I. Virtue, Practical Reason, and Telos in Recent Neo-Aristotelians

A Dissertation Proposal

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Thesis

This dissertation defends a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue, practical reason, and human *telos*. I present, compare, and discuss the ethical views of three of the most prominent and influential neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists: Philippa Foot, John McDowell, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Then I offer my own account.

My governing question is this: What is virtue in relation to practical reason and to our human *telos*? Three main themes fall out of this question. What is virtue and why it is necessary? What is practical reason and what is the relation between rationality and morality? Does humanity have one *telos*,many, or none – and what difference does it make to morality?

Specifically, in this dissertation, I shall defend the thesis that **virtues** (**especially practical wisdom**) **are the excellent character traits all human beings need, for virtues partly constitute the realization of our natural human telos.** As I shall argue, virtues like courage and practical wisdom are neither culturally relative nor dogmatically inflexible. Rather, the virtuous person is truly admirable as an exemplary human being.

My thesis has three main parts: the notion that virtues are excellent character traits all humans *need*; the notion that all human beings especially need practical wisdom, which is single name for the excellence (or excellences) of practical reason; and the notion that such character traits partly (but not fully) constitute the realization of our natural human telos. Each part, of course, needs, clarification. In the course of clarifying and defending these claims, I shall be obliged to take a stance on several active and lively debates among virtue ethicists.

The Neo-Aristotelians

I select my themes and authors from the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists. Who are they? Rosalind Hursthouse provides a list: Anscombe,[1] Geach,[2] Foot,[3] McDowell,[4] MacIntyre,[5] Hursthouse,[6] Nussbaum,[7] Thompson.[8] For my part, I add Annas[9] and Brown[10]. These neo-Aristotelians are a group of contemporary (mostly analytic) philosophers that have written on a set of ethical questions that, in my opinion, represent some of the most significant and interesting work being done in English speaking ethics.[11] These writers (and their many followers and critics) have contributed to a

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1. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19; G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Harvard University Press, 1957).
2. Peter T Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1956.
3. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001).
4. John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998); John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996).
5. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
6. Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics and Human Nature," *Hume Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 67–82.
7. Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86–131; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (September 1988): 1993.
8. Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. Lawrence Hursthouse Rosalind and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 247–96.
9. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
10. R. Stephen Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum, 2008).
11. There are many other influential philosophers who will remain in the background of my discussions, despite being "big names" in virtue ethics from the last 100 years: they include

remarkable movement in analytic ethics. While I shall pay heed to the contributions of each of these significant authors, in order to keep my scope realistic, I have limited my primary focus to MacIntyre, Foot, and McDowell. The richness of views even in just these three promises illuminating comparisons and contrasts.

A Three-fold Schema

Many books and articles have been written on MacIntyre, Foot, and McDowell's views of virtue, practical reason, and *telos* (understood very broadly as 'happiness', 'flourishing' or 'well being').[12] However, not enough has yet been do on the dynamic relation between the three concepts.

 These three concepts are easily misunderstood by modern philosophers.[13] And together they constitute a formal schema that many have made central to their theories.[14] One justification for the scheme comes from Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. There, he argues persuasively that necessary conditions of an intelligible moral system are (a) conception of human nature – including human rationality – as it is; (b) a conception of some human *telos* or end we ought to realize; and, from these, (c) a conception of the qualities or actions that enable a human being to achieve his or her telos. Simply put, a moral theory needs a starting point, an ending point, and the means from

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* (Mouette Press, 1998); Bernard Williams; Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Clarendon Press, 2003); Michael Slote;Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Paul Bloomfield, *Moral Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Adams, Gopal Sreenivasan, Talbot Brewer, and R. Scott Smith. One could certainly construct a worthwhile project approaching all of (or a different sub-set of) these authors. Nevertheless, the smaller set of Neo-Aristotelians are my focus. Every project must cut off scope somewhere.

 12. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* gives a concise and clear account of all three.

