

Why be a good Human Being? Natural Goodness, Reason, and the Authority of Human Nature

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Abstract The central claim of Aristotelian naturalism is that moral goodness is a kind of species-specific natural goodness. Aristotelian naturalism has recently enjoyed a resurgence in the work of philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Michael Thompson. However, any view that takes moral goodness to be a type of natural goodness faces a challenge: Granting that moral goodness is natural goodness for human beings, why should we care about being good human beings? Given that we are rational creatures who can ‘step back’ from our nature, why should we see human nature as authoritative for us? This is the *authority-of-nature challenge*. In this essay, I state this challenge clearly, identify its deep motivation, and distinguish it from other criticisms of Aristotelian naturalism. I also articulate what I consider the best response, which I term the *practical reason response*. This response, however, exposes Aristotelian naturalism to a new criticism – that it has abandoned the naturalist claim that moral goodness is species-specific natural goodness. Thus, I argue, Aristotelian naturalists appear to face a dilemma: Either they cannot answer the authority-of-nature challenge, or in meeting the challenge they must abandon naturalism. Aristotelian naturalists might overcome this dilemma, but doing so is harder than some Aristotelians have supposed. In the final sections of the paper, I examine the difficulties in overcoming the dilemma, and I suggest ways that Aristotelians might answer the authority-of-nature challenge while preserving naturalism.

Keywords Aristotelianism · Natural goodness · Practical reason · Human nature · Foot · Hursthouse

Natural Goodness and the Authority of Human Nature

The central claim of Aristotelian naturalism is that moral goodness is a kind of species-specific natural goodness.¹ As Philippa Foot says in *Natural Goodness*:

I believe that evaluations of human will and action share a conceptual structure with evaluations of characteristics and operations of other living things, and can

¹I sometimes refer to Aristotelian naturalism simply as ‘naturalism’ or ‘Aristotelianism,’ and sometimes as ‘the natural goodness view.’ In this essay, these terms all describe the same position.

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only be understood in these terms. I want to show moral evil as ‘a kind of natural defect’. *Life* will be at the centre of my discussion, and the fact that a human action or disposition is good of its kind will be taken to be simply a fact about a given feature of a certain kind of living thing.²

I regard the works of Philippa Foot (2001) and Michael Thompson (2008) as paradigm examples of Aristotelian naturalism. Versions of the natural goodness view can also be found in the writings of John Haldane, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others.³ In the Thompson-Foot presentation of the view, naturalism begins with a point about the representation of living things. From hyacinths to hedgehogs to human beings, we understand individual organisms *as living* by viewing them in light of the life-form that they bear. The representation of the life-form articulates the species-specific *good* of such organisms, and serves as a criteria for evaluations of natural goodness in the parts and operations of individual members of the species.⁴ In the case of humans, our form is distinguished by a faculty of practical reason, or the rational will. Judgments of moral goodness and badness speak to excellence and defect in the human will—in the action and character of human beings *as such*. The moral virtues are those dispositions of the will that are required for a person to live and act well *qua* human being. Thus moral virtues (whatever those turn out to be) are a type of *natural goodness* in humans, and vices a type of *natural defect*.

One attraction of Aristotelian naturalism is that it promises to capture the thought that moral goodness is human goodness—that the virtues make one good *qua* human being—while also capturing our continuity with the rest of the biological world.⁵ Moreover, it attempts to capture this continuity without explaining away moral judgments or reducing them to their survival value. However, any view that takes moral goodness to be a type of natural goodness faces a challenge: Given that we are rational creatures who can ‘step back’ from our nature, why should we see human nature as authoritative for us? *Granting that moral goodness is natural goodness for human beings, why should we care about being good human beings?*

I understand this question to ask how, *given* a natural goodness view, morality could have rational authority. For if moral goodness is goodness as fixed by our nature, then morality’s requirements seem to be normative only if our nature has authority over us. Unless we have reason to be *good human beings*, the norms that make us good human beings will have no claim on us. I refer to this as the **authority-of-nature challenge**. The core idea behind this challenge is that rationality opens up a gap between whatever is naturally good, or normal, for humans as a species of living things, and whatever is normative for us, in the sense of having a claim upon our reason. Call this the **normal-normative gap**.

Multiple authors have raised worries in this area, but there remains a need to state the authority-of-nature challenge clearly, to identify its deep motivation, and to distinguish it from other criticisms of Aristotelian naturalism. I do this in the next section. In section three, I apply the challenge to Philippa Foot, and I argue that she fails to provide

² Foot (2001) p. 5.

³ Haldane (2009), especially chapter one; Hursthouse (1999); MacIntyre (1999).

⁴ I use the terms ‘life-form’ and ‘species’ interchangeably.

⁵ On the appeal of capturing our continuity with other creatures, see Annas (2005) pp. 11–13.

an adequate response. In section four, I articulate what I take to be the best response to the challenge, which I term the **practical reason response**. This response argues that the normal-normative gap is illusory, and therefore the authority-of-nature challenge rests on a confusion. However, the practical reason response opens up Aristotelian naturalism to a new criticism – that it has abandoned the core naturalist claim that moral goodness is kind of species-specific natural goodness. Thus, I argue, Aristotelian naturalists seem to face a dilemma: Either they cannot answer the authority-of-nature challenge, or in meeting the challenge they must abandon naturalism. Aristotelian naturalism might overcome this dilemma, but doing so is harder than some Aristotelians have supposed. To illustrate this difficulty, I consider the work of Rosalind Hursthouse. In the conclusion, I note ways that Aristotelians might answer the authority-of-nature challenge while preserving naturalism.

