

Aspiration and Inspiration in Foot and Rand

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“*Even at our best* we are so situated as to have to, and as being willing to, give up much to achieve much, whichever way you look at it: we are a delicate mix of *consumers* and enjoyers of the goods and riches we have achieved, and then of driven and reflective *producers* of new goods, new challenges.” – Gavin Lawrence¹

“Perhaps ‘because it is there’ is not sufficient reason for climbing a mountain.” – Spock²

1. “Because It Is There”

On June 3, 2017, mountain climber Alex Hennold became the first person to “free solo” California’s El Capitan mountain—that is, climb it by himself without any equipment. His ascent was filmed for the documentary *Free Solo*, and what’s notable about that movie is Hennold’s intense rationality and self-discipline. It’s particularly striking in scenes involving his girlfriend (now wife) Sanni. We see her understandably alarmed at the extreme danger to which he exposes himself—yet Hennold frankly tells her that he values mountain climbing more than this romantic relationship with her, and if forced to choose, would select it over her.

Hennold’s climb was an astonishing achievement, requiring great focus and diligence, and one must admire his dedication to his goal. But is it *rational*? Can his choice to devote such energy—and risk the feelings of those who love him to such a degree—be substantiated by

¹ Gavin Lawrence, “The Deep and the Shallow,” in John Hacker-Wright, ed., *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue* (Guelph, ON: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 238.

² *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (Paramount Pictures, 1989).

reason? When mountaineer George Mallory was asked in 1924 why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest, he replied “because it is there.” I want to consider how Philippa Foot and Ayn Rand would evaluate that answer. My broader goal is to examine the role of *aspiration* in a morality that purports to be grounded in nature.

First, we should acknowledge the traditional explanation, offered by Aristotle. Aristotle refers to the *megalopsychos* or “magnanimous” man who pursues “fine” goals (*to kalon*) because of their fineness, not as an act of calculated moral choice, but on account of his honor. As Julia Annas puts it, this *kalon* is “done for its own sake, without ulterior motive...with the *kalon* as its aim, rather than benefit or pleasure, which are other characteristic human aims.”³ Aristotle says such magnanimity “does not arise” without the virtues and “is not possible without being fine and good,”⁴ so this is not an amoral or immoral choice.⁵ Yet the magnanimous man pursues the noble goal not because it serves an end, but as an end in itself: on account of its nobleness. When Mallory said he wanted to climb Mt. Everest “because it is there,” he was plainly appealing to that kind of choice: to select a grand goal, and prioritize it, *because of its grandeur*.

2. Foot on Motivation

In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot grounds ethics in nature by arguing that each living being has a form of living—its nature—such that its possession or lack of these species-specific qualities give reason to conclude that it is a good or bad instance of that kind. Thus a deer that cannot run fast is a defective deer. Likewise, “human beings are creatures with the power to recognize reasons for action and to act on them,”⁶ so a person lacking the qualities of character whereby he recognizes valid reasons for action and acts upon them is a defective person. Basic virtue includes choosing well, and being moved by moral

³ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 99.

⁵ I leave Nietzsche aside, although I suspect one reason Foot (as I argue) gives this whole idea short shrift is because it is so associated with him.

⁶ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24.

considerations is “on a par” with other kinds of choosing well.⁷ Someone disposed to choose well—who has “goodness of the will”⁸—finds moral reasons sufficient ground for action, without needing any additional motivating desire.

Foot acknowledges that “sentiments” such as “pride” can also “motivat[e] human virtue.”⁹ Yet she offers no account of how that works. In fact, the framework she offers for naturalistic ethics is quite minimal, and it’s noteworthy that she spends more time on defects or vices such as “shamelessness”¹⁰ than on virtues, excellences, or even the “goodness” of her title. In brief, it’s unclear how aspiration fits into her account at all, let alone the motivation to realize a *kalon* project. Instead, the “automatic reason-giving force of moral judgment”¹¹ looks like ordinary ratiocination. A smoker, for example, has sufficient reasons for quitting when he knows *facts*: that smoking causes cancer and that it is “silly to disregard his own future.”¹²

But it does not seem “silly” either to climb a mountain for its own sake or not to do so. Hennold therefore either has no *reason for action* in this respect or his reasons for mountain climbing aren’t moral ones. Foot can adopt the latter position only by rejecting Aristotle’s idea of pursuing noble ends for nobility’s sake. She can recognize that physical fitness or mental discipline, such as Hennold manifests, are virtues—and that for an *unfit* person to attempt such a climb would be a defect—but she can offer only a hint about whether “because it is there” is a good reason for climbing a mountain.

In fact, Foot might regard Hennold’s choice not as a virtue but a defect. In *Virtues and Vices*, she observed that “most men waste a lot of their lives in ardent pursuit of what is trivial and unimportant.”¹³ The distinction between valid ends and trivial, unimportant ends seems to Foot to rest on the premise that there are intrinsically or objectively valid human ends, the pursuit of which qualifies as worthy, and the attainment

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 154.

