

CHAPTER FIVE: REASONING ABOUT ENDS

5.0 Introduction

Can we bring instrumental reasoning to bear on the selection of ends, and especially upon the selection of final or ultimate ends? Widely shared assumptions suggest not. Remember that, in the terminology introduced in the last chapter, an *end* is an objective sought or aimed for its own sake, that a *final end* is one that is not sought or aimed at for the sake of any further objective, and that ultimate ends are a subset of final ends. Those facts, in combination with the uncontroversial premise that instrumental reasoning consists of adapting means to ends, make it natural to infer that instrumental reasoning can have nothing to say about final ends. However far instrumental reasoning can reach, it will have to proceed in terms of some further end. No end or objective to which some tract of instrumental reasoning leads can be final, for anything to which it

leads will be adopted or selected for its conduciveness to the further end. Accordingly, if there is any bearing of practical reason upon final or ultimate ends, it must be along some non-instrumental route.

Matters look more desperate yet – so far as the rationality of final ends goes – for those who also endorse *instrumentalism*, which can be defined in terms of two theses:

- (1) Rational agents have reason to adopt means to their ends. This is the instrumental function of practical reason.
- (2) There is no other function of practical reason than regimenting means in terms of ends. In particular, there is no non-instrumental function of reason by which ends are determined or picked out.

Instrumentalists can be expected to accept the argument that instrumental reason cannot bear upon ends, but will deny that practical reason affords us any non-instrumental routes to the selection or identification of final ends. What cannot be supplied by instrumental reason cannot be supplied by reason at all, but must have some non-rational source.¹

Despite the naturalness of the inferences, I think them mistaken. Instrumental reasoning can bear upon ends, including final and ultimate ends. Reasoning about final ends is open even to the theorist who confines his account of practical reason within the

¹ To say that the selection of an end has some non-rational source is not, of course, to say that its selection or pursuit is *irrational*, for that would require that there be some way in which practical reason does bear upon ends, by ruling out some and presumably not others as irrational.

strictures of instrumentalism. Drawing together strands of argument from earlier chapters, what I shall try to do is, first, show that this is possible and second, that it is plausible that the resulting structure of ends has intriguing parallels to what is recommended in eudaemonist theories. We shall find that instrumental reasoning, proceeding from a normal set of motivations, can lead to an over-arching ultimate end, including within itself other ends, sought or pursued for their own sakes, and that among these are practices expressive of enduring traits of character.

However successfully that project may be carried out, there remain loose ends. In the remainder of the chapter, I shall try to briefly address some of them, with the aim, not of resolving them, but of marking out areas and directions for further exploration.

5.1 Instrumental Reasoning About Final Ends

If instrumental reasoning can bear upon final ends, there must be some defect in the argument against such bearing sketched above. In fact, there are at least two. The first is a confusion of form with content. The second comes from overlooking a particular class of ends.

Suppose that some means, M , is adopted because it promotes an end, E_1 . Schematically, something like that will be true whenever instrumental reasoning supports the adoption of some means. However, it tells you nothing about the content of the means, M . It may be that M , which genuinely does promote E_1 , consists in the pursuit of E_2 for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else, that is, as a final end. That will

be possible in principle when the pursuit of E_2 as a final end is sufficiently conducive to E_I .² The end, E_I , provides a reason for the adoption of the means, but that does not imply that once the adoption has occurred, the means itself will consist, wholly or partly, of something done for the sake of E_I . The possibility that it will not is overlooked due to the tacit assumption that the form of an instrumental argument, that the means is adopted for the sake of an end, dictates the content of the means adopted.

A second reason that the possibility of instrumental reasoning to a final end is overlooked is through failure to consider a class of ends from which the reasoning might proceed. Some ends organize action on an ongoing basis – health or wealth, for example. Others, however, may be definitively achieved and, when achieved, no longer function as ends. If the end is to take a walk, then, once the walk is taken, one no longer has that end. Overlooking definitively achievable ends may contribute to failure to recognize the possibility of instrumental reasoning to a final end. Simply put, adopting some final end, E_2 , may achieve what is aimed at in some definitively achievable end, E_I . If so, E_2 will remain to direct later action, while E_I , in the service of which it was selected, vanishes from the agent's body of ends. E_2 will not, on an ongoing basis, be directed to the service of E_I because E_I , having been definitively achieved, is no longer an end.

In principle, then, instrumental reasoning can bear upon final ends and thereby at least potentially upon ultimate ends. So far, however, that is only in principle. The fact that we can conceive of instrumental reasoning leading to the selection of a final end does

² I mean that the pursuit of E_2 as a final end must be conducive enough to E_I that its adoption as a means to E_I is rational. That would generally be untrue if there were markedly superior ways of achieving or promoting E_I .

not tell us that there are any interesting cases in which it does. For that, we need to go beyond any purely formal approach.

5.11 Schmidtz's *Maieutic Objectives*

David Schmidtz has noted the same two points, that there is a “distinction between *pursuing* a final end (which by definition we do for its own sake) and *choosing* a final end (which we might do for various reasons),”³ and that there is a possibility of “eliminating [an] earlier goal as an item to pursue [by achieving it].”⁴

These points are exploited to call attention to the existence of *maieutic objectives*,⁵ which are “achieved through a process of coming to have other [objectives].”⁶ Among the plausible examples he offers are the goals of settling upon a career, of selecting a spouse, and of finding something to live for. One seeks to settle upon a career only until one has done so, to select a spouse only until a suitable and willing spouse has been selected, to find something to live for only until something has been found. In each case, the point is that the initial goal, the maieutic objective, no longer structures or guides action but is replaced by something appropriate to what has been settled upon. One seeks to do well in

³ Schmidtz 1995, 61. In Schmidtz's usage, a “final end” is just what I call an “end,” but the point remains that pursuing something for its own sake is compatible with its pursuit having been selected for some other purpose.

⁴ Schmidtz, 1995, 64.

⁵ Schmidtz refers to “maieutic ends” rather than “maieutic objectives.” This is because, generally, he uses “end” to refer to what I term “objectives.” There is no implication in his usage that an end is sought or pursued for its own sake, and thus none that a maieutic end (his usage) must be pursued for its own sake. I have adjusted his terminology to match mine by speaking consistently of “maieutic objectives,” which may or may not be aimed at for their own sakes, rather than of “maieutic ends.”

⁶ Schmidtz 1995, 61.

the chosen career, to live happily with one's spouse, to promote the cause or causes one has selected.

Schmidtz incorporates these themes into a series of models for the structure of a person's ends and concludes that it is possible, in principle, for there to be no "loose ends," ends which are simply given, but which are not in any way the product of rational deliberation. Though ends which are simply given are necessary to get the deliberative process underway, it need not *remain* the case that any ends are simply given: every end can be the object of a choice which is both rational *and* instrumental.⁷

So far, this seems right. I have no quarrels with Schmitz over either the existence of maieutic objectives or the use to which he puts them. What I am concerned to do is not to show that he is wrong, though there are, no doubt, matters in the neighborhood on which we would differ, but to go beyond him in certain respects. What he seeks to show is that there are maieutic objectives that may lead to the instrumental rationalization of a system of ends. For a particular person, the needed maieutic objectives may be present or they may not. Schmitz believes that the maieutic objective of finding something to live for will often be present in contemporary circumstances, but I think he would agree that it may not be, and, when it is not, no further instrumental argument (on that subject) can be addressed to the person who sees no need to find something to live for.

If, for the moment, we take "finding something to live for" to stand in for coming to be motivated to some degree by moral ideals,⁸ shaping one's actions on the basis of

⁷ Schmitz 1995, 69-79.

⁸ Finding something to live for is 'standing in' for coming to be morally motivated because the kind of moral motivation I have in mind is not readily expressed, without further elaboration, in Schmitz's

some conception of what is right or good or admirable, as distinct from what is effective or efficient with respect to some given set of ends, then what I wish to show is that moral motivation, or the kind of reasoning that can lead to moral motivation is not that contingent. A very general problem, faced by almost all, generates the need to think about what to live for, what one's life will be about. I shall try to approach it from two directions, first, by saying something about what it is for there to be something one's life is about, and second, by exhibiting the problem, and the reasoning from the problem, that leads to there being something one's life is about in that sense.

