would be unwilling to trade our current lives (with their complex but often difficult-to-satisfy preferences) for that of a simple but satisfied clam. The best explanation for our sense that there are shameful pleasures and that one can maximize certain kinds of pleasure yet still be missing something is that pleasures differ not only in quantity and kind, but also in value. (3) Once we acknowledge that pleasures are of fundamentally different kinds, we see that maximizing pleasure is not intelligible as a goal in itself. In order for the concept of “maximizing X” to have content, there has to be a metric for X that allows us to choose between alternatives based upon how much X each offers. However, since pleasures are so different, there can be no common metric by which they can be measured and compared. Consider a concrete example. I sometimes have to choose between spending quality time with my children and working on scholarly projects. Should I spend an extra hour with my children that I would have spent working on a book? Interacting-with-my-children pleasure simply feels different from writing-a-book pleasure, so I cannot directly compare one to the other, and make the choice based on which would maximize pleasure in some

1 neutral sense. (Sometimes we hear talk of “hedons” of pleasure, but this
2 is at best a vague metaphor, and at worst a Procrustean quantitative
3 fetishism with no basis in actual experience.)

4 Does this mean that the choice of how to combine pleasures
5 in a life is irrational? No. Not all reasoned judgments can be settled
6 numerically. Any of Rembrandt’s self-portraits is better than any of C.
7 M. Coolidge’s paintings of dogs playing poker, even though we cannot
8 quantify the difference. Furthermore, in ordinary practical reasoning,
9 pleasure is normally not the first thing that comes into our consider-
10 ation. In thinking about how to balance my role as a father with my
11 role as a scholar, I am much more likely to start with assessments of the
12 values I assign to the activities themselves, and of what kinds of time
13 commitments I need to reach goals central to those values. I might be
14 concerned that my child is having problems with school, so I spend more
15 time helping with homework. Alternatively, perhaps I think I have a
16 distinctive scholarly contribution to make with a particular article, but I
17 have had trouble completing it, so one weekend I forgo a trip with my
18 children to a Renaissance Faire in order to spend more time writing. I
19 will get pleasure from either activity, but the pleasure is not the focus of
20 the deliberation. Pleasure becomes the focus only in special cases, like
21 when we are trying to decide what to do on our vacation (“Going to the
22 beach would be nice, but I also like skiing. Which one would I enjoy
23 more?”). I want to stress again that *pleasure is an important component*
24 *of living well*. Perhaps someone could rationally choose a life in which
25 there was little pleasure, but at the very least we would seriously ques-
26 tion that choice. But there is a world of difference between saying, (1)
27 it counts strongly against the rationality of a choice if it does not bring
28 pleasure of some kind (true), and (2) the maximization of pleasure can
29 and should be the sole determinant of all our choices (false).

30 I hope to have made two points in the preceding section. First,
31 the choice of human goals cannot be completely subjective, because
32 there are some (even ones that motivate many humans) that are simply
33 unintelligible as ultimate goals. For example, wealth is rational as an
34 intermediate goal, a means to achieving some further end, but it is simply
35 unintelligible to suggest that wealth is an ultimate goal in itself. Second,
36 we have seen that some things are reasonable to pursue as aspects of
37 our ultimate goals (like prestige and pleasure), but they are conceptu-
38 ally dependent on some other goal to give them concrete form. In the
39 next section, I shall argue in favor of six candidates for ultimate goals.

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Six Adequate Answers to the Why Question

We have been discussing a variety of unsatisfactory answers that Bloggs could give to our question, “Why are you an attorney?” but now let us approach from the opposite direction and consider what an adequate response would be. Suppose Bloggs says, “I am a defense attorney because I think it is important to protect the innocent. Even when I know my client is guilty, I feel like I am serving the community because I am a bulwark against the indiscriminate exercise of government power.” At long last, we have an intelligible, defensible answer. Bloggs has told us what he finds valuable in his career, and we can sympathetically understand it as an intrinsically valuable goal. When we imagined Bloggs saying that he is an attorney because it makes him the most money, it was legitimate for us to ask what he wants all that money for. In contrast, if Bloggs says that he is an attorney because he wants to help others and serve the community, it makes no sense for us to challenge him, “But why would you want *that*?” The difference is due to the fact that money is merely an instrumental good, while helping others is intelligible to us as an ultimate goal.