¹² Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 23.

¹³ Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 6.

of which leads one to what she calls “deep happiness,” as opposed to the superficial satisfaction that trivial attainments bring. Gavin Lawrence summarizes:

for something to count as deep happiness only certain objects can be involved, and the agent has to view them in certain ways, and not in others; victories in disputes with neighbors over milk bottles can’t be so viewed, absent special circumstances, whereas those other things, like family life, and work, can be (and cannot not be, absent a special story). That is, not just anything can intelligibly be viewed as something *basic* in human life, nor as *nonbasic or trivial*.¹⁴

Obviously someone like Hennold isn’t *vicious*, but Foot also acknowledges that there are circumstances in which virtues can operate as vices due to context: a hardworking person, for example, might work to such excess that he neglects other goods so that the result is a defect.¹⁵ Perhaps in Hennold’s case she would say his courage and steadfastness run contrary to the virtues of seeking tranquility or a stable family life, and his virtues cease to function as virtues because—being focused on trivial ends—Hennold wrecks the goal virtues are meant to serve, which include not just “satisfying appetites and following desires,”¹⁶ but satisfying the *right kind* of appetites and desires.

Hennold presumably *has no* desires contrary to climbing El Capitan.¹⁷ He even prefers it to his girlfriend’s love. What’s more, he at least seems deeply happy, not superficially so. (“I felt so good,” he says afterwards. “I’m so happy that the experience was like what I’d hoped for. I didn’t compromise on any of the things that were super-important to me.”) It seems like Foot would regard this as a flaw. She suggests this when she says that virtues depend on the nature of the *species*. She uses the analogy of a wolf: “there is something wrong with

¹⁴ Lawrence, “Deep and Shallow,” 202.

¹⁵ Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 16-17.

¹⁶ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 17.

¹⁷ In the film, Hennold submits to an fMRI scan, and the scientist who reviews it concludes that his amygdala responds differently than the ordinary person’s, so that what others find stimulating does not stimulate him. This is a provocative thought, but fMRI science remains so imperfect, one hesitates to place too much weight on it yet. “Revisiting Doubt in Neuroimaging Research,” *Nature Neuroscience* 25 (2022): 833-34.

a free-riding wolf that feeds but does not take part in the hunt,” she writes; such a wolf would be “as *defective* as those who have defective hearing, sight, or powers of locomotion”—and she concludes from this that “the assessment of human action” must involve the good that a person does for others.¹⁸

That view seems to beg the question of whether goodness should be assessed in terms of the species or the individual. Biological evolution, at least, does not support her, because the relevant unit of evolutionary selection is not the species, or even the individual animal, but the gene.¹⁹ Obviously naturalistic ethics does not contend that goodness depends on what fosters the replication of genes, but that’s because consciousness doesn’t exist at the gene level; it’s an emergent property manifested in *individuals*, and only human individuals can flourish, suffer, judge, think, or act, so virtue and vice must relate to the individual *qua* individual, not just as a representative of his species. Even the jump from the idea that wolves instinctively hunt in packs to the proposition that there’s something wrong with a free-riding wolf seems overly hasty. Actually, if we encountered a “lone wolf” who figured out how to improve his chances of survival with substantially less investment of resources, we would be unlikely to call him defective, but would probably remark on his extraordinary intelligence (which is a virtue). For humans the situation is even more drastic. We surely do not regard August Landmesser—famous now as the only man refusing to salute Hitler in a photograph of a Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg—as defective for “free-riding” on Nationalist Socialism.²⁰

The problem with Foot’s analogy is that we aren’t “social animals” as she unfortunately says,²¹ but are better described, in Bronowski’s phrase, as “social solitaires,”²² meaning that our capacity for introspection generates the possibility of dual allegiances: the group

¹⁸ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 16.

¹⁹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Landmesser’s nonconformity cost him his job; drafted into the army, he went missing during the war, presumed dead. Elizabeth Flock, “August Landmesser, Shipyard Worker in Hamburg, Refused to Perform Nazi Salute,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 7, 2012.

²¹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 16.

²² Jacob Bronowski, *Science and Human Values*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 47.

and the individual. We keep company not only with others but with ourselves,²³ and this inescapably means that we have obligations to ourselves that can compete with whatever obligations we may have toward others. This dual nature has a significant consequence for how we manifest virtues.

To start with, it would be more accurate to say that virtues relate to roles, and that we (and wolves) inhabit concentric roles simultaneously, so that it's possible to have virtue in one role but lack it in others. A "lone wolf" might have great virtue as a hunter but deficiency as a member of the pack. Likewise, Hennold might have great virtue as a climber, but lack virtues in other areas of life. This is a trivial observation, as such people are plentiful—and it is revealing that the typical examples are artists: Percy Bysshe Shelley; Sammy Davis, Jr.; Frank Lloyd Wright; Jimi Hendrix. Foot is not only silent about the motivations of such people, but, given her contention that moral reasons are sufficient by themselves and require no additional motivating force, I suspect she cannot call these examples of virtue, but must dismiss them as having elevated the trivial over the basic.

