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Foot and Aristotle on Virtues and Flourishing

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Abstract This article compares the views of Foot and Aristotle on virtues and flourishing. It is argued that the view put forward in Philippa Foot's recent book, *Natural Goodness*, suffers from a certain sort of vagueness and it is open to other criticisms which the Aristotelian view can avoid. Foot's views have been subjected to criticism in the recent literature by David Copp and David Sobel. These criticisms are given consideration in the article and it is argued that the more traditional Aristotelian view advocated by the author will have the means to answer some of these criticisms whereas Foot's view will not.

Keywords Philippa Foot · Aristotle · Virtue ethics · Ethics · Flourishing

In her recent book, *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot defends a virtue ethics which makes the concept of human flourishing and the role of the virtues in such flourishing issues of central concern.[1] The reason she does this has to do with the fact that she believes plants and animals can possess or lack a kind of intrinsic goodness, what she calls "natural goodness," which hinges upon their flourishing and the qualities essential to such flourishing, and she sees human goodness, including moral goodness, as akin to the natural goodness of plants and animals. Ultimately, she believes that just as we can make objective assessments of the intrinsic goodness of plants and animals based on whether or not they have the characteristic traits necessary for the attainment of their flourishing, so too can we make objective assessments of the goodness of human beings.

In this article I will explain and critically examine her view, arguing that her account of human flourishing suffers from a kind of vagueness which makes it too difficult to tell whether or not the virtues are necessary to its attainment. I will go on to show that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle presents a virtue ethics which *does* make it clear why the virtues are essential to human flourishing. I will also go on to show that there are other elements of the Aristotelian virtue ethics which make it, with either slight modification or

[1]Foot, P. (2001). *Natural Goodness.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. This text will be referenced in the notes as NG.

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without, immune to various criticisms which David Copp and David Sobel have recently leveled against Foot's position.[2] My intent is to support the view that either Aristotle's position is superior to that of Foot's or, at least, that there are elements to his theory which should be incorporated into hers so as to make it more defensible. It is also my hope that along the way I will be able to point out some of the central issues which would need further discussion in developing a fully justified Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Foot's View

In *Natural Goodness* Philippa Foot argues that the goodness of human beings should be understood as akin to the goodness of plants and animals. Thus, to better understand the goodness of human beings she thinks we should first understand the goodness of plants and animals.

She contends that plants and animals are good when they are not defective, and she says a living thing is defective when it lacks a feature or behavior that is typical of its species and which plays a role in the development, self-maintenance, or reproductive success of the organism and/or the community of which it is a member, such as its flock, herd, pack, etc.[3] To clarify her position, she notes that when a creature lacks a feature which is merely characteristic of its species, it is not thereby defective. She says it is characteristic of oak trees that their leaves rustle in the wind, but if an oak tree's leaves did not do this it would not be defective. Rather, it would just be odd. In contrast, oak trees characteristically have thick, strong roots. Lacking this would be a defect, since they need such roots for their development, self-maintenance, etc.[4]

In essence, she argues that plants and animals are good when they have the features characteristic of their species which are necessary for them to flourish as members of their species. Flourishing as a member of a species of plant or animal is to be judged in terms of whether an organism develops, maintains itself, reproduces, etc. in the manner characteristic of its species.

She goes on to argue that just as the goodness of a plant or an animal is to be judged in such terms, so too the goodness of humans should be judged in this way. That is, the goodness of an individual human being, just as in the case of plants and animals, has to do with whether he or she possesses those traits characteristic of humans and which are necessary to human flourishing.[5]

This, of course, raises a question about human flourishing. What is it? As, noted, Foot believes plants and animals flourish when they do well at development, self-maintenance, reproduction, and at least in the case of social animals, when they do their part in helping the other members of their community (herd, pack, flock, etc.). Does Foot think human flourishing amounts to the same thing? And does she think human beings are good when they have those traits and engage in those behaviors characteristic of the species and which are necessary for such flourishing?

[2]Copp, D. & Sobel, D. (2004). Morality and virtue: An assessment of some recent work in virtue ethics. *Ethics 114*, 514–554. I will refer to this article and the authors in the text and notes as C&S.

[3]NG, Ch. 2, esp. pp.28–32.

[4]Ibid., p.33.

[5]Ibid., p.15–16; 44.

Foot does not think human flourishing is the same as plant and animal flourishing. She writes:

> Whether an individual plant or animal actually succeeds in living the life that it is its good to live depends on chance as well as on its own qualities. But its own goodness or defect is conceptually determined by the interaction of natural habitat and natural (species-general) 'strategies' for survival and reproduction. What conceptually determines goodness is a feature or operation of survival and reproduction, because it is in that that good lies in the botanical and zoological worlds. At that point questions of 'How?' and 'Why?' and 'What for?' come to an end. But clearly this is not true when we come to human beings.[6]

And she continues with:

> [F]or all the diversities of human life, it is possible to give some quite general account of human necessities, that is, of what is quite generally needed for human good, if only by starting from the negative idea of human deprivation. For then *we see at once that human good depends on many characteristics and capacities that are not needed even by animals, never mind by plants.* There are, for instance, physical properties such as the kind of larynx that allows of the myriad sounds that make up human language, as well as the kind of hearing that can distinguish them. Moreover, human beings need the mental capacity for learning language; they also need powers of imagination that allow them to understand stories, to join in songs and dances – and to laugh at jokes. Without such things human beings may survive and reproduce themselves, but they are deprived. And what could be more natural than to say on this account that we have introduced the subject of possible human defects; calling them 'natural defects' as we used these terms in the discussion of plant and animal life?[7]

The preceding passages make it clear that Foot does *not* believe that human flourishing is the same as plant and animal flourishing. These passages also make it clear that, if she thinks doing well at development, self-maintenance, etc. are necessary to human flourishing, she certainly doesn't see them as sufficient. For she notes how a human being could survive and reproduce without a larynx or the mental capacities for language use while still being "deprived."

It is clear then that Foot sees the elements of plant and animal flourishing as neither identical to nor sufficient for human flourishing. This leaves open the question of whether they are necessary to human flourishing. The general tone of her book suggests she does think they are necessary to human flourishing. In describing the importance of the virtues in human flourishing she says, "Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship."[8] This suggests the importance of self-maintenance in her concept of human flourishing. She also talks about humans who don't do their part to help out in their communities as "defective."[9] At the same time her position on the role of reproduction in human flourishing is more vague. She regards lacking "the

[6] Ibid., 42.

[7] Ibid., p.43, my italics.

[8] Ibid., p.44.

[9] Ibid.

capacity to reproduce" as a defect, but she doesn't regard the *choice* of childlessness as a defect.[10] So, does Foot think the elements of animal flourishing are necessary to human flourishing? It's just not clear given what she says. I suspect she believes that development, self-maintenance, contributing to the community welfare, and at least having the capacity to reproduce are all necessary parts of flourishing human lives. But she also believes there are other essential elements. In discussing the crucial role of the virtues in human flourishing she writes:

> Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbours. They also need codes of conduct. And how could they have all these things without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience?[11]

This passage suggests that flourishing human life also requires friendship and love.

