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Aristotelian Naturalism

A Research Companion

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Chapter 15

Realistic Humanism: Martha Nussbaum on Human Nature

Angela Kallhoff

First and foremost, it needs to be said that Martha Nussbaum never advocated ethical naturalism, regardless of how one defines it. This statement must be the central point of departure for a comparison of Nussbaum's concept of ethics and that of ethical naturalism. The same holds true even if the objective is *not* to substitute scientific explanations for moral properties but to develop an approach based on the neo-Aristotelian view of natural goodness.

Most recently, several authors have argued the renewed viability of Aristotelian-influenced ethical naturalism (Foot 2001; Kallhoff 2010; McDowell 1995). Instead of deriving normative content from empirical data and deeming knowledge of nature as an empirical intent, nature itself is understood as a subjective concept, as believed in ancient perceptions of nature. This so-called *inverted* ethical naturalism not only has the advantage of bridging the gap between (subjective) valuations and facts – particularly the facts defining the human biological constitution as a living being – it also invites pondering an alternative anthropology and action theory contrasting with contemporary assumptions. A human is then no longer defined as a composite of mind and matter. A human becomes a thinking, acting being within the framework of his or her mental and physical capacities (Thompson 1995, 2008). Instead of explaining good behavior as a reaction to rationally accepted social standards, behavior is then understood as an option for realizing ends within the parameters of a human's valuating nature. Contemporary virtue ethics argue in favor of this behavior model (MacIntyre 1981).

Modern discussions on ethical naturalism must differentiate between a scientific assessment of nature and the neo-Aristotelian concept of human capabilities. I propose that Martha Nussbaum did *not* explicitly advocate the latter. So what can still be put forth on Martha Nussbaum and ethical naturalism? To begin with, Nussbaum

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most certainly was attributed with Aristotle-based ethical naturalism, as remarked by Hursthouse: "In 'Two Sorts of Naturalism,' McDowell argues not for the claims of Aristotle's naturalism, but for a proper understanding of it. Martha Nussbaum, in 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics' (1995), also argues powerfully for an understanding of Aristotle's conception of human nature as 'internal and evaluative' rather than external and 'scientific' in the modern sense—and none the worse for being so" (Hursthouse 1999, 195 FN 3).

Thus, it is Hursthouse's proposal we must explore. We should at least deter hasty assumptions that Nussbaum's valuating of nature immediately implies neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism.

Furthermore, we should take precautions when explaining human nature to remember that conclusions do not necessarily fall into *ethical naturalism* categories. Nevertheless, Nussbaum stressed in her illumination of human moral faculties and needs the de facto prerequisites for a good life as well as the de facto limits and prospects for realizing the same. For Nussbaum, these factors trigger immediate moral demands. To place this aspect of Nussbaum's ethic on a par with ethical naturalism is misleading. A meta-ethics designation is also lacking. The obvious term in this case, *Realism*, lies outside of empirical evidence considerations, yet applies the scientific objectivity of examining property models to moral experience and perception (Boyd 1988). A moral realist reckons with moral evidence, comparable to the attributes and substances of physical objects. Nussbaum brought to ethics a realism of a different color: When a human being's capacity for moral action can be explained, then universal human faculties must also be evaluated in assessing a good life. No matter how variable these faculties are, the general limitations and leeway of virtual experience and corporeal existence must be taken into account. Considering the lack of a meta-ethics concept in this aspect of Nussbaum's theory, I propose the term *realistic humanism*.

The *first section* of this paper handles the departure from ethical naturalism's classic definition to neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. The *second section* depicts the extent to which Nussbaum's universal faculty proposal can be identified as Aristotelian naturalism. If at all, certain segments of Nussbaum's earlier arguments for a list of basic human faculties come close to this breed of naturalism, although it remains evident that she did not avouch classic ethical naturalism. The *third section* reasons that Nussbaum's recognition of realities in human life and her interpretation of a good human life are better termed *realistic humanism*.