In fact, she seems to rule out the choice to excel in sonnet-writing, singing, architecture, guitar-playing, or, presumably, mountain-climbing, as virtuous choices. She differentiates "the goodness of good action," which does not have "a special relation to choice,"²⁴ from what she calls "competition examples," which involve people stipulating to an arbitrary end, and then using it to judge instances or examples by relation.²⁵ The latter, she says, "will hardly seem suitable as a model for the use of 'good' in moral contexts," because there is "no point" to the stipulated end, and thus to speak of its goodness or its attendant practices also appears arbitrary.²⁶ She again uses a canine example, this time spaniels with long ears: once dog-fanciers decided upon this end, they could evaluate efforts to attain the goal of long ears, and judge some dogs "good" in this sense. But that's not what we do when speaking of good or bad human action, in Foot's view. Obviously she does not mean that such actions are exempt from moral evaluation—she would say it is wrong to treat dogs cruelly in order to make them satisfy arbitrary

²³ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003).

²⁴ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 24.

²⁵ Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 140-42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

aesthetic criteria—rather, she means that *moral* choiceworthiness does not resemble a procedure whereby we simply pick a goal and aim at it, whether it be dog breeding, musical excellence, architectural beauty, or mountain climbing. What, then, do we make of Foot’s acknowledgment that “sentiment” or “pride” can play a role in motivating virtue?

She never addressed that question in detail in her writing. In “Reasons for Action and Desires,” in which she expressed puzzlement that moral reasons should be automatically action-guiding, she acknowledged that some people have “desires to live a certain kind of life,” and “choose” to act in moral ways “because they think they *ought* to do so—because this is how a man ought to live.”²⁷ But she rejected the idea that moral reasons require any such choice, motivation, or desire. Moral reasons are “necessarily practical” because people “who have successfully been taught morality see moral considerations as reasons for action.” Thus “we do not have to look for something special in the way of ‘moral motivation.’”²⁸ Virtues therefore consist of recognizing certain kinds of reasons as reasons for action and following through, and just as goodness in a wolf consists (in part) of cooperating with the pack to bring down prey, human nature is such that a good person recognizes and acts upon moral reasons, because that is the form of human life.

This analysis seems better suited to ruling out bad actions than proposing good ones. In short, Foot acknowledges “weakness of will,”²⁹ but offers no account for *strength* of will. It seems that she could regard Hennold’s decision to climb El Capitan as, at best, a distortion of virtue—an arbitrary aesthetic choice, like deciding what ears are beautiful in spaniels. And given Hennold’s extraordinary devotion to this trivial goal, his acts appear like a defect, because, as with the lone wolf, they disrupt his natural relationship to others of his kind.

That last point matters because, as Lawrence observes, Foot makes this argument in part out of a wish to show that we cannot attain “deep happiness” through evil—specifically, that moral argument excludes the possibility of choosing bad values and still attaining happiness.³⁰ The loyal Nazi who holds bad values cannot be *deeply*

²⁷ Ibid., 155.

²⁸ Ibid., 142.

²⁹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 19.

³⁰ Lawrence, “Deep and Shallow,” 214.

happy, whereas the Germans who chose to die rather than cooperate with the Nazis, “did not sacrifice their happiness,” because there was a certain kind of depth to their actions in resisting the evil regime.³¹ Their letters, she observes, reveal an “extraordinary sense of happiness,” which appears to have been generated by their sense of how “acting in this way” related (or would have failed to relate) to their later sense of themselves.³² In other words, (a) what counts as “deep happiness” depends on the basic goods, (b) these include certain virtues and lack of vices, (c) so deep happiness excludes evil or trivial pursuits.³³ But it’s difficult to see how this can work without the kind of aesthetic choices Foot excludes.

The nonconformist Germans chose to act as they did because they thought “this is how a man ought to live.”³⁴ As Sophie Chappell notes, the choice of fine or noble action seems a far more plausible explanation for the satisfaction of someone who chose death over cooperating with the Nazis.³⁵ Foot is searching for “a sense in which they did not sacrifice their happiness in refusing to go along with the Nazis.... There would have been a way in which they would not have felt that happiness lay in acceptance,”³⁶ but this seems like a strained effort to “hold on to” the idea of virtue leading to happiness.³⁷ As Chappell writes, “the point of the saintly martyr is not that he acts on an imperative of *happiness* at all.... [H]e acts on a quite different kind of imperative: the imperative that Aristotle expresses by *heneka tou kalou*.”³⁸

Foot’s argument therefore seems to shift, rather than explain, the role of choice in moral actions. The problem, in Lawrence’s words, is that virtues also “come in optimistic, good-enjoying, situations, not merely as constraints but the very point of the action, the fine, the *kalon*...in short, situations the agent rightly hopes arise in [his] life.”³⁹

³¹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 95-96.

³² Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 95 n.19 and 96.

³³ Lawrence, “Deep and Shallow,” 214.

³⁴ Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 155.

³⁵ Sophie Chappell, *Knowing What to Do* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 200.

³⁶ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 95-96 (emphasis omitted).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ Chappell, *Knowing What to Do*, 202.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

But if it's sensible to say that the Germans who chose death over cooperating with Hitler held a valid notion of life-success according to which they would not have considered themselves as having succeeded while cooperating, why cannot Hennold likewise say that there is a type of life he would not consider successful—one in which he made no attempt to climb El Capitan—and that the reason is just that this alternative life, while possibly including non-trivial natural goods, nevertheless lacked the fineness a successful life should include?⁴⁰

3. Rand's Aesthetic Choice of Optional Values

Rand's approach to virtue is different. She *does* start with choice, but not the kind Foot is denying. Foot is rejecting the idea that moral arguments must add a desire for the result (i.e., a sentiment) to the moral reasons themselves. But Rand doesn't claim that; she argues that there's a single basic choice to enter into the realm of living as a human being, which means, to subordinate oneself to morality. This is not a choice between equally viable alternatives (which differentiates Rand from existentialism⁴¹), but an acceding to the schedule of values nature lays out for us. Within those values, however—the most fundamental of which are mandated by nature—lies a wide range of additional, optional values.⁴² We are free to decide to be a butcher, baker, or candlestick maker. Ethics gives no one right answer within these

⁴⁰ As should become clear below, I in no way intend this comparison to diminish the honor due to those who resisted Hitler. My point is that moral choices must include a sort of internal choice to commit to nobility for the sake of nobility—a choice that will manifest itself in varying degrees based on the circumstances, and in the case of the nonconformist Germans, manifested itself in an especially magnificent and tragic way.

⁴¹ Ordinary reasons cannot carry weight for someone who hasn't already accepted this, so we could not argue a person into it by the kinds of reasons that motivate ordinary action, but despite the resemblance to existentialism here, this choice is not arbitrary. James Lennox, "Reasoning about Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand's Ethics," in Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox, eds., *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 24.

⁴² Tara Smith, *Viable Values* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 99-101.

alternatives. How, then, does one decide? To an important degree, Rand's answer is *aesthetic*: we pick a value because it is appealing.

I mean "aesthetic" literally. Rand sees art as a teaching device—not in a didactic sense, but in the sense of offering a glimpse of a "sense of life," which means the psychological and moral atmosphere of a hypothetical world generated in accordance with the artist's own values. Rand sees art as a device for "the contemplation of values,"⁴³ by projecting ideals we may not—probably do not—fully comprehend, but which can convey to us, in ways logical argument never can, what it would be like to live the kind of life that (the artist suggests) is within reach if we make, or fail to make, certain choices. Art lets us choose among available good lives. It does this by *inspiring*. Rand writes:

The generalized abstraction of a hero permits every man to identify himself with James Bond, each supplying his own concretes which are illuminated and supported by that abstraction. It is not a conscious process, but an emotional integration.... What [audiences] seek is profoundly personal: self-confidence and self-assertion. Inspired by James Bond, [a person] may find the courage to rebel against the impositions of his in-laws—or ask for a deserved raise—or change his job....⁴⁴

Inspiration consists of an evocation: an erotic pull on the consciousness toward values which can later be evaluated by reason, but are not deduced from it. This pull is not arbitrary any more than hunger for food is arbitrary, because we must then bring the values that inspire us to the bar of reason. (Should I eat this delicious-looking mushroom?—check if it's poison!) At that point, one inverts the process by *aspiring* to be like the legitimate ideal in question. This is a holistic process of suggestion and evaluation, parallel to the holistic process of induction and deduction we call the scientific method.⁴⁵ Rand did not think reason the handmaiden of the passions, but in this context, passion proposes and reason disposes.

This aesthetic selection resembles the Aristotelian choice of the fine or noble, because we're drawn to the instantiation of values by a pre-rational element. But we are not here pursuing the "fine" *truly* for

⁴³ Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1975), 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁵ Jacob Bronowski, *The Visionary Eye* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 11.

its own sake, since it is subject to the test of reason. Nevertheless, we also cannot give a full account of the value's preferability *vis-à-vis* others in terms of mere logic. What makes one kind of available life choice "finer" than another can only be felt—even though the range of legitimate "fineness" is constrained by reason.⁴⁶

