Chapter 1

Introduction: Nature, Virtue, Reason, and Teleology

"Not everything that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best."

–Aristotle, *Physics* 194a 32–33.

Ethical Naturalism

In the broadest sense, 'ethical naturalism' is a name for any view of ethics that accords with metaphysical naturalism. In this sense, etihcal naturalism includes a wide variety of "deflationary conceptions" of ethics, be they "non-cognitivist, prescriptivist, projectivist, relativist"[1] or any other anti-realist conception that acknowledges the "purported objectivity"[2] of morality but aims to "debunk it"[3].

In a narrower sense, however, 'ethical naturalism' is name for some types of moral realism according to which moral facts are real. In this sense, ethical naturalism is, as James Lemnan puts it, the view that "there are objective moral facts and properties and that these facts and properties

1. Richard Boyd, "Finite Beings, Finite Goods: The Semantics, Metaphysics and Ethics of Naturalist Consequentialism, Part I1," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, no. 3 (2003): 504.

2. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 287.

3. Ibid., 154.

are natural facts and properties."[4] In this sense, furthermore, ethical naturalism's rivals are super-naturalism (moral facts are real and somehow divine), non-naturalism (moral facts are real but not natural), and anti-realism (there are no moral facts).

On this broad definition, neo-Aristotelian is a brand of moral or ethical naturalism that identifies moral facts with natural facts about humans, their needs, their nature, their typical aims, etc. As Rosalind Hursthouse says, "Virtue ethics, or at least any form of it that takes its inspiration from Aristotle, is usually taken to be a form of ethical naturalism – broadly, the enterprise of basing ethics in some way on consideration of human nature, on what is involved with being good *qua* human being."[5] The hope is that if we can say what a *good human being* is, we shall be well on the way to describing what kinds of actions are right and wrong, or what kind of character traits are admirable or blameworthy.

Neo-Aristotelian naturalism is an attractive view. Once it was formulated and popularized by philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Iris Murdoch, and Alasdair MacIntyre, it has made its way into other academic fields, such as sociology, business, bioethics, education, and others. For example, sociologist Amanda Maull summarizing the issue like this:

> Drawing upon the works of philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Richard Kraut, and Martha Nussbaum, the claim is made that there are moral properties and facts that are natural (rather than occult or supernatural), which are derived from certain innate dispositions and capacities of living things (i.e., those associated with growth and self-maintenance as opposed to destruction or harm). Human beings have evolved as social creatures with special capacities for speech and reason such that specification of "human flourishing" is more complex and problematic than it is for plants or animals. For the human being, the idea of the "good life" goes beyond biological survival and pertains to potentially ambiguous concepts such as virtue, happiness,

4. James Lenman, "Moral Naturalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2014. Alternatively, Russ Shafer-Landau's moral realism is not a metaphysical but an epistemological thesis: moral facts *can be known* apart from knowing natural facts. Some moral truths are self-evident. Cf. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, 4 (Oxford University Press, 2003).

5. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 192.

and "well-being."[6]

Three Sorts of Ethical naturalism

Within a broad agreement among neo-Aristotelians, live questions are still being debated. Philippa Foot's brand of neo-Aristotelianism is certainly a type of ethical naturalism. She aims to discover that "the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be determined by quite general facts about human beings."[7] But she goes further. She does not just base evaluative properties on "considerations of human nature" but identifies properties such as goodness with natural properties of all organisms (such as health and disease). Jennifer Frey summarizes the "master thought" of Foot's brand of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism:

> The ethical naturalist's master thought is this: man needs the virtues just as much as a bee needs its sting. Such a thought is intriguing insofar as it takes the ethereal and elusive 'moral ought' and brings it back down to earth, by locating it within a wider structure of evaluation we already readily grasp and acknowledge as objectively valid.[8]

Mark Murphy calls Foot's hypothesis a type of "secular natural law theory". It aims to apply to ethics natural normative notions such as 'necessity', 'ought', and 'health', which are already in use in biological and other sciences.

One of the potential attractions of Foot's type of ethical naturalism is that, by bringing the 'moral ought' into closer contact with empirical disciplines, ethicists can more fully avail themselves of the fruits of modern science. As Joyce points out: "Key contributions can be made by social and

6. Amanda Maull, "A Deweyan Defense of Ethical Naturalism," *Society* 50, no. 6 (2013): 577.

7. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 45.

