REALLY NATURALIZING VIRTUE

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Abstract

A plausible naturalistic virtue ethics requires a plausible naturalistic account of virtue. One way of naturalizing virtue is to give an account of the virtues as those traits that enable realization of the ends of creatures like us. However, three important concerns threaten the theoretical adequacy of the view. (1) It appears that the fact of human variability entails that there is no human lifeform comparable to that of other living things. (2) It appears that, even if there is a human lifeform, this notion essentially involves a problematic concept of normality. And (3) human beings differ from other types of organisms in that they can set their own ends. I argue that naturalized virtue ethics can meet these concerns and therefore has a more than decent chance as a plausible form of ethical naturalism. However, in examining the theory we are led to a more modest understanding of what the ambitions of this kind of ethical naturalism ought to be.
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1. Ways of Naturalizing Virtue

One of the main theoretical attractions of virtue ethics is that it holds out the promise of providing a plausible ethical naturalism. However, a plausible naturalistic virtue ethics requires a plausible naturalistic account of virtue. One way to naturalize virtue is in terms of benefits to the agent. In this sort of theory, the virtues are those traits that are good for a human being, that enable the possessor to lead a happy or flourishing life. Both Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are in part attempts to justify the claim that the virtues are a benefit to their possessor. Many, besides Thrasymachus, have objected to this first way of naturalizing virtue.[1]

Another way of naturalizing virtue, which forms the focus of this paper, is to give an account of the virtues as those traits that enable realization of the ends of creatures like us. Possession of these traits makes one a good human being, understood as denoting a good specimen of the kind. The idea is that there is a human "lifeform" relative to the realization of which human beings and their traits are evaluated. Such a naturalized virtue ethics essentially depends upon a coherent notion of a human lifeform. However, three important concerns threaten the theoretical adequacy of the view.

First, it appears that the fact of human variability entails that there is no human lifeform comparable to that of other living things. If there is no human lifeform, then there is nothing in this theory upon which to ground evaluation. A crucial theoretical support is missing, for there is nothing relative to which human beings and their traits can be evaluated. Second, it appears that, even if there is a human lifeform, this notion essentially involves some concept of normality. However, normality does not seem to be the sort of theoretical construct upon which we could base ethical evaluations of human beings and their traits. For one thing, the normal does not appear to track the ethical. For another, thinking of

human beings in terms of normality appears to lead to some undesirable and even paradoxical consequences. Finally, human beings differ from other types of organisms in that they can set their own ends. Questions arise then as to how those ends fit in with humans' natural ends and which ends get priority when the natural or "given" ends conflict with the merely "chosen" ones.

Although these do not exhaust the possible objections to this second way of naturalizing virtue, they are interesting in that they are commonly held and, if true, potentially devastating for the theory. Most importantly, perhaps, an adequate response to them makes clearer this way of naturalizing virtue and what the limits of such theories are. Although the theory can meet these concerns and therefore has a more than decent chance as a plausible form of ethical naturalism, in examining the theory we are led to a different understanding of just what the ambitions of this kind of ethical naturalism ought to be. The truth is that proponents of naturalized virtue ethics—and of any related neo-Aristotelian virtue theory—should be less than optimistic about its prospects as a normative theory.

In §2 I sketch out naturalized virtue ethics. In §3 I address the concern that human variability entails there is no human lifeform, arguing that this objection is mistaken, for the simple reason that relative to other species human beings are not so variable as we tend to think. In §4 I consider the second set of concerns surrounding the concept of lifeform and its relation to normality. I show that on a proper understanding of the sort of normality involved in the concept of lifeform, these concerns can be answered. In §5 I address the third set of concerns raised by the human capacity to set our own ends. I argue that naturalized virtue ethics has the resources to adequately accommodate this concern, as long as we understand the role that practical reason plays in the theory and that ends can conflict. Finally, in §6 I explain how this view compares and contrasts with other, similar theories. I also explain what there is to recommend this theory to the naturalist yet why there is nothing to recommend it as a normative theory. This applies not only to the present theory but to all similar forms of naturalized virtue ethics. Naturalized virtue ethics ends up being a theory of how we reason about such matters, not a theory of how we ought to reason. However, supplemented with the right sort of commitment, the theory can give ethical guidance.