In the end it is not clear as to what all Foot thinks is a part of human flourishing. But it is clear that whatever human flourishing is she thinks we human beings are good when we have the characteristic traits and behaviors necessary for human flourishing. It is also clear that she sees possession of the moral virtues, such as justice, courage, temperance, etc., as essential to human goodness.

A Problem with the Vagueness in Foot's View

One very significant problem with her lack of clarity concerning the concept of flourishing is that without the requisite clarity one cannot see why it is that we human beings need the virtues in order to flourish. As noted in a passage cited above, she says we need virtues, like industriousness and tenaciousness, to house, feed, and clothe ourselves. She also says we need to form family ties, friendships, and codes of conduct and we need the virtues to do these things as well. She also talks at length about the importance of the virtue of trustworthiness and how this virtue is needed for human beings to flourish, since, as Anscombe has noted, "...few people have authority over everyone they need to get to do things, and few people either have power to hurt or help others without damage to themselves or command affection from others to such an extent as to be able to get them to do the things they need others to do."[12] The idea here is that without a predominance of trustworthy people in our community we wouldn't be able to flourish, since our flourishing depends upon the help of and agreements we make with others.

In *Natural Goodness* Foot does not say much, if anything else, about why the virtues are necessary for human flourishing. There is a problem with this, because the virtues are *not* necessary for the things listed in the previous paragraph. Rational self-interested persons living in a community with a good set of moral rules and strict enforcement of them would be able to reliably achieve all of the ends listed in the previous paragraph, and such rational self-interested persons can be counted on to achieve these ends without possessing the

[10] Ibid., p.42.

[11] Ibid., pp.44–45.

[12] Ibid., pp.45–46. See also Anscombe, G.E.M. (1981). On promising and its justice. In *Collected philosophical papers, vol. iii* (p.18). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

virtues. While not wanting to work to secure food, clothing, and shelter for myself and my family (perhaps, I would rather spend my time lifting weights, chasing women, and reading philosophy) and while struggling to do so out of a sense of duty or fear of the shame I will feel if I don't secure these things, I can still be counted on to secure these things. But to secure these things from a sense of duty or out of fear of the shame of not doing these things is *not* to do these things as the virtuous person does them. It is not doing them virtuously, and one who acts this way lacks the relevant virtues. Additionally, people do not need the virtues to form family ties, friendships, or codes of conduct. There are lots of people who lack such virtues as justice, courage, temperance but who nonetheless maintain close family ties and friendships and who understand and obey the moral rules of society. Such people can maintain these ties of family and friends primarily out of the fear of letting their family or friends down, often struggling internally to do what is right for their friends and family, and they can consistently obey the rules of society doing what justice requires without wanting to but fearing a bad reputation or punishment.

In reply to this criticism it could be said that the virtues are just reliable dispositions to act rightly. Since the rational self-interested individuals I have described would have these dispositions, they would have the virtues. Thus, my argument fails. But this kind of reply would not work, because it is based on a mistaken conception of the virtues which neither Foot nor I embrace. In her book Foot explicitly rejects such a purely dispositional account of the virtues. She writes:

> What, for instance, distinguishes a just person from one who is unjust? The fact that he keeps his contracts? That cannot be right because circumstances may make it impossible for him to do so. Nor is it that he saves life rather than kills innocent people for by blameless mishap he may kill rather than save. 'Of course,' someone will say at this point, 'it is the just person's intention, not what he actually brings about that counts.' But why not say, then, that it is the distinguishing characteristic of the just that *for them certain considerations count as reasons for action, and as reasons of a given weight*? Will it not be the same with other virtues, as for instance for the virtues of charity, courage, and temperance? Those who possess these virtues possess them insofar as they recognize certain considerations (such as the fact of a promise, or of a neighbour's need) as powerful, and in many circumstances compelling, reasons for acting. They recognize the reasons, and act on them.[13]

And,

> The just person aims at keeping promises, paying what is owed, and defending those whose rights are being violated, so far as such actions are required by the virtue of justice.[14]

According to Foot, someone who regularly does what justice requires but does so only to avoid punishment or to maintain the respect of his community is not exhibiting the virtue of justice. To exhibit this virtue one must do what justice requires and do it *because* it is what justice requires, not because it is in one's self-interest. It is certainly right to think justice involves more than consistently doing what justice requires, and Foot recognizes this. Hence, the rebuttal to my objection is both inconsistent with Foot's own views and based on a mistaken account of the nature of the virtues.

[13] Ibid., p.12.

[14] Ibid.

I would also draw attention to an Aristotelian distinction between the strong willed person and the person of virtue. The strong willed person does what is right but finds it difficult to do so, fighting and overcoming his desire to do what is wrong. Aristotle contrasts this sort of person with the virtuous person who does what is right because it is right and desires to do so as well. According to Aristotle, the virtuous agent doesn't find right action difficult.[15] Here I would note that many people can be counted on to do what is right even though they lack virtue. I know many people who fight their selfish, lustful, vindictive, etc. urges every day, but I can still count on them to keep these feelings in check and do what is right. Thus, the virtues are not simply reliable dispositions to do what is right, nor are they necessary for achieving the ends Foot considers.

The considerations of this and the previous section are intended to show that in *Natural Goodness* Philippa Foot does not give us a clear conception of human flourishing, and while she does tell us some of the things that are parts of human flourishing, such as having food, clothing, shelter, friends, codes of conduct, etc, it is not at all clear that, despite what she says, the virtues are necessary to the attainment of these ends. In the next section I will go on to discuss the views of Aristotle, and I will argue that the theory he presents in the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a clearer account of why the virtues are necessary to human flourishing.

Aristotle on the Virtues and Human Flourishing

A, or perhaps *the*, central question of Aristotelian ethics is what constitutes human flourishing, living well, or *eudaimonia*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle refers to flourishing, or living well, as *eudaimonia*. In what follows I will employ this term as well, using it interchangeably with "flourishing" and "living well."

Aristotle believes both (a) that living well is the aim of all human action and (b) that everyone agrees that it is. He thinks everyone agrees that we do what we do in order to live well, but he also acknowledges that there are disagreements among us about what living well consists in. He notes that some people think it is the life of pleasure, while others think it is the life of honor, etc.[16] While acknowledging that there is some truth to these other

[15]It might be objected here that while Aristotle does distinguish between the strong willed person and the temperate person in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk.VII Ch.7, this does not mean he believes this distinction holds with respect to the other virtues. That is, it may be that Aristotle believes there is no correlate to the strong willed person when one turns to contexts requiring courage or justice, etc.

