

Aristotelian Naturalism and the Imperfect Project of Normalizing Ethics

MARTIN HÄHNEL, Institute of Applied Philosophy, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany

HÄHNEL, M.: Aristotelian Naturalism and the Imperfect Project of Normalizing Ethics
FILOZOFIA, 79, 2024, No 2, pp. 184 – 194

In this paper, I claim that the project of recovering an “ethics of normality” not only consists of the attempt to return metaphysical concepts to their everyday meaning but also is dedicated to the goal of developing a theory of the ethically self-evident that ultimately leaves things as they are. In contrast to competing ethical theories of deontology and consequentialism, Aristotelian naturalism, as a promising approach to the justification of virtue ethics, is able to provide a particular heuristic of ethical reservedness. For example, Aristotelian naturalism gives us good reasons to formulate objections to efforts to improve human nature – and even to make this improvement a moral imperative – or to implement educational programs that exceed the reasonable measure of what is ethically acceptable. In particular, I argue that the neo-Aristotelian concept of a person, expanded or grounded in the way just described, offers the appropriate basis for developing an innovative and integrative bioethical ontology of the human being.

Keywords: Aristotelian naturalism – virtue ethics – applied ethics – concept of a person – life forms – human nature

Introduction

The following article is more a presentation of a philosophical research program than an argumentative discussion. It is a condensation of central research questions on Aristotelian naturalism that I have exhaustively discussed and attempted to answer elsewhere (e.g., Hähnel 2020). Without getting lost in details, I will attempt to outline the basic concerns of Aristotelian naturalism, identify its critical potential, and show ways in which it can be productively developed. I would like to show that Aristotelian naturalism lays the foundations for an “ethics of normality” that does not need to be reinvented but

rather needs to be uncovered anew. Such an “ethics of normality” points to the normative inadequacies and overstretching of deontological and consequentialist ethical models, without presenting itself as a supernaturalist option. It also offers, under the premise of its organic further development, the appropriate basis for introducing an innovative and integrative bioethical ontology of the human being.

I. The Basic Concern of Aristotelian Naturalism

A general attitude of rejection towards Aristotelian naturalism today may be rooted in the fact that many critics of the approach believe that Aristotelian naturalism, and with it, virtue ethics, is primarily fighting for the trophy of the best normative theory in contemporary ethics. This is a misjudgment, since the neo-Aristotelian approach, at least in Philippa Foot’s version, pursues more of a therapeutic goal, without giving up the claim to be able to answer normative questions with its own conceptual means just as well as competing approaches. In this sense, Foot does not develop a specific ethics of human nature that is refined down to the last detail, but rather, following Wittgenstein, supports the ambitious project of normalizing (instead of naturalizing) modern ethics, which in her opinion is on an erroneous path.¹

In this paper, I claim that this project of recovering an “ethics of normality” not only consists of the attempt to return metaphysical concepts to their everyday meaning but is also dedicated to the goal of developing a theory of the ethically self-evident that ultimately *leaves things as they are*. As is well known, “normality” is not used as a technical concept within the recent ethics debate because it is difficult to define and should not be confused with the more common concept of “normativity” (although in Aristotelian naturalism, normativity has a lot to do with normality). Philippa Foot alone speaks of normality when she distinguishes the normativity of “Aristotelian categoricals” from the binding significance of statistical judgments of normality (*nota bene*, a neo-aristotelian notion of normality cannot be reduced to the latter).² “Normalizing” therefore does not mean to return to an original (purely ethical) state or does

¹ John Hacker-Wright believes that ultimately Foot is also pursuing a “moral vision” in which the development of a rational moral code is to be advanced on a contractualist basis with the help of virtue ethical considerations (Hacker-Wright 2013, 151).

