Chapter 1

Introduction: Virtue, Reason, and Flourishing

"Men need virtues as bees need stings."

–Peter Geach, "The Virtues"

Thesis

Philippa Foot's version of neo-Aristotelian virtue theory aims to lay the foundation and built the outline of an ethical naturalism that Mark Murphy calls a "secular natural law theory" in that she identifies ethical facts or properties such as virtue, vice, right, wrong, good, and bad with straightforwardly natural facts or properties of the human species. Foot's theory is classified as a type of ethical naturalism. Jennifer Frey summarizes the "master thought" of this type of 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.[1]

By bringing the 'moral ought' into closer contact with empirical disciplines, Joyce points out that ethicists can enjoy the fruits of modern science:

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

> Key contributions can be made by social and developmental psychologists, experimental economists, neuroscientists, geneticists, primatologists, anthropologists, comparative ethologists, and evolutionary biologists.[2]

Foot's is not the only kind of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism, however. John McDowell criticizes the kind of scientism that would seek to make ethics an empirical discipline. He (and others) object to the heavily "biologized" kind of theory arguing that virtues are perceptual sensitivities to "what a situation requires", understanding requirement as partially constituted by the rationality. In a word, his sort of ethical naturalism emphasizes "second nature", that is, human rational consciousness in so far as it is enculturated by language, custom, evaluation, habit, and a "way of seeing". Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* builds up Foots account and supplies many missing pieces; however, she agrees with McDowell in rejecting the search for an external, objective, scientific foundation for virtue ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre's 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."[3]

These internecine controversies are more than a war of words. They represent two or three substantially different "sorts of naturalism"[4] Annas distinguishes two sorts of naturalism, one that emphasizes the biological nature of humanity (at the expense of the odd normativity of reason) and another that emphasizes the rational nature of humanity (at the expense of the mundane descriptivity of biology).[5] Christopher Toner distinguishes between the "biological naturalism" of Thompson

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

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

4. John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Hans Fink, "Three Sorts of Naturalism," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (August 2006): 202–21; Christopher Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 220–50.

5. Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?" in Stephen Mark Gardiner, *Virtue Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

and Foot (and Hursthouse) on the one hand from the "second naturalism" or "excellence naturalism" or 'culturalism' of McDowell and MacIntyre, each of which has its strengths and problems.

Is there any way to unite the *rational/cultural/intersubjective* "second nature" aspect of ethics with the *empirical/biological/objective* "first nature" side of the same?

In this dissertation, I defend the broadly Footian/MacIntyrean project of aiming for a secular, scientific foundation for virtue ethics against various objections, such as the "is-ought gap". I attempt to carry the project forward a few steps by arguing that we must develop each of our notions of nature, virtue, practical reason, and human flourishing all in dynamic relation with the others.

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

In the course of these chapters, I will defend this thesis and elaborate on its related components. The primary themes are virtue ('acquirable excellent character traits') human nature (our life form as 'practical, rational animals') and human flourishing. As Christopher Toner says, this kind of virtue ethics proposes a close tie between one's species or life-form and the flourishing that constitutes "the good life" for creatures like us: "human nature is normative, such that to be morally good is to fulfill one's nature."[6]

These three concepts are interesting individually but even more so as a single schema, which I call the "virtue triangle."

The Virtue Triangle

Why are these three *together* greater than the sum of their parts? In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre persuasively argues that there are three necessary components entailed in the performance of any task – however menial or lofty: namely, a goal, a starting point, and the means from the starting

6. Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism," 221.

point to the goal. Consider a simple action such as cooking dinner. Suppose my goal in this case is 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 I will enact to bring make a meal hopefully to that pictured in the cookbook. Similarly, one cannot make any mundane journey (say, leave for vacation) without knowing (a) where that destination is, (b) where one is at the moment, and (c) the directions — on foot, by car, or plane, or boat or what have you — to the destination. So, MacIntyre reasons, perhaps the same three necessary conditions exist for an intelligible moral system. One needs (a) a conception of human nature – including human rationality – as it is *prior* to deep self-reflection or moral effort; (b) a conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize; and (c) a conception of the qualities, actions, attitudes, resources, laws, etc. that enable a human being to achieve his or her telos. The point of this astonishingly simple reflection is that we ought to demand that any moral theory supply all three components. 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. A moral theory without any one of these three formal constraints is bound to stultify. And many moral theories proposed lack one or two of the three.

At the same time, each of these three concepts are liable to misunderstanding in our modern context. Hursthouse puts the point this way (though her terms are slightly different): "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."[7] Objections fired at neo-Aristotelian ethical

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

theories often hit a bullseye but on the wrong target.[8] 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 conception of human biology, the human "life-form", our rational "form of life", the human characteristic way of life, 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.

Chapter Outline

1. Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism
2. Natural Normativity
3. Virtue
4. Practical Wisdom
5. Flourishing
6. Natural Teleology Revisited
7. Conclusions

This chapter explains the assumptions, historical context, and methodological limits of my project.

Chapter % is the foundation of all the rest, in that it addresses and attempts to resolve the worry that ethical naturalism is impossible. 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 organic life, including humans.

Chapter % builds on natural normativity and constructs a concept of *normative human nature*.

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

All the generic truths about human beings can be synthesized in the two predicates of rational and animal: Human nature is to potentially be practical, rational animals. For practical, rational animals, some traits are excellent and others undesirable given the kind of thing such animals are. We are parts of nature that are aware of nature, including the natural fact that we are part of nature.

Chapter % 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 'self-regarding', 'other-regarding,' and 'object-regarding' virtues, sensitive to the intrinsic worth of self, others, and objects such as art, truth, beauty, etc. Virtues are also, among other things, necessary for the acquisition of more virtue, especially practical wisdom.

Chapter % 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 out of individual and cultural relativism. Practical reason is the capacity for resolving what to do, for "thinking how to live."[9] 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. Practical wisdom 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 % outlines an account of natural human flourishing, placing my virtue account squarely within the eudaimonist tradition but with important modifications. Flourishing for crea-

9. Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard University Press, 2009). I borrow Gibbard's elegant phrase, but I take my view of practical reason in a far more realist direction than he would care to.

tures 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 % returns in earnest to the theme of strict, metaphysical naturalism. Several objections on behalf of science and scientifically-minded philosophers need further comment. 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.

Chapter % draws conclusions and makes suggestions for further reasearch.