LEARNING TO SPEAK: A PRELUDE TO AN
AUGUSTINIAN CONCEPTION OF PRACTICAL REASON

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by

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Abstract

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Augustine has been neglected in contemporary moral philosophy, despite the rise to prominence of virtue-based approaches in ethics. This “virtue revival” has sparked extensive examination of ancient and medieval ethics, to the relative neglect of Augustine, who is an important figure in that tradition. This dissertation seeks to develop the outline of an Augustinian approach to ethics by bringing Augustine into contact with contemporary reflections on practical reason. In particular, it engages thinkers who seek to gain traction on issues of moral philosophy by examining the contours, requirements and presuppositions of successful human agency. The dissertation articulates an Augustinian understanding of practical reason by discussing ways that these debates can benefit from Augustine’s insight that all exercises of practical reason which fail to recognize that the human heart is restless until it rests in God are self-defeating.
The dissertation explores the usefulness of this Augustinian idea by examining the phenomenon of the defeasible goodness of the goods agents pursue in action. It suggests that the best way for agents to make sense of the defeasible goodness of good things is by rendering these goods commensurable in terms of the place they can play within a certain kind of “pilgrim” life described in the third chapter. However, the commensurability of goods must be understood as a result of practical deliberation, not a precondition of it. This approach requires taking seriously the possibility that practical reason comes along too late to be of any use. That is, agents typically possess the resources for successful deliberation only after making the relevant decisions. Chapter five discusses this problem, critiques an influential approach to it, and suggests an Augustinian approach to the problem.
To Marianne
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CHAPTER 1

LEARNING TO SPEAK: CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF PRACTICAL REASON AND AUGUSTINE

Augustine has been neglected in contemporary moral philosophy. The “virtue revival” of the last 35 years or so has sparked extensive re-examination, development, critique and appropriation of the works of Aristotle and Aquinas.¹ Plato and the Stoics have also received some attention as proponents of what Julia Annas has called the “morality of happiness,” with the thought that all these thinkers have something to say to the contemporary discussions and debates of moral philosophy.² But with the exception of a few short treatments of Augustine, his work has not been mined for the potential


contribution he could make to such a discussion.³ In this dissertation, I hope to provide a beginning remedy to this situation. I speak of the situation as one that needs to be remedied because I am convinced that engaging with Augustine’s thought will prove fruitful in the continuing re-examination of ancient ethics in contemporary moral philosophy.

Arguably, the “virtue revival” was started by Elizabeth Anscombe’s classic article, “Modern Moral Philosophy.”⁴ In that work, Anscombe argued that we should abandon moral philosophy until we developed an adequate philosophical psychology.⁵ Thus the revival in examination of ancient ethics that this article precipitated has been connected to examining the views of these “eudaimonists” regarding moral psychology, practical reason and practical wisdom. In this dissertation, I seek to bring Augustine’s thought to bear on contemporary debates in practical reason. In particular, I will be bringing his thought to bear on those who have been following Anscombe’s dictum in a certain way. The thinkers I have in mind seek to gain traction on issues of moral philosophy by examining the contours, requirements and presuppositions of successful human agency.

Charles Taylor and Elijah Millgram are two thinkers who not only employ this approach, but have also reflected upon and defended this sort of approach, and both of

³ MacIntyre has treatments of Augustine in chapter IX of Whose Justice? Which Rationality? and in lecture IV of Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) has a chapter dealing with Augustine. There is of course a large body of literature on Augustine, but very little attention is given to him by contemporary moral philosophers.


their work is of particular interest in setting up how this dissertation will proceed.⁶ At this point, I will briefly discuss Taylor’s treatment of this sort of approach to moral philosophy. Following that discussion, I will raise an issue canvassed by Millgram as important for the motivation of an Augustinian view. The reason for discussing Taylor’s view of moral argument is that it is something like the approach often deployed by Augustine when arguing for his account of the moral life, and the style of argument fits well with Augustine’s views about human agency and the potential pitfalls to successful agency. The reason for discussing the issue raised by Millgram is that it raises a problem very much at the center of Augustine’s conception of human agency and practical understanding (and understanding in general).

Taylor distinguishes between what he calls “apodictic” moral argument and “ad hominem” moral argument.⁷ As a first approximation of what ad hominem moral argument consists of, Taylor writes the following:

Practical argument starts off on the basis that my opponent already shares at least some of the fundamental dispositions toward good and right which guide me. The error comes from confusion, unclarity, or an unwillingness to face some of what he can’t lucidly repudiate; and reasoning aims to show up this error. Changing someone’s moral view by reasoning is always at the same time increasing his self-clarity and self-understanding.⁸

In this sort of moral argument, one moral outlook Y is vindicated over another X if the transition from X to Y can be cogently portrayed as an advance in knowledge, from a

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less good to a better understanding of the phenomena in question. That is to say, it can be portrayed in a way that a proponent of X can himself recognize in his own terms.⁹

One way this sort of argument could proceed is by showing that a person disavows something that he must presuppose in order for his deliberations (or the deliberations of a successful rational agent, as he conceives such) to make sense and not be self-defeating. For Augustine, exercises of human agency are self-defeating when they fail to adequately acknowledge Augustine’s claim that the human heart is restless until it rests in God. That is, such exercises of agency fail to adequately acknowledge that no merely temporal good can satisfy human longings. This point is relevant for Augustine’s engagement with views that try to gain traction on ethical questions by examining the contours, requirements and presuppositions of successful rational agency. From an Augustinian perspective, any account of successful rational agency which implicitly denies or does not accord sufficient place to the idea that the human heart can be satisfied by no temporal good will be an account of self-defeating agency. The task for an Augustinian engaged in ad hominem arguments with such accounts of agency would be as follows: he must demonstrate in a way that his interlocutor can recognize that exercises of agency conforming to the interlocutor’s standards of successful rational agency will be self-defeating in some way.¹⁰ He would then have to argue that an Augustinian account of why such agency is self-defeating is superior to any account the


¹⁰ By ‘conforming’ I mean that the agents satisfy the relevant conditions, not that they are intending to do so or that they are aware that this is what they are doing.
interlocutor can give. In this dissertation, I will be content to suggest ways that different accounts of agency are self-defeating and suggest Augustinian explanations of the sources of failure of these accounts. I will be setting up the framework for such ad hominem arguments without fully carrying them out. It will largely be in the process of offering Augustinian explanations of such failures of rational agency that I will articulate the contours of an Augustinian account.

Another way that ad hominem moral argument can begin is by demonstrating that an interlocutor fails to provide an adequate account of some recognized phenomenon of practical life (i.e., recognized by both sides). If one can, by deploying one’s own explanation of the phenomenon give a better account than one’s interlocutor can of this failure on the interlocutor’s part then one will again have shown the transition from the interlocutor’s view to one’s own as constituting an advance in understanding. In my judgment, this is how Socrates proceeds in several dialogues, such as the Meno. I shall lay the groundwork for this kind of ad hominem argument in chapter 5.

My articulation of an Augustinian conception of practical reason and the various ad hominem arguments I will set up will center around two issues raised by Elijah Millgram that I will discuss briefly here. Others have treated these and related issues, but Millgram sees one issue as arising out of the other, so it will be useful to explore his treatment.

The first issue involves the question of the commensurability of ends and goods. I will discuss the issue in more detail in chapter 2, but the basic problem is familiar. In life, agents are faced with the prospect of seeking and realizing a variety of good ends. A

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person cannot realize all of them, so he must choose between them. The problem is that there are many \textit{kinds} of ends he might pursue and they are desirable in many different ways. Further, it is not obvious how one can compare these ends in a way that they are good so that one can make a non-arbitrary and intelligent decision about how to adjudicate conflicts between them (and note, at every moment one is faced with a conflict between good ends, because at any moment there are a myriad of ends which have something to be said for them, such that one must choose \textit{between} them because one cannot realize all of them). It seems that adjudicating such conflicts intelligently would require some kind of common standard that one could apply to the various ends available that would allow one to have a basis for choosing between these ends (rather than arbitrarily plunking for some over others).

A standard solution to this sort of problem is to suggest that there is some intrinsic feature that ends can possess in various degrees which one can discover, and the achievement of which one should seek to \textit{maximize} in one’s decision. Utilitarians, for example, take \textit{pleasantness} to be just such a commensurating feature possessed by disparate ends.

This way of seeing the issue suggests that ends are commensurable in advance of practical deliberation about them, and the job of practical deliberation is to \textit{discover} and seek to \textit{maximize} this commensurating feature of good things.

Millgram proposes an opposing way to understand commensurability in the context of practical deliberation. Millgram argues that the commensurability of ends is the \textit{result} of successful practical deliberation, rather than a \textit{precondition} of it.\footnote{\textsuperscript{12}} That is to
say, it is typically through the process of describing, conceptualizing and seeking to understand the nature of the desirability of various ends that a commensurating standard comes to apply to them. So commensurability is not something *discovered* by practical deliberation, but instead successful deliberation *renders* disparate ends commensurable. To put it another way, the ends would not *be* commensurable *unless* one deliberated in a certain way.

This sort of situation often obtains in situations of *learning*. In chapter 2, I will draw on an example from the film *The Karate Kid* in order to illustrate this. I will suggest that in that film the activities of the protagonist (Daniel) are not properly described as “learning karate” *unless* Daniel is able to commensurate these activities under that description. 13 Because of the unusual method of teaching employed by Daniel’s teacher, this is not automatic, and a large portion of the film is devoted to portraying Daniel’s attempt to make sense of what he has been taught.

If this is how things stand, Millgram notices that it creates the potential for a certain paradox of practical deliberation. As Millgram puts it, “practical reasoning is likely to give out precisely when we need it most.”14 Millgram worries that typically when an agent faces a decision – particularly a difficult decision when the relevant considerations are multifarious – he will lack the conceptual, imaginative and deliberative resources to render the various considerations relevant to a decision adequately commensurable in order to make an intelligent decision. One reason Millgram cites is


that “experience has a way of coming along too late to be of use.”\textsuperscript{15} Millgram is not idiosyncratic in these concerns. In part, he is articulating the familiar reality that it is often only in\textit{ hindsight} that we can adequately describe a situation in such a way that would have rendered the relevant considerations tractable. That is, we typically get the resources needed for successful deliberation only \textit{after} we have made the decision for which we needed those resources. I will term this problem the “access problem.”\textsuperscript{16} This name highlights the issue that there are problems ‘accessing’ our reasons for action, because they are not available to us in deliberation, but are only available after the fact.

In part, this dissertation will be a defense of an Augustinian conception of practical reason and practical wisdom carried out as a series of (incomplete) ad hominem arguments focused around an Augustinian understanding of the access problem. As such, I would like to connect these issues through a discussion of Plato’s \textit{Meno}.\textsuperscript{17} In my judgment, Plato’s \textit{Meno} portrays Socrates engaged in ad hominem argument. Perhaps not coincidentally, this dialogue which involves substantial discussion of Socrates’ philosophical method also contains discussion of an access problem – the well-known “paradox of learning.” The paradox here involves a puzzle with regard to learning in that it seems that one has the resources for achieving understanding of a certain question only after one has achieved that understanding, which suggests that learning (by deploying resources that will enable one to gain understanding which one does not now possess) is

\textsuperscript{15} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 287.

\textsuperscript{16} I am grateful to David Solomon for this term.

\textsuperscript{17} Plato, \textit{Meno}, in \textit{Plato: Five Dialogues}, Second Edition, G.M.A Grube trans., rev. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002). Unless otherwise noted, I will be relying on this translation. References to Plato’s \textit{Meno} and other works by Plato will use the standardized Stephanus page numbers, rather than the page numbers of the translation used.
impossible. Augustine himself addressed this sort of issue at various times in his writings, and he devoted an entire dialogue (De Magistro) to the discussion of issues about learning. Further, the Meno raises other issues regarding learning virtue which will be helpful to address in articulating Augustine’s basic understanding of the issues surrounding practical understanding.

1.1 The Meno, The Defeasibility of Good and the Access Problem

The Meno begins with a brash Meno asking if Socrates can tell him whether virtue can be taught. As is typical in Platonic dialogues, Socrates moves the conversation toward seeking a definition of ‘virtue’ by specifying its form. The question of whether virtue can be taught seems to drop out of the discussion until later, but if we are attentive to the details of the attempted definitions of virtue, we will see that this part of the dialogue is highly relevant both to the question of what Socrates can tell Meno, and to the related question of whether virtue can be taught. So Meno’s initial inquiry is still in play here. Accordingly, let us turn our attention to Meno’s attempted definitions of virtue.

Meno begins by offering a definition of the various kinds of virtue proper to different social roles and positions that persons occupy. There is one virtue for a man, another for a woman, another for a slave, and so on. This of course violates a familiar

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18 Plato, Meno, 70a.
19 Plato, Meno, 71e-72a.
Socratic stricture on definition, namely that it must specify the single form that ties all instances of the *definiendum* together and makes them what they are.\(^{20}\)

Socrates appeals to the particular virtues in order to suggest that there is something that the virtue of a man shares with the virtue of a woman, a slave, etc. He argues that all the activities he stated as being definitive of virtue must be performed justly and moderately in order to count as virtuous.\(^{21}\) This objection recurs throughout the dialogue.

Meno gives two other main definitions of virtue: 1) virtue is to rule over people 2) virtue is desiring good things and having the power to attain them.\(^{22}\)

Among other problems, both these definitions are subject to the objection that the activity in question must be performed justly and moderately in order to be virtuous. This objection is obvious in the case of the first definition. Let us examine more closely how Socrates deploys it to object to the second definition.

On its face, the definition does not seem far from the sort of definition to which Socrates would be sympathetic. But Socrates presses Meno to specify what he means by ‘good things.’ Meno indicates that he means goods such as health, riches and honors in the city. Regarding such goods, it is Socrates’ view that seeking and acquiring them must be done justly and moderately.\(^{23}\)

\(^{20}\) Plato, *Meno*, 72c.

\(^{21}\) Plato, *Meno*, 73a-c.

\(^{22}\) Plato *Meno*, 73d and 77b.

Socrates’ reason for pressing this objection even to the last proposed definition becomes evident given what else he says in this portion of the dialogue. Socrates wishes to press a view of virtue such that it will be indefinable in terms of achievement of what we might call “temporal goods” such as money, good repute, power, etc. But the problem runs deeper than this. The progress of the dialogue suggests that all definitions of virtue must fail. For if one proposes some non-circular set of conditions to define virtue (i.e., conditions which do not implicitly define virtue in terms of virtue) Socrates’ objection will apply. In order to respond to the objection, one will need a non-circular definition of what it means to perform activities “justly and moderately.” That is to say, one will need a non-circular definition of virtue, or acting virtuously, and will be back where one started. That is the upshot of the recurring objections to Meno’s definitions. For every activity that Meno proposes as definitive of virtue, Socrates claims that this activity must be done virtuously in order to be virtuous – which of course gets us nowhere in defining virtue. It is no wonder that Meno concludes that one cannot discover what virtue is.24

This recurring objection and its upshot are directly germane to the broader question of the dialogue, whether virtue can be taught. Since virtue is not definable in terms of any particular activity or set of activities, it will be difficult to learn it. For one thing, it will be difficult (if not impossible) to set down a set of rules to guide a person concerning virtuous action. To develop this point, let us examine Socrates’ more explicit treatment of the teachability of virtue in the Meno.

When Socrates discusses the teachability of virtue, he finally makes the claim to which the discussion had led – any good or activity (apart from activities defined in such

24 The problem of circular definitions is discussed in the dialogue from 73d-77a.
terms as “acting virtuously” or “acting justly”) is sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful.\(^\text{25}\) That is to say, all such activities or goods are only defeasibly good. Wisdom is necessary to rightly use goods, activities and character traits so that they are good and beneficial.\(^\text{26}\) (But, as I will elaborate below, it appears that wisdom must operate in the absence of informative rules set down in advance which will determine what is good and beneficial).

In everyday deliberations we typically recognize some sort of defeasibility of the importance or relevance of a consideration. That such and such an object would provide nourishment does not always mean that eating it would, all things considered, be a good thing. However, Socrates’ more radical claim has interesting consequences concerning reason and action. Since goods and activities are only defeasibly good, it apparently requires wisdom to know when they are good. But precisely because of the pervasiveness of this defeasibility it is difficult to find any materials for wisdom to work with. What do I mean by this?

Wisdom involves discernment about what is best to choose within a given context. Such discernment comes from experience in part, but always with the help of reason. One role of reason is to develop a stock of principles or rules of thumb for various situations, which experience has helped one understand. Experience helps one to understand the scope, content and rationale of the principles and rules of thumb. Likewise, one’s understanding of these principles aids one in assessing new


\(^{26}\) Plato, *Meno*, 88a-b. The formulation that wisdom is the *right use* of defeasibly good things connects very closely with Augustine’s views. (Socrates later rejects the idea that wisdom rather than true belief is necessary to rightly use defeasibly good things).
circumstances in which one finds oneself. However, if nearly any good that one might pursue is only defeasibly good, it will be difficult to get a reliable set of such principles (even if one views these principles as improvable, open-ended, and limited in scope). The discussion of the *Meno* would lead us to expect that there are very few such principles. At the very least, there will be very few principles providing any sort of deep explanation of when actions will be good and when not. This is a lesson one might take from the indefinability of virtue. There is no description that one can formulate that specifies when an action or pursuit is virtuous and when not. This casts doubt on whether becoming good involves anything like *learning*. At best, one can acquire a skill at using rules of thumb so that one’s actions turn out to be good most of the time. But one cannot take any steps to improve one’s understanding of *why* these principles are useful, and why applying them works in the contexts it does, and does not work when it does not. Some such consideration could lead us to conclude, as Socrates did in the *Meno*, that virtue and wisdom involve true belief without any account or understanding of those true beliefs. (i.e., understanding why they are true). There is, then, a difficulty in *accessing* what rationale might be available for our actions. That is to say, it is difficult to act for good reasons.

Of course, it was a similar access problem that Meno raised for Socrates with the paradox of learning in the middle of the dialogue.²⁷ Meno challenged the possibility of learning in general (so that Meno would not have to continue the discouraging task of trying to learn what virtue is by giving a definition that was to Socrates’ satisfaction). This difficulty was apparently answered with Socrates’ doctrine of recollection. It might

²⁷ See Plato, *Meno*, 80d.
be difficult to access understanding of a true definition, but one can do so by “recalling” a memory that is already present in one’s mind.  

So much for the general problem of learning. However, when the discussion finally returned to the topic of learning virtue, a similar access problem reared its head. Let me state this access problem more succinctly: Access problem: There is an obstacle to agents grasping relevant reasons for action such that they could act for those reasons.

1.2 The Access Problem and Augustine

In my view, Augustine’s work provides us with much neglected resources for thinking about why there might be an access problem, and how to think about practical reason in light of it.

Augustine provides a challenging account of why goods, aims and activities are defeasibly good in the way Socrates points to in the *Meno* and elsewhere. He famously begins his *Confessions* with the assertion that “our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

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28 See Plato, *Meno*, 81a-86c.

29 My discussion of Augustine in this dissertation will mainly draw on four works by Augustine: *Confessions*, *City of God*, *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), and *On the Teacher* (*De Magistro*). Unless otherwise noted, I will rely on the following translations for each: St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Maria Boulding, trans. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997); St. Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson, trans. (London: Penguin, 2003); Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* D.W. Robertson, Jr., tans. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1958); Augustine, *The Teacher in Against the Academics* and *The Teacher*, Peter King, trans., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995). Editions of the *Confessions* widely use the standard division of the work into books, chapters, and paragraphs. I will refer to the *Confessions* using these divisions, rather than referencing page numbers of the Boulding translation (For example, I will cite Book one, chapter three, paragraph five as follows: Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.3.5). The *City of God* is divided into 22 books. I will reference the book number and the page number in the Bettenson translation. *On Christian Doctrine* is separated into books, chapters and paragraphs, and I will cite it the same way I cite the *Confessions*. References to *The Teacher* will simply be to the page number in the King translation.

30 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.
Augustine’s account of the pervasive limited nature of the goodness of temporal goods derives from this initial conviction. The searching, sophisticated self-examination of the *Confessions* is crucial for bearing out this conviction.

Before examining how the *Confessions* work as such an argument to establish Augustine’s central claim about the human good, it will be useful to lay out Augustine’s view of good action and the good for humans as directly as possible.

For Augustine, enjoyment of God is the highest human good. He believed that humans would be unfit (for a variety of reasons that I hope to make clear) to enjoy God if they delighted in any created good below God.\(^31\) Hence, Augustine claimed that God alone is to be enjoyed, while all else must be used to fit one for that enjoyment. All goods achievable by action in life (which I shall term ‘temporal goods’) are good “in a place” and together “very good.”\(^32\) Temporal goods have circumscribed functions within God’s creation. Right use of these goods involves using them in accordance with this function and acknowledging their goodness as part of God’s creation, rather than hankering for them to be better than they are. Hankering for things to be better than they are involves seeking to satisfy one’s longing for God by pursuing these goods. The right use of these goods fits us to enjoy God because it involves a humble acknowledgement of our own limits (to achieve our end with temporal goods alone), and it recognizes the goodness of creation, while recognizing God as distinct from and more worthy of praise and love than created things.

\(^31\) ‘Fit’ here does not mean ‘deserving.’ It means fit in the sense of having cultivated the capacity for a certain kind of enjoyment.

\(^32\) See Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.12.18.
This view led Augustine to a rather radical conception of the defeasible goodness of temporal activities and aims. Since good action fits us to enjoy a good beyond what we achieve in action, the pursuit of any good can become harmful to the task of fitting oneself to enjoy one’s highest good. The reason for this is the limited and circumscribed goodness of temporal goods. A consequence of their limited goodness is that pursuit of these goods can be disordered.

The pursuit of some aim is disordered when one’s pursuit of it is not suited to its goodness. Such pursuit damages one’s fitness to enjoy one’s highest good as a result of hankering for the object of one’s pursuit to be better than it is. It is possible to pursue any temporal aim in a disordered fashion, just because no aim can be identified with the human good. This is what creates room for disordered pursuit.

Augustine provided an explanation of disordered pursuits that also allows us to gain a better sense of his view of good things and the highest human good. The explanation of disordered pursuits is pride. Pride is an overestimation of one’s capacities, abilities and importance. At its root, it is a rejection of viewing oneself as a finite creature (and hence a form of self-hatred) and a rejection of acknowledging God as creator.33

How does pride explain the disordered pursuit of goods? There is a fundamental irony to pride. One overestimates oneself, which includes the belief that one can achieve one’s highest good in life by action. This requires finding some pursuit or set of pursuits

33 I note here that this sort of pride can be exemplified by those who affirm that they are creatures and affirm that the human heart is restless unless it rests in God. Such persons can fail to adequately acknowledge this in their deliberations by treating temporal goods as if they could satisfy human longings (even while they would deny that they could. According to an Augustinian understanding of human nature, this would not be an extraordinary occurrence at all.
within one’s powers that one invests with ultimate importance as being that in which one’s highest good consists. The irony here is that overestimating oneself leads one to pursue lesser goods than one’s supreme good as supremely worthwhile. In the process, one becomes less, for one makes oneself unfit to enjoy the highest good of which humans are capable of enjoying. It is in the very act of pursuing limited goods as ultimate goods that one becomes unfit. One reduces one’s capacities to the point where one is only capable of enjoying and appreciating these lower goods. But this enjoyment is inherently flawed because one’s enjoyment of these goods involves esteeming their value beyond what they warrant and hence seeking from them that which they cannot deliver (a resting place for the soul). There is a self-defeating dimension to this pride, since “our heart is restless until it rests in you.” This pride explains disordered pursuits because the assumption that one is self-sufficient (i.e., that one has the ability to achieve one’s highest good in this life, by action) requires finding a good that one is capable of pursuing and equating it with one’s highest good. This will always be a limited good that is only able to defeasibly contribute to an agent’s good.

Furthermore, one actually degrades the good things which one hankers to be better than they are. One does so because one is incapable of finding their proper and best use, which is the use that allows them to be appreciated in such a way that they serve as signs that point beyond themselves and bear witness to one’s supreme good (I will discuss this further below).  

34 The idea that the best use of good things is one that allows them to point beyond themselves is one that Augustine drew from scripture. Consider what Moses tells the Israelites in chapter 8 of Deuteronomy: “And he [the Lord God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 8:3, ESV).
Since pride leads to disordered pursuits of goods which make one unfit for enjoying one’s highest good, it seems natural to think that humility is necessary for the ordered pursuit of what is good. This humility consists of an acknowledgement of one’s place as part of God’s creation. But humility goes beyond a simple intellectual acknowledgement and is brought to completion by faith, hope and love. The actions that embody these virtues perfect the agent’s practical reason and character, thereby fitting the agent to enjoy God. The agent’s capacity to enjoy God is renewed because of the new orientation of his will and loves.

Love is central here because our loves largely determine what we pursue. It is disordered love that issues in disordered pursuit of temporal goods. In order for love to be fitted to its proper object, it must be a humble love. That is, it must be love which does not labor under false pretensions regarding one’s own capacities. This has several consequences.

The first consequence of this sort of humility regards how one pursues one’s highest good. Such pursuit recognizes that it is one thing to love something, and thus to seek to enjoy it; it is quite another thing to be able to attain to enjoyment of it. Humble love of God requires a recognition that one cannot attain to full enjoyment of God in temporal life, because of the reality of being a finite temporal creature as well as because of the consequences of sin. As finite, temporal creatures, humans cannot attain to full enjoyment of God while engaged in the activity of earthly life. As sinful, when left to their own devices, humans do not accept this condition and seek to enjoy their highest good by their own powers in this life. This leads to the prideful, disordered pursuits discussed above.
In this condition, faith and hope are required in order to pursue God in a manner that fits one to enjoy him.\(^{35}\) Hope is needed so that an agent can set his sights on an end that is remote from temporal life (enjoyment of God); faith is the virtue that embodies one’s hope. It is the virtue that enables one to pursue temporal goods in light of one’s hope of an eternal good. The language Augustine uses for this is “referring” all things to God.

Because of the remoteness of the human good, the ordered love and right use of good things turns out to make reference to an agent’s character and practical reason. The right use of temporal goods is that use that gives an agent a sense of his final good (thus in the process preventing disordered love of the temporal good in question). At the same time, it bolsters his love for and resolve for referring all goods to that end. Hence, good action in this life fits an agent to enjoy his ultimate good by perfecting his reason and character. Augustine uses the imagery of a pilgrim or sojourner to express this point.

Humans must use temporal goods the way a pilgrim who hopes for his homeland would. Such a pilgrim would not allow the good things he encounters to distract him from preparing himself to enjoy life in his homeland. Instead, he would use these gifts to nourish himself and bolster his hope for and understanding of life in his homeland.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{35}\) See Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, pg. 852. Augustine writes, “‘The just man lives on the basis of faith.’ For we do not yet see our good, and hence we have to seek it by believing; and it is not in our power to live rightly, unless while we believe and pray we receive help from him, who has given us the faith to believe that we must be helped by him.”

\(^{36}\) Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 877. “…A household of human beings whose life is based on faith looks forward to the blessings which are promised as eternal in the future, making use of earthly and temporal things like a pilgrim in a foreign land, who does not let himself be taken in by them or distracted from his course towards God, but rather treats them as supports which help him more easily to bear the burdens of ‘the corruptible body which weighs heavy on the soul.’” It is instructive that Augustine speaks of a “household” here. Although I have been focusing on an individual agent, his place within a certain kind of communal life plays a crucial role in the perfection of practical reason. I should also mention that
There is an additional aspect to humbly using good things well in order to perfect one’s practical reason. In addition to an agent recognizing his limits, he must also recognize his dependence. An agent is dependent upon God for all that is involved in referring temporal goods to him. Failure to acknowledge such dependence invariably leads to disordered, prideful pursuit of temporal goods in the way we have already discussed. This is Augustine’s consistent critique of any view that holds that the human end is within a human’s power to achieve independent of God. This dependence has cognitive and conative dimensions. One depends on God for the apprehension of one’s good. One also depends on God for the ability to act on that knowledge in referring all things to God.

There is one final aspect of this recognition of dependence. One recognizes that even when one’s will has been oriented correctly, one’s love of God is always limited and incomplete, as is one’s apprehension of one’s good. So the right use of temporal goods is not carried out under conditions of full knowledge of and love for one’s final good. Instead, the right use of temporal goods involves furthering this understanding of one’s good that one does not have at the moment of action.

The structure of Augustine’s account produces a particularly acute access problem. Note what practical deliberation entails on this account. One is trying to figure out how to rightly use goods. One rightly uses them when one’s use of them perfects one’s grasp of the limits of these goods, and thereby fits one to enjoy one’s highest good. But this means the answer to the question one asks in practical deliberations (“How can I rightly use these goods”) depends on one’s understanding of the answer to the question despite appearances at the end of the quote, Augustine’s view, I believe, avoids objectionable dualism about the human good and avoids denigration of ordinary life.
(since right use involves use that perfects one’s practical understanding). That is to say, the phenomenon one is trying to understand partly depends on one’s understanding of it. This seems to leave practical reason resourceless in coming to understand the right use of goods. What makes matters worse, part of the relevant understanding will involve acquiring a proper understanding of one’s own incapacity to rightly grasp the goodness of temporal goods and rightly order them (this follows from the fact that perfecting practical reason entails acknowledging dependence to perfect one’s practical reason).

The problem here is that there are not adequate answers to the questions facing practical reason unless practical reason is able to articulate an answer to these questions. So the central problem of practical life can be characterized as learning to speak adequately about that life. I put things this way for a few reasons. First, the notion of “learning to speak” is central to Augustine. He devotes an entire dialogue (De Magistro) to problems related to learning to speak, and it is in that dialogue that Augustine puts forward the idea that all instances of humans coming to understand occur as a result of divine illumination. Further, the Confessions can be characterized as an exercise of learning to speak intelligibly about his life. Not surprisingly in this light, Augustine spends a substantial amount of time in the first book of the Confessions discussing how he learned to speak as a child. The nature of Augustine’s speech becomes a topic of discussion at various important points within the Confessions.


38 See especially the openings of books five, ten and eleven of the Confessions.
There are other reasons that the notion of “learning to speak” is important to the concerns of this dissertation. The concerns of De Magistro very much parallel the issues surrounding the paradox of learning in Plato’s Meno. Further, contemporary linguists and philosophers of language have noticed a puzzle regarding learning to speak that is analogous to this access problem. The input that serves as the grounds of language learning appears in no way sufficient to explain the knowledge one exhibits when one learns to speak.\(^{39}\) Hence some linguists have proposed theories of language learning analogous to Plato’s theory of recollection put forward in the Meno to solve the paradox of learning. On these views, the ordinary input one receives that aids in learning a language (all the ordinary linguistic interactions a pre-linguistic child goes through as part of its socialization) are occasions for activating a knowledge already present in the child. In this connection, when I directly address the access problem in chapter 5, I will do so by discussing obstacles to achieving practical understanding in deliberation that parallel apparent obstacles to learning a word or concept due to the “poverty of input” that goes into such learning. I will then address and critique what I will call “Wittgensteinian” approaches to the access problem in the views of Murdoch and McDowell, the latter of which explicitly connects his views of practical understanding to Wittgenstein’s views of language learning.\(^{40}\)

In what follows, I would like to briefly outline how Augustine conceived of the task of perfecting one’s practical understanding proceeding in the light of the access

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\(^{39}\) Wittgenstein powerfully brought this to our attention in the early parts of the Philosophical Investigations (which he framed as a response to Augustine’s views of language).

\(^{40}\) These approaches are ‘Wittgensteinian’ in that they articulate ways in which agents achieve practical understanding without employing or grasping general principles.
problem. This discussion will focus on Augustine’s attempt to tell an intelligible story about the course of his own life in the *Confessions*.

In the early books of the *Confessions*, Augustine recounted how he slowly came to the conclusion that his prideful pursuits were futile. Having done this, he needed to find a way forward, and the subsequent books of the *Confessions* recount how he found this way forward. His first impulse was a strongly dualist impulse of abandoning these earthly activities altogether. His first foray into a dualist conception of the best life came with his joining of the Manichees. He abandoned this outlook in favor of a form of neo-Platonism. He credited neo-Platonism as a step forward, largely because it offered him the conceptual resources to understand evil more adequately than he had as a Manichee. He was beginning to perfect his practical understanding. The Platonists he read had helped him to speak.

However, Augustine grew dissatisfied with Platonism, in a way that he could partly articulate with the conceptual resources offered to him by Platonism. Platonism had allowed him to see temporal goods and objects as “good in a place” and together “very good.” It had also allowed him to move away from the ethical dualism of Manicheanism, where he conceived of evil as a substance opposed to goodness (both of which he conceived of in more or less physical terms). Instead, he came to conceive of evil as a “negation” of goodness, the source of which was a will which “hankered for created things to be better than they are.”

41 See *Confessions*, Book 7.

42 See *Confessions*, Book 7.
So Platonism moved Augustine forward by giving him insight into the limited goodness of temporal pursuits, and insight that the goodness of objects was a function of the “place” they had as limited objects within a larger whole. This allowed Augustine to discover the pride and futility of his previous pursuits. However, Augustine found pride within the Platonist program of acquiring wisdom. For Platonism, as Augustine characterizes it, recommended using the insight gained from inquiry to remove oneself from the world of time and space and cling to what thinkers like Plotinus called “the One.” This clinging involved grasping the One as the source of the being and goodness of all other things (compare Plato’s form of the Good).

Clinging to the One would involve purifying one’s loves so that one can see temporal goods for what they are and not hanker for them to be better than they are. Thus far, Augustine can agree. However, in Augustine’s view, the Platonist vision of escaping the concerns of temporal life involves pride as well. While the Platonists require one to grasp the limited goodness of objects by noting their temporality and corruptibility, they fail to take stock of the condition of humans as finite and corruptible (albeit rational) creatures. The Platonic goal of escaping temporal life and clinging to the One involves a hankering for human nature to be better than it is. According to Augustine, at the heart of purifying one’s loves is not hankering for oneself to be better than one is. It requires humble self-love that recognizes the limits of human existence. If one is to cling to God, this humility is necessary and must be part of thankfulness for one’s life as a gift. This led Augustine to reject the Platonist program of removing oneself from the concerns of temporal life.
As far as Augustine was concerned, the Platonists “knew the goal but not the way to it.”43 They knew that one must purify one’s loves by ceasing to invest temporal objects with more worth than they warranted as limited, corruptible things. However, the program they recommended for this task involved failing to account oneself as a finite being. This pride makes the Platonist project self-defeating in Augustine’s view.

Augustine begins to articulate his alternative to Platonism in one of the more famous passages of the *Confessions*. Having pursued three “Platonic ascents” without being able to cling to God thereby, Augustine signals the way forward as follows:

> On your exceedingly great mercy rests all my hope. Give what you command, and then command whatever you will. You order us to practice continence. A certain writer tells us, *I knew that no one can be continent except by God’s gift, and that it is already a mark of wisdom to recognize whose gift this is.* By continence the scattered elements of the self are collected and brought back into the unity from which we have slid away into dispersion, for anyone who loves something else along with you, but does not love it for your sake, loves you less. O Love, ever burning, never extinguished, O Charity, my God, set me on fire! You command continence: give what you command, and then command whatever you will.44

This paragraph puts the work of purifying one’s loves into an entirely new key. First, we see Augustine highlighting the importance of humility in the midst of purifying one’s loves. Recognizing the limits of temporal goods, and hence the limits of one’s pursuits, serves as the basis and rationale for purifying one’s loves. However, such humility must also recognize one’s limits and dependence in carrying out this purification. Finally, the goal of the task itself is achieving a certain kind of humility, for it is such humility that will fit one to enjoy one’s highest good, namely, resting in God.

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43 See *Confessions*, 7.21.27.
44 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.29.40.
The relevance of this for conceiving the access problem is clear for Augustine. To be frank, virtue and the perfection of practical reason come – to modify the formulation in the *Meno* – as a gift from God. Any other view fails to grasp the nature and importance of the humility that brings about and partly constitutes this perfection of practical reason. Whereas in the *Meno* virtue being a gift of the gods excluded it from being a matter of reason and knowledge, these are not exclusive options for Augustine. For Augustine, the gift from God that is necessary for perfecting the practical reason is the gift of faith. Despite this, the overall picture of the perfecting of practical reason is in fact not so distant from Plato or Aristotle’s picture. Socrates in the *Republic* points out the necessity of training the sensibilities of the guardians before they attain reason (*logos*) and can give an account of these sensibilities, thus gaining wisdom. For Aristotle, a good upbringing is a necessary precondition for reasoning well about the good. Neither have the view that such pre-rational preparation for sound understanding of the good and sound reasoning about the good in any way vitiates the rationality of such understanding and reasoning. For Augustine, faith plays a role similar to the education of sensibilities in Plato and Aristotle.

Faith (like the process of habituation for Aristotle, and the training of sensibilities for Socrates/Plato) does have a cognitive component. Faith is what allows one to use temporal actions and temporal goods to act in light of one’s highest good which is not achievable by action in this life. The content of faith delineates how one can use temporal actions and goods to act in light of one’s highest good. The picture here is that good human action has a certain symbolic value such that it can bear witness to the fact that humans are dependent upon God to attain their highest good and that their highest
good is not achievable by action in life. Recall again the pilgrim imagery that Augustine deploys. A pilgrim who resists comforts when he is apart from home because they will dull his memory of his homeland, and weaken his perseverance in trying to return home acts in light of his hope for his homeland. Accepting such comforts also conveys a falsehood about his aims. It suggests that he aims for a comfortable life however he can get it, rather than the particular kind of life that is available in his homeland. Resisting these comforts bears witness to what the aims of his activities are. All of his activity will be ordered not to having things go well in the land of his sojourning. Rather, a pilgrim uses his sojourning, in light of his hope for his homeland, to prepare himself for living in his homeland. Augustine’s language for this is that the sojourner “refers” all things to his homeland. Every action gets its significance from how it symbolizes and prepares one for life in one’s homeland.

In order for a sojourner to refer all his activity to his homeland, and thus fit himself for life there, he needs two things. He needs a conception of life in his homeland, and he needs insight into how to refer his activity during various stages of his sojourning to this life. For Augustine, this is what faith provides – a conception of the highest good for humans and insight into how to refer earthly activities to that end. Notice also that a faithful sojourner who continues to refer his activities to life in his homeland will also improve his conception of life in his homeland, and how to fit himself for it by continuing to refer his activities to such life. As a result, he becomes better fit to enjoy such a life. Such indeed is the point of the enterprise of referring one’s activities to life in one’s homeland that is not present here and now. In the same way, faithfully acting in light of one’s highest good improves one’s conception of that highest good, improve
one’s ability to refer action in one’s life to that highest good and thereby fit oneself to enjoy it. That is to say, it perfects one’s practical reason. Engaging in this activity of “referring” all one’s activities to one’s highest good is what I have characterized as “learning to speak.”

1.3 The Road Ahead

The task that remains for me is working out the details of how “learning to speak” works, how it allows an agent to refer activity to his highest good, and how such referring fits an agent to enjoy this highest good, and how we can think of this as the perfection of practical reason, particularly in light of the access problem. Let me chart a map of what follows, as I attempt to articulate the basic contours of an Augustinian approach to these issues.

For Augustine, the human heart is restless until it rests in God, and the chief obstacle to becoming fit to enjoy such rest is that one fails to acknowledge the limits of temporal goods to satisfy that rest. Thus a conception of Augustinian practical understanding must articulate how agents can come to adequately acknowledge the limits of temporal goods in and through their deliberations and actions. Thus, chapter 2 will begin by discussing in more detail what I have called the “defeasible goodness” of good things. I will draw extensively on the work of G.E.M. Anscombe (particularly *Intention*) for this discussion.

Anscombe uses the practical syllogism as a useful way to model exercises of practical reason. A practical syllogism exhibits a certain action as falling under a description that is desirable to realize in some way. But the inferences of these syllogisms
(which designate an action to be done) are defeasible. That is, one can rationally affirm the premises but fail to “draw” the conclusion by performing the proposed action. This defeasibility of practical syllogisms highlights a pervasive problem of action. At any moment, one is faced with the prospect of pursuing and realizing a variety of ends which are good in some way. When faced with a decision, the task of practical reason is providing understanding of why one should pursue certain of these limited goods in this context rather than other goods. That is, one needs an understanding of which practical syllogism(s) to follow in a given deliberative context.

A chief problem for practical reason here is the variety of good ends and the variety of ways in which these ends are good. As discussed above, this raises the question of whether agents can grasp the defeasible goodness of ends in such a way that they can relate these ends together in practical deliberation. Without the ability to do this, agents cannot grasp the defeasible goodness of the various ends available to them, which, from an Augustinian perspective is not only important for practical deliberation, but is a main goal of the practical life, for it is this grasping which fits a person to enjoy his highest good. This last point is an important one to keep in mind throughout. An Augustinian point of view shares the Platonic conviction that practice is for the sake of understanding, not the other way around. It is not that the point of perfected practical reason is something else to be achieved in this life. Instead, the point of one’s pursuits is to perfect one’s practical reason. The oddity of this reversal of the more typical way of thinking is mitigated by the idea that this perfected understanding does fit one to enjoy a good, but one that is remote from all one’s temporal pursuits.
Most recognize that a central task for practical reason is allowing an agent to negotiate the defeasibility conditions of the various ends available to them. This requires that in some way or form one is able to *relate* different ends together.\(^45\) An Augustinian must understand this relating in such a way that fits in with his overall conception of the practical life giving an agent an understanding of the right use and limits of various temporal goods in such a way that fits him to enjoy a unitary but remote good.

My Augustinian conception of relating various defeasible goods together will draw on two ideas that are present in the literature on commensurability and practical reason. The first idea is that ends can be related by describing them in terms of the place they have in a certain kind of life conceived as a whole. The second idea has already been mentioned: such “commensurating”\(^46\) descriptions only apply as a result of practical deliberation and understanding. The relevant description would not apply to these ends *unless* the agent came to understand them in a certain way. Notice that agents have extended the uses of these ends by articulating a use that would not be available apart from such articulation. I have characterized this sort of extending of the goods available to one as a result of one’s ability to articulate those goods as “learning to speak,” and it is worth elaborating here on how this approach to commensurability fits nicely within an Augustinian understanding of practical reason.

\(^{45}\) I intend something very minimal by this notion of ‘relate.’ This does not mean that the goods are comparable in the sense that an agent can apply some common description, measure or standard to them. All I mean is that it is necessary for an agent to at least be able to say, ‘when good x and good y conflict in circumstances like these, x takes priority,’ and if this judgment is a deliverance of practical reason, there must be some basis or ground for it.

\(^{46}\) I put ‘commensurating’ in scare quotes here, because I will need to distinguish my notion of commensurability and commensuration from other notions of commensurability.
On an Augustinian picture one enhances the potential use of good things by recognizing their limits, and thereby allowing them to point beyond themselves and bear witness to one’s supreme good. The enhancement of the use of good things by recognizing their limits reverses the ironic results of pride, where one degrades these goods by hankering for them to be better than they are.

The relevant commensurating descriptions only apply as a result of deliberation because of the kind of life into which these actions must fit in order to be commensurable. It is the task of chapter 3 to elaborate and articulate the nature of this life. In short, the relevant life is aptly described as a pilgrim life. That is, it is the kind of life that relates the goods available to it together in a way that fits one to enjoy a way of life remote from one’s own. The primary way one does this is by using the good things available to one as signs that bear witness to the remote life one seeks. Notice that goods cannot be used this way unless the agents using them have a sense of how they can be so used. Hence the use of goods that allows one to commensurate them by relating them to this kind of life is a result of practical deliberation, not a precondition of it. In chapter 3, I will go into more detail regarding how Augustine understood human life as a pilgrimage, and how he understood this notion of using goods as signs to bear witness to a good and a way of life which is remote from one’s own.