8. Jennifer Ann Frey, "The Will and the Good" (PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 5.

developmental psychologists, experimental economists, neuroscientists, geneticists, primatologists, anthropologists, comparative ethologists, and evolutionary biologists."[9]

Yet Foot's brand is by no means uncontroversial. Stephen Brown summarizes a "charge… frequently levelled at ethical naturalism, *viz.* that it seeks to 'reduce' ethics to something else, perhaps biology, perhaps to something even more 'fundamental' like physics."[10] John McDowell levels such a charge. While not *quite* accussing Foot of this mistake, he thinks her theory is dangerously close to the kind of mistake that would "biologize" ethical theory, turning ethics into an empirical discipline. His criticism of such a mistake is that it falls prey to the "Myth of the Given"[11] – roughly, the notion that some conceptual content (including ethical norms) can be just *given*, for free, in perceptual experience.

While criticizing Foot, McDowell is himself a neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalist in the narrower sense described above: he thinks moral values are real (but not non-natural) parts of the world, but he denies that they are parts of the empirical world. Rather, moral values are part of "second nature."[12] "Second nature" is for McDowell our own rational consciousness in so far as it is enculturated by language, custom, evaluation, habit, and a way of seeing the world. McDowell's "second nature" is inherently rational but also social, and depends on our intersubjective "form of life." Hence, values are "secondary qualities" of nature, partially constituted by the mental act of the observer. Virtue is a sort of perceptual sensitivity to "what a situation requires."[13] But McDowell understands the property of "what a situation requires" not as a primary natural fact, but a dispo-

9. Richard Joyce, "Ethics and Evolution," *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory, 2nd Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013)*, 2013, 1.

10. R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008), 5.

11. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996). McDowell borrows this phrase from Sellars. Cf. Wilfrid Sellars and others, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1, no. 19 (1956): 253–329

12. McDowell, *Mind and World*. Cf. also Georg W. F. Hegel and Allen W Wood, *Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) 195: "The habit of the ethical appears as a second nature which takes the place of the original and purely natural will and is all pervading soul, significance, and actuality of individual existence."

13. John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331–50.

sitional property partly constituted by primary nature and partly constituted by "second nature", that is by the rational appraisal of the moral agent.

McDowell and Foot both lay claim to the title of 'neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism', since neither wishes to completely debunk morality but neither wishes to accept a source that is supernatural or non-natural. But, as we can see, McDowell and Foot represent two very different "sorts of naturalism."[14]

These internecine controversies are more than a war of words. One finds a grounding for real moral values in the context of intersubjective rationality, while other finds it in a broader context of biological functionality. Perhaps a helpful caricature of the controversy would be to say that one sort emphasizes biology (that is, the physical, the scientific, and the objective) while the other sort emphasizes rationality (that is, the conscious, the subjective, the cultural or intersubjective). Both see the importance of grounding ethical facts in natural facts, but Foot (and Brown) think that natural teleological facts are live candidates; McDowell does not.

Other neo-Aristotelians had to take sides or to find ways to synthesize the two sides. For example, Rosalind Hursthouse's landmark monograph, *On Virtue Ethics*, builds on Foot's account in many ways, even though she agrees with McDowell in rejecting the search for an "external", objective, scientific foundation for virtue ethics. And Alasdair MacIntyre's view is not easily defined: his early writings align more with McDowell in rejecting "Aristotle's metaphysical biology", but his later writings align more with Foot in a finding that "human identity is primarily, even if not only, bodily and therefore animal identity and it is by reference to that identity that the continuities of our relationships to others are partly defined."[15]

Between Foot's and McDowell's sorts of ethical naturalism, who has the upper hand? Is there any hope for a "third sort" of naturalism that synthesizes the two, or denies the distinction? Can

14. John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Hans Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (August 2006): 202–21. Both of these articles will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

15. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

natural normativity or natural teleology unite "second nature" with "primary nature"? Can natural teleology unite the *rational/cultural/intersubjective* aspect of ethics with the *empirical/biological/objective* aspect of the same?

Thesis

In this dissertation, I defend the broadly Footian/MacIntyrean project of aiming for a secular, scientific foundation for teleological virtue ethics. I defend this project against various objections, such as the "is-ought gap" and cultural relativism, and as proof of concept, I advance the project a few steps. Since it seems to me correct that we must develop accounts of natural teleology, virtue, practical reason, and human flourishing all in dynamic relation with the others, I accordingly offering a chapter on each of these themes.

Specifically, I shall defend the following thesis: **virtue is the plurality of acquirable excellent character traits (such as moderation, tolerance, and wisdom) that all practical, rational animals need, because virtue partly constitutes natural human flourishing.**

My overall aim is to "sell" virtue ethics to scientific naturalists who might have various objections to it, and to "sell" the notion that science has something to support and contribute to ethics to virtue theorists and other ethical naturalists.

