

The Reflective Life

Living Wisely with our Limits

VALERIE TIBERIUS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Preface

This is a book about how to live life wisely. You might think, given the title, that my answer would be to think and reflect more. But this is not my answer. I think that when we really take account of what we are like—when we recognize our psychological limits—we will see that too much thinking, rationalizing, and reflecting is bad for us. Instead, I think we need to think and reflect *better*. In a nutshell, this means that we need to develop the habits of thought that constitute wisdom: we need to care about things that will sustain us and give us good experiences; we need to have perspective on our successes and failures; and we need to be moderately self-aware and cautiously optimistic about human nature. Perhaps most importantly, we need to know when to think seriously about our values, character, choices, and so on, and when not to. A crucial part of wisdom is knowing when to stop reflecting and to get lost in experience.

Despite these cautions about too much reflection, I have titled the book in a way that emphasizes the reflective aspect of life. Why? I think that philosophical questions about how to live engage us insofar as we are reflective creatures. So, a philosophical answer to the question “How should I live?” has to speak to the reflective part of us. The answer has to be one that satisfies us when we are in a curious and thoughtful frame of mind. I argue in this book that if we cultivate the habits of wisdom, our lives will be successful from our own reflective point of view.

This is also a book about the more abstract topic of how to philosophize about how to live. A recent trend in moral philosophy has been toward what some are calling empirically informed ethics. This trend began with those interested in moral cognition, and it has spread to meta-ethics, philosophy of action, and moral psychology generally. The empirically informed methodology has not yet caught on in normative ethics (the branch of ethics that aims to answer questions like “How should I live?” and “What is the right thing to do?”). There are good reasons for this. The main one is the worry that we cannot conclude anything about what *ought* to be the case from the facts about what *is*. While I certainly agree that this leap should be avoided, I also think that empirical psychology can inform our philosophical theories in interesting ways. Showing how this is so is a subsidiary aim of this book.

Acknowledgements

I feel extremely fortunate to have received many kinds of help while writing this book. My home institution, the University of Minnesota, awarded me a sabbatical in 2006 and the McKnight Land Grant Professorship in 2002–4, which freed up time and gave me the resources to present my work in many distant places. My thanks are due to the Graduate School and the McKnight family for this generous award. I am also grateful to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Steven Rosenstone, whose continued support was crucial to finishing the book. These resources allowed me to hire two research assistants, whose help has been tremendous. Mike Steger helped early in the process when I was beginning to look into the psychology literature. Matt Frank's help in the later stages—which ranged from formatting the bibliography to providing detailed comments on the manuscript—was truly indispensable. I would also like to thank my department and colleagues, my fellow ethicists Sarah Holtman and Michelle Mason in particular, for supporting me and putting up with my absence while working on the book. For more help with the final stages, I am grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for allowing me to spend a month at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center in northern Italy, an inspiringly beautiful place to work. Having such a wonderful interdisciplinary group of scholars to talk to for a month was also helpful in unanticipated ways.

Many people have read and generously commented on parts of the book at various stages. I am grateful to Julia Annas, Elizabeth Ashford, Thomas Augst, Ruth Chang, Tim Chappell, Bridget Clarke, Roger Crisp, Julia Driver, Carl Elliott, Martin Gunderson, Thomas E. Hill Jr., Sarah Holtman, Christopher Hookway, Rosalind Hursthouse, Mark LeBar, Michelle Mason, Andrew McGonigal, Lisa McLeod, Elijah Millgram, Michelle Moody-Adams, Tim Mulgan, Jesse Prinz, Vance Ricks, Patricia Ross, David Schmidtz, Martin Seligman, George Sher, Henry Shue, Thomas Spitzley, Karen Stohr, L. W. Sumner, Corliss Swain, Christine Swanton, R. Jay Wallace, C. Kenneth Waters, Gary Watson, Jennifer Whiting, and Eric Wiland. Particular thanks are due to John Doris, who, in addition to providing constructive comments on the longest chapter of the book, invited me to join the moral psychology research group that has fueled my interest in empirically informed ethics.

I have also benefited greatly from presenting and discussing parts of the book at the following conferences and departments: the Department of Philosophy at the University of Arizona, the British Society for Ethical Theory, the Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, the Central States Philosophical Association meeting, the Young Scholar at Cornell program, Daniel Andler's seminar at the École Normale Supérieure, the Joint Session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society, the Ockham Society at Oxford University, the Rocky Mountain Virtue Ethics Summit, Radboud University Nijmegen's Conference on Selfhood, Normativity, and Control, the Scots Philosophical Club, the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield, Daniel Haybron's seminar at St Louis University, the Syracuse Philosophy Annual Workshop and Network (SPAWN) at Syracuse University, John Doris's seminar at Washington University, and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin Colleges.

I owe special debts of gratitude to Dan Haybron and Jimmy Lenman, who each read the manuscript more than once and provided me with detailed, helpful comments and encouragement when needed. Though there are still many flaws, the book is much better than it would have been without them. I am very fortunate to have parents, step-parents, and sisters who enjoy spending our limited time together discussing philosophical ideas, and who have given me excellent advice about the process of writing. Finally, my greatest thanks are to my partner John David Walker, who put up with my book-related moodiness, read anything I asked him to, provided criticism when I was ready for it and cheerleading the rest of the time. If this book is half as good as he believes it is, I would be very pleased.

Parts of this book have been published elsewhere. A version of Chapter 3 appeared as "Wisdom and Perspective", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 102/4 (April 2005): 163–82. A version of Chapter 4 was published as "Perspective: A Prudential Virtue", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 39/4 (Oct. 2002): 305–24. I am grateful for the permission to include this material.

