

*SECUNDUM NATURAM HOMINIS:*

AN ESSAY ON HUMAN FORM AND MORAL GOODNESS

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Thomas Aquinas claims that human virtue is *secundum naturam hominis*, in accord with human nature, while vice is *contra naturam hominis*, contrary to human nature.<sup>1</sup> In saying this, Aquinas expresses an ancient and still appealing thesis – that moral goodness is *human* goodness, the goodness proper to our nature as human beings. We can evaluate people as singers or sculptors or science-teachers, but judgments of moral goodness and badness speak to excellence and defect in the action and character of human beings considered *as such*. In this dissertation, I develop and defend a version of *Aristotelian naturalism*, according to which moral goodness is a sub-determination of the category of natural goodness. For Aristotelian naturalism, virtue is indeed in accord with human nature, and vice contrary to human nature, but properly grasping this thought requires a special interpretation of “human nature” as *human form*.

While philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot have recently breathed new life into Aristotelian naturalism, the view also faces number of challenges, and many philosophers consider the position doomed to fail.<sup>2</sup> I argue that Aristotelian naturalism can survive the most serious objections against it, though in certain respects this requires formulating the view in a way that departs from authors like Anscombe and Foot. I also show how the appeal to human form can make a contribution to substantive ethical debate. Having defended an Aristotelian framework in earlier chapters, in the final chapter I employ Aristotelian categories in an argument about labor exploitation and the global economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Pt. I-II Q. 71 A.2

<sup>2</sup> The Aristotelian natural goodness view can also be found, with some variations, in the work of philosophers such as: Anselm Müller, Michael Thompson, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre.

According to Aristotelian naturalism, our thought about human good should be understood as a special kind of *life-form* thought. From hyacinths to hedgehogs to human beings, we understand individual living things *as living* by viewing them in light of the life-form that they bear. In addition, the goodness of parts and activities in an individual living thing must be understood in relation to its good as defined by its life-form. In the case of human beings, *our* form is distinguished by the faculty of practical reason, or the rational will. Moreover, the moral virtues are those dispositions of the will that fit a human being to realize human good – to live well *qua* human being. Thus the moral virtues are a type of *natural goodness* in human beings, while the vices are a type of *natural defect*.

We gain insight, then, into the character of human goodness by beginning with the thought that humans are one kind of *living thing*, and then investigating the special sort of excellence and defect found in living things. Like other forms of natural goodness, moral goodness is a matter of realizing the kind of life characteristic of a certain life-form. At the same time, however, unlike natural goodness in plants and non-human animals, moral goodness pertains to the rational will of a living being. Closely related to this, moral goodness requires that we guide ourselves according to our *understanding* of the very form that we bear – it belongs to human beings to live according to a grasp of human form. Thus the notion of the human good is at the heart of both moral philosophy and the moral life. Human good determines what counts as goodness and badness in individual human actions, and a practical understanding of human good guides the actions of the virtuous person.

One of the attractive features of Aristotelian naturalism is that it captures the thought that moral goodness is human goodness, while also capturing our continuity with the rest of the biological world. And it captures this continuity without explaining away moral judgments or

reducing them to their survival value, as in some forms of “evolutionary ethics.” However, Aristotelianism is not the only contemporary view that stresses the relevance of human nature for ethics. Thus before turning to Aristotelianism, I first consider a recent *non*-Aristotelian appeal to “the human” in moral philosophy – the neo-Humean view of Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt’s account of morality is based in a conception of human nature that combines (a) a subjectivist view of practical reason with (b) the idea of “volitional necessities” that mark human beings – things which humans simply cannot help caring about. In the first chapter, “Love, Morality, and Volitional Rationality,” I argue that Frankfurt’s conception of “the human” is insufficient to provide a satisfactory account of moral goodness, because it fails to capture any sense in which immorality is defective, and it fails to explain the rational authority of morality.