In chapter 3, I will attempt to motivate understanding one’s life as that of a pilgrim by setting up an ad hominem argument regarding a certain view of agency drawn from the work of Joseph Raz. I will try to point out a way in which such agency can be self-defeating, and provide an Augustinian explanation of that failure that will motivate his conception of human life as the life of a pilgrim.
Chapter 4 is a transitional chapter that consists of an ad hominem argument between Augustine and Harry Frankfurt. There is a lot of shared ground between Augustine’s conception of agency and the self on the one hand and Frankfurt’s on the other. What that chapter highlights is that a crucial aspect of practical understanding is an acknowledgement of continuing incapacity to achieve practical understanding, or to realize the self one wishes to become. Thus Frankfurt’s notion of unified rational agency as “acquiescence to the self” – that is, aligning one’s will with the higher order desires with which one identifies, and hence realizing the self one most wishes to become – has a crucial shortcoming. For Augustine, the root reason why acquiescence to the self is not enough for practical understanding is that practical insight always points to a good which we cannot achieve by action in this life, and correspondingly, a self which is capable of enjoying this good which we are incapable of realizing in this life. Augustine sees the failure to acknowledge this incapacity of the self to be rooted in pride. Further, he sees such pride as the root of the persistent denial of the idea that “our heart is restless until it rests in God.” A main goal of Chapter 4 is to show how agents conforming to Frankfurt’s conditions of “acquiescing to the self” can display pride in failing to acknowledge their incapacities, and that such pride leads to self-defeating exercises of agency. (Since in this case it keeps one from realizing the self one identifies with, it “defeats the self” in a fairly literal sense).

Since practical understanding allows us to become aware of our own incapacities with respect to practical understanding and rational agency, we are forced to confront the access problem head on. If practical understanding leads us to acknowledge that the point of such understanding (realizing a self fit to enjoy our highest good) is something that we
cannot realize, we must address the concern that practical wisdom will fail us in the end; in Millgram’s terms, practical reason will give out precisely when we need it most (in becoming the self fit to enjoy our highest good). Thus, in chapter 5, I revisit the access problem. I canvas reasons to think that our resources for rational deliberation are impoverished. That is to say, the material available for practical judgment radically underdetermines such judgment (in a manner analogous to the way that the input by which persons learn words and concepts radically underdetermines their judgments about the applicability of the concept). At best, we get the resources for genuine understanding of a situation and its place in our life only in retrospect, which means we always (up to the very end of our lives) are unable to perfect our practical understanding.

In the chapter, I critique what I call “Wittgensteinian” approaches to this problem, particularly the work of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell. I then discuss the direction an Augustinian approach to this issue would go in. In the process, I articulate the remaining philosophical work to be done in order to fully articulate an Augustinian conception of practical reason.
In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre surprisingly concluded that the good life for man is the life spent seeking the good life for man. Augustine’s outlook is congenial to such a thought, for Augustine thinks that good action and a good human life are matters of perfecting one’s conception of and appreciation for one’s highest good, which is not achievable in life; the good life for man does not consist in attaining any particular temporal good. Instead it is a matter of using one’s pursuit and conception of temporal goods to perfect one’s conception of the best life for man. The point - so far as this life is concerned - of success in the practical life is perfecting one’s practical understanding, not the other way around. So it is not a far stretch to say that Augustine believes that the good life for man is the life spent seeking the good life for man.

Augustine gives priority in this life to practical understanding because the supreme good for humans is remote from this life, so the point of this life is becoming fit to enjoy that remote good. One does this in part by recognizing and understanding the defeasible goodness of what I have called ‘temporal goods.’ That is to say, agents

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48 Throughout the chapter we should keep in mind that the highest good for man is not such a life, but that such a life fits an agent to enjoy his highest good.
recognize that none of these goods (or any combination of them) constitutes the supreme good for humans that will satisfy human longings and make them blessed. Thus, it is important to get a handle on the defeasible goodness of good things in order to articulate an Augustinian conception of perfecting practical reason. Furthermore, we must do this in such a way that makes clear the Augustinian conviction that the point of practical life is practical understanding that fits one to enjoy one’s highest good, and that this understanding comes by recognizing the limited nature of temporal goods so that one does not hanker for them to be better than they are, and thereby degrade oneself and them.

I will suggest that humans can properly pursue temporal goods by relating these various goods together by situating them within a life oriented around grasping the limited nature of temporal goods in such a way that enhances their appreciation for and fitness to enjoy their supreme good which is remote from these things. In this chapter, I will articulate some of the structural features of how this relating together (or “commensurating,” as I will call it) of defeasibly good temporal goods works. In particular, I will suggest that we should understand an Augustinian conception of such commensuration as involving a certain kind of learning. In this kind of learning, a person learns how to relate various activities, pursuits and ends together by placing them under a common description in terms of their place within a certain kind of life. However, the relevant description does not apply to these goods unless the agent is able to understand them in a certain way. I will express this thought by saying that these defeasibly good things are not commensurable unless the agent commensurates them. The task of this chapter is to discuss the defeasible goodness of temporal goods and to articulate an
understanding of commensurating those goods such that the goods are not commensurable unless the agent commensurates them.

Before discussing this, let me reiterate why this sort of account of commensuration fits within an Augustinian framework. The act of commensuration conceived in this way makes available descriptions of one’s ends that would not otherwise be available to act under, because the relevant descriptions would not apply. Thus the act of perfecting one’s practical reason enables the proper use of a given temporal good by understanding its limits. Apart from this understanding, the commensurating description would not apply, and the proper use of the temporal good in question would thereby not be available. The fuller discussion of why temporal goods are only commensurable as a result of practical understanding on the part of the agent commensurating them within a certain kind of life must await the discussion of that kind of life as a pilgrim life in chapter 3. I will begin by discussing the defeasible nature of temporal goods.

One striking feature of human life, that in some way or other becomes evident to most people at some point, is the sheer amount and variety of activities that lay some claim on our time and energy as in some way worthwhile, necessary, fitting, pleasant, humane or good in some other way. Having noticed this, one should also notice the difficulty we often face in organizing and prioritizing our pursuits of these various activities. Attending to this reality should make agents aware of how many of their aims are, and are construed by them in practical deliberation as, only defeasibly good. These worthwhile, necessary, fitting, pleasant or beneficial activities are not such, and are not viewed as such, in any and every context in which an agent might perform them.
For both Plato and Aristotle, the fact that most human activities are only defeasibly good played an important role in forming each of their conceptions of a practically wise person. Both the *Meno* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* seem to portray the person of practical wisdom as one who is sensitive to conditions in which the goodness of aims and activities is defeated, and the reasons for such defeat. Aristotle’s refrain that virtuous action involves acting within a certain domain in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason, toward the right people seems to suggest this about the particular virtues of character. His discussion of *phronesis* in book VI suggests that the *phronimos* is one who fits together the various domains where one can act well, and can determine what constitutes acting in the right way, at the right time, toward the right people.

Elizabeth Anscombe was greatly influenced by the Aristotelian corpus, and any discussion of contemporary treatment of the importance of the defeasible goodness of aims as a consideration for an account of practical rationality and reasons for action must begin with her. Specifically, such discussion must begin with her treatment of these matters in *Intention*.

In *Intention* Anscombe made familiar the idea that actions are intended and intentional under certain descriptions.\(^{49}\) Let us begin with some observations that should be uncontroversial. First, for many action descriptions, actions falling under those descriptions are in many instances good, but in other instances base, unwise, inappropriate, unfitting or bad in some other way.\(^{50}\) Fiddling is a fine activity, but not

while Rome burns. Fiddling while Rome burns is callous, or worse. Washing one’s hands is often an excellent idea, but incessant washing is often part of a cluster of behaviors termed “obsessive compulsive.” Doing excellent work is important, but most of us recognize the badness in disproportionate devotion to one’s job leading to the neglect of other important matters.

It would not be difficult to expand the list of examples given above to illustrate that actions falling under certain descriptions are often the thing to do, but sometimes must be set aside in favor of other considerations. This is all familiar and should be uncontroversial. The *Meno* suggests that the goodness of most actions falling under such descriptions will be defeasible. The only possible exception would be descriptions specified in terms of virtue, excellence or some such evaluative term. I do not need to take a stand at this point on how far the phenomenon of defeasible goodness extends. However, Anscombe’s discussion does indicate that our reasons for action (that is, the descriptions under which we place intentional actions to explain and justify them) are for the most part defeasible reasons. That is, the reasons that explain our actions only defeasibly justify action.

It is useful to model the defeasible nature of practical reasons by examining practical syllogisms. Anscombe herself devotes much space in *Intention* to a discussion of practical syllogisms and practical reasoning. For my purposes, I do not need to be

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50 This fact is not due merely to the manner in which one performs them. I am not simply pointing out that, for example, if one helps someone in a manner that indicates they are putting you out one does not act as well one might. The defeasible goodness of aims runs deeper than this.

51 See Anscombe, *Intention*, §33-34.

52 The entire discussion that follows is deeply indebted to *Intention*. I use the practical syllogism to model an agent’s reasons in acting intentionally. Such practical syllogisms can be useful for modeling an
tied to one particular account of the practical syllogism, except that we should conceive of it in such a way that it models the defeasibility of practical reasons. The practical syllogism has a general but unquantified premise characterizing a certain kind of object or action as good in some way. There are three main desirability characterizations – the useful the fitting and the pleasant. These characterizations are what we will find in the first premises of practical syllogisms. The second premise of a practical syllogism is some premise referencing a particular, which states that an instance of the kind of object characterized as good in the first premise is present or obtainable in some way. Alternatively, one gives a more specific action type stating that in this instance such an action constitutes the kind of action specified as good in the universal premise. The following is an example of a practical syllogism.

Eating sandwiches is pleasant.
Here’s a sandwich.
So, I eat it.

We should think of the conclusion of a practical syllogism as specifying an action (parallel to a proposition in an ordinary syllogism), and one who “draws” the conclusion

agent’s reasons even when agents act intentionally without engaging in any process of reasoning. In this connection, see Intention §42.


54 Anscombe discusses desirability characterizations throughout the latter part of Intention. See §35ff. See also Candace Vogler, Reasonably Vicious. Vogler makes much of the three-fold division of desirability characterizations (and she argues that Anscombe implicitly operated with the scheme). Vogler is drawing on Aquinas, and follows him in seeing the root of the three-fold division in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle discusses the three objects of love (the useful, the pleasant and the fitting.) Vogler again follows Aquinas in seeing the three-fold scheme in Aristotle’s discussion of the three kinds of friendship in the Nicomachean Ethics.
would be someone who does the action specified in the conclusion (as one who draws the conclusion of an ordinary syllogism forms a belief or judgment).

These inferences are defeasible. That is, although the premises represent good reasons for the action that is their conclusion, it is possible to affirm the premises and rationally refrain from performing the action that is its conclusion. When such is the case I will say that the inference in question is defeated.

There are two ways that such defeat can occur (and they are not mutually exclusive). Consider the above syllogism whose “major premise” states that eating sandwiches is pleasant. This is not a quantified proposition, so the proposition could be true while in this instance eating a sandwich would not be pleasant, if for instance, one has an upset stomach. In this case the reason itself is defeated. Although it is typically pleasant to eat sandwiches, it would not be so here. When referring to such situations I will say that one’s reason is defeated.

The second way such an inference could be defeated is when it would be pleasant to eat the sandwich before one, but there is something better one should be doing – perhaps one is in the middle of giving or listening to a lecture. In such cases I will say that one’s reason is overridden, and the inference is defeated. These syllogisms make reference to the action in question and the reason for refraining from it. (See the first example below). In a slightly different kind of case, perhaps eating a sandwich would be pleasant, but there is something else entirely that one should be doing, such as driving somewhere you planned to go instead of eating. In this case, one’s reasoning is modeled by a syllogism that makes no reference to eating or refraining from eating a sandwich, but
it enjoins an action that in this case rules out eating a sandwich (See the third example below).

In all such cases of defeat, we can find another practical syllogism whose premises explain the reasons that the inference in question is defeated. In the first case, a relevant syllogism might be the following:

Upset stomachs are unpleasant.
Eating this would give me an upset stomach.
So I avoid eating it.

In the second case a relevant syllogism might be the following:

Remaining undistracted and undistracting in philosophy lectures is fitting.
Eating this sandwich would distract me and others.
So I refrain from eating it.

In the third case there is a syllogism with true premises whose conclusion makes no reference to eating the sandwich. Rather, its conclusion specifies a different action entirely:

Meeting others for conversation is pleasant (or good).
I can do so by getting in my car and heading downtown.
So I get in the car.

It is clear that there will be a myriad of syllogisms which have true premises at the time the agent acts. Take our last case. There might also be a symphony playing where he would have to leave right away to make. Alternatively, perhaps it would be a good time to help a friend with some car trouble he has been having. There will be true practical syllogisms with these actions as conclusions, as well as a host of other syllogisms not mentioned.

55 Throughout this chapter, I will use “true practical syllogisms” as shorthand to refer to a practical syllogism with true premises. The relevant inference might or might not be defeated with true practical syllogisms.
There is an excellent example in Aaron Sorkin’s television show *Sports Night* of someone working through a true practical syllogism and coming to conclude the inference is defeated. In this episode, Dan – a co-anchor of the *Sportscenter* type show within the show – is trying to figure out a charitable cause upon which to dispose some of his extra income, having received many such requests in the mail. He seeks the aid of his co-anchor Casey, and the two have the following exchange as Casey looks through Dan’s various envelopes.

Casey (looking at an envelope): The Montgomery Symphony Orchestra.
Dan: Montgomery, Alabama?
Casey: Who cares? (He tosses the envelope aside and looks at the next one).
Dan: Well, what’s wrong with music and why shouldn’t Montgomery have some?
Casey: Well, there’s nothing wrong with music, and Montgomery obviously does have some. But this is about prioritizing. I don’t think the world is suffering from a lack of quality symphony orchestras, do you?
Dan: No. But music, culture, the arts – these things shouldn’t be confined to just New York and Vienna.
Casey: It’s settled then. The Montgomery Symphony Orchestra gets a charitable donation from Dan Rydell.
Dan: Not so fast. What’s the next one?56

Dan and Casey examine the next envelope from the American Heart Association, and Dan realizes that using his disposable income well is a complex matter.

The reason I detailed this part of the exchange is that Dan and Casey move somewhat quickly through a practical syllogism, but Dan resists drawing the conclusion and writing a check because he recognizes there might be defeating conditions on the inference – in this case, some better way he can put his money to use. We could express the defeated syllogism in question as follows:

- Quality music outside of major city centers is good.
- Writing a check is a chance to contribute to quality music outside a major city.

So, I write it.

When an agent is faced with a myriad of syllogisms one of whose conclusion he might draw, what determines what he has the best reason to do, and what constitutes acting for a good reason? I do not mean to suggest that in all situations where there are conflicting practical syllogisms (practical syllogisms with true premises whose conclusions are actions both of which cannot be performed at the time) there is a unique rational answer and a uniquely best reason for action. However, the goodness of many of the actions available to the agent will be genuinely defeated in one of the ways specified above. In order to determine what acting well and acting rationally amounts to when so many of the actions available to one at any given time are only defeasibly good, it will help to examine what such defeasibility tells us about these aims and actions.

Most directly put, the defeasible goodness of such a large portion of intentional actions, and the defeasible nature of practical reasons indicates the limits of such actions. Put thus, this says little more than that the goodness of these aims is in fact defeasible. But there is more we can say about how these aims are limited by attending to the ways in which these reasons can be defeated. To do this, it will be helpful to leave behind talk of practical syllogisms and speak more directly about intentional action.

When an agent acts intentionally, there is an answer to the ‘why’ question to which Anscombe drew our attention, which seeks a reason for action.\textsuperscript{57} Anscombe and others (e.g. Davidson) have drawn attention to the fact that one can “embed” such ‘why’

\textsuperscript{57} Anscombe, \textit{Intention}, §5ff.
questions and giving of reasons. Often the reasons one gives are other descriptions under which one’s intentional action falls. Let us adapt an example from Davidson.58

Suppose I open the door to my house and hit the light switch on the wall. Someone might ask a series of ‘why’ questions, seeking my reasons for this intentional action. The answers to the series would be a series of descriptions under which my action falls. So, why did I hit that switch? To turn on the light, to illuminate the room, to see where I was going. Upon hearing these answers, someone could still ask why I wanted to see where I was going. My response might not be another description under which my hitting the switch falls. Instead, I might cite something else I was trying to accomplish to which turning on the light was a means (reading a book, perhaps). Of course, once I give this answer, there are a many descriptions under which reading a book falls (or ends it is performed in order to achieve) which specify why I am reading – to understand this author, to give me ideas, to get a job, etc. In short, the immediate reasons represented by a practical syllogism are always part of larger networks of considerations that provide one with putative reasons for action. These considerations in part derive from one’s plans, large scale aims for one’s life, assessments of what is worthwhile, or admirable, and one’s grasp of the good life. Such aims give direction to one’s more narrowly considered actions. Without being able to have plans, a picture of the kind of life one wishes to lead, judgments about the sorts of pursuits that are worthwhile, it is difficult to see how humans could act intentionally.59

The limited goodness of aims is (at least in part) a matter of the limited contribution that they make to these more overarching directors of one’s action. The limited ability of aims to contribute to one’s overall plans, purposes and projects at least provides the best explanation for why most people recognize in their deliberations that their aims are only defeasibly good.

There are two main types of defeat that I discussed earlier. The first is that in one’s circumstances an action type that would typically fit one of the basic “desirability characterizations” does not do so. So that while eating a sandwich is usually pleasant, there are circumstances in which it would not be. But the second type of defeat occurs where the action in question does properly fall under a desirability characterization, but there are good reasons to refrain from the action, and engage in some other activity. This phenomenon underscores the limits even of the pleasant and the fitting or good as aims. These might be basic desirability characterizations, such that reason giving typically ends by the invocation of them⁶⁰; nonetheless, things that are pleasant or fitting are pleasant and fitting in some way. That leaves room for an action that is pleasant or fitting to not be all things considered the thing to do. Now, in the case of the first type of defeat, I suggested the best explanation of defeat is to be found in the role a certain kind of pursuit can play in a larger network of pursuits, aims, etc. If we are to think of the second type of defeat in the same way – where something pleasant or fitting in some way is

⁵⁹ In chapter 15 of After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre makes much of the idea that grasping the wholes of which our individual actions are a part is essential for acting intelligibly (to ourselves and others).

⁶⁰ See Intention, §38 for discussion of this point.
nonetheless not the best thing to do – then we should explain the defeat in terms of more comprehensive pursuits and aims that are pleasant and good in a less qualified way.\textsuperscript{61}

However we explain the phenomenon of defeat, the following should be clear from the above discussion. During any instance of deliberation, there will be many actions available to a person which will have something to be said for them. There will be many true practical syllogisms, all of which cannot be carried out. These actions will vary greatly regarding the immediate domain of the activity (eating, socializing, studying, physical labor, household chores), the sorts of pursuits and projects these actions are a part of or could be made a part of, as well as the descriptions under which the particular actions might fall, depending upon the larger context of the action (eating a sandwich could fall under the descriptions, ‘satisfying one’s hunger’ ‘replenishing energy’ ‘preparing for battle’ ‘indulging one’s impulses’ ‘practicing moderation’ and many others besides). These descriptions specify what one can accomplish in performing various intentional actions. In addition to this, one will be able to contribute to accomplishing many aims by performing intentional actions, where the intentional action is a means to some end separate from it.

I must mention a complication regarding the notion of ‘intentional actions available to a person’ because the complication is important for the account of how

\textsuperscript{61} It is worth noting that this way of thinking about defeasibility is contrary to the manner it is conceived in utilitarianism. According to universal hedonic utilitarianism, an action is best just in case it maximizes the total sum of pleasure over pain in the world. So the good or fitting is measured in terms of its contribution to the sum of pleasure over pain. And the pleasant is measured quantitatively. Determining how much an action will contribute to the total sum of pleasure over pain in the universe need not make any reference to the place of such an action within one’s larger plans, one’s conception of the kind of life one is trying to lead, one’s conception of what is worthwhile to pursue, etc. (These things are only relevant the way every other fact in the universe is relevant – insofar as they determine the amount of pleasure over pain the action in question will produce). The contribution of this action to these plans, pursuits, etc. has no special place in determining whether it is best.
agents relate these various actions and ends together in deliberation and action. It would be a mistake to think that there is a fixed stock of descriptions available at all times and all places for all agents to choose from. First, it is obvious that certain conditions must be met in order for some action types to be possible for an agent. These conditions are of various kinds and agents can fail to satisfy them in many ways. For example, a person might lack the relevant skills. So I cannot here and now play the french horn part of Bruckner’s Fourth Symphony, because I cannot play the french horn. Second, a person might have the relevant skills but in various ways is not in a position to exercise them. So a person might have the skills to be an excellent football head coach, or head of marketing, or teacher, or whatever, but will not be able to exercise those skills unless someone hires them to the relevant position. Or one might lack the resources needed to perform the action.

Perhaps more important for our purposes is the fact that human cultural and intellectual development can make actions available that were not available to anyone previously. Talking on the phone was not available to humans in the eighteenth century, giving university lectures was not available in early medieval Europe, etc. It is important to see that many (if not all) of these cultural developments depend upon conceptual innovation. Before it was possible to give university lectures, there had to be universities and university life, and before that was possible, people had to conceive of the idea of a university and be able to describe in some way activities that no one had yet or even could yet participate in.

In addition to these ways that actions can become available to an agent, the way a person thinks about a situation can open up (or close off) actions available to the person.
Consider someone facing a choice between two jobs. How should the person think about her situation, and the relevant considerations involved in this decision? Should she think about her choice in terms of how it might contribute to the overall happiness of the species, or in terms of her self-expression or exercise of autonomy, or in terms of providing for her family, etc.? The way she thinks about the decision will partly determine the descriptions she acts under both in choosing the job, and in performing the job that she chooses.

Consider also someone engaged in the kind of activity that MacIntyre calls a “practice.” Such practices have goods internal to them. Such goods satisfy three conditions. They cannot be realized except in the practice or some similar practice, they cannot be specified except in terms of the practice, and they cannot be understood and appreciated except by participants in the practice. MacIntyre uses chess as an example of such practices and gives an example of a young child being initiated into the practice and coming to appreciate the goods internal to it. The child is initially motivated to play chess and play to win because the child is offered candy for playing, and additional candy for winning. But MacIntyre suggests that the child, although playing for goods external to the practice of chess, can come to appreciate the goods internal to chess and come to play for the sake of achieving them. In such a situation, the child will come to act under descriptions under which the child would not previously have been able to act. (That is, the child would not be able to act under such a description until the child comes to appreciate these internal goods).  

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62 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 188-189.
Further, there is the possibility of a certain kind of creativity in articulating the nature of situations and one’s commitments within them that makes available new descriptions for oneself and others. Taylor sees this sort of articulation as central to the moral life, particularly within modernity.63 Taylor discusses how Plato articulates a set of commitments in terms of self-mastery by reason which makes available a cluster of descriptions that depart from the earlier honor ethic of Greek culture. He also notes how the modern ethic of altruism provides a different way of articulating commitment to other-concern which differs from the Christian notion that roots other-concern in love for God, and articulates it in terms of such notions of “dying to oneself,” “taking up one’s cross” or with the notion of agape.64

These creative articulations can be appropriated by agents who did not formulate them, by coming to conceive of their situations and commitments within them in these new terms, and using these terms in practical deliberation to gain traction on how to think about the various considerations relevant to their decisions. So a person might see how the notion of ordering one’s passions, or loving another as oneself is salient for various decisions. Similarly, a person can come to see his life as a “quest” or lived out as a “sojourner” in ways that make sense of his situation.65

63 I think Taylor underestimates the role that creative articulation of commitments played in pre-modern frameworks. I will not take up the argument here. I will try to show its importance to an Augustinian framework throughout this dissertation. That would be the start of an argument that this kind of articulation is important in pre-modern eras.

With these complications in hand regarding the actions and descriptions ‘available’ to an agent at a time, let us return to the issue of how such an agent can understand the defeasibility conditions of a practical syllogism. That is, given the variety of actions and pursuits available to a person that have something to be said for them, how is a person to bring any rational considerations to bear in determining which action or actions are best (supposing there is no uniquely best action)? The person must have some way of relating these options together so that he can compare them. The difficulty arises, however, when one notices the variety of these actions and the variety of descriptions they fall under. What common measure is available to compare nourishing one’s body, investing in a friendship, participating in a charity project, making more money, teaching one’s children, learning in a class, etc.? Further what common measure is there for the more comprehensive pursuits these actions are a part of or might contribute to? This sort of incommensurability appears to pose obstacles to rational agency. Rational agents must be able to compare and relate different possible pursuits together, at least to the extent that their choices can make sense to them in terms of that comparison. Lacking any ability to compare disparate ends according to a common standard would seem to leave a person with no resources to make sense of his different and disparate choices. He would lack any framework for making his actions intelligible. It would be difficult to apply

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65 For the notion of a ‘quest’ being central to the moral life, see After Virtue, ch. 15. The notion of a sojourner need not be used only by Christians. Persons who are the inheritors of a displaced culture face the question of how they can live meaningfully in the absence of the cultural framework that had given intelligibility to the world and their place within it. It seems to me that the notion of living one’s life as a stranger in a foreign land can be useful. For exploration of the challenges facing persons whose cultural framework has been displaced, see Jonathan Lear’s reflections on the Crow Indians in Radical Hope (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
notions of rationality to the choices of such a person. His choices would appear to be arbitrary.  

This sort of complete incommensurability of aims presents a major obstacle to agency. In the discussion that follows, I will address the question of whether there are better or worse ways of making ends commensurable for one, as well as the nature of commensurating ends that is necessary for sustaining rational agency. In the process, I will be able to discuss in more detail the various ways in which incommensurability can present obstacles to agency.

This problem that the apparent incommensurability of the various goods available to us in action presents to acting rationally has received a good deal of attention. I turn now to a discussion of incommensurability, and how rational agents might commensurate ends.

It will be worth setting forth at the outset the conception and view of commensurability I will be working with. The view of the commensurability of goods to which I am committed will put me in agreement at many points with those who object to accounts of the commensurability of goods.  

66 I will discuss the views of Joseph Raz later in this chapter, and in the subsequent chapter. Raz argues that a certain amount of incommensurability of aims is necessary for rational agency. I do not mean to dismiss his views by what I say. My point is here is that persons must find some ways of comparing some of their ends in order to bring even minimal order to their actions. Without this minimal ordering ability, a person’s ‘actions’ (if they could be called that) would be little more than disconnected and arbitrary bits of behavior that would be difficult to account for (except with the uses of terms such as ‘madness’ since the person lacks any resources for ordering his actions). Some commensurability of aims is necessary for agency. I take that much to be fairly uncontroversial. In the following treatment, I will discuss in more detail various ways that incommensurability presents obstacles for rational agency. But at this point, I do not wish to commit myself to the extent or kind of commensurability necessary for rational agency.

67 I am thinking in particular of Henry Richardson in Practical Reasoning about Final Ends (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and David Wiggins especially, “Incommensurability: Four
I will understand commensurability in terms of common *descriptions*. Actions are commensurable when they can be brought under or compared in terms of a common description. The common description needed for excellence in practical reason is description in terms of the place of various options within a certain kind of life, namely a certain kind of *pilgrim life*. If actions can be compared in terms of how they fit within such a life, then they are commensurable. Notice that this sort of account does not conceive of commensurability in terms of some *quantifiable good* which other goods *maximize*. Perhaps *comparability* of ends is the better term here, because *commensurability* often connotes the idea that goods can be related in such a way as to maximize some singular good. That is not the way I am conceiving commensurability.

It will be useful at this point to set out what my conception of commensurability entails and does not entail in terms of David Wiggins’ treatment in “Incommensurability: Four Proposals.”

Wiggins proposes the following as an analysis of commensurability:

Option $A$ is commensurable with Option $B$ if and only if there is a valuational measure of more or less, and some however complex property $\phi$ that is correlative with choice and rationally antecedent to choice and rationally determinant of choice, such that $A$ and $B$ can be exhaustively compared by the said measure in respect of being more $\phi$ and less $\phi$; where an exhaustive comparison in respect of $\phi$-ness is a comparison in respect of everything that matters about either $A$ or $B$.\(^{68}\)

Let us take these conditions for commensurability in turn:

1. The must exist a valuational measure of more or less.

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My account of commensurability denies this first condition, particularly if the measure is thought of as a quantifiable measure. On my account, goods need not be compared in terms of such a quantifiable measure in order to render them commensurable.

2. There must be some however complex property $\varphi$ that is correlative with choice.

If we take “correlative with choice” in a weak sense to mean ‘can be realized by choice’ then I hold that there is such a property (“fitting into a certain kind of life”).

3. There must be some however complex property $\varphi$ that is rationally antecedent to choice.

I will take this condition to mean that A and B realize $\varphi$ to the extent that they do in advance of deliberation and decision, such that it is the task of rational deliberation to discover the extent to which A and B realize $\varphi$. In my view, the relevant commensurating property applies only as a result of deliberation and decision, so in the sense in which I have defined “rationally antecedent to choice” my commensurating property does not satisfy this condition.

4. There must be some however complex property $\varphi$ that is rationally determinant of choice.

If we take ‘rationally determinant’ to mean that the rationality of a choice is determined by the degree to which it realizes $\varphi$, then I accept something in that neighborhood, but somewhat weaker. In my view, a choice is an excellent exercise of practical reason insofar as it enables a person to conceive of his life as a certain kind of pilgrim life and fit his choices within such a life. On this weaker view, the excellence of a choice with respect to practical reason can be indeterminate at the time of choice. How a choice contributes to one’s eventual grasp of one’s life as a pilgrim is not necessarily determined

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at the time of choice. So if this condition is meant to say that the rationality of a choice is determined at the time of choice, then my conception of commensurability does not satisfy it.

5. \( A \) and \( B \) can be exhaustively compared by the said measure in respect of being more \( \phi \) and less \( \phi \); where an exhaustive comparison in respect of \( \phi \)-ness is a comparison in respect of everything that matters about either \( A \) or \( B \).

Insofar as this expresses a requirement for quantifiability, my conception does not satisfy it. With regard to the notion that the commensurating property specifies “everything that matters about \( A \) or \( B \),” I must make a few comments. Wiggins is trying to capture the idea behind some views of commensurability that nothing is “lost” when one chooses the better of two commensurable options. If all that matters is the extent to which the options realize \( \phi \), then all that was lost in the choice of \( A \) over \( B \) is less \( \phi \) than one realizes with the choice of \( A \). This condition expresses a strong value monism which I must briefly compare to my Augustinian account. On an Augustinian account, even if one succeeds in commensurating two options in terms of how they can be fit into one’s life as a pilgrim, one can recognize loss in what one must forego. These commensurating choices fit one to enjoy one’s highest good. Doing so requires that one sees the limits of temporal goods, in part because of their nature, and in part because they are pursued in this life within a fallen context. Hence, one can recognize that it is “less than ideal” that the best use of goods available to one will cause you to disappoint a friend, or create animosity with others where there previously had been cordiality. That is to say, one can recognize genuine goods as being lost in such a situation that will only be remedied when earthly pilgrims enjoy the life in their homeland to which their activities are directed.
Furthermore, a key reason that there is space for this sort of recognition of loss is because an Augustinian recognizes the remoteness of the Supreme Good. Because of this, an Augustinian account does not view rational deliberation as ignoring all temporal goods in favor of one privileged one. It is not a view that nothing is good except insofar as it realizes some well-defined temporal good, as other value-monisms claim. In fact, the task of practical reason is seeing how each created thing can be good “in a place.” That is, it is the task of more fully understanding how each temporal thing could find a place in a life that bears witness to one’s Supreme Good of rest in God. So far from ignoring the specifics of these goods in favor of one definable property which they exemplify, agents must understand the specific contributions good things can make to a life of bearing witness to a remote good.

There are several main points from the rest of Wiggins’ discussion on which I wish to focus here. The first is that the incommensurabilist wishes to deny that there is some value realizable in action by which other goods can be compared when those goods and values are considered apart from an agent’s conception of how to live his life as a whole.69 It will be obvious that my Augustinian account denies that goods can be commensurated apart from consideration of the place they have in an agent’s life as a whole.

Wiggins also argues that the incommensurabilist wishes to deny that a commensurating property can produce a rank ordering of the place various goods will have in an agent’s life.70 I will discuss issues relevant to this question in more detail in


chapter 5. I will say here that an Augustinian would expect there not to be any systematic priority of some goods over others, and would expect there not to be many projectible rules, graspable by agents in advance of deliberation, about the contexts in which one type of good will have priority over another.

Finally, Wiggins argues that the incommensurabilist is concerned to allow for the existence of *tragic conflicts* between goods, such that none of the choices before the agent can be suitably fit into the agents conception of how to live because of the way it conflicts with his other options.\(^71\) What place does an Augustinian account have for tragic conflicts of this kind?

First, an Augustinian could invoke the unsavory choices agents often face (e.g., between going to war and being conquered) to bolster his thesis that happiness is not available to agents in this life.\(^72\) So in the first place, we can say that an Augustinian account recognizes the existence of these sorts of tragic conflict in the sense that the choice would be intolerable *on the assumption that happiness is constituted by fitting together temporal goods within a life.* Augustine denies this assumption, arguing instead that temporal life fits us to enjoy a remote good, and uses the existence of these kinds of tragic conflicts as part of his argument that happiness is not achievable in this life.

There is a deeper sense in which an Augustinian can recognize the existence of intolerable choices, the stems from his view of the fallenness of the created order. There are certain choices that are intolerable in their own right – Sophie’s choice, for example, where Sophie is forced to choose in a Nazi death camp which of her children will die and

\(^71\) David Wiggins: “Incommensurability: Four Proposals,” 64.

which will be spared.\textsuperscript{73} However, such choices are possibly redeemable, insofar as they can lead a person to recognize the reality of fallenness and the limits of created goods to lead to happiness, and thereby fit an agent to better acknowledge and recognize the nature of her highest good.\textsuperscript{74}

Having compared an Augustinian concept of commensurability to other concepts of commensurability, I shall now motivate and discuss in more detail an Augustinian view of commensurability.

We have already seen the importance of the fact that intentional actions fall under various descriptions when performed. Incommensurability is a problem because there is not always a set of descriptions available to a person that allows him to compare actions available to him in a way that preserves his sense of what he sees as good in each of the options. One place to look for resources for descriptions that will yield comparability is within the person’s own network of aims, evaluations, projects and the like. To take a simple example, if he is trying to choose between eating food and working out, he can describe both activities in terms of the contributions they make to his health. Such a procedure of description and redescription can be made more subtle and complex. So a person thinks that eating will contribute more to his long term health than weight training; but he is an athlete in the midst of pre-season training where he is looking to accomplish goals regarding his upcoming season. For this purpose, getting to the gym is more important. So now he has two conflicting purposes that both make his immediate


\textsuperscript{74} I do not wish by this brief response to deny the difficulties here. But I would argue that the Christian tradition, and Augustine is no different here, is committed to the claim that such experiences \textit{are} redeemable in some such way.
options comparable, but in different ways. So he faces a conflict between his overall long-term health and pursuing excellence in this particular athletic endeavor.

In this case, the comparison might be fairly easy to make. If the threat of sacrifice of his long term health is not that great, he will think there is better reason to pursue the athletic excellence. But notice, even here we can understand his decision as more than just arbitrarily weighing considerations that look incomparable. In this case, he could consider what health is for, and a sensible answer is that it is for being around in such a state that one can pursue other worthwhile activities. His athletic activity is of course one such activity. This does not mean that there will be an automatic priority of pursuing this athletic endeavor over pursuing his long-term health. For health is not worth pursuing only for the sake of this endeavor, but for others he might take up in the future. If excellence at this athletic endeavor requires too great a risk to his long-term health, he might forego further pursuit of that excellence in favor of other enjoyments, and the avoidance of painful medical conditions and care. He and we can make sense out of what sorts of health risks are “too great” in terms of his other pursuits and intentions.

It is necessary to introduce a complication at this point. The examples I gave above suggest that this process of comparison can only occur using aims, projects and such that are determinate enough to yield straightforward comparisons of actions, indicating which would be best. Although one’s network of aims, pursuits, etc. provide resources for comparative descriptions of actions, the way comparison works is typically going to involve a two-way interaction between on the one hand bringing such descriptions to bear in comparing options, and on the other hand, examining the features
of the particular actions in question to understand how they fit those descriptions, and in
the process extend one’s conception of the relevant description.

There are at least two reasons to think that a necessary component of having
commensurable aims will be a two-way interaction between general descriptions on the
one hand, and more detailed descriptions, as well as particular actions on the other, which
fill in these descriptions. The first reason is the qualitative and not easily measurable
nature of many of the evaluative terms used in the general descriptions that provide terms
of comparison. In the fairly simple examples above, descriptions using terms such as
“excellence”, “worthwhile” and “health” were used in an attempt to guide action. These
descriptions also might involve such an idea as “contributing” to a certain pursuit or
project. If the pursuit or project does not involve maximizing a quantifiable end, then it
will also be difficult to compare particular contributions to the end. In the same way,
trying to compare aims in terms of their excellence, worthwhileness, or in terms of their
helpfulness, compassionateness, etc. will not provide one with an algorithm of
comparison. 75 What the above descriptions did help to do was relate for some kind of
comparison particular actions that seem initially unrelated (eating a sandwich, going to
the gym). These descriptions did this by fitting both actions within some larger project or
pursuit. But in order to characterize such a pursuit, one must use descriptions that use
terms regarding which one does not have a full conception. There is therefore some
indeterminacy in one’s grasp on the applicability of these descriptions.

75 Henry S. Richardson’s objections to the idea that rational choice requires commensurability are
rooted in objections to the requirement that rational deliberation would require such an algorithm. (See chs.
V and VI of his Practical Reasoning about Final Ends). The conception of rendering ends commensurable
I will articulate will not have in view the development of such an algorithm or algorithms of comparison.
Take a simple case for illustrating this. Learning the violin and building a house are two very different kinds of activities. One can compare them by placing them under the description of “contributing to living well.” Unfortunately, one is not likely to have a detailed enough conception of living well that would allow one to tell exactly what contribution each activity makes to living well.

The fact that descriptions that help compare ends are open-ended and indeterminate for agents who act on them might explain why Aristotle proposed a division of labor between the virtues of character and practical wisdom for leading an agent to act well. Aristotle’s formulation is that virtue makes the goal correct, and practical wisdom makes what is toward the goal correct.\(^76\) In an alternative formulation, Aristotle states that virtue makes the decision correct, but the actions naturally to be done to fulfill the decision are not from virtue, but another capacity.\(^77\) So a good person knows he should assist if he finds someone in need, but he needs practical wisdom to figure out what would constitute helping (giving him money, finding shelter, providing contact numbers). The role of practical reason is more than finding means to fully specified ends. Instead, it yields a determination of what constitutes those ends.\(^78\) In yielding such a determination, the agent then has an improved sense of the ends which he finds worthwhile to pursue. He has a better sense of what constitutes these ends in a way that is related to a better sense of what the point of such pursuits is.


\(^{77}\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a20. I have again relied on but modified Irwin’s translation.

The improved sense of the aims one acquires by considering and acting on specific candidates for constituents of that aim also improves one’s conception of the relationship between a particular comprehensive aim (e.g. helping others) and other such aims. It helps one make one’s comprehensive aims commensurate with each other. For example, one can learn to relate what it means to help others with what it means to pursue friendship.

The example from *Sports Night* which I partly discussed earlier is an excellent example of an agent filling in his conception of his aims in a way that relates those aims to other goods. Dan continues to consider how to use his money to help those in need. All the while, he is thinking of himself in the role of philanthropist, or benefactor. At the same time, he has been at the office all night, without any food available. Upon remembering he has half a sandwich in his office, he goes to get it for himself and his co-anchor. In his office stands a homeless man trying to get out of the cold. Dan lets him stay and offers him the sandwich. The homeless man says nothing at all until he cuts half the sandwich and offers it to Dan. Dan says, “Thank you.” The homeless man says, “You’re welcome.” This simple exchange calls into question who has helped whom. If Dan is perceptive, this will allow him to completely reorient his conception of what it means to help, and what he is trying to do when he seeks to aid those in need. This presents the possibility that helping those in need can be an occasion for *mutual* recognition of human limits. This mutual recognition of need opens up the possibility of pursuing other aims as *friends* – partners in pursuit of the human good – rather than
conceiving the relation as one where benefit goes only in one direction (the wealthy person benefiting the one he aids).79

Notice that this experience should adjust all Dan’s future charitable endeavors. He will no longer view his benefactors as those who need him, without remembering that he also needs them. And he needs them not just as material for doing good, but to remind him both of his limitations and of his capacities. By recognizing his limits, he opens the possibility to achieve ends beyond what he initially envisioned in his pursuit. This is an idea that is crucial for an Augustinian account, because in Augustine’s view it is only in humility that one is able to enjoy the highest human goods.

It would be too early to generalize and say that goods should be compared in terms of how the pursuit of them improves one’s understanding of those goods by also giving one a sense of one’s own limits. Nonetheless, I will flag here that this happens in Dan’s case. Drawing more general conclusions will require more discussion.

Aurel Kolnai observed the phenomenon that in apparent deliberation one is actually filling in one’s conception of those ends which one set out in deliberation to figure out how best to bring them about.80 This led Kolnai to argue that deliberation involves what he calls “sham rationality.”81 His thought is that deliberation appears to be a calculative activity, calculating the best means to specified ends. It is not difficult to understand such activity as rational. An agent has good reason to act on the results of a good calculation because she has come to know that the action chosen is the one that best


81 Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 274.
brings about the end she is calculating to bring about. She started out with a question, “What is the best way to x” and ended with a reasoned answer. But in fact, deliberation almost never involves such a straightforward calculation. Instead, one extends one’s conception of one’s end as a result of deliberating about specific features of the actions one is considering. It looks like decision is based on calculating that an action satisfies a certain end. Instead one extends one’s conception of the end on the basis of consideration of the action and performs the action as satisfying this newly conceived end. This is not calculation. And the reasons for action that calculation would provide are absent as a rationale for the action. One’s conception of one’s end did not lead one to knowledge that this action is the best means to it. ⁸²

One might work up Kolnai’s reasoning about the sham rationality of deliberation into the following argument:

1. If deliberation is a rational activity, then it is *calculative*.
2. Specifying and filling in one’s conception of one’s end(s) is not calculation.
3. Deliberation is specifying and filling in one’s conception of one’s end(s).
4. Thus, deliberation is not a rational activity.

Kolnai doesn’t go so far as to make this argument, or draw the conclusion that deliberation is not rational at all. Instead he claims that deliberation involves a “paradox of practice.”⁸³ There would be no paradox if deliberation were simple calculation; nor would there be a paradox if choice was “a purely gratuitous affair, a display of the freedom of indifference.”⁸⁴ If deliberation were calculation, it would be intelligible, because it would be possible to make mistakes about what is the best means to an end.

⁸² Kolnai summarizes these points on pp. 272-275 of “Deliberation is of Ends.”

⁸³ Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.

⁸⁴ Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.
So calculation would be necessary. There would be no paradox if choice was a simple choosing of a preference “no matter for which cause or in what course.”\textsuperscript{85} However, there would be no deliberation. Neither description, however, rightly characterizes human deliberation and choice. So there is a paradox. Kolnai writes the following:

Placed before significant choices, man cannot but deliberate, weighing ends as if they were means, comparing them as if they were fixed data accessible to theoretical measurement, whereas their weight depends on the seesaw of his own tentative willing and on his emergent \textit{parti-pris} as well as the other way round. In some sense, it is an inherently deceptive, not to say deceitful operation, with loaded dice as it were; the agent cannot help weighting what he is weighing, though neither can he do the weighing without a vague but imperative reliance on the results of his weighing, some would say the illusion of his manipulating objectively fixed weights.\textsuperscript{86}

Kolnai goes on to call this aspect of deliberation “circular and puzzling.”\textsuperscript{87} It looks like we are using ends as weights to weigh our actions as means to those ends, but really we choose on the basis of an independent assessment of means.

Let me make a few observations about Kolnai’s discussion. First, Kolnai admits agents “cannot but” deliberate, particularly when placed before “significant choices.” On Kolnai’s view, this is strange, because in such situations deliberation is \textit{least} like rational calculation. Here is when it makes most sense to say that an agent has not yet adopted her end (or fully conceived her options), and is trying to decide which end of a few options to choose. Should she go to law school or continue teaching at the small school? Should he stay single or pursue a wife? Kolnai might say that these “significant choices” have to do with setting down ends, if any choices do. They will influence the whole course and

\textsuperscript{85} Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.
\textsuperscript{86} Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.
\textsuperscript{87} Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.
shape of a person’s life. Yet here as with other decisions, agents feel the need to come to a rational decision by deliberation, and this means trying to calculate how the options fit with more abstract indefinite aims (living well, doing what is worthwhile, finding self-fulfillment, fulfilling one’s calling, etc).

