

Normativität des Lebens – Normativität der Vernunft?

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Human nature and the good life in Aristotle: The debate on human flourishing as an ethical notion

Aristotle frequently relates notions of what is good to statements about “nature”. Examples comprise the nature of the state and the political nature of persons (*Pol.* I.2 1253 a 1–3; 1252 b 30–35; 1253 a 8–12). Yet, Aristotle also alludes to nature in an altogether different way. Nature is a set of properties which provide the *dynamis* of living entities. By nature, persons are endowed with some capacities which they share with animals and plants (*EN* I.6 1097 b 33–1098 a 7; *Pol.* I.2 a 8–10). At some points, this second interpretation of nature is also integrated into normative statements. In a negative way, Aristotle reminds us of natural capacities in order to exclude persons from the citizenry (*Pol.* I.4 1254 a 12–16) and from ethical learning (*Pol.* I.6 1254 b 15–1255 a 2). Yet, in the function argument (*EN* I.6 1097 b 23–1098 a 18), Aristotle approaches nature from a positive side. Here, he alludes to insights about nature in order to explain the good life of persons. It is this type of Aristotelian ethical naturalism that has recently been discussed anew. In particular, it provides the background for interpreting *eudaimonia* as “human flourishing”.

Different from the first interpretation, nature in the context of the function argument is not precisely synonymous with goodness. Instead, the relation between natural capacities and the good life is a complex one. In particular, it has received two interpretations which point into different directions. The *first interpretation* aims at restating Aristotelian naturalism as a central doctrine in ethics. It says that Aristotle is right to interpret natural capacities as framing the good life of persons. Moreover, nature is a normative notion itself. It has impacts regarding the question of what persons *should* do. The *second interpretation* states that Aristotle is right in claiming that the biological make-up of persons needs to be taken seriously in defending moral claims which relate to the good life of persons. Yet, the acknowledgment of human nature is limited to providing some side-constraints in debating the good life. In particular, it does *not* contribute to explaining the content of the good life.

It is the second interpretation that has contributed to a shift of opinion regarding the question of whether or not an Aristotelian ethical naturalism is still credible. Whereas the stronger version has stimulated objections, the second interpretation has contributed to a more positive assessment of Aristotelian ethical naturalism.

In this contribution, I wish to discuss both options. It is my claim that – at first glance – it is the latter group which succeeds in situating Aristotelian naturalism in the context of contemporary ethics. The first group, instead, falls short of re-introducing Aristotelian naturalism. Yet, a thorough examination of the claims of group two deconstructs this first impression. The success of group two is owed to the fact that underlying premises which are needed for defending respective moral claims are not spelled out thoroughly. In the end, it must be conceded that the claims of group two are not more modest than the claims of group one.

The focus of this debate is derived from an interpretation of Aristotle's notion of happiness – *eudaimonia* – in terms of human flourishing. Authors who favour this translation usually cohere with one of the two interpretations of Aristotelian naturalism. *Human flourishing* highlights the insight that the good life of persons cannot be debated without also paying tribute to inborn capacities of persons whose realization is central for a good life. Thus, the concept of human flourishing emphasizes the anchoring of the concept of the good life in a notion of inborn natural capacities.

This contribution falls into five sections. I shall *first* go back to the function argument (*EN* I.6 1097 b 23–1098 a 18) which is the main source for re-addressing Aristotelian naturalism and for discussing human flourishing as a translation of *eudaimonia*. In particular, I shall outline three presuppositions which need to be made in order to interpret that argument as foundational for a footing of the good life in human nature. The *second section* is dedicated to approaches which attempt to reformulate Aristotle's insights in terms of fundamental insights in ethics. The *third section* discusses more modest approaches to Aristotelian naturalism. Scholars who are interested in Aristotelian naturalism do not necessarily say that it provides a foundation for ethics. Instead, they say that Aristotle's insights in human nature and the impact of those insights on moral claims need to be taken seriously. Yet, Aristotle's doctrines contribute to side-constraints of a moral theory which is based on other foundational premises. The *fourth section* presents a discussion of the modest approaches which reveals premises which are as demanding as the claims of group one. This leads to the *conclusion* that either way the concept of human flourishing rests on an evaluative concept of the natural human capacities.

1 A naturalistic interpretation of the function argument

In order to introduce his definition of *eudaimonia*, Aristotle says in the first book of the *Ethica Nicomachea*:

If (...) we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or action of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (*EN* 1098 a 12–17)

A naturalistic interpretation of the function argument takes the following lines: The specific nature of persons becomes apparent through a comparison with other species. In some respects, persons are comparable to other species; yet they are also endowed with a set of unique capacities. A second point of comparison is that persons as well as animals and plants learn to be “good at” fulfilling their characteristic activities. Generally speaking, the good life of a living being is realized when capacities are unfolded in accordance with the appropriate excellences and in accordance with the complete set of inborn capacities – the latter exemplifying a monarchic structure with reason at its top (Wilkes 1980, p. 345).