2. *Ergon* and Lifeform

We find the first attempt to naturalize virtue in terms of the human lifeform in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, in his famous *ergon* or function argument.[2] This way of naturalizing virtue has been revived of late by Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse.[3] Proponents of the theory see it as an alternative not only to supernaturalistic ethical theories, but also to subjectivisms of various sorts and to ethical nihilism. The basic idea is that there are lifeforms relative to which individuals and their traits can be evaluated. A species' lifeform (to define a neologism) comprises its characteristic ends and the characteristic ways those ends are realized. Human beings, like other organisms, have a species-specific lifeform. What it means for an instance of this lifeform to be justifiably considered good is for these

processes to be carried out well, which means generally that the characteristic ends are realized. In Aristotelian terms, a good human being is one who performs the function(s) of human beings well. The virtues are those traits of character that enable her to do so.[4]

In evaluating a living thing relative to its lifeform we do something like the following. First, we describe the life cycle of the species, which includes certain ends. Then we specify a set of propositions saying how the ends are characteristically secured for this species. From these specifications we derive norms. By application of these norms to an individual of the relevant species we can evaluate that individual. We can, Foot says, "judge [an instance of the species] to be as it should be or, by contrast, to a lesser or greater degree defective in a certain respect."[5] Such is the way, more or less, that botanists and ethologists evaluate oak trees, anteaters, and so on. These are naturalistically grounded evaluations. This theory is, therefore, a *prima facie* naturalistic theory. A proponent of naturalized virtue ethics maintains that the sort of derivation we can go through, for example, in showing the necessity of our being able to count on one another to keep our promises is identical to the sort of derivation we would go through, for example, in showing that oak trees need a strong root system or that bees need stings.[6] A similar strategy of justification, it is urged, can be carried out with other proposed virtues.[7]

Hursthouse explicitly spells out what she takes to be the characteristic ends of sophisticated social animals, of which human beings are an instance. These ends are individual survival, continuance of the species, characteristic pleasure and freedom from pain, and well functioning of the social group.[8] A human being, as the relevant sort of creature, can be judged as good or bad *qua* human being insofar as her parts and operations, her emotions and desires, and her actions well or ill serve these four ends. Those dispositions of the will that well serve these ends we call 'the virtues'. There is a problem with Hursthouse's list, however. It is better, it seems to me, to think of the latter two "ends," *viz*. characteristic pleasure/freedom from pain and well functioning of the social group, as proximate ends serving the ultimate ends of individual survival and continuance of the species (i.e., reproductive success). I return to these matters in §6. Suffice to say that, despite their differences, the views of Aristotle, Foot, and Hursthouse are all variants of naturalized virtue ethics.

3. Human Variability and the Continuity of Nature

In naturalized virtue ethics, human beings are evaluated according to how well their actions, desires, and emotions serve the ends characteristic of our species. These ends partially constitute our lifeform. However, it appears that the human lifeform is much more varied than that of other, nonhuman species, so that not only is there no identity between the structure grounding the botanical and ethological evaluations of plants and nonhuman animals but no analogy either.

Recognizing this objection, Hursthouse writes:

> "The way" human beings live varies enormously from place to place, from time to time, from one

> to another. When we look at the other species, although we do find regional and temporal variety … and some idiosyncrasies, the variation in us is of quite a different order.[9]

So it seems, *pace* naturalism, that human beings are not merely different in degree from other species of living thing but other in kind. This otherness, it would seem, might be so great as to render the explanatory-evaluative structure of naturalized virtue ethics impotent when referring to human beings *qua* human beings. Thus, there is no identity of structure between our evaluations of plants and animals *qua* creatures of their kind and our evaluations of human beings *qua* human beings. This is the case because, in effect, there really is no human lifeform, or at least not one consistent enough to ground evaluations.

If there is no human lifeform, then this so-called naturalized virtue ethics really ends up being not a virtue *ethics* at all, at least not in the sense of being a theory of ethical virtue. It might work as an account of the logic underlying our evaluations of certain functional aspects of living things and artifacts, and in that might actually have something to add to the philosophy of biology or engineering. But it fails as a theory of what warrants saying, in the ethical sense, that one person is good and another bad, that some desire is admirable and another not, or that this trait is a virtue and that one a vice. However, while the theory might fail in the job of prescribing an ethic (a point I return to in §6), it does not fail for the reason of human variability.