As strange as it might seem to engage in an apparently calculative activity when calculation is of little help, agents cannot help but engage in deliberation over significant choices. I think Kolnai does well to not simply dismiss this as another foible of human nature, but rather to suggest that there is something about the nature of what it is to be an agent that renders this impulse to deliberate intelligible. Kolnai writes, “The paradox is rooted in the fact that man cannot but choose freely…and that on the other hand he can only will goods and not the exercise of his freedom as such, and therefore in choosing cannot but try to choose wisely, i.e. to make a choice that is supported by grounds.”

Agents act for reasons, and ‘that I would be choosing this action’ is not a reason for doing it (because it would be a reason for doing anything else). So agents look for more substantive reasons for action. “Wise or eupratic or correct (as opposed to false) choice is not a concept invented and foisted upon man by prigs or preachers; it is what man of necessity desires and hopes against hope to contrive.” So my first observation follows Kolnai in saying that deliberation and acting for reasons is an essential part of agency.

The second observation about Kolnai’s view is that the paradox he outlines bears some similarities and parallels with the access problem I discussed in the introductory chapter. Recall what the access problem is. Most succinctly, it is a problem that arises if

88 Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 273.

89 Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 273.
the following condition holds: there are obstacles to having resources for successful agency available at the time of deliberation and decision. For Augustine, an access problem arises because the point of deliberation is perfecting one’s apprehension of one’s highest good. So when faced with a decision one would need to know how the various options will perfect this apprehension. But in order to do that, it seems one would need the perfected apprehension that will be the result of one’s decision and action. Therefore, the resources one needs to make a good decision are not available to one until after the decision has been made. One could get past this problem by further specifying a conception of one’s good in terms of the options before one. But that would seem to illegitimately assume what should be the result of one’s deliberation and action (understanding of how to develop one’s conception of the good). In a similar way, Kolnai suggests that deliberators illegitimately assume what they are trying to figure out by deliberation. One tries to bring to bear one’s ends on a “calculation” of means, but that calculation turns out to be a specification of one’s conception of those ends. In both cases one appears to be calculating means towards an end, but instead one is only able to figure out what to do by “stacking the deck” and specifying more fully one’s conception of the end in terms of the options available to one.

I have agreed with Kolnai that commensurating one’s ends involves more than calculating how they fit with more overarching, determinate ends. Kolnai takes this to indicate that such activity involves a sham rationality. Of course, another option is to say that deliberation as commensuration of ends involves a kind of rational process different from calculation. Since it involves extending one’s conception of one’s ends, perhaps it is
best to conceive of commensuration as a kind of learning. And perhaps what one is learning is different than what one would need to learn if deliberation were calculation.

Kolnai suggests that it was a necessary part of agency to deliberate in a way that improves one’s conceptions of one’s ends. This fits well with an idea that emerges from several writers on commensurability – in particular Charles Taylor, Elijah Millgram and David Wiggins. Their suggestion is that commensurability is not something determined by any intrinsic feature of ends considered apart from agents carrying out those ends, and apart from the deliberation involved in carrying out those ends. 90 They view it to be futile to ask, ‘how is knitting commensurable with feeding the hungry or doing philosophy’ abstracted from ways that those ends are fit into the whole life of a rational agent. So they do not look in the direction that utilitarianism would look and say that all the actions give or tend to give a certain degree of pleasure that can be compared. Instead, comparing these ends depends on the place they play in the kind of life being lived by the agent who is trying to commensurate them. 91

In addition to rejecting hedonic (universal or egoistic) utilitarian accounts of commensurability, these authors do not look to any other intrinsic feature of having a particular end, such as the strength of an agent’s desire for the end, as commensurating ends. Millgram points out that desires - considered as a term of art to denote whatever


91 As will be discussed in the next chapter, there is an important communal element to this life that I do not wish to entirely neglect here, despite speaking in terms of the life of the agent (rather than the shared communal life that allows persons to commensurate goods and pursuits).
state one is in when trying to get an end – do not always come with a discernable strength. They need not have the phenomenology of feeling a certain way that drives or pulls an agent in the direction of the desire.\textsuperscript{92} Further, if each desire has as part of it any feature that determined its relation to all other possible aims and determined its importance in all choice situations, agents would find themselves making absurd decisions if they acted in light of this. Millgram puts the point thus:

There is no reason to expect that when agents conceive an interest in some object, they at the same time consider and settle the relations of comparative importance in which it stands to all other possible objects of desire...A desire is formed in a particular practical context, and we should not expect its content to address demands not made by that context.\textsuperscript{93}

The comparative priority of one desire one has to any other desire one might have or pursuit one might take up is largely indeterminate. Millgram goes on to say that to form desires in such a way that the relations of comparative importance to all other ends are determined by the desire itself is to be “foolishly committing oneself to a position whose practical upshots you could not have seriously considered. Forming desires in this way would be imprudent thoughtless and rash.”\textsuperscript{94} Millgram argues that desiring in such a way would threaten agency. Instead of coming to deliberation with these comparative relationships settled, Millgram thinks that good deliberation is the process of commensurating ends in the particular choice situation one finds oneself. As he puts it, commensurability is the result of good deliberation, not a precondition for it.\textsuperscript{95}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{92} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 276.
\textsuperscript{93} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 276.
\textsuperscript{94} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 277.
\textsuperscript{95} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 289.
\end{footnotesize}
On one level, this approach should not seem surprising or remarkable. After all, an end is always an end for some agent. But this approach provides whole new ways to commensurate ends that would not be available if we were looking for utilitarian style commensuration. Consider the apparently unrelated activities of sowing and philosophy. Consider members of a close-knit community. In many such communities there is a worked out self-understanding of the goods they are pursuing by being part of the community. Sustaining the community requires continued reflection upon and teaching of these ideals. But most such communities are not merely places to think about the good. The idea is that their views of the good of this community get embodied and worked out and extended in everyday activities such as sowing, and teaching younger people to sow, so that they can sustain the future life of the community. There is a necessary interplay between theory and practice for such a community to sustain itself. The ends are made commensurate in view of the overall life within the community of the person partaking in them. One can be given priority over the other in particular instances in light of the overall place the two ends have in the common life of the community. And this “overall place” need not be fixed. There might be times in its history, or seasons where it devotes itself to one task or the other, due to particular events in its history. Or it might have an evolving sense of the overall aims of the community that changes the relative priority of many of its activities.

I used this last example to discuss the commensurability of ends as not determined by an intrinsic feature of the end. So the example emphasized the role of the particular choice situation in commensurating the ends, rather than any intrinsic feature

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96 This discussion is indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre’s discussion of practices and traditions, particularly in After Virtue, chs. 14 and 15.
of the ends. But commensurability is the result of good deliberation, rather than a
precondition of it, because of indeterminacy in how to fit the ends together in particular
contexts. The only way to make such things determinate is to have determined the
priority of the ends is advance, or to have such a determinate understanding of the
overarching ends of the life of the community that it is a matter of mere calculation how
to fit these pursuits into it. If either is the case, Millgram’s charge that one would have
adopted ends with practical upshots one could not have thought seriously about would
stick. So considering the specifics of sowing and philosophizing within the particular
overall situation one finds oneself and one’s community to be in will extend and make
more determinate one’s conception of the overall good of the community. The process of
commensurating ends within a particular situation that is part of a life as whole requires
the kind of back and forth interaction between the specific ends being commensurated
and the overarching ends of a life or community that I have outlined in the example. If
either direction is lacking, one will have either incommensurability or commensurability
in the manner that threatens agency in the way that Millgram outlines.

So deliberation is neither mere calculation of means to determinate ends, nor is it
discerning some intrinsic feature of a desire, such as its strength. How then shall we
understand deliberation? I think the only way to make sense of the above two
observations about deliberation (that it is neither mere calculation nor discovery of a
feature of an end considered in the abstract, apart from particular contexts in which it is
pursued) is that ends are commensurable only if an agent commensurates them. That is to
say, there is no fact about the ends that the agent is seeking to discover and which can be
understood apart from understanding how the ends are conceived as commensurable by
the agent. The only measure for making ends commensurable is the agent conceiving them as part of his life in a way that makes them comparable.

One might raise the following objection to the idea that ends are commensurable only if an agent commensurates them. One might say that this view simply fails to recognize the difference between ends being commensurable, in the sense of there being some common measure that an agent could apply to them and intelligibly compare them, and ends being commensurable for an agent, in the sense that the agent has applied the available measure. Just because this measure makes reference to the place of these ends in an agent’s life and other pursuits, does not mean the measure is not intelligible apart from conceiving how it is applied by an agent. That is to say, ends might be commensurable in terms of the place they have in a person’s life prior to an agent coming to understand them that way.

In order to answer this objection, it is necessary to complete the picture about how agents commensurate ends. Let us take for granted Millgram’s claim that the commensurability of ends cannot be understood abstracted from how those ends might fit into an agent’s life. But how does an agent go about conceiving of different ends with regard to their place in his life? Doing this requires that the agent form conceptions of both his actions and his life that make his actions intelligible to himself, particularly in terms of their place in his life. The thought here is that a conception of a whole unified life serves as the common measure of different ends and activities. How might an agent form such a conception, and how is it necessary for the commensuration of ends?

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97 This process may or may not involve the agent articulating or being able to articulate these conceptions.
Here it will be useful to return to thinking about intentional actions. A person engages in some behavior, and this behavior falls under many descriptions. Of course, the agent did not intentionally do all these things. Suppose the agent is sitting in a chair and writing. His behavior adjusts the acoustical properties of the room; however this is no part of his intention in writing. An agent’s intentions are the descriptions under which he performed the action. This does not mean that the agent must have thought about the action under that description. Rather, the description must make his reasons for behaving as he did intelligible. These descriptions explain the agent’s behavior by stating his intentions. Describing the action that way must make sense of what the agent is doing.99

Given that intentional actions are intentional under certain descriptions, and that these descriptions state what a person is doing and why he is doing it, it makes sense to think of the problem of commensurability as a problem of finding the right kind of descriptions under which agents could act, so that the actions thus described are comparable. Whatever it means to say that an agent acts under a description, ends being commensurable for an agent requires that an agent be able to act under descriptions that make his actions comparable in light of his life as a whole.100

Recall that the objection to the view that ends are commensurable only if an agent commensurates them distinguishes between the aims being commensurable, in that there is some way to compare them on the one hand and those ends being commensurable for

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98 For views in this vein, see Taylor, “Leading a Life” and Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, ch. 15.

99 See Anscombe, Intention. The discussion of this paragraph is indebted to her treatment, and the example is also from Intention (§4).

100 Once again, acting under such descriptions does not require that the agent think in terms of them (or that he is even able to think in terms of them).
an agent, where the agent has discovered this way of commensurating them. We can now see that our objector will distinguish between there being a description under which an action falls that makes it comparable with other actions, on the one hand, and the agent acting under such a description, on the other. My claim is that there is never a description under which an action falls that appropriately relates the action to the agent’s life as a whole in a way that allows commensuration with other ends, unless the agent in question is acting under such a description.\textsuperscript{101} In the midst of arguing that ends are not commensurable unless an agent commensurates them, I have suggested that what makes them commensurable is a description that places them within an agent’s life as a whole. At this point I must turn my focus to that suggestion and elaborate upon what it means. This is necessary to justify the claim that aims are not commensurable unless an agent commensurates them.

The initial problem of commensurability was that finding some rational way to commensurate ends appears necessary to navigate the defeasible goodness of ends that agents recognize in their deliberations. If negotiating the conditions under which the goodness of various ends is defeated is to be more than an arbitrary process, there must be some intelligible way of comparing ends such that the goodness of one can be seen in actual deliberative circumstances to defeat the goodness of another. That is to say, in contexts where eating is an option for an agent, but she considers forgoing or does forgo eating, she must have some way of comparing her options together in a way that indicates that the goodness of eating is defeated in this context. Without any such means of comparison, deliberation and decision will appear arbitrary.

\textsuperscript{101} Where, as noted previously, acting under a description does not necessarily mean \textit{thinking} in terms of such descriptions.
I do not think there is much need to belabor the claim that there is at least some need for some way of comparing aims, given that all agents recognize the defeasible goodness of most aims. It is very natural to see the defeasible goodness of aims to be a function of the place they have or are unable to have in different contexts within more comprehensive pursuits and aims of an agent. This is not simply due to the fact that more comprehensive ends encompass more pursuits. It is also due to the fact that, as Aristotle might say, the ends that constitute comprehensive aims are “subordinate” to those comprehensive aims. Aristotle parsed that by saying that the subordinate ends are done for the sake of the ends to which they are subordinate, but there is more to it than that. These comprehensive aims play a role in defining for an agent what is important and worthwhile to him that the subordinate aims cannot play. This is crucial to practical rationality one way or the other, but especially so if Charles Taylor is correct that such articulation of what is important, worthwhile and the like is crucial for an agent to have an understanding of the self – an understanding of his own agency that makes his particular pursuits intelligible to him.\(^{102}\)

It appears to make sense that an agent should consider aims in terms of the place of those aims within the life he is leading. This appearance does not come from any assumption that there must be a single definable end for human life. Rather, it derives from a recognition of what Charles Taylor has pointed out, namely, that all of an agent’s ends have in common the fact that they must be lived.\(^{103}\) They must all be fit within a

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\(^{102}\) See *Sources of the Self* and “Responsibility for Self.”

single human life, which is what it is largely because of the pursuits the agent undertakes and his reasons for undertaking them.

In order to understand how an agent’s comprehensive pursuits and the shape of the agent’s life can provide a common description under which his actions fall, I think it is useful to look at a somewhat quirky example from film. The 1984 film *The Karate Kid* has some interesting and surprising lessons to teach about moral education that will also be relevant to our topic of commensurability. The aspect of the film that I most wish to focus on is probably the most well-known sequence of the film. Young Daniel has moved to California from Newark to find himself the target of the karate-expert bullies at his high-school. Daniel befriends the handyman in his building “Mr. Miyagi” who reluctantly agrees to help Daniel with his plight, by speaking with the karate instructor of Daniel’s assailants. Due to this instructor’s belligerence, Miyagi cuts a deal where Daniel avoids any abuse in exchange for entering a karate tournament in several months time. Mr. Miyagi and Daniel then turn their attention to karate training.

Daniel promises to learn from Myiagi without asking questions, and soon learns that might not have been a great idea. Daniel’s first several “karate” lessons include washing and waxing cars, painting a fence, sanding a floor and painting a house. Myiagi’s instructions are minimal, including such gems as “don’t forget to breathe; very important.”

Not surprisingly, Daniel grows frustrated with his training regimen and finally snaps at Miyagi, saying he has not learned a thing about karate. In the best sequence of the film, Miyagi shows him how wrong he is.
I raise this example because it is a good instance of apparently unrelated aims (learning karate, doing various household chores) becoming commensurable for an agent. What was required for this to happen?

As already mentioned, in order for aims to be commensurable at all, there must be some description under which they fall by which they can be related. In this case, the relevant description is available to and understood by Myiagi, before being understood by Daniel (as is typical of teaching difficult matters). At this point in the proceedings, Daniel’s aims are commensurable – there is a description in terms of which his actions can be described. But the relevant description describes Daniel’s actions as part of learning karate. They are commensurable at this point only on the assumption that Daniel comes to commensurate them, as he does in the crucial scene of the film. In retrospect, we can say that he was learning karate all along, but had he never put things together for himself, he never would have learned karate; in such a case, the activities of waxing, painting, etc. would not be rightly described as “learning karate.”

Daniel’s activities under Myiagi’s direction are commensurable for a further reason. Upon commensurating his activities he has an improved conception of what he is doing, what he is learning and his reasons for learning it.

One might consider this unremarkable for the following reason. Activities are commensurable just in case there is a common description under which they fall so that their goodness can be adjudicated by agents in deliberation. They are commensurated when agents apply the common description and so compare the activities. Nothing more than that is going on in this case. I think if we examine closely what has happened, we

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104 It is worth noting that Daniel is also acting under the description of ‘trying to get my assailants to leave me alone’ and Myiagi teaches him quite a bit that changes his conception of that end.
will see that more than simple application of an available description occurs in this case. This is because, as I mentioned, the commensurating description would not apply unless Daniel eventually came to apply it to his actions. The relevant commensurating description makes reference to the role the activity plays in Daniel’s understanding of karate and the place it has in his life as a whole.

Before summarizing the lessons from this example, it is important to point out another feature of Daniel’s learning process. It deepened his understanding of what he was learning. Even on a technical level, learning the techniques in the way that he did solidified his ability to execute these techniques better than if he had been taught in another way. But beyond that, his process of education improved his overall conception of what he was doing. Even the fact that his education was unintelligible to him for a time taught him about how part of what he was doing by learning karate was learning to recognize and acknowledge his own limits of understanding.

How might we summarize the lessons to be drawn from this case? Daniels’s activities of cleaning, waxing, etc. fall under the relevant descriptions that commensurate them insofar as they are ordered toward Daniel’s learning of karate, but also toward his eventual understanding of how this training fits into what he is trying to learn. If they are not ordered toward this, they do not play the role in Daniel’s pursuits that make them commensurable with each other and with other aims that he has.

An interesting feature of this particular case is that the education Daniel undergoes not only teaches him the technical skills of karate, but also enriches his understanding of his life as a whole. The very process of education does this, by aiding
his apprehension of an overall outlook on life that Miyagi wishes to teach in the midst of teaching karate.

I wish to propose this example as a model of how ends are commensurable: activities are commensurable in a way that aids rational agency when they are such that they are ordered toward improving an agent’s conception of his comprehensive aims as well as improving his conception of the place of these comprehensive aims within his life as a whole. On this view, practical reason is about articulating or grasping descriptions of one’s pursuits so that they are commensurable. But this requires a special kind of description, because the relevant description does not apply unless one articulates it.105

It is important at this point to give a general characterization of the kind of description that commensurates pursuits. There will be several levels of understanding necessary in order to commensurate all one’s pursuits together within one’s life. At each level, there will be a description of an activity that fits it within some larger pursuit. For the most part, these descriptions will not apply unless the agent recognizes how they are part of the larger pursuit, or the activity puts her in a position to eventually understand this. For the most part, the descriptions will reveal how the particular activities constitute the agent’s comprehensive pursuits, and so enhance her understanding of those pursuits. That is more or less the first level.

At the second level, the understanding the agent has thus gained concerning her comprehensive pursuits makes possible a description of her life as a whole, under which

105 Or at least one must be able to act under this description. It is possible that agents can act under a description such that a third person application of the description adequately characterizes and explains the person’s intentional actions, even if the agent neither acted with that description in mind, nor ever articulated the description for himself. For these distinctions, see Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Mistake about Causality in the Social Sciences,” in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Second Series) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 48-70.
she acts. This description, combined with the understanding of her comprehensive pursuits allows her to articulate a description of those pursuits that fits them within the description of her life.

Again, it is going to be the case that these descriptions of an agent’s comprehensive pursuits will not apply unless the agent is able to act under those descriptions. That is to say, the agent’s pursuits must put her in a position to grasp the relevant description of her life as a whole.

I will take this topic up in more detail in the next chapter, but it is also important to discuss the kind of terminology or language needed in order to get the right kind of descriptions of particular pursuits, comprehensive aims and one’s life as a whole that will commensurate one’s pursuits. Certainly the language that Charles Taylor categorizes as the language of strong evaluation will be important in the articulation of these descriptions of one’s ends that fit within comprehensive aims and within a conception of one’s life as a whole. Such language is evaluative language that provides a way to qualitatively contrast aims. As Taylor points out, such language is necessary in order to articulate what an agent finds important. Such articulation will be useful for one following Augustine, because the articulation that commensurates pursuits will make perspicuous the various limits of pursuits in which one might engage. Ultimately, descriptions that make clear these limits, and thereby make clear the place a given pursuit can play in fitting an agent to enjoy her final good will be necessary to commensurate ends. Specifying the limits of ends will play an extremely prominent role for Augustine, because recognizing one’s own limits and hence the limits of one’s pursuits just is perfecting one’s practical reason in a way that fits one to enjoy in humility one’s highest
good (see previous chapter). Specifying how ends are limited also makes intelligible the
defeasible goodness of one’s pursuits, which was the consideration arising from practical
reason that requires commensuration of ends in order to make one’s pursuits and practical
deliberations intelligible.

Such descriptions that delineate the limits and importance of ends must be related
to a description of one’s life as a kind of narrative. Remember of course that such a
description must make pursuing or leading such a life intelligible – it must make sense to
try to live such a life. For reasons that I will discuss in the next chapter, Augustine
believes that such a narrative is only intelligible as part of a larger narrative – one where
the structure of one’s own narrative is mirrored in various ways by the structure of the
larger narrative.

We began discussing commensurability as necessary for an agent to make sense
of how to relate the various goods and pursuits available to her. All agents recognize
what I have termed the defeasible goodness of good things in practical deliberations. But
if these deliberations that in specific instances recognize that the goodness of one pursuit
is defeated by other considerations are to be anything more than arbitrary, there must be
some way of making conditions of defeat intelligible. The way to do this is by
commensurating one’s pursuits in a way that articulates the point of such pursuits.
Articulating the point of theses pursuits then makes clear the limits of these pursuits, and
hence makes defeat intelligible. Since commensurating ends is about making intelligible
to an agent the place and limits of his pursuits within his life, it is not surprising that we
have landed on the account of commensurability that we have, where the descriptions that
commensurate ends apply when the activities are suited to an agent gaining insight into their place and limits in the life he is living.

I have tried to make sense of the idea that practical reasoning and practical deliberation is really a process of *learning*. It is a matter of perfecting one’s grasp of and appreciation for the kind of life one finds worth pursuing. But someone might argue that this is not enough to show that the good life is all about perfecting one’s practical reason, or that the good life for man is a life spent seeking the good life for man. The perfection of practical reason is necessary so that one can actually *live* well. Perfected practical reason tells one what living well means, but perfecting one’s practical reason is not the same thing as living well. Something further is needed to make the argument that the good life for man is the life spent seeking the good life for man.

The response to this objection must await chapter 3 where I articulate the conception of the kind of life in which agents must fit their pursuits. I will simply comment here that on an Augustinian view, the improvement of practical reason which fits one to enjoy one’s highest good is *open-ended*, such that the perfecting of practical reason can never fully be carried out. Fleshing out and defending this claim will also require the arguments of chapter 3, but I mention it here as one part of the Augustinian view which I am developing.

The main concern of chapter 3 will be discussing the relevant description which commensurates pursuits. We will need a description that renders pursuits intelligible without having agents lose any sense of the qualitative *distinctions* between goods.
CHAPTER 3

LEARNING TO SPEAK: THE DIVERSITY OF GOODS, CHARACTER AND AUGUSTINIAN PRACTICAL REASON

The previous chapter discussed the importance of finding a way to unify one’s conception of one’s pursuits in order to act rationally. Agents recognize the defeasible goodness of most aims, and in order to make sense of this it is necessary to be able to relate these pursuits together. Doing so can make clear why the goodness of certain pursuits is limited. I discussed a conception of commensurability where goods are commensurable when a person places them under descriptions in terms of his life as a whole, but that the relevant description only applies as a result of deliberation. This suggests that the kind of life in view is a life spent learning the nature of these goods. In this chapter I will discuss the relevant description of one’s life which enables commensuration of goods. I will begin by discussing an objection that might arise to the idea that an agent should relate all his pursuits together in terms of a description of his life as a whole.

3.1 Commensurability and the Diversity of Goods

The emphasis on finding a unifying description for one’s pursuits might leave a misleading impression. It might leave the impression that Augustine favors the use of
very abstract moral language and concepts rather than language that does justice to the
great diversity of goods sought and available in human life, and that is suited to make
qualitative *distinctions* between these goods. I am thinking mainly here of the language of
“thick concepts” as well as the language that Charles Taylor calls “strong evaluation.”  

The worry here is that the attempt to unify goods pursued in human life has a
distorting effect. It prevents an agent from appreciating the *qualitatively* unique
contribution that different human pursuits make to a life. This is related to a worry voiced
frequently regarding utilitarian views of the good. Consider the way that utilitarianism
tries to think of all goods in terms of the contributions they make to pleasure and the
mitigation of pain. In a crude form, such a view glosses over qualitative differences in
pleasant activities, such that the pleasures of different activities are not distinct in any
way. Alongside this, some versions of the view also attempt to rule out from
consideration all qualitative distinctions of ends, such as those which Taylor discusses
under the rubric of strong evaluation.

Taylor distinguishes between weak and strong evaluation. Weak evaluation is the
evaluation of objects, aims, etc., in terms of how well they satisfy one’s desires, but it
leaves those desires as given. Strong evaluation on the other hand employs
discriminations using contrasting pairs such as “noble” or “base”, “important” or “trivial”
which are not rendered valid by desires, but offer standards by which desires can be
judged. These discriminations allow an agent to understand the goodness of his desires,

106 The notion of “thick” ethical language has received a lot of discussion. See Bernard Williams,
*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, ch. 8 for an influential early discussion. For extended discussions of
strong evaluation see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, particularly the first two chapters, and
“Responsibility for Self.”
and in doing so help an agent to articulate his deepest sense of what is important to him, as well as his understanding of the kind of person he wishes to become.107

In order to explain the distinction between strong and weak evaluation, Taylor provides an example and criticizes how a utilitarian would propose to view the situation. Taylor gives an example of someone addicted to overeating.108 This person might use the language of strong evaluation in assessing his addiction, saying that he wishes to be a different kind of person, one who lets his appetites be responsive to his higher aspirations. Using strong evaluation here involves using contrastive language. One describes cake-eating in such a way that there is a necessary incompatibility between eating cake and other aims one aspires to. One wishes to be a moderate person, while the cake-eating is intemperate. One wishes to be responsive to higher aspirations, while one’s cake-eating is base. As a base action it is necessarily in conflict with pursuing higher aspirations. That just is what it means to call a pursuit base.

Taylor suggests that a utilitarian would recommend viewing the situation not in terms of the qualitative distinctions of strong evaluation. Instead, he would recommend an agent consider that the problem with cake eating is not that it cuts him off from qualitatively better pursuits, but that it actually is sub-optimal in terms of the quantity of pleasure and desire satisfaction of which he is capable. Taylor articulates this way of viewing the situation thus:

Eating too much cake increases the cholesterol in my blood, makes me fat, ruins my health, prevents me from enjoying all sorts of other desired consummations…Here I have stepped away from the contrastive language of

107 See Sources of the Self, 4 and “Responsibility for Self,” 282.

qualitative evaluation. Avoiding high cholesterol, obesity, ill-health can be defined quite independently from my eating habits.\textsuperscript{109}

On the utilitarian way of viewing the situation, the ends one is comparing are not in any necessary conflict, because one has not characterized them using contrastive language.

Can we develop a notion of one’s life as a whole which commensurates the pursuits of one’s life in such a way that agents can make the qualitative distinctions between goodness marked out by the contrastive language of strong evaluation? Agents commensurating goods in terms of their place within a pilgrim life should be able to grasp and appreciate the difference between the \textit{excellence} of exercising a certain virtue, and the \textit{nobleness} of appreciating beauty, and the \textit{importance} of cultivating the earth, etc. In the view I develop they must understand the distinct contributions that such goods make and can make to such a pilgrim life, and they will grasp this in part through the concepts employed in strong evaluation. The way to think of this will be that a person’s grasp of what a pilgrim life consists in is partly \textit{constituted} by and dependent upon his understanding of the concepts of strong evaluation. In this way, he would lose his grip on what a pilgrim life consists in if he ceased to recognize the distinction between virtue and vice, or ceased to distinguish the virtuous from the noble, important, fulfilling, etc. Once one does grasp the contribution these qualitatively distinct goods make to a pilgrim life, this will lend \textit{unity} to these qualitative evaluations, but not in a way that \textit{eliminates} the need to employ these distinctions. Further discussion of this point must await my elaboration of the Augustinian notion of a pilgrim life.

\textsuperscript{109} “Responsibility for Self,” 285.
There is a second kind of qualitative distinction between goods not necessarily captured using Taylor’s language of strong evaluation that agents should also be able to appreciate and recognize. They must grasp the qualitatively different kinds of excellence and pleasure available through distinct pursuits. That is to say, agents need to be able to recognize that there are qualitative differences in the goodness of those goods MacIntyre has called “goods internal to practices.”\(^{110}\) A good is internal to an activity just in case it can only be pursued and achieved within the activity, it can only be specified in terms of the activity, and it can only be understood and appreciated by participants in the activity. The second condition indicates the need for a language and vocabulary specific to the activities in which there are goods internal to them. If this is true, then it at least provides good reason to think that one can only grasp these ends under the aspect of the good in a way that is unique to those goods. Using vocabulary specific to the activity is a unique way of coming to see these goods under the aspect of the good (as pleasant or fitting). Thus, in order to pursue and recognize these goods one must undergo a good deal of learning or training. Such training involves being initiated into the pursuit and into the standards of excellence of the pursuit and vocabulary used within the practice that allows practitioners to understand, achieve, and extend such excellence.\(^{111}\)

\(^{110}\) Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 187ff.

\(^{111}\) I should note here that this does not entail that everyone who can appreciate such internal goods will be highly proficient with the vocabulary that specifies these goods. Nonetheless, if they can appreciate and pursue these goods, it is arguable that they too apprehend the goods as good in a way that they don’t or couldn’t apprehend other pursuits under the aspect of the good. In order to pursue goods internal to practices, one must be able to act under the right kind of descriptions. If one is not acting under these descriptions, then one is not really participating in the activity. At the very least, insofar as one’s intentional actions are not describable in the vocabulary of the activity, one is not achieving goods internal to that activity. But it is not necessary that one is able to articulate one’s actions using this vocabulary.

A good example to illustrate these points is that of an athlete and a coach. An athlete might not have available the same vocabulary to describe his activities as his coach. A basketball player might
Once again, the description of human life as a pilgrim life which commensurates pursuits must lend unity to the goodness of the various goods internal to practices, without eliminating the need for agents to grasp the distinctions between these goods in order to properly place them within such a pilgrim life.

Taylor and MacIntyre seem to think that the diversity of goods which they outline is compatible with the idea that some sort of underlying unity exists between those goods in terms of their place within a life. When Taylor takes up the question of commensurability in its own right, he finds a way to commensurate aims in terms of an articulation of the life one is leading.¹¹² Further, when we look at what Taylor says regarding the qualitative language of strong evaluation, it is contrastive, which involves describing pursuits in a way that allows comparison between aims not otherwise possible. The language of strong evaluation is contrastive in that terms like noble, worthwhile, and important partly get their meaning by contrast with terms like base, worthless, trivial. This allows comparison between rather different pursuits (eating cake, playing with one’s children) because one can be described as important and the other trivial. This contrastive language provides a common description by which one can compare otherwise unrelated ends.

MacIntyre, who provides the rubric for discussing goods internal to practices, also seems to be committed to the claim that diverse goods can be commensurated in deliberation. In MacIntyre’s view, the pursuit of the goods internal to practices cannot lead to the achievement of the human *telos* unless those pursuits are organized within a life which has narrative unity.

3.2 Commensurability and Value Pluralism

David Wiggins and Joseph Raz argue that agents can appreciate the plurality of goods available in human life only if those goods are viewed as incommensurable. They think that *incommensurability* enables agents to organize these goods within their life in a way that make sense to them in terms of their individual characters. This would appear to put them at odds with an Augustinian view which argues that agents can appreciate the distinct goodness of various goods, while also grasping their underlying unity in terms of the place they have in a certain kind of life (i.e., a kind of life shared by all who are able to intelligibly organize these goods in a way that is not self-defeating). Addressing their views of commensurability will allow me to motivate and articulate the Augustinian view that goods can be commensurated in terms of their place within a certain kind of life, characterized as a pilgrim life.

Regarding incommensurability, Wiggins writes,

> Incommensurability in the sense we are now trying to pin down reflects the separateness and mutual irreducibility of the standing concerns that make up our orientation toward the distinct values and commitments (and whatever else) that impinge upon us in different sorts of situations. It reflects the fact that these concerns are not all variations on a common theme…

> How then, confronting these general concerns as they impinge upon particular historical contexts and situations do we make our choices? The answer is that we have to make our choice in the light of our overall practical conception
of how to live a life (both here and in general). We deploy these conceptions even as the variety of the contingencies that we actually confront constantly shapes or re-shapes the conceptions themselves (a two-way flow). It will be no wonder if choice (as now described) is the exercise of an irreducibly practical knowledge that can never be exhaustively transposed into any finite set of objectives that admit of finite expression.\textsuperscript{113}

On one level, Wiggins' view is similar to the Augustinian view I am developing. After all, Wiggins suggests here that agents are concerned to realize a plurality of goods in their lives. These goods are “mutually irreducible” so that they cannot be commensurated in terms of some common feature intrinsic to them apart from their place within a person’s life. Agents organize these mutually irreducible goods in terms of the place they have in the person’s life, and such organization shapes their conception of that life. Thus far, Wiggins’ view and my Augustinian view are in agreement. But I would like to explore Wiggins’ comment that these mutually irreducible goods are not “variations on a common theme” in connection with the idea which we share that each individual must find a way to fit these goods within his life in a way that makes sense.

The question here concerns the relationship between the goodness of these various mutually irreducible concerns and the way in which these concerns are organized within a life. According to my Augustinian position, there is a certain kind of life which each person’s life must exemplify (a certain kind of pilgrim life) in order to organize various goods in a way that makes sense and properly acknowledges their value. Wiggins’ picture denies this. In Wiggins’ view, there is not a single description that applies to all lives in which the various goods of life can be organized in a way that makes sense to the person.

On an Augustinian view, the various goods are distinct because they play different roles within a life that fits a person to enjoy his supreme good. As will be made clear later in the chapter, these temporal goods fit an agent to enjoy his highest good because they are able to signify and bear witness to that final good. From the point of view of a Christian doctrine of creation, they can do this because they reflect a person’s highest good. So while they are mutually irreducible, they are also “variations” on a theme. A full understanding of the underlying unity among this diversity of goods must await the enjoyment of one’s highest good in the beatific vision. But the goodness of these things is connected to the way they reflect one’s highest good, and by extension, their goodness is linked to the particular way that they contribute to a life which uses them to bear witness to one’s highest good. So an understanding of their goodness requires understanding how and why they fit into this kind of life.

Wiggins’ view appears to deny that a person can only appreciate the goodness or value of one’s standing concerns by seeing how they fit into one particular kind of life (a pilgrim life). Furthermore, Wiggins seems to deny that goods can only be intelligibly arranged in a way that acknowledges their goodness or value within such a life.

Wiggins’ picture appears to be that a person has mutually irreducible standing concerns with an indeterminate conception of his relative commitment to these concerns. In addition, he has a conception of how to live which is partly indeterminate, partly shaped by his standing concerns, and partly shapes his understanding of the relative importance of these standing concerns. His conception of how to live does not commensurate his standing concerns in terms of their place in his life. Instead, his understanding of his standing concerns provides him with options for arranging them
within his life in a manner that make sense to him because it is in keeping with his understanding of the value of these concerns and his commitment to them.

Joseph Raz shares Wiggins’ basic “value pluralism” and is more explicit than Wiggins that the value of goods does not determine how they must be related together within a life. On this point, Augustine agrees (but for reasons which differ from Wiggins and Raz). For various reasons, Augustine would deny that the goodness of good things determines how a particular person must fit them within his life. I will discuss the place for such options in an Augustinian framework later in the chapter. Although Augustine holds that there is a single kind of life on one level that all agents must exemplify in order to pursue excellence in practical reason, there are a lot of different ways to live this kind of life. Furthermore, as I will discuss later in the chapter, the notion of a pilgrim life is ultimately the notion of a life as part of a community of sojourners, where each member has a distinctive role to play within that common life (and within one’s role there will be options about how to carry out that role; further, because this is precisely the kind of life that is made intelligible in terms of a good that is never reached in that life, and never fully understood, there is always room for creativity within this way of life. Since one never reaches an and point to the task of figuring out how best to use the goods available to one in a way that bears witness to one’s highest good.)

So there is some agreement between Augustine and Raz. But Raz is explicit that the options made possible by the incommensurability of value (because how they should be arranged within a life is rendered indeterminate by such incommensurability) leaves room for the operation of the autonomous will which expresses its individual commitments which are not determined by reason. The incommensurability of good
secures the freedom of agents to autonomously give unique shape to their lives. This seems to rule out there being a single description of the kind of life that can organize the diverse goods available to agents in a way that makes sense. Certainly Raz provides no place within his view for such a description.

Raz articulates his views by distinguishing between two conceptions of human agency – what he calls the “rationalist” and “classical” conceptions. The key difference that he specifies between the two is that the rationalist regards reasons as requiring action and the classical conception regards reasons as rendering options eligible. He lists some other distinctives and summarizes the different pictures of agency as follows:

The…differences come down to a contrast between the rationalist view that generally rational choices and rational actions are determined by one’s reasons or one’s beliefs in reasons and are explained by them, as against the classical conception that regards typical choices and actions as determined by a will that is informed and constrained by reasons but plays an autonomous role in action.

Raz thinks of reasons for action in terms of values. Valuable aspects of the world constitute reasons. On Raz’s conception of reasons and rational agency, reasons make options eligible for a rational agent, rather than determining a single rational course of action. This leaves a place for the autonomous operation of the will which is responsive to reasons, but is not determined by them.

Finding a way to organize these distinct values within one’s life is a central part of rational agency, because the distinctive way that one chooses between and organizes

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options made eligible but not determined by reason expresses one’s unique character. Organizing these values within one’s life is not a matter of doing so in a way that reveals their underlying unity (as it is for Augustine). The fact that there is no underlying unity allows for the autonomous arrangement of these goods in a way that expresses the individual’s character.

I will try to push Wiggins and Raz in an Augustinian direction by suggesting a problem with this type of view, while suggesting an Augustinian explanation of why such a problem should arise, thus motivating an Augustinian way out of the problem. Before doing this, I would like to elaborate on Raz’s views a bit more.

I think Raz could accept Taylor’s position about the importance of contrastive language in deliberation, and the ability to render very different actions comparable. But I think Raz would argue that the various terms of strong evaluation pick out qualitatively distinct values that are incommensurable. So the noble, the important, the worthwhile, the fulfilling are all qualitatively different and incommensurable values that can be realized in intentional action.

Raz would argue that seeking further commensurability between the qualitatively distinct values denoted in the language of strong evaluation neglects the role and importance of the will in action and rational agency. He would also suggest, I believe, that agents who sought after such commensurability would lose their sense of their own agency to the extent that it would be difficult for them to be responsive to reasons (values). It would damage their rational agency.

So what is the role that Raz assigns the will in rational agency? The first role is that the will is responsive to reasons – that is to say, it is responsive to that which a
person takes to have value in some way. In Raz’s terms, the will is the capacity for intentional action. However, since reasons only make options rationally eligible, there is a further role for the will to play. Another way to put this is that the will must be responsive to reasons in a way that goes beyond moving a person to act in accordance with the most rational action. The will must also respond to reasons when it sees reason as making several choices eligible, but compelling none of them. Here the will is what allows a person to commit to an option in a way that cannot be fully explained by his grasping of the value of the option. That value is specified by the reasons for action, and *ex hypothesi* the reasons in the situation do not decisively commend one option over the others.

In attempting to articulate this view, Raz distinguishes between a thin and thick sense of ‘want’ or ‘desire.’ In the thin sense, agents want to do whatever they do intentionally.118 Think here of Aristotle’s discussion of the voluntary in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. A sailor who throws cargo off a ship to save the ship in a storm wants to do so, in the thin sense of want.119 The thick sense of want indicates an attachment to something not required by reason. That is to say, we are attached to the object or action not simply because reason recommends it. The sailor is only attached to throwing off cargo because he sees that he has to do so. He wants to do it only because of his recognition that he has a conclusive reason to do so. Raz summarizes his way of thinking about the relation between reason and the will thus:

118 ‘Things they do intentionally,’ just to be clear, does not encompass any description an intentional action falls under if the action is not intentional under that description (see Anscombe, *Intention* and Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”).

The view that I have outlined can be summarized by saying that the will is the
capacity for intentional action, which is instantiated in every intentional action.
This gives rise to the thin sense of ‘want’: I do what I want to do whenever I act
intentionally. The will is also the ability to be attached to various options, actions,
or objects, which expresses itself in the attitude with which we do what we do,
and which enables us to choose, even when, as is normal, reason does not dictate
a unique choice. This second power of the will gives rise to the thick sense of
‘want’, meaning an attachment not required by reason (though we can be attached
in that way to an option prescribed by reason, as well as to one proscribed by
it).\textsuperscript{120}

Elsewhere Raz suggests that the will is expressive of a person’s character or tastes when
it chooses between options made eligible by reason\textsuperscript{121} (Raz thinks it is expressive in this
way in cases of weakness of will as well, but I will focus on cases where the will must
choose between choices made eligible by reasons). So the picture of the role of the will in
rational action seems to be something like the following. A will is responsive to the value
of things. Being thus responsive also means properly responding to the incommensurable
values of various options, where there is no conclusive reason to choose any action
among several options. How does Raz conceive a will that is properly responsive to this
state of affairs (incommensurable options being set before it)?

The idea here seems to be that in the situation where options are presented to the
will, the will chooses in such a way as to express the attachments of a person that are not
due to the apprehension of the objective value of what he is attached to. I am going to try
to elaborate on what this might entail in a manner that is in keeping with Raz’s view. It is
important to keep in mind that in Raz’s view, the will’s ability to choose between options
– as opposed to being paralyzed when reason does not decisively commend one option,

\textsuperscript{120} Joseph Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will,” in \textit{Engaging Reason}, 90-117, p
111.

or always finding some reason it takes to be decisive – is crucial for sustaining human
agency. With that in mind, we can sketch how this might look for an agent.

We have already noted that different aims have different comprehensiveness. The
comprehensiveness of an aim has to do with how extensively it involves other less
comprehensive pursuits of an agent, and what portion of an agent’s pursuits and activities
it renders intelligible, because the other activity is done for the sake of the more
comprehensive pursuit or in some other way gets its point because of its relation to the
comprehensive pursuit. Such comprehensive pursuits include what Williams and others
have called “projects.” Such projects have been plausibly discussed as being important
for agency. Williams argues that the existence of projects and the ability to pursue them
in more than a haphazard way is necessary for a person to have a character, and provides
reasons for action the complete absence of which would make it difficult for an agent to
act for any reasons at all. 122 According to Williams, the absence of any reasons for action
arising from one’s projects means an absence of reasons to go on living at all.

Raz would argue that we should avoid an account of reasons for action and
rational agency that entailed there being a uniform set of projects in which rational agents
must engage. I say ‘uniform’ here, because Raz need not deny that there are some
projects in which all rational agents must engage. But there are projects in which it is
rational to engage, but it is not necessary to engage in these projects in order to be
rational. Not everyone needs to devote themselves to academic pursuits, or artistic life or
to educating children. But these projects are rational for their practitioners to engage in

since they realize important values in human life, and – I would add – they provide their practitioners with reasons for action they would not have apart from taking up these projects.

Raz has a particular way of understanding why it is rational but not compulsory for agents to take on and pursue projects of various kinds. Different projects realize different and incommensurable values. An agent who is responsive to these values also recognizes that action requires committing to one set over the others. So being responsive to these reasons requires investing oneself in pursuing one of these values in a way that outruns the reasons for pursuing it. One must prioritize these values within one’s own life, even as there are no reasons telling one which values to prioritize. How one does so is an expression of one’s character and forms one’s character. The picture here is not that agents let their inclinations just “take over” apart from their control when reasons give out. Instead the picture is that an agent properly responsive to reasons recognizes that because of the incommensurability of values, rational agency requires him to provide a distinctive ordering of these values in his own commitments and projects. In this way rational agency is a kind of manifestation of and expression of human creativity within boundaries. If this is the picture, I would add that it makes sense to think of those commitments as further forming the agent, so that we can think of a person’s character as the unique way the person relates and prioritizes incommensurable goods in his projects and life.

For Raz, this creative way of relating and prioritizing incommensurable goods is what is characteristic of human agency. Any agent responsive to reasons must recognize

\[\text{123 It seems compulsory to engage in some projects or others. But there are projects where it is rational not compulsory to engage in that one.}\]
this, because he must recognize that most actions demand of him a commitment to goods that goes beyond reasons for pursuing them. His “creative will” as I have tried to characterize it is the only thing that can meet this demand. So an agent must draw on the resources of his “thick desires” to find a creative way of realizing the incommensurable goods to which he has committed himself. These commitments and pursuits then further form his character and further define his unique way of relating the various goods of human life.