In this interpretation, goodness implies the self-realization of a living entity in terms of expressing and shaping natural capacities. It also alludes to standards of excellence which correspond to mastership in realizing the inborn capacities. Now, the function-argument has been at the focus of Aristotelian scholarship for several decades. I do not wish to recall those debates.¹ Instead I shall give a short sketch of the presumptions which underlie a naturalistic interpretation. In particular, these preconditions relate to the role of reason in happiness, the assessment of a biological interpretation of living beings and a clarification about the meaning of “good” within the argument. Each of these preconditions shall be explained in turn.

First, some authors defend the claim that according to the function argument, the good life consists in excellent activity of reason (*EN* I.7 1177 b30–31, X. 7–8 1178 a 6–10). This group of authors, the “intellectualists” or “exclusivists”, draw on Aristotle's claims about the best life in book X of the *Ethica Nic-*

¹ Among the classical contributions to the function argument are Achtenberg 1991, Clark 1971, Glassen 1957, Gómez-Lobo 1991, Kraut 1979, Sorabji 1964, Suits 1974, White 1981, Whiting 1988.

omachea.² Yet, Aristotle also states that a life as a philosopher is not a realistic expectation for each person. Different from the gods, persons need living conditions which also support their earthly way of life (*EN* X.9 1179 a 22–29; *EN* X.9 1178 b 33). Consequently, Aristotle distinguishes between an ideal of a life which only some persons can realize, and a more realistic concept of a good practical life.³ Whereas the life of the philosopher can be interpreted as the *overall best life*, the “inclusivists” say that Aristotle also gives a *realistic interpretation of the good life*. This latter interpretation corresponds to the theory of the soul which includes a variety of capacities which persons possess. Besides reason, persons have emotions which are also open to a process of formation through the acquisition and performance of virtue.

In particular, according to an *inclusivist* interpretation, which was first elaborated by John Ackrill (1980), *eudaimonia* includes all worthwhile activities of persons as ends in themselves.⁴ In this interpretation, the function argument fulfills an important task. In introducing a list of all natural capacities, it contributes to developing a *comprehensive account* of *eudaimonia*. The comparison with living entities different from persons serves at working out a comprehensive list of capacities whose development can be considered as essential capacities in defining the specific life-form of persons.⁵

Secondly, debates on the function argument include a stance on a widespread objection. This objection says that Aristotle employs a type of naturalism in his ethics, which needs to be classified as “brute naturalism” (McDowell 1994, p. 79). Both Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams once claimed that the Aristotelian theory of the good life is no more than an exemplification of a metaphysically founded biology (Williams 1985, p. 52; MacIntyre 1984, p. 163). In particular, Aristotle reiterates teleological and metaphysical presuppositions in the ethics. Therefore, naturalism of the Aristotelian ethics can neither be integrated into the context of modern philosophy, nor does it cohere with the natural sciences of our times.

² The distinction between an inclusivist and an intellectualist interpretation was introduced by Hardie 1965. Yet, in 1992, Kenny remarks that the debate has not come to an end so far; see Kenny 1992, p. 6.

³ Robert Heinaman argues for a reconciliation between exclusivists and inclusivists through a distinction of several questions that point to different strands of argument in Aristotle’s ethics. See Heinaman 1988.

⁴ The concept of an overarching good that comprises worthwhile types of activities as its components was proposed by Ackrill 1980.

⁵ Following Aristotle, “life-form” is a weaker concept than the species concept. It describes living entities regarding their “characteristic activities”. For a reformulation of that concept in the context of contemporary ethics, see Thompson 1995.

Yet, scholars have also proven that the accusations of Aristotelian naturalism as “brute naturalism” do not cohere with the claims made in the function argument.⁶ True, Aristotle claims that persons have a distinct set of inborn capacities. Moreover, this concept of nature is related to the nature of natural entities. As Alfonso Gómez-Lobo (1991) states: “There is no doubt that in the quest for the human *ergon* (...) Aristotle alludes to the three layers of life he has carefully sorted out in the *De Anima*.” (p. 54)⁷ Yet, the underlying biological premises are not as metaphysical as some authors have presupposed. Instead, Aristotle’s theory of natural kinds has been interpreted as a theory about species characteristics which relate to a notion of functioning well as such type of being within a certain surrounding.⁸ As a consequence, the good life is a sort of life whose characteristics can be spelled out as realization of inborn specific characteristics according to specified excellences. These excellences correspond to ethical standards which are set forth in Aristotle’s approach to the virtues; yet, they also match the characteristics of the properties of living beings. In this interpretation, the function argument says that nature is realized throughout a life process in terms of realizing typical characteristic activities of a living entity. The criteria of a successful development also imply a notion of mastership corresponding to the inborn capacities.

Third, the interpretation of the meaning of “good” in the context of the function argument is critical to its interpretation. Some authors defend the view that in the context of the function-argument, “good” has the meaning of “being good at doing something”. Yet, including this line of argument within a naturalistic interpretation has proven difficult. Peter Stemmer argues that it does not make sense to speak of a “good giraffe” as an animal that exemplifies the characteristics of the giraffe life particularly well (Stemmer 1998, p. 55). Moreover, a literal meaning of “functioning well” does not convince, either. As Suits (1974, p. 23 and p. 95) argues, it would be very fine to know the special function appropriate to man; this would solve all ethical problems at once. Yet, unfortunately, we do not have a notion like that.