As a first pass, there is a twofold reply to the variability objection. First, humans are not as variable as many of us think. Second, nonhuman animals are more variable than many of us think. Thus, the gap between humans and nonhuman animals is not as great as critics (and Hursthouse) seem to think. Besides our hubris, a factor that might persuade us that humans are vastly more variable than other animals is the fineness of the grain of our theoretical and everyday analyses of the phenomenon in question, in this case human behavior. Most of us usually pay much more careful attention to the behavior and appearance of human beings than we do to that of nonhuman animals. This is natural, of course, and no doubt has a positive biological fitness value, especially for social animals, whose survival, flourishing, and reproductive success depend so crucially upon their understanding their conspecifics. Moreover, careful observers often discover that the behavior (not to mention the physiology) of nonhuman animals is more variable than formerly thought. The variability of organisms is necessary for there to be evolution by natural selection. Behavioral plasticity is found throughout the animal kingdom, a fact that often only careful ethological observation brings to light.[10]

One important fact of human nature that restrains our variability, however, that keeps it from getting out of line, as it were, is that our ultimate ends do not change. They are fixed. For example, human beings invent, cook, and eat elaborate meals, but our nutritional needs stay the same. As Edward Wilson says, "Genes hold culture on a leash."[11] Our intelligence allows us to devise more creative ways of realizing the human ends; it allows us to invent and construct different "lifestyles." But, given what we are probably capable of doing, there is remarkable similarity amongst otherwise diverse modes. There

are human universals.

The charge that human variability entails there is no human lifeform not only flies in the face of the empirical evidence but also violates a central tenet of naturalism: the continuity of nature. In fact, Hursthouse concedes far too much to the critic. Our pride might erroneously dictate to our ego that we are far different from other species of animal, just as our pride once convinced us that we are other in kind from nonhuman animals. Naturalism rejects this assumption, and rightly so. It is a bit much to say that, compared to other animals, "the variation in us is of quite a different order"—except, perhaps, when it comes to setting our own ends (an issue I address below in §5). Moreover, Hursthouse herself agrees with what she calls the "standard first premise of naturalism": that human beings are animals and thus "have a particular biological make-up and a natural life cycle" (Hursthouse 1999: 206; cf. Romanell 1958). Life evolved from common ancestors. There is no radical break in the chain. The plain fact of human variability does not entail that there is no human lifeform. There is a human lifeform, albeit one that is more multiform in its expression than that of other animals. The mere fact of our versatility does not entail the theoretical inadequacy of naturalized virtue ethics.

4. Normality and the Human Lifeform

Hursthouse has her own reply to the foregoing objection, which relies on the fact that human beings are rational animals. Our being rational entails our greater versatility. I will consider the potential problems that our rationality raises in the next section (§5). Now I will consider a related issue. It seems that, since the human lifeform essentially involves rationality, many—perhaps most—human beings do not exemplify the trait that is supposed by many, Aristotle included, to be characteristic of human beings as such. Since rationality requires taking the right steps towards the right ends, Hursthouse says, "many human beings are *not* going on 'in the way characteristic of the species' and are thereby defective human beings."[12] She notes that this is as we should expect, and all but the most blissfully optimistic of us would probably agree that all too many, perhaps most, human beings are not going on in a rational way.

It certainly seems possible, on more than one account of rationality, that most of us are not rational; for if, as Hursthouse and Foot—following Aristotle—believe, to be rational is to make the right choices at the right times for the right reasons; or if, on a neo-Humean account of rationality, to be rational is to take the right steps to whatever ends we might have; then it is at least possible that most of us are not rational. But, if most of us are not going on in a rational way, then most of us are not doing as human beings characteristically do. But how is this possible? It seems to be a paradox. The concern here is not that there is no human lifeform, but that this lifeform characterizes a relatively small subset of the general population.

Let us set rationality aside for the moment and consider human beings as either good, bad, or neutral specimens of the kind. In doing so we can consider the present objection in a more general way.

If our lifeform involves our characteristic way of going on and this is understood as what we usually do, then it seems to follow that most of us are good. This might not cause a problem for the optimists among us, but consider the following wrinkle. Suppose that dishonesty, infidelity, cruelty, hypocrisy, and other supposed vices were to come to be the way most of us are.[13] If that should come to pass, then those traits of character would be representative of the human species. They would partly form the standard against which we would judge an individual as good, bad, or neutral in character. But this seems to run counter to our commonsense notion of which traits should be counted as virtues. So, if the way to understand the human lifeform is as what we usually do, we are faced with a pair of problematic options. Either most of us are not doing as we usually do, because most of us are not good, in which case it looks as if we have a paradox; or most of us are good, no matter how we act, as long as most of us are acting that way.