The main components of this thesis are virtue ('acquirable excellent character traits') human nature (our life form as 'practical, rational animals') and human flourishing. In the course of these chapters, I will defend this thesis in parts and as a whole. This kind of virtue ethics unites the concepts of one's species or life-form with the concept of one's flourishing or well-being as well as the concept of formal qualities necessary for flourishing. Put differently, we might say that this kind of virtue ethics unites form, function, and excellence. Hence, these three concepts are not only individually interesting but interesting in so far as they constitute a single, three-part schema, which (for lack of a better term) I shall call the "virtue triangle."

The Virtue Triangle

Why are the concepts of virtue, humanity, and flourishing *together* greater than the sum of their parts? In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre persuasively argues that there are three necessary "elements" to morality:[16] namely, a goal, a starting point, and the means from the starting point to the goal.

These three elements are necessary features of the performance of any task – however menial or lofty. In a simple project such as, say, cooking a dinner, my goal might be to reproduce what I see in the picture of a tasty meal from a cookbook. The starting point includes the raw materials at my disposal, such as the food in my fridge (and my cooking skills); the means to the end is a recipe, including a list of needed ingredients and instructions that, once enacted, will produce a copy of the meal pictured. Similarly, one cannot make any mundane journey without a destination, a starting location, and directions (on foot, by car, by plane, or what have you) to the destination. (Even the desire to "explore the countryside" or even to "wander about" involves a set *goal* if not a set destination.)

The point of this simple reflection is that we ought to demand that any moral theory supply all three elements. MacIntyre explains that, in morality, the first element is "untutored human nature" (as it is). The second element is the moral human, humanity as it could be and should be. The third element is the set of traits, actions, emotions, habits, etc., needed to move from the first to the second points. Understanding "human-nature-as-it-is"[17] is a task for philosophers, as well as psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc. This would include a conception of the human species as rational animals as it is *prior* to deep self-reflection or moral effort. Understanding human nature "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos"[18] was "the whole point of ethics." This third conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize. Moral rules or admirable character traits are the *content* of morality; but the telos of humanity is the *context* of morality. Telos

16. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 54 ff.
17. Ibid., 55.
18. Ibid., 55.

makes morality make sense.

A moral theory cannot simply offer one or two out of the three, and neglect the third. It needs *some* conception of individual or social well-being, *some* conception of what it means to be human (what kind of raw material are we working with?) and *some* conception of how one's moral duties and other obligations or other motivating factors connect humanity as it is with humanity-as-it-could-and-should-be. Morality simply makes no sense without showing which qualities, actions, attitudes, resources, laws, etc. enable a human being to achieve his or her telos. A moral theory is bound to stultify if it leaves out any one of these three formal elements. The scandel of many modern moral philosophies is that they do just that.

The neo-Aristotelians such as Foot, McDowell, MacIntyre, and Hursthouse attempt to remedy this situation by providing accounts of all three concepts. In doing so, they agree in drawing from pre-modern sources (such as Aristotle and Aquinas) but dispute the proper strategy for updating their ethical theories in our modern context.

All three concepts need additional clarification, for they are liable to misunderstanding in our modern context. Hursthouse puts the point this way: "Three of virtue ethics' central concepts, virtue, practical wisdom and eudaimonia are often misunderstood. Once they are distinguished from related but distinct concepts peculiar to modern philosophy, various objections to virtue ethics can be better assessed."[19] Objections fired at neo-Aristotelian ethical theories often hit a bullseye but on the wrong target.[20] A large part of my job is to stake out a conceptual space for virtue, practical reason (including its excellence, which I take to be practical wisdom), and natural human flourishing (which I take to be closely related to eudaimonia). My task is also to defend the trilateral form that relates them in a dynamic schema.

Whether the natural facts or properties in which ethical facts are located is some concep-

19. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2013.

20. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011) gives a concise and clear account of all three.

tion of human biology, the human life form (Thompson), our rational form of life (McDowell), the characteristic way of life (Hursthouse), or something else, the common point is clear: human beings need these qualities *because of who and what they are*, including a particular natural kind of flourishing defined by the natural normativity relevant to the species.

Telos

All three elements of the "virtue triangle" are important. But the unifying concept of the schema is not virtue but telos. If we cannot even perform a menial, intentional action without a goal, then *a fortiori* it would seem we cannot perform our highest moral duties without a telos.

Defining that telos is, of course, the rub. But it seems apparent that strict moral rules without any notion of the kind of life that is to be lived are bound to degenerate into a kind of pointless legalism. If the teleological notion of natural human flourishing in particular is central to the project of virtue ethics, it would seem that developing a plausible modern virtue ethical theory would require rehabilitating a notion of natural teleology in general.