5.2 *An Ultimate End: The Shape of a Life*

An ultimate end, in the system of a person's ends, is the final end to which all other objectives are means, whether external or constitutive, and whether themselves sought or pursued for their own sakes or not

Consider an *ideally structured ultimate end*. An ideally structured ultimate end would establish trade-off or priority relations among all of the more particular ends that constitute or contribute to it for any situation the agent might face. In its terms, it would be possible to provide an answer as to what to do, what is most important, what is most worth seeking, having or risking and the like, when the decision must be made under some

terminology. Since he refers to all objectives (my terminology) as 'ends', and uses 'final ends' to denote those objectives sought for their own sake, it is more awkward to express the ideas of (a) objectives sought both for their own sake and for the sake of something else (though he acknowledges their existence – "[a]n end could be final ... and at the same time could be instrumental, pursued as a means to some further end" [Schmidtz 1995, 66]), (b) objectives sought for their own sake and not for the sake of anything else ('final ends', in my terminology), and (c) an objective sought for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else, and to which all other objectives within the system of ends and means which shapes a person's actions bear the relation of being means (an 'ultimate end', in my terminology).

degree of ignorance. In all the situations of a life, guidance could be found in an ideally structured ultimate end.

Even this is not sufficient for such an ultimate end. Providing some decision principle or other is not enough. If all that is wanted is a decision principle to arbitrate between possible conflicts or tensions between ends, that can easily be provided. For example, we could assign importance on the basis of an alphabetical ordering. An ideally structured ultimate end would have at least two further features. It would be embodied in the agent's motivations so that she would actually decide, and view it as reasonable to decide, in terms of the rankings that it generated. Second, it would be reflectively stable – that is, it would not be subject to being (reasonably) altered or revised in the light of further experience or reflection.

Clearly, if one had an ideally structured ultimate end, that would be enough to say that one had an ultimate end. Equally clearly, no one has an ideally structured ultimate end, if only because the world can surprise us in ways for which we are unprepared by any prior thought or experience.⁹ We may be called upon to choose between options that we never thought of as being in conflict, never ranked or prioritized with respect to one another. An ideally structured ultimate end sets, so to speak, the Platonic ideal for an ultimate end compared to which all actual ends fall short.

But that we cannot have an ultimate end in that sense does not imply that we cannot have ultimate ends at all. It implies *either* that we cannot, and therefore do not,

⁹ The reasons discussed in Chapter Two for denying that we can have a complete preference ordering are also pertinent.

have any ultimate ends *or* that something that falls short of being an ideally structured ultimate end may still count as an ultimate end.

I argued earlier¹⁰ that one does not have an ultimate end who merely has two or more separate ends. To make sense of saying a person has an ultimate end, it has to *do* something, has to make a difference to what the person decides or would decide. Thus, the behavior of a person with an ultimate end cannot be explained equally well in terms of the ends that are said to constitute her ultimate end, operating separately. Specifically, I argued that the ultimate end would have to establish some trade-off or priority relations among the separate ends (I shall abbreviate by calling these ‘priority relations’).

However, having established some priority relations among separate ends is still not sufficient for a person to have an ultimate end. For it may be that priority relations have only been established among various subsets of her total system of ends, that there are, so to speak, ‘islands’ of coherence and prioritized relations among certain of her ends that amount to final ends to which all of *their* constituent or contributing ends are means, but that there is no over-arching end with respect to which all other ends are means. There may, for example, be priority relations established among her ends, *A*, *B* and *C*, and also among her ends, *D*, *E* and *F*. Those priority relations may be sufficient for the existence of a final end, *G*, unifying *A*, *B* and *C*, and for the existence of a different final end, *H*, unifying *D*, *E* and *F*, but so long as she has two or more final ends (*G* and *H*), she can have no ultimate end. In other words, the question whether a person has an ultimate end

¹⁰ In Chapter Four, § 4.32.

may re-emerge with respect to ends which themselves include others,¹¹ and again, there is no point in talking about an ultimate end unless it makes a difference, unless what the person would do, given the ultimate end, differs from what she would do, given the more particular ends alone (though the particular ends we are here considering themselves embody priority relations among other ends that may, partially or entirely, constitute them).

The priority relations among the person's ends must go beyond the establishment of local islands of coherence among her ends. She must also recognize the relevance of considerations of ordering and harmonization among her existing ends and be open to the possibility that the set of ends will stand in need of modification, revision or alterations in the relative importance of its members. The modification or revision called for may include taking steps to acquire an end that one does not already have, if this promises to better integrate her other ends or taking steps to eliminate some end if its pursuit interferes too greatly with others. It may be better to call this being on the way to having an ultimate end rather than having one, and, when I have occasion to refer to this fact, I shall speak of the *developmental process* involved,¹² but in one important respect, it doesn't much matter. Whether conceived as having an ultimate end or as a process the ideal terminus of which¹³ is having an ultimate end, it establishes a dimension along which

¹¹ Though the locution of 'one end including others' would most naturally be understood to refer to a constitutive relation between the included and the including ends, I use it here to cover both ways, the external and the constitutive, that one end may be a means to another.

¹² Cf. the discussions in Chapter Four, §§ 4.2 and 4.4, and also, in the same chapter, note 39.

¹³ That ideal terminus, of course, may never actually be reached.

improvements in the entire system of one's ends can be assessed, and thus does something that none of the particular ends by themselves, nor all of them together, considered only as a collection of ends, could do. It makes a difference to what she has and recognizes having reason to do. I shall abbreviate by calling action in accordance with reasons of this kind, which derive from having the ultimate end or undergoing the developmental process, *action according to the end or in terms of the end*.¹⁴

Is anything more required? At least this much, I think. We also need to insist on more modest analogues of the motivational and reflective stability requirements introduced in connection with an ideally structured ultimate end.

The ideally structured ultimate end is so embodied in the corresponding agent's motivation that she would always actually decide, and view it as reasonable to decide, in its terms. For someone who is, perhaps, only on the way to having an ultimate end, and not an ideally structured one at that, that is too demanding a requirement. First, given that the end falls short of ideal structuring, there may not be an answer (or not one accessible to the agent) as to what acting in its terms is, and second, given that the agent may only be

¹⁴ Should we *always* speak of the developmental process rather than of the ultimate end, on the ground that nothing short of the unattainable ideally structured ultimate end is beyond conceivable improvement, nor, therefore, beyond alteration? I do not see that that is required, for it is relevant *how* the end is supposed to change. To use a standard example, your end may be to have an entertaining evening, and varying possibilities for entertainment may present themselves – a concert or a play, for example. Even after the concert has been selected, new information (the play got a five-star rating from your favorite reviewer) may lead you to alter your plans, but that does not necessarily mean that your end has changed. What has changed is the way in which, rather than whether, you plan to be entertained. Going to a concert or to a play are competing specifications of the end of having an entertaining evening. It would be neither appropriate nor necessary to speak of a change of end unless something else, such as preparing for tomorrow's meeting, replaced having an entertaining evening. Similarly, if the ultimate end is expressed with sufficient generality, it may well be that only rather radical change would appropriately count as a change in the end: lesser alterations could be accommodated as changes in the way the ultimate end is specified rather than in the end itself.

on the way to having the ultimate end, there may be slippage between the agent's actual motivations and those she would have at some later and more complete stage of the developmental process. What is reasonable to require is that the ultimate end or the developmental process be motivationally salient in approximately the sense in which Williams (1990) has claimed that reasons must be internal: there must either be some motivation to act in accord with the end, or, if there is no such actual motivation, there must at least be a sound deliberative passage from the agent's goals, preferences, dispositions, etc., to the acquisition of such motivation.

Similarly, it is too much to demand reflective stability of ultimate ends in some sense precluding reasonable alteration.¹⁵ The perfect stability of the ideally structured ultimate end is only a function of the fact that, definitionally, it is provided against any changes in knowledge or situation, and so is never faced with anything radically surprising or wholly unanticipated. We, however, have no guarantee, definitional or otherwise, against the wholly unanticipated and, in particular, no guarantee against facing something wholly unanticipated in the light of which an ultimate end might reasonably be altered.

