

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ATTEMPTS TO BIND MORALITY TO HUMAN NATURE

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The purpose of this paper is to examine recent neo-Aristotelian attempts to tie morality to human nature. I look specifically at the work in this field conducted by Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse. In particular, I articulate their distinct use of the word 'good' (in the attributive sense), and how in making this move they illuminate what we are doing when we make ethical evaluations. I then look at two pieces written by Julia Annas and Bernard Williams which attempt to criticise the neo-Aristotelian project. I ultimately defend the neo-Aristotelian argument that moral activity is on par with self-interested behaviour in any evaluation of practical rationality.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is popular to assume that humans are self-interested animals and that morality is nothing more than a tool to get what we want. According to this view, acting morally is only rational when it enhances an individual's independent self-interest. Neo-Aristotelian philosophers Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse have, however, attempted to dismantle the self-interest based conception of rationality by demonstrating how morality can be conceived of as fundamental to the nature of all human beings. I will examine Foot's development of the concept of 'good', and how she conceives the ethical evaluation of human beings as analogous to the physical evaluations of other animals. I will then articulate Hursthouse's theory of human nature and how she establishes virtuous activity as rational behaviour. Finally I will explore attempts by Julia Annas and Bernard Williams to challenge the neo-Aristotelian assumption that human beings have a specific nature.

2. THE NEO-ARISTOTELIAN PROJECT

2.1 Philippa Foot

A recent move by contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists has begun to shift the ethical landscape by challenging the previously held doctrine that self-interest is the sole motivating force behind action. Philippa Foot, who has led the change in direction, once advocated Hume's theory of action – that actions must be based on self-interest – but has recently changed her mind on the issue, feeling that the, 'self interest theory of rationality, and the theory of rationality as desire fulfilment are mistaken.'¹ Foot now believes that the rationality of telling the truth and helping neighbours is on par with desire fulfilment and self-preservation. Each represents an equally important aspect of practical rationality. The problem with advocating this view is that the demands of morality can occasionally clash with improving one's self interest. Therefore, the principle aim of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism is to demonstrate that moral other-directed behaviour is as much a part of our practical rationality as self-interest. Or, in other words, it must be shown that it is rational to act in accordance with moral demands when it is against our self-interest to do otherwise.

According to Foot, critics of her project argue that moral actions come about through a combination of attitudes, feeling and desire, therefore, people do not act morally because they ought to, but because they have a desire to. Foot, however, believes that this argument rests on a mistaken 'hydraulic' picture of psychological determinants: 'a picture of desires as forces moving the will in certain directions, with action the result of a combination of belief and desire.'² This, Foot argues, arises as we want the reasons for action to result from an end which the agent just wants. In response to this claim, Foot argues that it is enough for someone to act merely due to the recognition of a reason – which might be the requirement of a moral guideline, without having a self-interested desire to do so. Therefore, not all action must result from the desires of the individual performing the action, but might occur due to another fact about human life. A conscious agent may thus elect to perform an action against their self interest, as doing so is the more rational decision given the type of animal we are and the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

¹ Philippa Foot, "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 15 (1995): p.4.

² ———, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), p.21.

For neo-Aristotelian naturalists, we must first discover what kind of animal human beings are, and from this develop conclusions regarding the rational ends of human action. To begin her investigation, Foot highlights what we actually mean when we say of something that it is 'good'. Foot focuses on the difference between good as an 'attributive' adjective, as opposed to it being used as a predicative adjective: 'a book that is a good soporific may or may not be a good book,' this is because it is good at being a soporific (attributive), but all things considered may not be a good book, as it is only good in relation to its immediate function – not in any general predicative sense.³ If something is said to be good, it does not mean that it has a predicative quality of goodness; rather, it is good at its necessary operations. Foot is interested in what is needed by a member of a species to be 'good' at being part of that species, and from this, attempts to conclude whether a particular animal is a good one. As will be shown, goodness for Foot is intricately bound to the characteristic activity of a given species.

