Chapter 1

Human Nature: Virtues as Necessary Traits for Rational Animals

"Man alone of the animals possesses speech." (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.1253a)

I. Applying Generics to Humanity

We saw above that the is-ought gap can be overcome by finding a perfectly respectable, almost ubiquitous, natural normativity. A natural teleological facts, are, if you like, a natural "ought". And teleological facts obtain in many – perhaps all – living things. Generic truths about those living things are genuinely normative, and therefore can be used to derive genuinely normative conclusions.

What remains is to see if this general pattern of natural normative he applies to human beings or not. And if so whether the normativity is genuinely *ethical*. Furthermore, we must return to an answer the other two objections mention above. (Namely, the objection that there is no such thing as "human nature"; and the objection that, if there is, "human nature" is nothing over and above a complex set of biological, physiological, and perhaps sociological descriptions.)

The success of this endeavor depends on whether we can identify the normative, teleological

facts that are true of humans as a species. It will succeed insofar as we can articulate those facts in true generics about humans.

Generic Truths about Humans in General

What are some candidates? What can we – by careful observation and inductive generalization – confidently say about humanity? Here are what I take to be a sampling of the kinds of things said about genetically modern humans without much scientific controversy. We are *homo sapiens sapiens*. Our species emigrated from Africa about 200,000 years ago, and are the only extant members of the hominin clade.

- Humans are rational
- Humans are language users.
- They are bipedal, walk upright, and have opposable thumbs.
- They have large brains.
- Their brains include a neocortex, prefrontal cortex etc. that corrleate with abstract thinking, problem solving, society, and culture.
- Humans are symbol users.
- In groups, humans communicate with signs and symbols.
- Humans are creative.
- Humans are self-reflective; they wonder who they are, tell stories about who they are, and disagree about who they are.
- Humans establish social relations not only upon biological grounds (children often grow up in homes with their biological parents) but upon normative grounds (some orphans grow up in orphanages created by philanthropists).

- Humans are curious.
- Humans gather knowledge into sciences.
- Humans don't just hunt and gather but farm, store, combine, ferment, and cook food.
- Humans don't just live on the ground, under the ground, or under trees, but build houses and shelters.
- Humans don't just build shelters of one particular type; they invent new shelters and structures in new places, such as caves, trees, hills, mountains, etc.
- Human females go through menopause.
- Humans have 32 teeth, are 4' 7" to 6' 3" tall (plus or minus), and weigh 120-180 pounds (plus or minus).
- Humans have two sets of 23 chromosomes in each somatic cell, and about 22,000 total genes.
- Humans reproduce sexually.
- Humans eat vegetables, red meat, fish, nuts, seeds, berries, fruits, mushroom, mollusks.
- Humans do not eat other humans.

Suppose that the earth was formed about 4.5 billion years ago and that life arose on earth 3.5 billion years ago. Suppose that anatomically modern humans arose about 200,000 years ago.

What defines us? What characterizes us? The old formulation of human nature was that humans are rational, featherless, bipedal, animals. I argue that this is still the best, emprically verifiable, scientific, and philosophical formulation of human nature. That we are animals is plain to anyone who wishes to examine the facts. Clearly, something changes when we examine human

beings compared to all other animals or all other natural kinds.[1] We continue to evaluate humans on the basis of their species, but we evaluate not just their health and normal developmental stages, and their maturity, but their *actions*. The fact that our being potentially rational differentiates us from whales and chimps and cauliflower is just as plain. I do not wish to assume that all species have *only one* differentium. (There may be a thousand other rational animals out in the cosmos somewhere else.) I only urge the point that we happen to be the only ones on earth.

So the attempt to characterize human nature, however broadly, must not only cite our *physicality* – our relation to the physical world – but our animality – our relation to the living world as a whole. What property or set of properties differentiates humans from any other animal, or any other physical object? So the property of being an animal encompasses a whole range of biological and neurophysiological facts that obtain in each normal human being. And the property of being potentially rational encompasses a range of psychological, intellectual, and cultural facts that obtain in each normal human being.