Articulating the Authority-of-Nature Challenge

Aristotelian Naturalism: Human Form and Moral Goodness

At the heart of Aristotelian naturalism is a notion of human nature that we may refer to as *human form*, to emphasize that it belongs to a larger class of life-form concepts. The importance of life-form concepts has been powerfully demonstrated by Michael Thompson (2008). Thompson's basic argument can be summarized as follows: In order to see something as living, we must construe certain things as vital processes of the organism—as eating, breathing, reproducing, etc. To be alive *just is* to be the subject of some such vital processes, and therefore representing something as living requires representing some things *as* vital processes. However, there is nothing within an individual, considered in isolation from a conception of its life-form, that will determine the proper description of what is happening at the level of a vital process. Vastly *different* physical-chemical happenings can amount to the *same* life process across different life-forms—e.g. 'hunting' or 'reproducing' can be instantiated in different physical-chemical happenings in individuals of different species. And the same physical-chemical happening can amount to *different* vital-processes in different life-forms.⁶ Considered in isolation from an understanding of the life-form in which these processes are occurring, there is nothing to fix the vital-description one way or another, nothing to determine that *this* physical-chemical happening *counts as* 'hunting', 'reproducing', etc. Thus to grasp what is going on here and now with an organism, and to even see it *as* living, we must interpret an individual organism through some conception its life-form.⁷

A conception of a life-form can be articulated in a system of 'Aristotelian categoricals,' which express the characteristic features and activities of the life-form – e.g. 'the great white egret has two wings', 'tiger moths produce clicks to jam the echolocation systems of predator bats.' Aristotelian categoricals express the *function* of different parts and activities in the life of the species: 'they articulate the relations of dependence

⁶ A striking example of this is that mitosis is a process of reproduction in single-cell organisms, but self-maintenance in human beings. See Thompson (2008), p. 55.

⁷ For a much more in depth treatment of these issues, see part I of Thompson (2008).

among the various elements and aspects and phases of a given kind of life.’⁸ An organized system of such statements spells out the natural history of a life-form; it gives ‘one’s *interpretation* or *understanding* of the life-form shared by the members of that class.’⁹

Natural-historical judgments contain a generality that is neither universal nor statistical. From the fact that ‘the great white egret has two wings’ it does not follow that a particular egret has two wings, or even that *any* egret now living does (a disease may be ravaging the egrets). Rather the life-form serves as a criterion for goodness and badness in the parts and activities of individual members of the species. What Foot calls ‘natural goodness and defect’ arises from a comparison between a) the representation of a life-form, and b) the representation of an individual bearer of the form. Given that ‘the great white egret has two wings’ and ‘this egret has no wings’ it follows that this egret is defective – it is *missing* two wings.

This joining of two kinds of judgments—one about the life-form, the other about individual bearers of the form—is the core schema for evaluations of natural goodness and defect. In this schema, understanding and evaluation are two sides of the same coin. We grasp what an organism has or does by bringing it under a life-form concept, and the life-form also provides the criterion for evaluating the organism’s parts and activities. Since the life-form is the criterion for evaluation, natural goodness judgments must be indexed to a particular life-form—good eyes *in* a mole, good breathing *qua* human breathing, etc.

While the life-form serves as the standard for evaluating individual bearers of that form, the schema of natural normativity does not pronounce on the goodness of the life-form itself. Judgments of natural normativity do not require any further thought that *it is good that* these creatures live as they do, or indeed that they exist at all.¹⁰

The proposal of Aristotelian naturalism is that the human faculty of practical reason can be evaluated according to the same schema of natural normativity used in evaluating plants and animals.¹¹ Practical reason is to be treated as a natural capacity of our species, just as memory, sight, and hearing are natural capacities. Of course, capacities like memory, sight, and hearing are found in a variety of life-forms. And what counts as excellent or defective in memory, sight, and hearing varies from species to species. In each case, the criterion of natural goodness is the individual’s own life-form. Good eyesight in a mole would be bad eyesight in a hawk. But the measure of natural goodness in the eyesight of Manny the Mole is mole-form, and we do not look to hawk-form when evaluating Manny’s eyes. In the same way, Aristotelian naturalism holds that practical reason in individual human beings is to be evaluated by the standard of ‘the human.’ And the naturalist thesis is that moral goodness is a form of species-specific natural goodness in the rational will of humans, and vice a natural defect in this faculty.

Aristotelian naturalists have stressed that they do not take ‘human being’ merely as another way of talking about ‘persons’ or ‘rational agents’, or some other category of beings. On the contrary, as Thompson (2008) says, ‘One mark of Aristotelianism is the

⁸ Thompson (2008), p. 78.

⁹ Thompson (2008), p. 73.

¹⁰ See Foot (2001), pp. 48–49.