How does it affect the adequacy of Bloggs’s answer that he seems not to enjoy being an attorney? Tortured geniuses like Ludwig Wittgenstein (in real life) or Dr. Gregory House (in fiction) have a sort of romantic appeal to them. My intuition is that their lives can be worthwhile, even though racked with pain and sadness. However, I am not certain of this, and even I admit that their lives would be better if they were more pleasant. But the case of Bloggs need not be so extreme. Let us suppose Bloggs explains, “Being a defense attorney is very stressful and frustrating, so I often seem to not be enjoying myself. However, I get immense satisfaction when I successfully defend the rights of a client. At the moment I can’t imagine being satisfied by any other career.” Not only does this answer make sense, but we might think that Bloggs gets more satisfaction out of his work precisely because it is so challenging. Not everyone would concur, but for many of us a life without the stresses and pains that come from surmounting challenges sounds horrific. This perspective is illustrated in the *Twilight Zone* episode in which a criminal, “Rocky Valentine,” dies and awakens in a world where his every wish is instantly met: he has unlimited amounts of cash, he wins every time he gambles, police are powerless before him, and he is surrounded by beautiful women (who lack any personality that might lead them to resist

1 his whims). After a month, Rocky is almost insane with boredom, and
 2 tells the person whom he thinks is his guardian angel, “If I gotta stay
 3 here another day, I’m going to go nuts! I don’t belong in Heaven, see?
 4 I want to go to the other place.” The angel replies, “Heaven? Whatever
 5 gave you the idea that you were in Heaven, Mr. Valentine? This is ‘the
 6 other place!’”⁶¹

7 Being a defense attorney is an example of what Aristotelians call
 8 a “political” life (in a broad sense of that term). While we should heed
 9 Kupperman’s admonition that “it would seem doctrinaire to claim to
 10 be able to limit in advance the number of major types of very good
 11 lives,”⁶² it would be potentially useful to many true “lovers of wisdom”
 12 if we could categorize some of the more plausible candidates. Three
 13 kinds of goods have been serious contenders for intrinsic value in the
 14 pre-modern Western tradition: (1) theoretical understanding and inquiry
 15 (as might be exemplified in the life of the theoretical physicist, the pure
 16 mathematician, and the academic philosopher); (2) practical activity
 17 with others for the good of one’s community (as could be seen in the
 18 life of a senator, a bureaucrat at the FDA, and a defense attorneys like
 19 our friend Bloggs); and (3) religious devotion (as might be found in the
 20 life of a monk, hermit, or monastic nun). These goods can be combined
 21 in certain kinds of lives. No matter how “pure” our research, most of
 22 us in academia have to walk back down into “the Cave” and take our
 23 turn as chair or dean. Similarly, Jesuits like Frederick Copleston famously
 24 combine religious devotion with theoretical inquiry.

25 In addition to the traditional three candidates, there are other
 26 kinds of goods that have been proposed as intrinsically valuable. (4)
 27 G. E. Moore suggested that it is “universally admitted that the proper
 28 appreciation of a beautiful object is a good thing in itself.”⁶³ He was
 29 perhaps overoptimistic about how universal this view is, but it is cer-
 30 tainly a common and plausible one. It is rare that one will be able to
 31 organize one’s entire life around just the appreciation of beauty; however,
 32 it is undoubtedly a valuable component of a good life. (5) Because we
 33 value the appreciation of beauty in art, most of us would acknowledge
 34 that the production of art also has intrinsic value. The appreciation and
 35 production of art are related activities, but not identical. I could have
 36 very good taste in music without being able to create it. In addition,
 37 artists are not always insightful about other arts or the work of other
 38 artists. But someone who said that she is working to produce beautiful
 39 paintings, sculptures, pieces of music, poems, or novels would not have
 40 to provide a further justification for her actions.