For Rand, this process is not an adjunct to a good life, but crucial to it. She thinks human beings naturally crave the heroic—but also that heroism can be found even in humble forms of achievement. Sibyl's heroism in Terence Rattigan's play *Separate Tables*—movingly demonstrated by her sitting at a dining-room table—is every bit as inspiring as any classic example of great heroism. The virtue in question here is pride, which Rand defined as "moral ambition."⁴⁷ Martin Luther King captured the thought well when he said: "if a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music."⁴⁸ Ambition begins not with haranguing but with inspiration. In fact, Foot's friend Iris Murdoch approached this idea when she said that "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture."⁴⁹

In his remarkable essay "Two Sorts of Naturalism," John McDowell—commenting on Foot—explores how aspiration relates to

⁴⁶ I suspect this accounts for the otherwise puzzling fact that Rand says that life is "*the only phenomenon that is an end in itself*," Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964), 17 (emphasis added), but later says that "a work of art...is an end in itself." Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 4.

⁴⁷ Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 142.

⁴⁸ Mervyn Warren, ed., *King Came Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL.: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 146.

⁴⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 75. Murdoch was contrasting what she called the "Natural Law" view of values with the "Liberal" view (70); the Liberal holds that we are free to choose our values and are fully responsible for our actions, whereas the Natural Law view says we are constrained by nature, which we must discover, conform to, and realize. Rand blends the two: man is naturally free to choose values, within limits, and in making that choice he comes to realize his nature, not in the sense of resigning ourselves to limits, but in finding way to act within and through those limits. By "through" those limits, I mean that "rather than restricting you, morality enables you to grasp what your life requires and to choose among the countless ways in which these requirements can be fulfilled." Allan Gotthelf, "The Morality of Life," in Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri, eds., *A Companion to Ayn Rand* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016) 90.

moral argument by invoking the concept of “second nature.”⁵⁰ People begin their approach to moral decisions by a sort of cost-benefit analysis of rational argument, he contends, but there’s a second step in the formation of moral character, which consists of developing an image of what *kind of person* one wants to be, and then trying to be like that image. This process develops our “second nature”—our habitual capacity to act morally without constantly thinking about it—and that serves the important role of preventing us from defecting from virtue in hard times. Courage, for example, is a virtue because it enables us to “stick to [our] worthwhile projects, in the face of the motivational obstacle posed by danger.”⁵¹ Yet courage consists not of a habit of periodically re-doing the calculations that persuaded us that our projects were worthwhile in the first place; that would actually be the opposite of courage: a constant willingness to run from the enemy or hide from our obligations when the going gets tough. Part of what it means to be virtuous, McDowell writes, is that one does *not* stand, like Falstaff, poised to redo the calculations at every moment, but instead develops, as Prince Hal manages to do, a “second nature”—by drawing a picture of what it means to be virtuous and then diligently seeking to be like that picture. This process teaches us “to take a distinctive pleasure in acting in certain ways,” so that “the rationality of virtue simply is not in suspense, though it is always open to reflective questioning.”⁵²

I said earlier that that our capacity for introspection generates the possibility of dual allegiances—the group and the individual—and this nature/second nature distinction seems to parallel those allegiances. There appear to be two levels of virtue: a level of basic goods over which we do not (sensibly) deliberate and a far more complicated and beautiful level, in which our choices consist of this aesthetic process of forming a picture of the good and pursuing it for its own sake, a stage in which the rationality of virtue ceases to be in suspense. Rand’s idea of a moral ambition to become like a (rationally valid) ideal chosen for aesthetic reasons seems to be just this kind of process.

4. Art and Internal Dialogue

⁵⁰ John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 170.

But are aesthetically chosen *kaloï* not moral—perhaps because they’re “competition examples”? Rand would agree that it’s possible to waste life on “trivial” ends, but she would take care in labeling any end trivial, because while nature limits the optional values one may choose, the boundaries are broad. Among the optional values, we may set valid priorities in aesthetic ways. A goal can be *objectively* trivial, by actually failing to serve the goal-holder’s scheme of values enough to justify the effort involved. But no goal is *intrinsically* trivial. Idiosyncratic optional goals are perfectly legitimate. For example, there are (believe it or not) world beatboxing championships.⁵³ Rand would *not* regard someone who devotes himself to becoming the world’s greatest beatboxer as wasting his life, assuming he honors all rationally mandatory principles such as independence or integrity, and finds sufficient fulfillment in the endeavor to justify the work. What counts as trivial is an aesthetic choice.

The fact that we choose among optional values in an aesthetic manner explains why Rand regards art as normative—emphatically so. She thinks “an artist reveals his naked soul in his work—and so, gentle reader, do you when you respond to it.”⁵⁴ What satisfies our craving for heroism indicates not just who we are but who we want to become. This also explains the extraordinary tenacity of aesthetic judgments, which Rand revealingly likens to romantic love. In her view, we almost literally *fall in love* with works of art, because the mechanism of appraisal is much the same with art as with a person: we’re attracted to people and to artworks in which we see reflected our own “sense of life”⁵⁵ or “style of soul.”⁵⁶ This “is not a matter of professed convictions,” but “of much more profound, conscious *and subconscious* harmony.”⁵⁷ That is why, when someone ridicules or even just dismisses our favorite artworks, we tend to take it personally in a way that we don’t take personally criticism of our favorite car or cell-phone.