¹¹ As John Hacker-Wright (2013) says: ‘Neo-Aristotelian naturalism should be understood as a thesis about rationality, according to which practical rationality is species-relative.’ p. 85.

special position it gives to the concept *human* in practical philosophy, in particular the preference it gives to this concept over the abstract concepts *person* and *rational being*.¹² Aristotelianism thus contrasts with the Kantian position, in which the ultimate explanation of moral goodness is a standard that applies to individuals *qua* finite rational beings. For the Kantian, we are subject to the moral law not *qua* human beings but *qua* final rational beings. The Kantian can grant that if human beings had very different capacities for memory, sight, hearing, etc., then satisfying the moral law would require different actions from those now required of us. Thus Kantians need not deny that ‘the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of specifically human life.’¹³ However, the ultimate ground of the choiceworthiness of morally good action is the same across all finite rational beings. On the Kantian picture, differences between human and Martian morality could only be differences in the *application* of a norm that belongs to finite rational beings as such. As Kant says:

[A] law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command ‘thou shalt not lie’ does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in conceptions of pure reason.¹⁴

For the Aristotelian, the specifically human life-form stands in the position that is occupied by ‘rational being’ on the Kantian picture. And ‘the concept *human* as our naturalist employs it is a concept that attaches to a definite product of nature, one which has arisen on this planet, quite contingently, in the course of evolutionary history.’¹⁵ In proposing that we treat practical reason as a capacity like sight or hearing, the naturalist is proposing that ‘we evaluate ourselves as a natural kind, a species which is part of the natural biological order of things, not as creatures with an immortal soul or ‘beings’ who are persons or rational agents.’¹⁶

The Challenge: Reason, Morality, and ‘Stepping Back’

Practical reason, however, appears to raise problems for Aristotelian naturalism that do not arise with faculties like sight, hearing, or memory. For practical reason enables us to ‘step back’ from our impulses and desires. Rather than being straightaway determined to act by our inclinations, each person can ask if she *should* act on those inclinations. More generally, we can ask whether any way of acting is a good one. We seek rational *grounds* for acting one way or another, and we act on our recognition of those grounds. So far, these are points that Aristotelian naturalists accept, and even emphasize.¹⁷ But we can push further. Reason enables us to reflect upon more than particular inclinations

¹² Thompson (2008), p. 7. Italics in original.

¹³ Foot (2001), p. 14.

¹⁴ Kant (1996) 4:389.

¹⁵ Thompson (2004), pp. 74.

¹⁶ Hursthouse (1999), p. 226.

¹⁷ See Foot (2001) chapters four and five; Hursthouse (1999) chapter six.

or desires. It enables us to ‘step back’ and to view our *entire life-form* ‘from without,’ and thus to call into question the authority of human form itself. We can ask whether we *should* act and live in the way that is naturally good for our life-form. As John McDowell (1998) says: ‘Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question.’¹⁸

McDowell (1998) uses this point about stepping-back to argue that virtue’s claim on reason cannot be grounded in the necessity of virtue for attaining human flourishing, where ‘flourishing’ is conceived independently of the virtues. What I am calling the authority-of-nature challenge begins with a similar point about ‘stepping back,’ but it employs this point in a different way. McDowell imagines a rational wolf who is a free-rider and a skeptic about his reasons to do his part in the hunt. McDowell’s point, as I understand it, is that if such an individual asks why he should do his part—or, more generally, why be moral—then it is inadequate to respond that wolves need to cooperate, or in general need the virtues. For even if that is true of ‘the wolf,’ *this* individual might be able to get his needs met through free-riding rather than through virtue (where ‘need’ is defined in terms of flourishing conceived independently of virtuous activity itself). And the same thing can be said for human beings.

McDowell’s argument, however, does not touch the kind of naturalism that Foot develops in *Natural Goodness*. For in her later work Foot does not attempt to address moral skepticism with the sort of strategy that McDowell attacks. Foot argues instead for the view that moral considerations are ‘on equal footing’ with considerations of desire and self-interest, each of which are sources of practical reasons (2001, 2004). She thus rejects a conception of practical rationality she had earlier accepted, according to which moral considerations can provide reasons only through some connection with the agent’s desires or self-interest.

However, while this move might avoid McDowell’s criticism, it does not address the authority-of-nature challenge. On the contrary, the challenge *accepts* that moral considerations provide reasons for acting to all people, and even that moral reasons are ‘basic’ within practical rationality, as Foot came to argue. The challenge is precisely that Aristotelian naturalism cannot account for this fact.¹⁹ We can formulate the challenge this way: Our rationality enables us to step back and ask whether we *should* live in the way that is ‘naturally good’ for us. And this question can only be properly answered with a *reason*—i.e., with a point about why it is good to live one way or another. An answer that appeals simply to our ‘nature’ is of the wrong sort, since it just re-asserts that this *is* the way things are with us, rather than giving an answer to the question of *why* we should embrace this way or depart from it when attempting to live and act well. As an answer to the question of how we should live, an appeal to our ‘nature’ will be relevant only if it is supported by the additional thought that our nature is *good*, or *it is good that* things stand this way with our nature. For only then could human form have rational authority for us. But as we have seen, the thought that *it is*

¹⁸ McDowell (1998), 172.

¹⁹ The authority-of-nature challenge differs from the claim that it is naïvely optimistic, and contrary to empirical research, to suppose that virtues like justice and benevolence are naturally good and vices like injustice and selfishness are naturally defective. For that sort of criticism, which concerns the *substantive* account of the virtues that follows from the naturalist framework, see Andreou (2006) and Woodcock (2006). For a reply to Andreou and Woodcock, see Lott (2012a).

good that things stand a certain way with a species is not part of the schema of natural normativity as found in plant or animals. Thus the thesis that moral goodness is natural goodness leaves us unable to account for the rational authority of morality.²⁰

Perhaps, however, naturalists can embrace the idea that *it is good that* this is how things stand with human form. But is there any good reason to suppose this, apart from religious beliefs or extravagant metaphysical commitments that naturalists eschew? Aristotelian naturalists insist that the Aristotelian notion of ‘function’ is distinct from the concept of ‘function’ as understood in evolutionary theory.²¹ However, even if we grant that natural-historical judgments are necessary for thinking about living things, and that life-form concepts cannot be replaced by evolutionary concepts, we can still insist that our account of human form must be *consistent* with evolutionary biology.²² And the evolutionary picture seems to provide little basis for thinking *it is good that* things stand this way with our nature. As Allen Buchanan (2011) says:

Anyone who knows a bit about evolutionary biology and admits that our thinking about ‘the natural’ should at the very least be consistent with evolutionary science will have serious reservations about the assumption that normal functioning is sacrosanct. Normal functioning, from the standpoint of evolutionary biology, is simply functioning that is typical of the organism as it happens to be now, as a result of highly contingent path its species has traversed so far. It is not optimal functioning, and need not be harmonious functioning, good functioning or even satisfactory functioning—*from the standpoint of what we rightly value.*²³

I believe that the authority-of-nature challenge gets its appeal partly from a comparison with other life-forms, and the tempting thought that *if* those life-forms could ‘step back’ from their life-cycle, then it could make sense for them to live differently. Consider the case of elephant seals, whose mating practices involve violent dominance hierarchies among the males.²⁴ These seals fight to gain exclusive control of the harem, sometimes to the point of significant injury, and female seals typically refuse to mate with any other than the dominant male. The emergence of such behavior has an evolutionary explanation, but if we imagine the seals transformed into rational creatures, then it seems they could ask *why* they should fight for mates this way. Further, it

²⁰ The authority-of-nature challenge might be thought of as similar Christine Korsgaard’s (1996) claim that ‘substantive realism’ is unable to answer ‘the normative question.’ The normative question is about whether and why the demands of morality have rational force. The problem with substantive realism, according to Korsgaard, is not that it denies the rationality of morality, but that it simply insists upon it, without giving an adequate explanation of how it could be so, and we see the inadequacy of substantive realism by posing the normative question. See Korsgaard (1996), especially lecture one. Likewise, the authority-of-nature challenge claims that Aristotelian naturalism cannot explain the rationality of morality, and that we can see this by asking why we should care about being good human beings.

²¹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 32.

²² The authority-of-nature challenge should be distinguished from the claim that Aristotelian natural normativity—even in the case of plants and non-rational animals—relies on a notion of *function* that is undermined by evolutionary biology. For that sort of criticism, see Fitzpatrick (2000). For a reply to Fitzpatrick, see Lott (2012b).

As part of my reply to the authority-of-nature challenge, I will say why naturalists should insist that this tempting thought rests on a confusion. See section 4.1. below.

²³ Buchanan (2011), pp. 3–4. Italics in original.

²⁴ I owe this example to Fitzpatrick (2000), although Fitzpatrick uses the example for a different point.

seems reasonable for them to adopt a new, less-violent arrangement for finding mates, on the grounds that it would achieve the same purpose (=reproduction) with less suffering. And it seems unreasonable for the rational seals to persist with dominance hierarchies, simply because the hierarchies are naturally good in elephant seals. While actual seals lack the rational capacities necessary to question their nature, we *can* view our form ‘from without’ and ask whether it has a claim upon us. And (the challenge goes) to persist in a way of living simply because it is ‘normal’ for our life-form amounts to making an unworthy idol out of human nature—unless, perhaps, we judge (implausibly) that *it is good that* things stand this way with our form.

It is important to see that the authority-of-nature challenge, as I intend it, is not directed at ‘human nature’ in the sense of what is statistically common, as when we say that selfishness or irrational prejudice are ‘part of human nature.’ The Aristotelian naturalist does not hold that because a tendency or attitude is widespread, it is therefore part of human form. What is ‘natural’ for a species in a statistical sense might be ‘unnatural’ in the sense of interrupting the characteristic life-cycle as spelled out in the natural-history—e.g. out of thousands of mayflies born, only a few live the naturally good life of ‘the mayfly.’²⁵ The authority-of-nature challenge does not overlook this point. The challenge is not directed at the rational authority of merely widespread tendencies, but of natural human goodness—i.e. the *naturalist* understanding of flourishing as the realization of human form.²⁶

The Challenge Applied to Foot

In chapter four of *Natural Goodness*, after setting out the basics of her view, Foot acknowledges that a skeptic will ask: “But what if I do not care about being a good human being?”²⁷ This question, Foot says, raises the issue of how Aristotelian naturalism can account for ‘the rationality of doing what virtue demands’—of why a person must, rationally, ‘do that which the good person must do.’²⁸

Foot considers two ways to interpret this skeptical challenge. First, it may be a challenge to a substantive account of the virtues—i.e. why do I have reason to do what *you* say is ‘morally good’? This question, according to Foot, makes sense, but it is not really a challenge to the formal framework of Aristotelian naturalism or the authority of morality *as such*. Rather, it is simply an invitation to debate substantive questions about what human goodness actually consists in—e.g. ‘You say we have reason to be humble, but is humility as *you* construe it a genuine virtue? Does human good really hang on acting *that way*?’

Alternatively, the challenge may be understood as granting that X-ing would be morally good, but still asking what *reason* there is to X. In this case, the questioner assumes that if she has reason to act on a moral consideration, this must be because it has some connection to her desires or self-interest. And Foot rejects this assumption. Rather, following Warren Quinn, she holds that: a) moral judgments are claims about

²⁵ See Thompson (2008), chapter four.

²⁶ The concept of human nature Buchanan has in mind is not human form, but his skepticism about the normativity of the natural can be adapted to apply to human form, as I have done here.

²⁷ Foot (2001), p. 53.

