Human Nature and Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

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Given that it relies on claims about human nature, has Aristotelian virtue ethics (henceforth AVE) been undermined by evolutionary biology? There are at least four objections which are offered in support of the claim that this is so, and I argue that they all fail.[1] The first two (Part 1) maintain that contemporary AVE relies on a concept of human nature which evolutionary biology has undercut and I show this is not so. In Part 2, I try to make it clear that Foot's Aristotelian ethical naturalism, often construed as purporting to provide virtue ethics with a foundation, is not foundationalist and is not attempting to derive ethics from biology. In Part 3, I consider the other two objections. These do not make a misguided assumption about Aristotelian ethical naturalism's foundational aspirations, nor question AVE's use of the concept of human nature, but maintain that some of AVE's empirical assumptions about human nature may well be false, given the facts of our evolution. With respect to these, I argue that, as attempts to undermine AVE specifically, they fail, though they raise significant challenges to our ethical thought quite generally.

1. Two Failing Objections

First Objection: No Human Essence

> What is the Aristotelian connection between the virtues and human nature? We could locate it in the following claim (henceforth 'the Aristotelian claim about the virtues').
>
> '(The) virtues arise in us neither (i) by nature nor (ii) contrary to nature, but (iii) nature gives us the capacity to acquire them and completion comes through habituation.'[2]

[1] One of the objections comes from Bernard Williams. The other three are ones I have heard made at conferences over the last ten years or so, and occur in articles too numerous to be cited.

[2] *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated and edited by Roger Crisp, Cambridge University Press, 2000, Book 2, Chapter 1.

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No significance should be attached to 'nature gives us'. An equally authoritative translation runs – '…neither by nature nor contrary to nature but because we are naturally able to receive them.'[3]

AVE accepts this claim, and the first objection consists of saying that it relies on the discredited concept of a human essence. Does it?

I accept that, although Aristotle was not the essentialist that Plato was, he certainly did believe some things about species essences which evolutionary biology undercuts. So he is, doubtless, alluding to such a human essence in the above claim. But we might just say, 'So what? Who cares?' The 19th century marine biologists had no difficulty in assessing Aristotle's observations in that field and (so I have read) finding most of them to be true; no-one said then, and no-one says now, post Darwin, 'Oh well, they have *all* been undercut by modern biology because we now know that there are no such things as the species essences that he assumed there were.' They just took the observations as being about the creatures they were obviously about and assessed them as true or false or worth exploring or whatever.

And we can do the same with his claim about the virtues. Modern Aristotelian virtue ethicists can take it as obviously about us, us humans, in the same way as human physiology is about us humans, and human psychology is about us humans and the human genome project is about us humans.

What is the claim saying? We can get a handle on it by thinking of a parallel claim to be made about human nature and language. The claim above is made up of three bits, and, in the case of language it goes (i) language does not arise in us by nature; each of us has to be taught to talk. But (ii) it does not arise in us contrary to nature either – our children lap up the teaching, Helen Keller thirsted for it – what could be more natural to human beings than language? And (iii) we suppose that, far from being blank slates as far as language acquisition is concerned, we are naturally able to receive language/have a natural capacity to learn a first language – any first human language – through initial training, and to complete the process ourselves. Given a training by our elders in our early years, we babble away, and after a time, we've got it.

[3] *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Christopher Rowe, philosophical introduction and commentary by Sarah Broadie, Oxford University Press, 2002.

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Someone might want to say that the third bit regarding language – or indeed virtue – is very speculative or they might want to say that the claim about language is more plausible than the claim about the virtues – but surely no-one would want to say that the claim about language must be false or nonsensical because – as we have now realised, given evolutionary theory – there is no such thing as a human essence. So the same goes for the Aristotelian claim about the virtues. It may be false, but if so, this is not because there is no such thing as 'essential' human nature, rather that at least one of the three claims about us that make it up is false (the form of objection that will be considered in Part 3).

So, my conclusion regarding this objection is that Aristotelian virtue ethics is not undercut just because there is no such thing as a human essence, only (at the moment and for a few millennia back and for maybe not much longer in the future) the human species, or humans, or us.

Second Objection: No Concept of Health

Now we come to another, closely related, objection. The Aristotelian ethical naturalism which modern proponents of AVE promote relies heavily on the concept of health, claiming to find an analogy between the evaluations of members of other species as good, that is, healthy, members of their kind or defective in some way, and our ethical evaluations of ourselves. But modern biology, it is claimed, not only rejects the concept of an essential human (or any species') nature; it also, and perhaps thereby, rejects the concept of health (and related concepts such as those of defect and malfunction and abnormality).