To mount a response to this objection, we first need to get a better understanding of the notion of lifeform. Hursthouse uses the term of art 'characteristic way of going on' to mean what I am calling 'lifeform', a choice that could lead to confusion. (Foot avoids this difficulty by using the terms 'life cycle' and 'natural history story'.[14]) Hursthouse's choice of words can lead us astray, because the implications of 'characteristic way of going on' might lead us into thinking that a lifeform of a species is the same as what most of them usually do or are like. These are not, as Hursthouse is aware, the same concept.[15] And while neither concept is by itself *prima facie* evaluative, both could be and have been used to ground evaluations. Moreover, each can be thought of as involving a different type of normality.

There are three different concepts of normality, and by looking at these in turn and understanding the relations amongst them, we will get a better understanding of lifeform.[16]

4.1. Evaluative Normality

In evaluative normality what is normal is, more or less, the same as what is good, and what is not normal is bad. Many people use 'normal' and 'abnormal' uncritically, often interchangeably with 'natural' and 'unnatural' respectively, to denote approbation or disapprobation of some behavioral attribute of individuals. Evaluative normality, however, leaves unstated what is to count as normal. By itself evaluative normality tells us nothing except that the normal is good. Different accounts of what normality is could yield different answers to whether a part, process, or behavior is normal and hence good or not normal and hence bad. So, if we are going to *ground* evaluation, somehow, in normality, it will not do just to say that the normal is the good. To do so would be to beg the question.

4.2. Statistical Normality

What is statistically normal for a population is what most of a population are like. For example, if most men in the United States are 5' 9", then that height is statistically normal for men. What is normal

in this sense can often be mapped out along a bell-shaped curve. Most organisms of a kind will fall somewhere in the middle, making up the largest area of the curve. Some, below average, will fall toward the left tail of the curve, while others, above average, will fall toward the right. These latter two groups will make up a relatively small percentage of the population of organisms when compared to the larger, normal group. When speaking of human behavior, we can think of our characteristic way of going on as what is statistically normal for us. It is what most of us usually do and are like.

If we were to ground evaluation in statistical normality, however, we would not have a virtue ethics, but a kind of conventionalism. There are ready counterexamples to evaluating people ethically in terms of statistical normality. Many human behaviors, actions and inactions, are quite out of the ordinary in a pretheoretically positive way, and thus not what we would think of as normal behavior, insofar as we understand normal behavior in the statistical sense. We need merely to think of those people we consider pretheoretically to be moral exemplars, those who go out of their way to help, to alleviate suffering, who sacrifice themselves for the sake of others. These people we often call good people in the ethical sense; we often even call them very good or perhaps excellent. However, in the purely statistical sense, these people are not normal. Turning to the nonethical realm, the same goes for those people who have exceptional musical, intellectual, or athletic ability. If an important test of value theories is how they square against our pretheoretical intuitions, then statistical normality cannot be the proper understanding of the concept for lifeform.

4.3. Biological Normality

Another, better way to understand lifeform is as involving biological normality. By 'involving' I mean that a species' lifeform includes what is biologically normal for that species. I stress this point so that I will not be misunderstood as claiming that a species' lifeform is reducible to biological normality. It is not. Lifeform comprises a species' ends and the ways those ends are realized. We understand biological normality for a species by examining how the characteristic ends are characteristically achieved. Understanding lifeform as involving biological normality works quite well for traits of nonhuman organisms and for the nonethical traits of human beings. To help us see this, we must get a better understanding of biological normality.

We can give an account of biological normality in terms of biological function. This is a usual way of understanding the notion. Roughly speaking, a thing's function is its job.[17] Thus, we say that a malfunctioning heart is abnormal. We then understand lifeform as, in some sense, well functioning. This appears to be, more or less, what Aristotle had in mind. When we are thinking of specimens of a kind, we can think of them as being more or less biologically normal. We can evaluate specimens of a kind relative to this standard. Thus, a defective member of a species is one that deviates from this standard of normality. For 'defective' we can substitute 'bad', if we wish, just as for 'normal' we can substitute 'good'. As Foot says, when thinking about "goodness and badness, and therefore about evaluation in

its most general form," we might equally think "in terms of, say, strength and weakness or health and disease, or again about an individual plant or animal being or not being as it should be, or ought to be, in this respect or that" (Foot 2001: 38).

While statistical normality does not provide us with a principled way of deciding whether deviations from the norm are better or worse, biological normality does. Mere deviation from the norm in this case is not bad. To count as bad or defective, a deviation from the norm must be in the direction of malfunction. A deviation from the norm in the direction of exemplary function is not bad, but to the contrary very good.