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

 14. For example, McDowell, Foot, and MacIntyre can be seen using this schema 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; Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and Foot, *Natural Goodness*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*

that start to that end.

The Centrality of Teleology

The attempt to construct a moral theory without any one of these components is bound to stultify. However, the unifying concept of the schema, arguably, is not virtue but *telos*. If we can't even create a shopping list of groceries we "should" buy without a clear conception of the dinner to be cooked, then *a fortiriori* strict moral rules and virtues without any notion of the kind of life that is to be lived are bound to degenerate into mere legalism.

However, the attempt to rehabilitate teleology may seem overly optimistic. The idea of teleology is a major stumbling block for many contemporary analytic philosophers. One the one hand, supernatural teleology is felt by some to be too religious; on the other hand, natural teleology is commonly supposed to be somehow debunked by modern science. Is there any alternative? Or can one of these disjuncts be rehabilited in order that teleology may serve its crucial purpose in ethics? Were Francis Bacon and others who intentionally excised "final causation" from science wrong to do so? If teleological virtue ethics is somehow endemic to pre-modern traditions, wouldn't virtue talk be obsolete? Wouldn't the revival of such talk be antiquarian and nostalgic?

I think that natural teleology as needed for virtue ethics built on human nature is – and can be shown to be – perfectly respectable in our modern era. The pursuit of virtues is no more obselete than any other human activity, like cooking or laughing or studying astronomy.

Nevertheless, the skeptical worries must be taken seriously and addressed in detail. Modernity is not the ancient world. Modern science, philosophy, and culture are not the same as their pre-modern counterparts. It is imperative that contemporary virtue ethicists pay due respect to what *has* changed. It is imperative that contemporary virtue ethicists clarify the relationship of their theories to modern science.

For this project, I set to one side the possibility of supernatural teleology – God directing natural affairs to his purposes or guiding humans by commands. The first reason for ignoring this

possibility, aside from considerations of space, is that there is no consensus among neo-Aristotelians regarding the supernatural, while there is broad consensus about the possibility of grounding an ethical theory in human nature.[15] Secondly, the existence of natural ends, if it can be defended, does not *necessitate* but is *compatible with* the possibility of higher, supernatural ends.

As difficult as it is to consider seriously the project of restoring teleology, final causality, natural purposivness to its proper place, it can be done. And in order to defend an account of virtue as partly constitutive of our natural human *telos*, it *must* be done.

A Hopeful Inquiry

In short, I shall defend my thesis by way of discussing the three mentioned themes in the recent neo-Aristotelians, especially MacIntyre, Foot, and McDowell. Some (though not all) of those defending a teleological conception of nature and ethics have been virtue ethicists. I believe this is because the Aristotelian tradition is uniquely situated to construct an ethical system including all three elements of the schema while rehabilitating natural teleology that is acceptable to moderns.[16]

Chapter Outline

The defense of my thesis and presentation of my primary themes will unfold in the following chapters.

Chapter 1. The Project of the Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethicists. This chapter sets up my project. It situates virtue ethics and the neo-Aristotelians in their historical and philosoph-

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15. Historically, a survey of teleological realists would feature theists, atheists, humanists, pantheists, and so on.

16. 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 Athenien 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.

ical context. This chapter also lays out my understanding of the distinction between ethics and metaethics, my key terms, methodological strategies, assumptions, and performs some other necessary philosophical housekeeping tasks.

      Chapter 2. Virtues as excellent character traits all humans need. The second chapter presents an account of virtue as excellent character traits all human beings need. It defends against various common problems that critics present, though it defers some discussions to be explored more fully in the foregoing chapters. Questions I aim to answer include: What exactly is a virtue? Are virtues "necessary" and if so necessary *for what*? Do virtues even exist or does the 'situationist challenge' render such talk empirically suspect? What is 'excellence'?[17] Are the virtues unified?[18] Is there such thing as human nature or has Darwinism abolished that notion?[19] Is there one human nature, no human nature, or many 'second natures'?[20] Are all virtues acquired or are some innate?