That may well be true of evolutionary biology, but that is, after all, but one amongst many of the biological sciences, and it seems pointlessly foolish to deny that many of them do employ the concept of species-related health (and thereby the related ones of defect etc.). For, obviously, medicine, and veterinary science do.

In response, it may be pointed out that medicine and veterinary science are both primarily practical and professional rather than theoretical subjects, and hence a reflection of our interests and desires. They are aimed at being put into practice, at getting things in the world to go the way we want them to. So the concepts of human health, and domestic cat health pick out ways we want to be, or want our cats to be; they do not carve the world at the joints.

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But then, one might say, what about human and animal physiology, with which the two practical/professional schools of study are so closely entwined? Medical and veterinary science are taught in universities as a mixture of both practical and theoretical, the list of the participating academics' research subjects is a mixture of both. True, medicine is distinct as an academic subject from human physiology, and veterinary science from animal physiology, because the former are primarily practical whereas human and animal physiology are not; they are not aimed at getting things in the world to go the way we want them to go, but to identify and explain the things there are. Nevertheless, physiology is primarily focussed on studying normal body function, where 'normal' is *not* just a statistical notion and human physiology gets defined as the science of the mechanical, physical, and biochemical functions of humans in good health, (their organs, and the cells of which they are composed.)

It may well be that human physiology first got going as an object of study only because of our interests in, or our valuing of, our living in certain ways; perhaps animal physiology got going for the same reason plus widespread prohibitions on human vivisection. Or perhaps we initially became interested in animal physiology because we valued domestic animals with certain properties – long life, large size, large reproduction (for their kind), resistance to external factors that inhibited any of these etc. And perhaps we first became interested in plant physiology because of our interest in agriculture.

Who knows. And again, who cares, because whether the just so story says that, or claims that the disciplines all began because we were struck with wonder about the world and wanted to know how all these bits of it worked – which was certainly what motivated Aristotle's marine biology – we wind up in the same place, with 'modern biology' as we have it now. Goodness knows how it evolved, but evolved 'it' certainly has, so that now we refer to 'it' as 'the biological sciences', using the plural to encompass its multiple branches, sub-disciplines and developments, which are quite beyond the ordering of a hierarchical taxonomy. We can classify the areas of study in different ways and I suppose two of the ways we could do so would be according to the extent to which they contributed to medical science or employed the 'evaluative' concept of health. But either grouping would have fuzzy edges.

The point of the above is not to try to set up the biological sciences as providing a suitably 'value-laden' foundation for ethics, but rather to draw attention to the fact that the ones that might be called value-laden or value-informed or to contain evaluations are not to be clearly

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distinguished from those that are not. We could regard medicine as applied biology but this is not to say that the other biological sciences are all value-neutral or non-evaluative and that values suddenly appear on the scene only when we do medicine. If evolutionary biology is indeed quite value-neutral, and has no use for concepts such as *health* or *malfunction* or *normal* (in its non-statistical sense) this presumably does not cut if off from the biological sciences of which that is not true – it gets material from at least some of them, and some of them get material from it. It is, as I said, but one biological science amongst many and not in any privileged position.[4]

So that evolutionary biology has no truck with the concept of health – or defect or malfunction or abnormality – has no bearing whatsoever on the fact that Aristotelian virtue ethics relies on those concepts.

To what extent does it indeed rely on them? Well, not to the point that some critics suppose, which brings me to the second part of the paper, which is a brief interlude on foundationalism and the Aristotelian biological analogy.

2. Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism is Not Foundationalist

A number of critics go to great lengths to illustrate why virtue ethics cannot be derived from evolutionary biology, or why evolutionary biology cannot provide it with a foundation. I am not going to discuss this form of objection because it is, simply, misplaced, but I will say something briefly about why it is misplaced, and what role the Aristotelian naturalism is playing if it is not a foundational one.

As we have just seen, it would be foolish to think that evolutionary biology would provide virtue ethics with its foundation; if any biological sciences did, it would be some of the other ones – the ones that provide medical science with its foundation – and ethology.

I take it that some of the biological sciences do provide medical science with a foundation in an obvious sense. They – and sometimes perhaps when one is talking about, say, pacemakers or laser surgery,

[4] Sterelny and Griffiths note that 'The contrast between polymorphic and monomorphic traits is standard in biology', defining monomorphic traits as traits that 'exist in the same form in every "normal" individual. Leg number is monomorphic in humans.' Kim Sterelny and Paul A Griffiths, *Sex and Death: An Introduction to Philosophy of Biology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999) 346.

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not only they but also some of the physical sciences – explain and justify a large number of medical claims. Where we still do not know how to do what we want to do (prevent cancer say, or cure chronic fatigue syndrome) because we do not know enough about how our bodies work, we are expecting that the biological sciences will tell us. Moreover, where we can justify but not explain, we are expecting the biological sciences to come up with the explanations. For example, we know (I think) that at least some acupuncture works – the sort that allows for open heart surgery on conscious patients – and it is very mysterious, but we expect some day western science will be able to explain it.