This objection would, however, be misguided. If one bears in mind that (1) Aristotle regards virtues as *settled* states of character and (2) the fact that the distinction between the strong willed and temperate person transfers so well to other contexts, it is very reasonable to think Aristotle would accept the transference of this distinction to other contexts. For instance, one might distinguish between those who end up doing what justice and bravery require but who struggle with themselves to do so, feeling much stronger temptation to flee danger or cheat than do courageous and just persons. Such persons wouldn't have the *settled* character required of virtue but through strength of will they may still do what is right.

[16]See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk.I Ch.4. This text will be referenced in the notes as NE. At the beginning of Bk.I Ch.4, he writes:

> Let us resume our inquiry and state...what is the highest of all goods achievable by action. Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another – and often even the same man identifies it with different things... [Ross trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.5].

views, Aristotle contends that neither expresses the whole truth. In contrast to these other views, he argues that living well consists in a life of rational activity done in accordance with virtue.[17]

Now, certainly, there is some vagueness in this but Aristotle clarifies in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He states that rational activity comes in two varieties – theoretical and practical.[18] He believes the very best, most godlike life, involves doing well at, exhibiting virtue in, theoretical activity. That is, to say the very best kind of human life involves exhibiting excellence in the pursuit of truth through the practice of philosophy.[19] However, there is another way to live well, to achieve *eudaimonia*, and this involves doing well at practical rationality. Practical reasoning is the reasoning we use in deliberating about what is to be done. It is reasoning employed in decision making. Aristotle believes that while it is not the best kind of life, we can still live well by doing excellently in this even though we do not excel at theoretical reasoning. He also believes that possession of the moral virtues – justice, courage, temperance, etc. – is necessary to doing well at practical reasoning.

Before going further, let me note that Aristotle would regard excellent practical reasoning as necessary to any well lived life, to any life exhibiting *eudaimonia*. For all lives require the use of practical reasoning and living well requires doing well at reasoning. We don't all need to be philosophers but we all have to make decisions. Thus, living well always requires excellent practical reasoning, decision making done in accordance with the virtues, such as justice, temperance, etc. Thus, Aristotle believes the virtues are needed to live well because in human beings all living well consists in doing well at practical reasoning and the virtues are necessary for this.

Recall that Foot also believes the virtues are necessary to human flourishing. But, as I have argued, she does not make it sufficiently clear why the virtues are necessary to human flourishing. In contrast to Foot, I believe there are two aspects of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which help us to see just why the virtues are necessary to flourishing.

First, consider Aristotle's distinction between the strong willed person and the virtuous person. This distinction is manifested in his discussion of the difference between the continent and temperate person. Aristotle states:

> ...the continent man and the temperate man are such as to do nothing contrary to the rule for the sake of the bodily pleasures, but the former has and the latter has not bad appetites, and the latter is such as not to feel pleasure contrary to the rule, while the former is such as to feel pleasure but not to be led by it.[20]

[17]NE, Bk.I Ch.7.

[18]In NE, Bk. VI Ch.1–2, Aristotle writes:

> ...let us now draw a similar distinction within the part which grasps a rational principle. And let it be assumed that there are two parts which grasp a rational principle – one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable, and one by which we contemplate variable things...Let one of these parts be called the scientific and the other calculative; for to deliberate and to calculate are the same thing, but no one deliberates about the invariable. (Ross trans., p.138)

What is referred to here as the "scientific" part of our rationality is also known as "theoretical reason," and the "calculative" part is practical reason.

[19]See NE, Bk.X Ch.7–8. In Bk.X Ch.8, Aristotle states:

> ...the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness. (Ross trans., p.268)

[20]Aristotle (1987), *Nicomachean ethics,* translated by David Ross, Bk.VII Ch.9, (p.181). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The strong willed person does the right thing but doesn't want to and consequently struggles psychically in doing what is right. In contrast, the virtuous person does what is right and wants to do it and, consequently, faces no internal, psychological struggles in doing what is right. The ease with which the latter performs right action is part of what makes him good at practical reasoning. In contrast the former person, the strong willed person, might reasonably be thought to lack something essential to doing well at practical reasoning. One might think of doing well at practical reasoning as akin to doing well at gymnastics. Given two gymnasts who do triple back flips on the vault, we reasonably give more points to the one who does so with more grace. Analogously, virtuous behavior is not simply right action. Rather, it is right action done at the right time, for the right reason, in the right way.[21] Further, since, as Aristotle argues, *eudaimonia* requires excellent performance at practical reasoning, it follows that the virtues are necessary for this.

Second, one should note the important role of pleasure in Aristotle's conception of living well. Recall that, according to Aristotle, there is a moment of truth in the idea that living well is the life of pleasure. That is, Aristotle believes flourishing, or living well, is pleasant. But, he does not believe that it is identical with the life of pleasure. In Bk. X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he criticizes Eudoxus for making such an identification between the good life and the pleasant life, arguing that no one would choose to live with the intellect of a child even if it was very pleasant.[22]

If living well includes pleasure *and* doing well at practical reasoning, then the virtues *are* necessary to living such a life. The central idea behind my argument here would have us contrast the person who does what is right as a matter of rational self-interest with the person who is virtuous, the person who does what is right out of her love of virtue. Someone who is moved to act rightly out of a love for virtue is more consistently going to take pleasure in right action. In contrast the person who acts rightly out of rational self-interest may often view doing the right thing as the lesser of two evils. For instance, the latter sort might keep his promise to mow his mother-in-law's lawn when he doesn't want to but do so only to avoid the anger of his wife. In this case neither option will be attractive and the poor fellow will not be able to take pleasure in doing the right thing. These situations will be common for the person who does what is right out of rational self-interest.

In contrast, the virtuous person who sees virtuous action as good in itself and who takes pleasure in the performance of virtuous deeds is less likely to resent the demands of morality. Consequently, for him a life of right action is more likely to be pleasant. Thus, if living well, *eudaimonia*, combines the truism that living well involves pleasure along with the successful performance of the human function, rational activity, then indeed the virtues are necessary to its attainment.

I have been arguing that Aristotle gives us a conception of flourishing and the virtues which makes it more clear why the virtues are necessary to flourishing than does Foot's view. Due to a certain amount of vagueness in her conception of the flourishing human life

[21] In the NE, Bk.II Ch.9, Aristotle describes virtuous behavior as follows:

> ...anyone can get angry – that is easy – or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy... (trans. Ross).

[22] See NE, Bk.X Ch.3. Aristotle states:

> ...no one would choose to live with the intellect of a child throughout his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at, nor to get enjoyment by doing some most disgraceful deed, though he were never to feel any pain in consequence. (Ross trans., pp.253–254)

it is not clear that the virtues are necessary for attaining such a life. My argument assumes that Aristotle is correct in distinguishing between the strong willed agent and the virtuous agent. I also argue that since, as Aristotle himself maintains, the good life is pleasant and since virtuous action is pleasant for the virtuous agent, Aristotle makes it clear why the virtues are essential to human flourishing, the good life.