Understanding lifeform as essentially involving biological normality, let us see how we would apply this structure to human beings. With respect to our "merely" physical parts and processes, the structure is a perfect fit. For example, a human being whose heart, lungs, and liver do not adequately perform their respective functions we call a defective human being. A human being whose heart, lungs, and liver perform their respective functions exceptionally we call an excellent human being.[18] Most of us, whose hearts, lungs, and livers function within biologically normal parameters, we may call good human beings *qua* human beings, that is, *qua* examples of the species. However, if it came to pass that cancer, heart disease, or obesity are prevalent in the human population, it would not follow that such conditions are thereby good for having become prevalent.

If we understand lifeform as involving what is biologically normal, there is no paradox in claiming that most human beings are not good examples of their kind. If we move from discussing physical traits to those traits of character we have called dispositions of the will or virtues—and thereby move from the nonethical realm to the ethical—we see also how it could be the case, in principle, that most human beings are not going along as they should ethically.

A critic might ask at this point how the concept of biological normality actually helps to resolve ethical questions. In answering such a charge we need to keep in mind what kind of theory naturalized virtue ethics is, and what I am trying to show by demonstrating and defending the theory. First, it is not a decision theory; second, by itself it probably will not resolve any ethical questions, except the ethical question of what counts as a good human being *given* the natural human ends. I return to these important points in §6. For now, I have only shown how an apparent paradox for the theory is resolved by an appeal to biological normality.[19]

5. Choosing Ends

Important concerns arise when we consider a characteristic way in which human beings actually do differ—presumably—from other types of organism on the planet. Unlike other organisms, individual human beings have a complex system of ends and goals that they consciously pursue. In short, human beings are creatures who can set their own ends. Questions arise then as to the status of these ends. For one thing, does naturalized virtue ethics say that the characteristic ends are more important than other

projects we pursue that do not have this biological basis? For another, what if an individual chooses ends that conflict with our natural ends?

There are two main issues to settle here. First, there is the issue of how our consciously chosen ends are related to the characteristic ends that are included in our lifeform and define biological normality. Second, there is the issue of how we resolve apparent conflicts between ends.

5.1. Chosen and Natural Ends

To answer this question, Hursthouse utilizes what we might call a "thick" notion of rationality. Not only must an individual take the right steps to her ends, but she must also take the right steps toward the right ends. The right ends are, simply, those ends that are natural to creatures like us. To be rational, then, is to act in such a way that one effectively realizes those natural ends.[20] This provides us with an answer to the preceding objection. It is true that individual human beings have a complex system of ends and goals that they consciously pursue. These ends are related to the characteristic ends included in our lifeform either by being identical to those ends or by being ways through which those ends are realized. Of course, if someone were to set goals that conflicted with the ends natural to us, on this view of what counts as rational we would be forced to conclude that that person was behaving irrationally. Moreover, on such a neo-Aristotelian account, the person is also behaving immorally, for to be rational is to be moral. In fact, the terms are more or less synonymous.

It might seem to critics that naturalized virtue ethics straightjackets human beings as far as pursuing individual life projects is concerned, that it makes us "heteronomous," in the pejorative sense of that term Kant intended.[21] Thus, it might seem, for example, that if someone values unity with God and thus chooses to live a celibate life and so rejects the characteristic end of reproduction and thus continuance of the species, this person has made a mistake in terms of rationality and hence morality. To many, that might seem a bit strong. As good modern liberals (in the classical sense), we should want our ethical theory to be neither too rigid nor too flexible in regard to the life projects that individuals might choose to pursue. Thus, if the foregoing account of rationality has the consequence of too much rigidity—and I think it does—then this account ought to be rejected. The question to ask now is whether we must throw out the whole theory, or perhaps just keep the parts that make it a fairly decent value theory of use in engineering, that is, in those cases where we know that the item in question to be evaluated was designed for a specific purpose and thus whose ends are already known. Undoubtedly, there are many philosophers who would like to have us reject naturalized virtue ethics, for they take this sort of theory to be moribund, a musty throwback upon which Kant should have had the last word.