⁵³ Michael Hill, “Top Beatboxers from Around the Globe Compete This Weekend in Atlantic City,” WNYC News, Sep. 1, 2022, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/top-beatboxers-around-globe-compete-weekend-atlantic-city/>.

⁵⁴ Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 34.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁶ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), 270.

⁵⁷ Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 22.

Foot has a far different view. In “Morality and Art,” she argues that moral judgment differs from aesthetic judgment in ways that are “unfavorable to moral judgment.”⁵⁸ For one thing, she thinks we are “freer from anxiety in relation to art than to morality,”⁵⁹ meaning that morality appears more urgent, whereas “aesthetic judgments guide our conduct in relatively calm waters when they guide it at all.”⁶⁰ Rand would disagree; in her vision, art gives a person, among other things, a spiritual “fuel” that strengthens him in times of stress⁶¹ and, ideally, “equips man for the battles he has to face in reality.”⁶² It certainly does guide, and it does so especially in crises.

Foot also thinks aesthetic and moral judgments differ in that the latter can involve cases in which someone has reason to act due to consequences for others—which means moral judgments must equip us to argue that a person should act contrary to his own interest—whereas the only person concerned in aesthetic choices is the person himself, who experiences the art in question, so there’s no need in aesthetics to persuade him to concern himself with others. This distinction would get nowhere with Rand, who rejects the premise that moral judgments focus on others. Foot, however, continues by saying that in morality we would hold that someone should do what’s right even if he gets nothing from it, whereas we would not say he should choose an artwork from which he gets nothing, except in hopes that he might come to appreciate it.⁶³

Of course, Rand would dispute the idea that a person should do what is right even if he gets nothing from it.⁶⁴ But for a similar reason, she would warn against the idea that someone who gets nothing from an artwork should for that reason cease to choose it. True, if an artwork, upon consideration, really leaves us numb, there’s no reason to waste time on it. But she would caution us that art offers a kind of moral education, by holding out an image of life as it would be if we accepted certain moral premises, and consequently it can draw us to change our

⁵⁸ Philippa Foot, *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶¹ Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶³ Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, 19.

⁶⁴ She would say that either the word “right” is being applied to something not truly right, or that the word “get” is being wrongly used in a way that omits a gain the person actually would realize from so acting.

values or attitudes in ways that improve our lives. This is a gradual process, and she even argues that our aesthetic preferences are likely to change as it happens. Thus it is not a mere matter of coming to like an artwork, but often of interrogating it and adjusting our premises and tastes accordingly.

Perhaps the most important distinction Foot draws is when she says moral statements rely on a “fiction”⁶⁵ of objectivity not found in aesthetic judgments: we say a person *should* act rightly with a degree of absoluteness not present when we say he *should* like Rachmaninov; we can take or leave art in a way that we cannot take or leave morality. Again, Rand would deny this. She would contend that we *cannot* take or leave art *any more than* we can take or leave morality—not just because art improves our lives but because it plays an indispensable role in comprehending and formulating values.

If humans need virtues as bees need stings,⁶⁶ so we need the aesthetic “deliberation” and selection of values as a way of articulating and refining the virtues we need. To switch philosophers (and bugs), consider Daniel Dennett’s statement that humans tell stories as spiders weave webs: “our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are.”⁶⁷ These stories are how we create the “pictures” Murdoch says we come to resemble, and this happens through the process of inspiration, introspection, and aspiration I’ve described.

W.D. Falk disagrees with Foot that moral reasons suffice for action. Such reasons on their own seem like “the dead exchange of information”⁶⁸ because just as one can lead the proverbial horse to water but not make him drink, so “we can take each other to” recognize reasons for action but cannot “make each other assimilate them for what they

⁶⁵ She would obviously have chosen a different word later in life, but the argument remains even if we substitute “claim.”

⁶⁶ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 35.

⁶⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 418.

⁶⁸ W.D. Falk, *Reasons, Ought, and Morality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 77-78.

are.”⁶⁹ Being asked to explain why someone should take action after being given the reasons is like being asked to explain why someone should avoid pain: “one may have to *take* guidance from reasons because the guidance they can *give* is there only for the *taking*.”⁷⁰ In other words, this, too, is a question of appreciating,⁷¹ and appreciation is fundamentally a self-guided action. “For something to be good on account of what it is like is thus to say that it is good *through* what it is like, by way of being correctly accounted for, computed, or reckoned with. Its value is conceived to depend on its properties, but on them as disclosed in experience or *beheld in contemplation or anticipation*.”⁷² We “reckon with” its goodness by imagining it and indirectly experiencing it, to see if it sparks desire. Later, one can justify its appropriateness, but the initial step is erotic. It makes sense that as evolved, biological creatures, we would start with appetite and proceed to justification. This process of drawing out motivations is at least part of how humans do virtue—by the development of a second nature through desire.

