Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: what kind of naturalism?"

This is a pre-print copy of an article from the book Virtue Ethics, Old and New, edited by Stephen M. Gardiner (Cornell UP, 1996): 11-29.

Virtue ethics is not by definition naturalistic. It would surely be surprising if it were; most ethical theories are compatible with different positions about their relation to the world. I take it that any ethics based on virtue requires an account of the good life which the virtues enable us to achieve.[1] On this issue of the good life most modern forms of virtue ethics are naturalistic, and often take a form called neo-Aristotelian, harking back to the best-known naturalistic theory from antiquity, Aristotle's. When we are investigating what the good life is, these theories hold, and how living virtuously might achieve it, we are aided by investigating our human nature. This in turn we do by seeing how we humans are a part, though a distinctive part, of the world that the sciences tell us about.

This means that they are rejecting two possible alternative approaches. One is to base ethical theory on a religious or metaphysical theory which gives us an alternative grounding for the virtues. There have been ancient, mediaeval and modern forms of Christian virtue ethics which do this, and similarly for other religions. Even among the ancient pagans, Plato in some places tells us that being virtuous is becoming like god, and fleeing from mere worldly matters.[2] Some virtue theories, then, urge us to find out about our human nature only to transcend it. Achieving the good life is, on such theories, not a matter of fulfilling our human nature but of striving to achieve a different kind of existence, a divine one. This is obviously a perfectly possible form for virtue ethics to take, although it is worth noting that in the period of antiquity when virtue ethics had its most serious and sophisticated development, it was naturalistic candidates which were in play.[3] And nowadays the most prominent forms of virtue ethics do not take this approach; indeed, most seem unaware of it.

The other alternative approach is more radical, namely to take a meta-ethical approach which is non-naturalistic. That is, we could hold that our ethical terms like 'virtue', 'good' and so on have their meaning in some other way than by referring to us and the world around us. Their meaning might lie in their being used to pressure people (oneself and others) to act, for example. Or it might lie in their being used to vent or express feelings. Non-naturalist theories have been influential in the late twentieth century, and the issue is obviously too large to discuss properly here. I mention them here only to make the point that there is good reason why a proponent of virtue ethics would not be tempted to a non-naturalistic account of virtue and goodness.

We can see this clearly from Philippa Foot's comment, in her recent book.[4] A philosopher, whom she does not name, was asked what account he gave of the goodness of a tree's roots, given that he held that 'good' should be understood not naturalistically but in terms of choosing things. Good roots, he said, were roots that we should choose to have if we were trees. Foot refrains from commenting on this, and indeed if it does not seem absurd in itself, it is hard to see what else could serve to render it absurd. Why, though, is it so absurd? I suggest that the absurdity lies in the way human concerns are projected onto trees, and nature generally, as though we were not ourselves part of nature. Non-naturalistic accounts of ethical terms assume that their function, prominently their normativity, is something that arises with humans, or is produced by humans, in a way which owes nothing to the nature which we share with other living things. The way we should live and act, on these accounts, has nothing to do with what we can find out from the sciences about nature, including those aspects of ourselves that form part of that nature. Our ethical terms, on this view, arise in ways cut off from any facts which locate us as parts of nature, so that when we try to apply these terms to parts of nature other than humans we have, weirdly, nothing to go on, and have to resort to feeble anthropomorphism. It strikes me as ironical that such accounts often arise (or are presented as arising) from an excessive respect for science. Not only do they cut off our self-understanding from the understanding we have of other things, they prevent us from seeing continuities between us and other living things, and in both these ways reveal themselves as profoundly anti-scientific.[5]

The simple point that the goodness of roots has nothing to do with what we do or don't choose enables us to see why virtue ethics, which makes the goodness of human lives central, is attracted not just to naturalism in general,

but to naturalistic theories of an Aristotelian kind, for these locate us humans in the world in a way which makes us, as Rosalind Hursthouse has put it, 'part of the natural, biological order of living things.'[6] A scientific naturalism which talks in terms of physics is not helpful for ethical discourse, but the level of biology and ethology is one which helps us to make sense of ethics in a way that takes account of all of our nature – our biological nature which makes us part of the world of living things as well as our rational nature which makes us enquire and reflect about it.

What is so helpful for ethics from this kind of biological naturalism is that we find that the normativity of our ethical discourse is not something which emerges mysteriously with humans and can only be projected back, in an anthropomorphic way, onto trees and their roots. Rather, we find normativity in the realm of living things, plants and animals, already. It is part of the great merit of the work of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse to have stressed this point. Like many important philosophical points, it is obvious once pointed out, but was rendered invisible for many decades by the ascendancy of non-naturalistic theories of ethical discourse. (Once we appreciate it, we can understand why those theories have been so barren of insight.)

Hursthouse, taking off from Foot's work, spells out, in her recent book, that ethical evaluation - if we are coming from a virtue ethics direction - is analogous to the ways in which we evaluate good, healthy specimens of living things such as animals and even plants. A good cactus is one whose parts and operations are well suited to serve its individual survival and the continuance of its species, in the way characteristic of cacti. We can evaluate good cacti on the one hand, and bad, defective ones on the other, by reference to the norms for cacti, which are quite complex. With animals, especially social animals, things get more complicated, because there are four ends to consider: individual survival, the continuance of the species, characteristic pleasure or enjoyment and characteristic freedom from pain, and the good functioning of the social group. As ethological studies tell us, a 'free-rider' wolf that joins in eating the prey without hunting with the pack is a defective wolf, and a barren female cheetah is a defective cheetah. This is so however much we might admire the wolf for getting away with it, or feel sorry for the pregnant cheetah's hard life.[7] The ways in which we are tempted to anthropomorphize nature have nothing to do with the actual ways in which members of species are evaluated: that is entirely in terms of what is appropriate to the species.