      Chapter 3. Virtue as excellence of practical reason. The third chapter presents an account of practical reason according to which practical wisdom (the excellence of practical reason) is a necessary condition of all the other virtues. Questions I aim to answer include: what is practical reason and what is excellence in regard to it?[21] Is practical reason better understood along Humean or Kantian lines – or something else?[22] Can moral reasons satisfy the "practical requirement" with regard to morality? Is practical reason egoistic or can we undermine the distinction between 'self-

      17. Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Clarendon Press, 2006).

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

      19. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998) chapter ?; Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 2008, chap. 5.

      20. McDowell, *Mind and World*; Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 5; Christopher Toner, "Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory," *Metaphilosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 220–50.

      21. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 4; McDowell, "Virtue and Reason."

      22. Paul Bloomfield, "Eudaimonia and Practical Rationality," *Oxford Studies Ancient Philosophy* 265 (2012): 286.

regarding' and 'other-regarding' virtues[23], between self-love and conscience?[24] Are the deliverances of practical reasoning subjective, intersubjective, or objective? I shall revisit topics touched on in chapter 2, especially the notion of human nature as "rational animals" touched on, and the unity of virtues as each depending on practical reason.[25]

 Chapter 4. Virtues as partly constituting the realization of our natural human *telos*. The fourth chapter presents an account of human teleology as partly achievable through the virtues. I distinguish various senses of *telos* and consider several potential specifications of this indeterminate concept. There is traditionally some link between virtues and *telos* (eudaimonia, flourishing, thriving, welfare, etc.), but Bentham and Nietzsche, among others, mock this alleged role.[26] The questions I am to answer are: What is our *telos* and how do virtues relate to it?[27] If virtues to bring about happiness, again, is that just egoism?[28] Is there even a *telos* for humanity, or is there no sense in speaking of a *human function*?[29] How relevant is our "metaphysical biology" to ethics?[30] Is ethics partly dependent on our animal nature[31] or solely on our rationality?[32] Are virtues necessary

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

 24. Julia Annas, "Morality and Self Interest," ed. Paul Bloomfield (Oxford University Press, 2009), 205–21; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, Macmillan, 1967), 462; 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.

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

 26. Cf. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*.

 27. 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'."

 28. Huang, "The Self-Centeredness Objection to Virtue Ethics."

 29. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*; Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 2008, chap. 2; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chap. 5.

 30. Brown, *Moral Virtue and Nature*, 2008, chap. 3 and 4; John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," *Mind, Value, and Reality* 167 (1998): 97.

 31. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*; Andrew M Bailey, "Animalism," *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 12 (2015): 867–83; James Barham, "Teleological Realism in Biology" (PhD thesis, Web; PhD dissertation, 2011).

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

for true or "deep happiness"[33] or are they necessary and sufficient?[34] Is it possible to be virtuous and miserable?

Chapter 5. Conclusion. The fifth chapter concludes by summarizing the contours of the main argument and surfacing a few objections that might remain. I offer ethical arguments with self-consciously metaethical import; the normativity of virtue and practical wisdom need to be related to broader concerns with normativity in general, wherever it might be found (in language, meaning, even metaphysics). This chapter could also gesture at future research directions. For example, my future goals would be to negotiate this account with various requirements of naturalism, and to weigh in on the lively debate on this point.[35] 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?

Virtue, practical reason, and *telos* are age-old themes. Treating them adequately is far to grand a task for one dissertation. As Glaucon said to Socrates, "The measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life."[36] Nevertheless, they are significant themes. My hope is that even an unworthy treatment of a worthy topic will attain some value.

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33. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chap. 6.
34. Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics, Old and New," ed. Stephen Gardiner (Cornell University Press, 2005).
35. 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.
36. John Cooper, *Complete Works of Plato* (Hackett, 1997) Republic 450b.