Contents

I. THE REFLECTIVE LIFE AND REFLECTIVE VALUES

1. Introduction	3
1.1. Living Well and Your Point of View	3
1.2. Process and Goal: Why Start with the First-Person Point of View?	9
1.3. Aristotle and Virtue	16
1.4. A Road Map	18
2. Reflective Values	23
2.1. Value Commitments and Justification	24
2.2. Reflective Values	35
2.3. The Justification of Reflective Values: Some Concerns	56
2.4. Conclusion: Values and the Challenges of Modern Life	59

II. WISDOM AND PERSPECTIVE

3. Wisdom and Flexibility	65
3.1. A Reflective Conception of a Good Life	65
3.2. The Limits of Reflection and the Importance of Shifting Perspectives	67
3.3. Attentional Flexibility	77
3.4. Wisdom and Rationality	83
3.5. Conclusion	87
4. Perspective	89
4.1. Having Perspective: Some Examples	89
4.2. Perspective and Reflective Values	91
4.3. Refining the Account of Perspective	95

4.4. The Value of Perspective	101
4.5. Conclusion	107
5. Self-Awareness	109
5.1. The Scope and Limits of Self-Knowledge	111
5.2. Acquiring Self-Knowledge	115
5.3. Moderate Self-Awareness: Habits and Skills	120
5.4. The Value of Self-Awareness	128
5.5. Conclusion	136
6. Optimism	137
6.1. Preliminaries: Endorsement and Virtue	138
6.2. The Value of Being Realistic	139
6.3. Cynicism	140
6.4. Realistic Optimism	148
6.5. The Value of Optimism	154
6.6. Conclusion	156
 III. BEYOND THE FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW	
7. Morality and the Reflective Life	161
7.1. Reflective Virtues and Moral Agency	163
7.2. Wise Decisions and Value Conflicts	168
7.3. Some Problems: Discretion, Complacency, and Intractable Conflicts	174
7.4. Conclusion	180
8. Normativity and Ethical Theory	182
8.1. Arbitrariness and the Desire to Live Well	185
8.2. Contingency	190
8.3. The Painter and the Anatomist	193
8.4. Conclusion	196
9. Conclusion	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	215

PART I

THE REFLECTIVE LIFE
AND REFLECTIVE VALUES

1

Introduction

1.1. LIVING WELL AND YOUR POINT OF VIEW

How should you live? Should you devote yourself to perfecting a single talent or try to live a balanced life? Should you lighten up and have more fun, or buckle down and try to achieve greatness? Should you be a saint, if you can? Should you be a parent, a career woman, a socialite, a good friend? How should you decide among the paths open to you? Should you consult experts, listen to your parents, do lots of research? Should you be self-critical or self-accepting? These are questions about how to live that are addressed to the first-person point of view, to you, the one who is living your life.

We might think that the way to answer these questions is to argue for a theory of the human good, well-being, or happiness. Should you try for greatness? That depends on the content of the good life, or the nature of human flourishing. If the best life for you is the life of perfecting your talents, then try for greatness. If the best life is a life of pleasure, you should find reliable sources of pleasure and forgo perfection. To know how to live, we need to know what we're aiming at, and this is what a good theory will define: the target. The problem with this approach is that it is difficult to get consensus about the target, especially if it is described in enough detail to be helpful to us. Philosophers and, more recently, psychologists have presented us with a diverse array of options, none of which is the obvious answer to everyone.

A different approach is to ask how to live our lives given that we don't know just what the target is, and without assuming that we would agree about the matter. This is the approach I take in this book: I defend a first-personal, process-based account of how to live, as opposed to an impersonal, goal-based theory of the good life. To put it another way, we begin with the question "How should I live?" instead of questions like "What is a happy life?" or "What is a good life for a human being?" My account of how to live well

is addressed to the first-person point of view; it invokes the perspective of the deliberator. It is an account that aims to answer the questions we have when we are trying to figure out how to live our lives and we have limited knowledge about how things will work out, what we're like, and which theory of the human good is the right one.

An obvious question about such a first-personal account is this: What is the relevant first person point of view? How do we characterize the point of view of the person who wants to know how to live? We can distinguish two broad possibilities that derive from the familiar division between reason and passion. First, we might think that the relevant point of view is a reflective or rational point of view. On this hypothesis, you live your life well by living in accordance with the plans you arrive at through reasoning and deliberation, or by using reason to keep your desires and passions in check. Alternatively, we might think that the relevant point of view is an emotional, appetitive, unreflective point of view. On this hypothesis, you live your life well by doing what you want or by letting your feelings be your guide; a good life for you is one in which you feel good, get what you desire, or enjoy your experiences.

There is a long philosophical tradition that follows the first path, putting reason in the driver's seat and identifying the person (and hence the person's point of view) with the rational or reflective part. Plato used the metaphor of the chariot and the charioteer to illustrate the point: we live well, according to Plato, when the rational part of our soul (the charioteer) is in charge of the appetites and emotions (the chariot). You do best when your rational self has the reins. There are some attractions to this picture: the rational self seems to be unified in a way that appetites and passions are not, which makes it a better candidate for representing your point of view. Further, the rational self seems designed to hold the reins and direct things. At the very least, when our passions pull us in different directions, the rational self seems to be there to figure out which way to go.

But it turns out that the rational or reflective self isn't all that good a charioteer after all. Recent investigations in empirical psychology show us that the self-conscious, rational processor is more fallible than we imagined.¹ The rational self makes inaccurate predictions about what we'll find satisfying, is plagued by biases, and has a tendency to distraction. When we try to be

¹ For an introduction to some of this research see Wilson 2002 and Gilbert 2006. I discuss the research in Ch. 5.

reflective about our choices, we end up confused about our reasons, and we choose things we don't ultimately like. The rational self is hardly the reasonable, responsible, and prudent leader we took it to be. Given these problems, letting reason rule may not result in a life we find satisfying even upon later reflection. Furthermore, the non-reflective self is not so easy to control as we may have thought. It sometimes feels as if our attention and energy get hijacked by emotions or desires that are immune to our powers of reason. Worse, it turns out that non-rational, subconscious mental processes explain a great deal of our behavior in ways that are almost entirely out of our control. As psychologist John Haidt describes it, Plato's metaphor of the chariot and the charioteer ought to be replaced by the metaphor of the elephant and the rider: the non-reflective self is like a great big, determined elephant, and the reflective self is the little rider sitting on top, with rather limited control (2005: 2–4). Our reflective selves are neither as smart nor as powerful as is required by the ideal of rational control.

