

Norms, Natures and God

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Contents

Acknowledgments	5
Acknowledgments	6
Chapter I. Introduction	7
1. Introductory Remarks	7
2. Aristotelian Natures	8
3. Mersenne Problems	10
Chapter II. Ethics	13
1. Normative ethics	13
2. Flourishing	13
3. Metaethics	13
4. Supererogation	13
5. The great chain of being	13
Chapter III. Applied ethics	14
1. Double Effect	14
2. Medical ethics	14
3. Environmental ethics	14
4. Marriage and other natural relationships	14
Chapter IV. Epistemology	15
1. Priors	15
2. Infinity, self-indication and other limitations of Bayesianism	15
Chapter V. Mind	16

CONTENTS	4
Chapter VI. Semantics	17
Chapter VII. Metaphysics	18
Chapter VIII. Laws of nature and causal powers	19
Chapter IX. Harmony, Evolution and God	20
1. Harmony	20
2. Explaining harmony by natures and evolution	20
2.1. Number of natures	20
2.2. Nomic coordination	20
2.3. Fit to DNA	20
2.4. Fit to niche	20
2.5. Nature zombies	20
3. Explanations of moral norms	20
3.1. Global aesthetic-like features	20
3.2. Family	20
3.3. Restitutive justice	20
4. Explaining harmony theistically	20
Chapter X. Eternal Life and Fulfillment	21
Chapter XI. Aristotelian Metaphysical Details	22
1. Introduction	22
2. Individual forms	22
2.1. Distant conspecifics	22
2.2. Ethical counting	23

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Acknowledgments

I would like that thank ... Nicholas Breiner??

CHAPTER I

Introduction

1. Introductory Remarks

I have a human nature or human form that governs my voluntary and involuntary activity. Much as the government governs the activity of the people *both* by legislating norms and encouraging people to follow the norms, my nature's governance also has the dual role of setting norms for me and influencing my activity to follow these norms. This nature is something real and intrinsic to me, something that makes me be what I am, a human being.

When extended to other fundamental beings besides humans, the above is the center of Aristotle's metaphysics. I will show that this center is extremely fruitful, providing compelling solutions to problems in ethics, epistemology, the philosophy of mind, semantics, metaphysics and philosophy of science. Many of these are prominent problems that have been the subject of much discussion, such as the problem of priors in Bayesian epistemology or of vagueness in semantics, while others are problems that have not attracted much attention, such as the problem of seemingly arbitrary detail in moral rules. I shall discuss these solutions in Chapters II–VIII.

The ability to give unified solutions to an array of problems spread through many areas of philosophy gives one a very good reason to accept the central Aristotelian theses. However, in Chapter IX, I will also argue that this center cannot hold on its own, and the way to be an intellectually satisfied Aristotelian, especially after Darwin, is to be a theist as well.

There are several lines of thought readers attracted to the unified Aristotelian solutions may follow. Some may deny that the problems facing the central Aristotelian theses are as

serious as I contend. Some may agree that the problems are serious, and regretfully reject the Aristotelian apparatus, either because they take the cost of the theistic solution to be too great or are unconvinced that the theistic solution works on its own terms. Others may agree that the problems are serious but find some other solution than the theistic one. But some, I hope, will conclude that the Aristotelian solutions are so attractive, and the theistic solution to the problems is sufficiently plausible, that this book provides not only a good reason to accept the Aristotelian center but also to accept theism.

We will be elaborating the metaphysical apparatus of what I have been calling the “Aristotelian center” gradually?? as we move through the problems and details of their solutions. At the same time, not every detail of the solutions needs to be adopted by the reader to find the general Aristotelian strategy compelling. Finally, in Chapter XI we will collect together the needed aspects of the Aristotelian metaphysics and discuss in greater detail the metaphysics needed.

??paths through the book?

In the rest of this chapter, we will do two things. First, I will sketch the central Aristotelian metaphysics in slightly greater detail. Second, I will discuss a neglected science-based argument from the 17th century polymath Marin Mersenne for the existence of God. This argument does not work, I will argue. However, an important thread running through this book will be how “Mersenne problems” analogous to the problems in science raised by Mersenne arise in many areas of philosophy and provide a compelling case for the existence of Aristotelian natures or forms.

2. Aristotelian Natures

According to Aristotle, reality is fundamentally built out of substances, which are real mind-independent entities. These substances are not limited to microphysical entities like

quarks and photons—indeed, it is not even clear that the microphysical entities are substances at all¹—and indeed Aristotle takes biological organisms like oak trees and human beings to be paradigm cases of substances.??ref

Each material substance has a form or nature—I will use the terms interchangeably in this book. This form or nature performs a number of roles including unifying the matter of the substance into a single thing, setting norms for the structure and activity of the substance, and guiding the actual development and activity of the object. The nature of the oak tree is not merely an arrangement of its particles, since an arrangement lacks normative force. In living things, the form of the substance is its life or soul: it makes the substance be alive.

