Chapter 1

Conclusion

> Not everything that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best.
>
> —Aristotle, *Physics* 194a.

In this chapter, I briefly take stock of the main argument of this dissertation before examining its broader significance and noting a few connections to other philosophical problems.

The main argument of this dissertation has been that human beings are best understood as practical, rational primates whose natural ends include the acquisition of the traditional list of virtues and (especially) practical wisdom. Since we are by nature practical reasoning animals, we have a natural obligation to acquire practical wisdom and any other trait that the practically wise person has.

In outline, I defended this argument by first laying the metanormative foundation in chapter 2. I developed a novel case for the Footian view I have labeled 'organic naturalism.' In chapter 3, building on this foundation, I made explicit some of the natural norms that pertain to human organisms. I argued that our best understanding – if only partial understanding – of our life form can be expressed in the same sort of normative/descriptive generics by

which biologists and other scientists identify the life forms of any organism. In chapter 4, I then showed how the traditional concept of virtue in the Aristotelian tradition falls under the description of 'natural human norms': the virtuous person is the person described in generic statements such as 'human beings are courageous and wise' etc. Virtues are those practices that are beneficial to creatures like us, and that are acquirable under the management of excellent practical reasoning. Virtue and practical wisdom enable us to actuate our life life form and become what we are. In chapter 5, I returned to the theme of practical reasoning to show how the process is best understood as necessarily involving substantive commitments to pursue good and avoid evil. Some of the mundane facts of nature are, for us, practical reasons that can motivate us to live a certain kind of life. Evaluative mistakes are certainly possible, but my account showed how such mistakes are failures in the attempt to be practically wise. Chapter 6 attempted to rebut the dual charges of bald naturalism and non-naturalism by breaking down the putative contrast between scientific reasoning (about nature) and ethical, practical reasoning (about norms). I suggested that there is indeed a proper distinction between theoretical reasoning (whether scientific or ethical) and practical reasoning (whether scientific or ethical). But the hard line is not between normative and non-normative reasoning, for all reasoning is normative in the relevant respects.

The primary criticism to my sort of Footian naturalism, expressed in various forms by dozens of writers, is that nature (defined in terms of what the sciences study) and science (defined as the study of nature) are fundamentally different from norms, reasons, and ethics. In an effort to dismantle what I take to be an unreflective prejudice, I criticized the picture of organic nature as merely bald or non-normative. On both the unrestricted picture of nature and my version of the restricted conception, norms come to light as natural. I offered 'recursive naturalism' as a new name for my view. On recursive naturalism, parts of nature recur within nature: natural organisms (namely, humans) reason about natural organisms; humans reason about humans; practical reasoners think about practical reasoning. Rather

than shying away from our best scientific picture of the world – including biological and human phenomena – recursive naturalism whole-heartedly embraces that picture. Indeed, affirming recursive naturalism makes it possible to affirm both moral and scientific realism; denying recursive naturalism seems to require denying both moral realism and scientific realism.

My account cannot pretend to have addressed every incisive objection or cover every crucial topic. I have aimed my argument, throughout, at the scientific naturalist who is in some sense already committed to scientific realism. Hence, I have attempted to clarify how my Footian sort of ethical naturalism can be compatible with a plausible version of scientific naturalism. But one possible shortcoming is the quick manner with which I have had to deal with delicate matters of epistemology and (especially) the philosophy of science. Scientific realism is by no means the only reasonable view, and there are many brands of scientific realism.

Another possible shortcoming is the absence of a discussion about the relation between virtue ethics and religious morality. Virtue ethics is often associated with Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or Taoist religious philosophy. Nevertheless, I have defended (especially) Foot's version of what Murphy calls a "secular natural law theory." Foot, McDowell and others are non-religious philosophers who find in Aristotle an alternative that is neutral with respect to theism. My hope is to play some part in showing the plausibility and practicality of the notion that even "modern knowers and godless anti-metaphysicians" have every reason to pursue virtue and wisdom.[1]

A third possible shortcoming is a fuller discussion of social reasoning. While 'homo sapiens sapiens' is a biological concept that purports to range over all genetically modern humans, the variety and contrast between the ways various cultures conceive of and pursue 'the good life for humans' is daunting. If, as MacIntyre has argued, we learn to reason

1. Paraphrasing Frederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 344.

within a social tradition, the problem of cultural relativism about rationality looms large. A fuller discussion would have to engage thoroughly with recent anthropological and socio-biological literature.

In spite of these admitted shortcomings, my project has been to establish that human beings indeed have natural ends, such as the acquisition of virtue and practical wisdom. Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism can provide mutually re-enforcing accounts of individual concepts such as virtue, practical reason, nature and human nature. When viewed together, these concepts form an interlocking whole that has the potential to solve problems in both ethics and metaethics, and beyond. The attractions of this view are manifold.

First, it is always dangerous to do moral philosophy *without* considering the theories of other times, places, and cultures, for we are liable to overemphasize pet virtues (or ignore pet vices) peculiar to our time and place. Neo-Aristotelianism draws on the ethical writings of other cultures and other times and so promises to correct lopsided ethical developments in our own time.

Secondly, neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism provides a satisfying possible answer to the problem of the relation between nature and reason. It pictures facts and norms as an organic whole, presented to us by the world and studied by all the sciences, including formal or abstract sciences. It even suggests that Aristotle was right to classify ethics as a different sort of science with its own subject matter, its own standards, and its own aims.ˆ[Cf. "For a well schooled man searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits: is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of probability from a mathematician has to demand strict demonstrations from an orator."[2]

Neither subsuming ethics under (merely descriptive) disciplines nor subsuming descriptive disciplines into normative categories, neo-Aristotelian theory holds great promise for coordinating the descriptive and normative dimensions of ethics, biology, and other

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2014) Book I.3.

sciences. Perhaps this is part of the explanation why the Footian sort of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is rightly enjoying a new renaissance in contemporary analytic ethics and beyond. In my view, it is both perfectly compatible with the modern scientific worldview and also useful in political life, bioethics,[3] business,[4] education,[5] and everyday life. It would be an improvement to almost any area of human life if we were aware of our own vices and worked to expunge them, and if we understood the virtues and pursued them.

Virtue, practical reason, and nature are age-old themes which demand more work than I can claim to have done here to treat adequately. As Glaucon said to Socrates, "The measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life."[6]

3. Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. Ron Beadle, "MacIntyre's Influence on Business Ethics," in *Handbook of Virtue Ethics in Business and Management* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2015), 1–9.

5. David Carr and Jan Steutel, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education* (Routledge, 2005).

6. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997), *Republic* 450b.

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