This last thought has both encouraged and discouraged philosophers who have suggested that our ethical evaluations of ourselves are recognizably like those we make of other species. In some ways the thought that 'our ethical evaluations of ourselves ought to exhibit at least a recognizably similar structure to what we find in the botanists' and ethologists' evaluations of other living things'[8] is quite unsurprising; after all, we are social animals, and unless we are prepared to alienate ourselves completely from our own biology this is what we would expect. The discouragement comes from the attempts by sociobiologists, and some philosophers too reliant on what they think are the truths of biology, to argue that our ethical evaluations should allow for, or even stress, the fact that we belong to a species where by and large males are more aggressive than females, females carry the greater biological burden of child-bearing and –rearing, and so on. The facts about our species that naturalists and ethologists on field trips would report do not, to put it mildly, look like a good basis for ethical theory. It is this depressing history which puts some philosophers off the whole idea.

What is encouraging, however, about the thought that our ethical evaluations of ourselves should reflect the distinctiveness of our species, is the point that there is something which genuinely marks off our species, something which is not so obvious from a field trip and which sociobiologists have strikingly failed to take into account: our rationality. As Hursthouse puts it: 'The other animals act. So do we occasionally, but mostly we act from reason, as they do not, and it is primarily in virtue of our actions from reason that we are ethically good or bad human beings'.[9] In her book, she develops a form of naturalism for rational beings which belongs firmly in the Aristotelian tradition, seeing our

ethical evaluations of ourselves as robustly based in the nature of us as a species, but taking properly into account the fact that we are a rational species.

Since we are social animals, we will evaluate ourselves on the way in which, and the degree to which, our make-up is fitted to serve these four ends, that is, (a) our individual survival, (b) the continuance of our species, (c) our characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment and (d) the good functioning of our social group – in the ways characteristic of our species. This is, of course, because any naturalistic account of animals – and of us, since we are animals – looks for traits which further the four ends when asking what makes us flourish, live lives which are good, choiceworthy lives.

But, because we are rational animals, we flourish in way different from other social animals, in a way which involves our use of reason, that is, the ways we achieve our four ends in a rational way. And this, as Hursthouse plainly sets out, makes a very large difference. For it is because we are rational that we can criticize and change what we do, and can choose to live and act in a variety of ways. Our conceptions of what it is to live a good life are not just given by the way that biology has left us able to achieve our four ends. One striking example of this is that it does seem to be the message of biology that men are by and large more aggressive than women, and that women bear the brunt of reproduction; but this does not land us with having to think that this must be the way the good life for men and for women has to go. This is because we can, and do, transform our conceptions of the good life for men and for women in the light of rational considerations, of what we have good reason to do, and ways of thinking about our lives that we have good reason to go for.

It is because we are rational animals that we can't identify what is characteristic of a good human life in the way that we can for other species. Further, even if we could, we would not thereby be committed to thinking that this must be the good life for us, just because we are humans. It is one of the most original achievements of the book that Hursthouse not only faces this point, but takes it up into her theory. 'Our characteristic way of going on... is a rational way. A "rational way" is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do.'[10] This is normative in just the same way as are claims about other species' characteristic ways of behaving. But two points are different with humans. One is that most of us humans don't in fact carry on that way – and thus are defective human beings. The other is that this gives us a characteristic way of going on only at an extremely high level of generality. It doesn't determine specific ways of life for us, in the way that characteristic ways of behaving do for other species.

Thus, although virtue must enable us to achieve our four ends, this allows for considerable variation in the lifestyles within which we develop the virtues. For example, the virtues might be practiced by a celibate monk; whether he does so or not depends not on his lifestyle but on whether or not he lives his chosen way of life honestly, with charity and so on. For, as Hursthouse says, ' a life lived in accordance with the virtues can take a great variety of forms, including those in which the exercise of at least one virtue figures much more largely and even at the expense of the exercise of others.'[11] The virtues practiced in a celibate lifestyle exclude, in an obvious enough way, virtues that can be practiced only in family and social circumstances. How then can they contribute to the ends of the continuance of the species and the good functioning of the social group? Now I agree with Hursthouse that the argument does not just end here. Plenty has been said, in many societies and not just in Christian ones, as to how celibates do contribute to these ends in an indirect way. Celibates often, for example, function as teachers to the young, and serve to maintain rituals important to the cohesive functioning of society. These societies have a conception of the continuance of the species such that you can contribute to it by helping to bring up children, not just by having them, and a conception of the good functioning of the social group which includes participation in various rituals. These can certainly be defended as reasonable conceptions of these ends, and ones that have much empirical support over a vast variety of societies and cultures.