By way of comparison with Augustine, an Augustinian will think that there are descriptions under which good things and good pursuits fall that commensurates them. This description makes reference to how a pursuit fits an agent to enjoy his highest good. However, an Augustinian would not deny that different agents may act in accordance with reason while pursuing some very different projects as Williams conceives of projects. Rational agency can find a place in the arts or academia, family life or single life, activities of production or activities of mental creativity. Further, as already suggested, an Augustinian will want to do justice to the qualitative distinctions regarding the goodness of things.

It is also worth noting that the Augustinian will not think that reason will always require one action over alternatives. However this will not be because the different options are incommensurable. It is rather because they are commensurable in terms of how they fit an agent to enjoy his highest good, or provide opportunity for an agent to so

124 We have to be careful in formulating the so-called “rationalist” position here. Raz characterizes the rationalist as one who regards reason as requiring action. (“Incommensurability and Agency,” 111) ‘Action’ here must refer to an action type, not a token in all its particularity (nor a type so specific as to specify completely the action that will satisfy the requirement).
fit himself. There will be many instances in which different activities are eligible to fit an agent to enjoy his highest good, because the agent’s highest good is not to be identified with any particular temporal activity. Instead one is to use activities and circumstances to fit oneself; part of this good use involves recognizing the limits of these goods and “referring” these goods to one’s highest good, the way a sojourner refers the goods in his life to life in his homeland. This recognition of the limits of goods and activities will include a recognition that one can refer the goods of one’s life to one’s highest good in all kinds of contexts and circumstances. One might find that one’s character and other traits (good and bad) better suit one for pursuing this task in one vocation rather than another (as an example), but this must be done with the recognition that a change in circumstances that, say, forced one from pursuing scholarly pursuits to devoting oneself to manual labor would not preclude one from being able to perfect one’s practical reason by the proper use of temporal goods – a use that referred these goods to one’s highest good.\footnote{The desert fathers were in part trying to remind Christians that whether in positions of power in the empire or in a context of persecution, Christians must always live as strangers on the earth. It helped remind them that their discipleship did not depend on the continued good will of the emperor, and that such good will could cause them to forget their hope as Christians.}

The fact that the human good is not identified with any particular temporal activity, so that all goods and many activities can be used to fit an agent to enjoy that good, there is some freedom and choice available to the rational agent. Further, insofar as the agent fails to recognize this choice and the reason it is available (several options can be used to fit an agent to enjoy his highest good), the agent’s choice will fail to improve, or even corrupt his own agency. He will fail to apprehend how various goods can be
referred to his highest good, and he is in a position to invest too much importance in a particular activity’s role in fitting him to enjoy his highest good.

The Augustinian and the Razian agree that there is freedom and choice available in many contexts of rational agency, and failure to recognize this choice and attempting to find some consideration that will rule out all but one option will stunt or corrupt a person’s agency and practical wisdom. They agree on these points because determining how an action would form the character and agency of a person is a crucial factor in determining what reasons the agent has for doing it. For Raz, rational agency enables a person’s capacity for self-expression. Being properly responsive to reasons means recognizing the room they leave for the autonomous commitments of the will. Part of Raz’s idea seems to be that such rational action will also make the will more autonomous than it otherwise would be. An agent who recognizes the role of the will in action will not seek about for sham reasons to determine his choice and limit his reliance on his own commitments.126

For the Augustinian, understanding the place of choice in action is important for rational agency because it is part of an agent’s grasp of the limits of temporal goods and pursuits. It is also crucial for another aspect of perfecting practical reason, which is an apprehension of the agent’s own limits. The two are connected because recognizing the limits of goods and pursuits involves recognizing their limits with respect to achieving one’s highest good and fitting oneself to enjoy one’s highest good. This involves recognizing one’s own limits in achieving one’s highest good, or fitting oneself to enjoy it. As mentioned, there are two aspects to this recognition. First one must recognize that

126 Compare Jean-Paul Sartre on bad faith and radical freedom. For comment and critique of Sartre’s views in this connection, see Charles Taylor, “Responsibility for Self.”
one’s own pursuits are not sufficient for happiness, and one must recognize one’s own tendency to pride, which leads one to treat one’s own pursuits as sufficient for happiness. Inability to diagnose this pride is in part what precludes one from fitting oneself to enjoy one’s highest good. For all these reasons, improving an agent’s self-knowledge is the crucial function of an agent becoming properly responsive to the choices that are rationally available to him. This self-knowledge is the antidote to pride that obscures from an agent his own limits, hinders his ability to apprehend the nature of his good, and hence skews his conception of the goodness and right use of activities, pursuits and ends.

For an Augustinian, responsiveness to reasons - including responsiveness to choices made eligible by one’s reasons - is necessary for self-knowledge, whereas for Raz, such responsiveness is necessary for autonomy and self-expression. That said, self-knowledge does seem to be a necessary component to self-expression. As mentioned, awareness of one’s own autonomy is necessary for not seeking about for reasons apart from one’s own commitments that would determine one’s action. Raz cannot go along with Augustine concerning the kind of self-knowledge that results from full responsiveness to reasons. If he did, he would be committed to the claim that full responsiveness to reasons renders values commensurable, a claim he is committed to deny. Full responsiveness to reasons would render values commensurable in terms of how the pursuit of such values provided an agent with an apprehension of their limits, and his limits, where such apprehension fits an agent to enjoy his highest good.

I would like to press Wiggins-Raz style value pluralism by examining a problem which arises if we develop that view in a certain direction. In particular, I will argue that this view of agency has the problem that agents conforming to it must fragment the
pursuits to which they are committed in such a way that it becomes difficult to have a character that one can express through one’s distinctive ordering within one’s life of one’s commitments.

3.3 Raz, Self-expression and Augustine

The key aspect of Raz’s picture is that an agent who is responsive to reasons acknowledges a value in expressing her character that is distinct from and independent of the value of the activities through which she expresses her character. The problem of fragmentation arises when we consider how self-expression might work through participation in what MacIntyre call “practices” and through the pursuit of the goods internal to practices. In order to do this, it is necessary to note an aspect of being responsive to the goods internal to practices in a way that is obscured by Raz’s account of agency.

Raz’s view suggests that one can be fully responsive to two values which reason presents as options prior to pursuing either one. It is at that point that an agent can decide how to pursue them in a way that expresses his character. But within practices it is not the case that one can appreciate the goods realized within those practices until one pursues them. So the picture of a rational agent having a full grasp of the values to be realized within different options, then choosing the option to which she is committed obscures a crucial aspect of becoming responsive to reasons for action. The aspect that is obscured is that an agent must engage in a practice and learn about the goods of the activity and how they are to be realized. She cannot jump into the practice with a full knowledge of the values to be realized, and knowledge of how her commitments will be expressed in such
activity. A more accurate picture is that engaging in an activity gives an agent a fuller grasp of the goods involved in the activity and her commitments are formed accordingly.

The aspect of Raz’s view which obscures the need for learning points to some differences between his view and Augustine’s that we can understand in terms of the notion of goods internal to practices.

According to an Augustinian view, successful agency which is not self-defeating requires agents to recognize their need to learn about the excellence involved in various activities in order to be able to appreciate the value of these activities. In order to do so, they must pursue these practices in a manner that seeks to conform to the best standards of excellence realized in the practice so far. In connection with these standards, MacIntyre discusses several things that apprentices must learn if they are going to be able to learn anything else within the practice, and thus realize its standards of excellence. The first is that an apprentice must learn the distinction between what is good to do and what only seems good to do to this particular apprentice, but is not in fact so. That is, he must learn to recognize mistakes in applying the standards of excellence of the practice. He must also learn the distinction between what is good and best to do for him with his particular level of training and learning in particular circumstances and what is good and best unqualifiedly.\(^\text{127}\) By systematically applying these distinctions, the apprentice learns to recognize his own defects and limitations of habit and judgment that keep him from achieving these standards. That is, he learns how he must be transformed in order to recognize and realize the goods internal to this practice.\(^\text{128}\)


In addition to conforming to the standards of excellence of a practice, a person must also come to more fully understand these excellences by understanding how they can be fit within a particular kind of life.\footnote{MacIntyre’s view shares both of these aspects of the Augustinian view. See \textit{After Virtue}, chs. 14 and 15.}

Raz’s view differs from the Augustinian view on both counts. An agent expresses his character through a pursuit by the way in which he is committed to that pursuit, and the manner of his commitment which expresses his character (i.e., the nature of his thick desires) explains his pursuit of excellence in the activity as well as his departures from pursuing excellence in that activity.

Second, an agent expresses his character by the way he organizes incommensurable concerns, in the absence of reasons to organize them in any particular way arising from the objective values of the concerns (which are incommensurable). So arranging them within one’s life in a particular way does not allow one to more fully grasp the excellence of these things in terms of how they can find a place within a certain kind of life. Instead, one’s arrangement of them reveals one’s character because of the way one arranges and prioritizes one’s commitments in the absence of reasons to do so grounded in the value or goodness of the pursuit.

These are the two main points at which Raz’s view is at odds with an Augustinian view. I would like to discuss an example with respect to each one that is suggestive of problems that an Augustinian would see arising from conformity to Raz’s conception of agency. The problem will be that the commitments of Razian agents are likely to be fragmented in such a way that presents obstacles to developing and expressing that
character. Before discussing the examples, I must make a comment on the nature of the commitments of the will which are expressed through an agent’s pursuits.

Part of my critique rests on the following claim. While there might be a sense in which one’s character is *shaped* by the way one arranges and prioritizes various incommensurable goods, one’s character consists of more than simply that organization of commitments. One’s character is not simply this organization of commitments. One’s character is the *basis* of this organization in the absence of reasons grounded in objective value. One’s character can *explain* the priority one gives to various pursuits.

Furthermore, one’s commitments to pursuits that transcend one’s reasons for such a pursuit constitute one’s projects. It is the substantive nature of these projects that makes it possible to say that the pursuit of such projects expresses one’s character. One expresses one’s character not only because one prioritizes between incommensurable pursuits, but because in doing so one embodies a conception of what one hopes to accomplish in each of the various pursuits one takes up.

If this contention is correct, it suggests the following picture of agents seeking to realize end within a given pursuit. First, the agent already possesses a conception of the values that can be realized within the pursuit, and she possesses a conception of how and why he will engage in the pursuit to realize the values that express her character. At the very least, as I have mentioned, Raz’s account does not give a place to the idea that one only learns of the values of different practices through participation in them. Furthermore, agents ascribe value to expressing themselves in their projects which is independent of the values realized within the relevant practices through which they express themselves.
One way to think about the notion of independent value is by deploying MacIntyre’s distinction between goods internal and goods external to practices. What would a Razian account make of such a distinction? As I understand Raz, agents that are sensitive to reasons must recognize that the goods of self-expression are distinct from the goods internal to practices which provide the objective reasons to engage in it. The goods of self-expression are external to the practices in which an agent expresses herself.

I will suggest that an agent who approaches practices in accordance with this Razian picture could face a potential problem that her commitment which expresses her character could become fragmented in a way that makes it impossible for her to fulfill the commitment, and thereby express her character.

3.3.1 Raz, Self-Expression and Excellence Within Practices

Agents would be forced to fragment commitments because of possible conflict between satisfying an agent’s substantive conception of her commitment which expresses her character (which value is not reduced to the value of realizing excellence in the activity) and achieving excellence in the activity. Furthermore, choosing to forgo excellence in a practice for the sake of self-expression through that practice – particularly in a context when one has insufficiently grasped the excellence involved in the practice – can lead to failing at the practice in such a way that one must acknowledge that one has also failed to satisfy one’s conception of how one would express oneself within the practice.

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130 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187ff.
Before discussing a particular case, let me articulate the kind of problem an Augustinian envisions would arise for Razian agents within practices. Consider practices where the care and education of others is a central part of the practice, as it is in parenting, teaching, pastoring, social work and other practices. Consider a person who embarks on one of these practices. He sees value in what can be realized by excellence in the practice, but he is also involved in the practice because of a different value (not arising from commitment to excellence in some other of her activities) which is expressing himself as a certain kind of parent, teacher, social-worker, etc. This motivation does not derive from the objective value that he can realize by excellence in the practice. Suppose one was interested in hiring a teacher or social worker and perceived this sort of dual motivation (acknowledged or not)? One would likely be concerned that the prospective teacher or social worker would confront a constant struggle between the realities of the job on the one hand and his picture of what it would be like to express his character through this job. Furthermore, if he attempts to resist this and seeks to conform his experience to his expectations of self-expression, he is likely to do more harm than he would otherwise do. Furthermore, if he views his commitment to self-expression as not simply being a function of achieving excellence and that it is this commitment which “tipped the scales” for him to choose this option over other jobs he might pursue, he will always have a motivation to opt out of learning and pursuing the often difficult course necessary to achieve excellence in the pursuit. Further one would worry that doing so would prevent success in the practice in such a way that he would also fail to express his character in the way he had hoped.
One could argue that agents need to adjust their conception of how to express themselves within a practice once they face the realities of that practice, but an Augustinian will claim that this can only work by subordinating one’s will to the standards of excellence of the practice the way MacIntyre discusses.

Let us look at a particular example in order to examine the kinds of difficulties an Augustinian envisions arising for a Razian agent. Consider a bright and energetic student – we’ll call her Rachel - who is facing graduation with a lot of interests, but without a clear career choice. She sees the value in several areas of employment she is considering and decides to apply for Teach for America. She finds it especially appealing to think of exciting poor, previously unmotivated children for reading, thinking and learning. When the school year starts she begins as a teaching aid. When the kids arrive, she begins learning how to instruct by observation and instruction from the main classroom instructor. This process of learning will ideally help give her an understanding of the goods involved in her vocation. I have suggested that her giving independent value to the fact that she is realizing the goods of this activity will potentially prevent her from a proper appreciation of and responsiveness to those goods. How might this be?

Teaching difficult students is usually rather unglamorous work. Often students struggle because of past neglect on the part of other teachers, as well as their own neglect of study – whether for good or bad reasons. Such students can often come to admire and appreciate teachers who impel them to be diligent, and improve academically, but these victories are hard won, and not always unmitigated success stories. (Nor are genuine cases of success ever fully recognized as such by students). In learning how to deal well and wisely with academic struggles, disciplinary issues and the like, Rachel must resist
the temptation to too quickly attempt to have her actual experience in school mirror the picture of what was possible that initially attracted her to the job. If she accedes to the temptation, she will fail to be responsive to the proper reasons for action. It might also not be readily apparent to her that failures with students result from her pressing for results too quickly out of a desire to realize the values that attracted her to teaching in the first place. This temptation will be difficult to resist if she thinks the importance of her activity is in large part due to the self-expression it makes possible.

In this connection, there are at least two reasons she might rush the kind of results she craves. First, the activities that would be best for her as a teacher/teacher’s aid to perform are too mundane for her to be motivated to do them. Secondly, she might want the ultimate results of the various kinds of aid that several people render a student to be attributable to her. I am trying to suggest that the explanation for these errors stems from the independent importance she gives to her participation in the activity, and to her realizing the values within the activity and thereby expressing herself. Recall that on a Razian view, her commitment to the activity will outrun the reasons for performing the activity. Reason makes this activity eligible. When excellence in the activity conflicts with her conception of how to express herself within the activity (as it might when activities are mundane or success requires patience without visible results) she has reason to depart from excellence in the activity. In the two types of instances I mentioned – mundane tasks with few visible results, or tasks that require patience rather than pressing for results – the reasons arising from the goods of the activity and reasons arising from the agent’s commitments that in some respect float free from these other reasons would lead to conflict within the agent.
Consider a task that is not likely to yield immediate perceptible results – teaching rules of grammar. This is necessary for meaningful, enduring improvement of reading and linguistic skills. But if this teacher is committed to teaching because she enjoys the thought of getting kids excited about reading or poetry or storytelling, there may very well be a conflict between this commitment and teaching grammar. One can have students create poetry with which they are happy, and that even has some virtues of expression, without subjecting them to the discipline of a rigorous learning of grammar or the principles of poetry (which can only be grasped well once grammar has been inculcated). The commitment to the former result cuts against pursuing teaching grammar, which is necessary for excellent teaching over the long haul. Of course teachers can sometimes try to spark interest and then ground the interest in learning. I am not thinking of a case where such is the best approach. I am thinking of a situation where the commitment always produces a conflict with teaching grammar because the commitment in no way commits her to that, nor even to the long term results of that activity. I am envisioning a case where the particular commitment that outruns the reasons within the activity provides reasons for pursuing other results entirely.  

The problem here runs deeper than simply producing a conflict between realizing the values to which one is committed and expressing that commitment. The real problem is that in this instance, trying to express one’s commitment makes it impossible to either to realize the value of teaching or express one’s commitment. So there is a need to resolve this conflict in order to realize either value (the value of teaching and the value of expressing one’s commitment).
As I said, a Razian could respond by saying that Rachel should adjust her understanding of how to express herself when she confronts the realities of the job. But it is necessary to point out that in doing so her commitment to teaching will not be a function of her recognition of the objective value that she can realize through teaching. Thus, her will remains autonomous with respect to the standards of excellence of the practice. An Augustinian will argue that she will not be able to express her character unless she subordinates her will to the standards of the practice. I will not argue this directly through examining more cases. Instead, I will present an Augustinian explanation of what goes wrong in cases like Rachel’s and use that explanation to motivate his solution. Consider these the first steps in a continuing ad hominem argument with Raz.

Before doing this, I need to raise a further concern about Raz’s view. The Rachel case points to difficulties in expressing oneself within practices. There is a further problem which arises when we consider how a Razian must relate different practices together within his life. The problem that arises is that a Razian will be compelled to fragment his commitments to different pursuits and practices in a manner which will make it impossible for him to have a single character which he can express through his actions.

3.3.2 Raz, Self-expression, and the Fragmentation of Commitments

In any human life, a person will have many commitments to different roles and activities through which values are realized which Raz believes are incommensurable with each other. On Raz’s view, a person expresses her character by engaging in these activities to which she is committed. The question which I think comes naturally to mind
concerns how these activities and the expression of these various commitments are related together in a human life that enables expression of character the way Raz envisions.

I deliberately did not raise this question by asking how a person’s various activities and commitments fit together. For Raz does not think that substantial coherence among one’s various commitments is necessary for rationality. He asks rhetorically in one article: “Why should people have a coherent life? In order to be all good, decent middle-class folk?”

One expresses one’s various commitments in a way that expresses one’s character without revealing underlying unity which ties together one’s commitments.

What are the other possibilities for thinking of the relations between an agent’s various commitments, if they are not commensurable commitments? I think there are two possibilities for how we would describe an agent’s commitments as a whole: in conflict or compartmentalized.

Suppose an agent eschews the kind of commensuration that is achieved by conceiving one’s various activities and commitments in such a way that they both are describable in terms of their place in some more comprehensive activity – either the life of a community, the individual’s life (or both), or some part of either of those that fits several different pursuits together. Insofar as the agent eschews such commensuration he engages in isolated activities and has isolated commitments. They are isolated in that no effort is made to conceive of them as fitting together in any way, except that a person

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133 This eschewing need not be intentional.
can express her distinct and irreducible commitments to them. They need not be isolated in another sense, because the demands of one activity and commitment could conflict with the demands of another.

At first glance, the possibility for conflict between commitments of one who eschews commensurating them seems rampant. This is because these commitments are not made commensurate in terms of how they fit into an agent’s unified life. Insofar as these commitments are not commensurated, there will be no application for the idea that one demand could defeat the other in particular contexts. Raz’s thought is that incommensurability is what gives an agent options rather than artificially determining rational choice by giving one aim priority over another through the use of some common measure.

The problem with having commitments arranged in such a way is that when the demands of one commitment conflict with the demands of another, one will have to honor one commitment at the expense of the other. But without any way to commensurate the activities, such that the idea of defeat can have application, there is no way to view such a situation except as a failure in the activity whose demands one does not satisfy, and a failure to express and honor one’s commitment to the activity.

Let us look at a concrete example of this. We can imagine, a la Bernard Williams, a Gauguin-type person, who views his commitment to art and his commitment to his family as coming into conflict with one another. He cannot achieve what he understands as excellence in art without abandoning his family. His actual choice for our

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134 So Raz, “Explaining Normativity: Reason and the Will,” 102: “Reasons which are incommensurate do not defeat each other.”

purposes is irrelevant. Either way of resolving the conflict would be a failure to honor his commitment to the other activity. To be sure, the decision he makes is a good indication of which commitment is more important to him, but Raz would resist concluding that the relative importance to an agent of two commitments renders them commensurable in a way that makes one choice more rational than another.

Notice what it is difficult for Raz to say here. It is difficult for him that the actual conflict situation reveals the nature and extent of Gauguin’s commitment or leads him to adjust his commitment in light of this conflict, so that they do not conflict in such a way that he must fail to satisfy one of his commitments. It is difficult for him to say this because he would have to say it without being committed to saying that his commitment to painting defeated his commitment to his family. For when commitments are incommensurable, the concept of defeat fails to have application. So his choice is not based on a comparison of his commitments where one is given priority over the other. These would involve understanding these commitments in relation to each other so that the commitments can be compared in the context of their place within Gauguin’s life. I take it that it is this sort of comparison of values that determines one’s relative commitment to them which Raz is interested in ruling out by his claim that they are incommensurable. On this construal, Raz’s view is that agents express their character by their distinctive ordering of commitments, but these commitments do not arise on the basis of comparison of the relative (objective) importance of these commitments, since such comparison is ruled out by incommensurability.

If Raz says that agents can compare the relative importance to them of these goods, his claim of incommensurability amounts to the claim that they do so without
commensurating them. We might in fact simply define the person’s commitments in terms of how he prioritizes them when given a choice between two values he might realize. However, Gauguin-style cases raise an interesting question to this point of view. It seems that we can fill in this kind of case in such a way that an agent is faced with two positive, uncommensurated commitments through which he had expressed his character, but that they conflict in such a way that however he chooses to negotiate the conflict would seem “out of character,” because whatever he chooses he is must fail to satisfy one of the commitments through which his character is made intelligible to himself and others. In this way, such conflict presents an obstacle to expressing his character.

There is reason to think that the possibility of conflict between positive uncommensurated commitments that shape and define one’s character is widespread, rather than confined to unusual cases such as Gauguin. The reason is that while an important aspect of understanding a person’s character involves understanding what he would forgo for the sake of what, a fuller understanding of his character requires understanding the nature of the projects to which he is committed and why he is committed to them. That is, the formal understanding of how an agent arranges his projects is not sufficient to understand a person’s character apart from substantive understanding of the projects themselves. One understands the person’s character in terms of the commitments themselves. But since these are uncommensurated commitments, it seems that many cases could arise in which one cannot satisfy the positive commitments that shape one’s own and others’ understanding of one’s character.

Raz might claim that it is possible to avoid such conflict with one’s positive commitments so that one does not face such obstacles to expressing one’s character by
exercising one’s commitments. But given the plausibility that positive, substantive, uncommensurated commitments could conflict in many cases, how is it that agents could avoid such conflict? Agents could compartmentalize their commitments. That is, one could pursue these commitments in such a way that a practical conflict between them could never arise. How could an agent carry out such compartmentalization, and what consequences would it have for the agent expressing his character through his commitments?

3.3.3 The Fragmentation of Commitments and the Fragmentation of Character

Kant presents us with excellent examples of compartmentalization in his “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” Kant draws a distinction in that essay between the public and private use of reason. As an example of these two uses, he asks us to imagine a clergyman, who preaches according to the dogmas of his church, catechizes children in accordance with the catechisms of the church, and the like. This is the pastor in his private role, engaging in the private use of reason. But if this pastor were to engage in the public scholarly use of reason — public because open to the free examination of other rational persons — he is “called upon to communicate to the public all his carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts about what is erroneous in that

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137 Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” 18.

This is a nice example, because the pursuits are declared not to be in conflict simply by placing the two uses of reason into different “spheres” (the public and the private). What this move makes impossible is integrating one’s duties as a pastor with continued inquiry into the “better arrangement of the religious and ecclesiastical body.” The assumption that the two activities could not conflict includes the assumption that there is no way to integrate them. Here the impulse to compartmentalize comes from a worry that rational reflection on religion would yield commitments that must conflict with the private (dogmatic) practice of religion. To avoid such conflicts of commitment, one puts the activities in separate spheres, saying that exercising one’s commitment to one does not bear one way or another on exercising one’s commitment to the other. This is what rules out the possibility of finding coherence between the activities.

Kant gives us an example of fragmenting what had previously been a single commitment for a person. Next I would like to examine fragmentation of one’s commitments to activities that are of completely different kinds. I will argue that an agent compartmentalizing such activities and his commitments to them also makes it impossible to fit these pursuits into more comprehensive pursuits and commitments.

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139 Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” 19.

140 Kant apparently views theological and ecclesiastical discussion as either completely dogmatic and impervious to any critical reflection and development, or free of all doctrinal or creedal constraints, and conducted within the bounds of “reason alone.” This is why the private practice of religion is not integratable with public reasoned reflection about such practice.
Alasdair MacIntyre provides some good examples of the prevalence of compartmentalization in modern life, and a useful analysis of the consequences of such compartmentalization for the commitments of agents who engage in it. Commenting on the attitudes and commitments of power company executives found during an investigation of the decision-making within such companies, MacIntyre writes:

One incidental discovery in the course of that study was that power company executives tended to a significant degree to answer what were substantially the same questions somewhat differently, depending on whether they took themselves to be responding qua power company executive or qua parent and head of household or qua concerned citizen. That is to say, their attitudes varied with their social roles and they seemed quite unaware of this.141

The sort of compartmentalization MacIntyre discusses here is undertaken to prevent what we might call intrinsic or conceptual conflict between commitments. Call the compartmentalization involved “conceptual compartmentalization.” If a power company executive has a commitment to keeping his family safe, he is also likely to have a different, conceptually irreconcilable commitment to safety qua power company executive. He avoids this conflict by relativizing his commitments to his social roles. So he has commitment to safety x, relative to his role as an executive, and commitment to safety z, relative to his role as a parent, etc.

Another type of compartmentalization is compartmentalization to avoid what we might call situational or practical conflict between commitments. Call this sort of compartmentalization “practical compartmentalization.” This is conflict that arises not because different commitments are conceptually incompatible, but because the demands of one commitment cannot be satisfied in the situation one finds oneself without failing to

satisfy the demands of the other commitment. So the time demands of one’s job might prevent one from spending adequate time with one’s children.

This second sort of compartmentalization is difficult to pull off for several reasons. First, if one construes one’s commitment to one pursuit or value in such a way that the commitment could not conflict with any other commitment – say one’s commitment to one’s job and one’s commitment to raising one’s children – then one is likely to fall into the first kind of conflict that we already discussed – conflict between satisfying one’s commitment to an activity and satisfying the standards internal to that activity. After all, if one circumscribes one’s commitment to parenting in such a way that it could never conflict with the demands of any other project, then it will be difficult to be an excellent parent. One of the salient features of such fundamental projects is that commitment to them often requires prioritizing the project over other pursuits to which one would otherwise be committed. I will discuss the second problem with practical compartmentalization after discussing a problem with conceptual compartmentalization.

My suggestion thus far is as follows: a Razian agent seeks to express herself by expressing her unique commitment to various valuable pursuits. The only way to avoid conflicts such that success at expressing one commitment entails failure to express another, one must compartmentalize these commitments. I will now argue that such compartmentalization influences the kind of character it is possible to develop, and hence constrains possibilities for expressing one’s character.

In order to do this, I will begin with the thought-provoking example Charles Taylor imagines in his article “Leading a Life.” This example will be useful for
examining how conceptual compartmentalization affects the character one can develop, and hence express. The case is as follows:

Imagine a tropical republic governed by a red-green coalition. The leader of the Green Party (call her Priscilla) is the minister of natural resources, vowed to protect Tropicana’s rain forests from total destruction. But the relation of forces is such that it becomes clear that the only way to avoid much worse destruction is to give over $x$ square miles of the forest to the chain saws of a large multinational corporation. Priscilla is intellectually convinced by this argument and realizes it would be irresponsible to sabotage the arrangement, but she asks to be relieved of her portfolio, so as not to be the person who introduces the necessary legislation and guides it through the chamber. What is at stake here is something like integrity; this act would go against the whole direction of her life and the causes it has been dedicated to.  

It will be useful to imagine that instead of asking off the portfolio in the interest of integrity, Priscilla engages in a bit of conceptual compartmentalization. But first, let us explore why Priscilla, as Taylor has her in the example, sees a conflict between her commitment to protect the forest on the one hand and leading the way on this bit of legislation on the other. Her friends in the Green Party might see no conflict, since this legislation is in the service of their ultimate goal of preserving the rainforests. Taylor imagines Priscilla articulating the conflict thus:

An important part of my life is to act as effectively as possible for this endangered cause...But on the other hand, why are we doing this? Why are we engaging in this fight? Yes, undoubtedly because the issue is important, because a lot is at stake here. But there is also something else: we know that we...are capable of feeling that the world, and the whole sphere of life commands our admiration and even reverence, although we often block this out and pursue just our own projects and seek to maximize our instrumental efficacy...we want to win the fight for the rainforests, but this is not all. We also want to cherish and develop a certain way of understanding and responding to the world – in short a certain reverence.  


As Priscilla articulates matters, for her to use some bit of the rainforest as a political bargaining tool even in the service of the political project of preserving the rainforests is to lack the reverence the cultivation of which is in large part what makes the project important in the first place. So there is a conflict between political effectiveness at achieving a goal and achieving the goal in such a way that makes the political end intelligible in terms of the overall point of pursuing such a goal.

Imagine if instead of articulating why she felt a conflict between political effectiveness at saving the rainforests and being true to her commitment to preserve the rainforests, Priscilla had engaged in some conceptual compartmentalization. This would involve her construing her commitment to the rainforest differently depending on which social role she is discharging. So she might relegate the commitment to cultivating reverence as part of her commitment qua private citizen and perhaps as a member of organizations designed to teach and learn about environmental issues, and in so doing cultivate the kind of reverence she speaks about. She would then also have her commitment to the political goal of actually preserving the rainforests, which would be honored without concerning herself in her political activities with how her political action would or would not aid the cultivation of the reverence she spoke about. This avoids conflict at the expense of fragmenting Priscilla’s commitment to the rainforests, and the environment generally. Not only does she now have two commitments, she has also isolated from one of those commitments (the commitment to the political project) the very concerns which made that commitment intelligible.

Notice that this compartmentalization has an immediate consequence for Priscilla’s character and the expression of that character. Prior to the
compartamentalization, her activities with respect to the rainforest were intelligible as arising out of her commitment, which encompassed a commitment to preserve the rainforests and in doing so, doing her part to cultivate a kind of reverence for nature. But her activity would no longer be intelligible in this way. If there were a situation where someone said that Priscilla was acting out of her commitment to the rainforests, one who knew her well would have to ask, “Which commitment?” At the very least, this shows that the kind of coherence that exists between one’s commitments is an important aspect of one’s character. But the point goes deeper than that. Too much compartamentalization makes it difficult for one to have a character at all.

One’s character is formed in large part by one’s commitments, values, and the pursuits one finds important. These commitments, etc. must be practical in nature if they are to be part of one’s character. They explain behavior as arising from the kind of person one is. But notice the obstacles to giving such explanations for Priscilla’s behavior. By fragmenting her commitment to the rain forest, neither resulting commitment is able to make sense of why she does what she does in terms of the kind of person she is. Priscilla will presumably spend some time in political activism, pursuing one commitment, and some time within private organizations pursuing the other. But why does she devote herself to each to just the extent that she does? What makes her pursue political gains to the extent that she does, and what makes her pursue her more grassroots efforts? It is hard to say really. Suppose she throws herself into one commitment to the relative neglect of the other. Her activities will be intelligible in terms of her character, but only at the expense of saying that the neglected commitment is a kind of deviation from her character, and insofar as she pursues it she does not express her character. Remember, the
behavior cannot be explained by a single commitment where she has assigned relative importance to the different activities involved in light of her understanding of her overall commitment.

If she balances the two commitments, what she expresses is not a character, but *characters* – one for each of the roles she plays. There is the character of the grassroots activist, cultivating reverence, but that reverence is sloughed off when she is in political debate, and she plays a new character. This is necessitated by circumscribing her commitments to the environment. Without thus circumscribing the commitments, they would possibly conflict.

As it turns out, a person has a character insofar as she plays only one. That is to say, one has a character only if that character can explain one’s behavior across contexts. Coherence between one’s commitments is not for the sake of being good-middle class folk. It is necessary to express such commitments at all.

Raz might argue that his view in no way leads toward *recommending* that agents fragment their commitments in the way Priscilla does, as I have described the case. But the problem with compartmentalization does not arise only in such cases. Compartmentalization is necessary to avoid the widespread and irresolvable conflict between commitments when an agent resists commensurating them. Conflict between uncommensurated commitments can be avoided by compartmentalizing one’s commitments, thus relativizing them to some one social role or other that one plays. I have suggested that insofar as one does this, one’s behavior becomes no longer intelligible as expressing or arising from one’s character, but rather as expressing or arising from some one or other of one’s social roles. If one likes, behavior becomes
intelligible not as arising from one’s character (singular), but from one of one’s characters.

Kant is fairly unapologetic about the point, and it should be pretty obvious from his example of the clergyman who also takes on the public role of scholar that his behavior is either intelligible qua clergyman or intelligible qua scholar, but not both. Let us look at MacIntyre’s examples of compartmentalization to see that the same problem arises.

Recall that MacIntyre reports on actual power company executives and their different attitudes depending upon which social role they are occupying. As quoted above:

…power company executives tended to a significant degree to answer what were substantially the same questions somewhat differently, depending on whether they took themselves to be responding qua power company executive or qua parent and head of household or qua concerned citizen. That is to say, their attitudes varied with their social roles and they seemed quite unaware of this.144

Let us assume that such an executive expresses different attitudes about public safety, depending on whether he is answering qua power executive or qua parent. That would suggest that in some contexts, but not in others, one could understand a power company executive’s behavior as coming from one who cares about the safety of his children. However, at other times – such as when he is executing his role as a power company executive – one would not bring this fact about him to bear in trying to understand his behavior. The reason one would not do so is not simply that this concern is not operative when he is working – as my love for music is not always operative when I am, say, teaching philosophy – the reason is that his concern for his children’s safety could not be

brought to bear on his deliberations or in understanding his actions, because of the way he has compartmentalized his commitments. Once again, we understand this person in terms of which social role he occupies, because the concerns of at least some of his other social roles could not be brought to bear in understanding him, when he is executing a particular role. Another way to put this is that understanding individuals with compartmentalized commitments necessarily involves figuring out which different roles they occupy, when they are occupying these different roles, and the different commitments associated with each role.

We should not underestimate the significance of the fact that different aspects of a person’s character cannot be brought to bear across different contexts when a person has compartmentalized commitments. For there is a language that is used to understand activity that applies across contexts of the person’s life: the language of the virtues.

Aristotle held that virtue is a firm and unchanging state.\(^\text{145}\) Perhaps this primarily refers to a diachronic feature of virtue traits. A trait is not a virtue if it is easily lost. However, I think part of the thought is that firmness names a synchronic feature of virtue traits.\(^\text{146}\) A person does not have the virtue of truthfulness, say, if he is honest in this or that situation, but duplicitous in other contexts.\(^\text{147}\) Virtue language is not relativized to context or social role. So if we genuinely wish to explain a person’s behavior by saying that he is honest, or trustworthy, or merciful, we imply that he is so in all or most contexts and situations in which he finds himself, where the relevant virtue is called for.

\(^{145}\) See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a35.

\(^{146}\) In this connection, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 198. MacIntyre writes the following concerning the virtues: “We cannot be genuinely courageous or truthful and be so only on occasion.”
So ascribing a virtue to an individual involves ascribing some level of integrity to the person. A truthful person has integrity to the extent that he acts truthfully whatever the context, and not only in the service of this or that commitment, or for this or that end.

In my view, the cardinal virtues are cardinal because they are just those traits that lead to acting well by relating together all areas of life. They thus enable an agent to act well in a variety of situations, rather than specialized situations. This enables the giving of virtue explanations for their behavior. Let us consider the four cardinal virtues in turn.

Wisdom is a matter of “seeing the big picture” and recognizing when certain actions, emotions, etc. are called for in a situation, and when such actions or emotions are not. This is what Aristotle referred to as acting and feeling “in the right way, at the right time, toward the right people, for the right reason.”\textsuperscript{148} Temperance involves desiring pleasure proportional to the goodness of the object of pleasure. This too involves knowing the relative goodness of ends, and how different ends fit together so one could know when seeking the pleasures of eating, or sex, or (if one grants a wider scope to temperance than just concerning physical pleasure, as Plato does, but Aristotle doesn’t) other enjoyable activity would be fitting and good. Justice is “giving each his or her due.” For the ancients, what a person is due is a function of their place within a way of life constituted by a common pursuit of the good life, and a common pursuit of an understanding of and appreciation for this kind of life. So justice requires grasping this common pursuit as a whole in order to recognize individuals’ place within it. Finally, Plato defines courage as right belief about what is terrible, and for Aristotle, courage is hitting the mean regarding feelings of fear and confidence. For both, courage involves

\textsuperscript{148} See Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1106b20.
willingness to face danger insofar as an adequately important good depends upon it. It involves not caring about one’s own preservation so much that one will sacrifice great goods for its sake. Courage involves a grasp of the common goods of one’s way of life and how those goods are constitutive of one’s own good. Further, courage is a cardinal virtue because, as C.S. Lewis observed, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” There is a kind of courage required to be truthful when it is difficult, or to show mercy when it is inconvenient, or to honor a commitment, when it is financially costly. Courage is exactly what is necessary for the virtues to have the feature I have been highlighting – it is necessary for them to be operative across contexts and social roles of a person’s life.

I have argued that the problems related to conflicting and compartmentalized pursuits arise when agents eschew commensuration of their commitments. There is another option for one holding a Wiggins-Raz type view. The person could hold that various commitments are commensurated for an individual agent in terms of how they fit into his life as a whole. Something like this seems to be Wiggins’ view. However, the value pluralist would likely deny that there is a common conception of a person’s life as a whole that applies to all agents through which each person can commensurate her commitments and apart from which they cannot.

I will not reply to this approach directly. Instead, I will reply by offering an Augustinian account of what goes wrong for agents who seek to express their character through their commitments to uncommensurated values. This explanation will motivate

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150 If either would allow for this, then I have no quarrel with them.
an Augustinian solution to the problem which holds that there is a certain kind of life through which agents can commensurate the various distinct goods of life in a way that allows them to avoid the kind of self-defeating agency discussed in this chapter. Think of this as setting up an ad hominem argument between an Augustinian view and the Wiggins-Raz view that would serve as a basis for further debate.

3.4 Augustine, Raz and Pride as the Source of Failed Agency

What would an Augustinian say is missing from Raz’s account of agency? Raz claims that incommensurability is necessary to preserve an autonomous role for the will to express an agent’s character and commitments. This requires that an agent not be determined to realize any particular set of values. But a consequence of this is that an agent properly responsive to reasons is responsive to the fact that her will is autonomous from realizing any particular value. So when she pursues a practice, she need not subordinate her will to the standards of excellence internal to that practice. In addition to agents being autonomous from the standards of any particular practice, an agent’s will is not subject to any attempts – by herself or others – to fit the various pursuits of her life together into a coherent whole. In fact, autonomy requires that an agent eschew such attempts at commensuration. I have argued that an agent who eschews commensuration must either accept widespread conflict between her commitments and pursuits, or she must compartmentalize her pursuits and her commitments to those pursuits in order to avoid such conflict. However if an agent pursues her commitments without commensurating them, I have suggested that obstacles will arise in expressing her character in these pursuits. This is crucial because Raz argued that incommensurability
was necessary in order for an agent to express her character. I have argued that either an
agent will not be able to express her commitment to a practice because she keeps that
commitment free from the standards of that practice, or she must fail to carry out some of
her commitments because of irresolvable conflict with other commitments (irresolvable
because she has eschewed relating these commitments together in some more
comprehensive pursuit), or she fails to have a character that can explain her action at all,
due to relativizing her commitments to her social roles in such a way that they cannot
conflict.

There is an irony in the failure of agency of a Razian agent that an Augustinian
would be quick to notice. The Razian agent attempts to be free from the standards of
particular practices or a conception of her life that would commensurate her various
pursuits. She attempts this so that she might have room to express her character in an
autonomous way, rather than being determined by reason. The irony is that staying free
from all such standards leads to the loss of character. The Augustinian would assess this
failure of agency as coming from a misapprehension of the role of the self in action, and
would identify this misapprehension as rooted in pride.

Let us examine in more detail the obstacles to successful agency faced by Razian
agents, in order to further articulate Augustine’s understanding of what goes wrong in
such agency, and how such defective agency can be remedied.

Consider the first problem which a Razian agent faces. A Razian agent is in
danger of conceiving the importance of her commitment to a practice in such a way that
she fails to realize the very values to which she is committed. In the example examined,
our teacher Rachel fails to realize the values that attracted her to teaching and she thereby
fails to express her character. It would be a good idea for an agent wishing to be responsive to reasons for action to ask why she fell into such failure in the first place. Her answer would have to assign a large place to the way that she conceived of her participation in the practice, and the importance she ascribed to her realizing the values to which she was committed. In short, she would have to recognize that she was the problem.

We should not miss that this would not be as easy for her to recognize as it is for me to point out. I already described the situation in such a way that lent itself to this explanation of what went wrong. But certainly, a person in the situation would have available various explanations of what went wrong that assigned little or no blame to herself. Uncooperative or apathetic faculty, difficult family situations, kids with attitude problems are just a few of the circumstances that Rachel could point to in explaining her failures. One should not view such explanations as satisfactory. First, the kinds of circumstances described help set the parameters for what constitutes excellence in teaching. By this I mean that excellence in such circumstances looks a lot different than it would in other circumstances, say in a private prep school; I do not mean to suggest that such circumstances place limits on the extent of excellence one can hope to achieve. Rather, they set out the kind of excellence one might achieve, or as I put it first, the circumstances determine what constitutes excellence.

Given that there is something that would recognizably be excellence at teaching in these circumstances, the circumstances do not provide a sufficient explanation of the person’s failure to achieve such excellence. The failure occurred because it was important to Rachel that she achieve a certain kind of result. This produced two kinds of problems.
There are two problems because she is laboring under two related misconceptions. The first misconception is that she thinks herself able to achieve her conception of excellence without learning what constitutes excellence within this shared activity, and without playing the appropriate role in achieving such excellence. Her second misconception is her conception of what would constitute her achieving excellence in the circumstances she finds herself in. Recall that she has a picture of inspiring previously unmotivated children and she pursues this while circumventing what is necessary for good teaching.

The first misconception leads her to think it unnecessary to subject her activity to the standards of excellence of the practice of teaching. The second misconception leads her to be unwilling to learn what constitutes excellence in teaching, for in the situation in which she finds herself such excellence is at odds with her picture of teaching whereby she will express her character.

The failure in her activity arose because of the independent importance she ascribed to expressing herself within the practice, and it arose because of the capacities she ascribed to herself concerning her ability to realize values without learning the standards of excellence of the practice. Augustine would see both misconceptions as rooted in pride. The two misconceptions arising from pride produce two related failures. First, Rachel is unable to realize excellence in the activity of teaching, and realize her own conception of excellence. That is the first failure. The second failure is that remaining in her prideful state, she is unable to recognize what would constitute excellence, and is hence unable to recognize or rectify her failure.

So pride makes her unable to realize excellence or her goals, and it makes her unwilling and unable to understand her mistaken conceptions, and the source of those
misconceptions as her own pride. Thus she is unable to fix those mistakes and failures, moving forward.

What would Augustine say an agent like Rachel needs in order to recognize her failures and fix the problem? In short she needs humility. How does that work as far as her participation in teaching goes? Humility requires recognizing the cause of her failures as arising from her pride. The only remedy to this failure is abandoning the misconceptions about herself and the importance of her participation in the practice which led to the failure. Having recognized the source of her failure, the only remedy is to subordinate her own agenda to the standards of excellence of teaching. Part of this abandonment of pride involves a recognition that she does not possess an adequate conception of what is worthwhile in the practice or of what constitutes excellence in the practice. This requires submitting herself to teaching from those who have a more adequate conception of the excellences involved in teaching. It also requires accepting a role suited to the common pursuit of such excellence, rather than a role suited to fulfilling her own agenda in the practice.

