

Symposium: Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism: Philippa Foot and Ayn Rand

Naturalist Teleology in Foot and Rand

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Ethics is a normative field, but for many ethical theories, that normativity is rooted in something non-normative. In the Aristotelian tradition, that argument goes something like this: things have natures, different sorts of things have different natures, so being a good thing is different for different things. For example, what makes a good pen good is different from what makes a good knife good, so even though there's such a thing as a good pen or a good knife, the goodness of each is not the same thing. A thing's excellence is connected with its function, which in turn is connected to its nature. So to talk about a good person, the Aristotelian tradition holds, we must have a conception of the nature of the person, and minimally, we can say that being a good person is different from being a good lion or a good eagle or a good strawberry. While there's no evidence either that Philippa Foot was a Randian or that Ayn Rand was a devotee of Foot, their ethical theories both make this essentially Aristotelian move. Rand notes that "Man cannot survive as anything but man," and argues that the basis of ethics, the correct standard of value, is "that which is required for man's survival *qua* man."¹ Foot notes that "it is the particular life form of a species of plant or animal that determines how an individual plant or animal should be," and argues that "the way an individual *should be* is determined by what is needed for development [and] self-maintenance."² This essay will explore the ways in which both Foot and Rand develop a naturalist

¹ Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Signet, 1961), pp. 24.

² Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 32-33. Foot's work in this area goes back at least to 1958 but the 2001 book is her most clear and comprehensive work on the subject. See also Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

teleology in the Aristotelian tradition as a grounding for ethics. I will also note areas where they might disagree.

Rand states that “Man’s consciousness shares with animals the first two stages of its development: sensations and perceptions; but it is the third state, *conceptions*, that makes him man....the living organisms that possess the faculty of consciousness need to exercise it in order to survive.”³ So there’s a particular *sort* of thing a human being is, and the criteria of being that sort of thing imply a normativity about the range of actions available to it. Humans have the capacity for rational activity (Rand means here not just the deductive process but more broadly conceptualization and abstraction), so they cannot live *as* humans without exercising this capacity. A life lacking in rational activity is more akin to beastly life, acting on instinct without engaging in deliberative activity.⁴

Rand’s position is that things in general are kinds of things; e.g., a car is a kind of vehicle, a whale is a kind of mammal. So to be a human is to be a certain kind of creature – again, following Aristotle, the kind of creature with the distinct cognitive capacities typically characterized as the rational faculties. For Rand, it’s also important that we are volitional: we have to choose whether to make the fullest use of our rational faculties. “Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man – in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life.”⁵ In other words, she thinks we fail to live a fully human life if we eschew the full use of our faculties. This is in virtue of the fact that “life” isn’t an undifferentiated phenomenon; rather there are particular forms of life – banana, snail, lion, human.

Similarly, Foot argues that humans are a particular form of life – she even uses the expression “life form” to give some clarity to what we refer to as species – and that we can understand defects and excellences in a particular life form as related to facts about that life form. For example, “it is necessary for plants to have water, for birds to build nests, for wolves to hunt in packs, and for lionesses to teach their

³ Ayn Rand, “For the New Intellectual,” in *For the New Intellectual* (Signet, 1961), pp. 14-15.

⁴ This insight is of course also found in Aristotle. See, e.g., *De Anima* 414b7-19

⁵ “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 25.

cubs to kill.”⁶ So, to take the most obvious example, a plant without water will die. In the other cases, Foot distinguishes claims about what is normal for a life form and what may or may not be true of an individual example: “Cats are four-legged but Tibbles may have only three.”⁷ So even though wolves are *typically* pack-hunters or hunt *most successfully* in packs, it’s certainly possible for a wolf who gets separated from the pack to engage in hunting, even if we wouldn’t expect that to go as well for that wolf. To take a clearer, if more absurd, example, an eagle who chose not to fly might still catch the occasional mouse to eat, but certainly wouldn’t get the kind of diet its life-form requires. The reason that example is absurd is that eagles don’t choose not to fly; they naturally use their power of flight to secure their own well-being (in contrast to humans, who *can* choose to neglect their rational faculties, to their detriment if Aristotle, as well as Rand and Foot, are correct).

For Foot, this gives us a way to have a teleological account of human action⁸ that is naturalist, a biocentric teleology. We can talk about purposive action without invoking a non-naturalist metaphysics. There’s a way something *should* be that follows from what it is *like*. A biocentric teleology is contrary to the Humean dictum that we cannot derive normative claims from descriptive claims.⁹ A strawberry is “supposed to be” red and sweet and juicy. So we can make judgments about particular strawberries on this basis: this one is good, that one is not so good. Of course, whether one strawberry is better or worse than another does not depend on intentional efforts – Foot says we should distinguish “in order to” from “trying to.” “The male peacock displays his brilliant tail *in order to* attract a female during the mating season. The display serves this purpose. Let us call such language, purposive language. But be careful here! Where something that S’s do is, in this sense, purposive we should beware of slipping over into saying of an individual S that it *has* this purpose when it does this thing.”¹⁰ This particular peacock isn’t acting on a conscious intention, but its actions are nevertheless purposive, and there is a sense in which striving is

⁶ *Natural Goodness*, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸ Not just human action, either; all creatures’ activities.