As for this latter point, a possible solution depends on the interpretation of “function”. In the interpretation which was criticised, the term “good” in relation to “functions” draws on a comparison between persons and organisms. The natural capacities of persons are paralleled to organs; a person realizes a good life,

⁶ For important contributions in this respect and for a defense of an alternative version of Aristotelian ethical naturalism, see: Kallhoff 2010.

⁷ See also Broadie 1991, p. 61.

⁸ For interpretations of Aristotle’s concept of the species in this sense, see Balme 1975, Pellegrin 1987, and more recently Lennox 2001.

when all functions are “in order” and work together in supporting good functioning; this is a healthy organism. Yet, this interpretation is particularly problematic. Persons actually differ from other living organisms in a significant way, they possess reason (see point 2). As Wilkes states: “The important notion of goodness here is (...) that he [the person] is good at being the kind of man that he has deliberately chosen to be.” (Wilkes 1980, p. 355)⁹ As a consequence, the interpretation of “functioning well” as internal functional organization does not convince.

Yet, different from this, “functions” can also be interpreted as the employment of “characteristic activities” of living beings. Living entities are functioning well, when they fulfil their life-supporting activities in a way which in turn supports their flourishing. Accordingly, what the function argument says is that a thorough characterization of natural capacities is a necessary step in developing an account of the appropriate excellences of a living entity, and persons in particular. Therefore, a comprehensive explanation of “good” does not only include ethical standards, both in terms of personal virtues and of virtues of persons as members of society, but also an idea of how persons should react to their life-form. According to this interpretation, natural facts are an ingredient in clarifying the content of “good” in the “good life”; yet, they are not sufficient for defining the good life of persons.

To summarize this naturalist interpretation of the function argument, it can be said that it builds on three assumptions. It underscores an *inclusivist* interpretation of *eudaimonia*; it says that some biological doctrines of Aristotle, in particular his statements about the relationship between characteristic activities and excellent performances, are basic to the interpretation of the good life of a living entity; and it says that for clarifying the content of “good”, the function argument does not draw on something like “internal functional organization”, but rather to standards which respond to potentials of living entities in unfolding their natural capacities. As a consequence, Aristotelian ethical naturalism differs significantly from modern ethical naturalism which has predominantly been interpreted as a metaethical claim about the meaning of “good” and its relation to terms in natural sciences. In particular, it relates a theory of characteristic activities to an interpretation of natural capacities as a necessary, yet not sufficient condition in explaining the good life of a living entity.

This has contributed to a preference for “human flourishing” as a translation of *eudaimonia*.¹⁰ It captures three aspects: It builds on an account of inborn nat-

⁹ A similar judgement regarding the role of the intellect is made by Jonathan Lear: “Human beings differ from even other social animals in that they alone (*idion tois anthropois*) have logos or reason; and it is clear that this reason is normative and ethical.” Lear 1995, p. 63.

¹⁰ For a discussion of this option, see Kallhoff 2010, pp. 47–48.

ural capacities of persons as living beings; it articulates the good life in terms of a process of a good development of the capacities of persons – mainly characterized by virtues –; and it says that the good life consists in activities whose content derives from knowledge about the natural capacities of persons and their contribution to a happy life.

2 Two restatements of Aristotelian ethical naturalism

Recently, two authors have elaborated a distinct stance on Aristotelian ethical naturalism. Moreover, they both claim that basic doctrines inherent in Aristotle’s naturalism are still basic for restating fundamental insights in moral philosophy. These authors are Philippa Foot and John McDowell. Even though their interpretations of Aristotelian naturalism differ, in one respect, they share a common insight: Both say that in order to interpret the good life in Aristotle’s ethics, it needs to be related to a notion of human nature. Due to the importance of this insight in both approaches to Aristotle’s notion of the good life, it is fair to say that they both contribute to an interpretation that comes close to a foundational interpretation of nature in Aristotle’s concept of the good life. It is not my aim here to give an exhaustive discussion of the interpretations of both authors. Instead, I shall only recall some of their insights in Aristotelian naturalism here.

Foot develops a theory which she terms *Natural Goodness* (2001). She argues that an account of species membership is the background against which the life of persons can be classified as either a good life or as a life which falls short of realizing well-being. Foot states:

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 categoricals give the ‘how’ of what happens in the life cycle of a 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, pp. 31–32)

As for human beings, Foot concludes:

In spite of the diversity of human goods (...) it is therefore possible that the concept of a good life plays the same part in determining goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals. (p. 44)

Moreover, practical imperatives are modeled against the background of natural principles. Even though Foot admits that it is a long way to go from a species-notion of the good life in the kingdom of animals to a notion of the good life of persons, she also says that there are some bridges that can be restated. Persons are finally focused on flourishing as notion of the good life that is – to some degree – independent of individual wishes and desires. Comparable to the good life of animals, it is good for persons to orient themselves towards that notion of the good life.