Remember also that the agent’s pride obscures from her that this very pride is the cause of her failure. In particular it makes her unable to understand that she has a mistaken conception of excellence in the practice. What she is also unable to realize is that she has a stake (given how she conceives the importance of her participation) in maintaining and pursuing this mistaken conception. Thus she is unable to diagnose the problem herself. So she needs someone to teach her what she does not think she needs to learn and which she has a stake in not learning (given her current character and intentions).
One of the mistakes Rachel made is that she thought she could function within the practice with the conceptions of excellence she brought to it. Insofar as she does so, she views her coming to understand the values to be realized in teaching as distinct from the process of engaging in teaching and pursuing those values. But this is a mistake. One must view the process of learning the excellences involved in an activity as part of the process of engaging in the activity. Failing to do so again involves a misapprehension of one’s capacities. In this case, the misapprehension is tied to the agenda of expressing one’s character. One conceives of oneself as having a determinate character that can be expressed by realizing the goods of this practice, and one believes one can, as one is, realize those goods which would be expressive of one’s character. One does not entertain the thought that one can and must be formed by this practice, in part because participation in it will advance one’s conception of the goods involved in the activity.

Rachel views herself as having a formed character that is fit as it is to excel at teaching, and a fully adequate grasp of the goods to be realized in the practice. All she needs is to be “shown the ropes” – given some technical instruction, curriculum instruction, etc. – and she will be ready to go. I have suggested that such an outlook must be mistaken because it demonstrates the very kind of character (prideful) that presents the chief obstacle to her learning to achieve excellence in teaching. So we must not construe her education into the practice in such a way that it makes the same faulty assumptions about her.

Avoiding the faulty assumption just discussed means viewing her education not simply as an education into the techniques and goods of teaching, but also an education into her own limits and in the ways in which she is likely to obscure those limits from
herself. We must view her education thus if we are rightly to understand what is
necessary for her to realize the goods of the practice. Her instructors and mentors must
approach her education this way if she is to receive the right kind of education.

Such an education does not merely give an account of excellence in the practice in
the abstract. It also serves to fit a new practitioner into the ongoing pursuits that make up
the practice. This means giving the person a sense of how she is to contribute to the
practice at each stage of her education, given her limits, the capacities she has developed
thus far, and the self-awareness she has developed thus far.

If this is how the agent comes to engage in teaching there is now a way to
construe her activity as the expression of her character, for her activity could involve an
expression of her limits and her recognition of those limits. I will develop this point
further below. This also allows us to understand the place for choice within a practice,
even if someone does seek to achieve the standards of excellence of the practice. For
surely there will not be a set of rules to be applied algorithmically the following of which
constitutes excellence in teaching. Excellent teaching will involve good judgment. And
there will be plenty of instances in which no single choice would constitute good
judgment for any teacher in a similar situation. Many situations will call for this or that
action depending on the particular skills and capacities of the teacher involved. The
Augustinian provides a good way to understand how an individual teacher should decide
between options (in the sense that there is no course of action that would be best for any
teacher in a similar situation) in a way that expresses his or her character. Instead of
expressing her unique way of engaging in the practice (as Raz would have it), her choice
could be understood in terms of her limits. In such a situation, a teacher could make a
decision in such a way that helps her and others recognize her limits, which we have seen is a necessary part of the common pursuit of excellence in teaching.

There is a point that Raz would wish to make that we should give its due. The claims of any particular practice upon an individual can never be absolute. For a full life responsive to reasons would involve an agent in many pursuits, practices, projects, etc. Further, in a particular instance it can make sense for an agent to participate in or enjoy the fruits of a practice or pursuit in such a way that is not pursuing or enjoying excellence or the greatest value available. Raz gives the example of watching a movie. There might be circumstances in which I have good reason to watch a movie, and I have better reason to watch a mindless movie rather a sophisticated movie. However, I argued that by not allowing ways for agents to commensurate pursuits in such a way that renders the limits of different practices intelligible, a Razian agent must either allow widespread conflict between the claims of various practice to which an agent is committed or the agent must compartmentalize these commitments, circumscribing the claims they put on a person in such a way that they could not conflict. How can I sustain this claim while recognizing Raz’s concern that sometimes there is good reason to engage in a pursuit in such a way that does not constitute pursuing, realizing or enjoying excellence in the pursuit (e.g. watching an enjoyably bad film)? In the course of sustaining this claim, I will articulate the Augustinian conception of the kind of life it is necessary to exemplify in order to commensurate pursuits and avoid the kinds of conflicts and fragmentation discussed thus far.
Along with Raz, the Augustinian recognizes the need to constrain the limits of a particular practice or pursuit. Placing such constraints upon an activity is in keeping with an Augustinian understanding of participation within an activity, which I have just sketched. In the following sub-section, I will sketch how Augustine understands the proper limits of practices.

3.5.1 Augustine and the Limited Goodness of Individual Practices and Pursuits

Achieving excellence in a pursuit involves engaging in it in such a way that one learns and acknowledges one’s own limits at each stage of one’s participation in the pursuit. Achieving humility is important at the first level, but there is still the possibility of what we might call second-order pride. This kind of pride involves overestimating the importance of the activities in which one is involved.

So the Augustinian agrees with Raz that there can be a tendency for a person within a practice, or for fellow practitioners to overestimate the importance of a given practice within a person’s life. Responsiveness to reasons would require giving importance to other activities, pursuits and the like, and must do so in such a way that in particular circumstances reasons to pursue one kind of activity can be more stringent than reasons to pursue even a very important practice, project or activity. An Augustinian view will try to account for the relative importance of different practices and pursuits in such a way that an agent will not find widespread conflict between the claims of various pursuits, nor will he be forced to compartmentalize his pursuits to avoid such conflict. In order to avoid either conflict or compartmentalization, the Augustinian will look for a
way to commensurate the various projects, practices and activities in which an agent is engaged or could be engaged. How will he commensurate such pursuits?

As suggested in the last chapter, an agent will be able to commensurate the various pursuits and practices in which he might take part by having available a description of his life and a description of his activities such that he can understand the place each activity has in his life as a whole. Such a description must be acquired in such a way and be the kind of description that will allow him to avoid widespread and irresolvable conflict or compartmentalization.

It is worth noting that both allowing widespread conflict and allowing compartmentalization have a similar consequence for one’s pursuits: one’s pursuits become fragmented. They cannot be fit together, either because exercising commitment to one often means failing in one’s commitment to another (in the case of conflict) or because the commitments are so compartmentalized that they cannot conflict, but there is no intelligible way to relate them together.

The source of this fragmentation involves a presumption. The presumption is that one could eschew commensuration of one’s pursuits in order to express one’s character while also maintaining a single unified character that could be expressed in action. The need for this particular presumption arises if one thinks with Raz that expression of character requires an autonomous role for the will, and that commensurating pursuits in the manner suggested denies such a role to the will.

For an Augustinian, the way to resist the presumption that leads to the fragmentation of character is to seek a description of one’s life in such a way that denies a certain kind of autonomy to the will. The individual would need to not construct but
receive a description of his life that placed him within a common way of life constituted by relating the various pursuits, practices, and activities of human life together in such a way that the participants in this way of life could come to a mutual understanding of their own limits. 151

Raz would have two related worries about this suggestion. The first is that this view involves a rationalist conception of agency, such that an agent’s reasons for action determine the agent’s choice rather than giving the agent options. The second worry is related, which is that this way of commensurating pursuits imposes a conception of the agent’s life upon him and thus does violence to his will. Raz could go along with the idea that a description of an agent’s life could commensurate an agent’s pursuits so long as the agent had independence in constructing this commensurating description. In such a case it would still make sense to say that reasons give an agent options, but there is still an autonomous role for the will to express one’s character, by choosing the option that best fits in with one’s autonomously developed description of one’s life. Answering these worries will require stating the Augustinian view of how one receives a description of one’s life that commensurates one’s pursuits and avoids the presumption discussed above (that one could have a unified character while allowing conflict between or compartmentalization of one’s pursuits). A further question will be whether this modified Razian view that allows a conception of one’s life to commensurate pursuits, but in a

151 This is at least part of what I take Augustine to mean by finding the difference between presumption and confession (confession here, being taken in its literal sense of “speaking with.”) See Augustine, Confessions, 7.20.26.
non-Augustinian way, involves agents in a similar presumption to the one just discussed.\textsuperscript{152}

The problem of pride which I have argued prevents a Razian from expressing his character, or even from having a character, came from an impulse to remain in some way autonomous from standards of excellence within a practice or from any pre-established standards of how to achieve excellence in one’s life as a whole by relating one’s various pursuits together. In the case of a particular practice, remedying this pride requires that an agent understand her activities in light of the standards of excellence of the practice. But she could not learn or pursue those standards without involving herself in a common life in pursuit of excellence in the practice. Part of this common life of excellence involves the practitioners coming to a mutual understanding of their own limits. In a similar way, the way to receive an applicable description of one’s life that could commensurate life’s various pursuits is to find a place within a common life characterized precisely by the pursuit of relating the various pursuits of life together in such a way that participants understand the limits of those pursuits and their own limits.

Before delving into how such a community relates its various pursuits together in such a way that members of the community receive a description of their life that commensurates their activities, answering an objection will help further characterize such a community. The objection points to a possible tension in the account. Within the pursuit of particular practices, one must subordinate one’s will to the standards of excellence of the pursuit, and conceive of one’s pursuits within the practice as part of a common

\textsuperscript{152} What follows draws upon of Alasdair MacIntyre’s discussion of practices, traditions and the unity of a human life in chs. 14 and 15 of \textit{After Virtue}, while articulating the argument a way that is amenable to a distinctively Augustinian account of the relationship between practices and traditions in an individual’s life.
pursuit. But one also must understand the limits of any particular practice by placing the practice within the overall life of this community characterized by a pursuit of understanding and acknowledgement of human limits. The problem arises when we consider that the arenas in which most practices are pursued are not tied to any particular community trying to relate the various practices in human life together in this way, or any other way. The picture of having schools, sports teams, orchestras, merchants, etc. as all part of a close-knit community relating these practices together into a conception of the good life as a whole is not adequate to the social realities of modernity.

Recognizing the truth of the objector’s claim about social conditions in modern life, an Augustinian would conclude that it is necessary for an agent who participates in particular practices to be a part of two communities – the community in which the practice is pursued and the community that relates practices and pursuits together in a way of life that recognizes the limits of each pursuit and practitioner.153 This can lead to conflict between practices divorced from such communities and the larger community that relates all areas of life together. However, as I will try to show, this conflict only occurs when a practice makes claims upon a person that presume to give the practice a place of supremacy in human life – or at the very least the practice fails to acknowledge any account of its limits. But insofar as it fails to do that, it fails to raise the question of what place excellence in this practice has within human life. Another way to put this is that it fails to ask the question what excellence in (for example) education is for. By failing to do this, the practice fails at being able to articulate what constitutes excellence in the practice. By failing to acknowledge the limits of the practice, practitioners also

153 This is in part why one finds the “two cities” in Augustine’s great work The City of God.
undermine the common pursuit of understanding and acknowledging their own limits, which, as we saw with the Rachel example, is a central part of any practice and enables the achievement of excellence in a practice.

Let us now turn, then, to a fuller account of this Augustinian community and way of life whose task is to relate the different pursuits of life together in such a way that allows members to recognize their own limits, in the service of fitting them to enjoy the highest human good. This highest good is not fully characterized at any point in the life of the community. The process of coming to recognize its own limits in characterizing and grasping this supreme good is itself part of its inquiry into understanding this highest good.

3.5.2 Augustine and the Common Life of a Pilgrim Community

The primary task of the kind of community that can properly circumscribe the demands of individual practices is cultivating an adequate sense of human limits, which includes developing ability to recognize tendencies to deny such limits and how such denial undermines the various pursuits within the community.

Accomplishing this task requires first of all resisting the impulse to grant undue priority or ultimacy to any particular activity or practice. Now, in the kind of community I am trying to describe, certain kinds of activities will have great importance in various ways. So what is to guide the community in its judgments and actions regarding when an activity is given “undue” priority?

In my discussion thus far I have been trying to suggest that the achievement of excellence in any pursuit or practice requires cultivating a certain kind of humility,
because pride prevents the achievement of excellence and it obscures to an agent the source of that failure being such pride. Similarly, pride and presumption renders an agent incapable of living an excellent life, because the idea that the agent has a single character fails to be intelligible. The remedy to both kinds of pride is an individual conceiving his activities – within a particular practice and within his life as a whole – as having a certain place within a common pursuit of excellence. If this is right, then an Augustinian community has a way to guide its judgments regarding when an activity is given undue priority. What guides it are the necessities for sustaining a community that can engage in understanding and acknowledging human limits, including the human tendency to pride which obscures those limits to agents, and obscures this pride as the source of various kinds of practical failure and failures of agency (e.g., the failure to develop any kind of unified character).

A community structured this way will relate to particular activities, practices and projects within it in a manner paralleling Raz’s conception of how individuals would relate to different practices, projects and activities. As I understand Raz’s view, living well cannot be reduced to excellence at any particular activity, project or practice. If living well did reduce to such excellence, there would be no place for an agent to express his autonomous will by choosing to realize particular values, rather than other values, when he had the option to rationally realize either set of values. As I examined his view, it seemed that he also sees awareness of the role of the will in rational agency as necessary for living well – or at least necessary for rational agency. Failure to recognize the role of one’s will in rational agency exhibits a certain unresponsiveness to reasons, because one thinks the reasons in favor of one course of action necessitate that action as
the rational choice, rather than rendering the choice a rational option among others. In a roughly parallel way, living well in an Augustinian community cannot be reduced to excellence in one particular activity, practice or project within it. Even the comprehensive pursuit of relating all the practices, activities and projects of life together in a way that commensurates them is not equivalent to achieving the human good. Rather, as I have mentioned, it fits the agents within the community to enjoy the highest good for humans. Further, an agent is fit to enjoy his highest good only if in humility he recognizes his limits, such that he is made aware of the fact that the good for humans is not equivalent to excellence he is capable of achieving in particular pursuits, practices or projects.

The human good, according to Augustine, is not equivalent to some particular human activity, practice or project pursued within an Augustinian community. Thus, we need a concept capturing how the pursuit and achievement of excellence within particular activities might play a role within the life of this Augustinian community. The concept Augustine employs is that of right use. Activities, pursuits, achievements, and enjoyment of such achievements find their proper place within this Augustinian community when they are rightly used. They are rightly used precisely when an agent’s and the community’s engagement in them allows the members to come to a recognition and appreciation of the limits of these pursuits as well as their own limits. In order for an agent’s or a community’s pursuit of an end, practice or activity to be describable as right use of that pursuit, the agent must in some way recognize that he is not pursuing the chief

154 See Augustine, On Christian Doctrine. In section 1.4.4, Augustine writes, “To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love.” See also book XIX, chapter 17 of Augustine, City of God. I will discuss this passage at length below.
or final good of his life or community. If he fails to do this, then his pursuit involves either a mis-estimation of the limits of his pursuits or a mis-estimation of his own limits in achieving the chief good for himself or his community (and it probably involves mis-estimation on both counts). Further, right use involves an agent and community coming to some understanding of how they might pursue various activities in such a way that allows them to acknowledge their own limits and allows continued investigation of such limits in their life together to flourish.

There is another point I would like to make about right use. As we have seen, a key part of an Augustinian community recognizing its limits involves being aware of tendencies to ignore such limits and being able to recognize and rectify such failures. To be sure, much of what will count as right use of good things will help the community be less susceptible to various failures arising from pride; however, a great part of right use will involve using pursuits to inculcate humility when rectifying failures of humility, so that members will be able to recognize and acknowledge such failings as well as acknowledge their limits, moving forward.

At this point, I wish to point out how what I have said concerning the right use of good things and good pursuits is a development of the characterization of deliberation and commensuration of pursuits that I set out in the previous chapter. In the last chapter I argued that activities are commensurable in a way that aids rational agency when they are such that they are ordered toward improving an agent’s conception of his comprehensive aims as well as improving his conception of the place of these comprehensive aims within his life as a whole. On this view, practical reason is about articulating or grasping

\[155\] The agent need not articulate this or conceive it in any way, but if he does pursue an end as if it were the final good of his life or community, he could not be said to be rightly using the pursuit.
descriptions of one’s pursuits so that they are commensurable. But this requires a special kind of description, because the relevant description does not apply unless one grasps in some way how the description applies.\textsuperscript{156} This is how I have been trying to understand the idea of ‘right use.’ One rightly uses one’s pursuits when one’s engagement in them is ordered toward recognizing and acknowledging their limits and one’s own limits, such that one thereby comes to understand the place such pursuits can have in a life of humble recognition of one’s limits.

Let me now characterize the description of their lives under which agents can act such that they rightly use goods and activities, making them commensurable in terms of this description. Not surprisingly, this description will express the idea that the right use of good things involves using these things in such a way that one recognizes their limits and one’s own limits. Considering several aspects of human limits will help us fill in and characterize the relevant description.

The primary limit that the relevant kind of communal life will recognize is human limits in achieving the highest human good through action. I have not to this point said much to characterize this highest human good or a human \textit{telos}. I have asserted that a human life lived well commensurates the various pursuits of human life in such a way that an agent recognizes his own limits and the limits of his pursuits. I have also said that in Augustine’s view doing this fits an agent to enjoy his highest good. I will not characterize this good in much detail, but the account of practical reason I give will

\textsuperscript{156} I wish for this grasping to be understood in such a way that one need not articulate the relevant description. But the relevant description must be available to the agent in the way that a coach’s description of a player’s activity - when the player ‘gets’ what he is doing without necessarily being able to articulate it – is available to that player.
establish parameters for a conception of the highest human good that members of an Augustinian community would develop. This more developed conception, combined with a conception of practical reason, would provide practitioners with resources for constructing a description of an agent’s life as a whole in terms of which all his activities are commensurated. I will characterize this description in a more general way. Further, as an Augustinian community reflects on conditions necessary to realize the highest human good in light of their recognition of human limits, they will develop further ways to characterize both their highest good and the life of their community and the agents within it. What I have already said suggests one condition to which they will need to attend. They must conceive of the highest good in such a way that a community and agent coming to recognize their own limits in realizing this good also fits them to enjoy that same good.

The first feature of the human good which it must possess in order for the pursuit of this good to support the acknowledgment and recognition of limits is that this good is remote. That is to say, it is not something that is achieved by achieving excellence in a particular activity or set of activities. In Augustine’s view, any attempt to equate the human good with achieving excellence at some human activity, combined with an attempt to order all pursuits around achieving such excellence would embed human pride in some way antithetical to the recognition of human limits and hence the right use of goods. This last contention makes sense only if one has a conception of a good that

157 This idea is present in the famous opening of the Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you.” See also Augustine, City of God, book XIX, ch. 4 and throughout the book.

158 Augustine, City of God XIX, 857.
humans have the capacity to enjoy, but that they cannot achieve by excellence in any human pursuit. I will not go into characterizing this good, but it is clear that for Augustine this good is God himself, and enjoyment of this good is that which he speaks of in the opening of the *Confessions* as the heart’s rest in God. It is worth noting in this connection, however, that Augustine can characterize the enjoyment of the human good in terms that do not invoke Christian metaphysics.\(^{159}\) In the *City of God*, book XIX, for instance, he characterizes this supreme good simply as “peace,” or alternatively as “eternal life in peace.”\(^{160}\)

What sort of description of a person’s life do we need in order to commensurate the various pursuits of human life in a way that fits a person to enjoy his highest good? We need a description that captures the idea that an agent uses goods and activities in a way that is ordered toward recognizing his own limits and the limits of his various pursuits in achieving his highest good. At the same time, such use fits an agent to enjoy his highest good. This description must also capture the idea that an agent must be part of a common way of life in which he receives this description, whereby he can commensurate his pursuits. This community is itself characterized by a pursuit of recognizing its own limits in light of its highest good. Finding a place within such a common life is a crucial part of agents coming to recognize and acknowledge their own limits.

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\(^{159}\) I am grateful to Alasdair MacIntyre for pressing me to recognize the importance of this point that for Augustine the human good can be spoken of in “neutral” terms.

\(^{160}\) See Augustine, *City of God* XIX, 852, 865.
Given all this, it makes sense that Augustine characterizes the relevant community as a *sojourning* community, and the members as sojourners, or pilgrims. Augustine writes the following:

…A household of human beings whose life is based on faith looks forward to the blessings which are promised as eternal in the future, making use of earthly and temporal things like a *pilgrim in a foreign land*, who does not let himself be taken in by them or distracted from his course towards God, but rather treats them as supports which help him more easily bear the burdens of the ‘corruptible body which weighs heavy on the soul.’

The idea here is that a sojourner is one who lives in a foreign land, but arranges his life in such a way that his life is referred to life in his homeland. As Augustine alludes to, this first of all means using goods and activities not to establish a comfortable home in the foreign land, but with the idea that one is journeying to one’s homeland. In addition to the above quote from the *City of God*, consider the following passage from *De Doctrina Christiana*. This passage is in the context of Augustine expounding the concepts of use and enjoyment and noting that things to be enjoyed make us blessed, while things to be used help and sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may move toward and cling to those things which make us blessed. Having done this, he writes the following:

Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home, miserable in our wandering and desiring to end it and return to our native country. We would need vehicles for land and sea which could be used to help us to reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed. But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and,

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161 In what follows, I will sketch the sense in which this life is based on the virtue of faith.

162 Augustine *City of God* XIX, 877.

entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the “invisible things” of God “being understood from the things that are made” may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and the spiritual.¹⁶⁴

One’s use of good things is meant to sustain one on this journey rather than distracting one into trying to establish a homeland where one finds oneself. This aspect of a sojourner’s actions would seem to treat goods as purely instrumental to getting the sojourner to his homeland. For example, the sojourner uses bread so that he can stay alive and reach his homeland. However, making it alive to one’s homeland is not sufficient for being fit to enjoy life in that homeland. Thus, there is another aspect of the use of activities and good things in one’s sojourning. Augustine’s language for characterizing this use is that rather than simply taking one’s activities to be instruments to getting one to one’s homeland, one “refers” all one’s activities to life in one’s homeland. Concerning virtue, Augustine writes, “But virtue is truly virtue when it refers all the good things of which it makes good use, all its achievements in making good use of good things and evil things,¹⁶⁵ and when it refers itself also, to that end where our peace shall be so perfect and so great as to admit of neither improvement nor increase.”¹⁶⁶ How shall we understand this idea of referring all good things to one’s homeland, one’s highest good?

¹⁶⁴ Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.4.4. I hope to make clear the relevance of the last sentence of the quoted passage shortly.

¹⁶⁵ The “good use of evil things” is not partaking in evil (so that good might result, perhaps), but rather, as Augustine made clear in the previous sentence of the City of God, turning to good use the ills that man endures.

¹⁶⁶ Augustine, City of God XIX, 865.
Augustine’s idea seems to be that one’s life in one’s sojourning should in some way signify life in one’s homeland, as well as bear witness to the fact that one’s hope for peace is a hope to dwell in and enjoy one’s homeland, rather than hope for comfort where one finds oneself. Recall the last sentence of the De Doctrina Christiana passage quoted above.

Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the ‘invisible things’ of God ‘being understood from the things that are made’ may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and the spiritual.\(^{167}\)

In the background of Augustine’s conceptualization of ‘right use’ is the conviction that although the highest good of what I have called an Augustinian community is remote from the life of that community, it is possible for such a community’s life to bear witness to and signify that highest good; doing so allows the members of the community to develop a fuller grasp of, and appreciation for, this highest good; this fits them to enjoy this good, and aids them further in the continuing right use of temporal goods; it thus aids them because their grasp of their highest good allows them to more suitably signify it in their activities, and their appreciation of that good motivates them to not make final ends out of limited temporal goods. Concerning signs, Augustine writes in On Christian Doctrine, “A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses.”\(^{168}\) Signs point beyond themselves to another reality. So the idea is that the life and activity of an Augustinian community will point beyond itself and signify the community’s enjoyment of its highest good. How does this

\(^{167}\) Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.4.4.

\(^{168}\) Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.1.1.
play out? First let us examine a case of a literal sojourner; we will then examine the right use of goods for those in an Augustinian community.

How can a sojourner’s life signify life in his homeland, as well as bearing witness to the fact that his hope for peace is a hope to dwell in and enjoy his homeland? We can raise an analogous question for a sojourning community. We should think of “life in one’s homeland” as involving a whole way of life that is not fully available for sojourners to live, yet nonetheless can be signified in various ways. What do I mean by saying that a community’s way of life is “not fully available to them as sojourners”? I mean that there are action types that are characteristic of this way of life for which nothing they could do in their sojourning would count as tokening this action type.

Let me take the example of the Biblical prophet Daniel when he was exiled from the promised land. When Israel was in exile, nothing an Israelite could do would count as traveling to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate the three great ceremonial feasts of Israel’s worship (Unleavened Bread, Weeks, Booths). So instead of trying to perform such an action, Daniel prayed toward Jerusalem three times a day. One plausible way to interpret Daniel’s activity is that Daniel was seeking to signify in his activities in exile an activity definitive of his way of life in his homeland. But his activity does more than this. It is also an open acknowledgement that he is unable to fully enjoy the good of a certain kind of life while in exile. Along with this is an acknowledgement of his own


170 Compare Ps. 137. In that Psalm, there is the explicit acknowledgement that the hope of enjoying the highest good of this people is not available to them in exile. So the Psalmist prays earnestly that he might “remember Jerusalem.”
limits in being able enjoy this good while in exile, or limits in his ability to “reconstitute” life in the land while in exile from it. Enjoying the activities definitive of his life in the promised land was not an option. Nor was modification of this way of life to fit the context of exile possible while also living peaceably in this new dwelling place. We hear that this practice had been Daniel’s habit only after hearing of the decree that all must worship only the king. In this contingent circumstance, it is clear that peace in the land of Daniel’s sojourning and enjoyment of the good of the way of life of his people are mutually exclusive options. However, as Augustine would read the situation, this contingent conflict between peace and his way of life should be a reminder that Daniel could never hope to fully live and enjoy the good of his way of life while in exile. Daniel’s prayer three times a day toward Jerusalem signifies his way of life in his homeland, and bears witness to the fact that he does not hope to fully live or enjoy this way of life while in exile. In addition to signifying life in one’s homeland while in exile, bearing witness that one’s hope to enjoy one’s highest good is only a hope to be restored to one’s homeland is the second aspect of referring all one’s activities to life in one’s homeland.

There is one additional aspect to a sojourner’s referring all things to his homeland. Consider activities like eating in exile, the main purpose of which is to sustain one alive so that one might be restored to one’s homeland. One refers eating to one’s homeland when one does not seek to use the food available to one to establish a peaceable and comfortable life in one’s sojourning to the neglect of striving to be restored to one’s homeland and way of life; but rather, one uses food to sustain one in one’s sojourning. Rightly using good things in this way, and not hoping to establish a life in exile where
one enjoys the good of life in one’s homeland, requires recognizing something further. It
requires recognizing that the highest good of life in one’s homeland that one might enjoy
cannot be equated with any activity one pursues in exile. If this highest good could be
equated with any such activity, then one could establish a life in a foreign land where one
enjoyed the good of life in one’s homeland. If this is not possible, then the good of life in
one’s homeland cannot be reduced to enjoyment of any activity or set of activities one
can pursue and enjoy in exile.\textsuperscript{171}

We now have some understanding of how a sojourner’s activities might fit him to
enjoy life in his homeland. How then does the description of sojourners apply to the
members of an Augustinian community as I have characterized it? How are they to refer
all their activities to their highest good?

An Augustinian community must use its pursuits to signify the enjoyment of the
highest good of such a community, and engagement in such pursuits must bear witness to
the fact that they do not hope to fully enjoy their highest good by engaging in such
activities; pursuing activities in this way also fits them to enjoy their highest good. The
best way to understand how they would do this is by discussing the virtues they would
need to develop in order to refer all things to a remote highest good. Doing so will help

\textsuperscript{171} This idea seems to be present in the book of Deuteronomy when Moses instructs Israel on the
dge of the promised land, so that they might be prepared for life in the promised land. In chapter 8, Moses
tells the people, “And he [the Lord God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which
you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread
alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” If the highest good of life in
the promised land was being comfortably nourished, then Israel might achieved that good in Egypt, so long
as they secured freedom from slavery to Pharaoh, for in Egypt – as they truly grumbled in the wilderness –
they were sometimes generously fed and comfortably provided for. The idea is that the good of life in the
promised land is not simply reducible to eating well and being comfortably provided for. Augustine
certainly had this and other biblical treatments of the motif of exile and return in mind when he developed
the idea that members of the City of God must understand themselves as sojourners.
us see how such virtues would be embodied in their activities, which will give us a sense of how they refer all things to their highest goods as pilgrims refer all things to life in their homeland.

The first virtue such sojourners need is hope. In this context, hope involves confidence and expectation that there is a highest good for this kind of community that they have the prospect of enjoying.\(^{172}\) We can begin to see the character of such hope when we remember the humility to which such hope must be joined. The humble hope of members of an Augustinian community is that while their temporal activities cannot achieve their final good, engaging in these activities in such a way that allows them to humbly acknowledge this does fit them to enjoy their highest good; further, although they cannot achieve this highest good in action, they have hope that they will in fact enjoy this good.

Straightaway, we can determine a trait that would characterize a community that bears witness to such a hope. The community will be gracious. This term has a double significance, and I wish for that significance to be retained in my usage. First, one is gracious when one is able to receive, acknowledge, be thankful for, enjoy and enjoy receiving good things from the hands of others. An Augustinian will view this kind of

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\(^{172}\) It might be possible, at least to attempt to order and refer all one’s activities to an end and way of life which one had no hope that the community could ever realize. I will not dwell on what this sort of life would look like. A few comments are in order, which I do not take to be any kind of refutation of this option. It seems that if one despaired of oneself or one’s community ever attaining or enjoying the end to which one referred and ordered all one’s activities within the life of that community, one would have two options. First, one might conclude that one’s community should radically re-construe its understanding of the highest good of that community, and refer its activities to that good. The second option would be to re-construe how one conceived of one’s community’s activities as all being “referred” to its highest good. The activities might be referred to this highest good by showing forth or bearing witness to the fact that the end the enjoyment of which would constitute ultimate flourishing for this community is something that the community has no possibility or hope of enjoying. There might be a way to understand the point of a community’s activity in such a context, but it would be rather different than what Augustine has in mind when he speaks of members of the City of God as pilgrims referring all things to their highest good.
graciousness as especially crucial with respect to those good things we receive from others that make our own achievements possible. For an Augustinian, lack of such graciousness has its root in pride that wishes to achieve only that excellence which is compatible with one’s not being dependent on the goodwill and help of others. This is a form of pride that would make impossible the achievement of the excellence within practices and within an Augustinian community which we have discussed this chapter. All such excellence depends on acknowledging what one needs to learn from others and how one must subordinate one’s independent will to the common pursuit in which one is engaged. Pride leading to ungraciousness makes humble learning and submission impossible. Consequently, such pride in a member of an Augustinian community would involve a forgetting, neglecting, concealing or denying in some way the hope that ostensibly joins the members of the community together in a common pursuit. For if one hopes that humble participation in the life of an Augustinian community will fit one to enjoy one’s highest good, then ungraciousness (which makes such participation impossible) involves a forgetting, neglecting, concealing or denying of one’s hope.

Ungraciousness involves a denial of one’s hope because of the content of that hope. One’s hope is that although one’s efforts and activities will not achieve the enjoyment of one’s highest good, one nonetheless hopes to enjoy this highest good. The very content of this hope acknowledges one’s dependence in realizing one’s highest good. Any denial of such dependence, thus involves a failure to refer one’s activities to this hope.

In addition to receiving gifts, graciousness involves giving gifts unbegrudingly, especially in such a way that they can be used by all for the mutual benefit or edification
of others. Failure to be gracious in this way also forgets, conceals or denies one’s hope. It presumes that one can flourish by holding back from others and using the goods at one’s disposal to flourish on one’s own. This is a denial of the hope that constitutes an Augustinian community. The presumption, it is worth noting, is the presumption I argued a Razian agent falls into. This highlights the fact that it cuts against the very raison d’être of an Augustinian community, which is remedying the fragmentation of one’s character that results from acting as a Razian agent.

In addition to graciousness, members of an Augustinian community would have to be characterized by acknowledgement of shortcomings, mistakes, transgressions that cut against the purpose of the community. The acknowledgement of such errors by an agent must involve a willingness to acknowledge the source of error being the agent’s own pride, along with a willingness to seek humility with the help of others. This is all to say that an Augustinian community will be characterized by repentance.

Along with repentance, an Augustinian community must also be characterized by forgiveness. Failing to repent and failing to forgive both fail to refer all things to one’s final hope. Failing to repent involves failing to humble oneself and acknowledge one’s limits and shortcomings. Doing so forgets that one’s hope is not that one will at some point have no limits or failings, but that by humbly acknowledging them one would be fit to enjoy one’s highest good. Similarly, failing to forgive one who repents also fails to refer things to one’s hope. It forgets that one has no hope in holding errors over others, or in exacting some kind of vengeance, but in humbly acknowledging one’s own pride; it

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173 One should think here of what it means to be a ‘gracious’ host.
also forgets that one’s hope of remedying one’s own pride is being part of a humble community willing to show one one’s limits while acknowledging their own.

We will recall that pride blinds agents to that very pride as the source of their failures and shortcomings. So the requirements of repentance and forgiveness place great demands upon those who need to repent and forgive. They must humble themselves – that is, act in a manner opposed to pride – while vulnerable to a pride that blinds them to the fact that they have need to humble themselves. Such an endeavor requires a kind of faith.

Faith is needful in two ways within an Augustinian community. First, faith involves trust that involvement in this community will allow one to recognize, acknowledge and remedy the pride to which one would be blind if left to one’s own devices. Part of this trust is trust that participation in the community will make available the kinds of descriptions for one’s actions and life that will help one make sense of one’s limits, and make sense of why one should humble oneself so that one might continue to flourish in the community. But there is a more general need for faith within an Augustinian community.

Let me characterize how I am thinking of the virtue of faith in this context. In order to do this, it is best to compare and contrast the virtue of faith with the virtue of hope. Roughly speaking, hope is rightly-grounded confidence that a certain end or good is attainable, is to be expected, or will come to pass. Faith has to do with the embodiment, or what I have called the “signification” of such hope. To have faith is to trust that it is possible to signify and embody one’s highest hope in one’s actions. Faith is also involved in the actual activities ordered toward signifying one’s hope. Faith is needed there in
order to resist the temptation to order one’s actions towards more immediately available goods, rather than to one’s highest good. But faith is also needed in order to have any confidence that one’s actions can succeed in signifying and bearing witness to one’s final good. One needs faith that the actions of one’s community have the meaning which the community ascribes to it.

It is the belief of members of an Augustinian community that by signifying and bearing witness to their final good, their activities improve the community’s understanding of that highest good, and fit the community to enjoy that good. This means that they are ordering their activities toward an end of which they do not have a full conception. They are also trying to fit themselves to enjoy this good. Their limited apprehension of this good is reason to shake confidence that their activities are ordered in the way they are trying to order them. Surely there are other reasons that could shake such confidence. Faith is a virtue when it has and trusts good grounds for maintaining trust in the significance of the community’s activities, despite grounds for doubt that exist.  

Putting these virtues together requires a graciousness of a different order from what I discussed above. It requires seeing one’s whole life as a gift. For the point of one’s life is receiving this narrative description of it, and fitting it into a larger narrative of a community, for the purpose of remedying pride that one would not know one had and would not be willing or able to fix without receiving this narrative from others and being received as having a part in their story. All of this is for the purpose of fitting oneself for a good that one does not fully grasp and that cannot be realized by one’s actions. One’s

174 I am not suggesting that one with faith ignores the grounds for doubt. Instead, he has objectively good grounds for maintaining his trust, even given the grounds for doubt.
life is about learning to do all things in light of the hope of this good, and so hope for it more clearly. One must have a strong sense of the good of one’s life as something received if one is to hold these ideas together.

To return to the initial concerns of the chapter, this picture of how one commensurates the various goods of life allows agents to continue to make qualitative distinctions between these goods for the reasons discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Agents are able to commensurate goods within a pilgrim life by seeing the distinctive role they can play in such a life. They each play a distinctive role because of the distinctive way in which they reflect and fit one to enjoy one’s highest good. Further, since this highest good is remote, persons never fully grasp how it lends unity to the various goods that reflect it, so that their only way to proceed in this life is to perfect that understanding through perfecting their grasp of the distinctive goods that reflect their highest good and the various ways in which they can bear witness to that good.

3.6 Conclusion

Let me comment briefly on what work this chapter has left undone. I have criticized Raz’s view of agency, saying that a Razian agent would have a fragmented character. I do not think that I have demonstrated this claim. For one thing, I have pondered a few very particular examples to make my point, and I have made some contestable claims about how to interpret those cases, relative to Raz’s view. I think the examination of more cases is needed. What I do think I have done is suggest a fruitful line of thinking to be examined while discussing other cases of Razian agents.
Concerning my discussion of Augustinian communities, I have often said that given their basic character they must think of themselves in such and such a way, or they must conceive their end as such and such. I do not take myself to have fully established those claims. My purpose was to sketch the contours of an Augustinian community and suggest the rationale for such a community. More detailed articulation of the reasons an Augustinian community must have the shape I have sketched is needed.

Finally, I have spoken much of the recognition and acknowledgment of pride, but not much of how a prideful person might become humble by participation within an Augustinian community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the concept of ordering loves and the process of ordering one’s loves. As with this chapter, it will be useful to sketch the Augustinian view of these matters, by seeing how Augustine’s view on this issue helps contrast his view of agency with some prominent contemporary accounts. Thus, I will begin the next chapter with a discussion of the views of Harry Frankfurt. I will then argue that deploying an Augustinian conception of ordered loves provides an important supplement and necessary corrective to his insights about human agency.
CHAPTER 4

IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION AND ORDERED SELF-LOVE: FRANKFURT AND AUGUSTINE

Now that we have a description of a life that can commensurate the pursuits of an agent in a way that is not self-defeating, it might appear from an Augustinian perspective that the only remaining tasks for practical reason are developing one’s conception of this kind of life and using that conception to figure out how one’s various pursuits can fit into this kind of life, and in so doing, succeed at living as a sojourner in the way that Augustine envisions. This picture of the task of practical reason would be misleading for a few reasons. First, as the idea of a pilgrim life itself suggests, it is a life whose point is never fully realized. Further, a main task of a pilgrim life is precisely that of realizing the limits of temporal goods to realize the supreme good of human life. Furthermore, in order to do this properly, agents must recognize their own continuing limits, incapacities and failures in living out such a life. In short, thinking of a pilgrim life as something that it is in one’s power to adequately live out fails to understand the nature of that pilgrim life. Taking this last thought seriously will require us to directly address the access problem in chapter 5.
In this chapter I want to motivate Augustine’s idea that a crucial part of practical understanding involves recognizing our continuing limits, incapacities and failures to achieve practical understanding. I will do so by engaging in an ad hominem argument between Augustine and Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt’s views are strikingly similar in many ways to Augustine’s. Despite the similarity, the argument of this chapter is that Frankfurt’s notion of the point of practical life as “acquiescing to the self” or realizing the self with which we wholeheartedly identify does not give sufficient recognition to the sources of continuing limits, incapacities and failures of agents who seek to do this. Because of that defect, the pursuits of agents who conform to a Frankfurtian account of agency as acquiescing to the self will be self-defeating in various ways.

The first tasks of the chapter are to set out Frankfurt’s main views and to compare them to some passages in Augustine, particularly from the eighth book of the Confessions, in which Augustine recounts his conversion to Christianity.

4.1 Frankfurt, Identity and Human Agency

As is well-known, Harry Frankfurt considers it a defining mark of personhood that persons can form higher-order attitudes.175 They can form attitudes about their other attitudes. So they can desire not to desire a certain thing, they can hope that they will not be afraid of a certain upcoming event, they can desire that a certain set of desires be effective in moving them to action, and so on. In Frankfurt’s view, at least some of a human being’s higher order attitudes are partly constitutive of his personal identity. The

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higher-order desires that play this role are the ones with which a person consciously identifies. ¹⁷⁶ Before examining what these claims mean, I will try to preempt misunderstandings of the claim.

Frankfurt’s view is not that the possession of certain higher-order attitudes, or any higher-order attitudes, is part of the persistence conditions for a human being. Nor is his view that familiarity with a human being’s higher order desires is necessary to identify that human being across time as “the same human being.” Frankfurt’s views are not about the identity of human beings at all. They concern the identity of persons.

A misleading picture can arise when we start distinguishing the identity and persistence conditions of a human being from the identity of persons. The misleading picture is that the term ‘human person’ actually denotes two numerically distinct substances – a human being and a person. Since personal identity – the person one is – is determined by the structure of one’s higher-order attitudes (the “structure” of these attitudes being partially determined by which higher-order attitudes one identifies with), this picture would suggest that radical change in the structure of a human’s higher order attitudes would cause the person they are to pass out of existence and a different person to come into existence, still numerically distinct from the relevant human being.

This is clearly not Frankfurt’s view, and I think there is a much more sensible way to discuss “personal identity” and its relation to the structure of higher-order attitudes. We should not say that the term ‘human person’ denotes two numerically distinct substances – a human being and a person. I think the best way to articulate Frankfurt’s

view is by saying that there are human beings who are persons in virtue of their capacity to form second-order attitudes.

Frankfurt specifies his view by distinguishing the use of “person” to denote a member of a biological species, and the use to specify an individual with “attributes which are the subject of our most humane concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and problemmatical in our lives.”¹⁷⁷

Personhood is the possession of attributes that make one a person. The attributes in question are higher-order desires, higher-order volitions, and identification with some of those higher-order attitudes. The particular higher order attitudes that a person possesses (in addition to certain of his first-order desires) make up what Frankfurt calls the “structure of the person’s will.”¹⁷⁸

Frankfurt does persist in using the language of personal identity, although the issues involved in his discussion are not really questions about the persistence through time of some numerically one substance. Nonetheless, I think Frankfurt intentionally uses the language of identity, and does so with a good deal of warrant. The notion of identity with which Frankfurt deals is one that is often tied closely to the concept of the self. The issues of identity raised here are the sorts of questions a person seeks to address when he asks questions such as, “Who am I?” In asking such a question, the person is seeking to identify the kind of person that he is. In Frankfurt’s view such self-reflection is definitive of personhood. But notice that what is definitive of persons is not just that they engage in self-reflection in order to identify the current state of their character; instead agents

¹⁷⁷ Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” 12.

engage in self-reflection in order to evaluate and assess their character through the formation of higher-order attitudes. The ultimate purpose of this is to identify the self one wishes to become. Let me go into some detail about how Franfurt conceives of this identification of one’s “ideal self.”

The formation of higher-order attitudes allows agents to form a conception of what is important to them and what they care about. In so doing, they evaluate which of the pursuits to which they are inclined by their first order attitudes are pursuits which they also care about (and care about caring about). Agents can then come to identify with certain of their higher order carings and other attitudes. Frankfurt speaks of this act of identification as creative of the self. But I think it is important to point out that while it might be creative of the self in one sense (I will raise questions about this later in the chapter), it does not create a new character for one. While one might identify who one “truly” is in accordance with the higher-order attitudes with which one identifies, this identification does not guarantee that one’s character conforms to this identification.179

Charles Taylor is helpful in setting out the issues surrounding a person’s conception of the self. In his article “Responsibility for Self,” he reflects on Frankfurt’s views and like views, saying that if what we are is defined by our goals, then a person on Frankfurt’s view (one who can form higher-order attitudes) is one who can raise the question: Do I really want to be what I now am? (i.e. have the desires and goals I now

179 I should point out here that the way I have been using and will use the concept of ‘character’ in this chapter is different than the way I used the term last chapter. In this chapter one can have a unified or fragmented character. Last chapter I suggested that the notion of having a character includes the idea of possessing a certain degree of constancy that is undermined when the self is fragmented. My rationale for doing this is that my use in this chapter will be more useful in expositing and discussing Frankfurt’s view, while my use in the last chapter was convenient for articulating my point about the fragmentation of the self that results from acting as a Razian agent, and the resultant difficulty in expressing who one is, which Raz sees as an important part of rational agency. I think ordinary English uses the term ‘character’ in both senses, and as far as I can tell, I have not equivocated in my usage within particular discussions.
He goes on to say that persons can characterize themselves by their goals, desires, and purposes, but can also “pose the *de jure* question: is this the kind of being I ought to be, or really want to be?” Finally, following Heidegger, he says that views of the self such as Frankfurt’s include the following idea:

The human subject is such that the question arises inescapably, which kind of being he is going to realize. He is not just *de facto* a certain kind of being, with certain given desires, but it is somehow ‘up to’ him what kind of being he is going to be.