15.1 Classic Naturalism and Aristotelian Naturalism

The term 'ethical naturalism' describes a group of meta-ethics characteristics within an ethical theory, serving as an umbrella term that does not define a specific theory characteristic. An ethical naturalist generally contends that empirical insights more than merely complement ethics. He/she is convinced that empirically proven attributes are a necessary part of defining moral-valuating properties, if not a sufficient

basis in themselves – a currently valid meta-ethics formulation attributed to G.E. Moore and his numerous critics in the twentieth century (Horgan and Timmons 2006).

Thus, in classic naturalism, the position of ethical naturalism is determined by its concept of empirical and normative data. There are three central forms of ethical naturalism, *eliminative naturalism*, *reductive naturalism* and the *double-aspect theory* of naturalism.¹ *Eliminative naturalism* claims there is no such thing as normative properties. The only true properties are natural properties. Normative properties are a fictive class of properties. *Eliminative naturalism* solves the *placement problem*, i.e. allocating pure normative properties within the corporeal explanation, with a monism. There is but one property category. The second major naturalistic theory is the *reductive naturalism*, which claims that normative properties are not independent properties – they can be explained or replaced with natural properties. *Reductive naturalism* can be divided into subgroups – a) analytical, b) substantial and c) trivial – depending on the interpretation of *reduction*. *Analytic reductive naturalism* claims the content of any normative property can be explained by analyzing the natural property designation. Normative properties can be substituted with natural properties, either by defining property content or by analyzing terms and concepts. In contrast, *substantial reductive naturalism* does not believe the relationship between normative and natural properties can be explained per analysis. In fact, here, normative properties are not an independent category as their terms and interpretations have further meaning that can only be explained by scientific, empirical analysis. Normative properties only exist in precisely this context. For example, the normative property *should* can only be explored by first defining human attitudes, which in turn, can only be achieved through empirical, psychological examination. And then there is the *trivial reductive naturalism* advocated by thinkers who admit the existence of normative properties is worthy of discussion, but they have no independent attributes (are *trivial*) and are in essence natural properties. Error theory defenders propound *trivial reductive naturalism* when arguing that the existence of values is an ineradicable preconception. Assuming values exist only veils the actual, empirical ontological mode of moral properties. The *reductive* aspect of this approach comes into play when explanatory processes inevitably lead to the conclusion that there is only one class of properties and that is not normative.

The third approach is the *double-aspect theory of ethical naturalism*, which claims there are properties with both normative and natural components. Unlike the *thick concept* discussion, the *double-aspect theory of ethical naturalism*, concentrates on concepts with both an evaluative and empirical component. Not that the *double-aspect theory* claims the analysis of a term necessarily strives for both attributes. It rather attempts to demonstrate that when allocating normative properties, attributes, or parts thereof, of certain natural properties must be taken into account.

¹For an illuminating survey of meta-ethics naturalism categories: Miller (2013), 143–179, 180–239.

Thus, when examining the term *healthy*, it is not enough to declare health the good condition of an organism. The *double-aspect theory* also attempts to show that the meaning of good in this case, can only be determined when it is tangent with the idea of functionality. In short, the liaison between the two aspects of a concept is both empirical and tangible.

One must read Moore's description of ethical naturalism multiplicity to ultimately determine that Nussbaum's naturalism is neither compatible nor concurrent with one or the other form of ethical naturalism. The *double-aspect theory ethical naturalism* comes closest to the neo-Aristotelian experimentation with an evaluating classification of nature, yet there are decisive differences. *Aristotelian naturalism* bears three definitive characteristics that are described as follows, distinguishing them from the above-cited **meta-ethics** naturalism according to Moore.²

First, the fundamental category is not defined by the attributes or qualities of a given object, but a *living organism's execution of activities*. Aristotle was particularly interested in explaining living things. Self-propelling bodies, not inanimate objects, were ontological paradigms. Neo-Aristotelian naturalism is dedicated to natural bodies that are self-propelling – among them the complex structure of life forms explained in *De Anima*.

Aristotle explained in his work *On the Soul*, “We resume our inquiry from a fresh starting-point by calling attention to the fact that what has soul in it differs from what has not, in that the former displays life. Now this word has more than one sense and provided any one alone of these is found in a thing we say that thing is living. Living, that is, may mean thinking or perception or local movement and rest, or movement in the sense of nutrition, decay and growth.” (Aristoteles, *De Anima*, book II, chapter 2, translated by J.A. Smith 1932). Thus, according to Aristotle, life means having the capacity to conduct life.