There are, however, several reasons for expecting a substantial measure of stability in ultimate ends. The most important may be that part of what is sought in an ultimate end *is* stability – for the ends by which one guides oneself to be mutually supporting rather

¹⁵ Part of the reason is that it is less than clear what it would mean to preclude alteration when it is a developmental process – that is, a process of alteration – that is being supposed to stably preclude alteration. No doubt, something could be said along these lines as to the features or directions of change that must be included in the developmental process in order for it to count as unaltered, and change from which would, therefore, count as alteration, but I shall trouble neither to work out anything of the kind nor to attempt a showing that nothing of the kind is available, for there is a deeper problem, discussed in the text, with precluding alteration in ultimate ends.

than evanescent or interfering, for the ultimate end is something to guide one's life by, not just parts or episodes within it.¹⁶ Other reasons are derived from the ultimacy and the generality of the end. Ultimacy limits the class of possible reasons for alteration, since there can be no other pursuits in terms of which to question or reject it – in contrast with all alterations of non-ultimate ends or objectives, which may occur in the light of other ends. The generality of the end insures that most changes will not count as changes of the end, but rather as improvements in the way it is specified or achieved.¹⁷ So, though, on one hand, we cannot expect perfect stability, on the other, we must suppose that the ultimate end has *substantial* reflective stability. To go further than that rather general and imprecise claim, to address the question of exactly how much reflective stability is to be expected, is to go beyond the reach of any considerations that I can see to be available. That we expect substantial reflective stability is a general claim, applying across many cases; what substantial reflective stability will amount to in particular cases will depend on the details of those cases.

In summary, to attribute ultimate ends (or the corresponding developmental processes) to real persons, the conditions that need to be satisfied include the person having reasons in terms of the end, the motivational salience of those reasons, and substantial reflective stability of the end. Where any of those features is absent, we have

¹⁶ The eudaemonist's conception of the ultimate end is, from the beginning, a conception of something that satisfactorily answers to concerns about living one's life, and not just parts of it, well. See § 4.2 and *NE* 1140a 25-28: "Now it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of things conduce to health or strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general."

¹⁷ See note 15.

reason to question whether the person either has or is moving toward having an ultimate end. Where they are all present, there is an intelligible sense in which the ultimate end or the developmental process shapes the person's life.

5.3 Conflicting Ends: Problem and Solution

We enter the world with an initial motivational complement of biologically given ends. Some are evident very early, in the form of attempts to obtain nourishment, adequate warmth and comfort. Others, evident in such forms as desires for sex or status,¹⁸ develop later.¹⁹ Once they appear or develop, such ends may shape action throughout our lives.

The biologically given ends, however, provide only the starting point, for we are, to a significant degree, motivationally plastic. The ends by which we are motivated are not rigidly fixed. This fact has important consequences in three areas. First, we are subject to various processes of education and acculturation through which we come to acquire other ends.²⁰ We come to care about fairness or the prevention of suffering. We develop passions for chess or sports cars or philosophy. Second, as we mature, we

¹⁸ That concern for status – or, more precisely, local relative status – has a biological basis is, I think, well-established. For explanation and some references, see Wright 1994, 236-262.

¹⁹ In speaking of some ends as biologically given, I do not mean that they are immune to being affected by environmental vicissitudes. I mean only that the organism characteristically, and in normal environments, develops so as to have certain ends. They are biologically given in approximately the same sense as five-fingeredness is among humans: nearly universal in the species, in a way that can be explained in terms of the organism's genetic code, despite occasional exceptions.

²⁰ I shall call the ends which are not biologically given *acquired ends*, though without intending any implication that the biologically given ends must be present or manifest from infancy in order not to count as acquired.

become cooperators in our own motivational re-shaping. We deliberately cultivate tastes, acquire or strive to break habits, and more. Third, our motivational plasticity extends not just to making changes to or among the additions to the biologically given ends – to re-modeling the superstructure erected upon the biologically given foundation – but to reworking the foundation itself.²¹ The importance of what is biologically given within the systems of our ends may be altered; it may even be set aside or over-ridden in the service of acquired ends. We take oaths of celibacy for a faith or become willing to die for a cause.

A further important feature, implicit in what has just been outlined, is that the ends by which we guide ourselves are *plural* and (to a significant degree) *mutually independent*. Even for the biologically given ends, and still more so for the acquired ends, there does not seem to be any way to represent them all as means to some over-arching end which is itself salient on the level of individual psychology.²² In short, the ends we have are plural and, to some degree, independent of one another. The independence of the ends is important, for that means that it is at least possible for one to be advanced at the expense of one or more others.

²¹ A better metaphor may be Schmidtz's. He questions "the idea that starting points are what subsequently erected edifices must rest upon. We should not be fooled by the metaphor. We should realize that our starting points can be more like launching pads than like architectural foundations. A launching pad serves its purpose by being left behind." (1995, 76)

²² The qualification is important because some might argue for an ultimate end not psychologically salient to the individual – at least not *as* an ultimate end – to which all others are means, e.g., reproductive success. I think that will not work, even on the level on which it is introduced, but for present purposes, it is sufficient to point out that reproductive success is not always what the individual aims at above all else. And if it is not *his* aim – something salient on the level of his individual psychology (rather than, in some metaphorical sense, the aim of his genes), it can neither be counted upon to solve his practical quandaries, nor even to provide him with guidance which he can recognize as relevant.

This kind of motivational complexity and plasticity is at the root of a problem which is virtually inevitable for us, but also provides the material for its resolution. In particular, what it provides is the material for an argument, grounded in instrumental reasoning, for the adoption of an ultimate end. I shall set out the argument briefly here and then elaborate upon its parts.²³

- (1) For a given person, there are conflicts among her ends.
- (2) Given (1), it is impossible for all her ends to be achieved.
- (3) Given (2), there is the problem, so long as the conflict persists, of inevitable frustration with respect to the achievement of at least some of her ends.
- (4) The goal of finding a solution to the problem of inevitable frustration can anchor instrumental reasoning directed at eliminating or reducing conflict among her ends.
- (5) An adequate solution will take the form of an ultimate end (or a developmental process directed towards coming to have an ultimate end) in terms of which the pursuit of multiple ends can be harmonized.

5.31 Why We Face Conflict Among Ends

So long as a person's ends are harmonious and realistically achievable, there may be no experienced need to evaluate the system of which they are part. With no difficulties, in principle, in guiding her actions by her ends, the practical task that faces her

²³ The following argument outline and section headings are not meant to precisely correspond to one another.

is just to find the means to those ends. That practical task, however, is unlikely to be ours. That is, it is unlikely for us to be so fortunate as never to have to deal with conflicting ends, to have an initial harmony among our ends. Our biologically given ends, combined with a perhaps haphazard overlay of acquired ends, almost inevitably lead to conflicts within the systems of our ends.

These conflicts are of two kinds. First, there is logical conflict, where, for the simplest case, one's end is both to bring about and to prevent the bringing about of some state of affairs, *S*. As discussed in Chapter Three, § 3.4, this is a real possibility, though unlikely for so simple a case. Second, there is circumstantial conflict, where there is no logical incompatibility between the ends, but where the circumstances are such that action that promotes one will prevent or tend to interfere with the achievement of at least one other. Since the conflict in such a case is circumstantial rather than logical, there may be options for taking action to alter the circumstances that give rise to the conflict. For simplicity, when I speak of circumstantial conflict, I shall assume that all such possibilities have either been exhausted or, in some other way, ruled out as unacceptable.

There are two reasons against expecting initial harmony to be a feature of our systems of ends. First, the ends that are biologically given were shaped by the evolutionary history that gave rise to them and presumably were adaptive – more so than available alternatives – at the time, in the environment, and against the background of other ends in which they were shaped into their current form.²⁴ Even if it were plausible

²⁴ See Chapter One, especially § 1.23.

that under the conditions of the ancestral environment,²⁵ the biologically given ends would never come into conflict, that environment is not ours. What might have worked there cannot be expected to work in our different circumstances. Second, there is even less assurance that the acquired ends will not come into conflict, either with the biologically given ends or with each other. The calculational demands of insuring that the members of a large set of ends are consistent with one another are too great.²⁶ In the case of biologically given ends, we can say that part of the required “thinking” has been performed by natural selection; for the acquired ends, there is no one to do the thinking but ourselves – and, to avoid ever acquiring conflicting ends, much of that thinking would have to be carried out with immature cognitive capacities. Thus, it is not reasonable to expect there to be an initial or uncontrived harmony in a person’s set of ends. An harmonious and realistic set of ends may, for us, be an achievement, but it is not a starting point, not an initial harmony, that is simply given or to be taken for granted.

5.32 *Conflict of Ends as a Problem*

Conflict of ends is a problem, but before proceeding with its discussion, there is a doubt to be addressed: Why is the conflict to be described as a *problem* – something that

²⁵ I think it is not plausible, because (a) evolutionary processes can only be expected to improve upon existing alternatives, not to achieve perfect adaptation to an environment, and (b) it is something of a misnomer to speak of *the* ancestral environment with respect to the evolution of biologically given ends, since they are almost certainly the result of accretion and refinement from *many different* ancestral environments.