⁹ See in particular *Natural Goodness*, chapter 1, and *The Perfectionist Turn*, chapter 6.

¹⁰ *Natural Goodness*, p. 31.

taking place even if not at the conscious level we are familiar with when we try to build a house or solve a puzzle. The strawberry's internal biochemistry is structured as to produce sweetness; the fern grows toward where there is more light – if we say “it is trying to be sweet”; “it is trying to get more light,” that's true in a sense, but Foot is right to note that this can be misleading if we understand that analogously to “Bob is trying to build a house.”

For humans, of course, the language of “trying to” and “choosing to” is perfectly appropriate, for things like building a house and for developing virtues, both occupation-related virtues and the virtues pertaining to character. On Foot's view, following Aristotle, there will be virtues and defects that do not involve choice-making – for example, the function of the eye is to see, but one can be born with better or worse optical mechanisms, and this is not something one makes decisions about. But we do have to decide to use our rational faculties to secure our own flourishing. This includes both learning how to be a better carpenter (if that's my occupation) and learning how to be virtuous in the moral sense (which pertains to my being a human being). Some of the characteristics humans need to flourish are non-cognitive – we “should” have efficient chemical processes in the digestive system that allow us to process nutrients, but (a) some people's digestive systems are less efficient than they might be in other people, and (b) we don't have any cognitive control over this. On the other hand, virtues of character do have cognitive input. We “should” have traits like courage and prudence and moderation, because having such characteristics is more conducive to our flourishing, and, unlike the digestive system, we have to recognize that this is true, and then take deliberate action to cultivate such characteristics.

On this account, that we have purposive actions is itself a characteristic for which there's a purpose, but it is the sort of purpose that follows from the sort of thing a human is – a biocentric teleology. The peacock “should” have brightly colored tailfeathers because that is an aspect of that life form; the strawberry “should” be sweet and red because those are aspects of that life form; the eagle “should” use its power of flight to access prey because that is an aspect of that life form. So with the human being, there's a normativity about our use of our rational faculties to secure our ends that is an aspect of our life form. We “ought to” use our rational faculties in the same sense that an eagle “ought to” use its power of flight. The difference, again, is that eagles

naturally do this unless injured or congenitally defective, whereas people do or do not use their rational faculties as a matter of choice (this is the fundamentally Aristotelian point that Rand’s account emphasizes).

What an eagle searches out for prey is instinctually defined, whereas many of our goals are more complicated. We naturally experience hunger, and the urge to find food isn’t chosen, but we might deliberate about our feeding: “I am hungry, but I will wait until after class to eat.” “I am hungry, should I have pizza or tacos?” “I could really go for a third donut, but I’d better not, that’s too much carbs for one day.” These are all examples of the rational process layered on top of what is instinctually driven. While we do not deliberate about *being* hungry, we can deliberate about how to act regarding the hunger. Understanding this helps us understand Foot’s argument as to why the word “good” in “the plant has good roots” and “good” in “this person has good dispositions” mean the same thing.¹¹ A person developing good dispositions – virtues – is doing what is conducive to the well-being of its life form, just as a plant that develops a healthy root system does what its life form requires. The difference is that whether the plant develops good roots is not a matter of choice and effort in the sense that we’d use these words about a person’s character development. We might say “I’m trying to become a more patient person” or “I’m working on becoming a more compassionate person,” and this is comprehensible language akin to “I’m working on my forehead” or “I’m trying to learn Latin.” Whether I succeed or not is contingent on a number of factors, but a necessary condition is that I want to learn Latin or become more compassionate and that I take action toward that end. The plant’s root growth is also contingent upon external factors (adequate water in the soil, not getting eaten by a mole, etc.), but the plant isn’t making decisions and deliberations about this. This is because people and potatoes are not just different things, they’re different *kinds* of things – different life forms.¹²

This returns us to Rand’s insistence that we must choose to act in ways that are consistent with the needs of the life form we are. We certainly cannot choose to survive in the manner of a frog or a leopard.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 41.

¹² I can’t resist noting that, as far back as 1966, scientists on the television show *Star Trek* would report not merely that their scans detected life, but that they detected “life forms.” Turns out this is not merely gratuitous sci-fi jargon; it’s a philosophically accurate way to report.

We do not have a choice about *being* human, but we have a choice about what dispositions to cultivate, and the “correct” choice must be those dispositions that are consistent with the well-being of our life form. “Man cannot survive as anything but man. He *can* abandon his means of survival, his mind...But he *cannot* succeed [by doing so] in achieving anything but the subhuman... Man has to be man by choice.”¹³ By “using the mind,” Rand means, among other things, “total commitment to a state of full, conscious awareness, to the maintenance of a full mental focus in all issues, in all choices, in all waking hours [as well as] the fullest perception of reality...and to the constant, active expansion of one’s perception.”¹⁴ This alone is not sufficient, of course: we must translate that conscious awareness and focus into the development of virtues, and to do that we must figure out which dispositions are virtuous and how to acquire them, and so on, which is what Aristotle devotes several chapters to in his works. But Rand’s point is correct (and Aristotelian): a conscious decision to use our rational faculties to cultivate those dispositions that will help us flourish is a necessary condition, even if not a sufficient condition, for flourishing.