Nonetheless, Hursthouse maintains that, 'the structure – the appeal to just those four ends – really does constrain, substantially, what I can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings I cannot just proceed from some premises

about what it is reasonable or rational for human beings to do to some conclusion that it is rational to act in such-and-such a way, and hence that a good human being is one who acts that way. I have to consider whether the corresponding character trait (if such a thing could be imagined) would foster or be inimical to those four ends'.[12] Her example is that impersonal benevolence, beloved by consequentialists, fails as a virtue because it cannot reasonably be seen as furthering the ends of the continuance of the species and the good functioning of the social group. For it looks as though our natural tendency to bond to our own families, relatives and loved ones does tend to further those ends, and that impersonal benevolence, if taken to be a virtue, would not. Suppose that we did develop impersonal benevolence, and regarded it as a virtue – that is, as a character trait of not just acting in certain ways but of thinking, feeling and reacting in a complex set of interconnected ways. Then we would be sufficiently detached from our own families, for example, that I would not be particularly bothered if I never had the chance to spend time with my own child, and, if my child were hurt, would not feel that it was anything particularly to do with me. How would this further our ends as social animals, who nurture our offspring?[13]

Now I agree wholeheartedly with both of these particular conclusions – that it is perfectly possible to practice the virtues in a celibate lifestyle, and that impersonal benevolence of a consequentialist kind could not be a virtue. But the point that Hursthouse defends both of them raises a problem here, or at least an issue which requires further thought. Reflecting about her position has pushed me to think further about the kind of naturalism that we are concerned with, for I think that we face an alternative here about the kind of naturalism required by a virtue ethics theory.

I shall pose the issue by asking, what is the relation between the four ends which we have because we are social animals, and our human rationality, which enables us to choose and create so many different ways of life? I shall distinguish between the weaker and the stronger relation between them. (We shall see why I characterize them as weaker and stronger, and claim that they go with weaker and stronger forms of virtue ethics.)

The weaker relation is the one which is generally associated with, and expected from, Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics. These rely on a form of naturalism which puts us in our biological place and emphasises, as Foot and Hursthouse do, continuities between our ways of evaluating ourselves and the evaluative patterns to be found in the lives of animals and plants. I call this the weaker relation because it holds that our four ends that we have as social animals form a robust constraint on the exercise of our rationality, and thus give it a weaker ability to transform them than the stronger view holds.

For the Aristotelian, human nature provides a kind of barrier which rational thinking has to respect, since otherwise it will be frustrated. The example of impersonal benevolence brings this out in a vivid way. Human nature constrains our rationality – our ability to choose different ways of life, to transform what we do and what we are – in two ways. Firstly, some attempts will just be unrealistic. Mothers do care about their own children in a particularly intimate way, and so impersonal benevolence would be peculiarly difficult to inculcate as a pattern of behaviour, never mind a virtue. Human nature is not plastic in this respect, as twentieth-century totalitarian regimes have discovered. And secondly, even if we could transform and reshape ourselves in this way – even if we could make ourselves more plastic in this respect –this couldn't be a good way of life for beings with our human nature. This has been obvious since Plato in the Laws rethought the radical suggestions about family life sketched in the Republic. We can think up science fiction scenarios in which there are societies of beings for whom (or for which) this could be a good life, but these beings would not be very like us.[14]

Human nature, then – human nature as we find it given in a naturalistic account which respects the right kind of sciences – sets bounds on the kinds of ways in which we can rationally rethink the way we live in these two ways. Firstly, some ways just won't work. People won't act that way, and if they're made to act that way they will resist it. It will have to be forced on them, rather than being, as

we say, natural to them. Secondly, even if we could make these ways work – somehow change people so that they ceased to resist – this would be a bad idea. Humans wouldn't flourish if they lived in those ways, even if they could be forced or manipulated into trying them out.

This is the weaker relation between our rationality and our human nature as social animals which gives us our four ends. Is it strong enough for an ethics of virtue, one which will give our lives ideals to pursue in the face of all the selfishness and short-sightedness that characterize humans as they actually are?

There are, I think, two worries here, of different kinds although they are related. One is that on some points it looks as though we do have prima facie reason to worry whether the weaker relation will produce conclusions that are ethically strong enough. For example, Hursthouse is rightly insistent that the way that reproduction weighs more heavily on women than on men gives us no reason to think that because of this the good life for women should be narrowed and constrained in advance, compared to the options for men. But, notoriously, many otherwise intelligent people have thought that human nature did produce exactly this barrier to women as opposed to men. Aristotle famously helped to bring the whole idea of ethically appealing to human nature into disrepute with his easy assumption that, because women unarguably do have a different kind of life from men, therefore the kind of good life they can aspire to, and the kinds of virtue that they can practice, are inevitably going to be different from those open to men. (And no prizes for guessing which is the superior version.) But more reasonable positions than Aristotle's can be defended, and have been. The fact that we care for our families is an important fact about our nature, showing that we can't, and anyway shouldn't, cultivate impersonal benevolence as a virtue; attempts to use our rationality to do this are misguided. This is because it wouldn't be compatible with our being the kinds of social animals that we are, with our characteristic four ends. Why aren't the biological differences between the sexes equally significant when we consider our nature as social animals, with our characteristic four ends? Why can't they be reasonably held to stand in the way of attempts to reason out good ways of living which counteract or overcome the biological disadvantages of women? As I indicated, I'm not in doubt about the right conclusion; I'm here raising a worry as to whether the weaker, Aristotelian view of the relationship between our rationality and our human nature as social animals of a certain kind is really strong enough for us to feel that it fully entitles us to it.