Foot first attempts to develop a coherent conception of what it means for a plant or an animal to be a good member of their species, and through this, attempts to illuminate what it means to be a 'good' human being. In demonstrating how we assess the goodness of animals and plants, Foot clarifies the method through which we should go about assessing ethical goodness. Foot argues that when we make statements such as 'this is a good cactus', we are obviously not expressing a pro-attitude towards the cactus based merely on what we desire the cactus to be like, rather, we think it is good in relation to how cacti characteristically are. According to Foot, features of plants and animals have 'natural goodness', and defect, that is unrelated to the needs and wants of other living organisms. 'Natural goodness', for Foot, can be contrasted with 'secondary goodness', which is when a member of a particular species is evaluated in relation to the desires of an individual member of another species. For example, we may say of a cat that it is a 'good' cat if it rolls around the ground in a cute way when we have guests over for dinner; however, this rolling about on the ground says nothing about whether the cat is a good member of its species.

³ ———, "Rationality and Virtue," *Norms, Values, and Society* (1994): p.207.

Foot uses the phrase 'Autonomous-species dependent goodness' to indicate the specific parts and operations under investigation when we assess 'natural goodness'. The word *autonomous* – in this phrase – attempts to clarify the notion that when we are accessing an animal's goodness, we are concerned with *its species* necessary parts and operations.⁴ To discover 'natural goodness' we should not evaluate a member of a species from the point of view of our needs, nor in an artificial environment in which we place it. The *species-dependent* part of the phrase emphasises Foot's idea that we must assess an animal's parts and operations in relation to what its species characteristically does; for example, the characteristic way of life for any given species determines whether a member of its species is well endowed with respect to sight ect., or if they are defective in a certain area. For example, an owl that could not see well in the dark would be a defective one in regards its species characteristic parts and operations; yet a human unable to do so would not be defective, as seeing well in the absence of appropriate levels of light is not how we characteristically function. Furthermore, for Foot, when assessing a particular plant or animal, we should not take into account every characteristic, but only that 'which has some function in that life.'⁵ Arbitrary features that do not contribute to the survival of an individual contained within a particular species do not enter Foot's assessment of 'natural goodness'.

The important distinction here is that of need. We should ask the question as to which parts and operations a certain animal needs in order to live the characteristic life of its species. For Foot, propositions regarding how a species should behave are determined by what is needed for its, 'development, self-maintenance, and reproduction: in most species involving defence, and in some the rearing of the young.'⁶ Thus, in the case of a tree, the rustling of its leaves serves no purpose in the life-cycle of that species, however, the growing of its roots does. From this we can conclude that a defective tree is one which fails to grow roots to a basic standard required for its self-maintenance; in contrast, its inability to aesthetically rustle its leaves does not contribute to its life, thus cannot be considered a defect.

⁴ I take parts to mean its physical components, and operations are what a member of a species naturally does. Operations, as a category of assessment, do not include intentional actions and desires; these form distinct categories which develop in importance once we reach the stage of sophisticated rational animals.

⁵ Foot, "Rationality and Virtue," p.208.

⁶ ———, *Natural Goodness*, p.33.

Foot does not believe that the notion of need extends only to individual survival, but also spreads to the survival of the species as such:

Autonomous species-dependent goodness is therefore intertwined with a particular notion of needs being based, at least in the case of plants and animals, not only on what is necessary for the health and survival of individual members of a species but also for the continuance of the species itself.⁷

While a defect often rebounds on the defective individual, this is not always so, and can instead threaten the continuance of the species; for example, a lioness that does not teach her cubs to hunt affects both the individual survival of each cub, and, thereby the continuance of the species in general. We therefore find even in sub-rational animals an assessment of 'natural goodness' not merely in relation to the ability of a certain individual's parts and operations to enhance its personal survival, but also the survival of others. And these natural other-directed functions do not merely extend to the immediate family, but also to the local community in general; for example, wolves have a necessary function of hunting in packs, and a wolf which failed to do this, yet enjoyed the fruits of its communities labour, would be a defective one of its kind. One might say that we find in this the entrance of other-directed behaviour into our assessment of 'natural goodness'.

So in what way, we may ask, does this method of assessing plants and animals help to inform us about the goodness of human beings? The answer is that we, like plants and animals, have certain ways of behaving that are necessary for our characteristic way of life. And, as with other sub-rational animals, other-directed behaviour plays an important part in the characteristic life of our species. For Foot, the facts about human life make it necessary that virtues such as honesty are part of our practical rationality: 'Moreover, in that we are social animals, we depend on each other as do wolves that hunt in packs, with co-operation such as our own depending on special factors such as conventional arrangements.'⁸ Foot's argument is that due to our social nature it is essential that we have other-directed virtues such as charity and justice, because without these it would be impossible to live the kinds of lives that we characteristically do.