Perhaps, then, we should abandon the reflective self and identify with the elephant. But this won't work either, for two reasons. First, our non-reflective, emotional selves are not the best leaders either. The most obvious problem here is that we can have passions that lead us in opposite directions, leading to a lot of frustration. Even without conflict, momentary passions can lead us in directions that frustrate our long-term interests.

Second, it is as *reflective* creatures that we want to know how we ought to live our lives. People who ask questions like "What is the best life for me?" or "How should I live?" are already engaged in some reflection about their lives, and so these questions need an answer that will satisfy us insofar as we are being reflective. When we ask these kinds of questions, we presuppose that we have some kind of control over our lives, and that there are reasons for doing things one way rather than another. In other words, these questions are normative questions that require normative, action-guiding, or reason-giving answers.² To abandon the reflective self in our account of how to live would be to ignore the real source of our questions about how to live and, hence, to risk not really answering the questions we have.

A benefit of the traditional picture according to which we are identified with our rational capacities, and living well is living rationally, is that it seems to provide an obvious and satisfying answer to our normative concerns. On

² Here I mean "normative" in the philosophical sense in which it is contrasted with "descriptive" and carries a claim to justification. "Normative" in this sense does not have to do with statistical norms or conformity to cultural expectations.

one way of looking at it, the rational self is thought to be acting under the authority of rational principles that provide a satisfying stopping point for our questions about how to live. Insofar as we find rational principles to guide our choices, the thought goes, we will necessarily have found reason-giving answers. Once we've found a rational principle to tell us what to choose, we don't have to ask why that choice would be a good one. The rational self is the right guide for us because discovering and choosing in accordance with rational principles is its job. Unfortunately, though, I don't think we can look at it this way. Above I suggested one kind of reason to be skeptical of views like this that overestimate our capacity to choose rationally. Now we can see a further reason for skepticism: the promise that there *are* rational principles that these capacities track is controversial. This book does not presuppose that there are rational principles with inescapable action-guiding authority. Instead, my approach, in the tradition of Hume, is to look to our experience as the only source of answers to our normative questions. An account of how to live, on my view, must be genuinely normative in a way that gives satisfying answers to the questions we have in a reflective frame of mind; but it must also be compatible with a naturalistic picture of the world, one that contains neither imperatives from God nor principles or values that exist independently of our commitments to them.³

If we can't abandon the reflective self, but can't trust our reflective capacities either, how should we proceed? One obvious thought is that we should try to improve our reflection. There are different ways to improve our reflective processes and different ways of thinking about what role these improved processes should have in our thinking about how to live a good life. One idea is that we should first describe an ideal or perfect form of rationality, free from all our normal faults and constraints. This strategy identifies the best life for a person with the life that she *would* live if she were ideally reflective; that is, if her reflection did not suffer from any of the problems that afflict real reflection. In thinking about the good for a person, this strategy has seemed attractive.⁴ While this might be a helpful way to

³ This claim is intended to be cautious. It is not my intention to suggest that Kantian approaches in general are incompatible with naturalism. While it seems to me that some Kantian positions make extravagant assumptions about rational principles, the views of Kantians such as David Velleman and Thomas Hill certainly do not.

⁴ This is one thing that animates full information theories. See, e.g., Griffin 1986. To be sure, these theories do not recommend that we actually become fully informed as a means to improving

think about “a person’s good” from the outside, it is not promising as a way to think about how to live from the first-person point of view. Given that we are not, nor ever will be, ideally or perfectly rational, it is not obviously helpful to be told that we should choose whatever we would choose if we were.⁵ Further, given the particular limitations of our reflective capacities, it is just not clear that trying to emulate a perfectly rational being will benefit us: an elephant rider who believes she is holding the reins of a horse might do much worse in controlling her elephant than one who recognizes what she’s got.

A different strategy is to think about how to train the rational and reflective capacities we actually have so that they can function together with our emotions, moods, and desires to get us somewhere we’d like to be. This strategy is the one I favor. It involves being more humble about the powers of reflection and acknowledging the importance of our non-reflective experience. Learning how to live with the fallibility of reflection does not (cannot) mean accepting the results of our actual reflection without criticism. But we can make sense of improving our reflection without thinking about the reflection of a perfectly rational being who is not very much like us. To do this, we need to think about standards for improvement that take seriously the ways in which explicit reflection tends to go wrong and the ways in which non-reflective experience can lead us in the right direction. I propose to do this by thinking of the improvement of reflection in terms of developing certain virtues, qualities of mind, or habits of thought, that are useful for us, given our needs and limitations.

There are, surely, many qualities that foster appropriate reflection and living well. My focus will be on those that come to our attention when we acknowledge the fallibility of reflection and rational control. The four virtues I discuss focus on different limitations or problems with reflection as a guide, and they are each a part of reflective wisdom.⁶ A person

our reflective capacities; they are not intended to give guidance to deliberators. This highlights the fact that full information theories are theories of the good, not theories of how to live. What I say here, therefore, is not intended as an argument against full information theories of normative concepts.

⁵ The best idealizing accounts of the good are actually more complicated than this; they make use of an advice model according to which the good for me is what the ideal me would recommend for the actual me (e.g., Railton 1986). Again, while such theories may provide a compelling analysis of the good, the move to an advice model doesn’t help when our questions are about how to live, given our distance from the ideal.