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I think most of my readers will appreciate the value of the preceding categories. However, I want to argue now for a more controversial type of intrinsic value: (6) skillful activity in a practice. I am here appropriating Alasdair MacIntyre's specific notion of a "practice," by which he means a "cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized."⁶⁴ "Internal goods" are those that can only be obtained through a specific practice. External goods can in principle be obtained in other ways; the activity is only a means to external goods. We can illustrate the distinction with the practice of teaching. An external good of teaching would be earning a salary. An internal good would be the experience of finally "reaching" a student who was initially resistant to learning.⁶⁵

Not every human activity has internal goods. Changing the bulb on my headlight is not a practice, because the only good that results is external (even though important): I can see when I drive at night. Nothing will be lost if I achieve the same goal in other ways (as by hiring a mechanic to fix it). Internal goods arise at least in part because practices present challenges to humans of potentially infinite complexity. Because practices are complex in this way,

. . . human powers to achieve excellence [in a given practice], and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is.⁶⁶

Let's consider the example of Western chess in more detail. Playing chess well is obviously a challenging activity. This is part of the reason that chess aficionados are intrigued by and admire especially good moves or ingenious solutions to chess problems. Chess is also an endless source of fascination because, although the basic rules have not changed since the nineteenth century, the tactics of chess continually evolve. One test of whether an activity is a practice is whether it is appropriate to say of at least one practitioner, "Not only was she really good at it, but she revolutionized the way we do it." For example, Wilhelm Steinitz, the first World Chess Champion, revolutionized the game with his subtle positional approach.⁶⁷

Some of MacIntyre's examples of practices—including physics, chemistry, biology, painting, music, and "politics in the Aristotelian



1 sense”—are consistent with the valuable ways of life we discussed
 2 above.⁶⁸ However, MacIntyre’s examples of chess and football fall outside
 3 our categories (1) through (5), as would similar practices like playing
 4 poker, cooking, bonsai, pumpkin carving, and jiu-jitsu. I would further
 5 expand the list of practices in directions not suggested by MacIntyre.
 6 I have no doubt that Plato and Aristotle, at least, would find account-
 7 tancy a vulgar and banausic activity. I would argue, though, that being
 8 an accountant could be a practice. Because the business world is always
 9 changing, accounting procedures are always in flux, and it requires a
 10 thoughtful approach to determine what are legitimate and illegitimate
 11 ways of measuring revenues, expenses, assets, liabilities, retained earnings,
 12 etc. (Luca Pacioli’s *Summa Arithmetica* of 1494 revolutionized account-
 13 ing by publicizing and standardizing the method of double-entry book-
 14 keeping.) Similarly, the various forms of engineering have not surfaced
 15 on traditional lists of intrinsically valuable activities, but the complex
 16 and ever-changing challenges presented by engineering problems make
 17 solving them a practice.⁶⁹ If engaging in practices is intrinsically valu-
 18 able, chemical engineers, CPAs, and poker players who are devoted to
 19 their respective crafts and do them well can take their place alongside
 20 philosopher-kings and saints as paradigms of lives that are well-led.⁷⁰

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Conclusion

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25 Let’s return to an example I used at the beginning of this paper: the
 26 claim “pure carbon dioxide is poisonous” is true. This claim is only true
 27 because there are animals like human beings; there would be no content
 28 to the notion of “poisonous” in a universe without animals. However, the
 29 claim is not, for that reason, subjective. Long before any human being
 30 or culture knew that there was such a thing as CO₂, it was true that
 31 inhaling pure carbon dioxide would be lethal. I have argued in this paper
 32 that claims like “Producing beautiful works of art is a worthwhile goal”
 33 are similarly anthropocentric. This claim is true only because humans
 34 exist, and because humans have the needs and capacities that we have;
 35 however, its truth is not relative to either individual whims or cultural
 36 fads. Producing beautiful works of art is intelligible as an ultimate goal
 37 in a way that the mere accumulation of wealth is simply not.

38 There are far more potential questions and objections to the theses
 39 of this paper than I can answer here or even anticipate. But I want to
 40 conclude by addressing one counterargument that I suspect will have

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particular urgency for many readers: “You seem to expect everyone to justify themselves to others and to their standards of rationality. Suppose Bloggs *did* insist that he wanted money for the sake of money? Suppose Herostratus *did* say that he preferred fame to prestige? Suppose someone said that his overarching goal in life is to count the blades of grass in various geometrically shaped plots?⁷¹ Why should it carry any weight that these answers seem incoherent or unsatisfactory to you or to anyone else?”