On the other hand, John McDowell wishes to restate Aristotle's notion of "second nature" (McDowell 1994). He says that we cannot expect that Aristotle possesses a modern philosophy of science. A theory of ethical naturalism presupposes a level of explanation which is value-free. In modern times, natural sciences have this property. For sure, Aristotle did not possess a value-free theory of nature (McDowell 1995). Therefore, an ethical naturalism which claims building a bridge between an explanatory level in terms of "nature" and attributes such as "good" cannot be found in Aristotle's ethics. But Aristotle presents another insight which is convincing and which also builds a bridge to a notion of human nature. He says that ethical learning presupposes a process which includes the formation of one's first nature. In particular, virtues are meant to conclude this process.

In order to give a fair treatment of both approaches to Aristotle's concept of nature and of the good life, much more would have to be said about the theoretical frames within which both authors develop the theses they defend. Moreover, much more would have to be said about the concepts of natural capacities that both employ. It is not the space here for doing so.¹¹ Instead, I wish to highlight some aspects that relate to the question of how human flourishing is reasoned as a normative notion. In particular, I shall draw on the interpretation of the function argument in section one in order to highlight some critique that appears necessary in order to adjust the interpretations to what Aristotle stated in his ethics.

Following the interpretation of the function-argument in section one, Philippa Foot appears to overrate the role of a notion of natural kinds in Aristotle's naturalism. In the interpretation presented in the first section, Aristotle does not rely on a normative species notion in order to classify a good life of persons; instead, he introduces a notion of excellent performances of natural capacities. Natural capacities are described in the approach to the human soul which differs from theses about species membership in the philosophy of nature in Aristotle. Moreover, Aristotle draws a sharp contrast between persons and other forms of

life in highlighting the role of reason and the function of ethical standards besides the function argument. John McDowell, instead, underrates the Aristotelian endeavour of explaining living entities in natural sciences. One might argue that some of Aristotle's doctrines in biology are now outdated. Yet, the overall explanatory frame for explaining the "good life" of living entities still has its merits, and moreover does not express a value-theory. Aristotle wishes to say that ethical standards also need to imply a notion of "appropriateness" which relates what is good to concepts of basic natural capacities.

Besides these critiques, both approaches to a notion of the good human life try to establish an immediate link between natural capacities and a notion of the good life. Even though McDowell frames his approach within a systematic bracket that transcends an immediate grasp of any natural capacities and instead highlights language as a realm of knowledge, he nevertheless identifies basic capacities that need to be shaped by means of virtues and virtuous activities. Here, we find nature as something like the bedrock of a process of formation that – in the end – transcends the human being's first nature in terms of a second nature. In Philippa Foot's writings, instead, practical reasoning remains tied to a concept of species-membership. Here again, human nature in terms of belonging to a distinct life-form in the realm of nature, has formatting power. Without that, persons would not be in a situation to develop a perspective on what a good life really consists in.

3 Three moderate interpretations

I shall now turn to interpretations which formulate a more modest goal in reassessing Aristotelian naturalism. They say that Aristotle got something right about the good life of persons in introducing natural capacities, but he did not get everything right. Instead, his approach to human nature and the ethical principles which he presents accordingly, need profound reassessments. In particular, a new systematically appropriate place of Aristotelian naturalism in moral theory needs to be defined. In the remainder of this section, I wish to discuss three options in turn: (a) human nature as raw material for processes of self-formation as proposed by Julia Annas (2005; 2011), (b) human flourishing as a basic notion of well-being in Martha Nussbaum's theory of justice (Nussbaum 1990, 1993, 2000, 2004, 2006), and (c) the natural form as an instance of self-constitution as outlined by Christine Korsgaard (2009). None of these authors addresses Aristotelian naturalism as a coherent approach to ethics; instead, they think that Aristotle's claims can be restated as side-constraints for a theoretical framework

¹¹ For an extended discussion, see Kallhoff 2010, pp. 178–188.

which builds on other doctrines. Yet, in all three approaches, human flourishing figures as the interpretation of a good life of persons.

Ad a: Human nature as raw material

Julia Annas is in the camp of authors who rejects ethical naturalism as a comprehensive moral doctrine. Moreover, she pays particular attention to the differences between persons as rational beings and living entities which do not possess reason (Annas 2005, pp. 15–16). Yet, Annas acknowledges that Aristotle attempts to introduce a naturalist basis in virtue ethics. Following Annas, this claim can be interpreted in two different ways. She distinguishes a *weaker version* from a *stronger version* of Aristotelian naturalism.

The *weaker version* says that human nature constrains rationality in two ways. *First*, some attempts in transforming our life “will just be unrealistic” (Annas 2005, p. 17). Human nature is less plastic than authors in our times think. *Secondly*, “even if we could transform and reshape ourselves in this way – even if we could make ourselves more plastic in this respect – this couldn’t be a *good* way of life for beings with our human nature.” (Annas 2005, p. 18; Italics by Annas) The *stronger version*, instead says that “our human nature is simply the material that our rationality has to work with. ... Human nature does not have to be seen as wholly plastic and transformable into anything at all; after all, a good craftsman will respect the potentials of the materials.” (Annas 2005, p. 22) In this latter sense, naturalism includes standards of appropriateness relating to natural endowment.