Now in this obvious sense in which biology provides medical science with a foundation, no Aristotelian ethical naturalist – including Aristotle on some authoritative interpretations – has ever supposed that it similarly provided a foundation for ethics. I certainly do not know of any modern virtue ethicist's work in which it is implied, let alone asserted, that ethics can be expected to become a branch of applied biology, as we might say medicine is, and I cannot think of any ethical claim of which any of us might want to say, 'Well we know that so and so is the case, and it's very mysterious why, but I expect one day biology will be able to explain it', the way we want to claim that about acupuncture and indeed hypnotism. Everyone who is taking the Aristotelian naturalist line takes it as obvious that they are not pretending to derive ethical evaluations of human beings from an ethically neutral human biology, but are already thinking about human beings in an ethically structured way.[5]

Perhaps thereby we divide ourselves from some of the proponents of the other sorts of normative ethical theories. Perhaps, amongst those proponents, there are still some stalwarts who believe they are, or who aspire to be, in the business of justifying their moral beliefs in some rational but ethically (and culturally) neutral way, whereas we virtue ethicists know we are not and are not even trying to be.

If we did think it was possible, we would surely avail ourselves of what was on offer. After all, it is obvious enough that, as far as justifying the claim that such and such a character trait is a virtue is concerned, there is no reason why virtue ethicists shouldn't make the same sorts of moves that proponents of the other normative theories make. We could spin the story that it is a character trait such that

[5] Larry Arnhart, in *Darwinian Natural Right*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1998) might be an exception to this claim.

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everyone's possessing it would have the best consequences; or the story that I can rationally will everyone's possessing it to be a universal law. If we thought one of these sorts of stories could provide a rational but ethically neutral foundation for virtue ethics – which biology clearly cannot – of course we would go for it. But, characteristically, we do not think that. So we think we would fare no better telling any of those sorts of stories.

'Well then', it might be said, 'if Aristotelian naturalism isn't seeking to provide ethics with a foundation in biology, what is it doing?' I think Bernard Williams came to give a good description.

Williams originally objected[6] to what he took Aristotelian naturalism to be, but he eventually conceded to Nussbaum[7] that there was a better way to read Aristotle, and he acknowledged (generous and honest man that he was) that most of his animadversions against it had been misplaced. (He retained one, which I shall consider in Part 3.) 'I grant' he said, 'that the Aristotelian enterprise may be seen in coherentist or hermeneutical terms'.[8] And, as far as the modern version is concerned, that seems a good description – it is offering a sort of coherentism – but a coherentism with a certain hermeneutical agenda.

Foot's Ethical Naturalism

After all, what you bring to a programme of achieving reflective equilibrium or coherence amongst your beliefs in a certain area is going to shape where you wind up, not least because it will affect what you take as relevant in that area. When Foot first began having her naturalistic thoughts, hardly anyone but her thought that they should work on getting their ethical and meta-ethical beliefs to cohere with a whole lot of other beliefs they had about good roots, good eyes, good cacti and so on, because they assumed those were irrelevant.

Taking Foot as the most influential ethical naturalist, it seems to me perfectly clear that what she takes herself to be doing is most

[6] Bernard Williams, *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 'Moral Standards and the Distinguishing Mark of Man', and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) chapter 3.

[7] Martha Nussbaum, 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics', in J.E.J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 86–131.

[8] Bernard Williams, 'Replies', Op. cit. 200.

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certainly not putting forward a foundation for ethics. She is a Wittgensteinian through and through, and hence anti-foundationalist, and she is doing what Wittgenstein says is the work of the philosopher namely assembling reminders for a particular purpose.[9] The general Wittgensteinian purpose is always to '*command a clear view* of our use of words'[10]; the particular purpose in Foot's case has always been to get clearer about our use of words when we are expressing or talking about our moral beliefs. When we evaluate someone as a good person, their action as right or wrong, their character as good or bad, what are we doing, what other uses of these words are these moral uses like?

When Foot first began objecting to the fact/value dichotomy, her opponents were quite sure they knew what the moral uses of 'good' and 'right' in assertions were like. They were like expressions of enthusiasm or disgust (the old boo hurrah stuff, remember). Or they were like commands – we saw more clearly what we were doing when we asserted 'John is a good man' when we saw our doing so as akin to our saying 'Be like John'. Or they were like self-addressed exhortations, 'Let me be like John!' And they were *not* like, were utterly unlike, 'John is a good thief' for example, because that was, obviously, a purely factual statement, as was 'That tree has good roots', and a different use of 'good' entirely.

