

# *Three Rival Versions of Nonmoral Goodness*

Thomas Loughran

Moral theory requires for its development an account of human well-being, of what it is for a thing to be good for a person—a theory, that is, of nonmoral goodness. Contemporary moral theorists—notably the so-called “new natural law theorists” and consequentialists alike—have come under fire for their failure to provide defensible accounts of nonmoral goodness.<sup>1</sup> This essay will present in outline three important rival approaches to the question of nonmoral goodness—natural law, communitarian, and informed-desire approaches—and will identify some significant strengths and weaknesses within and some principle differences among these rival versions. One of these approaches, the full-information informed-desire approach of recent popularity, will be developed to overcome its shortcomings by incorporating natural law and communitarian resources. Finally, the resulting view will be presented as maintaining the strengths and avoiding the weaknesses of each of the three rival approaches discussed, and thus as showing more promise than they for serving as the foundation of moral theory.

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<sup>1</sup>See Russell Hittinger’s *Critique of the New Natural Law Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987). His critique is more precisely that the natural law theories of Grisez and Finnis fail to provide the philosophy of nature on which an adequate account of the basic human goods must rest. See David Sobel’s “Full Information Accounts of Commensurating Well Being,” *Ethics*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (July, 1994), pp. 784–810, where he brings criticism of full-information accounts of well being to bear on what he calls the “standard consequentialist position.”

## I

Human action can be considered in terms of three logical components: apprehension, appetite, and the causes operating on these. The first component can be loosely called reason; the second, desire; and the third, the external causal influences on human action, including those in the observable and immediate environment of the agent, an environment which is prominently social in nature. The precise nature and causal relationships among these features of human action matter much for moral theory, but can be set aside for present purposes.<sup>2</sup> They are distinguished here only to suggest that attending to these components severally without adequate consideration of the three together leads to rival approaches to nonmoral good.

*A Natural Law Approach*

If we begin thinking about nonmoral goodness by attending introspectively to the process of reasoning about action (to deliberation), we notice chains of motivation in ourselves which converge into a reasonably limited number. In the attempt to categorize the wellsprings of human action, we in effect survey human nature, noticing its various aspects, functions, and ends. We have purposes related to our animal nature: there are goods of food, physical comfort and pleasure, and the like. Insofar as we are rational, there are goods of knowledge and education. We are social in nature; there are goods of friendship, community. We are sexual in nature; there are goods of procreation and family. We are consciously contingent beings, suggesting goods in the area of religion.

Lists such as these of the basic human goods, made with greater care but usually mentioning goods of less than a dozen or so kinds, have become associated with natural law theory.<sup>3</sup> The evident virtue of generating an account of nonmoral good by reflecting on human deliberation and human nature is that the list produced is likely to

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<sup>2</sup>For a sketch of the nature and causal relationships of these faculties which motivates and supports the view of nonmoral goodness presented here, see my "Freedom and Good in the Thomistic Tradition," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (July, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>See Mortimer J. Adler, "A Dialectic of Morals," *The Review of Politics*, 1941, p. 42; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 86–90; Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 124.

be applicable to and assessable by most, if not all, rational human beings. The substantial agreement among human beings about basic human goods is easily explained on this approach: human beings are generally alike, with similar capacities for activity and similar states constituting the actualization or fulfillment of those capacities.

But any such analysis of human nature and human ends is likely to be as thin as it is general, and their lack of specificity is perhaps the principle weakness of such approaches. The most important questions human beings have concerning how to weave successful individual human lives and successful communities from the fabric of human nature seem unaddressed on this thin natural law approach. It is far from clear how introspection into human nature helps to adjudicate the controversy between rival ways to prioritize and achieve goods drawn from the many areas of human activity which when considered abstractly are relatively uncontroversial. So, the appealing universality of natural law accounts of nonmoral goodness seems inescapably linked to an unappealing vacuousness.