However, at this point it might be objected that the Aristotelian conception of the virtuous agent is mistaken. To the Kantian it will seem that the strong willed agent is just as good as, if not better, than Aristotle's virtuous agent. The Kantian critic might say that taking pleasure in right action is morally irrelevant. What matters is doing what is right because it is right, regardless of whether one enjoys doing it or hates doing it.[23] The Kantian critic might want to know why the Aristotelian view is better than the Kantian one. If my argument rests upon a mistaken conception of the virtuous agent, then I haven't really exhibited the superiority of Aristotle's position.

In reply to this a couple of points are in order. First, I would note that if we proceed as Aristotle does in developing our conception of the nature of the virtues, then we will start with a conception of a flourishing life and derive our concept of the virtues from it. Since a flourishing life would seem to involve right action and pleasure, it makes sense, then, to favor the Aristotelian view of the virtuous agent over the Kantian view. For the Kantian view allows that the virtuous, i.e. strong willed, agent could be perfectly miserable in his performance of right action. Thus, assuming that the Aristotelian approach to defining and determining the virtues, an approach wherein one begins with a concept of flourishing, is correct, it makes perfect sense to see the Aristotelian view as superior to Kant's view.

Admittedly, not everyone will find this to be a plausible approach to defining the virtues. To defend this approach here would take us too far afield from my central concerns. Indeed, a defense of this approach would probably require a book length manuscript.[24] Regardless, there are at any rate other reasons to think that Aristotle's view is preferable. Here some of the research of Lawrence Blum comes to mind.[25] In his work, he shows that there are various occasions upon which doing what is right simply because it is right isn't good enough. When your friend or family member is sick in the hospital and you visit him only because you feel you ought to, this reflects poorly upon your character. As Blum argues, there are various occasions upon which we believe that a good person should feel a certain way, should have certain desires. There is a strong intuition that the son or daughter who wants to be at his father's side when he is sick is morally better than a son or daughter who

[23] Kant writes:

> Suppose then the mind of this friend of mankind to be clouded over with his own sorrow so that all sympathy with the lot of others is extinguished, and suppose him still to have the power to benefit others in distress, even though he is not touched by their troubles because he is sufficiently absorbed with his own; and now suppose that, even though no inclination moves him any longer, he nevertheless tears himself from this deadly insensibility and performs the action without any inclination at all, but solely from duty – then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth. [Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p.11.]

[24] The principle work of Foot under discussion in this essay, *Natural Goodness*, *op.cit*., is a book length defense of this Aristotelian approach to defining the virtues. For other book length defenses of this approach see: MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue.* South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; Wallace J. (1978). *Virtues and vices.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and Foot, P. (1978). *Virtues and vices and other essays in moral philosophy.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[25] See Blum, L. (1980). *Friendship, altruism, and morality.* London: Routledge.

shows up only out of a sense of duty.[26] Considerations like these suggest that Aristotle is correct in rejecting the Kantian conception of the virtuous agent.

Before moving on, I would also note that it is not my intent to suggest that Aristotle believes acting rationally in accordance with virtue guarantees a happy life.[27] Certainly, misfortunes can befall a virtuous person making his life go badly. For instance, the loss of loved ones might trouble one so much that despite the pleasure one derives from virtuous action one's life might on the whole be unpleasant. Foot describes a very interesting scenario wherein one's own virtue combined with the social conditions in which one lives can make living a happy life impossible.[28]

Despite the fact that one's life can go badly even though one is virtuous, Aristotle's point is that if one is going to rationally pursue the end of living well, a life that requires excellence at practical reasoning combined with pleasure, then it is necessary to possess the virtues. For it is much more likely that one will take pleasure in successful practical reasoning, practical reasoning that leads to right action, if it is done in accord with virtue. In addition to this, and as I argued earlier, Aristotle might also want to say that the grace or ease with which one makes the right decisions, a grace that requires the virtues to be consistently achieved, is part of what is involved in doing well at practical reasoning. Since Aristotle argues that human flourishing requires doing well at practical reasoning, he can be seen as providing another explanation for why the virtues are needed for human flourishing.

Foot and Aristotle and Some Recent Criticisms

So far I have presented the views of Aristotle and Foot on the nature of living well, and I have argued that Aristotle's view makes it clear why the virtues are necessary to living well and Foot's view, due to its vagueness about the nature of human flourishing, does not. As I have noted, if one believes that a correct account of living well should include some account of the necessary role of the virtues within it, then my argument so far gives us some reason to think Aristotle's view is preferable to Foot's. In what follows I will give further support for the superiority of Aristotle's view. I will present various of David Copp's and David Sobel's recent criticisms of Foot's view and I will show how it is that in some cases both the views of Foot and Aristotle can answer these criticisms, whereas in other cases Aristotle's but not Foot's view can answer them.

(1) *Can We Objectively Determine Animal Goodness?*

In a recent article, Copp and Sobel (C&S) begin by noting how Foot argues that the goodness of animals amounts to possessing those features needed for an individual's development, self-maintenance, reproductive success, and, in the case of social animals, the well-being of the community. They go on to challenge the idea that animal, or natural, goodness should be judged in terms of the attainment of these ends. They note that

[26] See Blum, pp.142–143.

[27] In the NE, Bk.I Ch.10, Aristotle writes:

> Now many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life more blessed..., while if they turn out ill they crush and maim blessedness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. [Aristotle (1987). *Nicomachean ethics*, trans. David Ross (p. 21). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.]

[28] NG, p. 94–95.

Rosalind Hursthouse, whose views are roughly the same as Foot's, believes these ends are shared among biological organisms, and, because of this, we should regard animal goodness as objectively measurable in relation to the attainment of these ends.[29] Both Hursthouse and Foot believe that insofar as we can objectively assess the goodness of animals in terms of how well they satisfy these ends, and insofar as we share ends similar to those of animals, we can then go on to objectively determine the nature of human goodness and the virtues necessary to its attainment.

In reply to this, C&S try to raise doubts about whether we can objectively determine animal goodness. They note that the ends specified by Hursthouse and Foot are not the only ends shared by biological organisms. In support of this, they note that scientists working in different fields, such as evolutionary biology, descriptive biology, and veterinary medicine evaluate organisms in terms of different kinds of ends, ignoring some of the ends on Foot's list and paying attention to certain ends she does not consider.[30]

C&S also note how the attainment of some of the ends Foot lists as relevant to natural goodness can be incompatible with the attainment of other ends on her list. For instance, pursuit of reproductive success is not always consistent with an organism's pursuit of self-maintenance nor with an organism's pursuit of the community welfare. Thus, even if these ends are shared among biological organisms, it is not clear what guidance they offer in developing a notion of natural goodness. When the pursuit of reproductive success conflicts with the promotion of the community welfare or self-maintenance, what constitutes the right, or good, thing for an animal to do?[31]

Despite the fact that C&S present this as a problem with Foot's conception of animal, or natural, goodness, the problem carries over into Foot's conception of human goodness. Since human flourishing, like animal flourishing, involves achieving a plurality of ends, such as self-maintenance and the community welfare, and since the pursuit of these ends can come into conflict for us, just as they can with animals, one might wonder how on Foot's view one is to resolve such conflicts.