Natures are innate to their substances. Nonetheless, this statement underdetermines an important question, namely whether substances of the same sort—say, red oaks—all numerically share one nature or each individual substance has its own nature, albeit in relevant respects??forwardref they are all exactly alike in substances of the same kind. For two things could in principle share something innate to them. It could be that all people have the same soul, much as two conjoined twins could have the same stomach. Aristotle scholarship is divided on the question whether Aristotle believed in “individual forms”, one per substance. However, at least one of the advantages of an Aristotelian theory of form will be accentuated if we accept individual forms, as we shall see.??forward Further, there is good philosophical reason to take natures to be individual, as we shall see in ??forward. Thus, I shall take natures to be individual. Nonetheless, if you like shared forms, *many* of the benefits I will draw out for a theory of forms will be ones you, too, can have.

¹The fact that in quantum mechanics, one can have a superposition of states with different numbers of particles is evidence that particles are not substances.??

3. Mersenne Problems

Marin Mersenne was a monk, philosopher, theologian and the 17th century equivalent of the arXiv preprint archive—he was a crucial line of communication between a broad variety of thinkers and scientists. He drew on his broad knowledge of the science of the time to offer an argument that begins with many pages of questions, of which the following are representative:

Who gave more strength to the lion than to the ant? Who made it be that earth is not in the moon's place, and that the planets aren't larger or smaller, closer or further? Who has ordered all the parts of the world as we see them? ... Why is the moon 56 earth-radii away from the earth? Why is the sun 1182 [earth-radii] away from us at its apogee? ... and why is its distance at perigee not other than 1101 [earth-radii]? ... I could equally ask you about Saturn, and Jupiter, and Mars ...??refs²

These “Mersenne questions” go on and on, with a mind-numbing number of examples. And Mersenne has one answer to all these questions, posed in a rhetorical question: “Was it not God?”??ref

The argument sounds similar to fine-tuning arguments for theism which became popular in the late 20th century. These arguments, too, list a variety of physical parameters and offer God as an explanation of them all.??ref But there is a crucial ingredient that the fine-tuning arguments, namely that the parameters listed are needed for intelligent life as we know it, or for some other valuable trait of the universe, like its amenability to scientific investigation.??ref The basic idea behind the fine-tuning argument is, very roughly, that nature is indifferent to value but God cares about value, so the fact that the parameters are valuable provides evidence for theism over naturalism.

It is, thus, natural to look in Mersenne for arguments that it is particularly valuable for the moon to be 56 earth-radii from the earth, but at least in this work, Mersenne does not

²The moon-earth distance is approximately correct. The earth-sun distance is an order of magnitude off.

supply them or even hint at them. Nor is there any argument that it is better that lions are stronger than ants, or that it is better for the moon to orbit the earth rather than the other way around. If Mersenne is giving a fine-tuning argument, the argument is oddly incomplete. And Mersenne's penchant for adumbrating detail at great length makes it unlikely that he has simply omitted such a crucial part of the argument.

Rather, it appears that Mersenne is simply looking for an explanation of the scientific details he cites, sees no prospect of a scientific explanation, and offers theism as the alternative. And indeed it is only in the 20th century with computer models of solar system formation that we have much in the way of plausible answers to Mersenne's questions about the distances between solar system bodies. For instance, the leading theory of lunar formation involves the earth being hit by another body and a large chunk being pushed into orbit. Given assumptions about the impact, one can then explain the resulting distance between the earth and the moon. But notice that such an explanation only gives an answers to the Mersenne question about the earth-moon distance at the cost of raising similar Mersenne questions about the parameters of the impact such as the mass distribution of the pre-impact earth, the angle and location of impact, the mass distribution of the impacting body, etc.

Mersenne gives a dizzying number of examples, and he seems to relish the sheer arbitrariness of the numbers like "56" and "1182". While this has some rhetorical force, it also has argumentative force. The more arbitrary-looking parameters the parameters are, the less epistemically likely it is that they are what they of necessity or that good scientific theories will predict their exact values. And the greater the number of parameters, the less likely it is that science can provide an explanation of them all.