This, I contend, is what inspiration and aspiration mean. Perhaps we could say that every person is a potential “megalopsychos” to some degree, and that art gives us the tools by which to comprehend *to kalon*, and to pursue it through a process that, while rational, consists not of constant, mundane calculation, but of a desire to be like the picture of the good.

In short, making pictures and becoming like them is as much in our nature any animal quality is in the nature of wolves, bees, horses, spiders, or deer. Art is the primary—though not sole—means by which we select between optional values, which is part of our moral reasoning.⁷³ And this is how choice must still play a role in virtue even

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁷¹ Ibid., 63-66, 118.

⁷² Ibid., 112 (emphasis added).

⁷³ This means art is subject to the same tests of objectivity as the values themselves. It seems plausible to say there’s something wrong with people who profess to “like” certain kinds of art—not just that they have different tastes or attitudes, but that, at least in extreme cases, certain forms of art are bad for the soul because they celebrate, inculcate, and even formulate, unhealthy types of value. Perhaps they *dysinspire*. By the same coin, other kinds of art are preferable—and thus objectively better for human beings—because they

if Foot is right about everything else. Recall her argument that we don't need "desire" in addition to moral reasons to justify action, because people "who have successfully been taught morality see moral considerations as reasons for action."⁷⁴ The "successful teaching" of morality consists of being aided to appreciate values, and this is typically done through art, which helps us envision the good life and select among means of achieving our specific form of it, within reason's boundaries. In "Reasons for Actions and Desires," Foot describes moral "teaching" as a process whereby we have inculcated into us the idea that moral evaluations automatically give reasons for action. Shortly afterwards, she acknowledges that some people form "desires to live a certain kind of life," and "choose" to act in moral ways because they believe "this is how a man ought to live."⁷⁵ Aesthetic choosing—inspiration, introspection, and aspiration—is a process by which we teach ourselves what optional choices are worthy of enacting.

5. Climbing above the Bare Minimum

What, then, of mountain-climbing? Rand suggests one can adopt a grandiose goal such as free-climbing El Capitan by an aesthetic process. One is attracted to this "optional" value, then brings it to the test of reason, where one queries whether it (or its prerequisite steps) will contradict the virtues given by nature—independence, integrity, etc.—or distort one's overall picture of the well-lived life. If so, it's not a true value. One cannot legitimately select torturing people as a goal due to aesthetics—as, for example, Yabu tortures the sailors in James Clavell's novel *Shogun*, to compose haiku about their screams. But if the optional value in question isn't so ruled out, we may adopt it for no other reason than that we are drawn to it. No optional value is ruled out as intrinsically "trivial."⁷⁶

Every normal person chooses "fine" ends in this way, even if the "fine" end in question seems humble. When Martin Luther King spoke of streetsweepers sweeping streets as Michelangelo painted, his

celebrate, inculcate, and formulate values that are more likely to contribute to the good life.

⁷⁴ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 142.

⁷⁵ Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 155.

⁷⁶ This process, of course, goes on throughout life, so we can decide today that what we valued highly a decade ago was actually trivial.

audience cheered because that makes sense: a life with no desire to act finely or well just for the sake of the beauty of doing so would be an impoverished life. And in Rattigan's *Separate Tables*, Sibyl's choice to sit at the Major's table in defiance of her mother is moving precisely because she acts nobly for its own sake. Such examples appeal to us in aesthetic terms to yearn for excellence—to adopt the “sentiment” to virtuous action.

We can therefore subdivide goals into two categories: those set by the basic rules reason warrants, and which require no choice as a motivator (beyond the choice to accede to nature), and the optional goals, which must be *aspired* to.⁷⁷ Nature can provide rational moral arguments with respect to the former (which to disregard would be a defect), but the latter are justified by fundamentally aesthetic appeals. The difference is like that which Niccolò Machiavelli suggests between fear and love: people will do the minimum necessary to avoid what they fear, but will go the extra mile for what they love.

Foot acknowledges this extra mile when she expresses admiration for the Nazis who chose to die rather than serve Hitler.⁷⁸ Rand offers a similar reflection by giving that kind of death to Kira in *We the Living*, who perishes rather than exist under Communism. She dies smiling while thinking of her lover Leo and reflecting that “she had known something which no human words could ever tell.... Life had been, if only because she had known it could be.... A moment or an eternity—did it matter? Life, undefeated, existed and could exist.”⁷⁹ Why does Kira view her life as “undefeated”?—so that she dies in the belief that (to borrow Foot's phrase) she has not sacrificed her happiness? The answer has to do with aspiration.