² Aristotelian categoricals are non-statistical generic judgments about the natural or normal form of living things, e.g.: “Lionesses (normally) teach their young to hunt.”

not refer to the scientific project of naturalizing moral properties³ but rather to inform general ethical inquiry about the existence of qualitative norms that are based neither on statistical generalities nor abstract principles but rather on what is “normal,” i.e., “reasonable,” “natural,” “human,” etc. Philippa Foot’s intention, which could be misinterpreted as a meticulously planned program, must not be understood as a type of ethics that prepares to close itself off to moral progress. The general incentive represented by Aristotelian naturalism to practice virtues and to flourish morally according to the precepts of one’s way of life does not characterize a backward-looking project that is sometimes even dismissed as a deliberate critique of modernity. Rather, neo-Aristotelian ethics, especially in its Wittgensteinian form, believes it can leave things as they are *because* it can not only avoid the danger of overdemanding agents who are willing to act morally but also successfully overcome non-cognitivist and proceduralist approaches in ethics.⁴ This peculiar heuristic of moral reservedness finds expression in the field of applied ethics, where Aristotelian naturalism can be used to formulate objections to efforts to improve human nature (*enhancement*)⁵ – and even to make this improvement a moral imperative – or to implement educational programs that exceed the reasonable measure of what is ethically acceptable. Furthermore, Aristotelian naturalism is also reticent about locating the source of normativity in a supreme lawgiver. Broadly conceived, the neo-Aristotelian project of normalizing ethics, which is not shared by all representatives, can be characterized as follows:

³ An “ethics of normality” thus also undermines the naturalistic fallacy. For example, Aristotelian categoricals do not contain evaluative statements or determinations about what is good. However, these judgments are nevertheless binding insofar as they describe the natural or non-statistically normal behavior of a member of a species. This behavior is not – and this was the aim of G.E. Moore’s naturalistic fallacy – normal because it is solely aimed at evolutionary benefit.

⁴ The objection of excessive demands, which is often raised against consequentialist moral theories, usually refers to the existence or formulation of a universal moral obligation to do the best we can, with the help of which the classical distinction between supererogatory and commanded actions, which is so eminently important for virtue ethics and Kantian moral theories, is leveled. Unlike Kantian approaches, neo-Aristotelian supererogation theories can draw on Aristotle’s doctrine of *mesotes* for additional support of their argumentative defense against the objection of supererogation (cf. Stangl 2016).

⁵ Aristotelian naturalism basically sees an essential difference between a therapeutic and an enhancement approach to what can be called “human nature.” For Aristotelian naturalism, “human nature” is not a mixed bag, but rather the unified source and form of human life (see Hähnel 2017).

- (1) Aristotelian naturalism, bypassing the naturalistic fallacy, is not a throwback to a biologicistic account of ethics. It is (quasi-) biologically based only insofar as it allows us to demonstrate the similarity of the functioning of life forms in nature (plants and animals) with the structures of our human ethical judgment and to make them fruitful for answering fundamental normative questions;
- (2) Aristotelian naturalism is only *one* approach to the normative justification of virtue ethics, albeit the most convincing because it is the most universal, the most integrative and the most widely discussed;⁶
- (3) Aristotelian naturalism, as a suitable approach to the normative justification of virtue ethics, is not able to replace the competing ethical justification paradigms of deontology and consequentialism, but merely to modify them in its favor and in contrast to purely rule-based approaches by prefiguring qualities of action whose claim to validity is independent of the consequentialist idea of an imperative that forces us to do the most or the best we can;
- (4) Aristotelian naturalism, despite its corrective justification, develops an independent concept of action, insofar as it makes the distinction between actions into good and bad ones dependent on the success or failure of achieving a certain form of life or life practice (virtues are not considered as means to fulfill a higher end, but are, as independent wholes, constitutive expressions of successful life practice), which is also constituted between individuals based on compliance with basic rules of human cohabitation;
- (5) the normative understanding of a species and a life form, contrary to what Philippa Foot asserts at the end of *Natural Goodness*, can certainly be extended to current questions of applied ethics, especially if one considers that today's bioethics should not strive solely to justify a medical virtue ethics (Pellegrino 2019) challenged by numerous constraints, but should also be concerned with the recurrent evaluation

⁶ It is a desideratum of future research to determine to what extent virtue ethics based on Aristotelian naturalism can be distinguished from non-naturalistic virtue ethics based on Aristotle (e.g., Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre), non-Aristotelian virtue ethics based on naturalism (e.g., neo-Darwinian approaches) and virtue ethics that are neither naturalistic nor Aristotelian (e.g., Kant's "virtue ethics"). The main difference between non-Aristotelian virtue ethics with a naturalistic basis (e.g., neo-Darwinian approaches) and virtue ethics that are neither naturalistic nor Aristotelian (e.g., Kant's "virtue ethics") is that they can be distinguished from each other or, under certain circumstances, can even be combined with each other.