While Foot doesn't suggest an answer to this quandary in her writings, it could be argued that there is some way to objectively rank the relevant ends. So, for instance, when there are conflicts the pursuit of reproductive success should trump the pursuit of self-maintenance or the community welfare, etc. But it is terribly difficult to see how the case for such an objective ranking could defensibly be made.

Unlike Foot, Aristotle maintains that human goodness is not to be achieved through the attainment of a variety of ends, rather it is to be achieved through the attainment of *eudaimonia*, which he defines as doing well at rational activity. And, while attaining *eudaimonia* may require a plurality of goods, such as friendship and certain levels of wealth and health, Aristotle still provides a clear account of what the sole end is in terms of which human goodness and/or the good life is to be determined. In this way the problem of conflict between ends which Foot's position faces is avoided by Aristotle.

In reply it could be argued that this isn't really being fair to Foot. As long as a plurality of ends is required in attaining *eudaimonia* and as long as the pursuit of these can lead into conflicts, Aristotle gives us an account of human goodness which is no clearer than Foot's. Such a reply would, however, be misguided. Clearly, Aristotle would put primary

[29] See Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On virtue ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[30] C&S, pp.534–535.

[31] C&S, p.535.

importance on doing well at reasoning, whether theoretical or practical. The virtuous engagement of our rational faculties is never to be sacrificed for the pursuit of wealth or health. In this respect Aristotle does provide a clearer account of human goodness and how to achieve it.

At this point the question of arbitrariness naturally arises. Why should human goodness, the good life, be measured in terms of the virtuous performance of rational activity? And why should this have primacy of place over the attainment of health or wealth? As noted above, Foot's position suffers from a problem of arbitrariness in its determination of the ends relevant to natural goodness. Does Aristotle's position face a similar difficulty?

No. Aristotle gives clear and defensible reasons for maintaining that human goodness is doing well at rational activity. Aristotle clearly points out that the good of a thing, its goodness, is to be determined with reference to its characteristic, or defining, activity.[32] So, for instance, knives are good when they cut well and eyes are good when they allow one to see well, etc. Since the defining activity of human beings is rational activity, it follows that they are good when they do this well. Since we do quite reasonably say that knives and eyes and other things are good when they do well at their characteristic activity and since rational activity is characteristic of human beings, there is nothing arbitrary in Aristotle's account of the human good.

Now, here it will likely be objected that there is still a significant amount of arbitrariness present within Aristotle's account. Many critics will want to know why rational activity is characteristic of human beings. After all, not all human beings are rational. Here those suffering from severe mental retardation come to mind. Furthermore, there are many things humans do, such as nuclear physics, ballet, write love letters, etc., which no other living things do. Thus, it is arbitrary to designate rational activity as the characteristic activity of human beings.

This is a significant criticism. Indeed, it is of such importance that I want to address it at some length in a separate section at the end of this essay. For now, however, I would like to consider other points raised by C&S, bearing in mind that I will confront the preceding objection later.

(2) *Why must the goodness of organisms be determined relative to species?*

Another argument which C&S make concerns Foot's focus on determining the goodness of individual organisms relative to their species. They argue that, even if the goodness of an animal must be measured in terms of its kind, it is not clear why the *species* is the relevant kind. Animals are not just members of their species. They are also members of both larger (genus, kingdom) and smaller (sub-species, herd) groups. Thus, if we determine the nature of natural goodness and the virtues relative to the survival, developmental, reproductive, etc. needs of animals, as Foot does, and if our account is to be objective, then there must be a reason for the focus on the species. C&S maintain that neither Foot nor Hursthouse provide a reason for this focus on the species.

This objection, like the previous one, is raised with respect to Foot's account of natural goodness. But it too can be transferred to Foot's account of human goodness. Indeed, C&S recognize this fact, and they resurrect the issue in attacking Foot's account of human goodness.[33] In doing so, they question why human goodness should be determined with respect to species membership as opposed to some smaller or larger classification.

C&S certainly raise an interesting question here, and I am not sure that there is anything explicitly stated within the Aristotelian corpus which would help in countering this

[32]NE, Bk.I Ch.7.

[33]C&S, p.542.

objection. However, I do believe an Aristotelian who embraces the traditional Aristotelian conception of the good life can answer this objection.

The objection raises two questions: (1) why not assess the goodness of individual organisms in terms of their memberships in groups larger than species; and (2) why not assess the goodness of organisms in terms of their membership in groups smaller than species? I will answer each of these questions and in dong so I hope to show that the objection poses no threat to the traditional kind of Aristotelianism I endorse.

If we apply the first issue to the question of human goodness, then, allowing *x* to designate any particular human being, we might imagine the question formulated as follows: why is the goodness of *x* to be determined relative to his membership in *Homo sapiens*, as opposed to his membership among the primates or the mammals or the animal kingdom? In short, it is because individuals are only good as members of larger groups than their species by being good members of their species. Suppose I am looking at a knife. Here the individual object I'm looking at is a member of the species knife and a member of the larger class of things, the genus, know as "tools." Now, for this to be a good tool it must be good *qua* species, in this case it must be good *qua* knife. Similar things can be said about other artifacts. For my chair to be good *qua* its genus, furniture, it must be good *qua* chair, its species. Thus, with respect to artifacts, goodness *qua* genus requires goodness *qua* species. And, since goodness *qua* genus occurs only through, or in virtue of, goodness *qua* species, goodness *qua* species has a primacy to it which justifies assessing the goodness of individual artifacts primarily as exemplars of their species.

Individual biological organisms should be treated accordingly. The individual lion can only be good *qua* animal by being good *qua* lion. If an individual lion is poor as a lion, I don't see how it can be any good *qua* animal. Analogously, for an individual human being to be good *qua* animal he will have to be good *qua* human being. As in the case of artifacts, goodness in larger categories, like genus or kingdom, is attained only by virtue of goodness *qua* species. So, again there is a primacy to the goodness *qua* species which justifies assessing the goodness of individual organisms primarily as exemplars of their species.

I do not intend here to suggest that goodness *qua* species is sufficient for goodness *qua* genus. I suppose there could be silly species of tools that an individual object could be a fine example of, but it would still be a silly, or poor, tool. Analogously, it seems possible that one could be a good human being but a poor example of an animal. For instance, one might do well at rational activity and yet be blind and deaf and sickly.