Second comes ontology and evaluation, albeit not those having gained relevance over the last century in the wake of meta-ethics. Aristotle was not primarily interested in word meanings, rather in the definition of what is tangibly good. An examination of *substantial good* poses questions on the nature of tangible, worthwhile life goals and circumstances as well as on the conditions conducive to achieving these goals. The focus is on virtues as the appropriate manifestation of inherent natural possibilities from which arises a number of objective, *human flourishing* circumstances such as health and wealth. Hursthouse explains one foundation of virtue ethics, “What constitutes the (true) good of others, and when life is and is not good, are amongst the things that the virtuous person knows and can recognize, but they are so not because she recognizes them but because of facts about human nature” (Hursthouse 1999, 82).³

²To gain a comprehensive explanation of the types of Aristotelian ethical naturalism see Kallhoff (2010).

³Hursthouse explains assumptions on *human prosperity* and virtue ethic thusly: “When we think of the virtues in general, or ‘virtue’ *tout court*, it seems that we think in the Aristotelian way. The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should – she

Third are Aristotle's discussions, and their neo-Aristotelian revival, shaped by the assumptions of a synchronicity between *good* and *natural*. Not that a neo-Aristotelian would even claim that something good is good because it is, at the same time, *natural* or good by *its very nature*. Not even ontology, drawing from the tele-ontological explanation of living beings, would take the leap from being to ought *without* explicitly justifying the conclusion. Yet today, in alignment with Aristotelian assumptions, attempts are made to charge *natural* with assumptions on what is *essential*. An *essentialist* assumption on the nature of man as a living being is then enough to identify *essential* and *ought to be*, which distinctly depicts the disparity to the *double-aspect theory*. No more seeking the empirical property and normative property in a mutual host. A living being's inherent property is then interpreted as a standard prerequisite for a good life. Philippa Foot clearly advocates valuating essentialism: When an essential aspect of a lion's nature is to protect its young from other species by training their hunting skills, then this is not only good, it also imparts insights into correct behavior (Foot 2001). Despite the difficulties in formulating standardized theories on Nature when taking human life into account, Foot investigated numerous parallels between standardized plant and animal life and human life (*ibid*). In closing her discussion, she concludes that to determine what is good and what is bad regarding character, disposition and volition, we must consider what is good for humanity and how humans live, i.e. what kind of creature a human is (*ibid*). In Foot's analysis of the species properties of human beings, she draws on Anscombe's so-called "Aristotelian necessities" (Anscombe 1981), which are things that are necessary because they lead to something good (Foot 2001). Foot develops the idea of *Aristotelian necessities* to the extent she claims that the assessment of human behavior is also dependent on fundamental aspects of a specific human life (*ibid*).

Although Foot exemplifies a very incisive view of Aristotelian naturalism, her stance clearly bears a third, general characteristic. In addition to her ontology centered on day-to-day life and to her questions on substantial goodness, Foot also displays a neo-Aristotelian naturalism, the core nature of which can be interpreted as inherently directed toward well-being and a good life.

15.2 Nussbaum's Neo-Aristotelianism

It would be presumptuous to reduce Martha Nussbaum's extensive and multifarious works to a hypothesis on human nature and a good life. When speaking about Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelianism, only a small, but revealing portion of her

gets things right." (Hursthouse 1999, 13) Foot interprets this aspect of human prosperity as a normative species attribute: "We start from the fact that it is the particular life form of a species of plant or animal that determines how an individual plant or animal should be: the Aristotelian categorials give the 'how' of what happens in the life cycle of that species ... The way an individual *should be* is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction: in most species involving defense, and in some the rearing of the young" (Foot 2001, 31–32).

work is cited and when possible, linked to newer theories and works. Known for her *Capability Approach* in political philosophy, Martha Nussbaum's list of abilities made an important contribution to the debate on the *Currency of Egalitarian Justice* (Cohen 1989). Following Amartya Sen, philosophers' primary arguments over the past century have not centered on whether equality is a legitimate demand in the justice debate but have instead intensively discussed the parameters by which equality should be measured (Sen 1992). Diverging from a utilitarian stance as well as from a resource approach, Nussbaum supported Sen's argumentation, adding a list of fundamental capabilities required for a good human life.⁴ The list's categories of capabilities refers to both the fundamental accomplishments and the components required for a good human life.