In elaborating further on the dependency of the good life on existing preconditions, Annas employs a “skill-analogy” (Annas 2011). She wishes to acknowledge the fact that persons are in a situation to shape their lives, but they cannot invent them from the scratch. Instead: “In the metaphor used in ancient ethical philosophy, the circumstances of your life are the material you have to work on, and living your life is working on these materials to make a product.” (Annas 2011, p. 93) This material includes factors beyond one’s control such as a particular age, a particular genetic disposition, gender, height etc.; having a particular nationality, culture, and language, having received a particular upbringing and education. It also includes what Aristotle termed “natural virtues” which basically represent inborn temper (Annas 2011, p. 94). Even though Annas wants to stick with “goodness in the living of a human life” and not with “goodness transcending a human life” (Annas 2011, p. 114), she rejects the view that any normative orientation could be developed from the notion of “human nature”. A skill is a technique which results from commitment to values as well as from exercising

which appears to be a good way of leading a life.¹² But, following the stronger version, nature also makes an appearance as material with a distinct shape. It provides a background of human excellence in that it includes particular potentials of self-evolvement.

Ad b: Human nature as basic functional capabilities

Even though human flourishing was initially introduced into the debate on Aristotelian ethics as a translation of *eudaimonia*, it later served as a term in theories of social justice. In particular, authors who refer to Aristotle in interpreting the good life of persons employ this term. Even though Martha Nussbaum is far from supporting ethical naturalism, she develops a list of capabilities which refers to Aristotle’s insights in the nature of man.¹³ In the context of a theory of social justice, basic capabilities are not intended to express moral demands addressed to those who possess the capabilities; instead, they are meant to explain basic potentialities of persons which need to be unfolded in order to lead a good life (Nussbaum 2000, pp. 71–72). Moral claims are mediated by claims of justice, which in Nussbaum’s approach are primarily addressed to political institutions. Nevertheless, there is an inherent normative claim here.

Nussbaum shares the Aristotelian presupposition that the human kind – as all types of natural kinds – can be described as entities whose essential characteristic functionings suffice for defining a certain type of being. Even though she rejects the idea that the background for reasoning this relationship is a theory of

¹² In a different way, Alasdair MacIntyre also articulates nature as a raw material which persons are demanded to form. This turn is particularly interesting because MacIntyre once rejected Aristotelian naturalism as simply expressing a metaphysical stance on biology. In *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) MacIntyre states that persons are not only depending on their natural capacities. Instead, moral development is – in part – a process in which persons learn to cope with their nature. Moral development is a development of “ascent” in which persons get more and more consciously detached from their animal nature; in the same time, they succeed in integrating it into a more comprehensive identity.

¹³ In an earlier version of the capabilities approach, this allusion is more explicit. Nussbaum starts with a “human life-form”, that initially also resulted from Aristotelian insights about human nature. Moreover, she states that the moral impact of her capabilities list also results from the fact that the capabilities describe human life in its very basic structure. She speaks of “spheres of human existence” (Nussbaum 1990, p. 228), of “grounding experiences” (Nussbaum 1993, p. 243), of “features of humanness” (ibid.) and of “the shard condition of human existence” (ibid., p. 249). It is this type of essentialism that contributes to the idea that something morally important is at stake.

“human nature”, she develops an account of human capacities that is essentialist. She argues that a range of capacities are ingredients in a range of presuppositions without which a good life cannot be realized. Moreover, each person needs these capacities in order to live well. Yet, she also admits that Aristotle’s notions do not refer to “dignity” and “personhood” in a modern sense of the words. Instead, Nussbaum draws on authors, including John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, in order to explain dignity and the value of persons (Nussbaum 2000, pp. 72–74). Aristotle’s insights are translated into concepts which substitute essentialist claims encapsulated in *dynameis* and *hexeis*. In particular, the content of basic capabilities shall be derived from other sources, i.e. by imagining other forms of life (Nussbaum 2006, pp. 352–356).

Ad c: Human nature as instance of self-constitution

One of the most fiercely attempts to reintroduce an Aristotelian conception of the “natural form” of living entities comes from a Kantian philosopher. Even though Christine M. Korsgaard defends the claim that Aristotle and Kant – different as their theories are – are regarding fundamental insights in morality much closer to each other than one might presuppose, this recent turn in Korsgaard’s moral philosophy is nevertheless surprising. In *Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (2009), Elisabeth Korsgaard explains how an Aristotelian theory about human nature succeeds in supporting a theory of personhood which has its footing in Kant’s moral theory. In particular, a concept of a natural form serves as an essential constituent of self-constitution.