²⁶ Consistency-testing is subject to combinatorial explosion. The more items that must be tested for mutual consistency, the harder the problem is – and the difficulty increases disproportionately as the number of items to be tested increases. See Chapter Three, § 3.4.

stands in need of a response or solution – rather than as a condition that must simply be accepted? Part of the answer is that the force of the “must” in “must simply be accepted” presupposes that nothing can be done to change matters in any relevant respect, and also that “simply accepting” is not itself something that can be carried out in different ways that can be distinguished as being better or worse responses, as, for example, acceptance with good or with ill grace. Perhaps it is true that no response is better or worse than any other, but, if so, that stands in need of further support. It is no more to be taken for granted that nothing can be done than that something can. Another part of the answer is that conflict of ends, if nothing is done about it, insures frustration; action on behalf of one or some ends will guarantee the failure to achieve one or some others. That frustration in the pursuit of one’s ends is a problem in the sense of calling for some response I take to be very nearly analytic: it would be difficult to understand how some alleged objective of a person really was his *end* if he regarded his frustration in achieving it as entirely unproblematic.²⁷

To return to the main line of discussion, where only a single end or a harmonious set of ends is in question, we can manage with notions of relative efficacy. But by late adolescence or early adulthood, if not earlier, we become reflectively aware of conflict among our ends, that the pursuit of one requires the frustration of another. It is uncontroversial that means can be graded as better or worse relative to a given end. What is not obvious is how to grade actions undertaken as means when the ends themselves

²⁷ Perhaps, he might *find* it impossible to do anything about the conflict of ends. Then, the frustration might be regarded as *tragic* rather than problematic.

seem to point in different directions.²⁸ When there are conflicts among ends, what is better in terms of one will be worse in terms of another, and without begging the question in favor of some end or subset among our ends, there will be no answer as to what course of action best serves our ends. In the absence of an answer, we face the problem of what to do about the conflict.

In fact, there are two problems here, the *local* and the *global* problems of conflicting ends. There is the local problem of what to do in the particular instance, and there is the global problem of what to do about the general fact of conflict among our ends.

In the particular instance, it must be decided whether to direct our action to the service of one end or the other, or perhaps neither, of a conflicting pair, when both cannot be pursued.²⁹ In the absence of a reason to go one way or the other, one may be selected arbitrarily, or some other *ad hoc* procedure may be applied. Or the local problem may be addressed by way of an attempt to resolve the global problem.

For the local problem, so long as there remains for the agent a pair (at least) of ends in conflict, no fully satisfactory solution is possible. Whatever is done, since action which serves one end will disserve the other, will amount to acting against at least one and possibly both of the conflicting ends. The only thing that could count as a fully

²⁸ This problem, I think, is one of the things at the root of our desire to grade lives or systems of ends as wholes as being better or worse. When ends are harmonious, we can just say 'better for this end' or 'better for that other end.' It is in the face of conflict among our ends that we raise the question of how to grade this end and that, either in comparison to one another or as parts of larger systems of ends.

²⁹ The case of two ends in conflict is, of course, only the simplest form the problem takes. More elaborate conflicts are also possible.

satisfactory solution to the local problem would be something that removed the conflict. Since, whenever there is conflict between ends, the ends must be independent with respect to one another, the minimum condition for removal of the conflict is either to remove one of the ends or else to remove their independence.

In other words, a possible satisfactory solution would be to abandon at least one of the ends in question, where abandonment would imply more than just non-pursuit, but rather abandoning it as an object of pursuit – which would mean that it is no longer sought or aimed at for its own sake, and therefore no longer in conflict with anything else sought or aimed at for its own sake. Another way would be to establish some kind of priority relation, suitable to arbitrate conflicts, between the conflicting ends. Either one of these would mean that at least one of the ends would cease to have its former status. In the former case, this is obvious, for at least one of the ends ceases to be an end. In the latter case, both could remain ends, but the priority relation itself, or something from which it derived, would have to have the status of an end,³⁰ to which the formerly independent and conflicting ends would serve as means.

In principle, local problems could be addressed piecemeal as they arise, with the abandonment of some end or the establishing of a priority relation whenever a conflict is

³⁰ Suppose a person has a pair of mutually unranked ends, E_1 and E_2 , that upon occasion come into conflict with one another, and that, to resolve the conflict, she adopts the simplest possible priority relation between them, one which, say, selects E_1 for pursuit in any case of conflict with E_2 . Then, it might be said that there is no *new* end, just the same ones with a new ordering. I take this difference to be purely terminological, and to turn upon how one individuates ends. The fact remains that either the priority relation does something that the ends alone did not do, or else at least one of the ends has changed in weight or importance in decision-making. If one end is now more important than the other, whereas before it was not, and if ends are individuated by differences in the courses of action they license, then the ends are not the same as before the adoption of the priority relation.

discovered. But that seems inadequate in more than one way.

First, the particular changes introduced into the system of ends, if they are only directed piecemeal to resolving conflicts as they arise, will lack any rationale beyond the fact that they do indeed serve to resolve the particular conflict.³¹ The question to be faced is: Why resolve the conflict in *that* way? Why eliminate the end, E_1 , rather than E_2 ? Why adopt the priority relation, R_1 , rather than one of its alternatives, R_2, R_3, \dots, R_n ? The answer might be just that the selections made *do* resolve the particular conflicts, though something else would have done so as well. That would be to admit that there is no further rationale beyond their role in resolving the immediate conflict. In effect, the argument for selecting, say, E_1 rather than E_2 will be that *something* is needed to resolve the conflict, and this is something. Only if nothing better could be provided would that be rationale enough.

Second, so long as the approach to conflicts of ends is piecemeal, the changes introduced may not reduce occasions for conflict. In particular, though an end-elimination will always reduce somewhat the possibilities for conflict between ends, since there will be one less end to come into conflict with any others, the adoption of a priority relation, since it involves adopting some new end, may well create additional occasions for conflict.

Third, the attempt to address conflicts within one's system of ends solely through piecemeal adjustments is psychologically unrealistic. Abandoning or acquiring an end is

³¹ Suppose there were some further rationale for resolving a conflict one way rather than another. Then, to that extent, the conflict would not be being addressed in an entirely piecemeal way, for the rationale would be generalizable and therefore applicable to other conflicts.

not the work of a moment. An end is something that has a more or less enduring place in one's motivations. It is not as if one could simply press a button and instantly have an altered set of motivations. (If there were a costless way to instantly alter motivations, why wouldn't everyone be ecstatically happy, since they would only need to alter their motivations to be utterly delighted with their activities and circumstances?) Given, however, that ends and the corresponding motivations are not instantly altered, that eliminating one end or acquiring another takes work, what is going to keep the person at the task? Since we are supposing that the adjustment is piecemeal, it won't be that he sees a reason for eliminating the end, E_1 , rather than E_2 , or for adopting the priority relation, R_1 , rather than R_2 . In the absence of a reason and in the face of contrary motivation – to keep on pursuing the end selected for elimination or to ignore the new priority relation – it is likely that particular piecemeal adjustments will not be successfully completed and even more likely that all the piecemeal adjustments needed to remove conflict among one's ends will not be successfully completed.

Last, piecemeal adjustments fail to get to the root of the matter. At best, they remove local problems as they arise or are noticed, but do nothing about either the fact that the person's system of ends is such that conflicts do arise or about the fact that new ends adopted, whether to resolve earlier conflicts or on some other basis, are also apt to engender conflict. What is not addressed by piecemeal adjustments is the global problem: Is there something to be done about the general fact of conflict among ends, which gives rise to the various local problems and their particular frustrations?

If anything can be done about the general fact of conflict, something that eliminates or reduces it, that will be, *ceteris paribus*, a better solution to the global problem than piecemeal adjustments in response to local problems.

5.33 Removal of Conflict as a Maieutic Objective

At some point in our lives, we face the global problem of conflicting ends, which consists in the general fact of conflicts within our systems of ends. That general fact has two major features, first, that, for each of us, our systems of ends include conflicts which are discovered from time to time, and second, that the processes by which our systems of ends are altered, including both the piecemeal adjustments aimed at resolving already discovered conflicts and other forms of the acquisition of new ends, are apt to introduce new conflicts. The problem, then, has both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. There are the conflicts existing at a time, and there are processes of end-alteration which themselves may give rise to further conflict. An adequate response will need to address both dimensions.

We can let solving the global problem stand as a specification of a goal to which instrumental reasoning is anchored, and ask what will serve to solve that problem. In principle, though on a broader scale, the same possibilities are available as for solving various local problems: Since the problem consists of conflict of mutually independent ends, plus, of course, the various processes that lead to further conflict, the solution will have to either eliminate ends or eliminate their independence, and will, in addition, have

to provide some way of regulating or channelling the acquisition of further ends so that they are less liable to give rise to conflict.