⁶ In my preferred terms, both reflective wisdom (which has to do with living your own life well) and moral wisdom (which has to do with understanding what is at stake from the moral point

with the virtue of perspective brings her actions and feelings in line with her values; perspective helps us cope with reflection's limited motivational power. Another part of wisdom, attentional flexibility, contends with the fact that appropriate reflection does not mean reflecting all the time; the wise person has a reflective conception of a good life for her, but she also knows when it is best to experience life without reflecting. The virtues of self-awareness and optimism are shaped by competing forces: the demand for good information to make rational choices, the tendency toward various biases in reflection, and the benefits of certain kinds of distortion of the facts. These virtues acknowledge that appropriate reflection does not mean relentlessly seeking the truth. The habits of thought that a reflective person has must be responsive to the fallibility of our rational powers, and alive to the presence of the elephant under our seats.

There are, then, three important features of a first-personal, process-based account of how to live well. First, it must aim at reflective success; that is, it must give us guidance that will be satisfying from a person's actual reflective point of view.⁷ Second, it must include norms of improvement for our reflection that are not derived from an unachievable ideal. And, third, it must recognize the importance of our passions and experiences both as a source of information and as a motivational force. In this book I develop an account of how to live that meets these three criteria, the Reflective Wisdom Account. According to this account, to live well, we should develop the qualities that allow us both to be appropriately reflective and to have experiences that are not interrupted by reflection, and we should live our lives in accordance with the ends, goals, or values that stand up to appropriate reflection. I call these beneficial qualities reflective virtues, and I take them to be components of wisdom. To live well, then, is to live wisely, and the wise person knows how to live with her limits.

In the remainder of this introduction I elaborate on the thoughts covered rather quickly in this section. I will also try to situate the Reflective Wisdom Account in the larger philosophical literature and to anticipate a few concerns one might have at the outset. Finally, at the end I will provide a road map for what is to come.

of view) are part of practical wisdom. Only the first kind of wisdom is covered in this book. For convenience, I sometimes use the term "wisdom" to refer simply to "reflective wisdom".

⁷ "Reflective success" is Korsgaard's phrase, though she uses the notion to argue against a Humean account. See, in particular, Korsgaard 1996: 93–7.

1.2. PROCESS AND GOAL: WHY START WITH THE FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW?

The fact that the subjective point of view plays such an important role in the Reflective Wisdom Account will draw comparisons to subjective theories of well-being. According to such theories, whether or not something contributes to a person's well-being depends on that person's attitudes toward it. Among these theories there are two front-runners: the Informed Desire Account and the Authentic Happiness Account. The former tells us that the good for you is the fulfillment of the desires you would have if you were fully informed.⁸ The latter, according to its main proponent L. W. Sumner (1996), tells us that the good for a person is her authentic happiness, which in turn is defined as her informed and autonomous endorsement of the conditions of her life.

Subjective theories of well-being make the good for a person relative to individual subjects, and in this sense they take the first-person point of view seriously. But these theories are intended to answer a different kind of question from the one I am addressing here. These accounts are well suited to answering third-person questions about the quality of life that a person is achieving, but not for answering first-person questions about how one ought to live. Subjective theories of well-being or welfare are about the target rather than the process or practice. Given that these accounts do not recommend embodying the ideals they invoke—they do not say that we will be better off fully informed, for example—and given that we cannot know what an ideal version of us would recommend, specific recommendations about how to live do not follow directly.

One response to this difference between accounts of well-being, on the one hand, and accounts of how to live, on the other, would be to say that there are two different questions here and two different kinds of theories needed to answer them.⁹ This is not incorrect, but I think the matter is more complicated than this answer makes it seem. Surely questions about the substance of the good life and questions about the process of how to live

⁸ Defenders of Informed Desire Accounts include Railton (1986), Rawls (1971), Griffin (1986), and Brandt (1979). Griffin (1986: 32–3) denies that his theory is appropriately characterized as subjective; he claims that his theory has elements of both subjective and objective views.

⁹ I thank Nicholas Wolterstorff and Julia Annas for helpful discussion about this distinction.

your life are closely related. Subjective accounts, and, I would add, Objective List Theories as well, can shed some light on the question of how to live by defining the target or aim of life.¹⁰ If so, what reason do we have to start here rather than there? There is a rich literature on well-being and the prudential good that focuses on defining the target. Why not advance that literature rather than change the topic? Very briefly, my first answer is that the guidance we get from a theory like mine is better than the guidance we can infer from a theory of well-being. And good guidance about a profoundly important practical question is worth pursuing. Second, the focus on the process motivates an exploration of the nature of wisdom, which is interesting in its own right. Third, an investigation of the process may shed light on the nature of the target. To explain these advantages further, it will help to say more about the approach I am taking.

As I have explained, the primary focus of this book is the process of how to live, rather than the target or goal; it is primarily an account of the practice of conducting life wisely rather than a substantive account of the goods that a wise person would choose. That said, the process of living wisely surely must aim at something, and it will be helpful to clarify what that is. The thing to do is to begin with a description of the aim that is presupposed by anyone who asks questions about how to live. Such a description can't be substantive; it can't spell out the content of the good life; but what we can say is enough to be helpful when taken together with various facts about what we are like.

Importantly, the question "How should I live?" is a normative question. It is a request for guidance and for reasons to live one way or another. The aim that is presupposed by anyone who asks normative questions about how to live is that of living a life you can reflectively endorse, a good life from your own point of view. By this I do not mean "a life that seems good to you". A person's own point of view is a subjective point of view in the sense that it belongs to the subject, but it is not the point of view from which anything goes. Rather, a good life from your own point of view is a life you can affirm upon reflection; it is a life that you approve of on the basis of the standards you take to be important. Once we see what it means to live a good life from your own point of view, we can also see what a natural goal it is, and how very odd it would be for a person not to care about it. A person who

¹⁰ Objective List Theories define the good life in terms of a list of goods. For example, see Kraut 1997. The label was coined by Parfit 1984: 493–502.

doesn't care about her own reflective judgment on the way her life is going is a person who has, in an important sense, abandoned the project of directing her own life.¹¹