⁷ _____, "Rationality and Virtue," p.209.

⁸ Ibid.: p.16.

It must be clarified that the assessment of 'natural goodness' in respect to animals and plants is built by Foot as an analogy not to be carried over to our assessment of human beings too rigidly. Through this analogy, Foot intends to develop a method with which we can evaluate ethical goodness. Her point is that from looking at the way which we assess the goodness of an animal, we can gain clarification regarding the appropriate use of the word 'good'. Once we have done this, we can apply this method to the ethically relevant aspects of a given human being, and assess whether they are good in the distinctively human realm of ethics. Evaluating the goodness of a human beings based on how they function in ethically relevant areas conforms to our traditional way of evaluating people, in that we call someone a "good boy/girl" if they meet our ethical standards, not because of their good health. So while Foot acknowledges that ethics is intricately related to the kind of animals we are, and we assess a person in the same manner that we do plants and animals, our assessment of human goodness is still of a distinct realm connected with our advanced capacities to reason.

2.2. Rosalind Hursthouse

Rosalind Hursthouse attempts to build on some of the core ideas found in Foot's ethical naturalism. She does this by determining the function of ethical behaviour, and by defining what aspects of human behaviour enter into this realm of assessment. It is to the distinct ethical realm of human existence that Hursthouse wants to apply Foot's usage of good as an attributive adjective. Hursthouse wants to show that when we say of a human being that they are good, we are really pointing to the fact that they are excelling in the field of necessary human activity. Ethical activity, for Hursthouse, is something with a definable purpose related to our broader function as a human being.

Taking inspiration from Foot's use of the word good, Hursthouse argues that an individual devoid of core moral qualities could be good in relation to the type of lifestyle they lead, but they will not be a good human being: 'an ethically defective human being, one who lacks the virtues, might live a long and very enjoyable life, but

he would still fail to live well as a human being, to live a good human life.'⁹ This is because, for Hursthouse, a good human being is one who necessarily has the core virtues. Thus, while Foot provided a vague outline as to the kind of moral qualities a good human being must have, Hursthouse fills this concept out by arguing that a good human being must necessarily be one who regularly acts in accordance with the core virtues:

The virtues make their possessor a good human being, one who is excellent rather than deficient; thereby human beings need the virtues in order to live well as human beings, to live a good characteristically human life, the sort of life we call *eudaimon*.¹⁰

For Hursthouse, the virtues are character traits which promote the well-being of the individual who is well endowed with them, by producing consistent activity in accordance with practical rationality. Hursthouse attempts to specify the indirect goal of ethical behaviour, by specifying the ends which the virtues must necessarily promote. She organizes her theory in the following way:

A good sophisticated social animal is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to its (i) parts (ii) operations (iii) actions and (iv) desires and emotions. Whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve (1) its individual survival through its natural life span, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and its characteristic enjoyments, and (4) the good functioning of its social group – in the ways characteristic of the species.¹¹

Hursthouse believes that the ethical way of assessing whether a human is well endowed with respect to the four ends is by assessing their character traits. Character traits are virtues if they promote the four ends and vices if they are antagonistic to them.¹² She thus takes the characteristic function of human behaviour to be behaviour directed towards the enhancement of the four ends. The four ends establish specific criteria against which we are to assess the character traits of an individual human being. However, when agents act virtuously they do not do so with the four ends in

⁹ Rosalind Hursthouse, "On the Grounding of the Virtues in Human Nature," in *What Is Good for a Human Being?*, ed. Jan Szaif (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p.264.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. In defining what she means by 'parts' and 'operations', Hursthouse states: 'By a plant's parts, I mean such things as its leaves, roots, petals; by its operations such things as growing, taking in water, developing buds, dying back, setting seed.'

¹² Ibid., p.269.

mind, but do so because they possess a certain character trait which prompts them to act in a certain manner. Thus, while the virtues are identified based on whether they enhance the four ends, individual actions in accordance with the virtues will not have the pursuit of the four ends within their intentional content.