But Mersenne has a fatal argumentative flaw. Even if we grant that it is very unlikely that a future science will predict these exact numbers, there is always the possibility of a stochastic explanation, one that does not predict exact values, but supposes a random natural process that generates a set of values at random. Now, if Mersenne had an argument showing that the values of the parameters are suspiciously valuable—say, necessary

for intelligent life—then a stochastic explanation might not be as good as a theistic one. From a Bayesian point of view, we might be able to argue that it is extremely unlikely that a random selection of parameters would have such value, but not nearly so unlikely that God would choose such parameters and hence the data supports theism over randomness. But given that Mersenne makes no case that the parameters have anything to recommend them to God for creation, we have no reason to think that the probability of God choosing is these parameters is any higher than the probability of them arising randomly, and hence we have no support for theism.

Suppose, however, that we had a Mersenne-type case where randomness was not a satisfactory explanation. Then there would still be one more problem with the argument. If one is willing to deny the Principle of Sufficient Reason, one could simply say that the parameters are what they are and there is no reason why they are like this—that they are a *brute* fact. This, however, is less satisfying than the stochastic answer, for adverting to brute fact should be a last resort, to be chosen when no explanation is available. But here there is an option, namely theism.

In the rest of the book we will find that if we turn our attention away from science and towards philosophy, we will find a myriad of cases like Mersenne's where there are seemingly arbitrary parameters. But these will be cases where a randomness explanation is implausible and bruteness is not satisfactory. However, unlike in Mersenne's case, I won't be arguing for theism as providing the solution. Rather, the solution will be Aristotelian metaphysics of form.

CHAPTER II

Ethics

- 1. Normative ethics**
- 2. Flourishing**
- 3. Metaethics**
- 4. Supererogation**
- 5. The great chain of being**

CHAPTER III

Applied ethics

- 1. Double Effect**
- 2. Medical ethics**
- 3. Environmental ethics**
- 4. Marriage and other natural relationships**

CHAPTER IV

Epistemology

1. Priors

2. Infinity, self-indication and other limitations of Bayesianism

CHAPTER V

Mind

CHAPTER VI

Semantics

CHAPTER VII

Metaphysics

CHAPTER VIII

Laws of nature and causal powers

CHAPTER IX

Harmony, Evolution and God

1. Harmony

2. Explaining harmony by natures and evolution

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2.1. Number of natures.

2.2. Nomic coordination.

2.3. Fit to DNA.

2.4. Fit to niche.

2.5. Nature zombies.

3. Explanations of moral norms

3.1. Global aesthetic-like features. ²

3.2. Family.

3.3. Restributive justice.

4. Explaining harmony theistically

¹This section owes much to discussion in my mid-sized objects seminar, and especially to Christopher Tomaszewski's suggestions on the explanatory powers of forms.

²I am grateful to Nicholas Breiner for drawing my attention, in the context of justice, to this form of explanation of moral features.

CHAPTER X

Eternal Life and Fulfillment

CHAPTER XI

Aristotelian Metaphysical Details

1. Introduction

2. Individual forms

Recall the debate whether forms are individual—numerically different ones for different members of the same kind—or shared by all members of the same kind.

In ??backref, we saw that there is some advantage to an individual form account of ethics: individual forms intuitively do a little more justice to the personal nature of ethical obligation.??[but conjoint twins] ??add But are there any other arguments for taking forms to be individual?

I believe so. An initial attempt might be to argue that then the numerically same entity—the form—is present in multiple places at once. I do not find this argument compelling, however, as I do not think multilocation is absurd.??ref But if you do, that is one argument. Let us consider some others.

2.1. Distant conspecifics. Suppose a shared form theory is true. Now, imagine that in our galaxy there is only one human being, Adam, and imagine that in a galaxy far, far away, God creates a humanoid comes into existence, with no genetic connection to Adam, but with a form that is just like Adam's: this form unifies matter in the same way as Adam's form does, it imposes exactly the same norms on the form's owner as the human form does on Adam, and it causes the same structure and behavior as the human form does for Adam.

At this point we have a dilemma: either the form of this humanoid must be numerically the same as Adam's or not. Suppose it must be numerically the same as ours. Then

somehow simply by creating something in a galaxy far, far away, God causes an entity in *our* galaxy—Adam's form—to become multilocated. This seems counterintuitive.

Suppose that the form does not need to be numerically the same as Adam's. In that case, we have admitted that there can be numerically different forms with the same broadly functional features (including the normative functions). This means that the question of whether you and I have the numerically same form is not settled by noting that the forms have the same functional features. Indeed, now the question whether your and my form is numerically different or the same becomes a metaphysical question that no empirical data is relevant to the settling of. There is nothing absurd about there being such metaphysical questions. But it is some advantage to a theory if raises fewer such questions, having fewer degrees of freedom. And if one does accept a theory where it is possible but not logically necessary that different individual substances have numerically different forms, then one really shouldn't be accepting that in practice you and I share a form. At best one should be agnostic on this question.

2.2. Ethical counting. ...forms are the most important, so why not count by forms rather than individuals, especially in cross-species contextst??