The idea that questions about the nature of a good life for you are normative questions that arise from reflection about how to live is central to the account defended in this book. One might worry that not everyone asks these questions, and that the kind of reflectiveness I am presupposing is the peculiar interest of professional philosophers. But I think that this pronouncement either is arrogant or misunderstands the kind of reflection I mean. The kind of reflection I have in mind, as we shall see, is not beyond anyone who has an interest in thinking about how to live.¹² A reflective person, on my view, is concerned to live a life that she can affirm, and because of this concern she sometimes thinks about what matters to her and why. If we do not insist that "thinking about what matters" is an analytic or highly intellectual kind of thinking (as I believe we should not), then it seems a bit of academic hubris to say that only academics think about these things.¹³ There is perhaps a distinctive way in which academics and intellectuals engage in reflection about their lives, but nothing in my account of reflection requires this particular way of thinking. (In fact, one might think that academics are at least equally susceptible to certain barriers to good reflection on how to live, such as the capacity for rationalization, a tendency toward self-deception and self-aggrandizement, and a lack of sensitivity to others.)

A related worry about the starting point of this book is that there are people whose direction in life is largely determined by their social roles, their religion, or their community, who live perfectly well without having these normative concerns about how to live. There may be some truth to this. Indeed, the importance of perspective, flexibility, self-awareness, and optimism is highlighted by features of life in contemporary Western culture that give rise to the need for skills different from the ones emphasized in the traditional virtues. Life in contemporary industrial democratic societies

¹¹ Of course there may be people, such as the severely depressed, who ought to abandon control over their own lives, at least temporarily. Theories of how to live, however, are directed at agents who do have an interest in, and the capacity for, directing their own lives.

¹² Certainly there are people for whom these questions about how to live well are not pressing. For a person whose basic needs are not met, living a reflective life is an extraordinary luxury. This does not mean, however, that such people are incapable of reflection, or that they would not be interested in living well in this sense if they were at liberty to do so.

¹³ In thinking about this issue, I have been influenced by Tom Augst's *The Clerk's Tale* (2003); and Arthur Kleinman's *What Really Matters* (2006). Both books, in very different ways, demonstrate a capacity for, and an interest in, reflection on the part of people who are not academics.

is characterized by competing demands and sources of stress, pressing and often overwhelming moral problems, and the imperative to be yourself in the context of a society that does not always foster the development of autonomy or approve of what people autonomously decide. This point about the relevance of culture to what counts as wisdom highlights a limitation that any account grounded in experience must acknowledge: namely, that it cannot claim to be truly universal. Rather, an empirically grounded account must start with people who have certain commitments and concerns as a matter of contingent fact.

Ultimately, the scope of my account depends on how universal are the various facts about human psychology on which I rely. This is a large question, beyond the scope of this book, and probably not one to which we yet know the full answer. That said, there are a few more things to say in defense of the starting point I have chosen. First, it should be pointed out that a self-directed life is not the same as a selfish life. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, some of the most important commitments we have are our commitments to others. This means that a concern to live a life that succeeds by your own lights does not rule out a sense of your own good that is deeply identified with the good of your family or community; a person could have both. Second, the kind of life that would make reflection on what matters unnecessary is increasingly unavailable to people. Contemporary trends in technology, economics, and politics are breaking down traditional networks of social roles very quickly and introducing a lot of options that give rise to reflection.

The theory defended in this book is addressed to those of us who do reflect on how to live our lives and who are concerned to find satisfying answers. These are the people I am referring to when I talk about how it makes sense for “us” to live, and what habits “we” ought to adopt. I think this is a limitation, but, for the reason outlined above, not a troubling one. With this qualification in mind, we can continue to explore the nature of the first-person, reflective point of view.

According to the Reflective Wisdom Account, then, a well-lived life is a life we endorse or approve of upon reflection. In other words, paraphrasing David Hume, to live well is to live a life that can bear your reflective survey.¹⁴ Now

¹⁴ Hume (1978 [1739–40]) seems to assume that bearing one’s own survey is an important goal in human life when he embarks on a brief exhortation to virtue at the end of the *Treatise*. Other philosophers who share this assumption include Bittner (1989: 123), Hill (1991: 173–88), Rawls (1971: 422), and C. Taylor (1976).

for our standards or our “reflective survey” to sustain genuine evaluation and justification, it must be possible to go wrong. If we take a person’s standards to be whatever standards she happens to have, then the resulting notion of the good life will not answer our normative concern, which brings with it the assumption that we can be wrong about various things, including what standards we ought to use to assess how well our lives are going. This implies that the point of view from which we evaluate our lives must be one from which we can recognize the possibility of error and improvement. If this were not the case, living well would simply amount to thinking you are living well; but the deep concern we have to live a good life is not a concern merely to think we are living good lives.

Given the nature of our concern to live well, the relevant point of view has to be one that we can take up to a greater or lesser degree, where doing a better job of taking up the point of view is something we see as an improvement. In other words, the relevant point of view must be something we aspire to, an ideal. Moreover, if we are to have an account that is action guiding in the right way, this ideal must be something we can actually aspire to, not an ideal that is far out of reach. What kind of point of view is ideal enough to make sense of the *normative* notion of ‘the good life’ and is also something to which ordinary people can aspire? I suggest that it is the point of view of a person with reflective wisdom. Reflective wisdom is the right kind of ideal because, as we will see, it grounds criticism of our actual standards and values, and it is an ideal easily recognizable as an improvement to our current point of view.

An obvious question for any account that makes use of idealization in this way is this: How wise must we be to count as living well? The first thing to point out is that, on my view, wisdom and appropriate reflection are not unachievable ideals. Given how I will characterize appropriate reflection, it is a state that is within our grasp; it does not include full information, perfect rationality, or full moral virtue. Second, thinking of the idealization in terms of the development of virtue allows me to refuse to settle on a principled stopping point for improvement outside the context of deliberation about how to live. From the first-person point of view, the question “How wise must we be?” is a practical question to be addressed along with other practical questions about how to live. The aspects of wisdom I discuss—perspective, flexibility, self-awareness, and optimism—give us guidance about such matters as how informed we should be, or how much we should reflect before making a choice. But, as we will see, these virtues take account of what we are really like; they do not describe an impossible ideal.