²⁸ Foot (2001), p.52 and p. 64.

practical reasons, and b) moral reasons are basic within practical rationality. There is, then, no special problem about the rationality of acting for reasons of virtue. In its second form, the skeptical challenge is misguided, and based on the wrong account of practical rationality. There is a ‘conceptual connection between acting well and acting rationally,’ and the skeptic who acknowledges that X-ing is required for acting well but keeps asking why he should X is confused. As Foot says, ‘To ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must a priori have come to an end.’²⁹

However, there is a third way to interpret the skeptical question, as posing the authority-of-nature challenge. Imagine a person saying: ‘I do not challenge the idea that moral considerations have rational force, or even that they are basic within practical rationality, but how is the *naturalist* entitled to that claim? Given your view that moral goodness is natural goodness, you can hold that morality has rational authority only if we have reason to do what our form dictates for us. But why think that human form is authoritative in that way?’³⁰

Nothing in Foot’s discussion addresses this interpretation of the question about why we should care about being good human beings. We can accept natural normativity in living beings, and that we too are living beings, but that is not enough to deal with the challenge. For the issue is the rational significance that natural norms should have for us. Likewise, the challenge is not met by adopting a conception of practical rationality in which moral reasons are basic. For the worry is precisely how Aristotelian naturalism can help itself to such a conception.³¹

In *Natural Goodness*, Foot labors to demonstrate that Aristotelian naturalism can meet ‘Hume’s practicality requirement,’ which is the requirement that moral judgments have a tight, non-accidental connection to acting—that they serve ‘to produce and prevent action.’ In order to meet Hume’s practicality requirement, Foot makes two moves. First, she insists that beliefs about practical reasons can explain action without further appeal to a prior desire or ‘conative state.’ Second, she argues that moral judgments embody claims about practical reasons. It is thus no surprise that morality has a tight, non-accidental connection to action: morality ‘serves to produce and prevent action, *because the understanding of reasons can do that.*’³²

Whether or not Foot’s moves are sufficient for meeting Hume’s practicality requirement, the challenge I am posing might be thought of as *Kant’s practicality requirement*. A main concern of Kant’s moral philosophy is to show that reason itself can be practical—i.e. that reason *can set its own end* and be practical *of itself*, and is not limited to instrumental reasoning that is practical only in service of an end that is given to reason from ‘without’ by (empirical) desire. We can put Kant’s thought this way: If

²⁹ Foot (2001) 65.

³⁰ Copp and Sobel (2004) have also pointed out that the question can be heard in a non-skeptical way: ‘But one could ask Watson’s question not only as an immoralist might, but as someone who wonders why our moral obligations stem especially from our species membership. Why should the constituents of natural goodness for members of my species (or ‘life-form’) determine what counts as morally good for me?’ Copp and Sobel’s question is close to what I call the authority-of-nature challenge, but they do not develop the challenge in the way that I do here. I hope to articulate the deep worry behind their question.

³¹ Finlay (2007) makes a similar complaint: ‘Foot thus suggests that the ‘ought’ in the skeptic’s query is meaningless. However, it seems coherent, and sometimes even important, to question whether I have sufficient reason to perform my natural human functions well.’ Like Copp and Sobel, Finlay seems to have in mind something close to the authority-of-nature challenge.

³² Foot (2001), p. 18.

there is to be a moral law that holds necessarily for rational beings, then reason itself must be practical, for if reason is limited to an instrumental role, then the demands of reason will vary according to individual desires and needs, and thus the ‘law’ cannot bind with unconditional practical necessity.³³ The deep concern behind ‘Kant’s practical requirement’ is not merely that rational judgments can explain action, but that reason *determines* what counts as acting well. The point is the *authority* of practical reason—that practical reason is not merely a useful tool, subservient to ends that are dictated to it from a source ‘outside’ itself.

In the same spirit, the authority-of-nature challenge complains that if moral judgments embody the requirements of our human nature, then the authority of morality is derived from something *given* to reason from ‘outside’—i.e. from our human nature. Thus it is not *reason* that is ultimately determining what counts as acting well, but our human nature. And why, the challenge asks, should we suppose that our nature, a product of evolution, should have rational authority over us, once we ask for *reasons* about how to live and act?

Responding to the Authority-of-Nature Challenge

Rational and Natural: Rejecting the Normal-Normative Gap

In this section, I will spell out what I take to be the most promising reply to the authority-of-nature challenge: the practical reason response. The challenge depends on an apparent gap between what naturally good for us *qua* human beings (=the normal) and what has a claim upon our reason (=the *normative*). The response rejects this normal-normative gap as illusory.

The Practical Reason Response: The appearance of a normal-normative gap depends on the thought that we can first specify some substantive conception of ‘the human’—some account of naturally good human functioning—and then step back from that conception. In the metaphor of stepping back, what we step back *from* is human nature—or, more precisely, some conception of human nature. What we step back *to* is a position of rational reflection. And the claim of the authority-of-nature challenge is that once we step back to this position, what is naturally good confronts us a fact to be evaluated, not as an authoritative voice to which our reason must submit, or a criterion for reasoning and acting well. However, this picture of stepping back covertly employs a notion of human nature that is not the sense of *human form* relevant to the Aristotelian claim that moral goodness is natural goodness. And if we keep the proper sense of human form in view, we can see that while any substantive conception of human form might be *wrong*, it will never be normatively inert as the authority-of-nature challenge supposes. Rather it must embody a *normatively significant* understanding of human life and action. For any conception of human form is a natural-historical account of ‘how the human lives.’ As with ‘the tiger’ or ‘the mayfly,’ a natural-history of ‘the human’ provides an interpretation of the characteristic and non-defective life-cycle of the species. And as both Aristotelians and their critics emphasize, humans possess a faculty

³³ For various formulations of this complex point (some of which go beyond what I have said here) see, e.g. *Groundwork* 4:389, 4:408, 4:442. *Critique of Practical Reason* 5:19–5:20.

of practical reason. Thus what is naturally good in humans is a life in which practical reason is functioning properly—i.e. a life that is *practically rational*, in the positive evaluative sense. Therefore any substantive account of human form—any conception we might step back *from*—will already *embody* some understanding of how we have reason to act and to live. A conception that does not include any normative claims about how humans should act cannot be an adequate conception of *our* form. With a conception of human form, *there can be no gap between what is normal and normative*.