In my defense of Aristotelian naturalism, I first consider the objection that Aristotelian natural normativity conflicts with the Darwinian insight that biological function is ordered toward gene replication. Because of this, the objection holds, Aristotelians are unable to distinguish between “actual function” and “incidental benefit” in biological teleology. In “Have Elephant Seals Refuted Aristotle?”, I show that this Darwinian objection is based on a misunderstanding of the Aristotelian natural norms. First, the objection fails to appreciate that natural norms do not require the thought that *it is good (or bad) that* this is how things stand with a life-form. Second, the objection fails to distinguish between teleological judgments that remain *within* a life-form conception, and those that seek to explain how a life-form came into existence. Once this distinction is properly made, we see that Aristotelian notions of “function” and “natural goodness” are neither refuted by, nor replaceable with, Darwinian categories.

A deeper set of worries concerns how we come to *know* anything about the human good. How do we determine what kinds of activities and experience human good consists in? Granting

that there are excellences and defects of the human rational will, how are we to say which traits are naturally good (virtuous) and which naturally bad (vicious)? These questions can lead to a *temptation* for Aristotelians, and this temptation in turn gives rise to a further criticism of the view. The temptation is to answer these questions about our knowledge of human form by appealing to some *minimal account* of the human. We can, the thought goes, begin with some spare, non-ethical account of human beings, defined primarily in terms of survival and reproduction. We then identify goodness of the will by seeing what kinds of rational traits are necessary to sustain this minimal life, and such traits are deemed to be naturally good.

This line of thought, which I call the “two-stage strategy,” is tempting in part because it promises to explain what belongs to the human in a way that will adjudicate between rival substantive conceptions of human good. However, this strategy also opens up Aristotelianism to the criticism that a *variety* of traits might provide for a minimal sort of human life, including traits that we regard as paradigms of vice, such as deception and greed. Because these traits can also “play a part” in human life, Aristotelian naturalism must deem these vicious traits to be “naturally good,” and thus there is a gap between what is naturally good and what we in fact consider to be morally good. To suppose otherwise is to have a “Pollyannaish” view of human nature. Hence one of the philosophers who has formulated this objection terms it the “Pollyanna Problem” for Aristotelian naturalism.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that Aristotelians should not give in to the temptation to pursue the two-stage strategy, although there are hints of this strategy in Foot, Anscombe, and others. In fact, both the strategy and the corresponding Pollyanna Problem are based in a failure to recognize the full significance of the Aristotelian claim that human form is defined by *reason*. For Aristotelian naturalism, there is not only a continuity between humans and other living things, but also a

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<sup>3</sup> Elijah Millgram, “Critical Notice of *Life and Action*” in *Analysis Reviews* Vol. 69 N. 3, July 2009.

watershed difference between humans and other creatures. The core of this difference is the presence of *reason* in human life. Once we appreciate this point properly, we can see that questions about what belongs to “the human” must be settled *not* by figuring out what is sufficient for “mere” survival and reproduction, but on the basis of our judgments about the forms of activity that are finally valuable, and what we have all things considered reason to do.

In chapter three, “Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form,” I give an Aristotelian argument against the two-stage strategy. The core of my argument is that if we begin with a spare, non-ethical account of “the human,” then we do not yet have *human form* in view. Thus nothing that belongs to *this* sense of “the human” has a claim to be naturally good, and therefore the two-stage strategy cannot possibly succeed. I also argue that Aristotelian naturalism can escape the Pollyanna Problem. The problem depends on the *empirical science assumption*, which says that in formulating Aristotelian categoricals about human action and character, we must rely on the same procedure and type of considerations as we do when formulating Aristotelian categoricals about other life-forms in the natural, or empirical sciences. However, once we grant that humans are a life-form characterized by the faculty of practical reason, reflection on the nature of human practical reasoning shows that the empirical science assumption must be rejected, and thus the Pollyanna Problem fails. In the final section of chapter three, I show how the category of moral virtue can shed light on our knowledge of human form. To possess a moral virtue, I argue, provides one with knowledge of human form that has a special character: it is knowledge of one’s own form that comes from knowing what one ought to do.