of living entities (iPS cells, embryos, transgenic laboratory mice, the human body modified by enhancement practices and drugs, etc.) and non-living entities (care robots, medical AI systems, etc.). A substantial concept of “life form,” dispensed from the consequentialist logic of optimization, offers the appropriate basis for this, to develop innovative and integrative bioethics on an Aristotelian basis;

- (6) neo-Aristotelian ethics or bioethics rejects any form of biologicistic and supernaturalistic interpretation of its premises and conclusions,⁷ which leads to the point that Aristotelian Naturalism
- a) stands in strong and indissoluble tension with moral approaches of neo-Darwinian provenance that also call themselves “naturalistic,”⁸
 - b) offers no standard of comparison for transhumanist approaches, whose peculiarity is to leave behind not the nature of the human, but the human as such,⁹
 - c) prevents the further development of the concept of life form towards a concept of a person that takes into account aspects of self-transcendence and mutual recognition of life forms,
 - d) is forced to borrow from the Kantian paradigm of the subjective, normatively binding the interpretability of one’s form of life, thus leading to a certain form of moral constitutivism,¹⁰

⁷ On Aristotelian naturalism’s treatment of the perspective of supernaturalism, see McPherson (2015).

⁸ Tarkian and Schmidt (2011) provide a good overview on various ethical positions based on a Darwinian understanding of human nature.

⁹ This is primarily about questioning the (ontological) category of the human being. Aristotelian naturalism also speaks of non-human life forms (animals and plants). However, humans are the highest form of life due to their ability to give and take practical reasons. This supremacy is denied by transhumanism, even in relation to non-living, non-human entities such as robots or AI systems. Aristotelian Naturalism can only be understood as an expression of bioconservativism (that is, the view that humans and their nature should be protected from dehumanization caused by enhancement, AI, etc.) if enhancement is seen as a condition for transhumanism or if transhumanism is the purpose of enhancement in its various forms. Aristotelian naturalism is not necessarily bioconservative if enhancement is made without transhumanist intentions, or if transhumanism does not have the goal of leaving human abilities behind. The designation of Aristotelian Naturalism as “moderate bioconservativism” expresses nothing other than a particular instantiation of the “ethics of normality” that we are presenting here.

¹⁰ Horn describes the competing project of moral constitutivism as follows: “Moral constitutivism is a relatively new term in the field of action theory and moral philosophy. The term stands for philosophical approaches according to which our self-understanding as

- e) can allow the political-social dimension of being human to be separated from its living dimension, or the latter to be downgraded in its relevance, by going back to Aristotle,
- f) in Wittgenstein's sense, is understood as a deflationary ethics project that allows no distinction to be made between ethics and morality, to either give the go-ahead for a pure ethical quietism or, by deliberately creating certain explanatory gaps, to virtually pave the way for the establishment of a certain form of ethical constructivism.¹¹

But what concept of ethics is ultimately hidden behind this specific positioning of Aristotelian naturalism? It is not clear enough from Foot's writings whether she, like Wittgenstein, conceives of the ethical as something transcendent and thus shares the deep skepticism of the Austrian philosopher towards normative ethics. It is also unclear to what extent a contextualist Wittgensteinian like Elisabeth Anscombe should be considered as a stooge for the development of an (ultimately soft) ethical naturalism à la Foot.

Presumably, Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Foot agree that ethics is not only a theory but above all a form of teaching life (cf. Wittgenstein 1989, 10f.). However, I dare to doubt that Foot accepted Wittgenstein's radical distinction into the immanence of the world and the transcendent realm of values – what he also calls the “mystical,” a distinction that leads to the famous “inexpressibility” (*Tractatus* 6.421) of ethics. It is more likely that Foot, through the influence of her friend Iris Murdoch, transforms the strict Wittgensteinian dualism of the factual and the mystical by attempting to resolve this contradiction in an inner-worldly way – partly in order not to have to resort to supernaturalistic sources of the justification for norms and the explanation of why we should strive for the good. Wittgenstein himself accommodates this tendency, reinforced by Foot, in his later philosophy itself, above all in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where – among other things with

agents is based on a fixed basic structure that is at the same time normatively substantial – and, depending on the approach, also includes moral norms. In other words, constitutivists claim that our practical identity as agents has normatively (or morally) binding implications” (Horn 2021, 378).