Regardless, while I am not supporting a sufficiency thesis here, I do believe that goodness *qua* species membership is necessary to goodness *qua* genus in a way that makes goodness *qua* species membership more fundamental than goodness *qua* genus. Thus, contra Copp and Sobel, there is good reason to judge the merits of individual organisms in terms of their species membership as opposed to their genus membership.

Now the other question C&S raise is: why determine the goodness of individual organisms with respect to their species as opposed to smaller groups to which they belong? One possible reply might begin by noting that when the question is put like this in very general terms, making reference to the determination of *goodness* and *the virtues* without specifying the type of goodness or virtues, there is *no* reason why they should be determined relative to species. However, if one wants to establish the nature of *moral* goodness and the *moral* virtues, then determination of goodness and virtue relative to the species is crucial. Responding in this way is Kantian and, perhaps, unAristotelian, but it may be that the only or best way to deal with the problem raised by C&S might require appealing to Kantian insights. Regardless, my point here is that if one wants to determine the nature of *moral* goodness and the *moral* virtues, then universality requirements must be

respected. The standards of moral goodness and the virtues necessary to it must be the same for all human beings. If this is correct, and I think it is, then it would certainly be a mistake to determine the moral goodness of human beings relative to smaller groups. For what it takes to flourish within smaller units of the human population, such as native American tribes, Jewish Kibbutzes, Nazi clans, etc., simply may not help one to flourish elsewhere. Indeed, what it takes to flourish in some of these communities may hurt you in others. Thus, if we are to determine what it is to flourish *qua* moral being, we must consider what it is to flourish *qua* human being. For only then can we discern a sufficiently universal conception of the good life and the virtues.

Another, and I suspect more Aristotelian reply, could also be made. It could be argued that smaller human units, such as families, neighborhoods, cities, etc. exist as a consequence of human efforts to realize their *telos* and this *telos* is shared in common by all human beings. That is, each human being has the natural end of self-development towards the fulfillment and/or perfection of the human form or essence. Human development, maturation, from infant to adult is driven by the natural impulse towards this end, and it is this end that shapes much of our behavior. The quest for food, clothing, shelter, the flight from danger, all of these serve our self-preservation, allowing us to realize our *telos*. Similarly, the forming of communities and families do so as well. Human nature is such that we don't do well at surviving and reproducing without forming communities. Thus, to better enable the realization of their essence our ancestors lived in communities and so do we.

It could be argued that the smaller groups to which human beings belong, such as families, clans, tribes, cities, nations, exist to enable the realization of the human essence – rational animal nature. Thus, while our identities, our natures, are formed in part by our membership in these smaller communities, what we are primarily, first and foremost, are human beings. Thus, if we are to determine whether any individual human being is good, or living well, we must give primacy of place to determining whether he or she is good *qua* human being.

(3) *Can't Uncharacteristic Features in an Organism be Good?*

Another criticism made by C&S focuses on Foot's view that what is characteristic of a species sets a normative standard for members of the species only with respect to aspects of an animal that relate to self-maintenance, reproduction, etc. Recall that Foot believes lacking a feature which is characteristic of one's species does not necessarily make one defective, detracting from one's goodness. Rather, lacking a characteristic feature is a defect only when lacking it damages one's chances at self-maintenance, reproduction, etc. Here one might reconsider Foot's example of the trees whose leaves don't rustle in the wind. This would be uncharacteristic but not a defect. In contrast, a tree without roots *is* defective, because the roots are necessary for self-maintenance.

C&S argue that this view about the grounds of normative standards is problematic, because it cannot make sense of how uncharacteristic features in an individual organism might be good. They have us consider a snail with an uncharacteristically hard shell or with uncharacteristic speed. They maintain that either of these traits in a snail would be good traits, since either would aid the organism in self-maintenance and reproductive success. However, they also note that Foot's view cannot make sense of these traits as good, because it is the *characteristic* traits which aid the organism in self-maintenance and reproduction that determine goodness.[34]

[34] C&S, pp.538–539.

This criticism poses no threat to Foot's view nor the more traditionally Aristotelian view that I am advocating. In defense of Foot, it should be noted that this criticism is based on a misunderstanding of her view. Her point is that when an organism lacks traits needed for self-maintenance and reproduction, etc., then the organism is defective. When it is defective it is not good as an organism of its kind/species. But this does not mean that an organism with uncharacteristic features which *aid* it in achieving such ends is bad or that such uncharacteristic features are *not good*. Foot's position can embrace the fact that such uncharacteristic features are good. Her interest is to clarify the standards for distinguishing between good and bad organisms within a species, and her account of defect and her belief that lacking defect constitutes the goodness of the organism is perfectly consistent with the claim that a snail's possession of an uncharacteristically hard shell is good for it. Assuming that such a snail possesses no defects, she could contend that it meets her minimum requirements for goodness and surpasses them with its uncharacteristic beneficial traits. Foot might want to call this a "Super Snail," as opposed to a merely "good snail."

The traditional Aristotelian view is also immune to this objection but for more obvious reasons. Aristotle does define human goodness in terms of what is characteristic of humans, their rational activity, stating that we are good, or living well, when we do well at this. However, he does not determine the good making properties, the virtues, of human beings in terms of what is characteristic of humans. According to Aristotle, whether bravery, justice, temperance, etc. are common, or characteristic, among human beings is irrelevant to determining their status as virtues of human beings. In developing their critique of Foot, C&S focus on how an uncharacteristically hard shell could be a virtue in a snail, and they suggest Foot's problem is making virtues characteristic features of organisms. But, as noted, Aristotle does not do this. Indeed, it is likely that he regards the possession of the virtues as uncommon.[35]

For all of the above stated reasons, the criticism under consideration here poses no threat to the views of either Foot or Aristotle.

(4) *Would the Existence of Rational Aliens Present Problems for the Natural Goodness Theory?*

When C&S move on to consider the application of these Footian natural norms to human beings in particular, most of their criticism focuses on the specifics of Hursthouse's views. While my interest is primarily with the relative merits of traditional Aristotelian ethics and Foot's natural goodness theory, I will briefly discuss one of C&S's more powerful criticisms of Hursthouse's view and explain how the more traditional Aristotelian view can be defended against this objection.

Hursthouse is not as vague as Foot in describing the nature of human flourishing. While Foot vaguely suggests that human flourishing involves meeting all of the requirements of animal flourishing plus meeting some other requirements specific to the concept of human flourishing, Hursthouse envisions human flourishing and animal flourishing as basically the

[35] In NE, Bk.II Ch.9, referring to virtue as the mean, or middle, Aristotle writes:

> ...it is no easy task to be good. For in every thing it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, anyone can get angry – that is easy – or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. [Aristotle (1987). *Nicomachean ethics*, trans. David Ross (p. 45). Oxford: Oxford University Press.]

same. Thus, since the virtues are to be seen as serving the ends of human flourishing, they should serve the same ends in humans that are constitutive of animal flourishing. This means they should serve to aid us in development, self-maintenance, reproductive success, and they should help us to contribute to the welfare of our own species. Foot's conception of human flourishing is broader in its scope but how broad is hard to say given the vagueness of her account.