My preferred response to the rationality objection does not involve our accepting a neo-Aristotelian account of rationality, but rather one that I find more plausible, namely, a neo-Humean one. On such a view, while rationality is a normative notion—as it should be—it is not *the* normative notion. On a neo-Humean view, for one to be rational is for one to take the right (that is, effective) steps towards one's ends no matter what those ends might be. Thus, one might be rational even though one

is pursuing ends that are not the natural ends of human beings. Thus, the celibate God-lover could be rational.[22]

On the present account, here is how our chosen ends fit in with those that are, for lack of a better tem, "given." We can define our objective interests as those interests that it is really in our interest to pursue.[23] These are the ends that, if chosen and pursued effectively, will tend to result in our long term flourishing, a term I am using here as shorthand for 'realization of our natural ends'. Thus, the ends we set for ourselves can be evaluated along a pair of different parameters. Either they are ways of realizing our natural ends, in which case they can be evaluated relative to their reasonableness, that is, relative to how effective they are at allowing us to realize those ends. Or we can evaluate our chosen ends relative to how they square with our objective interests, that is, with how they will contribute to or detract from our flourishing. It might be the case that the person who forgoes reproduction and thereby individual continuance of the species in order to realize unity with God does no (other) "harm" to herself or others, that is, does not thwart her own or anyone else's realization of the natural ends besides her own immediate contribution to the continuance of the species. Reason can endorse the acceptance of those ends that square with our objective interests, either by constituting them or by being means to their realization. To again foreshadow an essential point of this paper: it is not the case that we ought to evaluate people according to naturalized virtue ethics (or something very close to it) but that we do.

5.2. Conflicts Between Chosen and Natural Ends

Does naturalized virtue ethics say that the characteristic ends are more important than other projects we pursue that do not have this biological basis? Let us revisit our celibate God-lover. By choosing to forgo her immediate (possible) contribution to the continuance of the species, has she therefore made a mistake in terms of virtue and rationality? The questions to ask are (1) whether it really is in her objective interest and (2) how this end squares with the ends she is not realizing. To answer the first question, we must find out whether the pursuit of this end contributes to her realizing her natural ends or objective good. That is an empirical question. If it does contribute positively, then it is in her objective interest and hence, all things considered, is rational. It remains then to answer the second question. Depending upon how we imagine this person, one natural end she is forgoing is the aforementioned immediate contribution to continuance of the species. Also, she might be forgoing certain characteristic human enjoyments, such as sexual intercourse and deep erotic pair-bonding. The short, captious answer here is that one cannot have all "Seven Sacraments," as it were; that is, one cannot "have it all." Thus, whether one's ends are merely chosen or are amongst the ends natural to us, one might be unable to realize them all fully. Life necessarily involves trade-offs.

How, then, do we resolve apparent conflicts between ends? The naturalized virtue theorist and the deontologist, at least, seem to be facing a similar problem, though it is really no answer to say that a theoretical rival is in the same boat.[24] But, when ends conflict … we just make do. The reader

might reasonably be left here feeling a bit dissatisfied. Of course, a certain amount of dissatisfaction might characterize the human condition for the very reason that not all of our ends (whether given or chosen) can be realized in a single lifetime. We make the choices we think will be for the best, and learn to live with the results when they do not turn out as we would wish. Naturalized virtue ethics is not a decision theory, a fact too easily missed. Hence, it cannot - unalloyed - be an ethical theory.

6. Naturalized Virtue Ethics and Ultimate Ends

The theory I am suggesting here has similarities and differences with its conspecifics. First, the similarities: it is teleological; it is unapologetically naturalistic; and it is inspired by Aristotle. Next, the differences: it is not eudaimonistic; and it is explicitly "evolutionary." Now we are ready to see (1) the primary advantage this theory has over its cousins and (2) what any such a theory might reasonably aspire to and why.

One argument in favor of naturalized virtue ethics, from a naturalistic perspective, is that the theory is consistent with neo-Darwinism. Our naturalistic ethical theory—whatever form it might eventually take—must be consistent with neo-Darwinism, the best explanation we have of genetic diversity and functional complexity in the organic world. Furthermore, although I will only outline such a case here, a case could be made that, if neo-Darwinism is true, a prediction of that theory is that something like naturalized virtue ethics ought to be our logic of evaluation, using 'ought' in its purely predictive sense. That is, if our natural, ultimate end is reproductive success (or, alternatively put, genetic proliferation), then we would expect that we would have a psychological tendency to valorize those traits that reliably enable realization of that end. Such a logic of evaluation would, as it were, sew the seeds of its own success, as long as it had a genetic base. Also, we might predict that this logic of evaluation would tend to praise itself, that is, would tend to valorize its own existence. From a purely neo-Darwinian perspective, the ultimate function of any gene is to secure its own continued existence. That it could do so, *ceteris paribus*, explains why it is here.