¹¹ Constructivist approaches in metaethics, to which constitutivist ones can also be counted, repeatedly bristle at the fact that in Aristotelian naturalism truths about the relationship between rationality, morality, and action do not have to be completely constructed by correct deliberation, but “only” have to be confirmed with reference to the form of life.

recourse to the concept of the life-form – he searches for possibilities of a meaningful, inner-worldly practical language.

II. At Which Point Is It Worthwhile to Think about the Neo-Aristotelian Project Further?

Just because Aristotelian naturalism seeks to normalize ethics does not mean that it cannot produce moral truths or make progress in metaethics, normative, or applied ethics. Rather, Aristotelian naturalism proves to be a very adaptable approach to the theoretical justification and practical spelling out of norms that are to be sought in the basic structures of human life and action. Thus, unlike competing designs in ethics, it can also take Nietzsche's fundamental discrediting of morality seriously by countering the tendency, especially demonstrable in the field of bioethics, to think and act beyond our human way of life for to see the "possibility of a new species or life form that could develop from our own" (Foot 2001, 115). Aristotelian naturalism offers an interesting, if not perfect, basis for bringing ethics back down to earth. It neither favors Nietzsche's ideal of the destructive self-creation of an egoistic and solitary "*Übermensch*" nor the utilitarian plan to let everyone's ethical objectives merge into the impersonality of universal benevolence.

In the following and as some sort of a conclusion without a comment, I would like to pick out and briefly present only three possible perspectives for further elaborating Aristotelian naturalism: a) *Thomistic explorations*, b) *Political forms of life*, and c) *Neo-Aristotelian concept of a person*.

A) Thomistic Explorations

In contrast to consequentialism and deontology, Aristotelian naturalism, especially in its Thomistic further development, provides probably the most authentic theory on human passions. By contrast, deontological and contractualist approaches tend to represent and take as a basis a Stoic view of feelings and passions, i.e., one that is ultimately unaffected by morality and the value of an action. Utilitarianism classifies feelings exclusively horizontally – even Mill's more distinguished variant of qualitative utilitarianism does not change this – in the binary grid of pleasure, which is to be promoted, and displeasure, which is to be avoided. A neo-Aristotelian-neo-Thomist virtue ethics could succeed in grasping all facets of human emotional life and directing them toward the good of the human being, towards its well-being. Thomas Aquinas thus offers a corresponding framework for Aristotelian naturalism, which allows the virtues and passions to be assigned an original place in the

general reason-guided and hierarchical order of love (*Summa theologiae*, I – II, q. 25, a. 2 c).¹²

B) The Concept of a Political Life-Form

First of all, the close relationship between the neo-Aristotelian theories of ethical naturalism and the Hegelian theory of dialectical naturalism seems to make it possible to determine the normativity of the form of life on a level other than that of a species-dependent good. Aristotle, to whom Hegel refers in several places, already speaks of a political form of life, and neo-Hegelian authors such as John McDowell make use of the idea of a “second nature,” which can also be understood in political and social terms. In addition to Hegel and the neo-Hegelians, a politicization of the human form of life can also be found in the materialist social theories of the Frankfurt School as well as in Nancy Fraser’s distinction between capitalizable and non-capitalizable nature, whereby nature, which is in itself unavailable, is increasingly integrated into social acts of formation. Against this background, then – with a view to Aristotle and his tense determination of the relationship between βίος θεωρητικός and βίος πολιτικός¹³ – the general question must be clarified as to whether and in what sense the political essence of human beings can be conceived of as nature-determinacy.

C) Neo-Aristotelian Concept of the Person

Another promising research perspective consists of obtaining a neo-Aristotelian transformed concept of person. However, this transformation project must be qualified from the outset by the fact that a possible concept of “personal forms of life” (cf. Noller 2020) is largely fed by conceptual resources that are alien to the neo-Aristotelian paradigm of normative justification.¹⁴ Here, one would immediately think of Kantian¹⁵ and phenomenological (Drummond 2017) figures of reasoning, the use of which would raise the

¹² On this see also Hacker-Wright (2020).