Our language is unique. Other animals that communicate use non-grammatical closed systems with a small, finite set of symbols.ˆ[Communication systems used by other animals such as bees or apes are closed systems that consist of a finite, usually very limited, number of possible ideas that can be expressed. In contrast, human language is open-ended and productive, meaning that it allows humans to produce a vast range of utterances from a finite set of elements, and to create new words and sentences."

I would add to this formulation that we are *practical*, rational animals. That is, we do not just act but act on reasons. We set goals and act in order to achieve goals. In the unity of reason between theoretical and practical that I shall ground both moral and intellectual virtue. All the acts of reason (whether theoretical or practical) are acts of *reason.* (I shall pick up the theme of practical rationality in a later chapter.)

1. Katherine Hawley and Alexander Bird, "What Are Natural Kinds?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, no. 1 (2011): 205–21.

I must hasten to add that "humans are practical, rational animals" is a generic. It admits of exceptions. Anacephalic babies are not even potentially rational, for they lack the subvenient brain structure necessary for rational consciousness, yet they are recognizably *human* (they are not opossums), just defectively so. (A war veterans is still human even if he or she is no longer bipedal!) Injury, illness, genetic defect, radiation poisoning, and any number of other negative factors may render a human being sub-rational. Coma, mental illness, and other factors may render a human being non-practical (unable to direct his or her own life to a normal degree). The point of the argument above was that generic truths about humans inform us about the lifeform of the species.

From Nature to Virtue

What does all of this have to do with virtue? Peter Geach says "Men need virtues as bees need stings."[2] Philippa Foot echoes Geach's statement about "need" and "necessity" as well. Alasdair MacIntyre subtitled his most recent monograph: "human beings need the virtues."[3] The kind of necessity being predicated here is the same kind of necessity with which a bee needs a sting. It is a formal and teleological necessity. Virtues are those qualities needed by us as members of the human species, each member of which exemplifies the same human nature of being a potentially practical, rational animals.

Here is one: 'Human beings are practical, rational animals'. This is a generic, hence it is both descriptive and normative; it is a "thick" term. Initially, we can conclude that if human beings *really are* rational animals that an *irrational* human is ipso facto defective.[4] Again, I do not here intend to discuss mental illness, disability, birth defect, chromosomal disorders, and other such exceptions to 'normal' functional humans.

2. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 17.

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

4. To call a human 'defective' sounds like a schoolyard insult; but it is a straightforward, evaluative description of some people.

Now we must go further and specify what kind of life it is we as human beings live arising from what kind of creatures we are. Of course, the difficulty comes in attempting to move from such vague statements to particular moral statements: 'Human beings make and keep promises.' This will give us initial insight into the concept of virtue, which is our main theme. The subsequent chapters will provide more detail into the nature of virtue.

II. Neo-Aristotelians on Human Nature

Foot on Applying Generics to Human Nature

Foot is well aware that the imposition of normativity onto brute nature, or the derivation of normativity from brute nature, is likely to seem absurd:

> The idea that any features and operations of humans could be evaluated in the same way as those of plants and animals may provoke instant opposition. For to say that this is possible is to imply that some at least of our judgements of goodness and badness in human beings are given truth or falsity by the conditions of human life. And even if it is allowed that certain evaluations of this kind are possible—those vaguely thought of perhaps as 'merely biological'—there is bound to be scepticism about the possibility that 'moral evaluation' could be like this.[5]

However, she has tried to earn a hearing for this notion by arguing that the "meaning of 'good' in so-called 'moral contexts' " does not have a special logic of its own. Rather, as she insists, "no change in the meaning of 'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will.'[6] Hursthouse articulates Foot's basic point in this way:

> The starting point is an idea that she has never lost sight of, and which figures in her early attack on Hare. It is the idea that 'good', like 'small', is an attributive adjective. What that entails is that, although you can evaluate and choose things according to almost any criteria you like, you must select the noun or noun phrase you use to describe the thing you are calling good advisedly, for it determines the criteria of goodness that are appropriate. Hare can call a cactus a good one on the grounds that it is diseased and dying, and choose it for that reason, but what he must not

5. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.
6. Ibid., 39.