It makes sense on this view to see our faculty of reason as a power, to be used or not used. We have other powers, such as our sense perceptions and our autonomic systems. All of these powers are part of our evolved nature as a particular form of life. This is the same kind of claim one might make about a lion or an eagle or a fern. The lion’s life form includes powers and capabilities distinct to that life form (though in some cases similarities exist: a lion’s life form is more closely like that of a tiger than that of a butterfly, but nevertheless lions and tigers are also different). The lion’s powers serve a purpose in the lion’s life – but not in the sense that a car has anti-lock brakes installed for a purpose. Any artifact has attributes put there “for a reason” – nothing about a car is naturally occurring; it is put together by human craft, and each piece serves a purpose intended by the car maker. Teleological accounts of human flourishing are often derided for presupposing that our “parts” have a purpose in the same sense. But, as Foot notes, this is a confusion that reveals a poor understanding of biology as well as a failure to attend to the distinction between senses of “purpose.” The eye has a purpose: to gather visual data. The heart has a purpose: to pump blood through the circulatory system. If my heart stops working efficiently, my quality

¹³ “The Objectivist Ethics,” pp. 24-25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

of life diminishes (and if it stops working altogether, life ceases). If I keep my eyes closed, I can't navigate the world as well as if I opened them. Now, one may be born with congenital defect in a heart valve – this is not a matter of choice, nor is a defect in visual perception due to macular degeneration (or injury). But it's nevertheless true that that's what eyes and hearts are *for*. Rationality is *for* something in just this sense: a capability of the life form we are that plays a role in the survival and flourishing of individuals of that life form. Thus, we can speak of a *biocentric* or *naturalist teleology*, without making any assumptions or implications about an intentional universe or divine fate.¹⁵ Biocentric teleology only presupposes natural kinds, that is, the idea of a life-form.

I think it is clear that both Foot and Rand have a view that can be categorized this way (as does Aristotle himself). An interesting coda to this discussion might be to consider the people they see themselves as opposing. Rand famously was presenting her ethical theory in opposition to traditional and/or religious views, what she calls “the mystic, the social, [and] the subjective.”¹⁶ She argued that religion is metaphysically false and typically originates in attempts to control others, and old-world political systems like monarchy and communism are of course also like this. In her view, the leading candidate opposing such systems was subjectivism, the view that there is no morality and I should just do as I please. She thinks this too is mistaken, as it also abrogates the rational faculties, albeit in a different way than communism or religion. Because reality is objective,¹⁷ and we have a particular nature as humans, which includes reason and volition, we can have a reason-based ethical system that enables us to survive and flourish. Foot, on the other hand, while also an atheist, was less concerned with opposing theology-based ethics than with refuting the ethical non-cognitivism that dominated academic philosophy in the 1940s when she was coming up, as represented by thinkers such as A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson. (Non-cognitivism can also ground

¹⁵ These may be true, but the point is that biocentric teleology can be true *whether or not* there are gods. For arguments that modern biology is not inconsistent with the sort of teleology Foot has in mind, see, e.g., several essays in *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 1987), especially Gotthelf's “Aristotle's Conception of Final Causality” and John Cooper's “Hypothetical Necessity and Natural Teleology.”

¹⁶ “The Objectivist Ethics,” pp. 33-34.

¹⁷ Hence “Objectivism.”

subjectivism, and both Foot and Rand would find subjectivism unacceptable.) She was also interested in responding to non-cognitivism's chief foils, Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. For Foot, the biocentric teleology of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition was a legitimate answer to the challenges to ethics prevalent in her milieu.¹⁸

The main difference between Foot and Rand in this regard lies in the fact that Foot, an academic philosopher, operates according to the norms of the profession, and mentions when she's explicitly appealing to an Aristotelian concept.¹⁹ Rand was a fiction writer, who only later in life turned to non-fiction essays to outline positions that she had earlier sought to dramatize through her novels. She notes that she's influenced by Aristotle in a general way, but doesn't engage in the sort of citation practices one sees in academic philosophy. Nevertheless, Rand presents arguments and theories, and in this case, is making a solidly neo-Aristotelian case for biocentric teleology that is very much in harmony with and complements the arguments we see in Philippa Foot.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive account of Foot's work in its historical context (and that of her friend and colleague G. E. M. Anscombe), see Benjamin Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up To Something* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ For further discussion of how "appealing to an Aristotelian concept" differs from Aristotle scholarship, see my "Aristotelians and Neo-Aristotelians," *Reason Papers* vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 2023), pp. 233-40.