The second worry is more indirect. It concerns the result when we turn to the implications of the weaker view for the agent who raises the question of how living according to the virtues will benefit him as an individual. For the issue of how the virtues enable us to live good lives and flourish as human beings is connected to the issue of how the virtues benefit me, if I am virtuous. We can see this particularly clearly with Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics, which hold to the weaker relation, and also hold the thesis that living virtuously is necessary, though not sufficient, for flourishing, living happily. I shall not here be concerned with arguments to show that living virtuously is necessary for flourishing. The worry here concerns the thought that for the Aristotelian view, virtue is not sufficient.

Now this can easily be made to seem a strange worry. The thought that virtue is sufficient for happiness or flourishing is apt to produce Aristotle's response: you can't be serious. But if you accept that a flourishing life isn't just one in which you have lots of stuff, or one in which you get success by any means – if, that is, you accept that wicked or selfish people do not in fact flourish, so that only those who live virtuously have a chance of flourishing – then a problem does emerge as to why virtue is not sufficient for flourishing. For it is up to me whether I live virtuously, or at least try to, but Aristotelian theories accept that even if I do the best I can I may still be deprived of happiness by factors that are beyond my control. For Aristotle, happiness is a hybrid combination of living virtuously and of achieving a measure of success in worldly terms. The latter is not under my control, and cannot be guaranteed.

I am not here thinking of the kind of case that Aristotle himself worries most about – what might be called the Priam situation, where an individual lives

virtuously and successfully, and then meets total worldly shipwreck, and Aristotle is left holding that he is neither happy nor unhappy.[15] What concerns us here is rather the point that someone may put all her efforts into living virtuously and still be deprived of flourishing because of something which from her point of view is bad luck in the natural lottery (as we call it). She may live virtuously and yet fail to flourish because of being, to use Aristotle's examples, friendless, childless or very ugly. Even if we think these examples are no longer realistic (though I doubt this, given the tremendous emphasis on appearance and popularity in most societies) we get the virtuous person who does not flourish because she is always chronically sick, or dies prematurely. The thought here is that our human nature as social animals makes it impossible for us to flourish if we cannot form normal social contacts, or lead a normally active life, or (in some societies) lack family support in old age, or die prematurely, with projects unfulfilled, even if these disasters are no fault of our own. People in this situation are suffering from a tragedy that they do not deserve, but they are not flourishing.

This worry – that virtue does not guarantee flourishing – takes two forms, both problematic for the status of virtue ethics as an ethical theory. Firstly, is it good enough for an ethical theory to tell us that virtue is the only way to flourish, but that we may fail to flourish because of factors about human nature which are not our fault and which our rationality is powerless to alter? Virtue ethics is a very demanding theory, which requires us to reshape our lives; is it reasonable for it also to demand that we lower our expectations of what it can do for us? Hursthouse makes much of the analogy with health; a healthy diet, exercise and so on is not just a good idea but the only reliable bet if we want to live a long healthy life, and yet there is no guarantee, since the people who live healthy lives may drop dead young and those that live unhealthy lives may go on to be a hundred .[16] I think that we expect more of a moral theory than this – in the health case, after all, I might turn out to be lucky in my genes, but I can hardly have such a hope with virtue and flourishing. It is reasonable for me to ask why it should be so important for me to make myself into one kind of person rather than another, when my flourishing turns out to depend on factors which have nothing to do with me.

This is connected to the second point, which is that we expect that an ethical theory must be universal, by which I mean, fairly minimally, that it must apply equally to everyone, with no arbitrariness as to what beings are left outside it. (This point is of course problematic when we think of the role of non-human animals, but I shall lay that aside for now.) Virtue ethics, on the weaker interpretation, makes a demand of everyone, that they be virtuous, claims that living virtuously is the only way to flourish, and yet allows that you may fail anyway however hard you try, because of factors outside your control. Not all these factors trace back directly to our human nature as social animals, but some of them plausibly do. So if failure to be universal is problematic for virtue ethics, which I take it that it is, then it seems to be a liability for Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics that they think that the exercise of our rationality in forming the good life is constrained by some aspects of human nature which are not amenable to being transformed by it.

There is a response to this.[17] Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics, it can be claimed, are universal in that it is true for everyone that living virtuously is necessary for flourishing; everyone has the same rationale for adopting the theory. The unlucky, it is true, may fail to flourish because of factors other than virtue, but even the unlucky are better off, if they live virtuously, than the non-virtuous or vicious; for, since virtue is necessary for happiness, these people do not flourish however lucky or unlucky they are. Thus the necessity thesis can make a reasonable demand of everyone. But while this response has merit, it also, I think, has two weaknesses. Firstly, we do need to be assured that even the unlucky can flourish to the extent that they are virtuous; and people unlucky in the natural lottery raise more serious problems here than the Priam situation does. Aristotle himself notoriously thinks that for many people flourishing is just not achievable because of conditions that they can do nothing about, and we need a firm assurance that modern forms of virtue ethics need not be similarly resigned. Secondly, the idea of the unlucky virtuous people still being better off

than the lucky non-virtuous needs more support from within the theory. Virtue is not sufficient for you to flourish; for that it needs external goods. Yet it is still powerful enough to make you better off than the non-virtuous with external goods, even when you lack those external goods. Even if we accept this conclusion, we need to know more precisely just what it is about virtue that permits it: just why is it more important for flourishing than external goods for the unlucky, but never enough, without external goods, for the lucky to flourish?[18]

So much for the situation where we have what I call the weaker form of the relation between our rationality and our human nature as social animals. It is clear by now why I think of Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics as themselves being weaker forms of virtue ethics.