All this is, of course, speculative. Determining that something like naturalized virtue ethics represents our evolved logic of evaluation is a complicated empirical issue. Nevertheless, these considerations explain, if naturalized virtue ethics is our evaluative logic, why it is our logic. Even if it is our logic, however, that fact would not entail that the logic is correct. Just because it is our logic does not mean that it ought to be. Of course, if it is the only logic that *can* be ours, due to our evolved psychology, it follows that—given that 'ought implies 'can'—no other logic of evaluation is a plausible candidate.

One advantage this theory has over related theories is that its explicit acceptance of evolutionary theory allows its proponents to provide a principled, naturalistic explanation for why certain ends are our natural ends. Quite simply, they evolved to be so. On Hursthouse's account, it looks like an open question whether a unifying theoretical account can be provided to explain why *those* things get onto

the list of ends and thus are called 'good', except to say that they are our ends. The same goes for a theory like Foot's, where *eudaimonia* or flourishing is taken to be our natural end. In Aristotle's terms, we call the ends 'good' just because they are our ends, that for which we aim and strive, and it seems that no further explanation of the goodness of these ends can be given.[25] It is not that the ends are self-justifying but rather that they are not the kind of thing in need of justification. This, of course, leaves the ends themselves—if they truly are our ends—immune to rational criticism.

Some naturalized virtue ethicists, including Foot, Hursthouse, and perhaps Aristotle, think that we can arrive at an account of the ends through observation or human ethology. There is, of course, some room to argue about whether these are our natural ends. For the neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalist, that argument forms part of the ethical discourse. However, for the naturalist the argument takes place in a court into which has been introduced a cold, hard theoretical fact. The ultimate end of all complex biological traits is individual survival and continuance of the species or genotype, because those traits having served those ends in the past explains why those traits currently exist.[26] The theory I am presenting here, as opposed to Hursthouse's or Foot's variants, can explain why what we take to be natural ends are our natural ends: our dispositional evaluative tendencies evolved that way, in fact, were selected by nature to be that way. We have a well-established theory—neo-Darwinism—that makes certain predictions about what human beings will take to be important, that is, will take as ends to be pursued. We observe whether those predictions come true. None of this means, of course, that reproductive success is good. Thus, my version of naturalized virtue ethics is in more or less the same boat as any other such teleological theory. But such is the ethical limit of this kind of theory. Even if it is "our" logic, it does not follow that it is the right one to have.

Naturalized virtue ethics, then, is not a "decision theory," nor is it intended as a prescriptive ethical theory. It does not tell you what you ought to do. It is a theory about an important mode of ethical evaluation. We could look at an oak tree, for example, and see that, given what we know about oak trees, it would be a better oak tree if it had more water. But it does not follow that we ought to water it. The same thing goes for our evaluations of human beings. Even if we can look at someone and judge that he would be better off—in the sense of being a better human being—if he had courage, nothing follows directly about what I or anyone else ought to do in regards to him, nor what the state should do. There is an 'is'-'ought' gap, as it were, forevermore. However, I or anyone else can judge the coward as, say, a middling human being. Moreover, we evaluate someone's actions insofar as they are *evidence* of someone's character. We do not directly, in naturalized virtue ethics, evaluate actions. Even a good human being can do things that are bad or wrong. The question is whether he or she does such things consistently and from a settled disposition.

An important consequence of presenting this theory is that such a presentation demonstrates the domain and scope of naturalized virtue ethics generally. That is, we see what such a theory can aspire to and where it should not tread. There is no way for a naturalist to theoretically unify the ends on the list except through a neo-Darwinian account.[27] This might lead us to reject teleological theories in

general. Or, it might lead us to realize that this is our theory, or at least one we are predisposed to fall back upon. That said, there are a trio of ways, at least, that the current theory might be turned into a normative theory. For one thing, one might adopt a kind of "perfectionism," where one adds a normative premise to naturalized virtue ethics along the following lines: "One ought to develop those traits that reliably enable realization of our natural ends to the fullest degree." Here we have bridged the 'is'-'ought' gap in the most straightforward way possible, by simply adding a normative claim to our supply of available premises. A similar move would be to adopt a kind of utilitarianism, saying something like "Promote the development of those traits that reliably enable realization of our natural ends."[28] A question arises, of course, as to how any such premise might itself be justified. If it cannot, then the 'is'-'ought' gap has not been bridged, except by the fiat we might call 'commitment'.[29]

Another, slightly more subtle way that naturalized virtue ethics might become part of a normative theory is as follows.[30] Consider someone who has the settled disposition of the will we call 'courage'. This is a trait the possession of which presumably enables realization of our natural ends, a fact that also explains why it is valorized. The one who has courage takes certain sorts of things to be reasons for action, things of which the person who lacks courage simply takes no notice. The courageous person sees a situation that demands courageous action, sees that one ought to act *like so* in that situation, and then acts like so. Normativity, if one wishes to call it that, enters into the picture then as a subjective feature of agents. However, from the courageous agent's perspective, the demands of courage are as real as anything else.