> do is describe it as a good cactus, for a cactus is a living thing. He can describe it as a good 'decorative object for my windowsill' or 'present to give my detestable mother-in-law', but not as a good cactus.[7]

The point here is that 'goodness' is not a sui-generis, non-natural property projected by human beings out onto the world; rather, 'good' and 'defective' pick out natural properties of living things. The goodness of a cactus is relative to its cactus nature; the goodness of human beings is relative to their human nature. And that human nature is to be or have the potential to become practical, rational animals. Hursthouse continues:

> When we moved from the evaluations of other social animals to ethical evaluations of ourselves, there was an obvious addition to the list of aspects which are evaluated. The other animals act. So do we occasionally, but mostly we act from reason, as they do not, and it is primarily in virtue of our actions from reason that we are ethically good or bad human beings. So that is one difference that our being rational makes.[8]

A major objection that may arise to this equation of "rationality" with "human nature" is the response that rationality (in us) is just too different from any other kind of value or evauluability in animals and plants. Animals are not rational and so seem to belong to the realm of bald nature, pure descriptivity; humans are potentially rational and so they seem not to belong to the realm of bald nature, but live in the space of reasons. Culture, language, science, rationality, philosophy are all in the space of reasons. Hursthouse summarizes this worry as follows:

> This is a major part of the genuinely transforming effect the fact of our rationality has on the basic naturalistic structure. But has it transformed the structure beyond recognition? I said that ethical naturalism looks to be doomed to failure if it depends on identifying what is characteristic of human beings as a species, in the way their pleasures and pains and ways of going on are characteristic of the other species. By and large we can't identify what is characteristic of human beings as a species in this way—there is too much variety. boy are you I'm curling like she's very eat meatAnd even if we could, it looks as though we would not allow anything we identified to carry any normative weight if we thought it was something we could change. So is ethical naturalism, after all, a non-starter?[9]

7. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 195.
8. Ibid., 217.
9. Ibid., 222.

McDowell is the major proponent of this worry.

McDowell

McDowell, recall, thinks that values are secondary qualities of the world but not primary. This belief is consistent with his solution to the mind-body problem that even primary qualities are not given to us in experience without the involvement of spontaneous conceptual capacities. He assumes that nature – primary nature – is bald nature, disenchanted from values, teloi, and other esoterica. Yet to posit humanity, especially human rationality, as merely mechanical would be to tonight our rationality. So he posits the space of reasons. Humanity exists in a space of reasons where we recognize reasons for belief and reasons for action. We are initiated into a Space of reasons by education, formation, cultivation (or *Bildung*).[10]

McDowell here invokes Aristotle's notion of ethics, by which he hopes to rethink our conception of human nature and nature as a whole. He says, "the rethinking requires a different conception of actualizations of our nature."[11] Second nature is that space in which human beings are initiated into particular ways of behaving and knowing.

> On this view of the virtues and vices everything is seen to depend on what human nature is like, and the traditional catalogue of the two kinds of dispositions is not hard to understand. Nevertheless it may be defective, and anyone who accepts the thesis that I am putting forward will feel free to ask himself where the temptations and deficiencies that need correcting are really to be found. It is possible, for example, that the theory of human nature lying behind the traditional list of the virtues and vices puts too much emphasis on hedonistic and sensual impulses, and does not sufficiently take account of less straightforward inclinations such as the desire to be put upon and dissatisfied, or the unwillingness to accept good things as they come along.

10. Bildung=formation, education; bild=form, image.
11. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 77.