Regardless, in critically assessing Hursthouse's position, C&S argue that since it only endorses promoting one's own welfare or that of one's own species, it implies that the exploitation of animals or, if there are any, fully rational aliens would be morally acceptable. Certainly philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan would find the first of these implications problematic, and many people would find the second implication problematic. Suppose there were fully rational, loving, peaceable aliens who landed on our planet. It would hardly be appropriate to enslave them just because (a) doing so benefits us and (b) they are not human beings.

In reply to the problem of animal treatment, Hursthouse could make a Kantian move. She could argue that, while we have no direct obligations to animals, we still have an indirect duty to treat them well, since if we don't we may become less sympathetic to human beings and end up harming them. This kind of reply is notoriously problematic however, since there is a strong and common intuition that animal suffering is something intrinsically bad and that we should be concerned with eliminating and/or reducing it to make life for animals better. At this point I would like to discontinue my consideration of the ethical treatment of animals, because it raises deep issues that would take us too far afield from the central concerns of this essay. Instead, I want to take up the problem of rational aliens.

A Kantian ethic would have no problem dealing with the issue of rational aliens. Were there such beings, they should be treated with all of the same dignity and respect as human beings since their rationality would make them ends in themselves. In what follows, I will argue that the Aristotelian virtue ethics can be "Kantianized" in a way so as to make it immune to the problem of rational aliens, and I will express doubts as to whether positions like those of Hursthouse and Foot can be similarly altered or understood.

An advocate of a more traditional Aristotelian theory could suggest that we consider Aristotle's account of human beings as rational animals as akin to a plausible account of *persons* and then transfer his conception of human flourishing and the virtues to the concept of *personhood*. That is, we could define persons as rational beings (whether animal, alien, or robotic) and think of the good life for persons as a life of doing well at reasoning. Additionally, we could think of the virtues as those qualities necessary for persons to do well at this, leaving open whether or not all the same virtues would constitute goodness across the different categories of persons. Doing this would provide an unproblematic way to broaden the sphere of our moral concern so as to incorporate fully rational aliens, robots, etc., thereby solving the problem under consideration.

It might be objected that one could do this, but then one wouldn't any longer hold an ethic that is anything like an Aristotelian ethic. Thus, to do this and call oneself an advocate of "Aristotelian ethics" would be grossly misleading about the nature of one's views. But such an objection places too much emphasis on the biological elements of Aristotle's ethics. Are there significant biological elements in Aristotle's ethical writings? Yes, of course! But still if one defines persons as rational beings, maintains that such beings are good in doing well at their characteristic activity, argues that the virtues are those traits that enable a being to do well at its characteristic activity, and consequently defines the virtues in terms of their role in enabling persons to do well at reasoning, and if one makes this theory of the good

person and the virtues the centerpiece of one's ethics, then one has all of the elements necessary for a basically Aristotelian ethics.

This is the only way I know of to adequately solve the issue raised here by C&S. Further, while I think one can advocate a basically Aristotelian ethic while focusing on good personhood and the virtues necessary to it, I am really not sure that one can hold a view like Hursthouse's, or for that matter Foot's, and make this move. They both make our membership in the biological species *Homo sapiens* and the analogies between human goodness and the goodness of other living things so central to their ethics that my proposed solution may not be sufficiently coherent with their views to make it workable.

Rational Activity as Characteristic of Human Beings

Earlier I argued that Aristotle's conception of human goodness avoids the arbitrariness of Foot's view because we reasonably judge things as good when they do their characteristic activity well and because Aristotle correctly identifies the characteristic activity of human beings as rational activity. But I also noted that this position might be criticized in either or both of the following ways: (1) it may be argued that there are many things humans do which no other animals do. Thus, it is arbitrary to single out rational activity as characteristic of human beings; and (2) it may be argued that many human beings, for instance the severely mentally handicapped, do not engage in rational activity. Thus, rational activity cannot be the characteristic activity of human beings. To these points I would like to add a third related criticism. It could also be argued that human beings are not the only rational animals. Thus, again, it would seem to be a mistake to say that the characteristic activity of human beings is rational activity. I now wish to confront these objections. I will begin with the first one.

While it is true that there are other things human beings do, such as ballet and play basketball, which separates them from other animals, it does not follow from this that rational activity is not the characteristic activity of human beings. For something to count as the characteristic activity of a type of thing or species it must be an activity performed by every normal member of the type or species. Since it is false that all normal members of *Homo sapiens* do ballet, or play basketball, etc, such activities are not the characteristic activity of human beings. Since rational activity is performed by all normal human beings and no other animals engage in this kind of activity, it makes sense to say that such activity is the characteristic activity of human beings.

Certainly, some philosophers might balk at my reference to "the normal" human being. The critic might want to know what my criterion of the normal is here. It might be objected that without an adequate definition of the normal my argument fails. However, such criticism is misplaced. One doesn't need to provide an adequate analysis of a concept to justifiably employ it. I might not be able to define what a great basketball player is but I still know that whatever the definition is Michael Jordan is one of them. It is safe to say that whenever the vast majority of the members of a group have a certain trait, then the trait is normal for the group. Thus, since the vast majority of human beings engage in rational activity, rational activity is normal for human beings.

My reply to the first objection sets up my reply to the second. The preceding points clarify that on my view an activity is characteristic of a group only if all normal members of the group engage in it. The second objection states that some human beings don't engage in rational activity and moves to the conclusion that rational activity cannot be the characteristic activity of human beings. In doing so, the second objection mistakenly

assumes that the characteristic activity of a group must be performed by *all* of its members. Certainly this assumption is a mistake. It is commonplace to speak of the characteristic traits or behaviors of groups of things, while acknowledging that not all members of the group do this. For instance, a characteristic activity of ballet dancers is stretching exercises, but this does not mean that *all* ballet dancers do such exercises. Or consider that it is characteristic of good basketball players to be tall, but this is not intended to suggest that all good basketball players are tall. Rather, it is normal for ballet dancers to do stretching exercises and for good basketball players to be tall. Thus, we say these are characteristic activities and traits of these groups.

The last of the objections states that animals besides human beings are rational, so rational activity cannot be the characteristic activity of human beings. But this, of course, raises the question of what it is to be rational. This is a notoriously complex issue. But let me just say that the concept of rationality is multi-faceted, meaning there are many different senses attached to "reason," "rational," etc. with each bearing its own set of norms and/or criteria. No doubt there is some sense in which other creatures exhibit rationality. Here I am reminded of the old experiment wherein a chimpanzee could figure out that to get a banana from the ceiling he must stack up objects and stand up on them. However, just because animals possess some kind of rationality, it does not thereby follow that there is no distinct conception of rationality possessed by all normal human beings and which no other animals possess. In other words, it does not follow that there is no sense of rationality allowing for us to truthfully say that rationality is the characteristic activity of human beings.