There are two basic possibilities for the solution to the global problem. Either it will involve an ultimate end, whether in the form of acquiring one or of undergoing the corresponding developmental process, or it will not. The latter possibility can in turn be subdivided into approaches which involve acquiring some additional end and those which do not.

The last of these, an approach to the global problem that involves no end-acquisition, is not a real option, for there is only one way to remove conflict between ends without acquiring some new end. That is to eliminate one or more of the conflicting ends. The problem is in finding a rationale for end-elimination, for abandoning one end in particular rather than another. There must *be* such a rationale, or we would only be engaged in the kind of piecemeal adjustment already dismissed as inadequate. But any such rationale will either be entirely *ad hoc*, and thus only verbally distinct from piecemeal adjustments, or it will be generalizable. Even a rationale so simple as conflict-avoidance (as distinct from this-conflict-avoidance) will apply to other conflicts and will imply that some end-eliminations are better than others.

For example, it may be that there is a conflict between ends *A* and *B*, between *C* and *D*, and between *B* and *D*. Examined one at a time, *A* might be eliminated from the *A-B* pair and *C* from the *C-D* pair, leaving *B* and *D* in conflict. If there is no other ground than the elimination of conflict, the better option would be to eliminate *B* and *D*, and thus,

at the cost of abandoning two ends, to eliminate three conflicts. Even to go that far is to apply *some* generalizable rationale to multiple cases of conflict. Counting conflicts and settling upon which ends to eliminate on the basis of reducing the total number of conflicting end-pairs may of course be too crude, and it is easy to imagine more refined criteria, depending upon the details of the case, but more refined criteria would *also* be generalizable rationales.

To the extent that generalizable rationales enter the picture, even the simple elimination of a member of a set of conflicting ends serves to reduce the mutual independence of remaining ends, even if they are not themselves members of the same conflicting set, for if, out of the set of conflicting ends containing *A* and *B*, *A* is eliminated because, in addition to being in conflict with *B*, it has the property, *F*, then, in any other conflict, if one and only one of the ends in conflict, *C*, also has the property, *F*, then *C* will be the one to be eliminated, unless it also possesses some offsetting property, *G*. In other words, what is to be done to resolve the *C-D* conflict will depend in part upon the resolution to the *A-B* conflict, or, more precisely, upon the reason for the choice that was made there.

Thus, if end-elimination is to be more than piecemeal adjustment, we must appeal to generalizable rationales. What is their status? It appears that they must either be ends or else somehow derivative from or based upon an end or ends other than those immediately involved in the end-elimination at hand, and further, that the rationale or the ends upon which it is based are regarded as more important than at least one of the ends

involved in the conflict. For if other ends were not involved, or if any other ends involved were not regarded as more important than the end to be eliminated, it would be unclear why something aimed at for its own sake should be given up to comply with the rationale.

The upshot of the argument so far is that all approaches to the global problem involve the acquisition of or appeal to new ends.³² Thus, the objective of solving the global problem of conflict is a maieutic objective, one which can be achieved only by coming to have an end or ends.

And given that some ends must be acquired if the global problem is to be approached at all, it is straightforward that there is no stable stopping point short of an ultimate end, for the alternative is to continue to acquire ends in the form of priority relations or generalizable rationales, which themselves may engender further conflict. To be sure, it *might* be that the successive acquisition of ends to address conflicts as they arise would lead in the direction of progressive simplification and unification of the system of ends. But if so, that would be accidental, for it might be that conflicts between *A* and *B* are addressed by a priority relation, R_1 , that conflicts between *C* and *D* are addressed by a different priority relation, R_2 , and that, with two new ends in the picture, there are conflicts between R_1 and R_2 , between R_1 , *C* and *D*, and between R_2 , *A* and *B*. Three conflicts may be substituted for two. If there is some feature of the process of end-acquisition addressed to conflict-removal that prevents that kind of outcome – that insures that, over time, the system of ends becomes (or tends to become) progressively simplified and unified, that would be equivalent to having, or moving in the direction of having, an

³² See note 31.

ultimate end.

In summary, given the plurality and mutual independence of our ends, there is the problem of almost inevitable conflict, and, when there is conflict, the achievement of some ends insures the frustration of others. Given the conflict, the search for a solution is a maieutic objective, which can in the end only be achieved by the acquisition of a new end. More specifically, given conflict and end-plasticity, there may be a solution. By revising or adjusting the set of one's ends – perhaps acquiring new ends, perhaps eliminating some, perhaps altering relative weights – one can reduce or perhaps eliminate end-conflict and the attendant frustration. In effect, this amounts to adopting an over-arching end to which the formerly independent ends become constitutive means. The over-arching end prescribes something that, without a fair amount of background (which I have tried to provide), might sound nearly empty, namely, successful end-pursuit or, perhaps better, since it is more obviously related to eudaemonism, *comprehensively successful living*, where a life can be said to be comprehensively successful to the extent that it is a success in all the ways that a life can reasonably be expected to be a success.

5.4 Structuring the Ultimate End

We can give instrumental reasons for adopting or moving in the direction of having an ultimate end, but, even when spelled out as comprehensively successful living, there is more that we need to know about the component ends – about what one needs to succeed in doing in being comprehensively successful. Can anything general be said

about the component ends? If an ultimate end gives the shape of a life, what is the shape of a life guided by comprehensively successful living?

Much of the answer will be subject to individual variation. Consider what may be called *endowments*, which include both physical and mental capacities and potentials and access to external resources. Given a set of endowments, some aims or projects will make sense, while others will not. Thus, for example, paraplegics, not to mention most of the rest of us, are unlikely to succeed in plans requiring exceptional athletic skills, nor are the very poor likely to make their livings as investment bankers. Since people differ in endowments, they will also differ in the kinds of aims or goals that it will make sense for them to pursue.

Further sources of variation will be traceable to features of the individual's motivations. These might also be classified as endowments, but they are significant enough to merit separate mention. These may differ from one person to another, not only through differences in environment and experience, but also by way of innate predispositions brought to experience.³³

On the plausible assumption that these sources of variation between persons will not somehow be abolished or counteracted through the developmental process involved in

³³ Impressive evidence of the innateness of some psychological features can be found in the studies of identical twins, separated at birth, cited by Pinker. "Their minds are astonishingly alike, and not just in gross measures like IQ and personality traits.... They are alike in talents such as spelling and mathematics, in opinions on questions such as apartheid, the death penalty, and working mothers, and in their career choices, hobbies, vices, religious commitments, and tastes in dating. Identical twins are far more alike than fraternal twins, who share only half their genetic recipes, and most strikingly, they are almost as alike when they are reared apart as when they are reared together." As he concludes, "by showing how many ways the mind can differ in its innate structure, the discoveries open our eyes to how much structure the mind must have." (1997, 20-21)

the acquisition of an ultimate end, what will count as successful living will depend both upon what one has to work with in the form of endowments and upon the innate and acquired motivational features in terms of which one judges what to do with one's endowments. What these considerations amount to is that, so far as the sources of variation considered have an impact upon ultimate ends and, through them, upon the lives shaped by those ends, there is not a general answer to questions about the component ends involved in comprehensively successful living.

But there must be commonalities as well. It is hardly adequate for an ethical theory to say that everything depends on the individual. So, given that there will be much that properly varies between persons, depending upon their endowments and aims or projects, are there any features that we can argue that they nevertheless should have in common?

What I shall argue is that there are reasons for accepting and coming to embody in one's motivations and behavior practical principles having the functional role of the virtues. Traits fulfilling this role, I shall call *f-virtues*. F-virtues have at least the following features³⁴:

- They are stable traits of character which, in appropriate situations, issue in action.
- They involve intelligent responsiveness to relevant features of those situations.

³⁴ These features are discussed at greater length in Chapter Four, § 4.4.

- They are partially constitutive of the ultimate end, which, for present purposes, I am identifying with comprehensively successful living.
- As constitutive of the ultimate end, they are ends and therefore cultivated and exercised for their own sakes.
- As constituents of the ultimate end, they constrain, though they do not dictate, what else may be part of the ultimate end.³⁵

The reference to their functional role is deliberate, despite the fact that the best examples of f-virtues are also, simply, virtues. The point is to focus upon these functional features first without demanding that whatever possesses these features also be among the traditionally recognized excellences of character.