#### *A Communitarian Approach*

The relative lack of content in accounts of nonmoral goodness resulting from natural law approaches might prompt attention to those elements in the whole context of human action from which the details of successful decisions are drawn: to the particular environment, the concrete social context, within which decisions are made. Only in the concrete situation in which the individual human agent actually deliberates can be found the data which give substance and intelligible form to human action. In fact, merely general accounts of human ends seem unable by themselves to supply any direction for human action at all. For the question as to whether the fulfillment of some human function is good for a person seems to depend on what actual human agents would do under fully specified circumstances. These would be circumstances, of course, in which the available options might not permit the actualization of a given human function at a cost which any human being would judge to be worth paying. What is good for human beings, then, would seem to be a function of the concrete circumstances in which human beings find themselves. Human beings do not find themselves within such circumstances alone; they belong to communities. Within such communities wisdom is gathered about how to transform one concrete set of physical and social circumstances into some alternative concrete set of circumstances toward which its



members are more inclined. What is good for human beings, it might thus seem, is inescapably tied to concrete human communities rather than to abstract human nature.

In focusing on the specific causes giving substance to the deliberations of existing human beings, communitarian approaches of this sort promise the kind of detailed answers to the actual questions human beings have about their good, details which natural law approaches seem unable to provide. Such details can be accumulated, moreover, bringing about in time a practical wisdom about how human beings in such and such kinds of community can respond to such and such kinds of challenges and opportunities. So, perhaps the principal strength of communitarian approaches to nonmoral good is their ability to provide detailed accounts of what is actually good for human beings.

But such detailed accounts will vary from one community to the next. Different stores of practical wisdom suitable for solving different sets of problems emerging from different particular sets of concrete physical and social circumstances will characterize different communities; what is good for a human being would seem to be relativized to the mode of community life in which he or she participates. Whose values, which store of practical wisdom to use in choosing from among rival modes of community life would seem to be questions which admit only question-begging answers, given only the resources afforded by a communitarian approach. Moreover, insofar as this feature of communitarian rational justification is noticed by members of a given community, the lack of theoretical support for the actual practice of community life may erode the motivational link between community values and individual action. Once it is noticed that membership in this particular community is not the only option available to its members, and that in the end only question-begging justification can be given for supposing that remaining within this community is good for its members, the inclination of those members to think and act in ways characteristic of mature members of that community may diminish. But one characteristic of nonmoral good which must be included in any account of it is the connection between the good and human inclination. A state of affairs which when adequately understood fails to motivate a given individual is, at least on the face of it, improperly called her "good." These three features—relativism, resourcelessness for guiding choice among rival modes of community life, and the resulting motivational skepticism—seem the biggest weaknesses of communitarian approaches to nonmoral good.

*An Informed-Desire Approach*

The importance of the link between nonmoral good and human motivation has led many to build their accounts directly from the phenomenon of human inclination, or desire. While surely not everything that is desired is good *simpliciter*, it has often been maintained that the good is what would be desired under some circumstance or other. Attempts to specify those circumstances have focused on the elimination of cognitive defects—ignorance and error—and have resulted in what are known as informed-desire accounts of well-being or of nonmoral good.<sup>4</sup> Recent informed-desire approaches have pointed toward the ideal state where ignorance and error are removed from practical judgments, so that an agent would be fully and vividly aware of all of his or her options; such attempts have been called full-information accounts. Surely, no existing human being is ever in circumstances such as these, and so the good for any individual has accordingly been defined roughly as what her idealized fully-informed self would advise her actual self to do. This turn in informed-desire theory has been toward what have been called “Ideal Advisor” accounts of nonmoral good.<sup>5</sup>

The virtues of informed-desire approaches have been characterized as their ability to capture a pair of intuitions about nonmoral good, the epistemic and internalist intuitions.<sup>6</sup> These intuitions correspond roughly to the “informed” and “desire” components of such accounts. The epistemic intuition is the recognition that information generally improves desire or inclination, and that choices are rightly criticized by pointing out relevant information not adequately considered by the agent.<sup>7</sup> The internalist intuition is roughly that whatever is meant by something being good for a person, it must include some connection

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<sup>4</sup>Recent statements of informed-desire approaches include those of Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979); Peter Ralton’s “Facts and Values,” *Philosophical Topics* 14, Fall, 1986, and “Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Review*, 95, April, 1986; and James Griffin’s *Wellbeing* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>The “Ideal Advisor” handle is taken from Connie Rosati’s “Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good,” forthcoming in *Ethics*, Vol. 105 (January, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Don Loeb’s unpublished paper, “Full-Information Accounts of Rational Desire and Individual Good,” is helpful concerning the nature of and the interplay between these two intuitions.