Indeed, I suspect there are several forms of rationality which only human beings engage in. Consider Aristotelian theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning. These are two forms of reasoning which human beings employ that no other animal does. Theoretical reasoning involves deducing truths about the world through inductively supported generalizations or intuitively obvious first principles. Practical reasoning involves arriving at a decision based on a general conception of one's own welfare and/or that of others and a conception of how best to promote such welfare. While animals might be able to engage in such thinking in some rudimentary ways, the level of sophistication at which they operate compared to even the most simple minded humans suggests that the kind of rationality normal humans possess is different from that of animals. So, just as there is some sense in which both animals and humans are rational, so too is there a sense in which humans alone are rational. It is in this sense then that it can truthfully be said that rational activity is characteristic of human beings.

In concluding this section I should acknowledge that more could be said on this topic. Indeed, more *should* be said on this topic, but to deal with this issue further here would take us too far afield. I have tried to exhibit the rational defensibility of the view that there is a true sense in which rational activity is the characteristic activity of human beings. As noted this view, can be criticized in various ways. I have tried to show that the Aristotelian view can be defended against several of these criticisms.[36]

[36]The Aristotelian view that I defend here has also been defended in the recent literature by Thomas Hurka. See Hurka, T. (1993) *Perfectionism* New York: Oxford University Press. For criticisms of the Aristotelian view see Suits, B. (1974) Aristotle and the function of man: Fallacies, heresies, and other entertainments. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy 4,* 23–40; and more recently Kitcher, P. (1999) Essence and perfection. *Ethics 110,* 59–83. For a reply to Kitcher, see Byron, M. (2000) Virtue and the reductivist challenge. *Contemporary Philosophy 22,* 34–41. Some of the issues I consider in this section are discussed in these articles.

Darwinian Worries

Before concluding I would like to consider one additional kind of objection. I have been arguing that a more traditional Aristotelian virtue ethic, one that embraces rational activity as the characteristic activity of human beings and that develops a conception of human goodness and the virtues from this, has the resources to solve various problems confronted by Foot's less traditional Aristotelian ethic. In response, it might be objected that embracing a more traditional Aristotelian ethic is problematic since it involves embracing a view of biological species in general and human nature in particular which is implausible in a post-Darwinian age.

In other words, it might be noted that Aristotle did not realize that all species, including *Homo sapiens*, were products of evolution by natural selection. Thus, he thought that species had fixed natures with reference to which we could justify normative claims. It might be objected that if, as Darwinism suggests, species lack fixed and permanent natures then it is no longer reasonable to appeal to human rationality as the characteristic feature of humanity and to justify normative claims with reference to it.

In answering this point, let me begin by noting it is indeed the case that Aristotle believed in the fixity of species. Let me also note that I fully embrace the Darwinian view of the origin of species and, consequently, I reject the Aristotelian vision of fixed and permanent species. However, to embrace Darwinism poses no threat to the kind of Aristotelian ethic I embrace.

True, human beings have not always existed. Perhaps, (though I doubt it) at some distant point in our evolutionary past human beings were not rational animals. At some point in the future, human beings as we know them today will no longer exist. At some point, the sun will burn out and all life on our planet will be wiped out. But, so what? The fact of the matter is that human beings are now, and for a *very long time* have been, rational animals, and we will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. As long as this is the characteristic activity of human beings it makes sense to judge the merits of human beings and to define the virtues with reference to their doing well at reasoning.

In response to these points two additional worries come to mind. First, it might be said that if human beings are the products of evolution, then rational activity cannot be distinctive of them. For there must be some ancestral species from which they evolved which had some level of rationality, and presumably there are surviving related species, such as the higher primates, which also possess some level of rationality. Second, it might be noted that if, as I concede, human nature is subject to the forces of evolution, then there might come a time when rationality is not characteristic of human beings and then the table of the virtues would have to be completely revised.

Concerning the first of these points, I would note that in the preceding section of this paper I acknowledge the existence of some kind of rationality in nonhuman animals. But I also contend that there are several forms of rationality which only human beings engage in. Thus, in defense of my position I maintain that, while there are certain forms of rationality that nonhuman animals engage in, there are other forms distinctive of human beings and doing well at these is constitutive of the distinctly human good.

In reply to the second point, I must simply acknowledge that this *is* a possibility. That it is, there *may* come a time when, through the ongoing process of evolution, human nature is no longer characteristically rational. Were this to happen then human goodness would have to be judged by some other standard and this in turn would likely justify changes in our conception of the human virtues. But to acknowledge that this is a possibility is not to say that it is likely nor liable to happen at any time in the foreseeable future. Indeed, I think it's

safe to say that such a turn of events is highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. But, as a Darwinian, I must acknowledge this possibility and the consequent contingency of the nature of human goodness and the virtues necessary to its attainment.

Certainly there are some who feel that embracing a more traditional Aristotelian virtue ethic – one which grounds normative claims by appeal to our characteristic rationality – is problematic given the truth of Darwinism. But, for the reasons given herein, I don't find this problematic.[37]

Conclusion

This essay serves various ends. First, I show that Foot believes the virtues are necessary to human flourishing, but I also show that given the vagueness of her account of human flourishing it is too hard to see how it is that the virtues are necessary to its attainment. I go on to argue that the virtue ethics Aristotle presents in the *Nicomachean Ethics* does make it clear why the virtues are necessary to human flourishing. This provides us with some reasons to think the traditional Aristotelian view may be preferable to that of Foot. I go on to argue that Aristotle's theory also provides ways to avoid problems for Foot's view which have been recently noted by C&S. In doing so, I show how the traditional Aristotelian metaphysical biology and Aristotle's appeal to rational activity as characteristic of human beings are both useful in avoiding some of the problems noted by C&S. I also argue that other problems could be avoided if we look at Aristotle as giving us an account of the nature of personhood as opposed to human beings. Finally, I also point the way towards certain key issues that need to be addressed if a traditional Aristotelian ethics is to be adequately defended. For instance, I acknowledge the importance of defending Kantian universalisability requirements for moral norms and/or the importance of defending Aristotle's metaphysical biology. Additionally, while I give some brief defense of the Aristotelian claim that rationality is characteristic of human beings, I acknowledge that more needs to be said on this subject, as there are significant criticisms of this and its applicability for the derivation of moral norms.[38]

[37] I offer more extensive support for the compatibility of Aristotelian virtue ethics and Darwinism in my *Commonsense Darwinism* (forthcoming Open Court Press). For another defense of a Darwinian approach to Aristotelian ethics see Arnhart, L. (1998) *Darwinian natural right: The biological ethics of human nature.* Albany, NY: The SUNY Press.

[38] I would like to thank an anonymous referee for this journal for his/her various useful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.