I turn now to the stronger relation between our rationality and our human nature as social animals. On this view, our human nature is simply the material that our rationality has to work with. I put it in terms of material because of the usefulness here of a metaphor which is very common in ancient thinking on this topic. My practical rationality is seen as a skill or expertise which gets to work on the circumstances of my life, including of course the rest of my human nature, and makes something of it, in the way that a craftsperson makes an object from raw materials. Human nature does not have to be seen as wholly plastic and transformable into anything at all; after all, a good craftsperson will respect the potentials of the materials. This corresponds to the point that we are living beings of a distinctive kind, and that projects for living well have to work with this point. But what is distinctive about us is that our ways of living can be transformed as a whole by our rationality; we can choose and create new ways of living. To quote from Hursthouse, 'Apart from obvious physical constraints and possible psychological constraints, there is no knowing what we can do from what we do do, because we can assess what we do do and at least try to change it.'[19] I can try to turn my life from a mass of materials which are formless in the sense that I haven't given them form, into a product of rational thought, unified by my trying to live by certain kinds of reason and make myself into a certain kind of person, a life which I am living, rather than just taking for granted.

On this stronger view, all of our social animal nature is transformed by its being activated, as we live, in a rational way. To take something basic, although we eat to satisfy hunger, and so do lions, we do so in a way which is not simply tied to the satisfaction of hunger, as the lion's is. It involves a number of social aspects – eating is standardly a social occasion, meals are structured in various ways, numerous conventions are involved. It also involves a number of individual choices – we like some foods and not others, and don't eat what we don't like unless to be polite, we make great efforts to prepare food in complex ways, we care about specific results. So even our basic needs and the ways we fulfill them are thoroughly transformed by occurring in the life of a rational animal. I have taken something basic like eating, because it would be easy to think that this aspect of us really is something we share with the other animals in an inevitable way, and so is something that is properly to be seen as a constraint on the way in which rationality can rethink our lives. But if we think about the role that eating plays in our lives, we can see that we don't share it with the other animals in a relevant way. Its meaning in our lives is quite different from what it is in theirs; it has been transformed by the fact that we are rational animals. Of course there are some situations where humans are so reduced by starvation that they do think of eating as the other animals do, but these are situations so desperate that considerations of living well have to recede.

The same kind of consideration is true of the place in our lives of sexual differentiations and their implications. We do not blame male cheetahs for impregnating the female and then paying no further attention to the birth and upbringing of the cubs. This is just the evaluative pattern for cheetahs, and for us to get indignant is anthropomorphism. Indeed the wide variety of patterns here among other animals should warn us off anthropomorphism, since in the case of so many of them any attempt to see them in human terms rapidly becomes distressing, disgusting or otherwise clearly inappropriate.[20]

In a human life, sex and reproduction have a completely different significance from what they do in the lives of the other animals. They give rise, for a start, to patterns of family life (which themselves vary, of course, among

different societies). So for humans differences of sexual role are already part of a system of living together with other humans. And, unlike other social animals, we see these as socialized, as part of a shared social world that is the product of shared efforts and subject to changes in the ways those efforts are made. Biological differences are already seen as being part of, involved in, social roles and patterns. It is part of the way we see these biological differences that we see them as resulting from and involved in relationships which can be negotiated in different ways. Changes can thus be brought about in different circumstances. Even humans who hold biological differences, and the social roles within which they are located, to be changeless, hold this for reasons: they are seen as fate we have to submit to, imposed on us by God, or the like; they are not, as they are for other social animals, just a given which cannot even be thought about.

This is, of course, as brief and schematic as it could be, but it serves, I hope, to show that on this perspective the biological differences between the reproductive roles of men and women are not to be seen as a barrier to the rational planning of good lives – 'it would be nice if women could be the professional equals of men, but they simply can't, because of their special biological role of motherhood' and the like. This whole idea does not get off the ground, because the special biological role of motherhood is already seen as part of human social life. Creating ways of life in which it is not a disadvantage to women is not a matter of bringing the merely biological under control, but of changing our views about the proper organization of family life.

What of Hursthouse's point that on an Aristotelian view we can see clearly why impersonal benevolence could not be a virtue? The Aristotelian view seemed to do a good job of showing why this was so. Humans can't live in such a way as to be emotionally indifferent to their children, say; and even if we could be forced or induced to do so, it could not be a good way for us humans to live. Here the idea that human nature is providing barriers to reason-driven ways of organizing our lives seemed the right idea. If we think that our human nature is more like material for us to develop into a finished product by the use of our rationality, it might seem that we have little or no defence against the idea that impersonal benevolence could be a virtue for us. We are attached to our own children and families; why isn't this an already socialized aspect of our life which is subject to negotiation and to our coming to think of better ways of organizing it?