That there are stable traits of character that involve intelligent responsiveness, on cognitive, affective and motivational levels, to situations of various types – greed, gentleness, generosity and fairness, for example – I take for granted.³⁶ In light of that, remember that the upshot of earlier argument was that an adequate solution to the problem of conflicting ends would take the form of an ultimate end, specified for our purposes as comprehensively successful living, in terms of which the pursuit of multiple ends can be harmonized, and which is constituted by those same ends.³⁷ If any of the ends constitutive

³⁵ The fifth item is not so much an additional requirement as an entailment. Any trait of character that satisfied the other conditions would also constrain what else could be part of the ultimate end.

³⁶ For some doubts, however, see Harman 2000 and 2003. For some discussion, see Flanagan 1991, 276-314, and for briefer discussion with a response, see Flanagan 2002, 153-159.

³⁷ See §§ 5.3 - 5.33.

of comprehensively successful living takes the form of an action-guiding trait of character, then it would be an f-virtue, and if an instrumental case can be made in favor of including one or more f-virtues among one's ends, that would complete the project of showing that instrumental reasoning yields the eudaemonist structure.

What instrumental reason can there be for an agent to cultivate an action-guiding character trait and practice accordingly? The answer depends on several factors. First, there must be a recurrent situation-type for the character trait to be responsive to and exhibited in. Second, the trait must be one which can be built up and established as part of the agent's character through learning and practice. Third, possession of the trait must be advantageous in some way, as assessed from the agent's standpoint.³⁸ Fourth, the trait must facilitate decision-making, action and response appropriate to the relevant situation-type. Perhaps the most important, though not the only, type of facilitation here consists of circumventing the need for calculation when time is short. When one already has a settled disposition to respond in a certain way, there is less need to figure out what to do. Fifth, there must be some reason that the trait stands in *need* of cultivation, that it is not something for which one can simply count upon uncultivated tendencies. The virtues – and therefore also their functional equivalents, the f-virtues – are, as Philippa Foot says, “*corrective*, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good.” (Foot 1978, 8) In a similar vein, Walter Lippmann comments that

³⁸ This locution is not meant to be so narrow as “advantageous for (or to) the agent.” The agent may assess a trait as advantageous because of its contribution to something for which he cares, which may or may not be some advantage to himself.

[t]hey would not be called virtues and held in high esteem if there were no difficulty about them. There are innumerable dispositions which are essential to living that no one takes the trouble to praise. Thus, it is not accounted a virtue if a man eats when he is hungry or goes to bed when he is ill. He can be depended upon to take care of his immediate wants. It is only those actions which he cannot be depended upon to do, and yet are highly desirable, that men call virtuous. (1957, 207)

Taken together, these features explain why an agent would have an instrumental rationale for cultivating f-virtues. The first and second features insure that the trait can be acquired and that there are circumstances apt for its acquisition and exercise. The third provides the reason for acquiring it – its advantageousness. The fourth and fifth together explain why the f-virtue has to be cultivated and why the corresponding activity and response must be practiced or engaged in for its own sake³⁹ – and therefore as a constituent of the ultimate end⁴⁰ – for otherwise, the advantageous response cannot be counted upon to be forthcoming.

³⁹ More precisely, the f-virtue will initially be cultivated for the sake of something else, its advantageousness, but *what* is cultivated is the disposition to respond and act in certain ways for their own sakes, not just for the sake of something else. See above, § 5.1.

⁴⁰ If an f-virtue is practiced for its own sake, but not as a constituent of the ultimate end, then it must be as a means to some other end. But, for the kind of dispositional trait under consideration here, that will often be implausible, for a situation-type to which an f-virtue is responsive will not be confined to the pursuit of some single end to the exclusion of others. Courage, for example, involves a kind of response to dangers of all types and faced in the service of many different ends. If courage really is an advantageous disposition to have, it will not be confined to being a response to danger of one or a few types, depending upon what end is being served.

5.41 *The Advantages of Virtue*

The question that remains is whether the five conditions are satisfied and, therefore, whether an instrumental case can be made for any f-virtues. Since the best argument I know that the conditions are met in fact takes the form of arguing for what I have been calling the traditionally recognized excellences of character, that is what I will present.

There is a further advantage in directing attention to the members of the standard catalogue of virtues in the fact that it is uncontroversial that they satisfy four of the five conditions. Specifically, it is uncontroversial that there are recurrent situation-types for the virtues to be responsive to, that the virtues can be established in one's character through learning and practice, that they facilitate decision-making, and that they are corrective. What remains is to argue that they are advantageous. What I shall do is sketch, but no more than sketch, an argument for the advantages, from the agent's perspective, of the traditionally recognized excellences of character, the virtues.⁴¹ Since the benefits or advantages are to be taken into account as reasons for living a virtuous life, they have to be in a form that can be understood by the agent, prior to her acquisition and practice of the virtues. Any advantages of the moral or virtuous life that can only be

⁴¹ Part of the reason for the sketchiness is that, for present purposes, I take the traditionally recognized excellences of character in the aggregate, without considering separately the claims or merits of honesty, courage, compassion, fairness and so on. Nor am I addressing the difficult problems associated with the fact that some character traits once, and perhaps traditionally, regarded as virtuous – chastity, for instance – may seem less compelling now. For pertinent discussion, Martha Nussbaum's "Non-relative virtues: an Aristotelian approach" (1993) is quite interesting.

appreciated from within will not belong in the instrumental case. The boundary between what can be appreciated from outside or from within, however, is not sharp, for what can be appreciated from outside the virtuous life may include acknowledgement of facts that can be fully appreciated only from within. That virtue is its own reward may only be fully understood by the virtuous, but that does not mean that the outsider cannot see that the virtuous *do* find satisfaction in virtuous activity, not just in external goods to which it leads, and therefore does not mean that the outsider cannot see that there is some reason to suppose that, were she to become virtuous, she, too, would find satisfaction in the virtuous life.

Though they are real considerations, such appeals to the intrinsic rewards of virtue are not the main part of the case. What is more important is the fact that what are widely recognized as virtuous traits of character have a systematic tendency to be advantageous to their possessor.

Note first that traits that are thought to be generally advantageous neither to the possessor nor to others will not be recognized as virtues. At best, such traits will be thought matters for indifference, and if they are actually generally disadvantageous to either the agent or to others, they will be regarded as failings, vices or perhaps simply misfortunes. That will include, of course, any traits that are generally advantageous to the agent but disadvantageous to others. It will be especially important for a society to discourage the development of such traits.

Since we can count on any traits that are socially recognized to be generally

harmful to others to be discouraged, only traits that are either advantageous to the possessor, to others or to both will be recognized as virtuous.

That means that two out of the three possible combinations of individual and social advantage – the case in which the individual gains (without disadvantaging others) and the case in which both the individual and others gain – include advantage to the agent. The troublesome case is that in which there is some socially advantageous trait which is not advantageous to the individual. This may take either of two forms – the easier case in which the trait is merely not advantageous to the agent without being disadvantageous and the more difficult in which the trait appears actually to be disadvantageous to its possessor. The question for the troublesome case is how such traits are elicited, and the answer appears straightforward: the development or possession of the traits is rewarded in various ways, with praise, honor or respect, as well as with more tangible and often, though indirectly, associated rewards in such forms as wealth and influence.⁴² What these facts mean is that the virtues, even in the troublesome case in which performance seems sometimes at odds with the advantage of the agent, tend to be advantageous to the agent. At least, it tends to be advantageous to the agent to acquire the virtues, though acting accordingly may of course be disadvantageous in the particular instance. This should not be surprising. As R. M. Hare notes:

⁴² The indirectness of the more tangible rewards, combined with the fact that they are not guaranteed to materialize, may be essential to insuring the real development of the virtuous traits as opposed to their simulation. Direct, tangible and relatively assured reward might make it psychologically impossible to develop the authentically virtuous trait, an aspect of which is performance of the relevant activities for their own sakes.

It is a physical and not a social fact that there are no rings of Gyges. But the more important empirical facts here are social ones. It is no accident that the world and society are such that crime does not in general pay. People have made it like that because they did not want crime to pay; it is more in the general interest if criminals are brought to book. We must not think here merely of the legal system and courts and policemen; they ... would be ineffective unless backed up by much more powerful social pressures. Mankind has found it possible to make life a great deal more tolerable by bringing it about that on the whole morality pays. It is better for nearly all of us if social rewards and penalties are attached to socially beneficial and harmful acts; and so it has come about that on the whole they are.⁴³

Much more could be said along these lines, and further and deeper investigation would surely be desirable. But what has been said so far, I think, provides a reasonable case that the virtues are systematically advantageous to their possessor. Though it is true that virtue may require significant sacrifice, it is an illusion, perhaps due to misplaced emphasis, that makes it appear that the virtuous life is dominated by sacrifice and cannot be expected to be good for the virtuous. The truth is more nearly the reverse: the advantages are the dominating feature and the sacrifices the occasional exceptions. Given

⁴³ Hare 1981, 195-196. Also of considerable interest in the current connection is the entire chapter from which the quote is taken, 188-205.

this – and given the fact that the advantages appealed to can be appreciated by an outsider who is not assumed already to be virtuous – the instrumental case for incorporating the virtues as constituents of comprehensively successful living appears to be in good shape. We are well advised to make virtue a part of our lives.