<sup>7</sup>The epistemic intuition is reminiscent of Aquinas’s claim that some error of judgment is necessarily involved in any instance of sin: *ST.*, I, 63, 1 ad 4m; *ST.*, I-II, 58, 2 and 77, 2; *ST.*, II-II, 53, 2.



to desire, or more properly to some motivational disposition internal to that person; this is just the intuition about the link between motivation and nonmoral good against which the communitarian approach, as outlined above, seems to fall short.

In spite of the initial appeal and popularity of full-information accounts, they have been subject to considerable recent criticism.<sup>8</sup> As do the virtues, so the vices of full-information informed-desire accounts correspond roughly to “informed” and “desire” aspects. First, the notion of an ideally-informed human being seems incoherent, on account of both the amount of information relevant to human choices, and of the impossibility of being at once fully and vividly aware of certain kinds of information. As to the amount of information, it seems any being who was simultaneously fully and vividly aware of all of her possible options would not *be* a human being, and thus would not be the identical fully-informed “self” for any human being. Nor is it clear that any being could have a complete and simultaneous grasp of certain kinds of experiences. No one who knows what it is like to have deep compassion for other human beings could be also fully and vividly aware of what it is like to take delight in the sufferings of others, one might think. So, it seems that no human being could fully grasp the amount and kinds of information relevant to human choices.

Secondly, it seems that any person who could experience delight at the sufferings of others would not be the kind of person whose advice we would want to take. In general, persons reared differently will have different perspectives and different reactions (like sorrow or delight) in otherwise similar circumstances (like witnessing the suffering of others). The hope of ideal advisor theories is to characterize some fully-informed state which will neutralize the effects of those differences. But the nature of past experiences seems, at least generally, to affect the way one reacts to any future set of experiences, including (were it possible) all experiences considered nearly at once. So the desires emerging from exposure to full information would be different for a person were she to have undergone one formation rather than another. Such desires would retain the incommensurability which appeal to the notion of full information was intended to eliminate.

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<sup>8</sup>See the papers by Sobel, Rosati, and Loeb.

Ideal advisor versions of full-information theory attempt to specify some single neutral and authoritative set of information conditions such that the desires of persons in those conditions for their real-world counterparts would constitute the good for their less knowledgeable selves. These attempts have been judged by reluctant critics of full-information theory to have run into a blind alley.

### *Differences Among These Three Approaches*

Three different approaches to understanding nonmoral good have thus far been sketched, each one corresponding to an initial emphasis on a different component of human action: natural law approaches to an initial emphasis on the role of reason, informed-desire to inclination, and communitarian to the proximate causes of these two components. Nothing said here shows that these approaches are ultimately incompatible with one another. Yet each approach can be developed in ways which focus on the role of one component to such an extent that inadequate attention is given to one or both of the remaining components. Rival accounts of nonmoral good will emerge from such unbalanced emphases. Three approaches have been sketched in just such an unbalanced manner for the purposes of illustration, and the resulting conflicts among them can be seen in three areas: regarding the source of knowledge of nonmoral good, the scope of judgments about it, and the motivational force of those judgments.

On the natural law approach sketched above, human nature determines the character of human good, and all rational human beings have cognitive access to that character through the introspection which reason affords. Community life may be needed to attain a full measure of rationality and is surely needed to achieve the goods revealed to rational persons through introspection. On the communitarian approach, however, community life plays a deeper role. For that approach insists that it is not human nature but rather concrete social life which determines the character of the good for members of a community. Members depend on life in community not only in the ways the natural law approach would admit but also for the kind of specific education which enables maturity in that community and adequate knowledge of the good for mature members of that community. The ideal advisor approach differs from each of the previous two in insisting that the good for any given human being is determined not by human nature nor by the character of social life but instead by each human being's



own dispositional properties to incline in certain ways were each fully rational and in fully-informed circumstances. Community life is necessary for the actualization of those circumstances—for scientific progress and education, at least—but it does not determine the character of the good for human beings other than by providing or restricting the range of options for individual choice. So, for knowledge of the good, the natural law approach seems to suggest introspection; the communitarian approach, formation to maturity in one's own mode of community life; and the ideal advisor approach, an education toward that fully-informed and impartial perspective which is taken as the ideal of all rational inquiry.

