

A Dissertation Proposal

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Recent Neo-Aristotelians on Virtue, Practical Reason, and Happiness

The recent neo-Aristotelians virtue ethicists¹ have been working on three important concepts: virtue, practical reason, and *eudaimonia* (often translating ‘flourishing’ or ‘happiness’).² MacIntyre has argued, persuasively, that each of the three are essential to an intelligible moral theory; an account of virtue without a coordinated account of practical reason and happiness is futile. So a contemporary virtue ethicist needs to give an account of all three together. Yet each of these three concepts are “often misunderstood” by modern moral philosophers.³

Perhaps the concept that ties them all together is *telos*, for some conception of our *telos* defines where we ought to be; some conception of our human nature as practical reasoners defines where we are; and some conception of the virtue defines those qualities that will help us transition from where we are to where we ought to be. The loss of *telos* has, in many ways, been the Achilles heel of

1. Foot (2001), Geach (1956, 1977), Hursthouse (1999), McDowell (1995), MacIntyre (1999), Nussbaum (1993, 1995), and Thompson (1995).

2. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011) gives a concise and clear account of all three; John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 331–50 and John McDowell, “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (University of California Press, 1980), 359–76 gives his account of all three; Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001) presents her account of all three; MacIntyre presents his account of all three especially in *After Virtue* but also *Dependent Rational Animals*.

3. Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/>, 2013).

modern moral philosophy. As difficult as it is to consider seriously the project of restoring teleology, final causality, natural purposiveness to its proper place, many of those trying their hand at defending a teleological conception of nature and ethics have been virtue ethicists. The reason for this is, I think, that the Aristotelian tradition is uniquely situated to construct an ethical system including all three elements.⁴

In light of the importance of virtue, practical reason, and happiness *as a set*, and in light of the work produced by neo-Aristotelians in recent decades, I propose to write my dissertation working through their writings and presenting my own original contribution to these important issues. Although many books and articles have been written on these authors' views of virtue, practical reason and human nature, or happiness, I would like to focus these chapters on the dynamic relation between the three. Coordinating all three concepts into a coherent system requires sensitivity to what slight changes in one concept might have on the others.

My thesis is an answer to this governing question: what is virtue and what is the relation of virtue to practical reason and to happiness which is our presumptive human *telos*?

My first goal would be to defend the following thesis: **virtues are any excellences of human nature – but especially the excellence of practical reason – which partly constitute human happiness.**⁵

Clarifying and defending this thesis will force me to present and take a stance on several

4. For Aristotle himself, humans were rational animals with a particular psychology and set of potentialities, including the endowment of divine nous; our species-wide telos was happiness or eudaimonia. A life of virtuous activity was the means to eudaimonia, and detailed information about the virtues – both moral and intellectual – were knowable from tradition and ratified or modified by reflecting on the lives of virtuous Athenian citizens. For neo-Aristotelians some aspects of Aristotle's three-fold system are correct as is, some need revising and updating, while others need throwing out.

5. Compare "persistence in being for the good" (Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Clarendon Press, 2006)); "The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should" (Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics").

active and lively debates among virtue ethicists: what is an ‘excellence’?⁶ Are the virtues unified?⁷ what is there such thing as human nature or has Darwinism abolished that notion?⁸ Is there one human nature or are there many ‘second natures’?⁹ Christopher Toner¹⁰] Are all virtues acquired or are some innate?

The question as written captures all three of MacIntyre’s components: in light of best scientific and philosophical evidence, we ought to be able to come up with a tentative conception of human nature; the possible natural teleological facts about us will give us a conception of our goal; and from these we ought to be able to learn at least some truths about which virtuous and vicious qualities enable the realization of the goal.

My second goal would be to divide, explain, and defend the separate parts of this definition: What is practical reason and what is excellence in regard to it?¹¹ This would be the second chapter and would invite discussion of live debates among virtue ethicists and metaethicists and others about the nature of practical reason (is it Humean, Kantian or something else?)¹², the “practical requirement” with regard to moral reasons; the charge of egoism and the distinction between ‘self-regarding’ and ‘other-regarding’ virtues¹³, between self-love and conscience¹⁴ as well as revisiting

6. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*.