That is exactly what it is, on the stronger view; but the stronger view also claims that it does allow us a good defence against the idea that impersonal benevolence could be a virtue. More than that, it claims that it actually gives us a stronger defence than the Aristotelian view did.

On the stronger view, we reject impersonal benevolence as a virtue, on the same grounds as the Aristotelian does. Humans do care about their own families, in such a way that they have to be forced to act otherwise; and even if they could be forced or otherwise changed so as to act otherwise, this would not result in a good way of life for humans as we are. On the stronger view, however, this is not presented as a brute fact about humans standing in the way of a rational proposal. Rather, impersonal benevolence as a virtue for humans is rejected as being a bad idea, one that has more rational considerations against it than for it. I can do no more than sketch some of them here. Any project whose success requires forcing people to act in ways that are deeply repugnant to them is dubious on several grounds. It is unlikely to succeed, for a start. It exacts tremendous cost. And it raises sharply the question what this goal is, for which people's lives have to be commandeered. What justifies it? If it is urged that it will make people's lives either better or happier, what grounds such an idea of the goal which people have to be forced to pursue, or fooled into pursuing? And what justifies the idea that this is a project in the first place? Who are these people who are proposing to alter other people's lives from the outside, as though they didn't share that kind of life? And where have they got their idea of a good human life? If it's so good, why doesn't it appeal to other people anyway? These are, obviously, all first versions of objections which have been developed with great sophistication over the last few years; here I merely mention them to indicate that the stronger version of virtue ethics does not lack arguments against the idea that universal benevolence might be a virtue for us humans.

Moreover, arguing against the idea on its own terms can reasonably be seen as a more powerful defence than claiming that the proposal is defeated by human nature, as though that were just a barrier about which nothing more could be said. That way of looking at the matter arguably gives too much to the other side, as though the proposal might be a rational one, with human nature as a merely mindless opposition, the spirit being willing but the flesh unfortunately weak. On the stronger view, we are not reduced to thinking of our resistance to a virtue of impersonal benevolence as merely the old Adam part of us rebelling against our rational planning. It is as rational beings that we reject it; we are not just social animals but rational ones, who can recognize a bad idea when we see one, and realize that as social, rational animals we would not flourish under such a system: the result would not be good human lives, taking all of human nature into account.

Indeed, the weaker, defensive posture arguably grants too much to the consequentialist way of thinking which produced the proposal of impersonal benevolence as a virtue in the first place. For the consequentialist, morality makes a rational demand, and if we fail to meet it this merely shows us to be weak and selfish. The fact that we care about our 'near and dear' gives us a 'bad conscience' because it appeals to our selfishness; we feel it is 'forbidden fruit' because it stands in the way of our achieving more good, which is the rational demand on us.[21] In showing this position to be completely misguided, we are on stronger ground arguing that as rational animals we have every reason to reject it, than if we argued that we would be recalcitrant about it even supposing it to be a rational demand.

This is what I have called the stronger position: is it strong enough to sustain an ethics of virtue, which, as I've insisted, gives us ideals to pursue in the face of the difficulties we have living up to them? The problem here is more likely to be that it is too strong. We do not need here to worry about possibly reactionary uses of human nature to constrain ethical thought in indefensible ways. But we might feel uncomfortable about the implication in this case for the agent for whom the question arises how the virtues will benefit her. For, as already stressed, these questions are linked. Just as the weaker relation turned out to go with the weaker, Aristotelian view that the virtues are necessary for a flourishing life, but not sufficient, so the stronger relation turns out to go with the stronger, Platonic-Stoic view that living virtuously is sufficient for flourishing.

On this view, if you draw a short straw in the natural lottery (chronic illness, disfigurement, premature death and so on) these are not aspects of human nature which, as Aristotle puts it, curtail and maim your ability to flourish however virtuously you live. Rather, they are just more of the material you have to work with, along with your situation in life, your job, your circumstances in general. It is just as much up to you to live a virtuous life in these particular circumstances as it is for someone in circumstances that you would prefer. Someone with a normal appearance, health, reasonable income and friends can live virtuously; so can the solitary, poor, ill and disfigured person. The latter is trying to achieve flourishing through a virtuous life just as much as the former person is. On the stronger view, the latter person is not doomed to fail at flourishing if she lives virtuously, just because her circumstances are not those of the former one. This does not imply, of course, that there is nothing preferable about the former person's circumstances. Of course we would all choose to have those circumstances rather than to be poor, ill and so on. But the fact that we would all prefer the former life, in the sense of the circumstances of that life, does not show that there is something doomed to failure about the second life, in the sense of the living of that life.

So, given the stronger relation of our rationality to the rest of our human nature as social animals, all of our natural circumstances, just like the rest of our circumstances, are material for our rationality to work on as we try to live the good life. There are thus no aspects of our human nature required for us to flourish but outside the control of our rationality. What matters is not whether I am healthy, but what I make, in my life, of my health or lack of it. What matters is not how long I live, but the quality of the life I have lived, however long or short. What matters is not whether I have narrow or wide scope for my actions, but how I cope with the range I have.