Before explaining how an Aristotelian notion of the biological make-up and its good-making properties relate to the overall good life of persons, it first needs to be mentioned that Korsgaard indeed comes close to Aristotelian ideas which are encapsulated in the function argument. In explaining the “constitution of life”, Korsgaard claims that “Aristotle extended his account of artifactual identity to living things with the aid of the view that a living thing is a thing with a special kind of form.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 35.) She then continues to explain the relationship to “goodness”:

[...] goodness is not a goal for people, but rather is our name for the inner condition which enables a person to successfully perform her function – which is to maintain her integrity as a unified person, to be who she is. This is why Plato and Aristotle always compared health to virtue. (Korsgaard 2009, p. 35)

Korsgaard sees this relationship founded in a “complex notion of teleological organization”:

A good giraffe action, such as nibbling the tender green leaves at the tops of the trees, keeps the giraffe going, for it provides the specific nutrients needed to constantly restore and refurbish her giraffeness through the nutritive process. Yet, the giraffe’s action is one to which she is prompted by instincts resulting *from* her giraffe nature. (Korsgaard 2009, pp. 35–36)

Korsgaard then explains the difference between artifacts and living entities and concludes: “being a giraffe is not a state, but rather an activity.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 36) Moreover, Korsgaard interprets this as foundational for the understanding of “identity”: “To be a giraffe is simply to engage in the activity of constantly making yourself into a giraffe: this is what a giraffe’s life consists in.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 37)

Later on, Korsgaard builds these insights into her moral theory. She first explains that a living thing is a thing with a self-maintaining form, which needs to be (continuously) reproduced (See Korsgaard 2009, p. 93). Korsgaard also insists that even though the difference between the movements of plants or animals and persons is evident, there is nevertheless a “continuum” which ties both together, human action as being “at the extreme end of a continuum” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 98). Persons do not only react to instincts, but rather are in a situation to taking “the desire for food to provide him with a reason for going to the refrigerator.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 105) Yet, this mechanism is something which already animals possess. In order to understand it correctly, instincts must be regarded as having two sides.

An animal’s instincts determine her to hunt when she is hungry, flee when she is afraid, fight when she is threatened, and so on. Instinctive action is autonomous in the sense that the animal’s movements are not directed by alien causes, but rather by the laws of her own nature. (Korsgaard 2009, p. 106)¹⁴

¹⁴ One interesting question is how Korsgaard (2009) determines the relationship between the existence of a continuum on the one hand and her notion of autonomy which is – according to Kant – pure spontaneity. One answer to this question is given when Korsgaard states that there are two senses of autonomy or self-determination. “In one sense, to be autonomous or self-determined is to be governed by the principles of your own causality, principles that are definitive of your will. In another, deeper, sense to be autonomous or self-determined is to *choose* the principles that are definitive of your will. (...) Every agent, even an animal agent, is autonomous and self-determined in the first sense, or it would make no sense to attribute her movements to her. Only responsible agents, human agents, are autonomous in the second and deeper sense.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 108)

Even though Korsgaard argues for transcending nature in order to lead a morally engaged life, she introduces Aristotle's concept of nature as the organizational structure of a distinct being as an ingredient in human life, too. Moreover, she states that there is this unifying entity; even if persons need to engage for actively developing that unification after having left a natural state of being, it still appears to provide an interlayer against which the development takes place.

Different as all three proposals are, they all have two goals in common. Each author wishes to integrate a notion of "human nature" which coheres with some insights of Aristotle in that concept. In particular, nature is interpreted as a set of inborn capacities whose essential characteristics are of particular importance for leading a good life. They need to be kept intact and developed through the life span of individual persons. Even though natural concepts do not necessarily cohere with biological concepts and interpretations of our times, they are intended to portray nature as an explanation of the presuppositions for living a life as a specified natural kind.

The authors do not only say that this "natural form" is significant in ethics. Each author also tries to define an adequate place for this notion within an approach to ethics which – in its central premises – deviates from Aristotle's interpretation of that space. In particular, none of the authors wishes to argue that nature includes potentials whose "good development" is predefined. Instead, they say that taking natural capacities into account contributes to rethinking the general hypothesis that human nature is unlimited plastic. This rather modern thesis is substituted by an approach that does not only highlight the limits of plasticity. Instead, two of the core insights of Aristotle regarding the capacities of the soul are being reiterated. They say:

A) The good life of persons is not only constrained by inborn capacities; instead, inborn natural capacities provide a source of joy and are the backbone of a good life if (and this is important) they are being developed in a good way.¹⁵

B) In order to develop the parameters of an objectively good life, it is necessary to look into nature and to compare human capacities with the capacities of non-human animals and living beings. Even though the differences are striking, the points of comparisons should also not be forgotten either: Persons as well as animals and plants are said to flourish if they develop characteristic activities in a good and in a typical way throughout a life-span.

¹⁵ Here, everything depends on the interpretation of a "good way" – this is the reason why Aristotle spends so much place in his ethics on a discussion of the virtues.

4 Neo-aristotelian naturalism reexamined

Approaches to Aristotelian ethical naturalism which aim at reestablishing a naturalist moral theory have received manifold profound critique. It is not the place here to reiterate that critique.¹⁶ Instead, I wish to ask whether or not the modest interpretations of the last section deserve the same criticism as more foundational approaches to Aristotle's ethics. As opposed to the stronger versions of ethical naturalism, more modest approaches as portrayed in section three have a different focus. They say that Aristotle is right in claiming that persons need to respond to their natural endowments in order to develop a good life.¹⁷ But moral claims are only indirectly linked to claims about human nature. None of the approaches includes a duty to flourish; nor do duties of justice immediately relate to human flourishing. Instead, the authors argue for an approach to human flourishing that does refer to human flourishing as a constitutive condition of a more complex notion of personhood. Korsgaard appears to refer to the form of living entities, and of persons in particular, in this way.