The judgments about nonmoral good which result from these diverse kinds of procedures for acquiring knowledge of it are likely to differ from one another with respect to the scope of their applicability. Judgments about the requirements of human nature arrived at through introspection will be universal in scope: if knowledge, friendship, and the like are goods for any human being, they are goods for all human beings, insofar as they are a function of the human nature which all human beings share. On a communitarian approach, however, the judgments about the good made by mature members of a given community will apply (at best) only to members of that community, since those judgments represent the best advice which the most experienced members of that community have for succeeding in their particular mode of life. (Mature members of a given community may recognize some range of diverse roads to maturity suitable for persons of different temperament, and so the scope of at least some of their judgments about nonmoral good may be narrower than community-wide.)

For the ideal advisor theorist, judgments about nonmoral good are at their foundation restricted in scope to the individual agent's own good, since the desires of each fully-informed and rational individual are taken as normative. It may be possible, on this view, to arrive at tentative conclusions about what is good for any member of a given community or for all human beings. But all judgments about nonmoral good which apply to more than single individuals would have a derivative character, resting upon empirical observation of what a range of individual human beings actually desire in conditions maximally approximating ideal conditions. Thus, while natural law approaches yield judgments about nonmoral good which are immediately universal in scope, communitarian approaches yield judgments whose scope is



communitarian, and ideal advisor approaches yield judgments which apply primarily only to single individuals.

The ideal advisor approach is intended to establish a clear motivational link between nonmoral goods and the individual human beings whose goods they are. The motivational link between an individual and his or her nonmoral good considered along ideal advisor lines can be expressed this way: "This is exactly what you yourself would choose, were you fully aware of exactly that information which you yourself would deem relevant to this choice." The parallel expression of motivation for communitarian approaches is this: "This is exactly what you yourself would want, were you to be formed to maturity in the mode of community life in which you actually live." There is an important difference between ideal advisor and communitarian expressions of the motivational link. Human beings naturally incline toward information about their options, but they do not (so obviously, at least) naturally incline toward participation in whichever mode of community life they find themselves. The question "why should I seek information about my options?" falls flat, whereas the question "why should I be formed to maturity in the community in which I live?" may capture a genuine concern for some human beings. Persons content to continue in their current mode of community life would perhaps be motivated by knowledge about how they would choose as mature members of that community, but persons not so content would perhaps not.

The expression capturing the same motivational connection for natural law approaches—"this is exactly what you yourself would want," etc.—is more difficult to isolate: "were I to fulfill my human nature," perhaps. Once it is noticed that the dimensions of human fulfillment can come into conflict, no description of some general area of activity will seem to have motivational force for human beings other than in an "other things being equal" sense: "I will pursue the good of knowledge, unless I have to let my family starve to do it." So, the ideal advisor approach seems to offer the clearest connection between judgments about nonmoral good and human motivation; the communitarian approach seems to offer a firm connection for some kinds of persons; the natural law approach suggests only a *prima facie* connection.

Three approaches to nonmoral good have thus far been sketched, each introduced as arising from initial consideration of a different feature of human action. The approaches suggested by each of these three different initial considerations point as they mature to accounts

of nonmoral good which conflict with respect to knowledge of the good, the scope of judgments about the good, and the motivational force of such judgments. Yet it is far from clear that merely beginning from reflections on different features of human action must drive the accounts built on those reflections to lasting conflict. In the following section, the approach building upon reflection on human inclination and leading to full-information informed-desire accounts will be developed in a way incorporating key features of natural law and communitarian approaches. In developing the informed-desire approach in this way, its turn toward ideal advisor theory will seem a mistake, and the resulting view will be no less a natural law and a communitarian position than a full-information informed-desire account.

## II

The chief difficulties for ideal advisor theory have been presented as twofold: given the amount and kinds of information relevant to human choices, the notion of a fully-informed human being seems incoherent; given the effects of past experiences on a person's perspective, the desires which would emerge from exposure to full information would be in any case incommensurable. It is in the development of solutions for these difficulties that the informed-desire, communitarian, and natural law approaches to nonmoral good can be reconciled.