There is a familiar objection to this kind of view: why, on this view, is it rational for us even to prefer favourable circumstances? Why should I care about being healthy, having friends and so on, if these do not contribute to my flourishing? I can't deal with this issue here, but I should note that this is not hand-waving; this is a point on which much has been thought, and there are powerful and developed ways available of meeting this point.[22]

Probably the biggest advantage of the stronger view is its stronger claim to universality. Living virtuously is required for flourishing – and nobody will fail at this for reasons which are beyond their control or arbitrary. It is open to anyone to live virtuously given the circumstances of life which they have, and so the poor and ill can flourish as well as the rich and healthy. Epictetus the slave and Marcus Aurelius the emperor can both equally well try to flourish by living virtuously; indeed we know that the emperor found the slave's book helpful. It is one of the most attractive features of the Stoic version of virtue ethics that it is universal in this way, and thus appears more like ethical theories like Kant's with emphasis on the thought that living virtuously makes us members of a moral community in which everyone is an equal member no matter what the circumstances of their actual lives.[23]

Because of this, the demands that this stronger version of virtue ethics makes are matched by the point that if we go in for it, we do not have to lower our expectations about success; nobody will fail for arbitrary reasons, and so the effort we put into living virtuously, if we do, will be rewarded on the basis of what we do, not on the basis of facts about us that are outside our competence to do anything about.[24]

But we come to what is for many the biggest objection to the stronger version of virtue ethics. Does what I have called the stronger version of the relation between our rationality and the rest of our human nature as social animals give us a plausible form of naturalism? We might think not, if we think that the Aristotelian form is a plausible one. For it stresses continuities between the evaluative patterns in our lives and those that are to be found in the lives of plants and animals. The fact that we are rational animals makes a big difference, but does not nullify the continuities. Because we are rational, we can transform our lives, but it remains true that our four ends as social animals constrain what we can do by way of living well.

A stronger form of naturalism than the Aristotelian kind does have to stress what makes us different from plants and animals. Thus it does not find it particularly helpful from the point of view of ethics to stress the continuities between the evaluative patterns in the lives of plants and animals and those in ours – other than the fact that we are part of nature: we still stress the point that when we examine our own rationality we are examining something of which we can and must give an account acceptable to the sciences. Many forms of ethics which have emphasised our natures as essentially rational animals have taken this to go with a position, associated with Kant, which marks a sharp break between the kind of fact which science can discover about us and the kind of fact which is formed by our rationality. But this is only one way in which the position could be developed, and in the modern world it is far more reasonable for us to think as the ancient Stoics did – that our rationality indeed makes us different from other living things, but is just as much a natural fact about us and the world we live in as are facts about other species, and about us insofar as we are like them and our lives like theirs.

Thus there is nothing unscientific about an approach which stresses that what matters for the living of our lives, from an ethical point of view, is our rationality. We are not cutting ourselves off from the world that science studies, as the non-naturalists do. Indeed, the approach can appeal not only to biology and ethology but to another large and developed area of science, namely psychology. This is the approach of Lawrence Becker, for example, in his book A New Stoicism.[25] He develops an ethical theory which he claims has the structure of ancient Stoicism. We begin by considering our natures as creatures with various wants and means to achieve these rationally. We examine the development of our rationality, and the way in which we can come to value not just its instrumental use to get the ends we want, but its employment itself as rational agency; thus we come to have a conception of ourselves as rational

agents, and to value this in a non-instrumental way. This is all built up from accepted studies and results in the psychological literature. It does not require us to be particularly deferential to any particular school of psychology, merely to go along with widely accepted and tested results. I won't here go further into the issue of whether Becker succeeds in showing from this story, which is clearly a modern version of what the ancient Stoics called oikeiosis or familiarization, that we can get to a distinctive ethical theory which is of the sort I have sketched here.[26] I think that books like his are the beginning of a discussion, rather than the end. There has been comparatively little development of the stronger form of virtue theory and its associated form of naturalism, compared with the weaker, Aristotelian form and the kind of naturalism appropriate to it. I do think that there is an interesting philosophical issue as to whether it is the weaker or the stronger form of naturalism discussed here which is in the end the most satisfactory version for an ethics of virtue. If this discussion develops, then we may find ourselves seriously discussing whether virtue ethics should hold that virtue is sufficient, or merely necessary for flourishing. If so, then modern ethical discussion will at long last have caught up with its lively state in the first century B.C., which I for one would consider progress.[27][28]

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[1] Theories which reject this and give virtue a more minor role are, I hold, working with a reduced conception of virtue; I have no scope to argue this here, but I think it a plausible claim.

[2] Plato's most trenchant expression of this idea is at Theaetetus 173d – 177b, especially 176a-b, a passage which became very famous in later antiquity. Flight from the world is not implied in the mere idea of becoming like God, but it takes this form in the Platonist tradition, in which it was most influential.

[3] The period from the development of the major Hellenistic schools (Epicureanism, Stoicism and hybrid forms of Stoic/Aristotelian ethics) to the rise of revived forms of Platonism. In discussions of ethics such as Cicero's On Moral Ends we find that the debate is structured by 'Carneades' division', a framework for discussing ethical theories formulated by the great Academic sceptic Carneades. As a sceptic, he did not introduce ideas or methods of his own, but relied on the positions and methods he found himself arguing against; so it is notable that he pays no attention to 'other-worldly' accounts of virtue and happiness such as Plato's in the Theaetetus. It seems reasonable to infer that these were not live options in ethical debate. With the rise of revived Platonism these theories had a new lease of life.

[4] Foot (2000) pp 25-26.