Against these prevailing views, early Foot made at least two moves, just about the adjective 'good'. One was the old point that it is, at least for the most part, attributive, the way 'large' and 'small' are, and colour words, for the most part, are not. What that means is that, with a non-attributive adjective such as 'pink', you can say truly that something is pink without worrying about how you otherwise categorize the pink thing. It doesn't matter, for instance, whether you say it's a mouse or an animal, as long as it is, indeed, pink. But you can't do the same with 'large', because whether it's true that something being identified is large does depend on whether we categorize it as, for example, a mouse or an animal – one and the same thing is both a large mouse and a small animal. And so for 'good'; the good thief is the bad man, the good lover may, alas, be the bad husband, and so on.

Her second point was suggested by those examples. The adjective 'good' has a wide range of (as philosophers say) non-moral uses as well as moral ones. But we do not have any reason – such as a

[9] *Philosophical Investigations* §127.
[10] Ibid, §122.

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distinction drawn in a language other than English, or a satisfactory philosophical account – to suppose that this philosophical distinction between the moral and non-moral uses can always be made.

Regarding Foot's early work, I think one could say that the programme was simply coherentist, intended to show the crude subjectivists around her the error of their ways – hence her readiness to discuss 'good' in relation to inanimate functional objects such as pens and knives. And one could say too, that the programme was successful, generating the vastly more sophisticated forms of subjectivism we have nowadays.

But what began as the assembling of many, varied, examples of the use of 'good' with the purpose of undermining the fact/value dichotomy, became, in her culminating work, the assembling of a narrower set, with a much more specific purpose – to show a likeness, an analogy, between our evaluation of aspects of the other animals and our ethical evaluations of ourselves. She was, she said, 'quite seriously likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behaviour in animals'.[11]

The claim that there is a likeness or an analogy between two areas of talk distinguished by their subject matter (us and other animals that is) really is a pretty mild and one would think innocuous claim. If I stress that that is Foot's naturalist position – and mine, and I think Macintyre's – not that there is a foundation, not that there is any sort of primacy about the biological evaluations of the other animals, just that there is a likeness – it might be said, 'Well if that's all there is to it, what is all the fuss about?' That seems to me to be a good question. Why are people making such a fuss, trying to wipe virtue ethics right off the board?

It looks as though it really is Foot's analogy itself that is upsetting people, because they go on wanting to attack it even after we have belaboured the point that it is *not* an attempted foundation, for virtue ethics in particular, that the other theories would lack, but just an analogy. My suspicion is that, deep down, people don't like the analogy because, quite simply, it does not make human beings special enough as ethical agents; it does not keep us and our ethical thought and talk about ourselves properly insulated from any non-ethical thought and talk we have about the other animals. They want the difference in subject matter to make for lots of other differences, not to be told by Foot that they should be looking for similarities.

[11] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 16.

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Why go for the animal or biological analogy, they say, encouraging us to think of our ethical evaluations as being species-relative, when our ethical thought and talk about ourselves is about us as these very special beings, *persons*, which isn't a species-concept at all?

The response is – we go for the analogy in part to curtail our hubristic tendency to think of ourselves in that inflated way. The analogy puts us firmly in our place as something distinctly less than that special.

This does *not* rule out the significance of the fact that most of us are persons, that is, that we have a special sort of rationality. That would be odd, would it not, given that Foot's naturalism is Aristotelian and Aristotle is hardly an exemplar of a philosopher who downplays the point that our rationality distinguishes us from the other animals. That significant fact is present – it is us we are talking about after all – but in a species-relative way. Acquiring the rationality that makes *us* moral agents or persons fairly early in our development, and, if we are lucky, keeping it until we die, just is normal, healthy, human development. But, note, it is a stage in *human* development. The rationality and 'personhood' in question are human rationality and human personhood; the two concepts apply only to human beings, and thereby only to beings with certain biological properties, each of whom is, moreover, culturally and historically situated. We are not a whole different order of beings just because we spend most of our human lives being persons, and there is no reason to suppose, in advance of our encountering some promising candidates, that the concepts could also be applied, by family resemblance, to aliens or divine beings.

So one reason for heeding the analogy is that it helps us to shake off a bit more unwarranted Enlightenment optimism about what the Age of Reason will bring. Another reason is that we learn some interesting things about our ethical thought when we heed it.