In chapter four, “Does Human Nature Conflict with Itself?” I take up a different issue – whether or not Aristotelian naturalism is undermined by the tragedies and practical difficulties that mark human life. In particular, I consider the claim that human nature is such that, no matter

the circumstances, there will be some lack of virtue in any human life. The “no-harmony thesis” claims that, when it comes the virtues, human beings face an *inevitable loss*: possessing some virtues entails a lack of others. This thesis about the virtues is a deep challenge to Aristotelian naturalism. It amounts to the claim that human nature is not a *form* in the sense Aristotelians claim it is. While Aristotelianism can allow that all individual lives will suffer some failure or deficiency, it nevertheless regards human form as a teleological unity, whose parts fit together in a harmonious whole. The claim that there is no-harmony among the virtues is a rejection of this picture of human nature.

Many people are willing to grant the claim that the virtues conflict. This claim is sometimes portrayed as the “realistic” view of human life, or as the lesson of tragic literature and art, or as just plain common sense. However, I believe that we have no good reason to reject the harmony of the virtues. In chapter four, I lay out a series arguments in favor of the no-harmony view: the Cases of Inevitable Loss Objection, the One Life to Live Objection, the Darwinian Objection, and the Napoleon Objection. I refute each of these arguments, showing how we can account for the tragedy and loss found in human life without giving up on the harmony of the virtues or the claim that human form is a teleological unity. I then offer a positive argument in favor of the harmony view. My argument turns on the way in which the concept of virtue involves the notion of “making good.” I aim at demonstrate that for *any* trait that is a human virtue, possessing that trait could not possibly rule out the possession of some other virtue.

The first four chapters deal with questions about moral goodness that are placed at a high level of abstraction: How is moral goodness similar to goodness in plants and animals? How is the knowledge of human form that is relevant to morality related to the knowledge of human beings gained from the biological and social sciences? How does the notion of “the human good”

fit with the tensions we find in the moral life, and the seemingly divided nature of human beings? And indeed, it is part of my view that Aristotelian naturalism is best understood as a highly abstract framework. Naturalism serves to clarify what we talk about when we talk about goodness, but it is consistent with a variety of substantive conceptions of the human good and competing moral principles.

At the same time, however, Aristotelian modes of thought can make a difference to how moral questions are framed, and to how we answer those questions. In the final chapter, I draw on Aristotelian forms of reasoning to analyze an issue of pressing importance – labor exploitation and global justice. In “Exploitation, Human Economy and Global Justice”, I begin with the nature and purpose of a human economy – cooperative productive activity, involving the division of labor and exchange of goods and services, for the sake of securing the means of life. Beginning with this conception, I show how two norms of justice are intrinsic to the relation of co-membership in an economic order. These two norms require: (1) that the character and conditions of a person’s labor be such that they are not degrading or humiliating to that person, and (2) that a person be compensated for her labor at a level sufficient to secure a minimally decent human life. The normative force of these requirements rests ultimately on (a) the purpose of a human economy, which is to secure for its members the necessary means of life, and (b) the equal moral standing of members of an economy, as free beings whose flourishing is equally significant to the flourishing of others.

I argue that the norms requiring decent working conditions and living wages are internal to the nature of an economic order – to the kind of thing a human economy is. For this reason, they set minimal standards for the terms of labor that can justly be agreed upon by workers and employers, and they provide a basis for the charge of exploitation. These norms also provide the

basis for judgments about acceptable background conditions for situations in which terms of labor are to be settled by bargaining between workers and employers. Exploitative agreements arise, paradigmatically, because people are *forced* to accept them: the weaker parties cannot effectively influence the result of the bargaining process, and they have no better options available to them. Thus if a process of bargaining is not to be liable to result in exploitative agreements, the respective positions of the bargaining parties must be such that both parties have *effective agency* over the bargaining process to prevent them from being forced to accept exploitative terms. Conditions in which workers do not have such effective agency are objectionable from the point of view of justice.