The problem presented by the vast amount of experiential information relevant to our practical judgments can be mitigated in part by analysis. The good can be analyzed as roughly that which would be chosen over any—rather than over all—of its competing options were each pair fully known. This strategy of pairing options for comparison eliminates the need for reference to some impossible single instance of immediate cognitive awareness of all relevant information about all options. Yet it is not clear that postulating an enormously long series of consecutive cognitive comparisons between pairs of options by a single agent is more within reach of human cognitive capacity than is instantaneous practical omniscience. Ideal advisor theory has sought to link the choices of each human agent to all relevant information solely through idealized cognitive contact between the individual agent and that information; this is a first area in which a successful full-information account must depart from an ideal advisor approach.

It is possible that other people who are themselves in cognitive contact with information about an agent's options can shape that



agent's choices through intentional arrangement of the circumstances within which that agent's choices are made. Parents, for example, instill a habit of truth-telling in their children through the placement of a system of rewards and disincentives which intentionally mirror the positive and negative consequences which children will later learn truth-regarding speech to have. Many parents believe that the habit of truth-telling is what their children would prefer to have acquired, were they to come to experience what these parents already have experienced about truth-regarding speech.

To reasonably intend benefit to their children by cultivating in them the habit of honesty, parents require as resources not only the craft of shaping children's perceptions so as to guide their children's choices—the craft of child-rearing—but also at least rough varieties of historical awareness and of a philosophy of nature. Parents require some access to knowledge of how a range of other human beings have reacted to a spectrum of experiences related to truth-telling; this is a kind of historical awareness. They must have grounds, moreover, for assuming that their own children are relevantly similar to the human beings included in that knowledge base, that the circumstances their children will encounter are known in relevant respects, and that those circumstances are similar, again in relevant respects, to the circumstances in which parents have observed the behavior of other human beings regarding truth-telling. These grounds are part of a working philosophy of nature: a theory of human nature and of human circumstances.

Relying on these resources, parents attempt to link their children's choices and resulting characters to more information about their children's options than that with which their children are in cognitive contact. But as much as they might like to be, no parents are themselves aware of all the information relevant to their children's choices; to suppose that they were would be to try to solve the information problem merely by pushing it back a generation. Yet a child raised by an intelligent and concerned parent may have her choices intentionally linked, if not to all relevant information, at least to more information than the child could have acquired on her own. Of course, some of that benefit is transmitted through cognitive channels: through storytelling, example, advice, etc. But some benefits come not through what a child experiences, but rather through what she does not experience.

Step-saving omission of options can be prompted by a wealth of experience and yet produce benefits which take none of the child's time to accrue. An analogy with technology is apt. The contemporary

consumer, faced with the problem of reproducing high-quality sound, can by visiting an audio showroom encounter a range of options all of which are far beyond what a person in a technologically less advanced society could ever hope to produce by way of solutions to that problem. The hours of investigation of the properties of materials, theories of electricity and of sound which went into the production of the applications of technology presented to the consumer as options are together beyond the capacity of a single human being. Yet the length of time required for the consumer to make a successful choice is simply independent of the time spent developing the technology. In a similar way a child brought up in a given political order, taught a given language, initiated into a given form of liturgy, exposed to a given curriculum, and in general introduced to a given variety of activities in a certain order may choose from among the options presented in these contexts in ways which are causally linked to an indefinitely large pool of human experiences. Yet she may do so without herself being aware of those experiences. This possibility of noncognitive contact between agents and information about their options suggests, as an alternative to ideal advisor theory, an Ideal Tradition approach. How, or what could an “ideal tradition” be?

To perform a function analogous to that for which the notion of ideal advisor was created—to provide a theoretical link between the desires an agent has and full-information about his or her options—an ideal tradition would at the very least have to ground the kind of assumptions which ordinary parents were described as making in the rearing of their children. An ideal tradition must provide its members with reasons for supposing that it is a source of knowledge about how any and all of its members would choose in a variety of adequately-informed circumstances. The mature members of an ideal tradition would have knowledge of what those actual experiences have been, a kind of historical awareness. From their knowledge of these experiences, the mature members of an ideal tradition would have formulated an account of the nature of human beings and human circumstances—a philosophy of nature—grounding both a measure of successful prediction of the behavior of all of their members in future circumstances, as well as reasoned accounts of how their members would behave in other counterfactual circumstances. This philosophy of nature can be tested, refined, and confirmed or falsified in the track record of the tradition’s success in forming its members to maturity and in maintaining their allegiance to the tradition as they



encounter other ways to live, thereby adding to the tradition's store of practical wisdom.