Here is a little example of the sort of difference taking heed of the analogy can make. When, talking ethics, we are talking about good people and good lives, somewhere along the line we will probably come up against the problem presented by very different sorts of people and lives, all of which we are strongly inclined to say are good. Some of us incline to saying that there must always be an answer to which is best, it can't be indeterminate, and so search for some theoretical justification for ranking one over the other. Others find at least some of these attempts manifestly unsatisfactory, and accept the indeterminacy, saying that it reflects the Incommensurability of Values. We intend the capitals here, because we think of the incommensurability as being a significant

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feature of *moral* values, related to various features of us as Rational Beings – more capital letters – such as our autonomy, our integrity, the fact that we have personal values and so on.

However, if we follow Foot, we can recognise, agreeing with the second group, that the indeterminacy is certainly there, but not interpret the fact of its existence in such capitalised terms. Seen in the light of the analogy with the evaluation of other living things and how they are faring, all we are looking at is the sort of indeterminacy and 'incommensurability of values' – very much lower case – that we find right down at the level of plants, not something peculiar to ethics and our talk about ourselves as rational agents.

Here is a specimen of a particular sort of plant strikingly well-endowed in some respects, mildly defective in others, pretty good and healthy over all, and doing well in the way one would expect, given where it is growing. Here is another specimen, not as well-endowed in any respect, but without any corresponding defects; it is a good one too and also doing well. Is one better than another? Well, not according to any general criterion or standard. We might use a further criterion for a particular purpose; the showy well-endowed one may obviously be better for the village flower show competition. And we might invent a new criterion and make it general. But what would be the point when obviously the best description of the set up is to follow Aristotle and say that each is 'good with qualification'. The first is good despite-having-a-few-defects; the second is good though-with-nothing-outstanding-about-it.

A more general sort of difference that heeding the analogy can make is to encourage us to think about what empirical assumptions we make about ourselves as a kind of animal with a contingent nature when we talk about ethics and thereby to consider what would happen to that ethical thought and talk if the assumptions proved to be false.

In the remaining part of the paper I am going to do just that, through considering the second pair of objections.

3. Two Failing But Thought-provoking Objections

The objections considered in Part 1 took it that we Aristotelian virtue ethicists were talking old fashioned nonsense about the human essence. But a different set of critics have interpreted us rather more sensibly, allowing that we are, as I claimed in Part 1, talking about human nature in just the same way as, for instance,

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sociobiologists such as Wilson do when they say that human nature is ultimately selfish and philosophers of science such as Philip Kitcher do when they say no it isn't.[12]

Indeed, these critics want us to be talking sense about human nature, to be making straightforward empirical claims, because they think that evolutionary biology shows – well, no, not actually shows, but suggests – that some of these empirical claims are false; that the facts about human nature are, we may speculate, otherwise.

I will discuss two problematic putative facts about human nature allegedly suggested by evolutionary biology. I do not dispute that each of them, if it were a fact, would undermine one of the three bits of the Aristotelian claim about the virtues I cited at the outset. Nor do I dispute that they may well be suggested by evolutionary biology. My strategy will be to argue that, insofar as they are problematic for virtue ethicists, they are no more so than they are for most people who want to engage in ethical thought and talk.

Let us go back to the Aristotelian claim about the virtues. (The) virtues arise in us (i) neither by nature nor (ii) contrary to nature, but (iii) nature gives us the capacity to acquire them and completion comes through habituation.

It looks, does it not, as though it is not far off the obvious modern resolution of the nature/nurture debate; we become what we are because of the interaction of what we are 'born' with (saying 'conceived with' sounds too odd) and the environment. Take the first bit. It is obvious that we are not all born good, that virtue does not arise in us by nature, just as it is obvious that (contrary to Wilson) we are not all born selfish. (Of course, some people say that evolutionary biology shows that we are all born selfish, but this, if a fact, would so obviously be a problem for any ethical theory that I am not going to discuss it.)

But now take the third bit. It claims that there is a way in which we are born different from the other animals. Unlike them we can become virtuous because we are born with the capacities or propensities to acquire the virtues through habituation. The other animals cannot acquire *virtues*, which involve the recognition of certain considerations as *reasons* for acting because they do not, in the ethically relevant sense, recognise reasons *as* reasons at all. What 'habituation' covers in Aristotle is a lot. It begins in early

[12] See, for example, his 'Comment' on de Waal in Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

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childhood with an 'environment' which consists in being trained to behave in certain ways and gradually becomes something self-sustaining, i.e. you continue to act in those ways for reasons that you have made your own.

So there is one fairly straightforward empirical claim. We human beings are (for the most part) born with the capacities to acquire the virtues in this way.

Aristotle has also, in the second bit, made a point of saying that we do not acquire the virtues 'contrary to nature'. What is that claim doing? In part, it is just the denial of a picture that Plato, in his darker moments, draws. We would have the virtues contrary to nature if we were, psychologically, a battlefield for the irreconcilable forces of Reason and Passion (or Desire.) We would acquire the virtues if (and only if) Reason wins, but at a hefty price, our natural passions or desires destroyed, crippled, deformed, enslaved. And, according to the second bit, we are not like that. But this unfolds into much more.