Taylor helpfully recognizes that assessing one’s desires, goals and purposes in a particular way is not sufficient for establishing one’s character in accordance with one’s assessment. Posing the *de jure* question is, at best, a first step in becoming or “realizing” the kind of person one wishes to be.

Although Frankfurt recognizes that identifying with a set of higher order attitudes does not establish one’s character in accordance with those attitudes, he nonetheless speaks of identification as playing a role in constituting a person’s identity. For desires with which a person does not identify are then considered external to that person, not coming from them. When a person is moved by one of these desires, she is moved by an external force. In “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” Frankfurt writes thus of attitudes, thoughts and feelings with which a person identifies: “This willing acceptance of attitudes, thoughts and feelings transforms their status. They are no longer merely items

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that happen to appear in our psychic history. We have taken responsibility for them as authentic *expressions of ourselves.*”\(^{184}\) When a person identifies with a set of attitudes, those attitudes constitute the person’s “true self.”

Those attitudes with which the agent does not identify are now “external” to the agent.\(^{185}\) The agent has renounced their status as forming her identity. If they move a person to act, this event is not something in which the person is actively involved; instead it is something that *happens* to the agent.\(^{186}\)

In addition to specifying and constituting the true self of a person, identification with higher order attitudes sets a trajectory for the development of the person’s character. It specifies the person one wishes to realize (to use Taylor’s language). I think the best way to understand Frankfurt’s view of a person’s character is that it is defined in terms of the person’s freedom with respect to the desires with which he identifies. The person the agent wants to realize is one whose will has acquiesced to the attitudes with which the person identifies. That is to say, the person’s will (effective desires) accords with the higher-order attitudes with which the person identifies; hence there is no internal conflict within the person between what his will moves him toward and what he most deeply wishes to become. Such a person’s character can be defined in terms of the higher order attitudes with which the person identifies. In particular, the person’s character will be defined in terms of what the person loves and cares about, what is important to him, and


\(^{185}\) See Harry Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” in *The Importance of What We Care About*, 58-68. It is important to see that simply disapproving of an attitude is not sufficient for externalizing it. It is *identification* with contrary desires, and rejection of an attitude that renders it external. (See “Identification and Externality,” 65).

the fact that the agent is free in his pursuit of what is important to him, and what he cares about, and in seeking the good of what he loves (because his will is the one that he wants).\textsuperscript{187} A person who has this kind of unity within his will has \textit{wholeheartedly} identified with those higher-order attitudes with which he identifies.

A person whose will is not fully acquiescent with the higher-order attitudes with which he identifies has a different sort of character than that of a free person. Such a person can be characterized by specifying the higher order attitudes with which he identifies and the current state of conflict between his will and those attitudes. We can imagine describing such a person as “trying to live virtuously, but prone to fall into old habits.” This would specify the person’s character in the sense I am using ‘character’ to expound Frankfurt’s views.

It is worth noting here that Frankfurt says little about an agent’s \textit{ignorance} about what would constitute or how to realize the self he wishes to realize. It is worth comparing Frankfurt to Charles Taylor on this point. For Taylor, strong evaluation plays a parallel role in his account of human agency to the role higher-order attitudes plays in Frankfurt’s account. Recall that weak evaluation involves evaluating a pursuit simply in terms of one’s attitudes. So if one evaluates eating cake as desirable because of whatever attracts one to it, one is engaged in weak evaluation. Strong evaluation uses qualitative language to evaluate pursuits, and hence an agent’s attitudes towards those pursuits. So if

\textsuperscript{187} In “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” Frankfurt distinguishes between acting freely which is having a will that accords with the second-order volitions with which one identifies and one’s will being free. One’s will is free only if one is free to have the will one wants. That is, with regard to any of one’s first-order desires, one is free to make that desire one’s will, or to make some other first order desire one’s will instead. I do not think it is necessary to worry about this complication in our exposition of Frankfurt’s view. (“Second-order volitions” refer to second order desires regarding which set of desires one wants to be effective in moving one to action).
one evaluates eating cake as base, or weak-willed or intemperate, one is engaged in strong evaluation. Taylor views strong evaluation as an “articulation” of an agent’s sense of what is important, worthwhile, etc. Strong evaluation also helps articulate a person’s conception of the self the person wants to realize. By viewing strong evaluation as an “articulation,” Taylor places more emphasis than Frankfurt does on the idea that a person has a developing conception of the self that she wishes to realize.188

A terminological note before moving on to the next section: Sometimes Frankfurt uses the term ‘will’ to refer simply to an agent’s effective desires. I will call this an agent’s “situational will” or just ‘will1.’ Other times, Frankfurt speaks of an agent’s desires being effective “against his will.” Here Frankfurt seems to be using ‘will’ to refer to the higher order attitudes with which an agent identifies. When Frankfurt talks about the “structure of an agent’s will” I believe this is what he is talking about. When I refer to an agent’s ‘will2’ this is what I am referring to.

In the next section, I will make some preliminary comparisons between Augustine’s views and Frankfurt’s by considering some passages in book VIII of the Confessions that are rather striking in how they seem very much to be echoed in Frankfurt’s writings.

4.2 Augustine and Frankfurt on the Self and the Will

Book VIII of the Confessions is Augustine’s well-known account of his “conversion” to Christianity. In that book, Augustine speaks of the struggle within his

soul as he grappled with converting. He speaks of “two wills” within him. He speaks of the first will as having enslaved Augustine to it. He writes the following:

…It was no iron chain imposed by anyone else that fettered me, but the iron of my own will…The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when a habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion. These were like interlinking rings forming what I have described as a chain, and my harsh servitude used it to keep me under duress.189

In this passage, Augustine speaks of his own will as having enslaved him. The implication of this enslavement is that this will still moves him to act in accordance with it. However, he does so “under duress.” The thought that our wills could move us to action “under duress” is similar to some ideas developed by Frankfurt. Frankfurt has written much of how one’s desires can move one in some sense “against one’s will,” when one’s effective desires do not accord with the higher-order attitudes with which one identifies. In such an instance, one does not have the will one wants. So the idea is present in both Augustine and Frankfurt that one can act in accordance with one’s will while also being in a way “forced” to do so, in a way that does violence to oneself.

Unlike Frankfurt, Augustine seems to think that one can be in bondage to one’s will, whether or not one has a contrary second-order volition with which one identifies. Despite this difference, Augustine seems to share with Frankfurt the thought that a person is in bondage to his will or coerced by his will when his will moves him to act in such a way that does violence to himself by moving him away from his ideal identity or ideal self. The difference in their views lies in the fact that for Frankfurt, the ideal identity of a person depends upon and is determined by the aspects of his character with which he identifies. It is these aspects of his character that he identifies as constituting his true

189 Augustine, Confessions, 8.5.10.
identity, and specifying the self he wishes to realize. I speak of “ideal identity” because the achievement of freedom and unity of the self is not secured just by identifying with particular aspects of one’s character. One must also align one’s will to this self with which one identifies, by forming one’s loves, cares and volitions in light of it. Frankfurt follows Spinoza in calling this “aquiescence to oneself.”

For Augustine, as with Frankfurt, one is in bondage to one’s will when one’s will moves one to act in such a way that moves one away from one’s ideal self. However, the character of one’s ideal self is not determined by anything about the agent with which one identifies or to which one acquiesces. So we cannot refer to it as the self one wishes to realize. Instead, one’s ideal identity is determined by one’s nature as a created being, and achieving one’s ideal self makes one fit to enjoy the highest good of one’s nature. Because of Augustine’s view of the fall, an Augustinian view would hold that it is possible for a person to have second order volitions while not identifying at all with those aspects of his character and nature acquiescence to which would move him toward his ideal self. One can identify with a conception of oneself completely at odds with one’s ideal self. Again, this is because one’s will and orientation can be skewed by disordered loves. These loves are disordered, at least in part because they require pursuits predicated on errors about human capacities and limits. They embed a lie about human nature.

Although I have been contrasting Frankfurt and Augustine on the notion of an ideal self, the discussion leads to another point where their views are similar. For Augustine, disordered loves place a person in bondage to his will because they force him


191 Although there is a sense for Augustine in which humans long to realize this self, for only then will they be able to have the rest which their hearts seek. (Confessions 1.1.1).
to orient his pursuits in a way that runs contrary to his capacities and limits. Similarly, for
Frankfurt, one way a person can fail to achieve freedom and unity of the self is by his
will moving him to act in a way that does not harmonize with, and prevents him from
establishing the volitional necessities that would establish such freedom and unity of the
agent. Let me discuss the notion of a volitional necessity in order to show how
Frankfurt’s and Augustine’s views relate with respect to these matters.

One is subject to a volitional necessity when it is impossible to forbear from a
certain course of action because of what one cares about. Frankfurt writes, “There are
occasions when a person realizes that what he cares about matters to him not merely so
much, but in such a way, that it is impossible for him to forbear from a certain course of
action.”192 Frankfurt tries to distinguish such cases from cases of inner compulsion.
“Such encounters differ from situations in which a person finds that he is unable to
forbear, whether or not he wants to do so, because he is being driven to act by some
desire or by some compulsion which is too powerful for him to overcome.”193 The key
here is that the compulsion is a compulsion because it need not accord with one’s will; a
volitional necessity is a necessity explained by the quality of one’s concern about one’s
will on a particular matter. (This concern over one’s will involves higher order
volitions). Frankfurt further contrasts volitional necessities from inner compulsions by
trying to point out the autonomy volitional necessities make possible. He writes,

The reason a person does not experience the force of volitional necessities as alien
or external to himself, then, is that it coincides with – and is, indeed, partly

192 Harry G. Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About” in The Importance of What we
Care About, 80-94. The quote is from p. 86.

193 Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 86.
constituted by – desires which are not merely his own but with which he actively identifies himself. Moreover, the necessity is to a certain extent self-imposed. It is generated when someone requires himself to avoid being guided in what he does by any forces other than those by which he most deeply wants to be guided.¹⁹⁴

The idea is that volitional necessity arises by being true to oneself. It arises by achieving a certain significant conformity between what moves one to action and those aspects of one’s character with which one most deeply identifies. Accordingly, establishing volitional necessities establishes a way to sustain pursuit of that which one most deeply cares about. Thus, volitional necessities sustain freedom (having and being free to have the will; that one wants) and unity of the self; they sustain unity of the self because volitional necessities establish for an agent a set of final ends, which he is able to wholeheartedly pursue, rejecting that which is not in keeping with his pursuit of those ends. These ends are his final ends because he has wholeheartedly identified himself with his care for these ends, and hence pursuit of them unifies his pursuits around the concerns with which he wholeheartedly identifies. Frankfurt writes,

In order to prevent himself from caring about anything as much as he cares about them [the forces by which he most deeply wants to be guided], he suppresses or dissociates from whatever motives or desires he regards as inconsistent with the stability and effectiveness of his commitment. It is in this way that volitional necessity may have a liberating effect: when someone is tending to be distracted from caring about what he cares about most, the force of volitional necessity may constrain him to do what he really wants to do.¹⁹⁵

Volitional necessity frees an agent from forces, desires, impulses, etc. that are not in keeping with what he most deeply cares about. Because of the unity of the self thereby

¹⁹⁴ Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 87.

¹⁹⁵ Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 87-88.
achieved, an agent achieves his ideal self, because his whole character reflects the concerns he most deeply cares about and identifies with.

For Frankfurt, the flip side of the fact that volitional necessities can establish autonomy is that the consequence of failure to achieve the wholeheartedness characteristic of one under volitional necessity is lack of freedom and disunity of the self. 196 This was the point I initially wished to make in comparison with Augustine. For Augustine, one is free and can become conformed to one’s ideal identity by humble recognition of one’s limits, organizing one’s pursuits in light of those limits, and having one’s activity actively bear witness to those limits. Failing to do so prevents one from conforming to one’s ideal identity. For Frankfurt, subjecting oneself to volitional necessities, and organizing one’s pursuits around such activities moves one toward one’s ideal identity (the character that reflects that with which one most deeply identifies). So there is the common theme in both Frankfurt and Augustine of subjecting oneself to limits leading to freedom and achieving one’s ideal identity or self.

Frankfurt himself recognizes the presence of this theme in much ancient ethical and religious reflection. He writes the following:

The suggestion that a person may be in some sense liberated through acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control is among the most ancient and persistent themes of our moral and religious traditions. It must surely reflect some quite fundamental structural feature of our lives. 197

196 He speaks of disunity of the self most plainly in “Taking Ourselves Seriously.” Practical reason is predicated on an act of disunifying the self by externalizing some aspects of our character. The remaining task for practical reason is aiding the reunification of the self by aiding the conformity of an agent’s character to the attitudes with which he identifies.

197 Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What we Care About,” 89.
Frankfurt pursues this thought in a way that leads to another important point of contact between his views and Augustine’s. For volitional necessities arise from organizing our pursuits around what we most deeply care about. And an important source of such caring, according to Frankfurt, is love. Frankfurt realizes that this deepens the connection in his view between acceding to a force not within one’s immediate voluntary control and achieving freedom. He observes, “The idea that being rational and loving are ways of achieving freedom ought to puzzle us more than it does, given that both require a person to submit to something which is beyond his voluntary control and which may be indifferent to his desires.” Frankfurt concludes that we feel a sense of liberation in selflessness.\(^{198}\) He goes on to ask, “How are we to understand the paradox that a person may be enhanced and liberated through being seized, made captive, overcome? Why is it that we find ourselves to be most fully realized, and consider that we are at our best, when – through reason or through love – we have lost or escaped from ourselves?”\(^{199}\)

I will return to this question after examining the role of human loves in explaining failures or achievements in realizing the sort of freedom and unity of the self that comes from humility (Augustine) or selflessness (Frankfurt). But first I would like to point out the passage from Augustine that is most striking if one is looking to compare him to Frankfurt.

Having discussed the bondage of his will to perverted lusts, which I quoted earlier, Augustine goes on to say that a “new will” had begun to emerge in him, “the will

\(^{198}\) Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What we Care About,” 89, emphasis in original.

\(^{199}\) Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What we Care About,” 89.
to worship you disinterestedly and enjoy you, O God, our only sure felicity.”

Augustine continues, saying that these two wills battled within him. “But it [the new will] was not yet capable of surmounting that earlier will strengthened by inveterate custom. And so the two wills fought it out – the old and the new, the one eternal and the one spiritual – and in their struggle tore my soul apart.” Augustine continues in a manner that sounds strikingly Frankfurtian. He says,

> I thus came to understand from my own experience what I had read, how the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit strives against the flesh. I was aligned with both, but more with the desires I approved in myself that with those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will, rather than acting freely. All the same, the force of habit that fought against me had grown fiercer by my own doing, because I had come willingly to this point where I now wished not to be. And who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with the sinner.

In the first part of the above quoted paragraph, Augustine speaks of higher-order approval and disapproval of his desires. Regarding the one’s he approved of, he says he was *aligned* with them, which is language similar to Frankfurt’s language of identifying with some desires over against others. Regarding those he disapproved of, he says in these he was not the agent, for he was enduring them against his will. That is to say, they were contrary to his “new will” of which he approved. Frankfurt speaks of desires that move us contrary to our will as moving us against our will; he suggests that we are in a way passive in being influenced by them, and it is not *really* the agent being moved by these desires, because he has externalized them and identified with contrary desires.

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200 Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10.

201 Augustine, *Confessions* 8.5.11.

The second part of the paragraph differs from Frankfurt on the matter of one’s responsibility for the aspects of one’s character with which one does not identify; their disagreement here is as striking as the similarity between the two expressed in the first part. Augustine uses language that can really be put in direct opposition to Frankfurt’s assertions about the responsibility for the self that the agent bears.

According to Augustine, he was responsible for the character and will he wished not to have. He was responsible in that his voluntary actions explain his character – he had come willingly to the point where he now wished not to be; and he was morally responsible for his character, even though he had become “aligned” with the contrary will within him, and he wished not to have the character he had. “Who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with the sinner,” Augustine asks. Frankfurt, on the contrary, says the following:

Some philosophers have argued that a person becomes responsible for his own character insofar as he shapes it by voluntary choices and actions that cause him to develop habits of discipline or indulgence and hence that make his character what it is.203

It would appear that Augustine was arguing that very point in the paragraph quoted above. Frankfurt goes on to attribute the view to Aristotle, and further attributes to Aristotle the view that “we are responsible for what we are to the extent that we have caused ourselves – by our voluntary behavior – to become that way.”204 Frankfurt goes on to disagree with Aristotle, saying,

I think Aristotle is wrong about this. Becoming responsible for one’s character is not essentially a matter of *producing that character*, but of *taking responsibility*

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for it. This happens when a person selectively identifies with certain of his own attitudes and dispositions, whether or not it was he that caused himself to have them. In identifying with them, he incorporates those attitudes and dispositions into himself and makes them his own. What counts is our current effort to define and to manage ourselves, and not the story of how we came to be in the situation with which we are now attempting to cope.  

Regarding Frankfurt’s last sentence, for Augustine, bad character is a result of disordered loves, and the fundamental disordered love is disordered love of self, which Augustine names ‘pride.’ If that is the case, then if one finds oneself with a bad character, this bad character was produced by one’s love for oneself under a misguided conception of oneself; such love persists and is operative in one’s actions insofar as one fails to unify one’s desires and pursuits around the aspects of one’s character with which one has ostensibly “aligned” or “identified.” Frankfurt would contend that in such a case, one has failed to identify wholeheartedly with the aspects of one’s character with which one identifies, but one has not necessarily identified with a contrary will, or contrary aspect of one’s character. But if Augustine’s view of pride is correct, then failure to identify wholeheartedly is due to an agent’s identification of himself being fragmented. He is divided between two contrary conceptions of himself, and loves himself under both descriptions. This leads to the fragmentation of pursuits, and failure to achieve the unity of the self of which Frankfurt speaks.

As Augustine’s inner conflict reaches a fever pitch in book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes his failure to fully embrace a Christian life in terms of a failure of wholeheartedness. But he takes this failure of wholeheartedness to mean that he was not yet to be identified with the desires of his “new will.” He writes:

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When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God at last, as I had long since purposed, I was the one who wanted to follow that course, and I was the one who wanted not to. I was the only one involved. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly nor turned from it wholeheartedly. 206 I was at odds with myself 207 and fragmenting myself. This disintegration was occurring without my consent, but what it indicated was not the presence in me of a mind belonging to some alien nature but the punishment undergone by my own. In this sense, and this sense only, it was not I who brought it about, but the sin that dwelt within me as a penalty for that other sin committed with greater freedom, for I was a son of Adam. 208

Augustine says that he was at odds with himself. The conflict did not arise because his true self was contending with that which was not Augustine. Nor was it that he was completely divided into two characters. Instead his one person was fragmented. He explicitly denied the Manichean view that he was divided into two natures. He writes, “Some there are who on perceiving two wills engaged in deliberation assert that in us there are two natures, one good, the other evil, each with a mind of its own.” 209 Augustine goes on to repudiate this view in no uncertain terms. There are two wills within Augustine – two basic ways of orienting his actions and pursuits - but Augustine does not follow either one fully, so he is one person trying to follow two contrary principles of action.

In the main portion of this chapter, I will argue that Augustine’s conception of pride and ordered/disordered loves usefully illuminates failures and obstacles in achieving the kind of freedom and unity of the self of which Frankfurt speaks. For

206 ‘nec plene volebam nec plene nolebam.’ I neither fully willed it, nor fully did not will it.
207 ‘ideo mecum contendebam.’
208 Augustine, Confessions, 8.10.22.
209 Augustine, Confessions 8.10.22.
Frankfurt, *wholehearted* identification is crucial, and Augustine illuminates obstacles to such wholeheartedness.

If I can show that Augustine’s conception of pride does illuminate in this way, then it will be worth looking at some complexities Augustine introduces into pursuing the unity of the self that Frankfurt does not explore. I will say more about these complexities later on, but a few words are in order here. First, although Augustine had already “aligned” himself with the new will that was arising within him, he did not yet consider himself a Christian. His “conversion” only comes later in Book VIII. His new will did not yet identify him and the orientation of his character. I suggested why this was so several paragraphs above; he was divided between two contrary conceptions of himself, both of which he loved.  

210 Frankfurt can agree that identification without wholeheartedness can leave the self fragmented. Book VIII of the *Confessions* is useful because it illuminates the difficulties that arise between “aligning” oneself with a certain orientation of character and having that orientation properly identify one.  

211 Continuing to speak about an agent’s responsibility for a character he caused himself to have by his voluntary actions, Frankfurt writes,  

Even if we *did* cause ourselves to have certain inclinations and tendencies, we can decisively rid ourselves of any responsibility for their continuation by renouncing them and struggling conscientiously to prevent them from affecting our conduct. We will still be responsible, of course, for having brought them about.

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210 Although he characterizes himself as having said this prayer at an even earlier time in life, it is worth noting that in Book VIII, as Augustine speaks of his divided self and the struggle between his two wills, he recalls his prayer for God to grant him “chastity and self-control, but please not yet.” (*Confessions*, 8.7.17).

211 I have deliberately moved from Frankfurt’s active language of an agent *identifying* with aspects of his character and the desired result that these aspects of one’s character actually identify the person—having them be the person’s true character, rather than aspects of a (possibly fragmented) character. I will say more about the relations between “ideal identity” “identification” and “character” in the next section.
cannot be changed. However, we will no longer be responsible for their ongoing presence in our psychic history, or for any conduct to which that may lead. After all, if they do persist, and if they succeed in moving us to act, it will now be only against our will.\textsuperscript{212}

I take it that Frankfurt envisions “renouncing [certain inclinations and tendencies] and struggling conscientiously to prevent them from affecting our conduct” to be something that follows upon identifying with higher-order volitions regarding what one desires one’s will\textsuperscript{1} to be. The key point that Augustine raises is not merely that it is difficult to renounce inclinations and struggle conscientiously to prevent them from affecting conduct, having identified with contrary ones. Instead, the problem is that despite active “identification” or “alignment” with a certain set of desires and inclinations, it is often the case that contrary desires, inclinations, and dispositions are still part of an agent’s character. The person’s character – who the person is – is thus not to be identified with the desires and inclinations with which the agent identifies, nor with an orientation of the agent’s will congruent with those desires and inclinations. Further, and crucially, the reason desires and inclinations contrary to those with which an agent identifies partly constitute his character is that those contrary inclinations arise from a conception of himself by which the agent still directs his activities.

Although I have set out some differences between Frankfurt and Augustine, the intention of this section is to show that the problem of book VIII of the Confessions – Augustine coming to grips with and trying to resolve the division he found within himself – is almost exactly the problem that Frankfurt considers the problem for human agency

\textsuperscript{212} Harry Frankfurt, “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” 7.
and practical reason, particularly in “Taking Ourselves Seriously.” It will be useful to compare some quotes from the two works to make this point.

We have already heard Augustine speak of the two wills within him fighting it out, and about his fragmented character. Similarly, Frankfurt speaks of the fragmentation of the self an agent must seek to rectify. Frankfurt writes the following in “Taking Ourselves Seriously”:

What is it about human beings that makes it possible for us to take ourselves seriously? At bottom it is something more primitive, more fundamental to our humanity, and more inconspicuous than either our capacity to reason or our capacity to love. It is our peculiar knack of separating from the immediate content and flow of our own consciousness and introducing a sort of division within our minds. This elementary maneuver establishes an inward-directed, monitoring oversight. It puts in place an elementary reflexive structure, which enables us to focus attention directly on ourselves.213

The “reflexive structure” of which Frankfurt speaks enables higher-order desires and volitions. Frankfurt writes, “We are unique (probably) in being able simultaneously to be engaged in whatever is going on in our conscious minds, to detach ourselves from it, and to observe it – as it were – from a distance. We are then in a position to form reflexive or higher order responses to it.”214

Frankfurt notes the perils that come with dividing and objectifying ourselves in these ways. “The inner division that we introduce spoils our capacity for untroubled spontaneity. This is not merely a matter of spoiling our fun. It exposes us to psychological and spiritual disorders that are nearly impossible to avoid.”215 Nonetheless,
developing higher order desires and other attitudes is necessary for becoming a responsible person.

When we begin attending to our own feelings and desires, to our attitudes and motives, and to our dispositions to behave in certain ways, what we confront is an array of – so to speak – psychic raw material. If we are to amount to more than just biologically qualified members of a certain animal species, we cannot remain passively indifferent to these materials. Developing higher-order attitudes and responses to oneself is fundamental to achieving the status of a responsible person.\textsuperscript{216}

While, according to Frankfurt, the “division of the self” effected by reflexive awareness of ourselves and the formation of higher order attitudes is necessary to become a responsible person, it also presents the problem of forming a reasonably unified character and set of pursuits and commitments and avoiding “fragmentation, dissonance and disorder.” It is one thing to be able to reflectively endorse or disapprove of certain aspects of one’s psychic makeup. It is quite another thing to be able to form that psychic makeup in such a way that one’s commitments and pursuits both come from oneself and make sense.\textsuperscript{217} The idea of “making sense” here is that a person’s pursuits have a certain coherence such that others can ascribe a unified character to the person (as opposed to saying the person has the character of a fragmented person, so we do not know what he will do, or how he will respond). There is also the problem of freedom. This is the problem of having one’s pursuits make sense because one has approved of the course of one’s life. For Frankfurt, both problems (the problem of making sense and being free in doing so) are related to the problem of having a personal identity (that is, the identity of a

\textsuperscript{216} Harry Frankfurt, “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” 5-6.

\textsuperscript{217} I use the concept of making sense here; it is not a concept to which Frankfurt ordinarily appeals in the exposition of his views. He does however use the notion in “Taking Ourselves Seriously,” p. 2.
person). The division of oneself necessary for higher-order attitudes introduces the possibility that either one will have no unified character at all, or that this character will be imposed on one. In either case, one’s life is not directed by the person one is, for the person one is is defined by the higher order volitions with which one identifies.

Frankfurt recognizes the nature of the problems introduced by dividing the self when he talks about what is achieved when the self is reunified.

In our transition beyond naïve animality, we separate from ourselves and disrupt our original unreflective spontaneity. This puts us at risk to varieties of inner fragmentation, dissonance and disorder. Accepting ourselves reestablishes the wholeness that was undermined by our elementary constitutive maneuvers of division and distancing. When we are acquiescent to ourselves, or willing freely, there is no conflict within the structure of our motivations and desires. We have successfully negotiated our distinctively human complexity. The unity of ourself has been restored.218

Freedom – acting in accordance with the desires with which one most deeply identifies – reunifies the self that was fragmented in order to make personhood and this kind of freedom possible. That is to say, the problem of book VIII of the Confessions - Augustine establishing unity within his fragmented soul - is quite similar to the problem of freedom and personhood for Frankfurt: one must unify the elements of a divided self.

In the next section I will examine how pride, which in Augustine’s view is a disordered love of self, might explain failures to achieve freedom and acquiescence to oneself by wholeheartedly identifying with those attitudes with which one identifies.

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4.3 Self-Conceptions, Self-Love and Self-Defeating Agency

Despite the many similarities in their views that I have tried to sketch, Augustine and Frankfurt have differing conceptions of self-love. Frankfurt recognizes this, and briefly engages with Augustine in his chapter on self-love in *The Reasons of Love*; but it seems to me that he does not give the psychological subtleties of Augustine’s account their proper due. He writes, “St. Augustine regarded the impediments of self-love not only as innate, but as probably having been imbued in us by God.” In this sentence, Frankfurt uses ‘self-love’ according to his conception of self-love in which self love is wholeheartedness. Augustine would agree with Frankfurt in viewing wholeheartedness as partially constitutive of ordered self-love; but Frankfurt’s suggestion that it is simply the divine will to present obstacles to an agent having a unified will misses Augustine’s insights about the inevitable results of disordered self-love. In Augustine’s view, disordered self-love will defeat the self, in that one will be unable to realize the person one most wishes to become. Frankfurt, on the other hand, does not seem to have a place for a notion of disordered self-love, for he views self-love simply as an achievement – it is wholeheartedness that is achieved when contrary desires and impulses are sufficiently externalized and one can wholeheartedly pursue those ends about which one most deeply cares and which constitute oneself. I wish to suggest that there is psychological insight that we gain concerning obstacles to wholeheartedness by countenancing with Augustine his notion of disordered self-love.

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One way to put the difference between Augustine and Frankfurt is that they have different concepts of a ‘self-conception’ of an agent. Whatever concept of a ‘self-conception’ one could tease out from Frankfurt’s writings would be analyzed primarily in terms of the desires that an agent identifies with and the objects of those desires, which is what she most deeply cares about. There is little if any suggestion in Frankfurt’s work that an agent’s notion of her own capacities, potential and status in pursuing what she cares about is a central part of her self-conception. Let me attempt to clarify this point. For any pursuit an agent cares about, the agent has a conception of what she is pursuing; in addition to this, she will have some sense of what is worthwhile and choiceworthy about the pursuit, what she cares about in the pursuit. I will call the agent’s conception of the object of her pursuits, and her conception of what she cares about in that object, her “object conception.” Frankfurt’s view seems to be that identifying with pursuits on the basis of what I am calling an “object conception” forms an agent’s self-conception. I think Frankfurt is right that an agent’s object conception does partially form her self-conception. But I would suggest that there is a “subject conception” that also forms an agent’s self conception. What do I mean by a “subject conception”? For any pursuit in which an agent engages or about which she cares, the agent will have some conception of what it means for a being like her (i.e., as a human being, or under some other description that forms her self-understanding) to engage in this pursuit. The agent need not articulate this conception, or even be aware that she is operating with it. This “subject conception” involves and helps shape an agent’s conception of the human end, the good life, the meaning of life, as well as the purpose of this particular activity.

221 Of course, these conceptions might not be articulated or fully developed, and the agent might not be aware that she is operating with them.
It seems to me that both an agent’s object and subject conceptions will influence the descriptions under which the agent conceives her actions and pursuits. For one thing, they will underwrite and be articulated by descriptions using language of “strong evaluation.” When an agent deems a pursuit noble or base, or fitting or trivial, she is bringing to bear and trying to articulate her conception of what it means for a being like her to engage in this kind of pursuit in this particular way. Her evaluations reveal and help her articulate her sense of her capacities, the point of her pursuits, the shape of her life, the kind of person she is trying to or would like to become, etc. More broadly, these conceptions will be a factor in the kinds of descriptions under which she acts (for example, in going to work she might act under the descriptions of ‘earning a living’ ‘following her calling’ ‘undermining corporate modernity’ ‘doing her part within the economy’ ‘glorifying God’ and many others besides, depending on her conception of what she is doing and what it means for an agent like her to do it).

My point is not that Frankfurt explicitly denies that agents operate with “subject conceptions” and that these are part of the basis of identification. But I think drawing attention to these subject conceptions will provide new insight for understanding failures of wholeheartedness. Further, I do not wish to sharply separate what I have called an object conception and what I have called a subject conception. My idea of an ‘object conception’ has nothing to do with conceiving of a pursuit or action apart from any particular human concerns, or apart from the concerns of agents involved in the pursuit. Rather, I think an agent’s subject conception will shape her apprehension of the ends she pursues, how she sees those ends as good, and what she cares about in those ends; likewise, an agent’s object conception will help shape her conception of human
capacities, the human good, why she cares about the pursuit, and in general the human significance of the pursuit. Thus both conceptions will form the basis of, and help determine, how an agent identifies with various desires and pursuits, thus shaping her identity and self-conception. I think it makes sense to say that agents can attend to, say, musical performance in its own right, and learn of the standards of excellence in musical performance, and learn what is involved in realizing these standards. Further, agents can come to enjoy, delight in and care about pursuing such excellence. This would all fall under forming an agent’s object conception. But an agent can also consider how exactly music can enrich the human experience, or be the expression of genius, and in other ways conceive of what it means for someone like her to engage in musical performance and pursue musical excellence.

I think it is Frankfurt’s neglect of what I have called an agent’s “subject conception” regarding an end that explains a somewhat puzzling feature of his account of self-love. The puzzling feature – if I can put it this way – is that the self seems largely to be missing from Frankfurt’s account of self-love. Let me explain.

In *The Reasons of Love*, before addressing self-love, Frankfurt says the following about his concept of ‘love’:

Love is, most centrally, a *disinterested* concern for the existence of what is loved and for what is good for it. The lover desires that his beloved flourish and not be harmed; and he does not desire this just for the sake of promoting some other goal.222

When Frankfurt comes to apply this account to self-love, he says that one who loves himself has a disinterested concern to protect and pursue his own true interests. Frankfurt

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222 Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, 42.
goes on to say, “Now those interests, like the true interests of anyone, are governed and
defined by what he loves.”223 This is because what a person loves determines what is
important to him and hence establishes his true interest in what he loves. Frankfurt
concludes, “Thus it is axiomatic that a person’s self-love is simply, at its core, a
disinterested concern for whatever it is that the person loves.”224 Frankfurt does go on to
complicate this axiom a bit, saying that a person without any interests could demonstrate
self-love by attempting to overcome whatever personal characteristics may impair his
capacity to love, and by making suitable efforts to find things that he will in fact come to
love.225 But true self-love just is wholeheartedness.226

It is not my concern right now to compare every aspect of Frankfurt’s account
with an Augustinian conception of ordered love. Instead, I want to point out that
Frankfurt analyzes a person’s self-love almost exclusively in terms of other things that he
loves. This was what I meant when I said above that the self seems to be missing from
Frankfurt’s conception of self-love. But in light of Frankfurt’s views, it makes sense that
self-love would be analyzed largely in terms of what one loves. For in Frankfurt’s view, a
person’s loves and interests define the person that he is. However, my distinguishing an
“object conception” of one’s interests and a “subject conception” of the self that is related
to and partly constituted by those interests suggests that a person not only has interests,
but also conceives of his relation to those interests in a particular way in light of how he

223 Frankfurt, Reasons of Love, 85.
224 Frankfurt, Reasons of Love, 85.
225 Frankfurt, Reasons of Love, 89.
226 Frankfurt, Reasons of Love, 95.
conceives of what it means for a being like him to pursue those things that he in fact loves. The quality of a person’s self-love is partly determined by this subject self-conception. If that is the case, then there is room for self-love to be disordered because it prevents a person from wholeheartedly pursuing what he cares about. A person’s subject conception – usually unbeknownst to the person – can be in conflict with the pursuit of what the person cares about, such that the role his subject conception plays in his pursuits thwarts the wholehearted pursuit of what he loves. To take an example, for a self-centered person, what it means for him to engage in any pursuit is that he will be gratified, aggrandized, approved or comforted in some way. This orientation to all that he cares about presents obstacles to him wholeheartedly loving another person in Frankfurt’s sense of love. It will be difficult, and probably impossible, for such a person to have disinterested concern for the flourishing of another, for his involvement with another will always be concerned with his being gratified, aggrandized, approved or comforted.

In addition to an agent’s subject conception conflicting with his object conception of a pursuit, a person could be operating with several conflicting subject conceptions. Recall that an agent’s subject conception is a conception of what it means for a being like him to engage in a given pursuit. But in forming a subject conception, an agent can think of himself under several different (true or untrue) descriptions – a human being, a man (or woman, as the case may be), a Christian, an atheist, a factory worker, a thoughtful person, a genius, an ordinary guy, etc. It seems possible that an agent could conceive of the importance of a pursuit largely in terms of what he thinks it means for a person falling under one type of description to engage in the pursuit, while his actual approach and behavior while engaged in the pursuit is shaped by one of the other descriptions under
which he views himself. This will typically mean that he is unaware of the subject self-conception operative in his pursuit. This also can prevent wholehearted pursuit of what the agent cares about.

In the next section, I would like to look in a bit more detail at how an agent’s subject self-conception can prevent him from the wholehearted pursuit of what he cares about, and draw out some consequences for how we think of the relationship between wholeheartedness and identity. I will do this by revisiting some of the examples that I have used in previous chapters.

4.3.1 Subject Self-Conceptions, Pride and Fragmentation of the Self

Priscilla

I will begin this section by revisiting Priscilla, from Charles Taylor’s article, “Leading a Life.” I discussed Priscilla in chapter 3 with regards to fragmentation, integrity and character. So it is fitting to revisit Priscilla here in a discussion of failures of wholeheartedness caused by and leading to fragmentation of the self.

Priscilla, you will recall, is committed to the preservation of the rainforests in the tropical republic in which she lives and for which she serves as a political leader. This pursuit is important to her, she cares about it, and it is integral in forming who she is. But Priscilla’s pursuit of preservation is not an end isolated from Priscilla’s other concerns. It is connected to her love of nature and her conception of the importance of preserving such love for nature. The fact that her pursuit of preservation is connected to other concerns such as this leads Priscilla to make the difficult decision that Taylor imagines her facing – asking to be relieved of her portfolio so that she would not be the one to
introduce legislation that she knows is best for the long term preservation of the rainforests, but that would require surrendering many acres to the chainsaws of a multinational corporation.

Taylor imagines what Priscilla’s reasoning might have been as she made her decision asking to be relieved of her portfolio. As he imagines it, Priscilla not only contemplates the importance of preserving the rainforests, but she also contemplates what it means for her to engage in this political fight, and why it is important for humans in relation to nature. Part of the reasoning which he imagines Priscilla using is the following:

But…why are we doing this [engaging in public policy formation that will preserve the rainforests]? Why are we engaging in this fight? Yes, undoubtedly because the issue is important, because a lot is at stake here. But there is also something else: we know that we human beings are capable of responding to these issues, although we most often fail to respond adequately. We know that we are capable of feeling that the world, and the whole sphere of life, commands our admiration and even reverence, although we often block this out and pursue just our own projects and seek to maximize our instrumental efficacy. We want to become the kind of human who can fully feel and live this reverence, a goal that is not easy to reach.

We want to win our fight for the rain forests, but this is not all. We also want to cherish and develop a certain way of understanding and responding to the world – in short, a certain reverence.²²⁷

Priscilla reflects on what it means for humans to engage in preserving the rainforests, and this directs her pursuit of what she considers a very important end. Her reflections are especially interesting in light of our concerns here, because Priscilla recognizes that part of the significance of engaging in preservationist efforts is that such efforts can help *form* her and others’ self-conceptions, regarding their relationship to the rest of nature. She recognizes a tendency in humans to fail to respond with adequate

admiration to nature. We fail to acknowledge its beauty, or simply ignore this aspect of nature, often degrading its beauty in our rush to use nature for acquiring the various comforts we have become accustomed to in industrialized societies. We can connect this failure of humans to the mistaken subject conceptions to which we are prone, especially in this industrial and technological age. Technological advances have produced or realized a tendency in humans to forget our limits as rational animals and act as if we have overcome those limits, or are on the cusp of technological advances which will overcome them. We forget our embodied natures, as well as our dependence on nature in such a way that we must preserve and not simply exploit its resources. We also ignore how consistently viewing nature as a mere tool can corrupt our ability for the humane appreciation of beauty and majesty in nature and even in art.

Recognizing these tendencies in human nature, Priscilla wishes to cultivate a character in herself and others that mitigates our forgetfulness regarding nature and our relation to it, and enhances our capacity for the humane experiences it affords. Priscilla also seems to be acutely aware of the dangers political advocacy poses to cultivating reverence for nature – even political advocacy in the service of preservation. One engaged in political advocacy will develop a subject self-conception regarding what it means for her to pursue such advocacy. Further, there is a significant threat for those involved in political advocacy of developing a subject self-conception at odds with the self-conception Priscilla wishes to cultivate with her preservationist efforts. Consider this bit of reasoning in which Taylor imagines Priscilla engaging, as she considers what it would mean to introduce and support legislation submitting some of the rainforests to the
chainsaws of a multinational corporation in the interest of long-term preservation of the rainforests:

It would be in effect to treat ourselves like gods, who could give their singleminded attention to the disposal of things in the world, because they did not need to concern themselves with what they are becoming – their nature being fixed, invulnerable, not for them the continuing need to cherish the good in order to avoid becoming monsters. To throw oneself into winning the result alone, as though it did not matter what kind of human one might become, is an act of hubris, a leap beyond the vulnerable human condition. I…can see how the philosophy of disengaged reason that develops with the modern world can encourage this stance of the morally invulnerable agent, concerned only to control the world. But this is the illusion that stands behind everything I am fighting. And the history of our century has shown how political revolutionaries, in the name of total efficacy, can throw the ordinary human restraints on action to the winds. This same history has shown what monsters they can become. This hubris brings its terrible nemesis.228

Priscilla wishes to cultivate a certain kind of humility in herself and others. She recognizes the tendency of humans to become fixated on their capacity for technological control of their environment and in so doing, forgetting their limits and their environment’s limits. Such hubris also prevents humans from humble appreciation of the vastness and beauty of nature, and it prevents them from recognizing those aspects of nature that are beyond human control and manipulation. Further, Priscilla suggests that political involvement has a tendency to encourage this hubris of control to which humans are prone. Political involvement can encourage this hubris even when pursued in the service of causes that should inculcate humility – such as preservationist causes. Being aware of this danger inherent in political activity, Priscilla is very careful about exactly how she puts her political activities into the service of preserving the rainforests. She recognizes the possibility that her political involvement in preservationist efforts can

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prevent her from wholehearted pursuit of what is ultimately important to her about the preservationist cause – the cultivation of proper appreciation and reverence for nature. The reason political involvement can have this effect is that it has a tendency to encourage the development of a prideful self-conception that is at odds with the self-conception and character she is trying to cultivate by her efforts.

Dan Rydell

We met Dan Rydell – a character in Aaron Sorkin’s splendid television series *Sports Night* – in chapter 2 while discussing the defeasibility of reasons for action. Dan is the co-anchor of a *Sportscenter* type show within the show. In the episode, “The Quality of Mercy at 29K,” Dan finds himself bombarded with letters from various charitable organizations, all seeking money. Dan laments, “A couple of months ago I wrote a check to someone, and now I’m in the middle of Dickensian London.” He worries over being “inactive” while “talking a good game,” and says if he could figure out who to give his money to it would help “ease my liberal guilt.” After being told by a co-worker that she gives to an AIDS group when she has some extra money, Dan responds, “It’s not that we shouldn’t be trying to cure AIDS, it’s that we should be trying to cure everything.” Later in the episode, Dan’s co-anchor Casey asks him if he has solved his problem. Dan responds, “About how to be a guilt-free altruist? It’s easier being a miser.” Dan then goes into his office to retrieve half a turkey sandwich for him and Casey (who had not eaten for hours). While getting the sandwich he sees a homeless man who had gone into Dan’s office to get out of the cold. Dan decides against calling security, and gives the sandwich to the man. The man reaches into his pocket and Dan says, “No, you don’t have to pay me.” The man was actually pulling out a pocketknife so that he could cut the sandwich in
half, so that he could offer half to Dan. When he did so, Dan said, “Thanks.” The homeless man – who up to that point had not said a word, even when questioned – simply said, “You’re welcome.”

I think this example is instructive in showing how one’s subject self-conception can prevent one from wholehearted engagement in what one cares about. First, I think we can read Dan’s ‘thanks’ to the homeless man to be about more than just a sandwich. For the homeless man shows Dan true charity, to which Dan was somewhat blind by the way he was thinking about being charitable. Dan’s subject self-conception was that of a great philanthropist. He was going to “try to cure everything.” Dan’s expectations did not include a reciprocal charitable gesture performed by one that he benefited. But that is exactly what the homeless man did. The homeless man’s simple “You’re welcome,” serves as a reminder that true charity – loving one’s neighbor as oneself – does not place the giver in a position of superiority over the one who receives. Instead, charity promotes humility in both the giver and receiver. It should remind the giver of the fragility of life and that he has not escaped life’s vicissitudes by acquiring wealth. It should thus remind him of his kinship as a human with those he aids. Charity can remind the receiver that despite difficult circumstances, life is more than food and the body more than clothing. It should remind both giver and receiver of the importance of common goods in human life and impel them to pursue such things together, despite their different social and financial situations. I think it is plausible to say that the homeless man helped Dan come to see all this as what is important in charity, and that this is what Dan should care about in pursuing charity. But his self-conception as a philanthropist was an impediment to his

229 “The Quality of Mercy at 29K,” Sports Night (Season 1).
understanding true charity and pursuing it wholeheartedly. While in the grip of this self-conception, we see Dan’s discouragement (lack of wholeheartedness) for any charity in his remark to Casey that it is “easier being a miser.”