This engagement of the mature members of an ideal tradition with a variety of other ways to live, the source of tradition-enriching experience, is also a source of tradition-sharpening challenge. For among these other and different ways to live are memberships in other communities, different traditions with different histories and rival accounts of human beings and their world. This diversity of rival perspectives raises at the level of community the same relativism-of-perspectives problem which ideal advisor theorists encounter at the level of the individual. Even given the success of a tradition in forming and predicting the behavior of its own members—and it might well fail at this—it remains possible that those same members might have behaved differently in otherwise similar circumstances had they received a different formation. Any formation they have received connects the members of a tradition with a particular set of circumstances as experienced by a particular and finite set of human beings who have themselves been formed in some particular way. But there are other sets of circumstances which other sets of persons, nurtured by different formations, have, might have, or might yet have experienced. All perspectives, all communities, regardless of the richness of their store of practical wisdom, are particular; each has a particular and different effect on the ways their members experience the world and react to it. Whose account of maturity—that is to say, which mode of community life—is normative for defining the good for any or all human beings?

The full-information informed-desire approach to nonmoral good suggests a fully-informed comparison of rival traditions as a way to approach the relativism-of-perspectives problem, where the good for any individual is to be defined by her own inclinations as she emerges from such a comparison. That tradition which would be chosen over any of its rivals in fully-informed choice scenarios would have claim to being the best tradition for the human being who chose it. Yet the relativism-of-perspective problem is easily reformulated for fully-informed choice between pairs of rival traditions. For any two traditions, there are always at least two pathways to full information. A person can be formed to maturity, first, in one tradition, and then to the kind of imaginative maturity which MacIntyre calls “second first-language competency” in the second, or vice-versa. There are, in effect, at least two incompatible sets of full information for every

pair of rival traditions, since there are at least two different sets of experience, two different formations, which lead to that fully-informed state.

It is possible that a given individual might choose the same tradition of a pair regardless of which tradition first formed him or her to maturity. Narrative history of full-information encounters between rival traditions—history recounting the deliberations and choices of persons formed to maturity in one tradition and to imaginative maturity in a second—is the locus of evidence bearing on which tradition or traditions human beings would choose if fully informed. Yet such a tradition may indicate that persons in a fully-informed comparison of a pair of traditions would judge differently, depending on which tradition first formed them to maturity; traditions may be incommensurable in this sense. This latter possibility suggests something about the aim of rational inquiry in any tradition claiming to be ideal, as well as about the nature of the practical wisdom which would have to be stored in such a tradition.

To help its members rationally adjudicate between rival traditions they may encounter, as well as to preserve itself as a tradition while enlarging the pool of experience upon which it draws, an ideal tradition will aim to establish asymmetry between itself and its rivals, asymmetry which can be importantly threefold. A successful tradition will develop resources to characterize the life and thought of rival traditions not only in its rival's own terms—enabling its members to achieve second first-language competency in rival traditions—but also in terms of its own categories. The successful tradition will, moreover, generate an explanation in its own terms of problems internal to its rival traditions, both those which are recognized as such by the mature members of those rival traditions, as well as those which are not. Thirdly, the successful tradition will marshal these resources of characterization and explanation to develop strategies for persuading the mature members of rival traditions of its superiority over those rivals. This persuasion will involve translating the power of the superior tradition's own understanding of those problems recognized by the mature members of rival traditions as internal to those traditions into terms which retain a measure of persuasive force for persons formed to maturity in those rival traditions.

It is possible that one tradition might succeed in establishing asymmetry between itself and any rival tradition at the first, the second, or even only at the third of these levels of characterization, explanation,



and persuasion. In so doing, a tradition will be gathering resources for demonstrating its rational superiority over its rivals both to its own members on one set of criteria, and to members formed to maturity in rival traditions on a different set of criteria. A tradition which accumulates in its store of practical wisdom the resources for converting to it a range of mature members from a range of rival traditions in fully-informed choice scenarios, as well as for maintaining the allegiance of a range of its own mature members in similar fully-informed circumstances, would have claim to being objectively preferred by fully-informed human beings—to being better for human beings—than the rival traditions with which it has undergone such comparison. Rational agreement would have been achieved without neutrality of standards.<sup>9</sup> This strategy of achieving rational decidability without eliminating incommensurability is a second major departure from ideal advisor theory on the road to a successful full-information informed-desire account of nonmoral good.

