

BECOMING WHAT WE ARE: VIRTUE AND PRACTICAL WISDOM AS NATURAL
ENDS IN RECENT NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT: This dissertation is about ethical naturalism. I clarify and defend Philippa Foot's sort of neo-Aristotelian naturalism against that of John McDowell. Foot and McDowell are united in the affirmation that virtue is 'natural goodness' for human beings and they are even united in endorsing scientific naturalism. Nevertheless, they are divided in endorsing rival conceptions of 'the natural.' McDowell divides "second nature" from "first nature," while Foot rejects this division. McDowell divides the normative space of reasons and values from the descriptive realm of facts and laws while Foot argues that natural goodness is a feature of first nature. In other words, norms of practical reasoning are of a piece with organic norms of life, health, and well-functioning. I defend Foot's view and augment it by presenting interlocking accounts of virtue, practical reason, human nature, and nature itself. First, I contend that some natural norms are just as scientifically respectable as generic life forms such as 'the wolf' and generic activities such as 'hunting in packs.' Secondly, I argue that human beings are practical, rational primates and part of the same organic world. It follows, thirdly, that ethical norms and natural reasons defining a good human life are a subset of natural norms. The good life for human beings is one spent pursuing virtue and practical wisdom. This can be known both from an "external" scientific view of human beings and from an "internal" ethical view of ourselves. Finally, to secure the naturalistic credentials of my view, I articulate three influential conceptions of 'nature,' criticize McDowell's conception, and show how my view is consistent with either of the remaining two. On my view, which I call "recursive naturalism," practical reasoning is natural to human beings and human beings are part of the natural world even though we reason about the world, ourselves, and our own reasoning.

KEYWORDS: ethical naturalism, neo-Aristotelianism, virtue, practical reason, nature

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For Lindsay Elizabeth.

"Oh, who shall understand but you; yea, who shall understand?"

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γένει' οἷος ἐσσι μαθών. (Become what you are, having learned what that is.)

—Pindar, *Pythian* 2, line 72.

0.1	Preface	viii
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1. Preface

It is all very well to talk of clarity, but when it becomes an obsession it is liable to nip the living thought in the bud.

—Friedrich Waismann, *How I See Philosophy*, 16.

I went down to graduate school with a decade-long resolution to write on Plato's later dialectic. My resolution was challenged by Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness*. The astonishment I felt when first reading her work can only be compared to my first encounters with the Platonic dialogues: confusion, tempered with delight.

Natural Goodness is one of the rare philosophical monographs that manages to be a work of art. One reviewer warned that it is "so gracefully written that the reader runs the risk of... mistaking the book's fluidity for shallowness. In fact, the depth... is remarkable."¹ Indeed, it is a delight to read for its elegance and pugnacity, but it is a duty to read for its wisdom and profundity. Building on her prior work in virtue theory, Foot blends metaethics and normative ethics by laying the foundation for what Mark Murphy calls a "secular natural law theory."² She argues that living virtuously and wisely is natural goodness for human beings just as hunting in packs is natural goodness for wolves.

The obvious objection to such a thesis is that it inappropriately blends facts and values, that it either "biologizes" ethics or "enchants" science. This obvious objection (which Foot tackles head on in her monograph) rests on the common notion that nature and science are entirely distinct from values and ethics. This objection is a serious one. But it is more likely to be leveled reflexively by someone who has not wrestled with Foot's argument.

1. Brook J Sadler, "Review of 'Natural Goodness'," *Essays in Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2004): 28.

2. Mark Murphy, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/natural-law-ethics/>.

John Hacker-Wright is correct to say that “Foot’s recent readers have made some rather serious missteps in approaching her work.”³

Receiving an initial “cool reception”⁴ is not an infallible sign of a classic, but it is one tell-tale sign. It is plain from the literature that too few ethicists and metaethicists have come to grips with the precise details and wide-ranging implications of her argument. For example, James Barham suggests that Foot’s *Natural Goodness* and Rosalind Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* are making the same case, but that Hursthouse’s “account is the clearer and more detailed of the two.”⁵ This comparison is misleading on two fronts.

First, even though both books are successful in their aims, they have very different aims. Hursthouse’s book is intended to render modern virtue ethics conventional; Foot’s book is intended to disrupt a hundred years of metaethical convention.⁶ Hursthouse offers an olive branch to deontologists and utilitarians, trading in her formerly combative rhetoric for mutual respect so that iron may sharpen iron. Foot (like Anscombe and MacIntyre) calls into question much of what has passed for modern moral philosophy, naming names and picking fights.

Secondly, the relative clarity of the two books fits their aims. Hursthouse’s overview of virtue ethics is aimed at non-expert graduate and undergraduate students. It therefore exhibits some of the necessary, though unfortunate, style of textbooks: comprehensive, responsible, and occasionally plodding. Foot’s “fresh start”⁷ is aimed at professional ethicists.

3. John Hacker-Wright, “What Is Natural About Foot’s Ethical Naturalism?” *Ratio* 22, no. 3 (2009): 321.

4. *Ibid.*, 309.

5. James Lenman, “Moral Naturalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014. He says, “Neo-Aristotelian naturalism is articulated at length and along mutually similar lines in two recent monographs, Foot’s *Natural Goodness* and Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics*.”

6. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 5: “For better or worse—and many will say worse—I have in this book the overt aim of setting out a view of moral judgement very different from that of most moral philosophers writing today.”

7. *Ibid.*, 5.

It is therefore more comparable to a Platonic dialogue or Humean treatise: Foot plays the Socratic gadfly to the experts with “a swaggering gait and roving eye.” Her book is “crude”⁸ because it is what Waismann calls a “living thought,” digging deep into the soil of our pre-suppositions. *On Virtue Ethics* is a thoroughly respectable book, but *Natural Goodness* makes one proud to be a philosopher.

Happily, some ethicists *have* come to grips with the significance of Foot’s case, such as John McDowell and Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre’s eventual position begins to look similar to Foot’s position, for he defends the importance of human biology to human ethics in his most recent ethical monograph more than he did in *After Virtue*.⁹ By contrast, McDowell’s opposition to scientism leads him to disagree with Foot.

McDowell’s and Foot’s respective approaches to neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism represent rival visions of the relation between human beings and nature and hence between ethics and science. The fault line between these rival views is of enormous philosophical and ethical significance. The fault line between these views is the theme of this dissertation.

Though my research focus changed, there remains one respect in which these chapters might be seen as fulfilling my original resolution to study Plato’s later dialectic – not by examination but by enactment. That is, I aim to construct the argument as a sort of dialogue between author and reader. I take my primary audience to be readers who share (with Foot) an attraction to moral realism about virtue but who share (with McDowell) a commitment to modern science. In order to persuade this kind of audience that the two are not incompatible, I aim to assume nothing they would not assume, and to address first the objections that might arise in their minds. I would have written differently for a different implied audience, but every dialogue must have a limited scope and a definite voice. For this reason, I have bracketed worthy discussions of supernaturalism and non-naturalism. If my study of the

8. Ibid., 1.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Platonic dialectic has taught me nothing else, it is that one must not only *understand* one's interlocutors but in some sense *become* them.