*Daniel LaRusso*

In the film *The Karate Kid*, Daniel LaRusso learns karate from Mr. Miyagi, who entered Daniel in a karate tournament to give him two months of respite from beatings at the hands of the local karate expert thugs. From the beginning, Miyagi made Daniel aware that he would teach Daniel karate, he made Daniel aware that karate was for defense only, and he suggested that Daniel’s goal in learning karate should be simply to “make a good fight” and nothing more. Daniel seemed to agree with Miyagi’s goals and ideals, and identify with them. However, Daniel’s entire education in karate was a transformation of his understanding of those goals. Daniel’s education – without Daniel knowing what was happening – also transformed his character, so that he could learn what Miyagi had to teach.

Miyagi understood that in order for Daniel to learn the techniques of karate, as well as to inculcate Miyagi’s outlook regarding what was worthwhile and important about learning karate, he would need to learn humbling discipline. Miyagi inculcated this discipline by forcing Daniel to engage in a series of household chores (waxing cars, sanding a deck, painting a fence, painting a house) Daniel finally snapped, saying that in a week of “karate training” he had not learned any karate. Miyagi showed him that he was wrong about this, showing him that Miyagi had been ingraining in Daniel various movements of karate by subjecting Daniel to the various household tasks. More importantly, the tasks began to instill the discipline necessary to learn the relevant
techniques. Daniel had a tendency to want to bypass sustained training in order to learn and engage in the “flashier” parts of karate. Thus, teaching him discipline in a roundabout way was necessary. Further, the trust Miyagi gained by showing Daniel all he had learned without knowing it, and the humility this instilled in Daniel allowed Daniel to care about and learn what Miyagi had to teach concerning what was important and worthwhile about learning karate. Without this trust and humility, Daniel would not have been wholehearted in learning, even if in some ways he had identified with Miyagi’s outlook. Without the discipline Miyagi instilled in Daniel, he would have lacked the character to follow through on this education.

Rachel

I discussed Rachel in detail last chapter, so I will not say too much here, but she is relevant for this discussion. Rachel identifies herself with her desire to teach inner-city children; however her conception of her own capacities and role in doing this makes her both unable and unwilling to do that which constitutes excellence at teaching. Her subject self-conception makes it impossible for her to wholeheartedly pursue that which she cares about.

Upshot of the cases

In each of the above cases, there is a threat that the agent involved will be unable to wholeheartedly pursue what he or she cares about, not because of some contrary desire, but because of the agent’s conception of himself or herself, and understanding of what it means for him or her to pursue what he or she cares about. The significance of this is that it makes problematic Frankfurt’s understanding of identity and identification.
In Frankfurt’s view, identifying with certain of one’s attitudes externalizes other attitudes, such that they no longer constitute the person one is. Becoming wholehearted is a matter of developing one’s habits and inclinations so that one acts and desires in a manner congruent with those desires with which one identifies. For Frankfurt, one who is wholehearted in what he does and wants is one whose first-order desire to perform an action is exactly the desire by which he wants his action to be motivated, and there is no conflict in him between that motive and any desire at any higher order.\(^{230}\) For Frankfurt, one who achieves this inner harmony achieves what he calls “acquiescence to oneself.” One who fails to acquiesce to himself fails to conform his motives to what is important to him, and to those attitudes that constitute the person he is. It is this last claim that is made problematic by the examples and my analysis.

The problem is that in the cases imagined, the potential barrier to wholeheartedness does not arise directly from some desire contrary to those with which one identifies. Rather, the barrier to wholeheartedness arises from the agent’s orientation toward the desires with which he identifies, and that orientation derives from the agent’s self-conception; the barrier to wholeheartedness arises from the agent’s conception of what it means for a person like him to pursue those desires with which he identifies.

The key here is that it is not the case that some desire that is not part of the agent’s true self is the barrier to wholehearted pursuit of what one identifies with and cares about. Instead, the agent’s own conception of what it means for him to wholeheartedly realize or express his true identity in his desires and actions prevents him from doing so. In such instances, the agent’s identification of the person that he is is not

merely fragmented or double-minded (i.e., not wholehearted); it is self-defeating (that is, defeating of the self). It is the agent’s identification of himself that prevents him from wholehearted pursuit of that with which he identifies.

We can discuss the problem of those with self-defeating self conceptions thus: they care about those ends with which they identify in such a way that it is impossible for them to wholeheartedly pursue such ends. Again, I wish to stress that this is a different state than merely having a fragmented will – having desires contrary to those with which one identifies that are sometimes effective in action, thus keeping one from wholehearted pursuit of that with which one identifies. Instead, how one cares about and finds important those ends with which one identifies makes it impossible to wholeheartedly pursue those ends. We might say that in the first type of case there are external pressures keeping one from wholehearted pursuit of what one cares about, whereas in the cases I am examining, the barrier to wholeheartedness is internal to the caring itself.

I think the phenomenon of self-defeating self-conceptions shows that, at the very least, Frankfurt must complicate his conception of self-love. Frankfurt said of self-love that the love of a person for himself essentially consists simply in devotion to a set of objects comprising whatever it is that he loves.\textsuperscript{231} Insofar as one is devoted to what one loves, one loves oneself. Hence the highest form of self love is wholehearted devotion to what one loves. For Frankfurt, insofar as a person is unable to be wholeheartedly devoted to what he loves (which constitutes his identity), he is incapable of self-love. But that is because he is envisioning the impediments to such wholeheartedness being desires contrary to and external to his devotion to what he loves. However, I have tried to

\textsuperscript{231} Harry Frankfurt, \textit{Reasons of Love}, 86.
uncover the possibility that an agent’s conception of himself can lead him to be devoted to what he loves in such a way that he is incapable of wholehearted devotion to what he loves. In such cases, it is not attitudes external to his devotion to what he loves, nor his conception of himself that impedes wholeheartedness. Thus we should say that these agents are in a state of disordered self-love, because the way they are devoted to what they love (which Frankfurt defines as self-love) prevents them from wholehearted devotion to what they love (the highest form of self-love). Another way to put the point is that such agents are laboring under a misguided self-conception that impedes full or authentic self-love (wholehearted devotion to what one cares about).\textsuperscript{232}

However we categorize what goes wrong or could go wrong in the cases I have examined, the important thing to note is how an agent’s subject self-conception, and thereby how he cares about certain ends, can prevent him from wholehearted devotion to those ends. Frankfurt gives little or no attention to this phenomenon. However, I think we can see awareness of this phenomenon as driving Augustine’s understandings of ordered love, the virtues and ordered self-love. His awareness of this phenomenon also leads him to complicate his understanding of the process which Frankfurt calls “acquiescing to oneself” and Taylor calls “realizing one’s true self” – the process of bringing unity to one’s desires, motives and actions in terms of one’s true or ideal self. In the next section, I will examine Augustine’s account of these matters, focusing on his awareness of the

\textsuperscript{232} I have not articulated a full Augustinian view of self-love, being content to show how an Augustinian analysis of disordered self-love can put pressure on Frankfurt’s account. For Augustine, apparently wholehearted devotion to what one loves could be disordered self-love, for what one loves can be disordered. In Augustine’s view, devotion to anything that is out of accord with the right use of it will ultimately be self-defeating, for “our heart is restless until it rests in [God]” (\textit{Confessions 1.1.1}). I have obviously not attempted to argue for that claim in this chapter, although I hope that I have provided a useful conceptual framework for pursuing such arguments.
possibility that one’s self-conception can be a chief and continuing impediment to achieving unity of the self.

4.4 Augustine, Humility and Ordered Love

What really is the threat of self-defeating self-conceptions in the cases we examined? In each case, there is the threat that an agent will pursue what he or she cares about in such a way that he or she fails to recognize some limit of himself or herself. Failure to recognize these limits would prevent them from achieving the ends they are pursuing, and which they would otherwise be capable of achieving. For Augustine, the threat is the threat posed by human pride. In Augustine’s view, any end – regardless of how noble it is – can be pursued in a self-defeating way because of a prideful self-conception. This is possible even if the end one is pursuing is the Augustinian end of rightly using temporal goods in order to recognize their limits and one’s own limits, thus fitting oneself to enjoy one’s highest good. One can attempt to pursue even this end with a prideful self-conception. Let us examine how this realization shaped Augustine’s understanding of the self, virtue and ordered self-love.

233 The danger for Priscilla is thinking that she can be ruthlessly calculating about nature in political negotiations while still cultivating appropriate reverence for nature in herself and others. Dan Rydell’s self-conception makes him blind to his limits, and hence to true charity (since true charity acknowledges the needs and limits of both giver and receiver). Daniel LaRusso is in danger of thinking that he understands what is entailed in learning karate and that he has the character to be taught in a way that makes sense to him at the outset. He fails to acknowledge his need for discipline and trust in Miyagi. Rachel fails to see how she must subordinate her desire for visible results to the standards of excellence of teaching, and recognize that she can only learn and achieve these standards in reliance on others.

234 So Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice: “I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice though not in principle. As a child, I was taught what was right; but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit” (Chapter 58).
In Augustine’s mind, the fragmentation of the self which Augustine recalled in book VIII of the *Confessions* was resolved with his conversion, recalled at the end of book VIII. Book X of the *Confessions* marks a structural shift from confessing what he now understands about his past, to confession as part of his present quest for rest in God. Although Augustine is not pulled in opposite directions as he was in book VIII, he recognizes the continuing threat of pride to defeat his wholehearted pursuit of God and right use of temporal things as part of that pursuit. This realization adjusts Augustine’s whole conception of the pursuit of the highest human good. First, it allows him to acknowledge the remoteness of the human good, with the result that “human life of earth is a time of testing without respite.”235 (Recall that the highest human good is rest in God; thus, saying that human life has no respite from testing is an acknowledgement of the remoteness of the highest human good). Failing to acknowledge human life to be such a time of testing demonstrates a prideful self-conception, for one is assuming that one can realize the highest human good in this life. This prideful self-conception would be self-defeating for Augustine, since Augustine is now identified with pursuing the right use of temporal things to fit him to enjoy his highest good. Goods are rightly used when they bear witness to human limits and make an agent aware of and able to acknowledge such limits. The prideful self-conception that denies human life as a time of testing without respite denies these limits.236

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236 See the Appendix for some elaboration of this thought.
I think we can view the following – quite famous – passage from the *Confessions* as Augustine’s response to the recognition of the continuing threat of pride to prevent wholehearted pursuit of the right use of temporal things. Augustine writes the following:

> On your exceedingly great mercy rests all my hope. Give what you command, and then command whatever you will. A certain writer tells us, *I knew that no one can be continent except by God’s gift, and that it is already a mark of wisdom to recognize whose gift this is.* By continence the scattered elements of the self are collected and brought back into the unity from which we have slid away into dispersion, for anyone who loves something else along with you, but does not love it for your sake, loves you less. O Love, ever burning, never extinguished, O Charity, my God, set me on fire! You command continence: give what you command, and then command whatever you will.\(^{237}\)

Augustine goes on to detail the various temptations he still faces to misuse temporal things. The significance of this is that Augustine recognizes that a key part of the right use of temporal things is acknowledging his own tendency to misuse them by pride. Further, *any* use of temporal things that does not involve a humble acknowledgement of one’s own tendency to pride and hence recognition of “whose gift continence is” is a misuse of those things, and involves a prideful self-conception that will defeat one’s pursuit of right use of those things. Rightly using temporal things uses them in a manner suitable to them – not attempting to ignore or circumvent the limits of those things – *and* it aids the agent in understanding their limits and his limits. It also shows the agent that his chief limit in the use of these things is his proneness to pride which causes him to use them in an unsuitable and hence self-defeating manner (since use of things that denies their limits and one’s own limits is self-defeating).

Such right use of good things also points agents to recognize their final good. The agent recognizes that temporal things are limited precisely in their ability to serve as the

\(^{237}\) Augustine, *Confessions* 10.29.40.
highest good of a person. Further, right use causes agents to recognize their proneness to pride which leads them to treat temporal goods as if they were their final good. Such use defeats the possibility of using these goods in a way that does aid agents in enjoying their final good. In Augustine’s view, any attempt to treat temporal things as constituting one’s final good will defeat the genuine and wholehearted pursuit of those things. But I have only discussed how right use of good things leads agents to an understanding of how these things are not their final good. How does this point them to their final good?

Here it is crucial to understand that Augustine agrees with Frankfurt that our use of things, our pursuit of them, and our apprehension of their importance derives from what we love and how we love it. (Notice how the passage from the *Confessions* quoted above deals with the healing of the fragmented self, then moves directly to discussing ordered love). We misuse a temporal thing when we love it as something it is not. The source of our misapprehension of temporal things is our love for ourselves as something we are not – our disordered self-love. This is why the acknowledgement of continence as a gift is so crucial (“give what you command and then command whatever you will”). This acknowledgement marks not only the remedy to the blindness and subsequent futility of prideful pursuits; it also marks the healing of one’s love. It marks a transition from loving an elevated conception of oneself to loving God for enabling one to rightly use temporal goods, taking one from the blindness and futility of pride to being able to acknowledge and understand one’s highest good. Because this acknowledgement comes from re-ordered love, this change also fits one to enjoy one’s highest good. For “to enjoy something is to cling to it in love for its own sake.”

One clings to it in the hope that it
makes one blessed. Hence only love of God, and not mere cognitive acknowledgement of one’s own limits, enables one to enjoy God as one’s highest good.

This is why the Incarnation is so crucial for Augustine. Pride blinds us to what we really are, and relegates us to self-defeating pursuits and hence a fragmented self. The Incarnation shows humanity what it is and what it could be. Thus the standard Christian expositions of the meaning of the Incarnation stress the idea that Christ becomes what we are, so that we can become what he is. Augustine stresses the humility of Christ in doing this as the remedy to pride.

I discussed the irony of pride in a general way in chapter 1, and we have seen the irony of pride in this chapter. Pride prevents one from pursuing even those ends the pursuit of which forms one’s conception of what is important. To use Taylor’s language, an elevated conception of oneself (an elevated “subject self-conception”) prevents one from realizing the self one cares about realizing. Augustine understands the whole Christian doctrine of sin and the fall in terms of this fundamental irony of pride. In pride, humanity wanted to be like God, and thereby corrupted the image of God (in virtue of which humans are like God), and lost (not irrevocably) the ability to enjoy dwelling with God. In humility, Christ “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.” 240 Christ left his dwelling with the Father to become man. In pride, humanity corrupted its capacity to use temporal life to fit it to inherit and enjoy eternal life, and thus inherited death. In humility, Christ took on the

238 Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.4.4.

239 See Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 1.3.3.

240 Philippians 2:6-7 (ESV).
human condition, surrendering even to death. All that humanity had brought upon itself in pride, Christ submits to in humility. Augustine summarizes this by saying that Christ “stooped even to our pride.”\(^{241}\) The irony here – Christ lowering himself to humanity’s elevation of itself – is the mirror image of the irony of pride, and points to the irony of redemption – life comes through death.

Augustine appeals to the fact that the Incarnation displays humble love in a way that mirrors self-defeating human pride when he discusses the ability of the Incarnation to heal such pride. Consider what he says in book VII of the *Confessions*:

> Your Word, the eternal Truth who towers above the higher spheres of your creation, raises up to himself those creatures who bow before him; but in these lower regions he has built himself a humble dwelling from our clay, and used it to cast down from their pretentious selves those who do not bow before him, and make a bridge to bring them to himself. He heals their swollen pride and nourishes their love, that they may not wander even further away through self-confidence, but rather weaken as they see before their feet the Godhead grown weak by sharing our garments of skin, and wearily flinging themselves down upon him, so that he may arise and lift them up.\(^{242}\)

For Augustine, while there is an irony to pride in that it degrades those who elevate themselves in their own mind, there is also an insidiousness to it that has occupied our attention in this section. Because of the human tendency toward disordered self-love, it is easy for humans to fall into pride upon progress and success in any endeavor. This includes progress and success in the apprehension of the limits of goods and the continuing right use of those goods in a way that makes one cognizant of their limits and one’s own limits. Because success even in *this* endeavor can lead to pride (which must defeat the endeavor), constant remembrance of the great humility displayed in the

\(^{241}\) Augustine, *Confessions* 1.11.17.

\(^{242}\) Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.18.24.
Incarnation is necessary to keep humans from such pride. Because it is disordered love that leads to self-defeating pride, the love displayed in the Incarnation is necessary to heal such pride.

The reason I went into some detail on Augustine’s theology of the Incarnation is that it is helpful for articulating how Augustine complicates the process of achieving unity of the self. The key point is that the good with which one identifies (the right use of temporal things, fitting one to enjoy one’s highest good) must be pursued in constant awareness of one’s dependence in carrying out this pursuit without falling into the pride that would defeat the pursuit. Connecting with the theme of chapter 3, this pursuit is one that bears witness to one’s limits in carrying it out.243

243 On the idea that Christian virtue requires the humble acknowledgement of continuing weakness and acknowledgement of one’s dependence on Christ in one’s growth in virtue, see John Newton, Letter XXIV “Advantages from Remaining Sin,” in Letters of John Newton (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976). Also see the Appendix for elaboration of Augustine’s view that our pursuit of the right use of temporal things must bear witness to our limits in carrying out that very pursuit.
5.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I will address the access problem, and an influential response to it expressed in the works of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell. I will argue that their response fails, and sketch the basic outline of an Augustinian response that will provide the basis for extending the Augustinian account of practical reason developed in this dissertation.

5.2 Augustine and the Access Problem

Although Augustine almost certainly never read Plato’s *Meno*, many concerns paralleling the concerns of that dialogue permeate Augustine’s work. The idea that there is something problematic, even paradoxical, about one human teaching another is central to Augustine’s thinking. In fact, in *De Magistro (On the Teacher)* Augustine concludes that no human ever teaches another, in the sense of imparting understanding. The relevant problems run deeper than this, however. It is not only transmission of
understanding from one human to another that is problematic. The acquisition of practical understanding itself is problematic. Why is this so?

Myles Burnyeat’s “Wittgenstein and Augustine ‘De Magistro’” has a trenchant discussion of Augustine’s relevant views. Burnyeat argues that Augustine conceives of learning in terms of rational understanding. And understanding is a matter of seeing the connections and relations between items known, and therefore cannot be acquired entirely piecemeal. Understanding of a thing will be more or less difficult depending on the scope and complexity of the connections and relations relevant for understanding. What sort of connections and relations are relevant here? They are the connections and relations that underwrite the defeasible goodness of things, and hence the defeasibility of practical judgments. There is a lot to this, some of which I have already discussed and some of which I will get into later in the chapter. But at this point it is sufficient to note that the goodness of an action depends on its connections to the rest of the context of which the action is a part.

With regard to practical understanding, there are two related obstacles to grasping the connections necessary for making good practical judgments. The first arises from the temporally extended nature of human life, the second from the wide scope of the larger context of human actions, which make understanding of the relevant connections difficult. We can get a sense for both problems if we remember that grasping these connections is what is necessary for understanding the defeasibility of our practical


judgment, and hence grasping the relevance of any such judgment in a particular deliberative context.

One reason the acquisition of practical understanding is problematic is due to the temporally extended nature of finite human life. Because of this feature of human life, the descriptions and concepts available to us for deliberation and practical judgment are inadequate foundations for the judgments they are supposed to aid. The past is settled, so in retrospect, we can see the connections and relations between an action falling under certain descriptions and the larger context of which the action is a part. We can tell a story about the significance of past events in relation to each other, perhaps developing or refining our concepts and descriptions to adequately understand what has happened. But in a deliberative context we must project our understanding into a new context.

Let us examine a defeasible practical judgment to make this point. I might decide to take a job because it is good money, but ‘taking a good-paying job’ is a defeasibly good action, and when I am faced with a different good paying job some time down the line, successful deliberation will require that I have an adequate understanding of the defeasibility conditions of taking a good paying job. But that requires having an understanding of this new situation, which is precisely what one’s previous deliberations with the descriptions one will employ cannot provide. The problem of projecting practical understanding is not only that new situations are new, with different connections and relations holding than in other situations; the problem is also that the relevant connections and relations are not yet settled, because the future is not yet settled. We must wait to see how things play out.
A second, but connected obstacle is that life is lived out bit by bit, and action
descriptions are learned and applied to these “slices of life.” But once again, because
practical judgments are defeasible, it is not enough to simply know, for example, that
eating ice cream right now would be enjoyable. One must understand the ways in which
that enjoyment is defeasibly good. In order to do that, one must understand the wider
context of one’s action; on the Augustinian view I have been developing, one has to
understand the action in the context of one’s life as a whole, but it is not necessary to
argue for that here. The important point is that we learn of life piecemeal. We do not
typically understand our evaluative judgments in terms of the larger contexts of which the
relevant actions could be a part and that could defeat our judgments. So we learn that
basketball is enjoyable, but we do not learn the relevance of that judgment, relative to all
the different contexts in which playing basketball might present itself as an option. And
again there is a good deal of indeterminacy here. The place that an action has in the
context of one’s life is not fixed by the performance of the action. In this connection, it is
worth noting Millgram’s claim regarding an agent’s interests. He writes,

There is no reason to expect that when agents conceive an interest in some object,
they at the same time consider and settle the relations of comparative importance
in which it stands to all other possible objects of desire…A desire is formed in a
particular practical context, and we should not expect its content to address
demands not made by that context.\textsuperscript{246}

There is a third problematic aspect of gaining practical understanding, which is
connected to the access problem. I can summarize it as follows. Practical deliberation is
something that when done well yields understanding of a situation. However, on an
Augustinian view, an agent’s practical deliberations are part of the situation to be

\textsuperscript{246} Elijah Millgram “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 276.
assessed. First, while practical understanding of a situation requires adequate descriptions, the descriptions available to an agent also influence the actions and intentions available to him. Thus, in many circumstances, as an agent more adequately articulates a situation, he also changes that situation because of the better concepts and descriptions available to him in the situation. Second, on an Augustinian view, one deliberates in order to act well, but acting well is largely a function of how the situation aids one’s present and future deliberations and practical judgments. So practical understanding of a situation appears to require knowing in advance how our decisions could transform our practical understanding, and this seems difficult to do in advance of achieving such understanding.

I will try to explicate further these problematic aspects of practical understanding by looking more closely at the practical syllogism.

5.3 Practical Reason and the Access Problem

Let us recall the salient feature of practical syllogisms from chapter 2 and in that light explore the difficulties for practical understanding discussed above. The first premise of a practical syllogism is an unquantified general judgment that places some action description, object or event under a desirability characterization. The three basic desirability characterizations are that a thing is pleasant, fitting, or useful. The

247 It might not be that uses of practical reason modeled by the practical syllogism are the only legitimate uses of practical reason. I use the practical syllogism to draw attention to features of practical reason and human life that should be the concern of any account of practical reason and the human good – namely, the defeasible goodness of what we pursue in action, the necessity to order these goods within our lives, and the various obstacles to developing rational and intelligible orderings of these goods.

248 If it is an object or event that is desirable, some means/end reasoning will be necessary to draw the conclusion of the syllogism.
second premise is a particular judgment regarding the presence or realizability of an instance of the action, object or event with the relevant desirability characterization. The conclusion of the syllogism specifies an action – either the action in premise 1 or an action performance of which will in some way acquire the desirable object or bring about the desirable event of premise 1.

A salient feature of these syllogisms is that they are defeasible. At any given moment, there are many ends that an agent can see to be desirable in some way, and many more that he would see to be desirable in some way if he stopped to think about it. Any bit of practical reasoning, as modeled by the practical syllogism, is calculated to achieve one of those ends. What it is not calculated to do is decide between practical syllogisms to employ. A key task of practical reason is coming to develop a way to understand how the various considerations articulated in practical syllogisms relate together, so that an agent can know which conclusions of which syllogisms in which contexts he should follow.

In chapters 2 and 3 I suggested that it is a description of one’s life as a whole that can make tractable determinations about the applicability of practical syllogisms. But any account of practical wisdom that takes this approach must recognize that such a conception of one’s life as a whole ordinarily comes piecemeal. It comes by refining one’s understanding of one’s practical descriptions, drawing connections between descriptions, finding new and more adequate descriptions. This is not simply or primarily a matter of abstract reasoning about the good and the descriptions one uses to understand what is desirable and important in human life. It is also a matter of experience, reading novels, and engaging in other extensions of one’s imaginative powers. Although this is
not a matter of abstract reasoning, what is involved here is what Charles Taylor calls articulation\textsuperscript{249} – although some of the understanding involved may be largely tacit.

Elijah Millgram recognizes that we learn about our life piecemeal. He conceives of practical wisdom as being adept in the use of the practical syllogism by learning through experience about the defeasibility conditions of practical syllogisms. This learning process is the process by which we learn from experience what is important.\textsuperscript{250} His account of practical reason, which he calls “practical empiricism,” explores in detail the question of how we become adept at the practical syllogism through experience. That is, he explores the ways in which we can learn piecemeal the defeasibility conditions of practical syllogisms by articulating our sense of what is important to us in life.\textsuperscript{251} I will examine his views for insights about the difficulties confronted in becoming practically wise.

The process of learning from experience what is important is ordered toward improving one’s grasp of the defeasibility conditions of practical syllogisms. The practical need for such a grasp derives from the fact that many practical syllogisms will

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\item \textsuperscript{249} See Charles Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self}, 77.
\item \textsuperscript{250} See Elijah Millgram, \textit{Practical Induction} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); see also his “Reasonably Virtuous” in \textit{Ethics Done Right}, 133-157.
\item \textsuperscript{251} If I understand Millgram correctly, he is skeptical about there being a description that gives unity to one’s life as a whole. However, Millgram sees practical induction as the process whereby we become adept at using the practical syllogism, because we have a better understanding of the defeasibility conditions of such syllogisms. That is to say, we learn the contexts in which we should or should not draw the conclusions of defeasible practical syllogisms. Millgram calls this the process of learning from experience what is important. Furthermore, Millgram argues for the necessity of practical induction by claiming that the unity of the self over time requires that we learn from experience what is important. This seems to suggest that the primary context of action in which defeasibility conditions apply is the context of the agent’s whole life. If learning what is important is not equivalent to learning the place aims have in one’s life as a whole, then there is still the global judgment about what is “important” that makes judgments about the defeasibility conditions of practical syllogisms tractable. Until Millgram can answer the question, “important for what?” I think there is a crucial indeterminacy in his articulation of his view.
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apply in any given context. The less technical way to put this point is that there will be many pursuits at any given time that will have something to be said for them. An agent needs to have some way of discerning which pursuits defeat others in particular contexts. He needs to know which desirable end to pursue. In terms of the practical syllogisms, he needs to know which are “salient” – that is to say, which are undefeated in this context. This requires understanding the details of the situation, having adequate descriptions for the situation, and understanding how the different descriptions that generate applicable practical syllogisms interact, so that one can know which are defeated and which are salient.

This creates something of a paradox, however. Millgram expresses the paradox as he articulates his view of how practical reasoning makes us more adept with the practical syllogism by teaching us the defeasibility conditions of different syllogisms. Millgram expresses the paradox this way: “practical reasoning is likely to run out precisely when we need it most.”

Millgram’s reasons for this claim as follows: experience allows us to develop and more fully articulate our ends by seeing them in new contexts and learning more of their defeasibility conditions. Millgram notes that ability to be able to relate together different ends and features of a situation is most crucial for big decisions (such as choice of profession) where the relevant considerations are likely to be multifarious. However, such decisions are also typically the most unrepeatable, so that one is least likely to be able to draw on past experience so that one can have a refined sense of the relevant considerations and their inter-relations. Millgram recognizes a further problem due to his

proposal regarding the piecemeal manner in which we improve our practical reasoning.

For Millgram, we settle conflicts between ends in an *ad hoc* way with other conceptual resources we have available. We use what he calls “connecting judgments” to render the competing considerations commensurable. Consider the following examples Millgram uses in *Practical Induction*:

*Alison:*

Alison works for Devil’s Island Repertory Theatre, but she is negotiating the terms of a new and more interesting job at the Tragic Mews, down the coast. She does not yet have a contract in hand, and she has a policy of not giving notice, or letting it be known that she is planning to leave a job, until the next job is settled: she does not want to fall between two chairs, or have undercut her effectiveness if she ends up staying.

Tomorrow the Devil’s Island management will make plans for the coming season. Alison will be at the meeting, and sticking by her policy will mean lying; her lies will become the basis of her colleague’s almost sure to be disrupted plans. Alison is averse to lying, because she feels loyal to her colleagues and the organization of which they are a part. Which of the two competing practical judgments should take precedence in these circumstances? Is the practical syllogism that tells her to keep her plans to herself defeasible by her aversion to lying?

Alison cannot say which of the two considerations she feels more strongly, which is not to say she is indifferent; her desires do not have strengths that can decide the practical problem for her. But she realizes that were her current employers planning to fire her, they would not tell her, if there were business reasons not to. And she thinks that it is generally inappropriate to show more loyalty to others than they are prepared to show to oneself…She decides to continue to play her cards close to her chest; until she has a signed contract in hand, she will act as though she is staying at her current job.253

*Beth:*

Beth is a philosopher who has adopted a policy of not going to talks by visiting speakers; they do not, she has found, contain the advertised new insights, incisive arguments, or horizon-broadening ideas, but rather, by and large, just the same old moves in a slightly different order from last time. This week a visitor is coming with whom Beth would like to go to dinner after the talk; she feels it would be

embarrassing to turn up for the food after having skipped the paper. Should she make an exception to her policy?

Beth realizes that if she is bored by the talk, she will find dinner unenjoyable. For one thing, if the talk turns out to have been typically boring, she will have stopped paying attention midway through, and will be just as embarrassed by not knowing what went on as she would have been by not having come at all. For another, if the talk is as bad as the statistics indicate it will be, a philosophical conversation with the speaker is likely to be undesirable. For the same reason one should not bother to go hear speakers, one should not, Beth decides, have dinner with them afterwards.

However, the reason that Beth wants to have dinner with this speaker is that she has read the speaker’s work, and it is usually exciting, full of new insights, fresh arguments, and so on. There is every reason to expect that his work-in-progress will be just as good. And this makes it likely that his talk will be an exception to the practical judgment that philosophy talks are not worth going to. Beth decides to make an exception, just this once.\textsuperscript{254}

In Alison’s case the connecting judgment about loyalty resolves the conflict between being honest and covering all her bases. In Beth’s case the notable interesting nature of the philosopher’s work connects and resolves the conflict between competing judgments.

When discussing the paradox, Millgram notes the \textit{ad hoc} nature of such resolutions and notes that the availability of such connecting judgments is a matter of good luck – and often such connecting judgments will be unavailable. But Millgram notes a deeper problem here. He notes that in cases such as the two above “the number of relevant considerations was quite small…The more complex the situation, the harder it will be to successfully bring the competing considerations to bear on each other in this kind of way.”\textsuperscript{255} Millgram even doubts that there is a possible way to do this if the situation is complex and the relevant considerations sufficiently multifarious. But of course, that is when we need practical guidance the most.

\textsuperscript{254} Elijah Millgram, \textit{Practical Induction}, 62.

\textsuperscript{255} Elijah Millgram, “Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning,” 288.
Let me make a few comments on the difficulty of making considerations commensurable if we only improve this ability piecemeal in the way that Millgram envisions. We can see the depth of the difficulty if we reflect on some of Millgram’s claims. First we should examine Millgram’s reasons for his claim that we must treat practical reasoning as defeasible. Let us recall the nature of our practical judgments – we place actions and ends under certain descriptions and judge that actions falling under those descriptions are desirable. Now judgments of this nature are almost infinitely specifiable – eating is pleasant, eating on the porch with friends is pleasant, eating on the porch with friends with all the housework done is better than when there is still work to be done; agents who make these judgments can be more or less sensitive to the contexts in which the action descriptions apply and do not apply; they may also be more or less sensitive to the contexts in which they find these types of actions and ends desirable in some way. They can also be more or less sensitive to the limited and qualified nature of their judgments of desirability. That is, an agent may or may not be sensitive to the fact that basketball is pleasant in a particular way that is different than the pleasantness of friendship. Furthermore, it is not to be expected, nor is it practically a good idea that agents develop a sophisticated hierarchy of ends. Developing a “sophisticated hierarchy” of ends would entail agents specifying actual or potential ends they might pursue256 in as much detail as possible, and giving an ordinal ranking to each end.

I think it implausible that actual humans ever possess such a hierarchy, even implicitly, to be called on consistently in practical deliberation.257 But even if some

256 That is, ends they would have if they found themselves in certain situations.
human agents could possess such a hierarchy, Millgram gives good reason to suggest that it would be a bad idea to rely on it. Millgram puts the point this way about desires, but it applies to thinking about ends:

A desire is formed in a particular practical context, and we should not expect its content to address demands not made by that context…[A] newly formed desire will generally not contain within itself the resources needed to adjudicate conflicts between it and many other actual or possible desires…If you did form desires equipped with these resources…you would be foolishly committing yourself to a position whose practical upshots you could not have seriously considered.258

If one were to equip one’s ends with the resources to adjudicate conflicts between actual and possible ends, one would be committing oneself to a position whose practical upshot one could not have seriously considered. Millgram makes the point as part of his argument that we must learn from experience. If we do equip our ends with these resources, we are not likely to fully grasp the significance of what we have done; so when we are put in a situation of conflict of ends259 we are likely to frequently change our mind or not rely on our hierarchy at all. The reason for this is that when faced with actual choices, our not-fully-grasped-hierarchy is likely to commit us to courses of action that we cannot live with. All of this is to say that, in many cases, such a hierarchy will be useless in practical deliberation. Practical reasoning conceived as forming and appealing to such a hierarchy would almost always “run out precisely when we need it most.”

Furthermore, trying to rely on such a hierarchy, when we will often be led to abandon our

257 John McDowell argues against appeal to such a ranking system as being explanatory of action in “Virtue and Reason,” 68.


259 And let me note here that every moment of existence for a human with a reasonably complex set of ends is a moment of potential “conflict” between those ends – for at any moment pursuing a whole host of them will be possible, so one will have to choose between them.
established hierarchy is likely to be counterproductive, because it will corrode the unity of agency. Such agents would be people with well worked out practical views that they rarely stick to or rely on. They would be dogmatic and flaky at the same time. Further, in ordinary situations, their decisions will consist of “changing their mind.” Repeated experience of this is likely to contribute to a sense of practical confusion that is unnecessary. It will also contribute to the sense that one changes one’s practical views almost always, and thus lacks any coherent framework for understanding the place of different goods in one’s life. In this way, then, trying to develop a complete hierarchy of ends is likely to corrode unity of agency.260

If the above paragraphs are correct regarding practical hierarchies, it is tempting to say that they are no help to practical reasoning at all. For their only supposed advantage over treating one’s practical judgments as defeasible would be that they can provide in advance more resources for adjudicating practical conflicts. But the upshot of our discussion is that such a hierarchy could do no such thing, and laboring under the illusion that it can is likely to do more harm than good, as far as practical understanding is concerned.

So according to Millgram, it looks like we must treat our practical judgments as defeasible.261 But the reasons Millgram offers for treating our practical judgments as

260 This is significant because one of the initial attractions of such a hierarchy might have been its apparent ability to contribute to the unity of agency by meticulously relating an agent’s ends together.

261 Millgram’s argument justifies the epistemic claim that the way that agents specify and grasp their aims is such that their practical judgments regarding these aims are defeasible. Particularists have done a lot of work in arguing for the related metaphysical claim that there is no hierarchy of reasons for action to be had, such that end A always has priority over end B, no matter how detailed and context-sensitive the specification of these ends. I must say that I am sympathetic to this claim, but I will not argue for it here. I will also note that this claim is not the same as particularism proper. Particularists make the stronger claim that the reason there is no hierarchy to be had is that any consideration however specified
defeasible are equally reasons for us to think that our practical judgments will often be misguided. Millgram’s argument against equipping desires or ends with resources for adjudicating all conflicts is that we cannot have possibly considered or grasped the relationship between our ends and other ends that we might pursue. Millgram’s concern is that agents should not commit themselves to future decisions they cannot live with by equipping their ends with resources for adjudicating all conflicts. But if the worry here stems from our insufficient grasp of our ends in relation to other ends and considerations, the problem does not seem to be only with the future ways that a given end is connected with other ends. It seems that we are not likely to have grasped the desirability of different ends in relation to other ends and consideration relevant to decisions at the time we make them, especially if we consider complex decisions. But that is precisely what we need if practical deliberation is going to help us rather than “run out precisely when we need it most.” We can see that this is what we need by once again considering the practical syllogism. The content of any particular practical syllogism gives no guidance regarding which practical syllogism(s) are salient in the context. So what we need is a grasp of the relevant desirable ends in relation to each other and in relation to the relevant details of the situation. I am suggesting that Millgram’s line of thought should lead us to believe that this is precisely what we typically lack.

I note here that in speaking of practical reasoning as “misguided,” I am not making any particular assumptions about what makes successful practical reasoning successful. From an Augustinian perspective, successful practical reasoning fits an agent

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 can be a reason in favor of doing an action or a reason against it. I am not committed to this stronger claim. See John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” in Mind, Value and Reality, 50-76 for one of the sources of this particularist commitment. See the works of Jonathan Dancy, particularly Ethics Without Principles (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004) for extensive elaboration and defense of this claim.
to enjoy his highest good, but one need not make any such assumption. Millgram has a much thinner account of successful practical reasoning. Successful practical reasoning allows an agent to build a unified conception of what is important. On any standard of importance, it seems that we can be misguided about what is important. For example, many college graduates can attest to many hours of what they now consider “wasted time,” i.e., time spent on what is not important. So by the standard of their current conception of what is important, their practical judgment was misguided. That is to say, in light of their current conception of what is important, they judge that the activity was not worthwhile. And it is not quite sufficient to say that such hours are not wasted because they give an individual the experience necessary to judge that such activity is not worthwhile. For even if this is the case, the action might be misguided on two counts. Even if the ultimate standard of action is how the action contributes to developing a person’s conception of what is important, action of the kind we are considering could be misguided because there was a different course of action that would have done a much better job of contributing to the task of developing a conception of what is important.

My claim here is that Millgram’s point about why practical judgments must be defeasible should lead us to the view that practical judgment must often be misguided. Millgram’s thought is that we need to treat ends as defeasible, because the context in which we form a desire or choose an end does not adequately equip us to understand how that end will look in a different future context. But just as we are not likely to know how

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262 It is important to note here that Millgram’s conception of a good human life is not necessarily that of a life always engaged in significant activities to the neglect of ordinary, everyday activities. Note Millgram’s attention to the defeasibility of our practical reasoning. A reasonable conception of what is important that draws on experience and notes the complexities of life will likely note the importance of balance. One cannot always be engaged in important activities if that rules out wiling away an afternoon with a friend, etc. That is to say, in its place, doing those sorts of things is important too.
such an end might relate to other defeasible ends in future contexts, we are often unable
to grasp how those future contexts might be relevant to the present decision. Note that the
future is relevant to present decisions, and it is quite difficult to know in detail how these
future circumstances might bear on the desirability of making a given choice in the
present. “How things play out” is highly relevant to our retrospective judgments
regarding the desirability of a decision, and it seems that we cannot possibly predict, let
alone grasp the relevance of all these future events that will bear on the present decision.

This raises a more general problem that makes it difficult for practical reasoning
to be of use to agents: Typically there is substantial indeterminacy of the factors relevant
to the desirability of a choice. Why do I say this? In order to answer this question, it will
be useful to discuss some things MacIntyre says about how we characterize intentional
actions.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre notes how the descriptions we use to characterize
actions make sense against the backdrop of various interconnected, ongoing and yet-to-
be-completed narratives. 263 So MacIntyre gives an example of a married man working in
his garden. 264 He notes that the man is not doing one thing but many things. He is
“digging,” “gardening,” taking exercise,” “preparing for winter,” “pleasing his wife.” He
notes that some of these descriptions describe his intentions and some describe
unintended (foreseen or unforeseen) consequences of what he does. Further, in order to
fully understand the action, we must properly *order* and relate the different intentions and
consequences together. This means distinguishing which intentions are primary, or which

263 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch. 15.
are short-term intentions constitutive of longer term intentions. Doing this requires properly relating the action to what MacIntyre calls “settings,” and it is essential to these settings that they have a history. The settings of this very simple example include the institution of gardening, the history of this particular garden, the history of the household, the marriage of a particular couple and the institution of marriage. Further, we have several intentions which can be related together in different ways both causally and temporally. MacIntyre comments as follows:

For if someone’s primary intention is to put the garden in order before the winter and it is only incidentally the case that in so doing his is taking exercise and pleasing his wife, we have one type of behavior to be explained; but if the agent’s primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise, we have quite another type of behavior to be explained and we will have to look in a different direction for understanding and explanation.

In the first place, the episode has been situated in an annual cycle of domestic activity, and the behavior embodies an intention which presupposes a particular type of household-cum-garden setting…in the second instance the episode has been situated in the narrative history of a marriage…We cannot, that is to say, characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others.265

Since these settings have a history, we understand action by properly situating it in the relevant narratives, and properly relating the narratives together. Noting this, MacIntyre claims that “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”266

There is much to say about this discussion by MacIntyre that is relevant to the concerns of this chapter, but at this point I wish to draw one lesson from the discussion. The narratives are yet to be completed narratives, so properly situating an action within

265 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 206.
266 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 208.
them at a time is impossible without knowing how things turn out. Further, the relation between the relevant narratives is indeterminate at the time of choice.

In “Moral Luck,” Bernard Williams reflects on this kind of indeterminacy of factors relevant to judging action.\textsuperscript{267} He discusses a Gauguin-like case where an artist abandons his family in order to devote himself to painting. Williams discusses how the place the decision has in Gauguin’s life, his subsequent assessment of it, and his ability to justify it to others depend in large part on its success.\textsuperscript{268} So by the nature of the case he lacks the resources at the time of decision for adequately characterizing and understanding it such that practical deliberation will give him proper guidance regarding what to do.\textsuperscript{269}

We do not need to look at extraordinary cases like Gauguin to understand this phenomenon. Will a certain decision be good for one’s career? It depends on how we fill in the details. Should one be focused on advancing one’s career at this time? Again, it depends on how we fill in the subsequent details.

There is a further source of indeterminacy here. Indeterminacy arises because the desirability of an action depends in part upon how the action ends up influencing an agent’s subsequent practical understanding.\textsuperscript{270} Consider our discussion of Daniel


\textsuperscript{268} Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck.” 22-24.

\textsuperscript{269} This case and Williams’s discussion of it are complicated by the question of the overriding nature of the moral. Nagel and others would argue that remaining faithful to one’s family is a moral concern that trumps becoming a great artist, no matter how one’s art turns out. See chapter X of Thomas Nagel, \textit{The View from Nowhere} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). I reference Williams’s example here only as one case where how we understand and evaluate an action depends on what happens after the moment of choice.
LaRusso in chapter 2. It is a good idea for Daniel to take lessons from Miyagi only if he learns what Miyagi has to teach.\textsuperscript{271} By the nature of the case, Daniel must lack this understanding when he makes the decision, so he must also lack understanding of what would make his decision a good one.

There is a more formal way to put this point that we have already canvassed. In chapter 2, I followed Millgram’s suggestion that commensurability of ends is the \textit{product} rather than a precondition of good deliberation. As I elaborated on that claim, I suggested that ends really are not commensurable until and unless an agent commensurates them.\textsuperscript{272} The basic reason for thinking this is that ends and goods are not simply commensurable or incommensurable abstracted from how an agent fits them together in his life, how he deliberates about them, and how such deliberations form his practical outlook.

If all this is right, then we have several reasons to think there is something paradoxical about successful practical reasoning. To put the problem one way, there are several considerations that suggest we have adequate resources to guide our decisions rightly only \textit{after} we have made the relevant decision, which is what I have called the “access problem.”

\textsuperscript{270} This is especially true on an Augustinian view (or Platonic view) where the human good is remote from and transcends goods achievable in life. On this sort of view perfected practical understanding which fits one to enjoy this transcendent good is the point of good action, rather than good action being the ultimate point of good exercises of practical understanding. But one does not need to adopt this kind of view in order to motivate the above claim.