While in the case of plants and sub-rational animals we assess whether a specimen is a healthy animal and from this determine its goodness, human beings are conscious rational animals, and, therefore, are assessed according to distinct criteria. Human beings make decisions and act over and above pre-determined operations, this means at their assessment of them qua human beings will not be of what is given to them by nature; and it is this aspect of each human being that Hursthouse believes is up for ethical assessment. That leaves the aspects to be evaluated from the ethical point of view, 'reactions that were not merely physical, actions and emotions and desires, and our actions from reason.'¹³ And, Hursthouse believes that the virtues are perfect for our ethical evaluations of goodness, as they encapsulate all of the ethically relevant features up for assessment.

While Hursthouse argues that it is character traits that are up for ethical assessment, I believe that the concept of a character trait encapsulates a distinctively human quality: that of intentional action. While an individual might be said to have good or bad health, this will not impact on our general assessment of them as a human being, as our evaluation of their goodness as a human being is viewed in relation to what they can control; and what they can control is what they can act on intentionally. This argument implicitly endorses the view that emotions, desires and some reactions are the result of intentional action. This does not mean that the individual at any given time can choose their emotional response; but, rather, holds that these responses can be trained over time through intentional action. For example, if I am in the habit of losing my temper at those close to me over trivial things, I can over time change this pattern of behaviour by intentionally pulling my mind back to equilibrium each time this occurs. Through this my character will begin to change, and thus enhance my standing as a 'good' human being.

¹³ ———, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.207.

In response to Hursthouse, one might question whether we need to act in accordance with our natural ends. We are rational animals who can set ends for ourselves; therefore, one may look suspiciously at the notion that we have a characteristic way of going on against which we can evaluate our behaviour. We have the ability to try new ways of life, and do things that we have not previously done. Therefore, it seems difficult to look at the way we characteristically act, and from this extrapolate to the way we should act. In reply to this, Hursthouse argues that we do have a characteristic way of going on, and that is acting in accordance with rationality: 'Our characteristic 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.'¹⁴ In other words, we pursue what we perceive to be good for us. However, this comes with a serious price, as we may pursue what is extremely adverse to our well-being in the belief that it is good for us. Therefore, it is of great importance that we determine what kind of life will in the long run be to our benefit, otherwise we will be shooting at life with closed eyes.

Hursthouse believes that the virtues that enable the enhancement of the four ends look as though they will not differ substantially from those found in the common list. One may question how certain virtues, such as honesty and justice, enable the enhancement of the four ends; to this Hursthouse replies:

without honesty we would be unable to co-operate or to acquire knowledge and pass it on to the next generation to build on. And it has long been a commonplace that justice and fidelity to promises enable us to function as a social, co-operating group, something that, unlike other social animals, we cannot do by instinct alone.¹⁵

Therefore, according to Hursthouse, the naturalism project will fit well with the traditional ideas of what counts as virtuous behaviour; and the neo-Aristotelian attempt to tie morality to human nature will not result in the endorsement of what we currently consider as abhorrent character traits.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.222.

¹⁵ Hursthouse, "On the Grounding of the Virtues in Human Nature," p.270.

Hursthouse wants to defend a kind of naturalism which will not produce specific conclusions about the rightness and wrongness of homosexuality and euthanasia, but will consist largely in providing grounds for taking justice, charity, honesty ect., to be virtues. Hursthouse is not in the business of telling us how to act in specific circumstances, as determining what kind of action will promote the four ends will often come down to the particularities of the circumstances. Deciding on the correct course of action thus involves a certain amount of practical wisdom (*phronesis*):

The naturalism, *ex hypothesi*, grounds the starting premise that honesty is a virtue; but from then on, any debate about a particular case will be as messy and indeterminate and reliant on the notion of the *phronesis* of the virtuous, as the critic of virtue ethics despise it for being.¹⁶

Furthermore, Hursthouse does not set an ideal type of person one should aspire to be, as in order to be a good human being we do not have to live the same sort of life. While each individual must be well endowed with respect to the virtues, they might excel at one virtue at the expense of another, and still live a distinctively good life.¹⁷ There will still be room, under Hursthouse's naturalism, for a wide spectrum of personalities and lifestyles, but with the obvious exclusion of assassins and dictators, who will most likely be plagued by vice.