The major difficulties facing full-information informed-desire theory in its ideal advisor incarnation were presented as twofold: first, the notion of full information seemed incoherent, due to the amount and kinds of information relevant to human choices; secondly, the desires elicited from exposure to full information would in any case be incommensurable, due to the effect which rival formations have on human perspectives. This second difficulty may yield to the possibility of non-neutral rational agreement between mature members of nonetheless incommensurable traditions. The first difficulty, insofar as it is grounded in the amount of information relevant to rational choice, may yield to the possibility of the kind of noncognitive formation afforded by certain kinds of community. What remains is the alleged

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<sup>9</sup>“And it is of course this very same conception of reason that the genealogist rejects, so that genealogist and encyclopedist agree in framing what they take to be both exclusive and exhaustive alternatives: *Either* reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested *or* it is the unwitting representation of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretensions to neutrality and disinterestedness. What this alternative conceals from view is a third possibility, the possibility that reason can only move toward being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational inquiry. . . .” Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 59–60.

incoherence of the notion of full information grounded in the difficulty of combining certain kinds of information.

Imagine a tradition which developed a highly refined mode of life centering around a ritual which was held in secret and which required participation in, say, human sacrifice for admission. Could a mature member of a Christian tradition achieve second first-language competency in such a tradition? Probably not. The impossibility of a single individual having simultaneously full and vivid appreciation of such rival modes of human life may well count against the coherence of the kind of practical omniscience described by ideal advisor theorists, perhaps a redundant mortal wound. For the full knowledge in terms of which a person's good is defined is for ideal advisor theorists cast in terms of how a person would choose in light of a complete and fully vivid grasp of simultaneously all relevant information, and it is likely that no such complete grasp is possible for some pairs of options.

In a parallel fashion ideal tradition theory must admit that second first-language competency in certain kinds of traditions may be incompatible with mature membership in certain other kinds of traditions. But the impact of that admission is different for ideal tradition theory than it would be for ideal advisor theory. Full knowledge on an ideal tradition approach must be understood not in terms of any idealized experience by a single person, but rather in terms of the successive experiences of a number of persons whose reactions in given circumstances are thought to be similar within a range indicated by a theory of human nature and human circumstances. Such a theory of human nature can in principle enable prediction of how a given human being would choose in each of a pair of circumstances which could not both obtain in the life of a single person, just as such a theory can and does enable prediction of how a given human being's body would undergo physical changes in each of a pair of circumstances which could not both obtain in the life of a single person. A person's being burned to death is incompatible with the same person's being frozen to death, and yet we affirm the untestable hypothesis that the same human being could die either way. We affirm this because we have a theory of kinds from which we infer that one human being's being frozen to death is indicative of what would have been the burn victim's fate in relevantly similar circumstances. Just so, a theory of human nature could in principle enable the prediction that just as one human being was persuaded away from a given tradition with a given set of considerations, so would another person have



been similarly persuaded, even though that person's membership in a given tradition precludes the direct testing of that prediction. These kinds of problems deserve more precise formulation and more careful response. But enough has been said to make it plausible that an ideal tradition approach to these problems is considerably different and more promising than that of ideal advisor theory.

It seems, then, that full-information informed-desire theory can overcome its major weaknesses by abandoning some of its traditional assumptions and employing resources drawn from natural law and communitarian approaches. The difficulties concerning the coherency of the notion of full information and the incommensurability of perspectives can be resolved by abandoning reference to the ideal of a neutral and practically-omniscient perspective and substituting for it the ideal of non-neutral and practically-achievable maturity in an ideal tradition. A tradition is an ideal tradition insofar as it is equipped with a narrative history, a philosophy of nature, and the resources necessary to defend them successfully in dialectical engagement with conflicting accounts offered by any rival tradition. Maturity in such a tradition is the closest to ideal advisor status that human beings can hope to obtain.