Now that we have a better idea of what the relevant first-person point of view is and how the ideal to which it aspires is shaped by the concern to live a good life, we can return to the question about the value of focusing on the process rather than the target. First, beginning with the first-person question about how to live results in an account that addresses people on their own terms and, therefore, has a foothold in people's practical reasoning. This is the sense in which I suggested above that the guidance that comes from the Reflective Wisdom Account will be better than the guidance that comes from theories that aim to articulate the nature of the target: the best guidance is guidance we can follow. This foothold is one that eludes all varieties of third-personal theories of the prudential good, because different substantive claims about the nature of the good life will be accepted by some and rejected by others.¹⁵

One might object here that while the guidance we get from a first-personal account of how to live is guidance we *can* follow, it is not the guidance we need or want. Someone pressing this line of objection might say that what many people want is to live *good lives*, not to live good lives from their own point of view. Even if we make efforts to develop the virtues that would improve our reflective capacities, these capacities could be misguided enough that the Reflective Wisdom Account will lead us to live objectively bad lives. Essentially, the worry here is that aiming to live a life that you can endorse upon reflection (the rather formal target of my account) will not result in living a good life. But I think this worry is misguided, because it assumes that there is a way to live a good life without beginning from your own point of view. Even if your goal is to live an objectively good life in some sense, what else can you do besides reflect on what a good life consists in and attempt to live in accordance with those values? In short, the only reasonable way to pursue a good life, whatever its content turns out to be, is to try to lead a life that's good from your point of view. It is possible that living well from your own point of view you will do worse than you would if your life were governed by someone else. But we should certainly hope this is not the case, as it amounts to giving up on living our own lives. Ultimately, I

¹⁵ Given this, we might wonder why contemporary accounts of well-being and prudential value have not taken this direct, first-personal approach; why, that is, they focus on the question of what a good life consists in, rather than the question of what it is to live a life well. I suspect that the explanation lies partly in the fact that many of the main proponents of these theories are consequentialists, whose interest is in what ought to be promoted or produced from the point of view of all concerned. This is a legitimate interest, but it is not the only important question about our lives.

think the only way to vindicate this hope is to show that the result of starting from a person's own point of view is compelling as an account of a good human life. Making good on this promise takes the whole of the book: we have to wait and see where we get by starting from a person's own point of view.

The second reason to begin with the first-personal question of how to live is that doing so motivates the development of an account of practical wisdom, which is important in its own right. Surprisingly, philosophers have not had very much to say about the nature of practical wisdom in recent years. When they have discussed it, they have emphasized two common and related themes: the uncodifiability of wise judgment and the analogy between wisdom and perception.¹⁶ Wise judgment is thought to be analogous to a perceptual capacity, so that a wise person sees the right thing to do without applying a code of rules or general principles. While I accept the idea that having practical wisdom is not a matter of having the right code or decision procedure that one mechanically applies, I also think that the analogy to perception leaves the nature of wisdom mysterious and opaque. By breaking down wisdom into a set of skills, I hope to illuminate its nature without having to rely on rules or decision procedures.

There is, furthermore, an advantage to situating a characterization of reflective wisdom in the context of a naturalistic account of how to live. Given the constraints I have imposed on the construction of the Reflective Wisdom Account, the accompanying picture of wisdom will be one that takes seriously the facts about our psychology and the limitations of our rational capacities. This is, to my mind, a substantial benefit that should be appreciated by anyone who is committed to fitting ethics into the natural world. This last point introduces one more consideration in favor of starting where the Reflective Wisdom Account starts: for naturalists of a certain stripe, a psychologically realistic account of reflective practice may be a fruitful starting point for ethical theorizing in general, or at least an important constraint on the development of defensible ethical theories. For those who think that ethical theory must provide action-guiding reasons, and that such reasons must ultimately derive from a person's psychology, a theory of good reflective practice that is tied to our psychology and aspires to an ideal is a natural resource.

¹⁶ See, e.g., McDowell 1979; Nussbaum 1986. An exception to this generalization, and to the lack of philosophical attention to the nature of wisdom, is John Kekes (1995) who has developed a detailed and illuminating account of what he calls moral wisdom.

1.3. ARISTOTLE AND VIRTUE

Aristotelian accounts of the good life, and eudaimonist accounts generally, do focus on the first-person question of how we ought to live our lives (Annas 1993). In this respect and in others, the strategy of argument described above resembles the Aristotelian strategy for defining human flourishing. Yet my account of the reflective life is not really Aristotelian, at least not on one standard interpretation of the Aristotelian project.¹⁷ According to this interpretation, the Aristotelian project is naturalistic in a particular sense: it begins with thoughts about the human being as a natural organism (like other natural organisms such as lions and bees) and proceeds to think about what is good for a human being, given this nature.¹⁸ The Reflective Wisdom Account, on the other hand, begins with thoughts about the concerns embedded in the normative questions of reflective creatures. This difference makes a difference to which virtues are discussed, and to the justificatory structure of the theory. Furthermore, the account of how to live discussed here is contingent in a way that Aristotle's is not usually taken to be. My account is addressed to people with a specific concern to live well, it relies on claims about the values that people tend to, but might not have, and it is influenced by facts about culture that are historically and geographically specific. Aristotle's account of flourishing is not meant to be contingent in any of these ways.¹⁹ That said, there are some important similarities that should be identified.

Naturalistic Aristotelians are very sensitive to what people are like insofar as they rely on a conception of our nature to justify the virtues. A similar attention to the facts about us will be evidenced here. My attempts to explore what people are like in this book will be informed by empirical psychology

¹⁷ I should emphasize that my intention here is merely to elucidate the nature of my own project, not to engage in scholarly debate or interpretation of Aristotle.