We the Living is specifically *about* aspiration. The word derives from the Latin for “breathing into,” and the novel's original title was *Airtight*, in reference to a passage in which Kira cries out that the Communists “came and forbade life to the living...[and have] driven us all into an iron cellar [and]...locked us airtight, airtight till the blood

⁷⁷ I model this division on Lon Fuller, who opens *The Morality of Law*, rev. ed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), with a distinction between the “morality of duty,” which consists mainly of limits on action, and the “morality of aspiration,” which consists of goals at which we aim.

⁷⁸ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 95-96.

⁷⁹ Ayn Rand, *We the Living* (New York: Signet, 1995), 464.

vessels of our spirits burst!”⁸⁰ The U.S.S.R. is “ airtight” because the state eradicates the capacity to imagine great achievements—grand optional values—and to pursue them. Kira’s choice is aesthetic: she has the capacity to envision something grand and beautiful, and to seek to realize that vision, that is, to aspire. That’s an act of moral imagination—rational because the values it projects are subject to reasoned evaluation—and, in context, an act of defiance. This is one of the novel’s basic themes; Kira dies smiling because she was able to choose the beautiful and pursue it, even if for a brief time, because that just *is* living.

I conclude that “because it is there” holds more appeal for Rand than for Foot, but as a matter of aesthetics, rather than ethics strictly speaking. Consider a comment Rand made regarding the *Apollo 11* launch. In his 1962 speech announcing the lunar program, President Kennedy quoted Mallory’s “because it is there” remark, adding,

why, some say, the moon...? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain...? We *choose* to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.⁸¹

After attending the moon launch seven years later, Rand said it “conveyed the sense that we were watching a *magnificent work of art*.”⁸² Carefully acknowledging that the mission was “not a milestone of science,”⁸³ she described it repeatedly as an artwork: referring to it three times as a stage-play, the significance of which was that it “made such abstractions as rationality, knowledge, science perceivable in direct, immediate experience.”⁸⁴ In other words, the mission made sense as an aesthetic enterprise. In form, this looks like a “competition example.”

⁸⁰ Ibid., 404.

⁸¹ Theodore Sorenson, “*Let The Word Go Forth*”: *The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Delacorte, 1988), 178.

⁸² Ayn Rand, *The Voice of Reason* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 167 (emphasis added).

⁸³ Ibid., 170.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 171.

Yet where Foot thinks that kind of choice “will hardly seem suitable as a model for the use of ‘good’ in moral contexts,”⁸⁵ Rand sees it as highly suitable. The particular decision to go to the moon or climb a mountain, is optional, but the virtues it “enacts” are legitimate and rational, and the pursuit of such a goal is worthwhile, even if we choose it over other enterprises for “romantic” reasons.

Foot is right that nature gives us moral reasons that motivate action toward certain ends whose choiceworthiness is (so to speak) embedded within them, but these establish only the minimal framework, on top of which are the “optional” ends which actually occupy most of our lives. These are selected by an aesthetic process (subject to veto by reason), and this does generate a motivating choice or desire. And these choices elevate mere life to the good life. They’re necessary for what Foot calls “deep happiness.”⁸⁶ None is intrinsically trivial, although they can interfere with other values in ways that make them operate as defects. Yet as long as they are maintained in a manner consistent with honesty, integrity, etc., nothing rules them out, and even what might appear as trivial to others can rightly be “deep.”

Thus a person such as Hennold—who possesses the skills to attempt El Capitan—is not wrong to make that achievement the focus of his efforts just because he considers it a fine thing to do, given that he is fit, responsible, and honest with his girlfriend about his values, allowing her to decide whether to take that risk with him. Yet at the same time, there’s no reason to reject John Krakauer’s competing view that mountain climbing is not a value. After barely surviving a disastrous attempt on Everest in 1996, he concluded that while he once thought mountain climbing “a magnificent activity...not in spite of the inherit perils, but precisely because of them,”⁸⁷ he now believes, simply, “it’s not worth it.”⁸⁸ In the context of his values, that conclusion is just as valid as Hennold’s conclusion that it is.

⁸⁵ Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, 140-42.

⁸⁶ Lawrence, “Deep and Shallow,” 215.

⁸⁷ John Krakauer, *Into Thin Air* (New York: Anchor Books 1998), 352.

⁸⁸ Jennifer Mulson, “Best-selling author Jon Krakauer to speak at Colorado College.” *Colorado College Gazette*, Apr 17, 2016, https://gazette.com/life/best-selling-author-jon-krakauer-to-speak-at-colorado-college/article_461d8feb-619c-5f7a-90a2-6bf13b2846c5.html.

Yes, we need virtues as bees need stings, but we also need a vision of a fine or noble life, one that satisfies our natural need for meaning.⁸⁹ A life that omits that element is as deficient as the life of a slow-footed deer, and one forced to lead it can rightly complain of being “suffocated.” But one who does enjoy such a life can rightly claim to be “deeply happy.”

⁸⁹ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).