\textsuperscript{271} And one of the lessons Miyagi has to teach is that Daniel can learn from Miyagi only if he trusts that Miyagi has something to teach him, \textit{before} Daniel knows what that is. \textit{The Karate Kid} is not a random example in this context. I think one of the lessons of the film is that a certain kind of practical faith is often a necessary precondition to practical understanding.

\textsuperscript{272} Several others – none sharing the same basic views of practical reason – come to similar conclusions. See in particular Charles Taylor in “Leading a Life,” and “Responsibility for Self” and David Wiggins in “Deliberation and Practical Reason.”
Another way to put the problem is that the content of our practical reasoning always underdetermines our practical conclusions. I wish to spell this out a bit, because I think the practical case raises important issues not always treated in treatments of underdetermination of judgment.

The issue before us is whether the bases of practical judgments can provide adequate grounds for those judgments. How does the problem of underdetermination arise? The ground for practical judgment is the desirability of the relevant action, object or pursuit. The grounding desirability judgments consist of judgments that a certain object, action or pursuit is desirable in a certain way. What we need to justify is the inference that because x is desirable in the way that it is, it is all things considered desirable to pursue x in this context. The problem is that there are many true propositions at a given time that a particular action is desirable in some way. Further, practical deliberation itself can transform the descriptions we use to understand our situation in quite unforeseen ways, so that the true practical syllogisms available to a person are not fixed throughout deliberation. New ones can arise from a person’s new ways of describing his situation. What a person needs is a way to relate those judgments together such that he has grounds for an all things considered judgment – that x is (among) the most desirable options given the circumstances. The considerations of the previous paragraphs suggest that we lack the resources to do this adequately.

5.4 Wittgensteinian Responses to the Access Problem

What are the possible responses to the apparently impoverished resources of practical reason that can provide good grounds for decision and action? It is worth noting
here that the problem parallels the problem of how we make competent linguistic judgments and competently use words, given the “poverty of input” that went into learning words and the language. In “Virtue and Reason” McDowell draws the parallel between learning a language (and other kinds of learning) and inculcating a moral outlook. McDowell writes:

We are inclined to be impressed by the sparseness of the teaching that leaves someone capable of going on in the same way. All that happens is that the pupil is told, or shown, what to do in a few instances, with some surrounding talk about why that is the thing to do; the surrounding talk…falls short of including actual enunciation of a universal principle, mechanical application of which would constitute correct behavior in the practice in question. Yet pupils do acquire a capacity to go on, without further advice, to novel instances. Impressed by the sparseness of the teaching, we find this remarkable.

How should we respond to the apparent sparseness of resources for having good grounds for practical judgment – for “going on in the right way,” however we might conceive of the notion of “the right way”? Aurel Kolnai’s views point us to the idea that this situation renders practical deliberation a breeding ground for self-deception. As Kolnai puts the point:

Placed before significant choices, man cannot but deliberate, weighing ends as if they were means, comparing them as if they were fixed data accessible to theoretical measurement, whereas their weight depends on the seesaw of his own tentative willing and on his emergent parti-pris as well as the other way round. In

273 I say this is interesting because the primary alternative to Augustine’s reaction to this state of affairs will be a “Wittgensteinian” approach that draws on Wittgenstein’s treatment of the issue in the Philosophical Investigations. (The Investigations are also largely responsible for drawing attention to the “poverty of input” problem in the first place. It is also interesting because Wittgenstein opens the Investigations by quoting Augustine’s Confessions as an account of language learning that fails to notice the difficulties involved here. But Burnyeat (“Wittgenstein and Augustine ‘De Magistro’”) persuasively argues that Augustine did take this problem seriously, and that his treatment of the problem in De Magistro remained central to his thinking. In my view, Burnyeat’s assessment of the situation is helpful for understanding the end of the Confessions and for articulating an Augustinian conception of practical reason – after all, in the Confessions, Augustine seems to model the perfection of practical reason on learning to speak.

274 John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 64.
some sense, it is an inherently deceptive, not to say deceitful operation, with loaded dice as it were; the agent cannot help weighting what he is weighing, though neither can he do the weighing without a vague but imperative reliance on the results of his weighing, some would say the illusion of his manipulating objectively fixed weights. 275

I would like to focus on what I have called the “Wittgensteinian response” to the apparent poverty of resources for practical understanding. I would like to do so in light of Kolnai’s thought that this phenomenon makes practical deliberation ripe for self-deception. The view I have in mind is what has become the fountainhead of “particularist” approaches to practical reason. I will focus on the writings of Iris Murdoch and John McDowell. 276

It will be useful to begin with points of agreement between the “Wittgensteinian” approach and an Augustinian approach to underdetermination. Both hold to an indefinability thesis about the good. Murdoch speaks of retrieving the “deep sense of the indefinability of good, which has been given a trivial sense in recent philosophy. Good is indefinable not for the reasons offered by Moore’s successors,277 but because of the infinite difficulty of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality.”278 Similarly, McDowell suggests that the good is understandable only from within the determinate moral outlook of the virtuous person, and that this outlook is uncodifiable.279

275 Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends,” 272.

276 In particular, I will focus on Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (London: Routledge Classics, 2001) and John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason.”

277 Murdoch refers here to emotivists and other non-cognitivists who take good to be indefinable, because the grounds on which a person bases an ascription of goodness are subject to that person’s will.

278 Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, 41.

279 See “Virtue and Reason,” “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” and “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” all collected in Mind, Value and Reality.
for his part, holds that the good is indefinable in terms of anything attainable in life. No
temporal good is to be identified with the good. There is also a stronger thesis that
Augustine would share with Murdoch and McDowell which I will discuss below. An
Augustinian view should deny that there is any systematic priority of some temporal
goods to others, or that there are non-defeasible rules of practical reason regarding the
circumstances in which certain goods take priority over others.\textsuperscript{280}

Murdoch holds to indefinability because of the infinite complexity and
inexhaustibility of the good. Augustine holds to indefinability because of the \textit{remoteness}
of the good. In each case, their understanding of the indefinability of good provides a
nice explanation of the apparently limited resources of practical reason. For the
indefinability thesis underwrites the idea that there is infinite variability of the salience of
reasons for action.\textsuperscript{281} That is to say, there is no formulatable priority of considerations or
detailed systematization of relevant considerations that would avoid the indeterminacies
and complexities of practical reasoning discussed in the last section. They are all

\textsuperscript{280} This thesis should not be thought to extend to goods such as “exercising virtue.” Exercising
virtue does have systematic priority over the pursuit and attainment of any other temporal goods that might
conflict with it. However, this should not be thought to minimize the parallels between an Augustinian
framework and that of Murdoch and McDowell. For Augustine, virtue just is the proper ordering of other
temporal goods. But it fits quite well with an Augustinian framework to say that no temporal goods have
systematic priority over other goods, and that there are no non-defeasible principles for the ordering of
these temporal goods

\textsuperscript{281} By this claim, I am not claiming that they are all committed to a strong form of particularism.
By “infinite variability of salience” I do not mean that any consideration whatever (including e.g. ’that this
action is an instance of acting justly”) can in some contexts be a reason in favor of an action and sometimes
a consideration against the relevant action. Murdoch is committed to such a thesis, but I do not think that
either McDowell or Augustine are so committed.
committed to saying that no principle or set of principles will determine what appears to be underdetermined by the articulable resources of practical reason.282

Although Augustine and these Wittgensteinians share an understanding of the source of the complexity of practical reason (indefinability) they have different views about how agents should respond to this complexity, and about how practical understanding can be achieved in the midst of this sort of complexity. Furthermore, they have different views about the source of the indefinability of good. I will examine the Wittgensteinian response to underdetermination in light of their views on indefinability.

A similar thought seems to lead both Murdoch and McDowell to the claim that the good is indefinable (or a moral outlook containing a conception of how to live is uncodifiable, in McDowell’s case). It is the thought that the good should be sought “for nothing,” that is, for its own sake. Murdoch is explicit in rejecting any natural or supernatural telos for human life that renders virtuous action intelligible as virtuous.283 Murdoch writes:

The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. ‘All is vanity’ is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only way to be good is to be good ‘for nothing’…That ‘for nothing’ is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself.284 Murdoch speaks here of the “for-nothingness” of the good as the correlate of

282 Thus McDowell: “If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue required to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one’s mind.” (“Virtue and Reason,” 58). I think Augustine would concur.


284 Iris Murdoch, Sovereignty of Good, 69.
indefinability. McDowell is not as explicit on this point, but he does press Aristotle’s idea that virtuous action should be done for its own sake in order to develop an interpretation of the role of *eudaimonia* in Aristotle’s ethics. If I understand him correctly, he claims that in Aristotle’s view “*eudaimonia*” does not name a point or purpose for life in any way distinct from virtuous activity. 285 McDowell argues that *eudaimonia* consists of excellent activity (i.e., the activity of a good man) in the circumstances in which he is placed, and that “prudential notions” such as what is worthwhile or satisfying or beneficial are derivative to the virtuous person’s conception of excellent activity. McDowell says that it is *because* a life consists of exercises of human excellences that it is a satisfying life. 286

In this, Murdoch and McDowell differ from Augustine. As I understand Augustine, virtuous activity is sufficient to fit one to enjoy happiness, but it is not the same as *eudaimonia* - or in Augustine’s language, it is not the “supreme good” for human beings. The supreme good is eternal life in peace, and he thus disagrees with Murdoch and McDowell on whether there is an external point or *telos* of human life. Let us see how these differences play out in their different approaches to practical understanding.

For Murdoch and McDowell, a conception of an external human *telos* is not available to make some of the difficulties of practical understanding more tractable.

285 John McDowell “The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle’s Ethics.” As I am reading McDowell, the thesis that he attributes to Aristotle is stronger than the thesis that virtuous activity is a constituent of *eudaimonia* (which would only entail that virtuous activity is necessary for *eudaimonia*). He seems to be attributing the stronger “Stoic” sounding thesis that *eudaimonia* just is virtuous activity – which would of course entail that virtue is sufficient for happiness. Of course, Aristotle explicitly denies that virtuous activity is sufficient for *eudaimonia*, (see *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1101a15) and holds that the possession of at least some “external goods” is necessary for *eudaimonia*. It is instructive that McDowell speaks in this context of Aristotle’s “strains” in his treatment of the relationship of external goods to *eudaimonia* (“The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle’s Ethics,” 18).

However, McDowell does suggest that practically rational agents operate with a conception of how to live. In “Virtue and Reason,” McDowell conceives of a virtuous person as a person with perfected practical reason, in that the virtuous person’s character consists of a reliable sensitivity to the salient reasons for action in a situation.287 Remember why this is a crucial part of practical reason. In any situation there are multiple considerations that at least *prima facie* lend support to a variety of courses of action.288 If practical reason is to guide rational action, it must provide grounds for viewing some considerations as salient and others as defeated. The virtuous person in any particular situation properly apprehends which considerations are salient. Regarding particular instances where a virtuous agent sees one concern as salient over others, McDowell says that we can view this as a manifestation of the virtuous agent’s conception of how to live. However, we should not view the agent’s apprehension as arising from a straightforward *application* of his conception of how to live to the situation on the ground. That way of viewing the situation is what McDowell calls the “deductive paradigm.”289

In the deductive paradigm, one’s conception of how to live provides one with strong enough principles such that the principles plus the facts of the situation entail which consideration to treat as salient. A virtuous agent’s conception of how to live is uncodifiable, such that there is no systematic priority of considerations that can be laid


288 I say *prima facie*, because in McDowell’s view the salient considerations often “silence” competing considerations – i.e., render them such that in this context they are not reasons for action at all. See “Virtue and Reason,” 56. See also “The Role of *Eudaimonia,*” 17.

down “in advance of all the predicaments with which life may confront one.”  

The rationale for this claim seems to be similar to Millgram’s arguments against a policy of systematic ranking of considerations to be drawn upon in practical reasoning. The different considerations interact in quite different ways in different situations that could not possibly be anticipated. Nonetheless, in McDowell’s view, an agent’s conception of how to live does render his particular judgments intelligible. He says, “Our understanding of [a virtuous agent’s conception of how to live] enters into our understanding of actions…by enabling us to share, or at least comprehend, the agent’s perception of saliences.”  

How does our understanding of a person’s conception of how to live enable us to understand how a person sees a situation when that conception does not entail how he will see any given situation? This question seems especially pressing because McDowell, and Murdoch as well, recognize, and even emphasize all the apparent deficiencies of available grounds for practical judgment discussed in the last section.  

In response to such queries, McDowell draws an analogy with grasping the meaning of a word and applying it to novel circumstances. According to McDowell, we can understand why a person applies a word in a novel context, even if our (largely shared) understanding of the word does not include principles that entail the application of the word in the relevant context. The idea is that with the relatively meager input with which we learn the word, we “cotton-on” the meaning of a word, and can apply it to new contexts such that our application will make sense to others who have grasped the


meaning of the word, even though we are not working with principles that entail when
the word applies. McDowell quotes Cavell in this connection:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and
expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that
this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals not the
grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and
understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our
sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of
significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what
else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when
an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls
“forms of life.”

Is this an adequate reply? Whatever we say about the language case, we must
examine the details of how agents are able to possess a reliable sensitivity to the good,
such that the exercise of this sensitivity always issues in right action, given the apparently
insufficient grounds, on any occasion of decision, for getting things right. As we answer
this question, we should remember that both Murdoch and McDowell are moral realists.
According to them, there is such a thing as getting things right and getting things wrong,
and what it is to “get things right” is not merely a function of the choice or preferences of
the agent, or a shared consensus of people sharing a form of life.

Both McDowell and Murdoch use perceptual language in order to articulate their
conception of the moral outlook of a virtuous agent. Murdoch speaks of such an agent
having clear vision, and McDowell speaks of the virtuous agent as possessing a reliable
sensitivity. Murdoch elaborates a bit more than McDowell regarding what goes into
developing and manifesting such “vision” or “sensitivity.” Here she develops the idea of
giving attention to a situation. The focus here is seeing things as they are, without any

292 John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 60. McDowell is quoting from Stanley Cavell, Must We
type of illusion or obfuscation. The chief source of illusion comes from within the self, through various kinds of selfishness and personal illusion. Murdoch writes, “Virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is.”

Elsewhere she writes, “The chief enemy of excellence in morality…is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.” Murdoch’s idea is that just and loving attention to things is able to free a person from the selfish and self-absorbed fantasies that cloud practical understanding.

This use of perceptual language points us to a key aspect of Murdoch’s particularism. Her basis for denying any general principles is that proper deliberation in a situation requires attending to the particularity of this situation, rather than squeezing it into a pattern of other situations so that a general rule can be applied in deliberation. Murdoch compares attending to situations to attending to a work of art. Proper attention to a work of art goes beyond saying such things as, “This painting employs color in manner X which is characteristic of Y kind of painting,” then going on to apply settled criteria by which one judges Y kind of painting. Instead, so Murdoch argues, one must attend to this particular use of color and assess the piece as a unique piece, where its differences from similar pieces may mean that settled ways of assessing those pieces do not apply.

293 Iris Murdoch, Sovereignty of Good, 91.

294 Iris Murdoch, Sovereignty of Good, 57.
Murdoch provides an example of what she means by just and loving attention. The example is of a mother-in-law reconsidering her judgments regarding her daughter-in-law.

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very ‘correct’ person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as happening happens entirely in M’s mind.

Thus much for M’s first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’ Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, ex hypothesi, M’s outward behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.295

As we see in this example, a key resource for learning to see things as they are is redescription.296 In Murdoch’s example, M attends to D, realizing that her understanding of D is likely to be clouded by her own vainglory and prejudices. In the process of “looking again” at D she changes her operative descriptions of D. D goes from being

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295 Iris Murdoch, Sovereignty of Good, 16-17.

296 See Elijah Millgram, “Murdoch, Practical Reasoning and Particularism,” in Ethics Done Right, 168-197 for discussion of the importance of redescription to Murdoch’s views. I have been aided at various points in my discussion of Murdoch by this essay.
‘vulgar’ to ‘refreshingly simple’ from ‘undiginified’ to ‘spontaneous’ from ‘noisy’ to
gay’ and from ‘tiresomely juvenile’ to ‘delightfully youthful.’ Now, Murdoch notes that
such description and redescription is ‘infinitely perfectible.’\footnote{Iris Murdoch,  
\textit{Sovereignty of Good}, 23.} In fact, this view is a linchpin of her particularism.\footnote{See Elijah Millgram, “Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism” on this point.} In Murdoch’s view, the whole work of deliberation is
getting a true description of one’s situation.\footnote{See Elijah Millgram, “Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism,” 175.}

The infinite perfectibility of practical reason makes sense in light of the grounds
for Murdoch’s and McDowell’s basic position – the indefinability of good (or
uncodifiability of a conception of how to live, in McDowell’s case). Yet it is difficult to
square that aspect of Murdoch’s view with her views regarding the decisive nature of
deliberation conceived as acquiring a true to reality description of the situation. “True
vision occasions right conduct,”\footnote{Iris Murdoch, \textit{Sovereignty of Good}, 64.} she writes. McDowell similarly conceives of excellent
practical reasoning as providing quite decisive reasons; for a virtuous person conceives of
salient considerations not as overriding competing considerations, but as silencing them –
making them such that they are not reasons for action in the situation at all.\footnote{John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 56.}

My suggestion is that the decisiveness of the reasons these Wittgensteinians
conceive practical wisdom to provide fails to take seriously the considerations that
motivate their views in the first place. It is important here to emphasize the picture of
reasons for action that both Murdoch and McDowell endorse (McDowell is more direct

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\footnote{Iris Murdoch, \textit{Sovereignty of Good}, 23.}
\footnote{See Elijah Millgram, “Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism” on this point.}
\footnote{See Elijah Millgram, “Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism,” 175.}
\footnote{Iris Murdoch, \textit{Sovereignty of Good}, 64.}
\footnote{John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 56.}
on this point). The uncodifiability thesis is not the claim that persons possess a tacit grasp of rules or principles that they are too complicated to articulate. Murdoch’s indefinability thesis and McDowell’s uncodifiability thesis assert that the conception of the good really is uncodifiable – it resists codification into any general rules or principles. So virtuous agents operate with a conception of the good (a conception of how to live, in McDowell’s view) which explains their appreciation of salient considerations in particular instances, but simply is not the grasping - explicit or implicit – of general principles or rules.

This is where it becomes important to emphasize their view that the good (or the virtuous person’s conception of how to live) resists codification, but not because the good is something that transcends human life. That is to say, Murdoch and McDowell deny Augustine’s explanation of indefinability. What Augustine’s explanation provides us with and Murdoch and McDowell’s does not is an understanding of the various kinds of indeterminacy facing a person in any situation of practical decision. McDowell and Murdoch deny this indeterminacy with claims such as “true vision occasions right conduct” and that the virtuous person apprehends reasons as silencing competing considerations, combined with claim that true vision and sensitivity is of temporal reality considered in itself. Our descriptions and the practical upshot of these descriptions of temporal states of affairs must be shot through with indeterminacy, if we consider them in themselves (i.e., apart from reference to a remote good which they reflect). The relations in which the apt descriptions of one’s situation and actions stand to other things is simply not settled at the time of deliberation. But in that case, the proper assessment of a decision will only be possible in retrospect. And this is not merely an epistemic point. It

302 Murdoch does speak of the good as “transcendent” (see Sovereignty of Good, 57ff.) but the sense she gives to that term is different than what I am envisioning here.
is not just that we will always lack *information* to properly assess a decision, but that the relevant facts are not all in at the time of a decision. The assessment of a decision depends on how things turn out.

What, then, is the warrant for Murdoch’s claim that true vision occasions right conduct, or for McDowell’s claim that the virtuous person apprehends salient considerations not merely as providing the strongest or best reason for action, but as silencing competing considerations? McDowell puts his claim in the strongest possible terms: when a virtuous person exercises his sensitivity, *all* considerations conceivable as competing considerations are reconfigured in the virtuous person’s apprehension of the situation to provide no reason for action at all.\(^{303}\) This often entails a quite radical reconceiving of the purported considerations. McDowell considers a conception of excellence that includes some form of temperance. According to one way of looking at things, the temperate person must forego certain pleasures and thereby incur a loss (of pleasurable experience), but this loss is outweighed by the good achieved in acting excellently. McDowell asserts the following, on the contrary:

> The thesis is not that the missed chance of pleasure is an admitted loss, compensated for, however, by a counterbalancing gain; but rather, that in the circumstances (viz., circumstances in which the missed pleasure would involve flouting a requirement of excellence) missing the pleasure is no loss at all.\(^{304}\)

I have no objection to the idea that the larger context of a situation can lead a person to reconstrue his understanding of part of the situation. Seeing a prospective pleasure as base, or self-indulgent could lead one to conclude that one has no reason to


pursue it. What I do object to is McDowell’s envisioning of all competing considerations being silenced (rather than merely defeated) whenever excellence (virtue) is in view. My objection comes from the indeterminacy we find in many such contexts.

Murdoch and McDowell’s way of describing deliberative contexts works best for what we might call “episodic” deliberations and decisions. What do I mean by “episodic”? The primary feature of an episodic situation is that the context is relatively self-contained. Thus, Murdoch can use the metaphor of a work of art for deliberative contexts. In Murdoch’s example, how one treats (or thinks of) one’s daughter in law is determined by attending to her specific qualities and gaining an apt positive description of her, rather than a perfunctory one based on rigid ways of assessing people (combined with jealousy and other personal factors that cloud judgment). McDowell’s examples usually pit some consideration of excellence against a clear and present prudential prospect (gaining some pleasure, or avoiding some hardship) which the consideration of excellence is thought to silence.\footnote{305}

Murdoch and McDowell emphasize the uniqueness and complexity of situations, such that one’s grasp of the salient elements of a situation is not subject to formulation in a rule. But they underplay a key aspect of deliberative contexts that renders at least some form of holism about reasons for action plausible.\footnote{306}

\footnote{305 The examples are a bit less straightforward, since the judgment that there is a consideration of excellence in play is a subtle judgment based on perception of the situation; and this perception is not formulatable into rules (such as: when a situation has features x, y, z then a consideration of kindness is in play).}

\footnote{306 By ‘holism’ I mean the claim that at least certain considerations can have different ‘valences’ in different deliberative contexts. See Jonathan Dancy, \textit{Ethics Without Principles} for extensive discussion of this idea and many illuminating examples. I think we can also take holism to encompass the claim that there is no absolute priority of considerations at any level of description. Thus there are considerations X and Y, such that consideration X takes priority over consideration Y in some contexts, while Y takes}
The consideration I have in mind is the infinitely various ways that deliberative contexts are connected, and should be connected in thought by deliberating agents.

Treating deliberative contexts and decisions as isolated situations entails failing to attend to the situation as it is. First, it belies the very descriptions we use as we attend to these situations. Consider Murdoch’s example of M and D. Some of M’s descriptions situate D in various narratives. She describes D as a party to the marriage with her son. M brings to bear M’s relationship with her son (she notes her jealousy of her daughter-in-law). It would be mad for her to do anything else. How would she “attend” to D in such a determinate way that “occasioned right conduct” abstracted from the various narratives that are a part of D’s life and constitute M’s relation to D? But these narratives are historically extended, not yet fully determinate realities, and they are relevant to how M ought to treat D.

There is another aspect of the connectedness of contexts of decision, the denial of which would simply be inattention to our situation as it is: Our individual decisions contribute to the shape of our life as a whole. And although (according to Murdoch and McDowell), there is no general priority of one consideration over another, the different goods available must be given some place or other in my life. Charles Taylor

priority over X in other contexts. This last claim is fairly mild, and compatible with plenty of “generalism” about reasons for action. It does not even entail the central claim of holism (about variant ‘valences’), as best as I can tell. But one thing that lends plausibility to this weaker claim as well as the stronger claims of holism is the variegated connectivity of different deliberative contexts, and this connectivity is something that I think Murdoch and McDowell give insufficient attention to, or at least fail to recognize one of its upshots as a problem for their views.

307 See Alasdair Maclntyre, After Virtue, 206ff.

308 This does not commit me to any claim about what kind of shape good lives must have. Nor does it commit me to denying that there can be various kinds of disunity in human lives. It is simply the claim that the concept of ‘a whole life’ has application, and the place of decisions in a person’s life as a whole is a relevant aspect of understanding and assessing those decisions. See Charles Taylor, “Leading a Life” for relevant discussion.
puts the point this way (he is commenting on Aristotle, and speaks of a plurality of “final ends” but we can extend the point to all goods of human life): “But even if we see a plurality of final goods of equal rank, we still have to live them; that is, we have to design a life in which they can somehow be integrated, in some proportions, since any life is finite and cannot admit of unlimited pursuit of any good.”

Why do I say that McDowell and Murdoch deny an upshot of this kind of connectedness of action and decision? Because this kind of connectedness renders ineradicably indeterminate what Murdoch and McDowell claim the virtuous person can grasp as determinate. The place of a decision within a person’s life and within the other continuing histories of which it is a part is an aspect of deliberative situations that we must be sensitive to, if we are to adequately attend to things as they are. But the place of these decisions in the relevant history is only determined once the relevant histories have played out (typically long after the relevant decision has been made). Further, how these histories play out is beyond a person’s volitional control and the predictive power of any person.

In addition to this indeterminateness of any situation to which we must attend, the evaluation of most decisions and the judgment regarding which consideration was salient in any given situation must be a retrospective one, and this for two reasons. First, part of this judgment depends in large part on which of the many possible scenarios actually play out. It is only in light of this that we can judge certain decisions to be wise or foolish, trivial or important, a good career move or a bad one, good for one’s family or bad for it.


\[^{310}\] The Taylor quote suggests he at least underemphasizes the point, but I need not discuss that here.
(Is Daniel’s decision to learn Karate from Miyagi a good one? It depends on whether Daniel sticks around long enough to learn what Miyagi has to teach). Second, even if we could predict how these various connected histories will play out, we cannot envision these scenarios with enough clarity in advance to make these judgments without the aid of hindsight.

If Murdoch and McDowell believe the type of practical vision or sensitivity they envision is possible generally in human decisions (at least for virtuous agents) then they seem to be ascribing cognitive and imaginative powers to humans that they do not and could not possess.  

If this criticism is correct, then a Murdochian or McDowellian approach would seem to invite the very kinds of personal fantasy that Murdoch claims is the “chief enemy of excellence in morality.” Consider someone who grasped his reasons as silencing others while in a situation where such judgments of salience can only be made in retrospect. Such a person would have to presume to have a full grasp of how things will turn out (whether good or bad). This leaves plenty of room for self-aggrandizing fantasy. But a person’s picture of how things will turn out need not be self-aggrandizing in the sense that he makes himself the hero of the story, or accords himself too much importance in his deliberations, or is overly optimistic about how things will turn out for him. The very presumption of having this capacity to predict and assess how things turn out in advance is self-aggrandizing. It is so in the straightforward sense of ascribing too

311 Such a thought is, I believe, behind Augustine’s understanding of why he was unable to achieve neo-Platonic vision of “the One” (Murdoch’s conception of the good is in all relevant respects identical to the neo-Platonic conception of the One). It is also why he accuses the “Platonists” of pride for believing humans to possess such powers.

312 Iris Murdoch, Sovereignty of Good, 57.
much ability to oneself. It is also focused on the self in such a way that prevents the loving and just attention to others that Murdoch describes. Murdoch writes of difficult decisions that, “The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and *really looking*. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair.” However, the determinateness with which Murdochian vision requires us to see persons and situations (denying indeterminateness of salience and good choice) prevents precisely this just attention that Murdoch enjoins. Why is this?

Agents must view as settled in such situations, if they are to conform to the Murdoch/McDowell picture, that which is manifestly not settled, namely, the characters and lives of others. A Murdochian approach forces us to consider other’s characters and the course of their lives as either fixed or on a pre-determined course of development. Otherwise, how could we deny the need for retrospective insight in knowing what a loving approach to a situation would be? We must admit that this too is indeterminate, in that we do not know precisely how the decision will shape the development of others’ character or their lives more generally. The suggestion that the right course of action toward others can be grasped as necessary by just attention to the situation, including their place in it, denies this.

Perhaps description and redescription will help us here. Perhaps we can see that such an attitude is *patronizing* and try to leave it behind in subsequent approaches to others. But if we are going to leave behind the patronizing attitude, we will also have to

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313 Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 89.
leave behind the idea that our attention to a situation forces a certain course of action upon us. Too often it is impossible to have the knowledge of the full situation, especially knowledge of others, which would be required to maintain such a judgment.

Let me summarize what I have been suggesting in this section. We have been discussing within the realm of practical deliberation the kinds of poverty of input problems that fascinated both Augustine and Wittgenstein about all learning and judgment. Regarding those considerations, Burnyeat writes:

Wittgenstein probably knew much better than his expositors what he was doing when he omitted the sentences preceding his quotation [of Augustine’s *Confessions* at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*]. To leave out God and the Platonic mind from the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* was to accept Augustine’s problem as his own and to declare that it must be solved in naturalistic, purely human terms.314

My suggestion is that Murdoch and McDowell are taking up the problem as it relates to practical judgment and following Wittgenstein’s project of solving it in “purely human terms” while also taking a cue from Wittgenstein’s conception of learning as different from grasping rules and general principles. My further suggestion is that their attempt fails.

5.5 Augustinian Approach to the Access Problem

How does Augustine respond to the problems of underdetermination of practical judgment outlined in section 5.3? We can look at his response in light of problems raised for the Wittgensteinian approach. As Kolnai brought to our attention, practical reasoning, especially in light of the concerns we have been sketching, is ripe for self-deception.315

We cannot help deliberating to find out what to do, but in doing so it seems that we must “stack the deck” if our deliberations are going to give us any determinate answer regarding what to do.

The Wittgensteinian approach eschews the idea that we can grasp general principles or rules to get beyond the apparent poverty of input and indeterminacies of grounds of practical judgment. But the approach nonetheless requires us to believe that persons can have determinate understanding of something that simply is not determinate (how things will turn out and therefore which considerations will turn out to be salient). A person adopting this response to apparent underdetermination is in a position of being self-deceived (for she thinks she either has or could possess knowledge that no human can possess in temporal life). Can an Augustinian response on the part of an agent do a better job of seeing things as they are and avoiding self-deception?

We are bound to be skeptical upon first considering what I take to be the Augustinian approach to these matters. For starters, Augustine’s reflections on poverty of input and underdetermination arising out of *De Magistro* led him to his doctrine of divine illumination: no human can teach another, but all learning comes from divine illumination of the mind. Besides questions arising from the theological commitments to this position, the view seems ripe to produce self-deception. What could be more troublesome than a person viewing their every decisive decision being grounded upon divine aid that renders determinate for agents what must be indeterminate to ordinary human cognition?

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315 Aurel Kolnai, “Deliberation is of Ends.”
The Augustinian begins by affirming that the apparent insufficiencies of input and indeterminacies in deliberative contexts are actual insufficiencies and indeterminacies. Divine illumination does not render these things determinate for an agent. Thus, the Augustinian view I am sketching acknowledges that agents frequently lack a sufficient grasp of their normative concepts and intentional descriptions to anticipate their relevance in different deliberative contexts. It recognizes that this deficiency requires agents to regard their deliberations not only as defeasible, but also regard them as often misguided.

The Augustinian recognizes the various indeterminacies of deliberative circumstances which produce the paradoxical situation discussed above: persons possess adequate resources for good deliberation only after they make the relevant decisions. The Augustinian view does not look for divine illumination to solve these problems of practical deliberation.

Millgram suggests that we characterize phronesis (prudentia for Augustine) as mastery of the practical syllogism.\(^{316}\) That is to say, the phronimos grasps the defeasibility conditions of the various practical considerations, and therefore recognizes the salient consideration(s) of any situation, and acts on the basis of this grasp of the situation. The Augustinian holds that phronesis, so conceived, is impossible to attain in temporal human life. His view is not that the phronimos attains phronesis, so conceived, as a “gift from God,”\(^{317}\) despite lacking the deliberative resources to successfully deploy

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\(^{316}\) Elijah Millgram, “Reasonably Virtuous,” 135.

\(^{317}\) See *Meno* 100b, where Plato first raised the general problem of learning which has occupied us this chapter.
the practical syllogism. The Augustinian response is instead to reconceive the virtue of *phronesis* (or *prudentia*, or practical wisdom).

In book XIX of *The City of God*, this is precisely what Augustine does. He reconceives all the cardinal virtues as bearing witness to the continuing presence of evil, weakness and failure of the persons possessing them (they also bear witness to the continuing presence of external ills and evil).

How, then, should we conceive of Augustinian *prudentia*? Let us return to two ideas discussed in the last section, connected to our discussion of deliberative difficulties: the *connectedness* of deliberative contexts, and the narrative component of our deliberative descriptions. Actions are not fully intelligible except in relation to other actions, events, etc. The upshot of this is that we can never grasp the full significance of our actions in any particular situation. In response to this, one could reconceive practical wisdom as involving the Socratic recognition of this fact. Practical wisdom is acknowledging that one cannot know the significance of one’s actions, and often lacks precisely the deliberative resources one needs to make rational decisions. This is not an Augustinian reconception of practical wisdom. Augustine looks in a different direction in response to these deliberative obstacles.

For Augustine, whatever will supply our deficiencies of practical understanding, must allow us to continue to recognize these deficiencies. The solution Augustine proposes us brings us directly into the realm of Christian theology, so I will only briefly outline it. We have considered practical understanding in terms of fitting one’s pursuits into a certain kind of unified life. The conclusion of this chapter is that it is not within the

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318 See Appendix for discussion of Augustine’s treatment of the cardinal virtues in book XIX of *The City of God*. 

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deliberative power of humans to construct such a unified life. We can think of the solution in light of MacIntyre’s claim that the kind of unity that lives must exhibit is a certain kind of *narrative* unity. Augustine’s idea is that humans are unable to give their lives the kind of narrative unity that will perfect their practical reason and fit them to enjoy their highest good. If agents are to be made to be fit to enjoy their highest good, they must be able to understand their lives, including their own failures, in light of a narrative whose contours are not subject to the vicissitudes of life which vitiate human practical reason and agency. This narrative must be a narrative precisely about these failures of agency and their remedy in the midst of continuing human failure to remedy them. This is why Augustine closes the *Confessions* by embedding his own narrative onto the narrative of creation, fall and redemption, centered around the Incarnation where Christ remedies as a human what could not be remedied by humans. It is the chief remaining task of an Augustinian account of practical reason to make sense of how agents can conceive their pilgrim lives and their continuing failures to construct their lives as such in light of such a narrative, and in so doing become fit themselves to enjoy their highest good in the midst of their continuing failures to so fit themselves.

This conclusion is likely to raise a Nietzschean objection of the sort that Williams raises for Aristotle.\(^{319}\) Williams argues against Aristotle that in order to believe his account of practical reason, we must be able to believe his account of the relationship between practical reason and everything else, which we cannot reasonably do. We can imagine a similar objection to an Augustinian account. Augustine claims that if practical reason is not to be self-defeating or vitiated by the access problem we must believe his

\(^ {319}\) See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and “Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts” in *The Sense of the Past*, 189-197.
account of the relationship between practical reason and everything else. But he also makes the argument that I have tried to begin in this dissertation, which is that all non-Augustinian exercises of practical reason must be self-defeating or fail to address the access problem. That is to say, if Augustine is wrong about the relationship of practical reason to everything else, or his understanding does not provide an adequate response to the access problem then practical reason is not something that can help us live a coherent life or fit us to enjoy our highest good. That is to say, if Augustine is wrong, then Nietzsche is right.

5.6 Conclusion: Remaining Philosophical Work

I have sketched the basics of an Augustinian account of practical reason and have begun ad hominem arguments with several contemporary thinkers. These arguments have suggested that agents conforming to these various accounts of successful agency would be subject to pride in such a way that defeats their ability to be rational agents. It is necessary to continue those arguments in a way that would allow further articulation of the basic components of an Augustinian framework discussed in this dissertation. The goal of these arguments would be to sustain the position that all exercises of rational agency that do not acknowledge that the human heart is restless until it rests in God would be self-defeating. If the Augustinian can sustain that claim, then the “Nietzsche or Augustine” dilemma put forward at the very end of this dissertation would begin to appear more plausible. I have only hinted at why I think if Augustine is wrong then Nietzsche is right. A remaining task would be to directly engage Nietzsche and Nietzschean views of agency to establish the idea that if Augustine’s metaphysical
commitments regarding the highest human good cannot be sustained, then Nietzschean views of agency are the most plausible.

If the kind of Augustinian account of practical reason is to be sustained through ad hominem engagement with alternative accounts of agency, the Augustinian must make more concrete the central concepts canvassed in this dissertation. In particular the Augustinian must further explicate the notions of a ‘pilgrim life’ and what it means to use goods in a way that signifies the highest good for humans. The Augustinian would have to carry out this explication in connection with carefully tracing out the consequences of an Augustinian approach to the access problem. According to this approach, a central part of successful rational agency involves the acknowledgement on the part of the agent of his own continuing inability to engage in successful rational agency.

Some concrete issues that will arise in the course of these tasks are as follows. First, we will need to develop a concrete Augustinian psychology of the virtues and ordered loves. The difficulty here arises from the Augustinian insistence that virtue and love in this life are imperfect, and they are needed precisely to remind agents of those continuing defects of their virtue and love. Part of giving a more concrete account of virtue and ordered love will require discussion of specific temporal goods and the place these goods might play within an Augustinian community. In chapter 3, I discussed in a very abstract way how an Augustinian agent can and must recognize the diversity of temporal goods and the distinct contribution they can make to a pilgrim life. But the Augustinian view would have to develop some concrete understanding of how particular goods can play a distinctive role within an Augustinian community.
In that connection, the Augustinian view must develop a fuller account of shared goods and the goods of a shared life. I suggested that agents can live out a pilgrim life which commensurates goods only if they recognize that life to be a shared life; I also suggested that practical understanding comes from pursuing the human good in common with others. But the social component of the good life was underdeveloped in this dissertation. In addition, I spoke often of the importance of seeing one’s life as a whole in order to rightly use temporal goods, and I suggested that to do so there would be a narrative component to human agency. But this idea needs to be developed much further. What are the specific ways in which one can view one’s pursuits as connected as part of a narrative that renders practical deliberation more tractable? And how are the specific narratives in which a member of an Augustinian community would find himself able to enhance his ability to rightly use created things? How does deliberation bring narrative unity to the lives of those who deliberate (we must keep in mind that commensurability is the product of deliberation, not merely a precondition of it).

One suggestive idea developed in this dissertation is that good practical deliberation makes available better uses of goods than would otherwise be available precisely because practical deliberation yields an understanding of the limits of the deliberator and the temporal goods available to him. So it enhances those temporal goods by grasping their limits and the limits of practical deliberation. This seems important for articulating how an Augustinian community is able to confront the access problem, but there is much work that remains for grasping its precise relevance.

In relation to this, an Augustinian community is engaged in apprehending its own limits and correlative limits of created things. But it does so in the context of
acknowledging the gracious love of God. Proper recognition of this love recognizes the
goodness of oneself and others precisely under the description of one who is loved by
God. But that love is ennobling precisely because it is unmerited. This idea seems to me
important to develop as Augustinians discuss the various apparent paradoxes and ironies
of practical deliberation discussed throughout this dissertation.
APPENDIX:

AUGUSTINE ON THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

In the last section of this chapter, I argued that for Augustine the only way to pursue the right use of temporal things in a way that avoids pride which fragments the self and defeats the pursuit of right use, is to do so in a way that bears witness to one’s limits in carrying out this pursuit, particularly one’s proneness to self-defeating pride. I drew mainly from the Confessions to make this point, but Augustine picks up this idea in his discussion of the four cardinal virtues in book XIX of the City of God. I would like to examine his treatment of the virtues in this light.

Augustine’s discussion of the cardinal virtues in book XIX of the City of God is part of his argument against the Stoics who claimed that virtue is sufficient for happiness, and happiness is achievable in temporal life. Augustine responds by examining what the virtues show us about the human condition. Augustine writes:

Then again, what of virtue itself, which is not one of the primary gifts, since it supervenes on them later, introduced by teaching? Although it claims the topmost place among human goods, what is its activity in this world but unceasing warfare with vices, and those not external vices but internal, not other people’s vices but quite clearly our own, our very own?320

320 Augustine, City of God, Book XIX, 853.
The virtues themselves bear witness to the continued existence in the soul of vicious habits and tendencies. This thought is clearly parallel to Augustine’s thought in the last half of book X of the *Confessions*, where Augustine’s continence is found in his willingness to acknowledge the ways in which he is allured by the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life to misuse temporal things in pride and not refer them to his highest good. Augustine discusses each of the four cardinal virtues in an attempt to make his point. In all four cases he tries to show that the virtues bear reliable witness to the existence of evils in this life, demonstrating that we do not yet enjoy our highest good. Further, these evils with which we contend with by the virtues include evils within ourselves.

Continuing the just quoted passage, Augustine says the following about temperance:

And this is the particular struggle of that virtue called in Greek *sophrosyne*, which is translated ‘temperance’ – the virtue which bridles the lusts of the flesh to prevent their gaining the consent of the mind and dragging it into every kind of immorality. For it is never true, in this life, that vice does not exist, when, as the Apostle says, ‘the desires of the flesh oppose the spirit’…But what in fact, do we want to achieve, when we desire to be made perfect by the Highest Good? It can, surely, only be a situation where the desires of the flesh do not oppose the spirit, and where there is in us no vice for the spirit to oppose with its desires.321

Interestingly, Augustine gives an account of ‘temperance’ that is closer to Aristotle’s account of mere continence, claiming that this is the most persons can hope for in this life; but this continence bears witness to the hope that when one enjoys one’s highest

321 Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 853-854
good, one will enjoy (Aristotelian) temperance, “where there is in us no vice for the spirit to oppose with its desires.”  

Concerning prudence Augustine says:

And what of that virtue called prudence? Does she not employ all her vigilance in distinguishing good from evil, so that in our pursuit of the good and our endeavor to shun the evil, no mistakes may creep in? And does not she herself thus testify that we are in the midst of evils, or rather that evils are in us?  

Augustine continues the theme in his treatment of justice:

Consider the virtue of justice. The function of justice is to assign to each his due; and hence there is established in man himself a certain just order of nature, by which the soul is subordinated to God, and the body to the soul, and thus both body and soul are subordinated to God. Does not justice demonstrate, in performing this function, that she is still laboring at her task rather than resting after reaching its completion? For, we may be sure, the less the soul has God in mind in all its thinking, the less it is subordinated to God; and the more the desires of the flesh oppose the spirit, the less subordinate is the body to the soul. So long, therefore, as there is in us this weakness, this disease, this lethargy, how shall we dare to claim that we are saved?  

For Augustine, the very fact that prudence must be continually pursued with “vigilance” shows that we must guard against errors of judgment; this demonstrates that we have not achieved full wisdom where we grasp the good in such a way that there is no chance of mistaken judgment. The continued pursuit of ordering things by justice bears witness to continued injustice brought about by disordered loves and pursuits. Augustine then insists that one source of this disorder is the agent who pursues justice. He continues in weakness, disease and lethargy.

322 On Aristotle’s distinction between continence and temperance, see book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics.*

323 Augustine, *City of God,* XIX, 854.

324 Augustine, *City of God,* XIX., 854.
Concerning fortitude Augustine writes:

And then again, that virtue whose name is fortitude, however great the wisdom with which she is accompanied, bears most unmistakable witness to the fact of human ills; for it is just those ills that she is compelled to bear with patient endurance.325

Augustine concludes concerning virtue in temporal life:

For in this state the very virtues, which are certainly the best and most useful of man’s endowments here below, bear reliable witness to man’s miseries in proportion to their powerful support against man’s perils, hardships and sorrows. In fact, if they are genuine virtues (and genuine virtues can exist only in those in whom true godliness is present) they do not profess to have the power to ensure that the people in whom they exist will not suffer any miseries; genuine virtues are not such liars to advance such claims. But they do claim that though human life is compelled to be wretched by all the grievous evils of this world, it is happy in the expectation of the world to come, just as, in expectation it is saved.326

We should read Augustine’s claim here that genuine virtue bears reliable witness to man’s miseries in light of what he said in the beginning of this treatment of the four cardinal virtues. Augustine said that virtue in this life is “unceasing warfare with vices, and those not external vices but internal, not other people’s vices but quite clearly our own, our very own.”327 Thus true virtue bears reliable witness to our own vicious capacities, especially our tendency to pursue even virtue in a prideful way.

325 Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 855.
326 Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 857.
327 Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 853.
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