7. Robert M. Adams, “A Theory of Virtue: Response to Critics,” *Philosophical Studies* 148, no. 1 (2010): chap. 10.

8. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998) chapter ?; R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008), chap. 5.

9. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996); Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 5.

10. “Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 220–50.

11. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 4; McDowell, “Virtue and Reason.”

12. Paul Bloomfield, “Eudaimonia and Practical Rationality,” *Oxford Studies Ancient Philosophy* 265 (2012): 286.

13. Michael Slote, “Agent-Based Virtue Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (1995): 83–101.

14. Paul Bloomfield, ed., “Morality and Self Interest” (Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–21; Alasdair MacIntyre, “Egoism and Altruism,” 1967; Bloomfield, “Eudaimonia and Practical Rationality”; Yong Huang, “The Self-Centeredness Objection to Virtue Ethics,” ed. Robert E. Wood, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2010): 651–92.

the unity of virtues as each depending on practical reason.¹⁵

Thirdly, what is happiness and how do virtues partly constitute it?¹⁶ Is there a telos for humanity?¹⁷ How relevant is our “metaphysical biology” to ethics?[Brown¹⁸ chapter 3 and 4; John McDowell;¹⁹] Is ethics partly dependent on our animal nature²⁰ or solely on our rationality?²¹ Are virtues necessary for true or “deep happiness”²² or are they necessary and sufficient?²³ Is it possible to be virtuous and miserable?

I already have hundreds of pages of notes on these questions. I imagine presenting some arguments answering some (but probably not all!) the above questions, drawing on the recent neo-Aristotelian naturalists.

Chapter 0 - Preface, scope of project, key terms, assumptions

Chapter 1 - Virtue as excellence of human nature

Chapter 2 - Virtue as excellence of Practical reason

Chapter 3 - Virtue as partially constituting Happiness

Chapter 4 - Conclusions

The research of others and defense of my own account sets me up for future research. My future goals would be to negotiate this account with various requirements of naturalism, and to

15. W. Jay Wood, “Prudence,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A Boyd (Oxford University Press, 2014).

16. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Adams, *A Theory of Virtue*, chap. 4; McDowell, “The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics’.”

17. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* (Mouette Press, 1998); Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 2008, chap. 2; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chap. 5.

18. *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 2008.

19. “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” *Mind, Value, and Reality* 167 (1998): 97.

20. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Andrew M Bailey, “Animalism,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 12 (2015): 867–83; James Barham, “Teleological Realism in Biology” (PhD thesis, PhD dissertation, 2011).

21. McDowell, *Mind and World*; Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

22. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 6.

23. Julia Annas, in *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, ed. Stephen Gardiner (Cornell University Press, 2005).

weigh in on the lively debate on this point.²⁴ Is a virtue ethics based on a normative conception of human nature ethically authoritative? Is such an ethics ‘scientific’? Are the requirements of practical reason ‘natural’ requirements or ‘second natural’, are they merely ‘cultural’? Is naturalistic virtue ethics compatible with theism or is it necessarily atheistic? Is it compatible with atheism or is it necessarily theistic?

Objection 1: This is not just about virtue. True, but my area proposal, qualifying exams, and dissertation proposal have all been about virtue *and surrounding issues*, such as human nature, intellectual virtues, practice and practical reason.

Objection 2: This is too broad. Since the authors I am working with each cover all three topics, I think my arguments will remain within a reasonable scope.

Objection 2: This is about metaethics again. Since the authors I am working with are both virtue ethicists and neo-Aristotelian naturalists, I am interacting with them on their own terms. These terms will be explained and defended in the preface.

24. Stephen Brown, “Really Naturalizing Virtue,” *Ethic@* 4 (2005): 7–22; R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008), chap. 1.