In saying this, we have not yet said anything substantive about what such a life includes or which traits are human virtues. We have only drawn out an implication of applying the schema of natural normativity to human beings, understood as a species of practically rational animals. The authority-of-nature challenge is motivated by the role of reason in the life of human beings, and the distance that reason creates between humans and non-rational animals. The practical reason response says, in effect, that the challenge does not go *far enough* in appreciating the significance of reason for human beings.

To make the practical reason response more concrete, consider the following example:

At University X, the school authorities organize room and board for the students. However, the university's policies systematically discriminate against students from certain ethnic groups, giving them worse food and housing, and denying them access to prestigious courses of study. After exhausting other options, the students hold a hunger strike, with the more privileged students joining in solidarity with the disadvantaged students. In the process, many students experience pain and become sick.

Now, failing to eat to the point of pain and sickness would seem to be a clear case of natural badness. The digestive systems of the striking students are not getting what they need to function properly *qua* digestive systems of 'the human.' But let us suppose, as is plausible, that the students are *acting well* in refusing to eat on grounds of justice and solidarity. The critic of Aristotelianism can thus say, 'Doesn't this show that natural goodness is neither the same as moral goodness nor rationally authoritative? The students judged correctly that they were required, both morally and rationally, to depart from natural human goodness.'

The Aristotelian can grant that there is something naturally defective in the digestion of the sick students. Bringing together a) an understanding of the digestive system of 'the human' with b) judgments about the digestive system of *these* humans, we see that things are not functioning properly. Happily for the Aristotelian, however, that in no way implies that the *rational wills* of the students are defective. On the contrary, if we consider eating not as a 'merely biological' process, but as an act of the rational will, then we must evaluate acts of eating in terms of the *reasons* on which a person acts. Regarded as an act of the will an action counts as *good eating* only if the agent is properly responsive to reasons. And when we evaluate an act as morally good or bad, we are viewing it as an act of rational willing, not as a merely biological phenomenon in isolation from reason's influence. And because practical reason belongs to human form, an act of human eating—*qua* act of the will—will be *naturally good* only if

manifests proper responsiveness to reasons. Thus, insofar as the striking students act for good reasons in refusing to eat in these circumstances, they act in a way that is not only morally good but naturally good as well.

The example of the hunger strike illustrates the core of the practical reason response to the authority-of-nature challenge: Because we are practically rational animals, we cannot begin to say how ‘the human’ eats, copulates, relaxes, etc. without at the same time saying how we do these things in a way that is properly responsive to reasons. Thus by saying how ‘the human’ eats, copulates, relaxes, etc. we are already taking a stand on the sorts of reasons that we *ought* to recognize. Of course we may always ‘step back’ from a *particular* conception of human form, in the sense that we can ask whether the conception gives the correct interpretation of how human beings should act and live. But that should not be confused with stepping back from a normatively inert human nature as the authority-of-nature challenge conceives it.

We can now identify the mistake in the thought experiment about rational seals. For the example supposes, on the one hand, that we are dealing with a *new, rational* life-form. It also treats the dominance hierarchies of *actual, non-rational* elephant seals as belonging to ‘the rational seal’ – only the rational seals are now said to step back from their nature. However, if we are imagining a new, rational form of life, then we cannot suppose that the dominance hierarchies of actual, non-rational elephant seals belong to the life-form of this rational seal. For if practical rationality is indeed a characteristic capacity of the rational seals, then activities belonging to *their* form will be those according to reason (whatever practical rationality turns out to be for rational seals). But the dominance hierarchies of actual, non-rational seals are *ipso facto* not according to reason, so *those* dominance hierarchies are not part of the life of a rational seal, in the sense relevant to natural goodness in rational seals.

Abandoning Naturalism? A Dilemma for Aristotelians

I believe that the practical reason response, or something similar, is the strongest reply to the authority-of-nature challenge. It is possible to interpret Foot along these lines, although she does not develop the point explicitly.³⁴ However, the practical reason response exposes Aristotelianism to a new criticism—that it is no longer *naturalist* as it intends to be.

The problem is that the practical reason response seems to treat ‘the human’ as a stand-in for *rational beings*, rather than as a particular natural species. According to the practical reason response, what belongs to human form is acting rationally, or being ‘properly responsive to reasons.’ This is what shows the normal-normative gap to be illusory. However, it now seems that talk about ‘human form’ is merely a loose way of talking about ourselves as *reason-responsive beings*, or rational agents. Thus the response undermines the naturalist’s claim to be evaluating humans ‘as a natural kind, a species which is part of the natural biological order of things, not as creatures with an immortal soul or ‘beings’ who are persons or rational agents.’³⁵

The concern here is distinct from the question: How are we to arrive at the correct interpretation of human form? To that question, Aristotelians can answer that in order to

³⁴ See Hacker-Wright (2009).

