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The Argument of Ethical Naturalism

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Abstract

Ethical naturalism, the theory claiming that natural facts and especially facts concerning human nature play a justificatory role in ethics, is not very popular amongst moral philosophers. Especially in countries where Kant's influence is large, the charge of naturalistic fallacy is often made against it. The aim of this paper is to show that this charge misses the point: every ethical theory is at a certain level based on pure facts, natural or not, and natural facts concerning human nature are particularly suited for this role. The arguments in favour of ethical naturalism rely on a concept of human nature that includes basic desires related to ends we ought to pursue, as Aristotle and the Scholastics already saw long ago.

1. Introduction: Demarcating the Problem

When somebody, especially if he is a philosopher, mentions Ethical Naturalism (*EN* hereafter), we can be almost sure that he will utter negative critical remarks. And if we press him to explain his concern, we will usually not err if we expect, as an answer, the charge of *naturalistic fallacy* (*NF* hereafter). On the other side, ethical books are full of references to (human) nature; we find them even in the writings of David Hume, the father of the contention, as many commentators have indicated (Pidgen, 1993). In this paper I will try to show that such a charge is misguided and that, contrary to the appearances, *EN* is not only an acceptable philosophical position, but even a good candidate among the available options. Of course, *EN* is not without problems, but for the most part, they are exactly of the same nature as those all moral theories encounter.

Let me expand a little this last remark. When *A* objects *x* to *B*, *B* can answer directly or not. Among indirect replies, one consists in showing that *A* commits *x* too. I will term such a reply a *Tu quoque's* argument. In this paper, I will have recourse more than is usual to such arguments; they will not show that *EN* is correct, because they are not able to do it, but they will show that *EN* is not worse than its opponents. I will be more direct and positive too.

To begin with the charge of *NF*, some clarifications are in order. First, what is *EN*? Like all -ism, it has several meanings; but as I will consider *EN* in this paper, it consists in this main thesis, pertaining to what Anthony Quinton has named 'the central problem of ethics, that is the discovery of a criterion for the justification of judgments of value' (1966, p. 136-137):

EN: When you are summoned to justify an action, a judgement of value (concerning an action, a behavior, an institution or a trait of character) or a moral norm, it is *not* inappropriate to invoke a natural fact (more precisely: a natural fact concerning human nature or condition).

It is a thesis about normative justification: what *reasons* do we have to act and to judge as we do? As I will conduct my analysis on this normative level, I will not enter into the metaphysical aspects of the relation between facts and values. More importantly, normative justification is not psychological justification or motivation. Of course, there are many links between them and normative justification is not without effect on the psychology of decision. For instance, Kant demands that our actions conform to the categorical imperative factually (justification) and intentionnally (motivation). But the two are conceptually distinct, as is clear when we hear utilitarians argue that the principle of maximisation of utility justifies our actions, but must not be understood as a motive of action. In this paper, I will never be concerned by the psychological level of motivation.

On this normative level, *NF* states:

NF: When you are summoned to justify an action, a judgement of value or a moral norm, it is *quite* inappropriate to invoke a natural fact.

The reason for that is that it is not possible to derive norms and values from facts. Take this practical inference (*A*):

1. Every human being desires to be happy.
2. Therefore society ought to promote the happiness of every human being.

Such an inference is a *fallacy*, because it introduces in 2 a deontic verb

(ought to) without any corresponding semantic ingredient in 1: so the deontic character of 2 is without justification, it is like manna falling from heaven. To become a valid inference, we must add to *A* another premise. So we have (*B*):

1a. Every human being desires to be happy.

1b. *Human desires ought to be satisfied.*

2. Therefore society ought to promote the happiness of every human being.

As I hope is now clear, the struggle of *EN* against the charge levelled by *NF* I am concerned with has nothing to do with the open question argument or with the double nature of thick moral concepts. What I want to deal with is the question of *the sources of normativity*. Kant asks: what is the source of moral legislation? My naturalist answer would be: some natural fact¹. Of course, not any natural fact: as morality concerns human attitudes and deeds, it will be facts pertaining to human beings, for short, what the philosophical tradition has named 'human nature'. Moreover, not any human fact will be adequate to do this job; as we will see, appropriate facts will be facts internally related to ends or purposes. But I can't jump so quickly to these conclusions.