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Notas

[1] E.g., Philips 1964, McDowell 1979, Hooker 1996.
[2] *NE* 1097b25; cf. Whiting 1998.
[3] Hursthouse 1999, Foot 2001; cf. Brown 2004.
[4] A complication is that, for some Aristotelians and probably Aristotle himself, the virtues partially constitute our natural ends.
[5] Foot 2001: 34.
[6] Cf. Geach 1956.
[7] Hursthouse 1999: 208-210, Brown 2004.
[8] Hursthouse 1999: 202.
[9] Hursthouse1999: 219-220.
[10] Griffin 1992.
[11] Wilson 1978: 167.
[12] Hursthouse 1999: 223.
[13] Not an outlandish supposition!
[14] Foot 2001: 29, 51.
[15] "The notion of 'in the way characteristic of the species' is, perhaps, not just a statistical notion, even in the case of other animals" (Hursthouse 1999: 223). The 'perhaps' should be omitted if Hursthouse means what is biologically normal. Foot is also aware of this (Foot 2001: 33); cf. Thompson 1995.
[16] Wachbroit 1994.
[17] Foot worries that the sort of teleology involved in her naturalized virtue ethics might be mistaken for the notion of function as discussed in the philosophy of biology literature. She does not consider her use of 'function' to be the same as the use of 'function' by biologists, which, she notes, is synonymous with 'adaptation'. She writes: "To say that some feature of a living thing is an adaptation is to place it in the history of the species. To say that it has a function is to say that it has a certain place in the life of the individuals that belong to that species at a certain time" (Foot 2001: 32n10). Putting things this bluntly is to ignore the controversy over the concept of function. Some philosophers (e.g., Wright 1973) take something's function to by that for which it was naturally selected, while others (e.g., Cummins 1975) something's function to be the role it plays in some containing system. This latter use of 'function' is, it seems, identical to the use to which Foot puts the term.
[18] Brown 2004. Despite being defective or excellent in some ways, the human being in question might have many other admirable or despicable qualities. This shows that the "overall summing up" evaluation might be inexact or even indeterminate (Hursthouse 1999: 203).
[19] There are important and interesting questions surrounding the notions of normality and function. We might feel that, as naturalists, we need a nonnormative account of biological normality. If we are to give an account of biological normality in terms of biological function, a concern might arise as to whether the latter concept is normative or whether it can be naturalized (Bedau 1992). It might be the case that the concept of function is itself normative. But if it is, then biology itself is to some degree normative, and insofar as biology is a naturalistic endeavor, this way of naturalizing virtue is not in danger.
[20] Cf. Foot 2001.
[21] Cf. Putnam 1987, Williams 1995.
[22] An atheist would think there is a case to be made for why she is not. This is the case because, since God does not exist, there is no efficient means for unity with Him. Thus, any steps taken towards that end will be ineffective and hence irrational.
[23] Cf. Railton 1986.
[24] The utilitarian, it seems, does not have this problem. If two actions have the same utility, one might as well flip a coin, but one is not faced with a conflict.
[25] "Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that at which everything aims" (*NE* 1094a1-3). There is dispute over how we are to understand Aristotle's thought here.
[26] It would take us too far from the topic at hand to get involved in the "sociobiology" controversy, an imbroglio that has been more about politics than science. See Segerstråle 2000.
[27] See Brown forthcoming.
[28] See Brown 2005.
[29] Virtue ethics in general has not been without its critics, both internal and external (Louden 1984, Solomon 1988). Some philosophers have called into question whether there is such a category distinct from utilitarian and Kantian approaches to ethics (Nussbaum 1999, Hurka 2001), while others have called into question whether there are any such things as virtues (Doris 1998, Harman 1998). Many of these objections have been adequately addressed (Hursthouse 1999, Merritt 2000, Miller 2003, Brown 2004). The view I am presenting is actually immune to many of the standard criticisms.
[30] This line of thought is inspired by the work of John McDowell (McDowell 1979). I have little doubt that McDowell would disapprove of the present application of his thought.

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