Aristotle, and Plato more often than not, think that the passions are not insulated from reason, deaf to its suggestions. In so far as we are born with the capacities to experience, (Aristotle's examples) appetite, anger, fear, envy, joy, love, hate, longing, emulation and pity, we are born with the capacities to have these passions shaped by our upbringing and early experiences and later, by ourselves, by what we make of further experience and our reflections. Moreover, they think that, when the passions are shaped the right way by reason, they can come to be in perfect harmony with it.

Hence the famous Aristotelian distinction between virtue and mere continence which modern virtue ethicists sling at Kantians. If you tell the truth or pay your debts or help other people against inclination, because you think you should, that is mere continence and not good enough. You have more work to do on getting your passions into harmony with your reason. And when you have, you will find that, by and large, you enjoy doing what is virtuous; you will do it gladly; virtuous action –for the most part– gives pleasure to the virtuous. (In the terms of contemporary causal theories of action, your virtuous actions are overdetermined, caused both by the desire to do whatever it is and also by the belief that doing whatever it is is right plus the second order desire to do what is right.)

So there is a second empirical claim. We are all (pretty much) born to be such that we can bring our passions/desires into harmony with our reason and live happily and harmoniously together.

So we have two substantial empirical claims about human nature, about what (for the most part) is true of human beings.

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i) We are all pretty much born the same as far as those capacities or propensities that pertain to ethics – cognitive, affective, desiderative – are concerned. (I'll call them 'the ethically relevant capacities'.)
ii) All (pretty much) of these ethically relevant capacities have a further feature; they can all be developed together, not at each other's expense.

So Aristotle's claim about the virtues, embodying as it does these two empirical claims, is up for refutation. So now let us look at the two obvious ways in which it can be false. They are the following two Putatively Problematic Facts, which are brought as the two further objections I shall now discuss.

PPF1 is that as far as the ethically relevant capacities are concerned, yes we are all born pretty much the same, but we are born a mess – the capacities cannot be developed together.

PPF2 is that as far as the ethically relevant capacities are concerned, we are not born pretty much the same but significantly varied.

Third objection: We Are An Ill-assorted Bricolage

That PP1 may well be a fact, and that this is suggested by evolutionary theory, is an objection to Aristotelian naturalism that has been pressed by Williams (I noted above that he had retained one of his objections it). We may well be, as he has memorably put it, 'an ill-assorted bricolage of powers and instincts'.[13]

Indeed, he thinks that evolutionary theory suggests that we are born as just such an ill-assorted mess. 'The most plausible stories now available about (our) evolution, including its very recent date …suggest that human beings are to some degree a mess, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for whom no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory either individually or socially'.[14] We might note that this second quote is tentative – human beings are 'to some degree' a mess; they are beings for whom no form of life is 'likely' to prove 'entirely' satisfactory. But if we take that tentativeness seriously, the claim, as something aimed at Aristotelian

[13] 'Replies' in J.E.J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 199.

[14] 'Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem', in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 109.

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naturalism, is just too weak to touch it, and hence not interesting. None of us thinks – do we? – that democracy, as a social form of life, is entirely satisfactory. After all, it brought in Hitler and, after a fashion, Bush. But we think it's the best practicable one. And that's good enough; it gives us something to aim at socially, in the global village. *Eudaimonia*, or a flourishing life, the life of virtuous activity, which is what Aristotle thinks we can each individually live when we get our passions into harmony with our reason, does not have to be thought of as entirely satisfactory. In fact, Aristotle himself rather suggests that it is, in a way a kind of second best – our rational aspect ('the divine element within us') would be better satisfied if we lived the divine life of reflective activity. But it is the best practicable option for us, because we are human not divine. (I'm not endorsing any of that of course – it's the funny stuff from Book 10. I'm just mentioning it to make it clear that even for Aristotle, let alone a modern virtue ethicist, 'the good life' for human beings doesn't have to be roses all the way.) And that's good enough; it gives us something to aim at individually.

So to make the objection interesting, I think we have to take it as something rather stronger. Then it appears as, basically, an old idea – old enough to be present, at least to some extent, in Plato, as I noted earlier – namely that our unique combination of some set of affective/desiderative capacities not very different from those of some of the other animals plus a set of tricksy cognitive capacities unique to us (as a set) in the animal kingdom, makes us seriously at odds with ourselves – to the extent indeed that there is no likelihood that living *this* way, say, ethically, will be more satisfying or fulfilling or make us happier than living some other way. On the contrary, it is unlikely that any one of us will live a satisfying life, fulfilling our nature, given each of us is a mess, and if it turns out that some of us actually do, this will just be luck, no indication that anyone would be well-advised to take us as a model in the hope of winding up in the same happy state.