Other authors have tied claims of justice to a notion of human flourishing. They say: If human flourishing denotes a basically good life, and if flourishing is "objective" in the sense of providing a very basic notion of the good life which still leaves realm for a more comprehensive approach (as for instance one that also relates to personal wishes and desires), claims for a fair distribution of basic goods that provide conditions for human flourishing are justified.¹⁸ Either in terms of the natural form of living entities, or in terms of a basically good life, in these approaches, a theory of human nature articulates constraints which moral theory needs to respond to.

These claims can even be defended regarding Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which – at first glance – has little to do with Aristotelian ethical naturalism. At the heart of Nussbaum's approach to political philosophy is the list of basic capabilities. Nussbaum concedes that Aristotle's insight in the

¹⁶ For a profound critique, which pays respect to both sides of criticism, see Hursthouse (1999), pp. 192–216.

¹⁷ In particular, Aristotle's theory of the soul is an attractive alternative to dualist approaches to mental and physical states. Aristotle's alternative to a post-Cartesian anthropology rests on two pillars: *First*, the soul is interpreted as a distinct organization of natural capacities; as *dynameis*, these capacities are inhabited and simultaneously the background of personal developments. *Secondly*, natural capacities are materially realized. *Third*, natural capacities tend to be realized; in humans, this is the presupposition for leading a basically good life.

¹⁸ I have defended a similar claim in Kallhoff (2011). In my view, a certain range of basic public goods provide the basic conditions of human flourishing.

make-up of persons does not suffice in order to explain a basically good life. Nevertheless the concept of human flourishing remains central to her interpretation of the good life. In particular, she also concedes that her notion of human nature is explicitly *evaluative*, even *ethically evaluative* (Nussbaum 2006, p. 181). Moreover, she introduces something like a moral meaning of human flourishing, when she embarks on the critique of Kantian ethics.

For Kant, only humanity and rationality are worthy of respect and wonder; the rest of nature is just a set of tools. The capabilities approach judges instead, with the biologist Aristotle..., that there is something wonderful and wonder-inspiring in all the complex forms of animal life. (Nussbaum 2000, p. 306)

Nussbaum also states:

The species norm is evaluative, as I have insisted; it does not simply read off norms from the way nature actually is. But once we have judged that a capability is essential for a life with human dignity, we have a very strong moral reason for promoting its flourishing and removing obstacles to it. (Nussbaum 2006, p. 347)

In order to explain the relationship between normative claims and human flourishing, Nussbaum embarks on contexts and conditions which are necessary in order to develop basic capabilities. She thereby alludes to the notions “harmful” and “beneficial”. Yet, the concepts cannot be explained without also including an axiological meaning of “flourishing” as a notion of the good life of persons.

Christine Korsgaard, instead, does not have to imply a similar premise in addressing the “life-form” of living entities. Yet, different from the initial interpretation of “self-constitution” and the role of nature as a sheet from which persons successfully emancipate, later in her book “unification” appears to be something which persons rather still need to refer to in terms of a unifying principle of agency instead of transcending it. She says: “And in order to reunite, you have to have a constitution, and your movements have to issue from your constitutional rule over yourself.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 213) She explicitly states that persons as well as giraffes need a unifying principle against which they develop.¹⁹ Yet, in

¹⁹ A quote which shows this is taken from the final chapter of *Self-Constitution*, entitled “How to be a person”: “What is an agent? An agent is the autonomous and efficacious cause of her own movements. (...) It’s also true that in order to be autonomous, it is essential that your movements be caused by you, by you operating as unit, not by some force that is working in you or on you. So in order to be an agent, you need to be unified – you need to put your whole self, so to speak, behind your movements. That’s what deliberation is: an attempt to reunite yourself behind some set of movements that will count as your own.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 213) And in

persons, this role shall be fulfilled by the moral law. But a moral law lacks two of the properties which are essential in defining a “form” and for forms fulfilling functions of unification and self-constitution. A moral law is neither composed of essential ingredients which guarantee that the form remains the same, even though changing through time. Nor is it something which evolves spontaneously. Yet, these two characteristics are not only critical to Aristotle’s interpretation of human nature. They are also necessary in order to fulfill the function of a “form” which serves as a background for processes of change and self-determination.²⁰

5 Conclusion

In this contribution, I have distinguished two ways of interpreting naturalist doctrines which respond to a naturalist interpretation of Aristotle’s function argument. Both amount to a notion of “human flourishing” that relates the good life of persons to a concept of human nature. Yet, both ways of interpreting this link are different. On the one hand, the reassessment of Aristotelian naturalism has been regarded as part of the foundation of a moral doctrine. Then, the concept of nature is critical for shaping notions of the morally good life. Philippa Foot has made this claim explicit; she has reasoned a theory of the good life that amounts to a naturalist interpretation of doing the right thing, because it coheres with the human life-form.