³⁵ Hursthouse (1999), p. 226.

give an account of ‘the human’ we must rely on our all things considered judgments about how we have reason to act and to live. As Thompson (2004) says, ‘Of course we have no way of judging what practical thoughts and what range of upbringings might be characteristic of the human, and sound in a human, except through application of our fundamental practical judgments—judgments about what makes sense and what might count as a reason and so forth.’³⁶ But even if we accept this answer, another question remains: Why suppose that what we are judging is distinctly *human* soundness, rather than soundness for rational beings? The naturalist’s proposal is that the rational will of human beings should be regarded as a capacity of our species, and hence individual instances of willing can be evaluated according to the schema of natural normativity. But (the criticism contends) our fundamental practical judgments might just as well be tracking what is characteristic of some more abstract class of beings, such as rational agents—even if what is characteristic of rational agency is then applied, at a second stage, to our specifically human circumstances. Thus the Kantian might agree that we can only know what is true of *creatures like ourselves* through the application of our fundamental practical judgments but insist that the ‘creatures’ in question are, fundamentally, finite rational beings.

We can now see the authority-of-nature challenge as raising a dilemma for Aristotelian naturalists. Either Aristotelians can treat moral goodness as natural goodness, and just *assume* that we have reason to care about being good *qua* human beings, in which case they preserve naturalism but make an objectionable assumption about the authority of human nature. Or they can insist that what belongs to human form are ways of living that are practically rational, in which case they avoid the objectionable assumption, but they lose support for the naturalist thesis that in ethics we are evaluating ourselves *qua* human beings. With the second-horn of the dilemma, the point is not that naturalism has been refuted, but that it has simply left the stage. Given the emphasis on reason-responsiveness, the naturalist owes us an account of why moral goodness and practical rationality should be seen as forms of species-specific natural goodness.

The Dilemma in Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics*

I believe that this dilemma merits serious consideration by Aristotelian naturalists. I have attempted to shed light on the sources of the dilemma, and I will now highlight the difficulty in addressing the dilemma, as illustrated in the work of Rosalind Hursthouse.

In developing her version of Aristotelian naturalism, Hursthouse (1999) recognizes the worry that drives the authority-of-nature challenge. Hursthouse identifies two problems that reason creates for applying the natural goodness schema to human beings: ‘By and large we can’t identify what is characteristic of human beings as a species in this way—there is too much variety. And 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.’³⁷ While the problem of variety is outside the focus of this paper, the second problem is a version of the normal-normative gap.

³⁶ Thompson (2004), p. 73.

³⁷ Hursthouse (1999), p. 222.

Surprisingly, Hursthouse seems to *embrace* the gap: ‘Nature determines how [other animals] should be, but the idea that nature could be normative with respect to us, that it could determine how we should be, is one we will no longer accept.’³⁸ Hursthouse insists, however, that naturalism can be preserved for humans, because there *is* a characteristic human way of living after all—a *rational* way. As she says, ‘Our way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do.’³⁹ Now, it seems that Hursthouse intends the idea of ‘a rational way’ to solve not only the worry about variety, but the normal-normative gap as well. And her position can be interpreted as a version of the practical reason response: Since our characteristic way is a rational way, what is characteristically good (=normal) must also be practically rational (=normative). Thus the normal-normative gap is illusory, and we cannot develop a substantive conception of our characteristic life without thereby developing a normative conception of human form.

As a version of the practical reason response, Hursthouse’s appeal to ‘a rational way’ invites the criticism that she has abandoned naturalism. If the characteristic human life is simply a rational life, why suppose that we are evaluating ourselves *qua* human beings, instead of as members of some more abstract class, like ‘rational agents’? Hursthouse argues that her position is still a form of ethical naturalism, because ‘it is still the case that human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal, in the way characteristic of the species. And the structure—the appeal to just those four ends—really does constrain, substantially, what I can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings.’⁴⁰ The four ends of a social animal, according to Hursthouse, are: 1) individual survival, 2) continuance of the species, 3) characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain, and 4) the good functioning of the social group. These natural ends hold for humans as much as for elephants, lions, or other social animals, although our way of realizing these ends is ‘a rational way.’ And, Hursthouse argues, no trait could be a virtue for human beings unless it lead us to think, act, and feel in ways that realized these four natural ends.

How does the appeal to the four ends answer the charge of abandoning naturalism? Hursthouse’s idea, as I understand it, is that we cannot think of ourselves simply as rational agents when considering how we ought to live and act, because what *counts* as a rational way for us is constrained by our natural ends *qua* human beings. We act well by acting from virtue, and our specifically human nature constrains what traits are virtues, and thus our nature shapes the content of what we can rightly see as good. Therefore our characteristic rational way of living must be understood as a rational way *for human beings*, not for rational agents or persons or some other abstract class of beings.

The difficulty with Hursthouse’s strategy is that it is not clear how to interpret the kind of ‘constraint’ provided by our natural ends, and on the most obvious interpretation this constraint does not secure a distinctly naturalist position. To begin, notice that at least two of the four ends include an explicitly evaluative component—our *characteristic* enjoyments, and the *good* functioning of the social group. But what is

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

characteristic and good in human beings is simply ‘a rational way.’ So our characteristic enjoyments will be those enjoyments that we have reason to go for, and the good functioning of social groups is functioning that we can rightly see as good. Thus we seem to need some *prior* understanding of what is good and rational to give those natural ends any content. In itself that might not be a problem for Aristotelian naturalism, but it makes it hard to see how fostering those ends can provide a ‘constraint’ on what is rational and good for us. For we cannot say *which* traits further those two ends without *already* having a handle on what is rational and good.