¹⁸ Foot (2001) strongly suggests this interpretation. For a different interpretation of Aristotle see Nussbaum 1995. For a helpful general discussion of Aristotelian naturalism and its alternatives, see Stohr 2006. Other interpretations of the Aristotelian project may be closer to my view, though I do not know of any such project that brings empirical psychological research to bear on the question about the nature of practical wisdom.

¹⁹ There is a sense in which the conception of a good life for eudaimonists is contingent on the concerns of reflective agents. As Annas (1993: 39) explains, the ancients thought that we have "an instinctive tendency to think of our lives as wholes ... This is why we do not typically find arguments to show that it is rational to think of one's life as a whole, to see one's activity as given shape by a single final end. This is taken to be what we do anyway; at least we all do it instinctively, and the more reflective do it in a reflective way."

and, in particular, by positive psychology, a new field that has arisen within psychology, which emphasizes the study of mental health, well-functioning, and related strengths of character. Given the sensitivity of what counts as a virtue to facts about human beings and our commitments, it seems reasonable to refer to this literature in our discussion of wisdom.

Second, at least on one standard interpretation, the Aristotelian strategy does not divide moral values from non-moral values and attempt to ground the one in the other. The ancients did not draw a hard distinction between these two “types” of value; nor did they assume that one or the other was primary (Nussbaum 1986: 5). So too in my investigation, the intent is to take people as they are with a variety of commitments, some that would fall into a traditional conception of morality, some that would be categorized as prudential, and others that defy neat categorization (such as commitments to friends and friendship). What I hope to establish through this investigation also echoes the Aristotelian tradition according to which morality and prudence (as normally conceived today) are much closer than might appear to us post Hobbes. The intention here is not to prove that it is always prudentially rational to be moral; rather, the intention is to show that when we begin our inquiry from the right place, the question about whether acting morally is prudentially rational is much less pressing.

Third, both the Aristotelian account and the Reflective Wisdom Account emphasize virtues, which sets them apart from subjective accounts of well-being and the prudential good. Virtues, in my view, are sets of dispositions to think, act, and feel in certain ways, that work together as a regulative ideal for reflection and conduct. To say that a virtue is a regulative ideal is to say that it plays a particular role in a project of character development. A virtue must be a state at which it makes sense to aim, and there must be reasons for cultivating it that people can grasp. The reasons we have to cultivate the virtues essential to the reflective life derive from our interest in living well. It makes sense to cultivate these virtues because we will live better from our own point of view with them than without them.

Unlike the Aristotelian account, the account of virtue I favor is not highly unified. Which particular dispositions count as virtues depends upon the role that is played by the quality in question. Some virtues will include dispositions to overt behavior, others will include dispositions to have certain emotional responses. Further, virtues are identified, not with respect to human nature, but by reference to the idea of a reflectively successful life and the identified limits of our reflective capacities. That there is this variation does not mean

that the virtues have nothing in common. A reflective virtue, on my view, comprises (i) a set of cultivatable habits of thought, strategies, or skills (ii) organized around a practical need (iii) that is likely to contribute to living well in a way that can be appreciated from the first-person point of view. I take the components of reflective wisdom to have two kinds of benefit. First, they are instrumental to achieving components of a good life. For example, I shall argue that optimistic realism is a means to the end of pursuing certain ideals in a satisfying way. Second, reflective wisdom is, in some respects, constitutive of the kind of good life that answers to the concerns of a reflective person.

Philosophical discussions of the virtues have been under attack recently by those who think that broad and stable traits of character have been shown by social psychologists not to be widely instantiated in creatures like us (Doris 2002; Harman 1998–9, 2000). Virtue ethicists have responded in various ways (Annas 2005; Kamtekar 2004; Sreenivasan 2002). The best response for my purposes is that the kinds of virtues at work in the Reflective Wisdom Account are not the kinds of virtues that have recently been under attack. The virtues I discuss, as we shall see, are more like habits and problem-solving strategies than like the robust character traits familiar to Aristotelian virtue ethics. When we think of virtues this way, we can rely on some of the work done by positive psychologists (who share this view of virtues) that makes a good case for the possibility of cultivating reliable habits and developing skills. Furthermore, when it comes to what we can do to live well, the recommendations of the Reflective Wisdom Account do not preclude attending to the role of situational factors in determining how we see things, what considerations we are likely to be moved by, and what we value. These factors may be very important in the project of character development.²⁰

1.4. A ROAD MAP

For our lives to go well from our own point of view, we must have commitments to serve as standards of evaluation. For these standards to count as normative, it must be possible for us to be wrong about them and for us to reflect on whether they are good standards to have. These

²⁰ For an account that emphasizes the importance of social factors to the development of character see Merritt, forthcoming.

two observations lead to a characterization of a value commitment that emphasizes stability and justification. I define stability as the feature of our commitments that allows us to take these commitments seriously and yet have critical distance when we need it.²¹ Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of value commitments and a characterization of what I call “reflective values”. It proceeds to address the question of what value commitments most people have that would withstand appropriate reflection. Some value commitments are implied by the basic concern to live a life that sustains reflection. I argue that the value of life-satisfaction and self-direction are of this kind. To discover other reflective values, I propose that we filter the evidence about what people do in fact value through the norms that constitute good reflection. I survey some of the empirical literature on human values and argue that reflective values are plural, and that, for most people, they include close relationships with other people and certain moral ends. These generalizations about human values provide a foundation for claims defended in subsequent chapters.