On the other hand, a more modest interpretation says that Aristotelian insights about human nature are still important; yet, they will only serve as side-constraints in articulating moral claims – claims which need to be defended on separate grounds. This second option also reiterates some of the central insights of Aristotle on human nature. Moreover, it is “human nature” in an essentialist, yet biological sense of nature that is the focus of concern – even though biology in Aristotle’s times differs significantly from biological insights of our times. What distinguishes this second approach from notions of human nature which are more common today is not only the evaluative aspect in it. Moreover,

the following section, Korsgaard continues: “So every rational agent must will in accordance with a universal law, because it is the task of every rational agent to constitute his agency.” (Korsgaard 2009, p. 214)

²⁰ In my view, Korsgaard is not in a situation to really defending the continuum-claim about living entities. Even though self-distance and what Annas calls “working on nature as raw-material” can also be discussed from a Kantian perspective, she needs to decide whether or not morality includes human nature as a form which provides a unifying background or a moral law which cannot fulfill the same functions as a form.

Aristotle conceives of human nature as a set of enabling capabilities of the good life. Even though nature needs to be formed, it does not have to be “left behind” in order to lead a good life. It is rather – in Julia Annas’ terms – the raw material which provides the stuff that persons need to work on in order to realize a good life.

Yet, this interpretation comes to a price. The debate does not relate to moral insights that have been framed in terms of “duties” or in terms of “dignity” of persons. When moral claims relate to human flourishing, the reason for this is only to some degree an inherent value of flourishing. In particular, any such value cannot be stated without presupposing that self-development is a process that persons engage in, and engage in by profiting from rational capacities too. It is not a blind process; nor is it spontaneous in the sense of an automatism. Moreover, the moral claims are indirectly related to human flourishing: If a person chooses to flourish and if she needs a good development of her capabilities in order to lead a good life, claims of justice need to include a fair distribution of means for realizing and developing human capacities. Yet, authors of our time refrain from relating any duties to human flourishing in a more direct way. The main reason is that “human nature” does not include norms of a good life. Instead, it is conceived of as “raw material”, yet as a type of raw material that includes perspectives of self-development. In this respect, the notion of “human flourishing” has an evaluative connotation.

Apparently, the main problem of reconsidering Aristotle in a constructive way is not the underlying “metaphysical biology” as both Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams once claimed. Instead, it is the doctrine of standards of excellence which can at least in part be derived from nature itself that authors in modern times cannot easily subscribe to. Moreover, the modern experience is also an experience of individuals which tend to flourish “dangerously” and which are occupied with tendencies which do not contribute to the overall good life. Yet, a reexamination of the concept of natural capacities as potentials to a good life might contribute to a reassessment of that view too.

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Martin Rhonheimer

Willensfreiheit und klassische Tugendethik vor der Herausforderung durch die Neurowissenschaften

1 Die Neurowissenschaften als Erben der modernen Evolutionsbiologie

Heutige Evolutionsbiologen bezeichnen den Menschen in der Regel als „Produkt der Evolution“. Würde sie nur vom menschlichen Organismus sprechen, so hätte sie Recht und dies wäre unproblematisch. Nun ist aber „der Mensch“ nicht einfach mit dem menschlichen Organismus gleichzusetzen. Den Menschen als ganzen, in seiner leib-geistigen Wirklichkeit einfach nur als „Produkt der Evolution“ zu betrachten ist zumindest durch die Evolutionsbiologie selber noch nicht begründet. Es bräuchte dazu einer zusätzlichen, und zwar materialistischen, Metaphysik.

Ähnliches gilt in ganz neuer und hochaktueller Weise für die heutigen Kognitions- bzw. Neurowissenschaften. Sie bilden gleichsam die Applikation der Evolutionstheorie auf die Gegenwart. Ihre Vertreter betrachten den Menschen typischerweise als reinen Organismus, dessen kognitive Funktionen nicht nur durch das Gehirn bzw. das Zentralnervensystem gesteuert sind, sondern gerade darin ihren Sitz haben. Genauso wie für Evolutionsbiologen Gene den Entwicklungsprozess des Lebens steuern, so ist es nun für Neurowissenschaftler angeblich das Gehirn, welches fühlt, denkt und entscheidet. Bewusstsein oder Freiheit sind nur noch subjektive Epiphänomene oder Wahrnehmungsweisen dessen, was sich im Innern des Gehirns auf der Ebene neuronaler Verschaltungen bereits zuvor und definitiv abgespielt hat.

Doch gleich wie eine evolutionsbiologische Reduktion des Menschen, seines Selbstbewusstseins und dessen, was wir Geist nennen, auf reine Biochemie (DNA, Genetik, Epigenetik usw.) der Verabsolutierung einer wissenschaftlichen Teilerkenntnis gleichkommt, ist es auch mit der Idee, das Gehirn fühle, erkenne oder entscheide. Der Teil wird für das Ganze genommen¹ und damit wird jenes Ganze, das der Mensch ist, aus den Augen verloren.

¹ Vgl. zu diesem „mereologischen Fehlschluss“ (die Kritik daran geht auf Ludwig Wittgenstein zurück): Bennett und Hacker 2003; Fuchs 2009.