Fundamental to Hursthouse's theory of ethical naturalism is what she calls the Neurathian project. Instead of throwing away all of the traditional virtues and conceptions of correct moral action and starting to build a new ethical system starting from the four ends, we should instead maintain the core set of virtues and proceed to alter them slowly. The metaphor used is of a boat moving along the stormy seas of critical engagement, where each plank represents a different virtue or moral guidelines developed throughout our intellectual history. And instead of sinking the ship, we should replace the planks which are proven not to enhance the four ends, yet keep the ones which do: 'We proceed from within it...scrutinizing it, validating or changing it, bit by bit, plank by plank.'¹⁸ This method will allow for a greater amount of precision, as occasionally it might be difficult to determine the relationship

¹⁶ Ibid., p.267.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.271.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.266.

between a character trait and the four ends, and might take some prolonged reflection to find out.

3. CRITICISMS AGAINST THE PROJECT

3.1 Julia Annas

Julia Annas believes that Foot and Hursthouse's project of ethical naturalism has many benefits, including its avoidance of anthropomorphic projections onto nature. For neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, ethics is something that relates to what we find in the realm of living things, and does not rely on a transcendent God or ego. However, Annas points out that some people worry that basing ethical theories on biology can lead to dogmas and unfair restrictions; for example, one might argue that as women are biological different from men they should have a different account of the good life. Annas, however, argues that Hursthouse gets around this problem by acknowledging our distinctive rationality and its ability to determine truth and falsity. We can, therefore, criticise and change what we do and how we live in a variety of ways. This gives us a characteristic way of going on at a very high level of generality. Thus, if doing so is to our benefit, we have the ability to change what was previously thought to be of biological necessity. We can separate historical accidents and conventions from functions that are necessary for human flourishing.

Annas, however, is sceptical of the relationship Hursthouse builds between the four ends and our human rationality. Annas classifies Aristotelian virtue ethics as maintaining the 'weaker relation' between the two. It puts us in our biological place by emphasising the continuities between our ways of evaluating ourselves and evaluative patterns found in animals and plants: 'I call this the weaker relation because it holds that the four ends that we have as social animals form a robust constraint on the exercise of our rationality, and thus give it a weaker ability to transform them than the stronger view holds.'¹⁹ Aristotelian virtue ethics mounts a barrier restricting human behaviour, as if we attempt to transcend our natural boundaries we are destined to be frustrated.

¹⁹ Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?," p.8.

Annas, in reply to Foot and Hursthouse, argues for the 'stronger view', where we view our nature as something to be moulded and developed by practical rationality. Annas compares our rationality to a crafts person making an object from raw materials: '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 human nature, and makes something of it, in the way a crafts person makes an object of raw materials.'²⁰ As rational animals we can reject views such as Hursthouse's that universal benevolence is not a virtue, not because it is a brute fact about human nature, but because it is a bad idea, with more rational considerations against it than for it. It is not our nature that prevents us from raising this character trait to the status of a virtue. The 'stronger view' emphasises our separation from animals and plants, as it is our rationality which decides what is good for us, not our biological nature: 'our rationality indeed makes us different from other living things.'²¹

In response to Annas one might question if the 'stronger view' really separates us from biological restraints in the manner which Annas intends. It must not be forgotten that, for Aristotle, perfection as a member of a species is intricately tied to well-being. And that someone cannot be happy unless they perform the characteristic activity of their species. It is not that we choose what is good for us, and what character traits will lead to happiness, this is just a fact of the life which we live. And to actively pursue a type of behaviour that is inimical to our well-being would surely be to go down a path of despair. In reply to this, Annas argues that we do not elevate certain character traits to the level of virtues because of restrictions placed on us by human nature, but for other reasons, 'It is unlikely to succeed, for a start. It exacts tremendous cost. And it raises sharply the question what this goal is, for which people's lives have to be commandeered. What justifies it?'²² As rational animals, we decide to live a certain kind of life because we can see the value of it, and we do not pursue others because we can induce the probable consequences. Yet this leads one to ask why certain character traits succeed – or fail – in the promotion of our happiness. And I think that the answer to this is that they do so due to the kind of animal we are.

²⁰ Ibid.: p.13.

²¹ Ibid.: p.20.

²² Ibid.: p.16.

The good reasons we have for not going down a certain course of action often derive from what is naturally good and bad for us, and just because we have the ability to recognize these restrictions then act in accordance with them, we are no freer in terms of our ability to transcend ourselves.