Of course, having stable value commitments that constitute our point of view is not sufficient for a good life. We also need to act in accordance with our value commitments, and to reevaluate them when things don’t seem to be working. Sometimes, then, we need to reflect on what matters to us and how the various things that matter fit together to form a conception of a good life. At other times we must be completely absorbed by our values in a way that is incompatible with this sort of reflection. Knowing when to reflect and when not to, and being able to shift our attention among the various evaluative perspectives that engage us, is a crucial component of wisdom. This aspect of reflective wisdom, attentional flexibility, is the topic of Chapter 3. We also need the ability to stand back from our current focus in order to remind ourselves of what really matters to us, and then to bring our feelings, thoughts, and actions in line with these reflective values. In other words, we must have the virtue of perspective, a part of wisdom which is the topic of Chapter 4.

Reflection must be limited in other ways too. A relentless search for the reasons why we care about something can end up undermining our commitment to it, and an uncompromisingly accurate picture of what other people are like can be harmful to our relationships with them. My

²¹ “Stability” can have an unfortunate connotation of stubborn endurance. As we shall see in the next chapter, stability as I intend it is quite different from stubbornness.

characterizations of the virtues of self-awareness (Chapter 5) and optimism (Chapter 6) take account of these facts.

This investigation of the reflective habits of a wise person will provide an empirically grounded description of the person who lives well. Whether the Reflective Wisdom Account presents a compelling vision depends, in part, on how the reflective life matches up with other normative notions. In Chapter 7 I consider the relationship between the reflective life and morality, in order to show that the good life from a person's point of view gives an appropriate place to moral concerns.

Chapter 8 takes up a challenge to the very idea that the Reflective Wisdom Account constitutes a normative, action-guiding theory of how to live. This challenge stems from meta-ethical concerns about the relationship between facts and norms. Now, on the one hand, the Reflective Wisdom Account need not make any meta-ethical assumptions about the nature of values and norms. We can think of it as describing a path that it makes sense to take whatever the nature of the good, given that we must start with the rational and informational limitations we have.

On the other hand, the Reflective Wisdom Account does fit naturally with a certain meta-ethical position: namely, a Humean conception of normativity according to which the norms that govern how we ought to live are contingent on our commitments.²² On this natural reading, according to the Reflective Wisdom Account, claims about our reflective values are based on contingent facts about the kinds of commitments and concerns people actually have. Further, claims about how we ought to develop our character are dependent on these contingent claims about values, and on facts about our psychology and the pressures of modern life. I do not intend to argue for this Humean view against the alternatives. I do think that it is the obvious view for naturalists to have, and I want to consider it because I think that the Reflective Wisdom Account helps make the Humean picture more attractive and clears the way for a fruitful avenue for ethical theorizing. In particular, the main concern about naturalistic explanations of normativity such as the Humean one is that our own commitments cannot provide us with any real normative force, because they are ultimately arbitrary. As I will argue in Chapter 8, however, the commitments that

²² The label "Humean" means different things to different people. As I intend it, the essential Humean commitment is to the rejection of claims about evaluative authority that are independent of contingent human nature. In another familiar sense, a "Humean" is an instrumentalist about practical reason. The view I defend here is not Humean in this sense.

the Reflective Wisdom Account relies on are not arbitrary in any troubling sense.

For naturalists in the Humean tradition, ethics must fit into the natural world. As Simon Blackburn puts it, the Humean naturalist ambition is

To ask no more of the world than we already know is there—the ordinary features of things on the basis of which we make decisions about them, like or dislike them, fear them and avoid them, desire them and seek them out. It asks no more than this: a natural world, and patterns of reaction to it. (Blackburn 1984: 182)

One contribution I hope this book will make is to demonstrate by example one respectable way in which Humean naturalists can proceed in normative ethics. Philosophers committed to naturalism of this kind have largely turned away from normative philosophy and have focused their attention on meta-ethical analysis of the questions being asked and the status of the possible answers to them.²³ If I am right, then there is another role for Humean ethicists: by drawing out the implications of our commitments in light of our ideals and aspirations about how to live, we can derive normative conclusions about the reasons we have to choose to live one way rather than another. If my defense is persuasive, we should conclude that naturalists of this sort can defend first-order, normative theories. Such normative theories will (naturally) be dependent on people turning out to be a certain way or being committed to certain norms and ideals. But this is not a problem if our assumptions about what people are like are well informed and justified. Pursuing this methodology requires philosophers to leave their armchairs, of course, but it should not surprise us that a commitment to fitting ethics into the natural world requires us to investigate what that world is like.

Leaving the armchair has recently become a fashionable thing for philosophers to do.²⁴ While the movement toward empirically informed ethics is gaining strength and attracting interest, very few philosophers interested in well-being and the good life have entered the fray. Some of the reluctance may be due to a general philosophical concern about empirically informed ethics: namely, that there is a distinction between what is and what ought to be that is ignored or downplayed in this new empiricist movement. But I

²³ Simon Blackburn (1998) and Allan Gibbard (1990 and 2003) have done very important and influential work in this area. I do not mean to suggest that there is anything wrong with this approach; my point is just that Humeans are not limited to it.

²⁴ For an excellent introduction to the new field of experimental philosophy, see Knobe 2006. For other examples of how moral philosophy might be informed by empirical research see Nichols 2004 and Doris 2002.

think that illegitimate moves from empirical psychology to normative theory can be avoided without claiming that the science is irrelevant. A subsidiary aim in this book, then, is to provide a preliminary model for how such work in empirical moral psychology might be taken account of by philosophers working on normative questions about how we should live.

The question “How should I live?” is addressed to people for whom this is a normative question, people who have a concern for justification and standards. How to answer this question in the context of a naturalistic world view is the subject of this book. The scope of the answer developed here is not universal, and its recommendations are not rationally inescapable. If there are people who do not have these concerns, who do not care about what reasons they have to live one way rather than another, I have no argument to compel them to care. I do hope that the description of the reflective life I provide is attractive in its own right, and that it will therefore be natural to identify with the concerns that motivate this characterization. The concerns I identify as the concerns we have about our lives might be at times something to aspire to rather than something that already guides us. If this is the case, the Reflective Wisdom Account is relevant to our practical lives insofar as we aim to live in accordance with our aspirations.