¹³ According to Aristotle, the theoretical form of life has primacy over the political (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I 3 and 6, X 6-9), which is not to say that there are no conceptual and practical interdependencies here.

¹⁴ John Hacker-Wright speaks as a representative of recent research on Aristotelian naturalism about “personhood” in order to establish a connection between an intentional agent and the (human) life form to which he belongs. For Hacker-Wright, however, personhood is not something given, but is acquired exclusively through education. (cf. Hacker-Wright 2009)

¹⁵ On this, see the approaches of Heinrichs (2020) and Noller (2020).

already familiar question of the extent to which the project of Aristotelian naturalism could then still be called “Aristotelian” or “naturalistic” at all.

Against this background, I would like to focus on Robert Spaemann’s theory of the person (Spaemann 2007) in Thomas Buchheim’s current reconstruction, which makes an innovative contribution to thinking further about Aristotelian naturalism. Similar to Foot and Thompson, Spaemann’s plural notion of “persons” is characterized by the description of a specific way of life, which does not have to be realized by all members of the same filial association to say that this living individual is a person. The way of life of the specimens thus gives the filial association – analogous to Aristotelian naturalism – its specific form. However, according to the neo-Aristotelian model, judgments of the kind “Man is a person” are useless, since they produce tautologies and thus also have no evaluative content. Aristotelian naturalism in its original form is therefore completely unsuitable – not only due to the fact that it can hardly resist Peter Singer’s accusation of speciesism (cf. Hursthouse 1999)¹⁶ – when it comes to providing ethical and legal conceptions of human dignity with a viable philosophical foundation.

Thomas Buchheim, who is further developing Spaemann’s research programme, points out a possible way of further development. According to Buchheim’s interpretation, which dispenses with some of the metaphysical premises in Spaemann’s argumentation, any judgments about the “human form of life” should not be tautological, but thoroughly informative and action-guiding. How is that supposed to work? Buchheim argues that judgments such as “Man is a person” cannot be part of natural history, but, as “viventohistorical judgements” (Buchheim 2024, manuscript), they should express that persons have a place in natural history, but as living individuals they can also leave this place again, or have always left it.¹⁷ Furthermore, for Buchheim the “form of life” is not a purely logical category of judgment, but has an “ontologically real form that is built on associations of life under certain conditions” (Buchheim 2024, manuscript).¹⁸ The result for Buchheim is that persons, unlike neo-Aristotelian forms of life, require an ontological foundation that is not natural, not speciesist, but also not tied to the self-consciousness of

¹⁶ Hursthouse herself claims that she considers the concept of person to be ethically unsuitable.

¹⁷ Helmuth Plessner speaks here of an “eccentric positionality” of the human being that allows him to place himself in a frontal position to non-human life forms that owe their identity and their change to the course of natural history.

¹⁸ See Buchheim 2024, manuscript: “Thompson also concedes that our judgments (‘natural historical judgements’), if they are sound, need a foundation in the matter, that is, that life forms in his sense are phenomena ‘*bene fundata*’ (Thompson 2008, 76).”

individuals. That is, persons are what they are by nature, but not by their nature, but by what they are always doing in a formal sense – biographically, as it were, surreptitiously – without also being able to refrain from doing it (Buchheim 2024, manuscript).

With the help of such a neo-Aristotelian concept of a person or a personalized understanding of the neo-Aristotelian form of life, important bioethics discussions, which are held primarily on the beginning (e.g., with regard to the moral status of the human embryo) and the end of human life (e.g., with regard to brain death), could be reopened. Persons, now also understood as ontologically founded life forms, would no longer have to be identified by the presence or absence of certain (cognitive) characteristics and abilities but would remain bound throughout their life cycle to those characteristics defined and specified by species-specific affiliation in order to realize the “being of a person” of the corresponding life form. Thus, this attempt to introduce a concept of person that is expanded or grounded in the way just described makes it clear that Aristotelian naturalism does not have to buy its defense against supernaturalism by caving into the metaphysics objection if it wants to follow the track towards an ontology of the person.

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Martin Hähnel
Institute of Philosophy
Chair of Applied Philosophy
University of Bremen
Enrique-Schmidt-Str. 7
28359 Bremen
Germany
e-mail: haehnel@uni-bremen.de
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3692-758>