3.2. Bernard Williams

In his essay, *Evolution, Ethics and the Representation problem*, Bernard Williams investigates the relationship between biological evolution and ethics, and develops some important criticisms of the naturalism project. He points out that ethical naturalism, in the form of Foot and Hursthouse, rests on the ought/can distinction, which cites certain claims that human beings cannot live in certain way – as doing so will give rise to anxiety ect., – coherently leading to the constraints on certain personal, and institutional ideals and goals. Williams argues that this argument is strong enough – if successful – to prevent us from promoting certain types of activity, such as banning child birth before the age of 35. However, he believes that more work has to be done in support of the argument that biological theories *support* certain ways of life, such as living by certain virtues (for Virtue Ethicists), or maximizing happiness (for Utilitarians).

Williams calls his main criticism of ethical naturalism, the representation problem: 'how is a phenotypic character which would present itself in other species as a behavioural tendency represented in a species which has a culture, language, and conceptual thought.'²³ The problem is that while in sub-rational animals a behavioural tendency resulting from an underlying biological disposition will show up as itself, in the life of human beings – animals with linguistic and cultural consciousness – culture affects and shapes these pre-cultural behavioural tendencies in a way that the resulting guidelines no longer reflect accurately the biological disposition which brought them about. Therefore, in the human case it will be extremely difficult to discover what is actually good for us underneath the multiple layers of cultural strata.

²³ Bernard Williams, "Evolution, Ethics, and the Representation Problem," in *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.102.

For Williams, the representation problem arises primarily as human communities embody cultural norms. Williams argues that the most that a genetic character could yield would be an inhibition against behaviours of a certain kind. However, the problem arises when we try to determine the relationship between the inhibition and the socially sanctioned prohibition. Williams wonders what the need would be for a prohibition if the inhibition already exists in the first place: 'if sanctioned norms are necessary in the human case, or socialization into rule-observing behaviour, this must be because constraints on human responses in these areas are not, or not significantly, genetically based.'²⁴ In reply to this, one could argue that as humans have conceptual consciousness they are capable to pursuing ends which are not good for them. This might indeed manifest in anxiety or lack of social cohesion as the inhibition is repressed from immediate consciousness. It would therefore be the task of the ethical naturalist to put us back on track by re-directing us towards what is actually good for us. Furthermore, the original inhibitions might be refined in a certain way which makes them applicable to the style of life which humans have developed for themselves, and thus reflect the initial biological disposition, but in a more contextual manner.

Williams believes generally that conceptual baggage is added to our biological dispositions to the point that they cannot grant us enough power in assessing what is good for us. And, furthermore, as many of our rules work within the social realms which humans have created, what needs to be studied is what has worked for us historically rather than the biological dispositions which gave rise to this ethical guidelines in the first place. However, surely a mixture of the two is what is needed. And it would not be a surprise if the two acted in harmony. As the biological guidelines will be rather vague, historical information will help us achieve a greater specification of what is good for us.

The final criticism which Williams raises in this article is that humans have evolved by natural selection, which is a theory involving no teleological outlook. Nothing is planned or intended by nature in advance; nature is not pushing teleologically towards anything better than itself. Williams believes that ethical naturalism is an inherently

²⁴ Ibid., p.107.

teleological project, in the sense that it presupposes a hidden human nature waiting to be realized. In response to this one can once again point to the fact that humans are animals with conceptual consciousness that can set up ends for themselves which are inappropriate given their biological dispositions. This might involve going against nature in a way that will destroy our ability to function. To argue that certain behaviour is good for us is not to argue that there is a perfect ideal to which we should aspire. Rather, it will suggest where exactly we have gone wrong. Naturalism will act more like a self-correcting mechanism than a blue-print towards perfection.

4. CONCLUSION

Human beings are in a mess. We have a vague idea that we are trying to flourish, but we do not really know what this means, or how to get there. Foot and Hursthouse attempt to provide us with much needed direction. Many people feel that morality is a wall standing in the way of happiness; an arbitrary mechanism of control which prevents us from doing what we naturally want to do. I believe, however, that the neo-Aristotelian movement goes some way to demonstrating the falsity of what I consider to be a toxic idea. If we can once again understand virtuous activity as a path to our happiness rather than a gate blocking us out, we can begin to assess moral and political guidelines in a new light. We do have a nature, and that is to go after what we see as our good; however, until we can see that our good is constituted as much by morality as self-interest we will throw ourselves deeper into the pit of despair.

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