The project of rehabilitating natural teleology may seem overly optimistic.[21] It may be felt, for instance, that teleology has simply been debunked by modern science and therefore has no place in a scientific worldview, that Francis Bacon was right tha the search for final causes "defiled philosophy"[22] and so that any attempt to revive teleological virtue talk is antiquarian and nostalgic.

While it is true that some modern sciences focus exclusively on non-teleological causes (material, efficient, and possibly formal causes), methodologically excluding phenomena from study is

21. Arthur Ward's recent dissertation, to be discussed in a later chapter, argues that the sort of teleological naturalism being pursued here is not a good foundation for ethics. Arthur Ward, "Against Natural Teleology and Its Application in Ethical Theory" (PhD thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2013).

22. Cf. Bacon, *New Organon*, Book I. XLVIII "Although the most general principles in nature ought to be held merely positive, as they are discovered, and cannot with truth be referred to a cause, nevertheless the human understanding being unable to rest still seeks something prior in the order of nature. And then it is that in struggling toward that which is further off it falls back upon that which is nearer at hand, namely, on final causes, which have relation clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe; and from this source have strangely defiled philosophy."

different from denying such phenomena outright. Furthermore, some modern sciences (such as biology, ecology, medicine, and others) do irreducibly and unavoidably focus on teleological causes, as we shall see.

The differences between teleological niilism and teleological realism have significant ramifications for morality. For MacIntyre, the hypothesis that we ought to reject telos is the chief error of Enlightenment moralities. He explains why in his discussion of the three elements of morality which I have called "the virtue triangle."[23] It is difficult to understate the importance of this point about the self. Edward Oakes describes the removal of telos from our worldview as "perhaps the greatest category mistake ever made in the history of philosophy."

> That word "teleological" is the key to MacIntyre's solution, the loss of which is the cause of the catastrophe described in his science-fiction parable. Teleology is the study of final causes, goals, purposes, and aims: a style of explanation that saturates Aristotle's philosophy. After the combined impact of Newton and Darwin, however, this type of explanation seems mostly 'quaint' and once Aristotle's science seemed quaint, his ethics soon followed: when Newton demonstrated how motion can be better explained as resulting from the outcome of mechanical laws, and when Darwin posited natural selection as the "mechanism" for explaining an organ's functionality, the use of teleology in ethics was doomed…Emptying moral discourse of teleological concepts because of the perceived impact of Newton and Darwin has been for MacIntyre the catastrophe of our times.[24]

The problem is not that rejecting telos was unfortunate, or damaging, but that it was *a mistake*. Who are we, if we are not natural creatures? Since we are natural creatures, shifts in our thinking about nature are liable to match shifts in our thinking about ourselves. John Horton and Susan Mendus captures the stakes well:

> Where Aristotle understood man as a creature with a definite function which he might fulfill or deny, modern morality sees man simply as a rational agent who has no true or definable purpose independent of his own will… By appealing to a telos, Aristotle was able to distinguish between the way we actually are and the way we should be. His conception of human beings as having a specific telos brought with

23. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54ff.
24. Edward Oakes, "The Achievement of Alasdair Macintyre," *First Things*, 1996.

> it the possibility that we might fall short of the ideal… But with the rejection of Aristotelianism gain the rejection of any such distinction between what we are and what we should be. Post-Enlightenment man is seen as governed, not by a telos external to him, but simply by the dictates of his own inner reason… Thus the abandonment of an Aristotelian conception of the good has not only left us without standards by which to evaluate our moral arguments, it is also cast us adrift in the moral world.[25]

These reflections suggest that at least our conception of ethics needs to be teleological. As we have seen above, there are several ways to achieve this conception. Foot argues that teleology is genuinely natural to all living organisms; McDowell argues that it is not natural to all organisms but that it is to humans. Even MacIntyre's project is not *Aristotelian* but "neo-Aristotelian" in that he contrasts with Aristotle's project on several points.[26]

A fundamental feature of my thesis is that realism about natural teleology is – and can be shown to be – perfectly respectable, modern, scientific, and naturalistic. Hence, a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics grounded on human nature can be both scientifically informed and action-guiding.