[5] It has always been recognised that, formally, non-naturalistic metaethical accounts of ethical terms have more in common with religious or supernaturalist positions than they do with naturalistic accounts. But the implications, particularly for our attitude to the sciences (and the biological sciences in particular) have generally not been thought through.

[6] Hursthouse (1999) p. 206.

[7] Depressing facts about this can be found in Hursthouse, p 221 note 3.

[8] Hursthouse, p. 206.

[9] Hursthouse, p. 217.

[10] Hursthouse, p. 222-223.

[11] Hursthouse, p. 216.

[12] Hursthouse, p. 224.

[13] Indeed, there is a familiar problem at this point. What would motivate adults to bring children up to have the correct (on this view) moral outlook – that is, impersonal benevolence? As often, consequentialists are assuming that prolonged care of the young and their upbringing in the right way 'come free' with the theory, even though the theory itself gives it no recognition and indeed has no room for it.

[14] The Platonist can take up the argument by claiming that a good life will in fact require our transforming some aspects of our human nature into something different (as the Republic in fact does argue). This is to reject the naturalistic approach of the Aristotelian, demanding that ethics have a different kind of basis, and taking us away from the present debate.

[15] The Priam situation worries Aristotle in the concluding parts of chapters 9 and 10 of book 1 of the Nicomachean Ethics ; the concluding part of chapter 8 worries about the kind of problem I focus on here (being ugly, childless and so on). Stephen Gardiner has made the point that external goods and evils can play two kinds of role: they are antecedent materials for action, and also the subsequent results of action. The Priam situation deals with the second role, whereas I am here focussing on the first.

[16] Hursthouse, pp. 170-174.

[17] Both Rosalind Hursthouse and Stephen Gardiner have made me think harder about this.

[18] This problem exercised later Aristotelians considerably; for a persuasive but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to answer this problem, see Antiochus' theory in book 5 of Cicero's On Moral Ends.

[19] Hursthouse, p. 221.

[20] It is often so incongruous as to be comic, as in the Far Side cartoons.

[21] This is quite explicitly the view of Tannsjo, pp. 126-127: ' The recognition of the consequentialist rationale behind love (in general) does give a taste of forbidden fruit to our love, that is true. When, out of love, I pay special attention to a certain woman, rather than to a stranger, I may comfort myself with the thought that it is a good thing that I am the kind of person who is capable of loving someone, but I must also recognize that, if, in this particular situation, I were instead to pay more attention to the stranger, without, for that reason, turning into a person who is – otherwise- not capable of loving someone else, this would be a good thing to do. I could do it but I don't, shame on me, and, therefore, I do make a moral mistake (which makes my love taste somewhat bitter). But that's the way I am. And therefore, I can retain my special concerns, without having to give up my belief in the truth of consequentialism.

This mixture of love and bad conscience (because of my belief in the truth of consequentialism) is something I do exhibit, and, from the fact that I do exhibit it, it follows that this is something that can be exhibited. My love survives the knowledge of its rationale; it does not erode. Therefore, I stick- without any risk, - with my belief in consequentialism.

As a matter of fact, the observation that there is an element of "forbidden fruit" in love and friendship, according to consequentialism, is as it should be. This is something most people testify that they feel when, in a world of starvation, they watch TV and show special concern for their near and dear.'

[22] This is the major point at issue in much of ancient ethics. The Stoics' answer to this problem is their theory of 'preferred indifferents'; we have reason to value, and to choose, things like health and long life, as long as we recognize that they have a quite different kind of value from the sort that virtue has, so that virtue is sufficient for happiness while leaving us with a realistic attitude to the circumstances of our lives. One major advantage of this is that we can reject as confused the Aristotelian hybrid notion of happiness, as constituted both by the living of a life and (some unspecified) level of natural advantages. I have reason to care about the circumstances of my life, and to prefer them to be one way rather than another; but this is a radically different attitude from the one I take to the living of my life; this is something which is up to me whatever the circumstances of my life. Any attempt to think of happiness in terms of a threshold, as the Aristotelians do, will require a hybrid notion of happiness which conflates these two different attitudes, and tries to combine the living of a life with its circumstances. Despite the ingenuity of later Aristotelians I do not think that they succeed in meeting this point, but the issue cannot be fully argued here.

[23] But is virtue equally available to everyone whatever their circumstances? If not, the theory will not be universal. The Stoic answer is that it is, because to develop virtue you need to develop your reason, which is something we all have and can develop. There is another analogy here with Kant, who thinks that it is equally open to all humans to reason morally, not restricted to those with certain natural advantages.

[24] The point can of course be raised here that the notions of success and reward are not being used in ways that are familiar to those who associate them with monetary reward, success in terms of status and so on. For present purposes we should just note that this is a point which has been answered at length by developed versions of the stronger theory.

[25] Becker (1998).

[26] In particular, we need to examine whether Becker really succeeds in showing that from this psychological basis we can get to the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, as he claims we can.

[27] This is only half facetious. The discussions in, for example, Cicero's De finibus (On Moral Ends) are sophisticated and forceful, and it does not require much interpretation to see that they are about matters which are still relevant.

[28] I am very grateful for comments at the very stimulating Christchurch conference, for longstanding friendly discussion with Rosalind Hursthouse and for written comments from Stephen Gardiner and an anonymous referee.