To answer this objection, we need to take a step back and consider the nature of philosophy itself. For centuries, people have gone out of their way to denounce Descartes and accuse others of being Cartesians. But many of these same critics accept without reflection the fundamental subjectivism of Descartes’s approach. To really exorcise the ghost of Descartes, we must reject his view of philosophy as a solitary monologue, in which each person is answerable only to his own standards. As both the *Analects* of Confucius and the dialogues of Plato show (in their distinctive ways), philosophy is a discussion between humans attempting to reach a shared understanding. The attempt is not guaranteed to be successful, and understanding is not identical with agreement. In our individual lives and human history we increasingly recognize the extent to which others disagree with our view of the world. But we are able to recognize this only because we understand the values and perspectives that we do not agree with. To give up on understanding others is not to respect them; it is to objectify them, to treat them as we do rocks, plants, or hurricanes, whose “actions” can be causally explained, but not justified. To treat others as humans is to treat them as beings whom you can potentially ask, “Why are you doing that?” and expect an intelligible answer. Their answer may surprise you, challenge you, or disturb you, but until you have understood it, you have not done justice to your shared humanity with them.

And if you don’t agree with that, tell me “Why?” and we will begin a dialogue aimed at achieving a shared understanding.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Chenyang Li and Peimin Ni for their hard work in putting this volume together. Professor Ni was generous in providing many thoughtful comments on this paper, resulting in some significant improvements (though neither he nor Professor Li is responsible for any

1 faults that remain). Of course, I am especially grateful to Joel Kupperman
 2 for his outstanding work on both Western and Chinese philosophy, as
 3 well as providing a living example of how to be a Confucian gentleman
 4 in the contemporary world.

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Notes

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10 1. “People often have a sense of having experienced how much value,
 11 or lack of value, various things have. In some of these cases, it looks reasonable
 12 to suppose that they have got it pretty much right; that what they value really
 13 does have value, or that what they disvalue really is boring, empty, or abhor-
 14 rent” (Kupperman 2006, 143). Elsewhere, Kupperman remarks, “there seems no
 15 harm in speaking of value facts, as long as we bear in mind that to speak of
 16 the fact that X has high value . . . is equivalent to saying that X really does
 17 have high value” (Kupperman 1999b, 81). Formulations like this simply “draw
 18 a contrast between what Smith or Bloggs or a casual onlooker might take the
 19 value of some experiences to be, on the one hand, and some more authoritative
 20 judgment, on the other” (Kupperman 1999b, 80).

21 2. “Broad general rules provide a useful starting point and core of any
 22 morality; but there should be more to a morality than a core. . . . There is no
 23 requirement in logic or in the nature of moral thought that maxims take the
 24 form of general rules. Nor, if we do rely on rules, can we infer that for any
 25 given morally problematic case there is a single general rule that clearly and
 26 incontrovertibly is appropriate to that case” (Kupperman 1991, 77–78).

27 3. “Even if one accepts Aristotle’s favorable evaluation of the highly
 28 intellectual contemplative life, surely it is also true that lives that center on
 29 aesthetic creation, aesthetic experience, effective political and social activities,
 30 or on styles of personal relations can be very good. . . .” (Kupperman 1991,
 31 134. See also 144–145.)

32 4. Kupperman notes both that “It is easy to jump to conclusions about
 33 someone else’s life because we have missed nuances that are important to its
 34 value,” but also that “No one has ever advanced a coherent and convincing
 35 set of reasons for saying that judgments of this sort are nonsense or have to be
 36 false” (Kupperman 1991, 133).

37 5. Kupperman advocates what he describes as “a modest skepticism”
 38 about our knowledge of value, which “can be conducive to keeping an open
 39 mind.” However, he quickly adds that “complete skepticism would be unwar-
 40 ranted” (Kupperman 2006, 138).

41 6. My typology of realism and anti-realism in this paper is not meant
 42 to be exhaustive. I am simply focusing on what I think are some of the more
 common and plausible positions.

7. Kupperman 1999b, 81.

8. Kupperman 1999b, 81. Kupperman also notes: “It is natural to speak of ‘values’ in connection with our thought about and experience of what is or is not of value; and then it is easy to go from that to thinking of values as like things, furniture of a peculiar sort among the other furniture of the universe. But the objects of our thought and experience, even when they are empirical features of the real world, are not always things. In this respect it is healthy to compare values to the rate of inflation or to magnetic fields. Neither seems particularly furniturelike, and each is an interpretative construct related to (less conspicuously interpreted) underlying phenomena” (Kupperman 1999b, 74).

9. Kupperman 1999b, 82.

10. See Wiggins 1987; McDowell 1998; Putnam 1992.

11. For a defense of the interpretation of Xunzi I sketch here, see Van Norden 2011, Chapter X, 163–183; Van Norden 2000; Van Norden 1993.

12. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 269. (Translation slightly modified.)

13. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 274.

14. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 272.

15. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 299.

16. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 281–282. (Translation slightly modified.)

17. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 284.

18. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 276.

19. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 283.

20. Kupperman 2000. Kupperman also makes passing reference to Xunzi in Kupperman 2001, 37, 77 and Kupperman 1999a, 101.

21. Gallup Poll, conducted December 2010 <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/145286/>>. In 2010, only 16 percent of those polled believed that a purely naturalistic view of evolution accounts for the human species.

22. In 2004, Nathaniel Abraham, who holds an MS in biology and a PhD in philosophy from an accredited university, was hired by Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution on the basis of his credentials, but he was dismissed when he revealed to his superior that he is a Creationist (Boston Globe, December 7, <http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/12/07/biologist_fired_for_beliefs_suit_says/>). In addition, Benjamin Stein (a law professor and former New York Times columnist) co-wrote and starred in *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, a film criticizing evolutionary theory and championing intelligent design (Frankowski, Miller, Stein & Ruloff 2008).

23. Kupperman asks, “What logic connects the claim that very often we cannot expect consensus in judgments of value with the conclusion that such judgments cannot be correct? There surely is no logical contradiction in the notion of correct propositions about which, nevertheless, people cannot entirely agree” (Kupperman 2006, 140–141).

24. Charles Sanders Peirce was the first to emphasize that inference to the best explanation (or “abduction” as he called it) is a form of argument distinct from deduction. See Fann 1970.

- 1 25. Mackie 1991, sketches an inference to the best explanation version of
 2 what he labels (somewhat misleadingly) the “argument from relativity.” However,
 3 he simply asserts that moral disagreement is best explained by the absence of
 4 moral facts, without discussing any detailed examples to make his case.
- 5 26. Hume 1983, 113. (Emphasis in original.)
- 6 27. Herodotus, *History*, Book III.
- 7 28. David Wong, 1986, has argued that the disagreements between
 8 Western and East Asian cultures over individualism and filial piety are sufficient
 9 to support “relativism.” However, he has confirmed (in conversation) my sense
 10 that what he means by “relativism” is much like what I would label “pluralism.”
- 11 29. Montaigne 1958, 156.
- 12 30. Montaigne 1958, 155.
- 13 31. Kupperman’s extensive and insightful work in comparative philosophy
 14 is a further illustration of this approach to cultural differences. See, for example,
 15 Kupperman 1999a and Kupperman 2001.
- 16 32. For a thoughtful discussion of how contemporary anthropology has
 17 helped challenge narrow views of human nature, see Clifford Geertz 1973.
- 18 33. See Freeman 1986; Malotki 1983; Grinker 2001; Spiro 1992; Martin
 19 1986.
- 20 34. Brown 1991, Chapter 6.
- 21 35. Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005, 256.
- 22 36. *Mengzi* 6A1. Translation from Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2005,
 23 144–145.
- 24 37. Some philosophers interpret *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* as being much more
 25 similar in their views of human nature than I suggest here. For one such account,
 26 see Ni 2009. Ni also presents a provocative account of *Mengzi* as holding a non-
 27 cognitivist view of human nature, according to which the claim that “human
 28 nature is good” is neither true nor false, but is rather a “performative” recom-
 29 mendation. For my own (cognitivist) account of *Mengzi*, see Van Norden 2011.
 30 In addition, I argue in Van Norden 2007, that, although traditional Confucians
 31 were not pluralists themselves, the core insights of Confucianism can be incor-
 32 porated into a pluralistic philosophy.
- 33 38. Kupperman 2010, 189–190.
- 34 39. Hutton 2002, 373.
- 35 40. Hutton 2002, 374.
- 36 41. I hasten to note that neither Aristotle nor Aquinas was an anthro-
 37 pocentric realist about values. This is reflected in the important role that “final
 38 causes” play in Aristotelian physics and in the “function argument” of the
 39 *Nicomachean Ethics*. What I am doing in this paper is appropriating a particular
 40 aspect of Aristotle’s approach that does not in itself require anything beyond
 41 anthropocentric realism about values.
- 42 42. Supertramp 1979.
- 43 43. Hume 1978, Book II, Part III, Section III, 416. (Emphasis in original.)