Toward the justification of her list, Nussbaum never tired of making recourse to humanity's store of knowledge, the grand narrative on human life that reaches back to antiquity and has been continuously unveiled and expanded. Particularly valuable are myths and stories, writes Nussbaum, stories asking what it means to be a living being that, on the one hand, has particular abilities distinguishing it from the rest of Nature and, on the other hand, is also limited by its adherence to the world of Nature. These stories suggest that people in a great variety of societies acknowledge the general drift of these concepts (Nussbaum 2016). Although the fundamental capabilities are universally represented, it is also true that the justification of its elements is not supported by an empirically defined natural human capacity.

The reasoning behind the claim that Nussbaum did not advocate ethical naturalism is her reference to a *life form* in earlier editions of the capabilities list. This *life form* encompasses basic human capabilities – in the first draft of the list, one can even discover an Aristotelian concept of human life (ibid). More recent investigations into the *life form* concept reveal in Nussbaum a course in support of a *naturalistic* interpretation. On the one hand, *life form* can be Wittgenstein's depiction of a language community, specifically referring to a culture form, or, in contrast, can be defined as a more up-to-date, linguistic-philosophic Aristotelian *life form*, i.e. characteristics of a species (Thompson 1995).

At first glance, Nussbaum seems to have applied the aforementioned species theory as the basis for her capabilities list. It becomes perfectly clear, however, that her *human life form* is not intended to be naturalistic. Nussbaum leaves no doubt that although the *capabilities for a good life* may refer to anthropological data – and anthropology is influenced by an Aristotelian faculty theory – she does not intend a biological theory, the concept *life form* arises neither from biology nor from metaphysics. (Which is why the term *human nature* is avoided since it usually is linked to descriptions of humanity from an allegedly impartial scientific point of view or from a normative, often teleological metaphysical one.) The study certainly gives biology its due, but only to the extent that it is a part of and forms the human experience (Nussbaum 2016).

⁴The (unrevised to date) list of conditions “*the capabilities involved in having a good human life*”, cf. Nussbaum (2000), 78–80.

Discussions surrounding the components of a good human life are beginning to ask what precisely a *good life* is, and not the other way around. The spectrum of questions defines both the life form and the capabilities list, which are the prerequisites for a good life.

An open question is whether Nussbaum must take the next step – as Anscombe foretells – and incorporate certain *Aristotelian necessities* as prerequisites for *human flourishing*. Another question is whether the discussion will lead to a virtue ethics interpretation of a good life. The answer to both questions is a definite ‘no.’ Nussbaum sees herself as an author dedicated to political liberalism and thus demands respect for the diversity of human desires and life forms, stating that a broad spectrum of religious and other understandings of human life is an inherent element of all modern countries and the international community encompasses a far profounder diversity than any single nation. She goes on to write that it is therefore important to respect the multifarious lifestyles citizens choose to lead, as long as they do no damage to the areas relevant to fundamental capabilities (Nussbaum 2006).

This passage makes clear how Nussbaum’s capabilities list becomes normative. It does not strive to be an ideal for human flourishing nor does it come even close to demanding compliance as in virtue ethics. Nussbaum champions the justification of fundamental rights that embrace all conditions of human life (Nussbaum 2000). The *currency* of justice should no longer be society’s common welfare or an individual’s resource. Nussbaum’s political philosophy contends that the prerequisites for a good human life are not based on random capabilities for a good life, a precept that should be taken seriously. Political actions and decisions are only just when they promote the fundamental capabilities of each human individual.