As the Platonic parallel to this gloomy picture reminds us, there corresponds to this old version of the idea, an old way to deal with it, namely aim at the life hereafter. Yes, it is agreed, the combination of the spirit and the fleshly desires is most unfortunate, the two never to be reconciled, so the only thing worth doing is preparing your spirit for its release in either the Western or the Eastern ways. Less familiar is another Eastern way of dealing with the problem which recommends dismantling or reshaping (according to one's favoured interpretation) one's cognitive and cultural powers to return to the state or condition of small children.

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What should be noted about these ways of responding to the idea that we human beings are a mess is that they are responding in *the only practical way*, that is, by finding something substantial and long term for practical reason to aim at. Because that's the problem that the speculation presents us with which has to be addressed. And it is a problem not just for virtue ethicists, but *everyone*.

If there is no such thing as a predictable form of *eudaimonia*, or happiness or well-being for us humans, if any individual who winds up leading a satisfying life does so just by chance – then how can we make rational long term decisions about what to do? What is there for practical reason to do? I rely on being able to take the well-being of others as an end whether I am a virtue ethicist, a Kantian or a consequentialist.

Moreover, even if I am an egoist, I rely on being able to take my own well-being as an end. If it is not a practicable end, I could exercise my practical rationality in keeping alive (just in case I might be one of the lucky few) and in securing short term enjoyments and freedom from pain, but as for any more long term goals, I might just as well flip a coin to decide whether or not to go for them, and if so how. For, like everyone else, I am a mess of irreconcilable powers and instincts and there is no form of life that is at all likely to be satisfying to me.

So, I would say, the idea that Aristotle's more optimistic view is completely misplaced, and that we are all just a mess is, indeed, a very disturbing idea, but it is no more disturbing to Aristotelian virtue ethics than it is to any other position, including egoism. As I have noted, it is hardly a new idea, and why the facts of our evolution should be thought to give it a new plausibility is unclear to me, but I think we should all cross our fingers and hope that this is not so or we are all in trouble.

Fourth Objection: We Are Not Born Pretty Much The Same, But Varied

There are at least two ways in which we are not *all* born *exactly* the same which were (perhaps) recognised by Aristotle and which should be distinguished from the second Problematic Putative Fact that evolutionary biology is claimed to suggest.

One is very obvious; he classifies some people as 'brutish', noting that brutishness can arise 'through disease and disability' and asserting that such people possess neither virtue nor vice. On a charitable reading (ignoring some typically dreadful remarks about the

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condition being mostly found amongst non-Greeks) he is noting a familiar variation in human cognitive abilities, namely that some humans are born severely 'mentally handicapped' as we say. And he is excluding them from the category of people who are up for ethical assessment, as we all do today.

Many people find the second way he seems to recognise variation more disconcerting. In a tantalisingly brief passage in Book 6, he apparently introduces the idea of natural virtue, what you are born with, in contrast to full virtue, which is the set of character traits you wind up with after many years of dedicated habituation and the acquisition of practical wisdom. On one way of reading the passage, in saying we are born with natural virtue, he is just saying again what he said in the claim I began with – that we are all (pretty much) born naturally able to acquire the virtues. But on another way of reading it, he is noting what might well have seemed to him to be a fact, as it may to us, namely that some of us – only some of us – are lucky enough to be born much more able to acquire the virtues than others. After all, it often looks as though some babies are just born happy, amenable, and sweet-tempered and that, as toddlers, they display vestigial courage and self-control long before any training has had a chance to kick in, whereas others are born unhappy, cranky, difficult and timorous.

All right, so let us suppose, with Aristotle interpreted this way, that this is a fact. It entails that, as far as becoming good people is concerned, we do not start on a level playing field; some of us are likely to find it easier than others. Is that problematic for virtue ethicists? Well, it doesn't seem to bother Aristotle and I do not see it as a problem for any of us moderns. It is not a major qualification on the claim that we are all (for the most part) naturally able to acquire virtue. When we recognise virtue as a threshold concept, all we need is that, born with natural virtue or without, we are all, for the most part, born naturally able to reach the threshold. That some of us are bound to find it easier than others and get there more quickly, that within life's short span, some of those born without natural virtue can never get to be as good as some of those who started with that natural advantage, is just how things are. There are greater and lesser grades of virtue which are not in any way under the control of their possessors, just as there are greater and lesser grades of intelligence similarly beyond their possessors' control.