44. Hume 1978, Book I, Part I, Section I, 1. 1
45. Hume 1978, Book I, Part I, Section VII, 19. 2
46. Hume 1978, Book II, Part III, Section III, 415. For example, if I have a “complex idea” that consists of a mental image of the Space Needle in Seattle, my idea is true, because it is an accurate copy of a sensory impression of the Space Needle; however, if I have an idea of the Space Needle in *Portland*, my idea is false, because it does not accurately copy any sensory impression. 3
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47. Hume 1978, Book III, Part I, Section I, 458. 7
48. Hume 1978, Book II, Part III, Section III, 415. 8
49. In order to be fully adequate, any account of the Hypothetical Imperative would have to be much more complex, and could not treat our goals in isolation. However, all I need for my argument is the acknowledgement that we cannot do without some version of reasoning about the best means to achieve our goals. 9
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50. The truth of the claim is anthropocentric, though. If there were no human beings, there would be no fact about how long humans have to train for them (and also no truth about how long a “marathon” is). 14
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51. Another potential objection is that the “ought” of the Hypothetical Imperative is non-moral. If I choose to run in a marathon but fail to adequately train, I am guilty of a failure of practical rationality, but not guilty of a moral failure. This is accurate, but I am not attempting to defend a distinction between moral and other kinds of value. It is sufficient for my purposes if I establish that there are objective values of some kind. 17
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52. Hume 1978, Book III, Part I, Section I, 459. 22
53. Hume 1978, Book II, Part III, Section III, 416. 23
54. Hume 1978, Book II, Part III, Section III, 416. 24
55. Lewis 1992, Letter XIV, 73. 25
56. “Dick the Butcher,” in *Henry VI, Part II* (Act IV, Scene 2). 26
57. Does Bloggs aim at genuine prestige or specious prestige? In other words, would he rather be admired for a good quality that he actually has, or for a quality people mistakenly think he has? Here I think we should say the same thing we said about fame: we can imagine someone seeking specious prestige, but we cannot imagine them rationally preferring specious prestige to merited prestige. 27
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58. Aristotle puts this rather poetically by saying that the pleasure that accompanies an activity is like the bloom upon the cheek of a healthy youngster (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.5, 1174b30). Aquinas puts it more technically by saying that pleasure is not the “essence” of living well, but rather a “proper accident” of it (*Summa Theologiae* II-I, Question 2, Article 6). 33
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59. Cronenberg, Thomas, & Lantos (1996) is not to be confused with the film of the same name by Paul Haggis (2005). 37
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60. Kupperman 2006, 3–4. 39
61. Beaumont 1960. 40
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- 1 62. Kupperman 1991, 134.
 2 63. Moore 1903, §114, 189.
 3 64. MacIntyre 1984, 187.
 4 65. The internal goods of a practice can be ignored, as is illustrated by
 5 the character “Elizabeth” in the film *Bad Teacher*: “When I first started teaching,
 6 I thought that I was doing it for all the right reasons: shorter hours, summers
 7 off, no accountability . . .” (Kasdan, Eisenberg & Stupnitsky [2011]). MacIntyre
 8 would say, I think, that teaching is a practice, but “Elizabeth” does not treat
 9 it as such.
 10 66. MacIntyre 1984, 187.
 11 67. In a comparison of Steinitz to one of his leading opponents, someone
 12 said, “Kolisch is a highwayman and points the pistol at your breast. Steinitz is
 13 a pickpocket, he steals a pawn and wins a game with it” (Anderssen, 1887).
 14 68. MacIntyre 1984, 187–188. It might seem that any human activity
 15 (other than the most mindlessly simple and repetitious) counts as a “practice.”
 16 However, some engaging human activities will fail. Stamp collecting may be
 17 fun, but I do not think that it is challenging (except insofar as one needs
 18 money to buy certain rare stamps) or complex enough (because the standards
 19 and techniques of stamp collecting do not evolve).
 20 69. A classic defense of the value of engineering, both for its internal and
 21 its external goods, is Florman 1994.
 22 70. It will be evident to students of Confucianism that there is much more
 23 that can be said about the similarities and differences between the Aristotelian
 24 and Confucian views of the legitimate goals of human life. I explore these in
 25 more detail in Van Norden 2013.
 26 71. The example is borrowed from Rawls 1971, 432.

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