Other Disclaimers

One of the wonderful things about philosophical reflection is the license – indeed the imperative – to examine new ideas and rexamine old ones. Philosophers have a unique vantage point from which to find plausibility in the most exotic or unpopular thoughts, to criticize implausibility in the most cherished of thoughts, and to see interconnections between varying disciplines. While this dissertation begins in a straightforward analysis of virtue ethics, it unabashedly explores some ideas (of varying plausibility) from philosophy of science, philosophy of biology, bioethics, social sciences, and a bit of epistemology as needed. While these discurses were not expected at the beginning of my research, they came to seem necessary and fitting in the eventual presentation of conclusions,

25. John Horton and Susan Mendus, "Alasdair MacIntyre: After Virtue and After," in *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (Routledge, 2015), 6.

26. For instance, MacIntyre denies that Greek virtues are so timeless, abstract, and generically human as Aristotle would make them appear; they are partly indexed to fourth century, upper-class, educated Athenian culture. He also rejects Aristotle's metaphysics of nature. Nevertheless, he argues, the loss of a concept of telos is dramatic.

which form a coherent whole. I hope the overall cohesion is apparent, if not at the beginning, by the end.

Chapter Outline

1. Introduction
2. Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism
3. Normativity of Nature
4. Normativity of Human Nature
5. Virtue and Vice
6. Practical Reason
7. Practical Wisdom
8. Flourishing
9. Conclusions

Chapter 2 places my project in context and makes explicit my assumptions, aims, and source texts. My four goals are to establish a foundation for virtue ethics that is a secular, scientific, naturalistic, and normative. I address the broader question of whether the kind of neo-Aristotelian naturalism I have defended is compatible with 'naturalism' in any of the typical senses of the word. I argue that it is, and I suggest as a name for my theory 'Recursive Naturalism'. Recursive naturalism aims to capture the fact that nature recurs within nature. In other words, one part of nature (human beings) can think about nature (the whole cosmos), including that part of nature that doing the thinking (human beings). We know nature, where "nature" includes us knowing nature, and so on ad infinitum.

Chapter 3 is the foundation of all that follows. It defends the notion of natural normativity. As such, it addresses the worry that ethical naturalism is a non-starter. If ethical naturalists cannot derive normative conclusions from merely descriptive premises, then indeed it is impossible. And if there are no fundamental natural norms, one cannot derive normative conclusions. But there are natural norms. A conception of nature wherein nature is inherently normative is shown to be scientific in the form of 'generic' truths about all organisms, including humans.

Chapter 4 extends the notion of natural normativity to the concept of *normative human nature*. There are many generic truths about human beings, but just about all of them can be synthesized in the two predicates of 'rational' and 'animal': Human nature is to be potentially a practical, rational animals. For practical, rational animals, some traits are excellent and others undesirable given the kind of thing such animals are. We are that part of nature that is aware of nature. I address the objections that either "natural norms" do not exist for human beings or, if they do, that they are irrelevant to ethics.

Chapter 5 offers a definition of virtue consonant with the natural normativity already defended. Virtues are acquirable excellent character traits human beings need as practical, rational animals and which partly constitute natural human flourishing. Examples discussed include moderation, tolerance, and practical wisdom. These represent various kinds of virtues, namely 'self-regarding', 'other-regarding,' and 'object-regarding' virtues – those sensitive to the intrinsic worth of self, others, and objects such as art, truth, beauty, etc. Virtue is, among other things, necessary for the acquisition of more virtue, especially the virtue of practical wisdom.

Chapter 6 explores practical reason in more depth, since practical reason is supposed to define our human life form and also is supposed to supply a means to block individual and cultural relativism. Practical reason is the capacity for resolving what to do. To borrow Alan Gibbard's elegant phrase, it is our capacity for "thinking how to live." Practical reason is not a "value neutral" process instrumentally achieving one's ends but also a process of determining which ends are worthwhile. The excellence of practical reason is practical wisdom.

Chapter 7 explores practical wisdom. This is, among other things, a commitment and skill in acquiring more practical wisdom. Realism about practical reason blocks cultural relativism about virtues, yet allows an acceptable pluralism consonant with tolerance and wisdom. Practical wisdom which is supremely important in that it is both an intellectual and a moral virtue. It is necessary for acheiving other moral virtues and sufficient for achieving some other intellectual virtues. Hence, once a human being has reached a level of practical wisdom certain kinds of well-being are secured.

Chapter 8 outlines an account of natural human flourishing, placing my virtue account squarely within the eudaimonist tradition but with important modifications. Flourishing for creatures like us is, among other things, the practical wisdom necessary to undergo the process of discovering human flourishing and the achievement of our humanity. We become what we truly are, even if our existence and identity end in death, and even if our species goes extinct. Human misery and failure is not just pain nor death but to fail to fully realize one's humanity.

Chapter 9 draws conclusions and makes suggestions for further reasearch.