### III

The view which emerges from the importing of natural law and communitarian resources for the resolution of the central problems facing full-information theory is as much a natural law and communitarian theory as it is an informed-desire approach. The ideal tradition theory is a natural law approach insofar as its aim is to articulate a theory of human nature which correctly identifies universal human tendencies toward a range of ends. Mature inhabitants of any ideal tradition would be able to explain whatever measure there is of universal human agreement about human goods as a manifestation of these universal human tendencies, and can offer some account of *synderesis* as the ground of the universal human recognition of these ends as ends. But the ideal tradition approach avoids the thinness of some natural law accounts of the human good by insisting both that the ends which *synderesis* reveals require clarification and prioritization by prudence, and that the demands of prudence are not universally accessible but rather are more or less so in various forms of social life. Ideal tradition is thus communitarian in its insistence on the importance of certain kinds of community life for gathering, storing,

and transmitting practical wisdom. Yet its natural law resources have been shown to arm ideal tradition theory to confront relativism and resourcelessness in the face of intra-community assessment.<sup>10</sup> Finally, because the theory of human nature to which the ideal tradition would appeal would be falsified insofar as it ultimately failed to account for the behavior of even a single human being, the goods specified by that theory are good only insofar as they would have motivational force for any human being with any prior formation were those persons to undergo a full-information comparison of the ideal tradition with any other, and subsequently be formed to maturity in the ideal tradition they would have chosen. Thus, ideal tradition theory is a full-information informed-desire theory, one which preserves the epistemic and internalist virtues of such approaches without succumbing to the incoherence and relativism with which ideal advisor theories stand accused.

So the ideal tradition approach is at the same time a natural law, communitarian, and full-information informed-desire approach, one which shows promise for preserving the resources and avoiding the difficulties of each of the three approaches; these approaches to non-moral goodness turn out not to be rivals after all. As each approach was seen to emerge from consideration of apprehension, appetite, and their proximate causal influences respectively, they seemed to suggest conflicting implications regarding knowledge of the good, the scope of judgments about it, and the motivational force of those judgments. Yet the ideal tradition approach has the resources to resolve these apparent conflicts by distinguishing their elements and uniting them in a coherent account.

Ideal tradition theory affirms that knowledge of basic human goods can be achieved through introspection. But knowledge of *the* human good—a unified life within which the basic goods are organized and prioritized in a way toward which any human being from any background would incline were she formed to maturity in the ideal tradition—requires participation in a certain form of community life, a life characterized by a shared philosophy of nature and a common

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<sup>10</sup>Whether relativism can be overcome is an empirical question on this view; for all we know it is possible that some tradition can demonstrate the kind of asymmetrical resourcefulness described herein, but only in history can evidence be gathered that any such tradition remains a candidate to be actually such.



awareness of the history of their tradition. Education in such a community does not aim at a neutral outcome. But it does aim at forming human beings whose perspective is objectively and demonstrably superior to any other human perspective for any other human beings, even while there is no universally persuasive way of accomplishing that demonstration.

The judgments about the good made by human beings formed to maturity in that tradition will be universal in scope insofar as the theory of human nature and of human circumstances internal to that tradition identifies a range of common human dispositions to choose in various ways under various fully-informed circumstances. Among these common dispositions will be those toward mature membership in this ideal tradition. But circumstances consisting in different up-bringsings and relevant genetic differences will impact both the way any human being would be persuaded to inhabit the ideal tradition, as well as the way he or she would live out mature membership in it. So, some judgments about the good will be universal in scope, some will be kind-of-person- or kind-of-circumstance-specific, and some will be applicable only to particular individuals or sets of circumstances.

There will, of course, be judgments about the good which are general and have at best *prima facie* motivational force for anyone. But all-things-considered judgments about a given person's good will have actual and all-things-considered motivational force for her if she is formed to maturity within the ideal tradition. Moreover, insofar as that tradition has proven it can live up to its promise to be able to overcome all rival traditions in dialectical engagement, it contains in its store of practical wisdom the various resources needed to persuade any person from any perspective who enters into a full-information comparison of the ideal tradition with any other perspective. Thus, the ideal tradition's claims about what is universally good for human beings will have dispositional motivational force for all human beings.

This ideal tradition account of how the good is known and of the scope and motivational force of various judgments about it is just a promissory sketch. Yet enough has been presented to render plausible the claim that the ideal tradition approach to nonmoral good is a promising candidate in a field which has been noteworthy for its lack of a front-runner. The ideal tradition approach is, of course, very much like the view of the good which Alasdair MacIntyre ascribes to St. Thomas. How much so is a question which must remain for another occasion.