So this particular way in which there may be variation in the human population does not seem to be problematic for virtue ethics at all. I think myself that one advantage of going back as far

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as Plato and Aristotle for one's philosophical ethics is that one goes back to something so manifestly un-Christian, so untouched by the idea that a just and loving god creates us all equal, with an equal chance of becoming good. Aristotle's view of natural virtue, and Plato's serene assumption in the Republic that we are born as guardians or not are clearly untouched by it, as is their taking as obvious the enormous effect of nurture on whether we turn out good or bad.

It does not seem to me so obvious that proponents of the other ethical theories, if they incline to some sort of equality we all have as persons, can shrug off this sort of unfairness in life so readily. Maybe they can, because, after all, everyone nowadays accepts that being born into a certain sort of family and/or social milieu gives you a substantially greater or lesser chance of becoming good than being born into a different sort. But one still sometimes encounters an unwillingness to admit that A is a better person than B, notwithstanding some rather nasty emotional reactions that B has carried over from her unfortunate upbringing and that A is virtuously without, when B has, *ex hypothesi*, done 'everything she could' to extirpate them.

Be that as it may, the modest amount of variation perhaps implied by Aristotle's idea of natural virtue is not, as I said, a problem for Aristotelian virtue ethicists. But that we are able to accommodate some such inequality does not show we can tolerate a lot more, and it is, theoretically, on the cards, that we are born much more varied than Aristotle's sketchy idea of natural virtue allows.

This brings me to what, I take it, those who appeal to evolution are really after. Sterelny and Griffiths say

> '(So) no general biological principle suggests that human moral feelings, mental abilities, or fundamental desires should be any more uniform than human blood type or eye color. On the contrary, human cognitive evolution seems likely to have involved an evolutionary mechanism that produces variation within a population …'.[15]

I take it their thought is that, as far as the ethically relevant capacities are concerned, we are varied in really serious ways.

Since we have no idea whether or not this is so, thinking about it involves a thought experiment and the obvious one that springs to mind is: What if it turned out to be the case that about 10% of the population, say, were born psychopathic. (In so far as I have

[15] Kim Sterelny and Paul E.Griffiths, op.cit note 3, 8.

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grasped the distinction between that and sociopathy, I really do mean psychopathy.) Given we are not quite clear about what psychopathy is, we have to make the story up as we go along, but what I am imagining – and the people I have found bringing this objection forward are clearly imagining – is that, assuming some of us are born this way, there would be something biologically identifiable very early on with fairly clear cut edges. I mean something which, although there are very occasionally borderline cases, is otherwise an all or nothing matter. And given that it is psychopathy that we are imagining, what we are also imagining is that the presence of this identifiable whatsit is a very reliable, though certainly not infallible indicator of seriously immoral behaviour in adulthood. (Fill in for yourself whatever you take to be the prime examples of immoral behaviours to be.)

This sort of example tends to be brought up to frighten virtue ethicists, but it seems to me that it ought to frighten the living daylights out of anyone who is serious about ethics, or at least that we should all find it very problematic. Again, it is not a new threat or a new idea. It is just the old idea that some significant group of us are born irredeemably (for the most part yet again) wicked or amoral – or rather, predisposed to become wicked or amoral. You might think that the modern pseudo scientific version gives an especially threatening twist to the idea by introducing the point that, *ex hypothesi*, we would be able to identify these people, when or even before they are born, but that really is not so – that is part of the old idea too. We have a lamentable history of some group of us believing that another group of us is born irredeemably wicked; it is mostly a history of the assumption that the bad sort can be spotted before or at birth because mostly it is simply the history of racism (well, and sexism too of course.)

No doubt because of that history, our modern sensibilities are not at all attuned to taking this idea on board in our ethical thought. If we really did discover such a thing, what on earth would we do and how would we justify whatever we did in ethical terms, *whichever* normative theory we appealed to? I can imagine that some particularly hardline act utilitarians, and some of the redneck fundamentalists might cheerfully say oh well we'll kill 'em off at birth, and justify this in their usual ways, but I would say the rest of us are in real trouble.

So this is another speculation with respect to which I think we all, not just the virtue ethicists, had better cross our fingers and hope it is not so. That is as far as I have got in my exploration of the idea that our being varied, rather than pretty much the same as far as ethically relevant capacities are concerned, would present a serious problem

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for virtue ethics. And so far my conclusion is, in some versions it would not present any problem (though in the case of 'natural virtue' it might be awkward for some egalitarians or people who believe in fairness) and in the some-of-us-might-be-born psychopathic version, it would present a serious problem for any of us, whatever normative ethical theory we espouse.

4. Conclusion

Overall my conclusion is that, pending further efforts, neither evolutionary biology nor armchair speculations about what it suggests might yet be revealed about human nature pose any threat to virtue ethics as such, though the two speculations I have discussed above would indeed be problematic for ethics as we know it.

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