In the first half of chapter five, I set out my account of the two norms that can ground a charge of labor exploitation. I also show how these norms are relevant to the *global trade system*. If the trade system is to be just, it must be configured so that workers who are integrated into the system are protected from labor exploitation. Authors such as Thomas Nagel and Michael Blake are wrong to hold that norms of socioeconomic justice apply only within a political community under a sovereign. Rather, justice requires that the global trade system must not sustain conditions in which workers are forced to accept terms of labor that require: (a) working in degrading conditions or (b) working for compensation inadequate to secure basic human flourishing. In the second half of chapter five, I consider objections to my argument, including the *mere coordination view*, which holds that human economic activity is not cooperative but merely coordinated, and thus acting good *qua* economic agent is consistent with things going very poorly for those with whom one cooperates. Drawing on the notion of moral virtue, I argue that the mere coordination view of human economy is inconsistent with any egalitarian moral view, and thus should be rejected.



In the conclusion of my dissertation, *Secudum Rationem*, I address a question that is frequently asked of Aristotelian naturalism: *Granting that moral goodness is natural goodness for human beings, why should we care about being good human beings?* In her book *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot interprets this question as voicing skepticism about the rational authority of morality – *If I don't happen to care about being a "good human," what reason do I have to be morally good, or to care about the things the moral person cares about?* However, there is another way to interpret this question, which Foot does not address. On this other interpretation, the question is not doubting the rational authority of morality, but asking how the *Aristotelian* is entitled to claim the authority of morality. For (the questioner supposes) given that that moral goodness is natural goodness, we can hold that moral norms have rational authority only if human nature itself has normative authority over us – only if we have reason to do whatever our form dictates for us. But why should we think that human form is authoritative in that way, especially given our capacity to 'step back' from our nature?

This question gets its appeal partly from the comparison with other life-forms, and from the thought that *if* those other life-forms could "step back" from their own life cycle and question it, then it would make sense for them to do so. Once a creature is rational, it is able to ask how it should carry out its life. And once asked, that question can only be answered with a *reason* – with a thought about why it is good to act one way or another. Thus an answer that appeals to our "nature" seems to be of the wrong sort. For it just re-asserts that this *is* the way things are with us, rather than giving an answer as to *why* we should embrace this way or depart from it. An appeal to "nature" would only be of the right sort if supported by the additional thought that our nature is *good*, or *it is good that* things stand this way with our nature. Only then could human form have rational authority for us.

Although there is something correct about this line of thought, it is also misleading. What is misleading is the idea of human nature as something that we “step back” from, given our rationality. For this supposes that our “nature” is whatever we share with non-rational animals, and then our reason is added “on top” of that. But Aristotelian naturalism holds that reason is a *characteristic capacity* of our life-form, not something additional to it, and this means that the excellence of our form is rational excellence. Thus those activities and pursuits which have a place in the life of “the human” – which are ways of acting and living proper to our life-form – are those that are done according to a proper employment of reason. It follows from this that when we say a type of activity belongs to “the human,” we are already making a claim that this is a rationally excellent way of acting. For if it were not, then *ipso facto* it is not the excellence of our nature as rational animals. Thus once we have the proper notion of human form in view, the general worry about the rational authority of our nature disappears. For that worry depends on their being a gap between the dictates of our nature and the voice of reason, and there is no such gap for *rational animals* such as ourselves.

Having said this, we can also see what is correct in the worry about the authority of our nature. Faced with a substantive question about what human good is, or why we have reason to live one way versus another, it is indeed illegitimate to answer simply by appealing to “our nature,” unless that appeal is supported by a further thought about the *goodness* of a proposed manner of living and acting. However, this is not because reason is added “on top” of our life-form. Rather it is precisely because *our* form is distinguished by reason – just as Aristotelian naturalism holds.