5.42 The Maximizer's Challenge

The eudaemonist structure, in which there is an ultimate end of living well, which is partially constituted by commitment to the practice of the virtues, is, when embodied in our motivations, actions and responses, good for us. It might be replied that more is needed from a credible instrumental argument. If we are to be instrumentally justified in undertaking to acquire the virtues, we need assurance that it is the best option. And that, of course, is something I have not provided, nor am I in a position to provide it. There are, however, several levels of reply available.

Before beginning to reply, I shall distinguish two sorts of concern that may be expressed by the objection. One concern is with the virtues in general, with whether it can be good to adopt and so internalize practical principles that it is psychologically difficult or impossible to violate them to secure great benefit or to escape great harm. Wouldn't one do better to be more loosely attached to one's principles? The other concern is whether the traditionally recognized excellences of character are the right principles to internalize, whether there might be some other f-virtues with which one would do better. The two are only partially independent, and to the extent that they are not, the same

considerations apply to each, but there are some differences as well.

The first concern is in the same spirit as the familiar act-utilitarian criticism of rule or indirect utilitarianism. This critic will prefer rules of thumb, generalizations to which one expects exceptions, over any principle or character trait that cannot, without difficulty, be violated when it is advantageous to do so. To have a convenient abbreviation (at some sacrifice in accuracy), let us call the kind of principle to which the critic objects a *non-violable principle*. The question the critic asks is: if some non-violable principle is adopted, supposedly upon instrumental grounds of advantage to the agent, why is not the possibility of great disadvantage attendant upon following the principle a reason to give it up, or, more precisely, to give up or never adopt in the first place the non-violability feature? Why, in other words, is not a *violable* principle better?

There are two points to be made in response. First, the critic can be asked if he makes it a non-violable principle (a non-violable meta-principle?) to avoid adopting non-violable principles. I wouldn't attach much importance to the charge that his position logically undercuts or refutes itself, but there is a serious question whether it might be advantageous sometimes to adopt a non-violable principle rather than a violable principle. That appears to be an empirical question, not the sort of thing to be settled from one's armchair.

Second, it can be granted that we might do better if we were prepared to violate our principles just when it would be to our advantage to do so. Adopting a policy, however, of guiding oneself only by violable principles is only sensible to the extent that

we are reliable judges of when it would be advantageous to violate them. The fundamental problem with this is that it rests upon a tacit assumption that we have unlimited cognitive and motivational flexibility at our disposal. If our capacities are limited, as they surely are, and if in particular we are unlikely to make the best decision under pressure – perhaps due to bias or some other vice – it may well be that we would have done better to adopt some non-violable principles than to insist on guiding ourselves only by violable principles.

The second type of concern, whether the traditionally recognized virtues are the best principles to internalize, poses a different sort of problem. This second critic is not concerned so much that internalizing any principle, making of it an f-virtue, will tie his hands when it would be advantageous not to have his hands tied. Rather, his concern is that there may be better principles to internalize than the traditionally recognized virtues.

I agree immediately that I have no proof that the traditional virtues cannot be improved upon. Nevertheless, several things can be said in their favor. The first is that it is not a terribly weighty consideration against the virtues so long as no particular alternative is proposed. Once particular alternatives are proposed, some non-traditional f-virtues, then they can be subjected to examination and compared with their more traditional rivals.⁴⁴ Until then, the challenge is only theoretical.

Second, the widespread recognition of the virtues is evidence that they have proven satisfactory over a broad range of experience and for long periods of time. In every domain of inquiry, we must start where we are, and if we find ourselves with moral beliefs

⁴⁴ If the virtues are most fundamentally characterized in terms of appropriate responsiveness to situation-types (see Nussbaum 1993), then the imagined comparison may be between competing specifications of the same virtue.

– in this connection, especially beliefs about the virtues which are largely the deposit of our education and socialization – there is no reason to reject those beliefs simply because we lack proofs that they are right.⁴⁵

These answers are at best only partial, however. The charge that I have not shown that it is best to acquire and practice the virtues is one that, so far as I can see, cannot be met in that form. There is, however, an underlying assumption behind that charge that deserves to be challenged in its turn. This is the assumption that a satisfactory instrumental case for virtue should be a case that exhibits virtue, or perhaps acquiring the virtues, as maximizing – as doing the best that one can, given any relevant constraints.

The assumption that an instrumental case must represent what is to be done as maximizing, however, is one I criticized at length in Chapter Two.⁴⁶ We are unable, especially in connection with problems having the largest scope, to maximize. Our preferences are not fully ordered, and among options not fully ordered by preferences, maximizing has no determinate reference.

Since we cannot reasonably expect the choice to acquire and practice the virtues to be a maximizing choice in any event, the fact that no such argument has been provided is not a failing in the case for the virtues. In the place of maximizing, something else must be substituted. We must select, not what is best, but something that is good enough. It is true

⁴⁵ In the unlikely event that someone approaches the question without having any beliefs about what is virtuous and what is not, I would urge, among other things, the evidential value of widespread recognition. Also of interest is the fact that some evidence suggests that we are carriers of evolved moral predispositions. See, for example, Pinker 2002, Chapters 11 and 15, and Wilson 1993. If so, the limits to what we can find satisfying may be narrower than we suppose, and the evidence of traditional recognition becomes more powerful.

⁴⁶ See especially §§ 2.31 – 2.34.

that no argument has shown that there are no available improvements upon the virtues. It is also true that no argument has shown that some better possibility will not come to light tomorrow or next week. Those facts do not detract from the case that we have instrumental reasons to acquire and embody the virtues, for they are advantageous to the agent. What I have offered aims, not to be a proof that it is best to be virtuous – if I am right, no such proofs are available – but to be good enough.

5.5 Directions for Exploration

There are questions which bear upon directions for further exploration and development which I have not been able to address here. About some of these, I shall try to indicate what the questions are and why they remain problematic.

5.51 The Instrumental Framework: Costs and Benefits

One of the most obvious questions arises from the fact that I have attempted to operate within an instrumental framework: How far can an instrumental approach in ethics be expected to go? The short answer, I think, is that it has significant reach – more than many have supposed – but that it is still limited. One limit is not so much to what can be expected of an instrumental approach, but to what has been offered here. The case for a form of eudaemonism incorporating the traditional virtues has been sketchy. I think much more can be done in the way of filling in the details, and is worth doing, but that must remain for another time.

Setting aside the sketchiness of the argument, an important limit is that, to the extent that the case for eudaemonism, and, in particular, for acquiring and practicing the virtues, is instrumental, its cogency will vary among addressees. The basic reason is that an instrumental case for doing anything can be represented as comparing expected costs and benefits. It is unrealistic to suppose that they will balance in exactly the same way for everyone, and even if, implausibly, the instrumental case could promise gains to everyone, the gains might be insufficient to make the costs to be undergone worth the bearing. Even if there is always a benefit, there may not always be a net benefit.

A particularly important application is related to the fact that much of the cost must be borne at the beginning, in the form of effort, practice and habituation to acquire the virtues, while much of the prospective benefit, for the sake of which the cost is borne, is to be found in the form of ongoing returns in the more distant future. Since our lives are limited, the later one gets underway, the less is the chance that the future returns really will justify the costs borne. And it is not just that later in life, there is less time to recover the costs: The costs themselves increase, as habits, dispositions and value-judgments become more firmly a part of one's character, and therefore, more difficult to alter or excise, should it be necessary.