Perhaps, however, we can understand Hursthouse’s main point to be that human nature places *limits* on what is feasible for us, physically and psychologically, and that arguments about the virtues must take these limits into account.⁴¹ For example, humans are prone to form emotional attachments with small groups of people. Such a tendency might be (nearly) impossible to erase, and any proposed virtue must take this into account. However, this sort of constraint on feasibility is insufficient as an argument for naturalism. A theory of ethics that treats us ‘persons’ or ‘rational agents’ can grant that what counts as acting well is shaped by what is possible for us, and that our nature limits what is possible for us. But constraining the activity of practical reason in *this* way—as a matter of feasibility—does not show that practical rationality should be treated as a species-specific form of natural goodness. If human nature merely limits what is possible for us, that is consistent with a Kantian picture in which fundamental norms are independent of anything specifically human, and then *applied* to the human case. Such limits, for example, figure explicitly in the Kantian account endorsed by Ernest Weinrib (2012):

[A]lthough as the occasion for practical reason, agency involves abstraction from particularity, as an activity agency takes place under certain empirical conditions. For human beings, those conditions include the working of one’s will through the physical organism of the body, the sentience of that organism, the presence of various satisfactions that motivate action, the possibility of acting in contravention of the requirements of practical reason, the existence of an external world populated (apparently) both by other agents and by objects that lack free will, and the absence of omniscience concerning the future affects of one’s act...the empirical world that human beings inhabit supplies the circumstances within which practical reason is and ought to be operative for them. *The abstractive aspect of willing provides the normative basis for elaborating the rights of beings so circumstanced. Although the rights do not derive their normative force from the empirical conditions of human agency, they apply to those conditions.*⁴²

Indeed, if human nature shapes the virtues merely by placing *limits* on what is possible for us, we have returned to a picture of human nature as normatively inert material that reason must confront. And this, in fact, is precisely the picture recommended by Julia Annas (2005): ‘My practical rationality is seen as a skill or expertise which gets to work on the circumstances of my life, including of course the rest of my

⁴¹ See the discussion of Hursthouse’s view in Annas (2005): ‘For the Aristotelian, human nature provides a kind of barrier which rational thinking has to respect, since otherwise it will be frustrated.’ p. 17.

⁴² Weinrib (2012) p. 128. Emphasis mine.

human nature, and makes something of it, in the way that a craftsman makes an object from raw materials.⁴³ On this view, human nature is the *occasion* for the work of practical reason, rather than the *criterion* for the proper exercise of that capacity in an individual, as the naturalist proposes. On the schema of Aristotelian naturalism, ‘the human’ is the *standard* for evaluating the practical reason in particular humans, just as ‘the egret’ is a standard for evaluating flying, eating, etc. in particular egrets. If we carry over the Aristotelian structure to the analogy with skill, then human form must stand in the position of *the skill itself* rather than the raw material. For it is the skill of carpentry that is instantiated in individual carpenters and serves as a standard for evaluating their activities *qua* carpenters. In contrast, Annas’s use of the craft analogy effectively abandons the naturalist proposal about the criterion for evaluations of practical reason (as she intends to do). However, there is nothing in the notion of human nature as a mere limit on what is feasible that rules out a view like Annas’s, or even a thoroughly Kantian view of practical reason. And thus on the most obvious interpretation of ‘constraint,’ Hursthouse’s appeal to our four ends is inadequate to answer the worry that by appealing to practical reason we effectively abandon naturalism.

Conclusion

The problem I have raised for the practical reason response does not show that norms of practical rationality cannot be natural norms or that we cannot be evaluating ourselves *qua* human beings in our fundamental practical judgments. Rather Aristotelians simply have not yet provided decisive reasons to think that this is the case and to rule out the Kantian alternative with which they explicitly contrast their own view. So how might Aristotelian naturalists proceed in the face of this challenge?

I believe that Aristotelians should not abandon the practical reason response. It is not an ad hoc maneuver but a development of the core Aristotelian conviction that humans are rational animals. Nor should Aristotelian naturalists follow the path suggested by Annas, which leads out of naturalist territory. Rather Aristotelians must show that in talking about practical reason they have not thereby abandoned a concern with ‘the human’ for some more abstract category such as ‘person’ or ‘rational agent.’

At a general level, doing this will involve two tasks. The first task is showing that an abstract conception of rational agency cannot yield an adequate account of *our* practical rationality. This might be done in various ways, such as arguing that limiting oneself to the abstract category of agency makes it impossible to explain concrete moral requirements, or relies on implausible metaphysical assumptions. (These are, of course, familiar worries about Kantian ethics). The second task is to explain how aspects of human form enter into an account of practical rationality neither as mere *limits* on what is possible for us, physically and psychologically, nor as mere *raw material* on which practical reason operates. To my mind, this is the more difficult task. It requires, I think, challenging the manner in which Kantians such as Weinrib draw the distinction between the faculty of practical reasoning and the empirical conditions in which the faculty is realized. Aristotelians must show how *our* faculty of practical reason is *constituted* by things which Kantians portray as ‘mere circumstances’ in which the faculty operates. Our particular bodily capacities and vulnerabilities, our type of self-

⁴³ Annas (2005), p. 22.

consciousness, our particular linguistic abilities, our type of sociality—all of these things, the Aristotelian must insist, are not mere empirical circumstances for our reason. Rather these aspects of human form shape our faculty of practical reason, and are partly determinative of what *counts as* the property functioning of that faculty. Saying this, of course, is only gesturing at the way forward for Aristotelians, and elaborating these ideas requires much more work.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ For a recent attempt along these lines, consider Hacker-Wright (2013). Hacker-Wright’s argument is complex, and deserves more treatment than I can give here.