Chapter 1

Introduction: Virtue, Reason, and Flourishing

"Men need virtues as bees need stings."

–Peter Geach, *The Virtues*

Two or Three Sorts of Naturalism

Philippa Foot's virtue theory identifies evaluative properties (goodness and bandess) with straightforwardly natural properties of organisms such as health and disease; furthermore, she identifies moral properties (such as virtue and vice) with straightforwardly natural properties of human animals like us. 

In so far as Foot's kind of theory aims to uncover "natural norms" which can be used as moral laws, or proto-laws, Mark Murphy calls hers a "secular natural law theory". Jennifer Frey summarizes the "master thought" of this sort of 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.[1]

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

Since biological and other sciences already use normative notions such as 'necessity', 'ought', and 'health' in biological and other sciences, perhaps similar though modified notions can be used in discussions of distinctively human and moral normativity. One of the alleged attractions of Foot's type of ethical naturalism is that, by ringing 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 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 attempt to make ethics into an empirical discipline. He objects to a heavily biologized kind of ethical theory as scientism that falls in for the Myth of the Given – roughly, the notion that some concepts are norms can be just given to us, for free, in perceptual experience. By contrast, he argues that values are "secondary qualities" of nature, partially constituted by the mental act of the observer. Virtue is a sort of perceptual sensitivities to "what a situation requires", where we remember that what a "situation requires" is partially constituted by the rationality of the moral agent.[3]

McDowell still calls his view a sort of ethical naturalism, since he does not think values are supernatural, or non-natural. But he does not think values are completely subjective, either. Ethical facts and properties are to be identified with facts about "second nature."[4] "Second nature" is 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."

While McDowell and Foot both lay claim to the title of 'neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism',

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

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

4. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

they represent very two or three substantially different "sorts of naturalism."[5] These internecine controversies are more than a war of words. One sort emphasizes biology, the physical, the scientific, and the objective; the other sort emphasizes rationality, the cultural, the subjective or intersubjective. For example, Rosalind Hursthouse's landmark monograph, *On Virtue Ethics*, builds on Foot's account in many ways, yet ultimately 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."[6]

Is there any way to unite the *rational/cultural/intersubjective* aspect of ethics with the *empirical/biological/objective* aspect of the same? Is there any way to unite "second nature" with "primary nature"? Is there any hope for a " third sort" of naturalism that synthesizes the two, or denies the distinction.

Thesis

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" and cultural relativism. I attempt to carry the project forward a few steps by arguing that we must develop accounts of nature, virtue, practical reason, and human flourishing all in dynamic relation with the others, and accordingly offering such an account of each.

Specifically, I shall defend the following thesis: **virtue is the plurality of acquirable excellent character traits (such as moderation, tolerance, and wisdom) that are neces-**

5. 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.

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

sary for human beings qua practical, rational animals, because virtue partly constitutes natural human flourishing.

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. 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."[7] Hence, it is clear that these three concepts are not only individually interesting but constitute a single schema, which I 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" entailed in the performance of any task – however menial or lofty: namely, a goal, a starting point, and the means from the starting point to the goal. 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 I will enact to bring make a meal hopefully to that pictured in the cookbook.

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 astonishingly simple reflection is that we ought to demand that any moral theory supply all three elements.[8] The first element is "untutored human nature" (as it is). The

7. Christopher Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 221.

8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 54ff.

second element is human nature (as it could be, should be). The third element is the set of properties needed to move from the first to the second points. Moral rules or admirable character traits are the content of morality; but the telos of humanity is the context of morality. It quite literally makes the content of morality make sense. Understanding "human-nature-as-it-is"[9] 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"[10] was "the whole point of ethics." This third conception of some human flourishing or telos we can and *ought* to realize.

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 how 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 updating, 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 bet-

9. Ibid., 55.
10. Ibid., 55.

ter assessed."[11] Objections fired at neo-Aristotelian ethical theories often hit a bullseye but on the wrong target.[12] 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. Introduction
2. Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism
3. Normativity of Nature
4. Normativity of Human Nature
5. Virtue
6. Practical Wisdom
7. Flourishing
8. Natural Teleology Revisited
9. 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 concep-

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

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

tion 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*. 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 to block individual and cultural relativism. Practical reason is the capacity for resolving what to do, for "thinking how to live."[13] 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

13. 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.

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 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 % 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.