This fact about the timing and amounts of the costs and benefits suggests that, for most people, there may come a time at which no satisfactory instrumental case for the virtuous life can be made, for there will not be a sufficient future in which to recoup the costs. Accordingly, if there is an instrumental case for the virtuous life at all, it is also a

case for getting started early. That in turn suggests that it is important to begin inculcating virtue at an early age. In other words, moral education, beginning early, is important. So far as we want people to develop virtuous characters, it is unwise to unnecessarily delay the task of leading them to do so.⁴⁷

A further limitation is that the instrumental case depends upon assumptions about normal motivations. What, if anything, can be said about or to people with atypical motivational repertoires? It is hard to say anything generally applicable to such cases, but part of the answer will depend upon how atypical the motivational repertoires in question are, and in what way they are atypical. However, we cannot count upon there being a satisfactory instrumental case that everyone, regardless of motivations, has reason enough to acquire and practice the virtues. An argument meeting that condition would be nice to have, but I cannot see that it is available.

5.52 Beyond an Instrumental Approach?

Since both of these are limitations upon the reach of an instrumental case, they suggest the further question whether the second thesis of instrumentalism, as earlier defined,⁴⁸ is true. Is practical reason in fact confined to regimenting actions understood as means to the ends that they serve? I have argued in effect that the restriction of the scope of practical reasoning to the service of means to ends, even if true, can go further than

⁴⁷ There is the further point that, though the instrumental case for someone to become virtuous is framed in terms of benefits from the agent's perspective, there are also benefits to the rest of us in dealing with and living among virtuous people. From *our* perspectives as well, there are reasons to encourage the development and practice of the virtues as early as feasible.

⁴⁸ See § 5.0.

many imagine. A question calling out for exploration is whether the thesis *is* true: is there something that can be offered to those who are (rationally) unmoved by the instrumental case,⁴⁹ something that can legitimately claim to be reason rather than bludgeoning or propaganda?

I am inclined to think or to hope that the answer is affirmative, and am interested in exploration along broadly Kantian lines. What many philosophers inspired by Kant have sought has been a grounding of all of morality in reason alone, with no need to appeal to any sentiment or commitment that could be otherwise. If that kind of grounding can be provided, it would reach to and have a grip upon every rational being. There would be no barriers constituted by unusual motivations or lack of time for prospective benefits to materialize. The case for morality would be rationally compelling for all. I think that inspiring and that there are real prospects of fruitful non-instrumental approaches, but even if it is true that practical reason is not confined to instrumental rationality, it may not go so far as Kantians would hope.

5.53 *The Politics of Virtue*

The kind of eudaemonism or virtue ethics I have favored is most naturally understood as providing guidance, primarily or in the first instance, for individuals. The questions to which it is addressed are, in decreasing order of generality: What is it to live well? What is it for *this* person to live well? What is it to act and respond well in *this*

⁴⁹ That someone may, in some other way than rationally, be unmoved by good reasons is, of course, not a disease for which philosophy offers any remedy.

situation? But there are other questions to which a eudaemonistic approach does not so easily lend itself, and which have thus been underexplored.⁵⁰ These are, broadly speaking, *political* questions: How is a society to be ordered? What can appropriately be required of everyone?

On a general level, it is possible to say what should be done about political issues. The same generic advice as applies to other contexts and types of problems can be given here: The right thing to do in a given situation – including, presumably, a given political situation – is to act as the person of practical wisdom would act. The principal problem is lack of specificity: What *would* a practically wise or virtuous person do with respect to political issues? What *is* it to act and respond well with respect to the issues faced by a political decision-maker?⁵¹ This is more a problem in politics than elsewhere, because in other areas we draw upon a larger fund of experience. A deep feature of a virtue-based approach to ethical issues is that one does not expect to find rules, codifiable in advance, to dictate all of one's steps. Perception of the particular situation and responding appropriately plays an important and ineliminable role.⁵² Much of our understanding of the

⁵⁰ Part of the problem is not that the politics of virtue has gone unexplored but that the exploration has been undertaken by thinkers, primarily the ancient Greeks, who were facing so different a political world from ours that it is difficult to apply lessons, in other than the most general terms, from their exploration to our situation. Michael Slote, with somewhat different concerns than mine, discusses the issue. (Baron, Pettit and Slote 1997, 273-280) His focus is upon whether political proposals are virtue-ethically defective, as issuing from or being supported or sustained on account of some vice, or, alternatively, whether they issue from or are supported or sustained by some virtue. As I see it, this overlooks or sidesteps the questions raised by the necessity that a political order in some way take account of the less than fully virtuous among us.

⁵¹ I am referring primarily to those occupying some public office or official position. There are related questions about the right way to behave as a citizen.

⁵² “[T]he whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters

virtues is acquired, shaped and refined in the setting of individual lives and small-group interactions. But when we try to transfer the concepts and practices that have served us well in individual and small-group contexts to apply to issues that impinge upon large groups of mostly anonymous others – that is, to contexts for which our experience, for the most part, has not prepared us – it is not clear that, or how far, or with what qualifications, our concepts apply.

The executive virtues⁵³ would, no doubt, have a place in any well-lived life in almost any imaginable setting. That is because they are contributory to success in whatever one is doing. But it is hardly enough, in the political realm, to urge courage, ambition, perseverance and the like without saying anything about the causes or goals in the service of which courage, ambition and perseverance are commended.

What is much less clear is what happens to the other excellences of character as they are realized and exhibited appropriately in the political realm. There are two points here. One is that experience with the political realm may require that recognized virtues be qualified in ways that are either not appropriate or not necessary in individual or small-group contexts. This is a special case of the general point that what a virtue amounts to, what it *is* to practice a virtue in a given situation, depends upon what is of importance in that situation, including any other virtues that are called for.⁵⁴ The second is that there may

of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or set of precepts, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation.” (*NE* 1104a 1-9) See also *NE* 1094a 13-27 and McDowell 1996.

⁵³ I borrow the term from O’Neill 1996, 187-188. The executive virtues “are manifested in deciding on, controlling and guiding action, policies and practices of all sorts.” (187)

⁵⁴ See Chapter Four, note 72.

be distinctive excellences in the political realm that can only be properly recognized and appreciated through experience. To the extent that either or both of these conditions hold, our understanding of the relevant virtues of political life may be defective and our application of moral concepts to persons and issues involved in the political realm in one way or another inappropriate.

A further important reason turns upon the fact that what is at stake in the political realm is of concern to all citizens. This has a bearing in several ways. First, there is the question of what is to be required, given that not all are virtuous and given that those charged with imposing, administering and enforcing requirements cannot themselves all be counted upon to be virtuous.⁵⁵ It may well be that the standards for what it is appropriate to require are different from the standards governing what ought to be done. In fact, it is straightforward that there is a relevant difference here. Insofar as requirements in a political order are associated with sanctions, a necessary condition for the proper imposition of a requirement is not just that what is required is something that ought to be done, but also that non-performance is something that ought to be met, or at least is permissibly met, with the imposition of the relevant sanction. If there are any cases in which what is wrong cannot properly be sanctioned, then, to that extent, proper law – what can properly be required – will not be simply a reflection of what morally ought to be done.

⁵⁵ This is leaving aside the earlier mentioned fact that principles of right conduct are not fully codifiable and therefore not fully codifiable in law. Even for the guidance of fully virtuous people, it would not be possible to make the requirements of the law coincide perfectly with what morally ought to be done.

5.6 Summary

Many questions remain for exploration. Some focus upon the reach of an instrumental case for eudaemonism and the implications of that for practical reason in general. Others are related to applications of the kind of eudaemonism or virtue ethics sketched here to the political realm. Undoubtedly, there are many more. There is, in any event, no shortage of related issues in need of further investigation and research.

For the present, however, summary of the main conclusions of this chapter may be helpful. It is natural to suppose or to argue that instrumental reasoning cannot bear upon final or ultimate ends, and, if there is no non-instrumental form of practical reason, that final or ultimate ends must have some non-rational source. The supposition or argument, however, is mistaken because the acquisition of ends, even if they are final or ultimate, can serve maieutic objectives which have the role of giving birth to other ends.

The claim that final or ultimate ends *may* be selected or adopted as the upshot of instrumental reasoning stands in need of elaboration. I argue that a pervasive feature of human psychology, the conflict of ends, is a problem, solving which is a maieutic objective, and to which the best solution is the construction of an ultimate end (or embarking upon a corresponding developmental process) in terms of which end-pursuit can be harmonized. The ideal end-point of the developmental process can be identified as comprehensively successful living, or eudaemonia.

Though individuals can be expected to differ substantially in the component ends that will be included for them in comprehensively successful living, we can expect

common features as well. These have their basis in a common human nature, which, in our shared world, sets us certain common problems as well as establishing some motivational constraints, in recurrent situation-types with which we are faced, and in the fact that acquiring certain dispositions of intelligent responsiveness to those recurrent situation-types can be expected to serve us well. This is how the excellences of character enter into and qualify comprehensively successful living.