In sum, the only option for linking Nussbaum’s ethic to *ethical naturalism* is to read her capabilities list as neo-Aristotelian naturalism, which would simultaneously incorporate a virtue ethical, standardization of *human flourishing* as its sterling asset, resonating with essentialist assumptions on the capacity for a good life. Nussbaum, however, would reject a teleological interpretation of a good human life that embodied objects or general life’s goals. On the contrary, she would argue that her capabilities list approach is solely aimed at supporting the capabilities for a good life within political institutions. The *human life form* is distilled from cultural interpretations and the grand narrative. There are absolutely no references to empirical biology nor to other empirical facts to define what is *good*. Thus, there is no evidence on which to base a *contemporary* ethical naturalism (see Sect. 15.1).

15.3 Nussbaum’s Realistic Humanism

In my opinion, a designation that much better describes Nussbaum’s ethic is *realistic humanism*. This definition comprises two elements. One, Nussbaum is interested in what could define humanity at its best. Her philosophical impact is firmly directed toward a valuating interpretation of life’s possibilities. She is less interested in what humans are, but what they can be at their best. While investigating these conditions

for a good life, Nussbaum increasingly turned to psychological assumptions regarding the emotion structures of human life, particularly with the philosophical interpretation of emotions (Nussbaum 2001, 2004, 2013). That Nussbaum did not avouch ethical naturalism does not at all imply that she rejected empirical theories and their insights. Quite the opposite, her theory of emotions and her examination of the highly complex emotion, shame, repeatedly drew on psychological insights (Nussbaum 2004).

Two, Nussbaum strives to assert her theory of emotion insights in political philosophy. In her most recent discourse on *political emotions* (Nussbaum 2013), she implicitly refers to findings on *human nature* in experimental psychology:

“We now need to add two tendencies that also appear deeply rooted in human nature, and which pose a serious threat to the stability of democratic institutions: the tendency to yield to peer pressure, even at the cost of truth, and the tendency to obey authority, even at the cost of moral concern. [...] In a series of **rigorously** designed experiments conducted over a long period of time, psychologist **Solomon Asch** demonstrated the high degree of deference average subjects exhibit toward peer pressure.” (ibid., 191)

Nussbaum especially recognizes cognitive psychology, but also other empirical sciences, as having made essential contributions toward the interpretation and nature of human life:

“It is a propitious time to write on this topic [political emotions], because cognitive psychologists during the past several decades have produced a wide range of excellent research on **particular emotions, which, supplemented by the work of primatologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, and psychoanalysts,** gives us **a lot of empirical data that are extremely useful to a normative philosophical project such as this one.** Such **empirical findings do not** answer our normative questions, but they do help us to understand what may be impossible and what possible, what pervasive human tendencies may be harmful or helpful— in short, what material we have to work with and how susceptible to ‘work’ it may be.” (ibid., 15–16)

However, the interpretational sovereignty for important issues in practical philosophy as well as the apparatus for answering questions on good and right rest upon the normative science of ethics.

Nussbaum never fails to be open to findings on realistic life options and on the structural nature of capabilities and actions. The sources for realistic humanism are diverse and well they may be. In the course of *experimental philosophy*, Nussbaum has redeemed a long-standing demand ethics – an interdisciplinary approach that also encompasses empirical data – a true achievement. This abruptly reawakens a latent question in naturalism, namely the question of scientific competence and the leadership position in interdisciplinary coherencies.

There is no doubt that Nussbaum’s consistently startling probing refrains from relying on canons of knowledge in any way, shape or form. Equally, certain is that she does not propound ethics as a normative science. It is not the collected knowledge of empirical sciences that forces new questions, but ethics, as a science, is free to formulate and predetermine the questions for scientific examination. Ethics is free to choose, according to self-determined criteria, the teachings and insights useful for validating ethical statements. Investigation goals always carry a practical relevance, especially regarding political organization and institutionalizing. This

aspect reveals the true contrast between ethical naturalism and Nussbaum's approach to philosophical work. Nussbaum not only reinstates ethics' autonomy as an independent form of knowledge, she grants ethicists the freedom to apply empirical sciences when they contribute to answering critical normative questions. Ultimately, as early as Aristotle, ethics aims no less than to contribute to a successful shaping of human practice.

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