It is easy to see that the reformulation of the above practical inference (*B*) does not settle the problem we are confronted with when we are inquiring about moral justification. If *B* is not a fallacy, it is in need of justification too: why, can we ask, is there an obligation to satisfy human needs? Of course, the problem is here no more a formal one, it is a substantial one, and it is not without interest to note that, often, the charge of *NF* is a hidden way to dismiss a philosophical thesis and to promote another one (Birnbacher, 1990, p. 75). So, let us forget *NF* and ask about 1b the same question we have asked about 2: if the deontic character of 2 is justified by the deontic one of 1b, the deontic character of 1b is in turn without justification, it is like manna falling from heaven. So, what could count as a justification of 1b, i.e. of the deontic character of our moral judgments?

Before proceeding, two remarks are still in order:

1° Moral language has two domains: we speak about *values* and about *norms*. In the following I will not explicitly distinguish these two domains

¹ It is the title of a book by Christine Korsgaard: *The Sources of Normativity* (1996). Our topic is the same, but not our conclusions.

when it is not crucial to my argumentation².

2° In the definitions of *EN* and *NF* I have given, the notoriously equivocal concept of 'fact' appears, as it is usual in the discussion of the '*fact-value dichotomy*'. This concept has a general sense, as in the definition Chisholm has put forth: 'Facts are the things that make propositions true; if a proposition is true, it is in virtue of a certain fact' (1976, p. 120)³. It is not the sense I am interested in, because it could beg the question if we acknowledge moral facts such that 'Human desires ought to be satisfied' is true; in that case, the '*fact-value dichotomy*' evaporates. But the '*fact-value dichotomy*' is still 'the *is-ought* question'. So, when I speak of 'fact' in this context, I mean 'what can be stated in a descriptive sentence'; for instance 'events' or 'states of affairs' (Rundle, 1979, p. 337).

2. Some Ends We Pursue Naturally

What does count as a justification of 1b, i.e. of the deontic character of our moral judgments? Human nature, *EN* says.

In the history of western thought, such a thesis has often been voiced. For sure, it has even been the dominant one before Modernity. So it is not necessary for me to begin from scratch and I will start with a thesis professed by scholastic thinkers, from Aquinas onward. It is the thesis that human beings are driven by four fundamental inclinations and that these natural inclinations are the source of morality in human affairs. These inclinations (i.e. dispositional natural desires) are the following:

1. The desire to live
2. The desire to procreate
3. The desire to know
4. The desire to live with human fellows (Timmons, 2002, p. 70)

There are similar desires in non-human animals, but as animals are devoid of reason, they do not manifest them in the same way. For example, human procreation and animal reproduction aim at the same goal, but they are lived

² My position on this subject is that values inhabit the most fundamental moral level and that norms are grounded upon values. See my 2008a.

³ Later, Chisholm reduces facts to true propositions, but it is of no importance for my purpose (p. 123).

very differently. This is ancient philosophy, but not quite: sociobiologists too put a fundamental and not necessarily conscious desire at the foundation of morality: the desire to survive, and accept the thesis that our ethics comes from our human nature, a nature that is inescapably social, as Peter Singer states: 'The principles of ethics come from our own nature as social, reasoning beings' (1983, p. 149). It is simply another manner to state 1 and 2, and even 4, as human beings cannot survive alone, without being members of political communities. The difference between sociobiology and medieval Aristotelism is that they adopt different conceptions of nature (and of laws of nature): for the former, it is the modern and scientific conception of it, while the latter entertains an ontological or metaphysical one. It is very important to notice that metaphysics is about *facts* and not about norms, because we frequently hear people classifying all that is not scientific as ethical or normative. We shall see that other naturalists resort to the psychological side of human nature, invoking natural sentiments like benevolence. But always, it is human nature.

It is interesting to note that sociobiology too has been charged for committing *NF*. Daniel Dennett replies by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*: 'If "ought" cannot be derived from "is", just what *can* "ought" be derived from? Is ethics an *entirely* "autonomous" field of enquiry? Does it float, untethered to facts from any other discipline or tradition?' (1995, p. 467) It is the manna's argument, and it is a good argument: ethics must regulate *human* behavior, so it cannot be completely disconnected of facts about human beings and nature. But in my opinion Dennett stops too early and does not take seriously enough the manna's argument: 'It is one thing to deny that collections of facts about the natural world are *necessary* to ground an ethical conclusion, and quite another to deny that any collection of such facts is *sufficient*'. So understood, the naturalistic thesis evaporates, because, as we have seen, every practical inference contains some facts about the natural world. Even a Kantian will agree with this passage of Dennett. To be a true adept of *EN* you must claim that facts are *sufficient* to ground ethics, i.e. that there exists some basic practical inference that contains *only* facts and nothing else. Why? Is not ontological naturalism, i.e. the thesis that only natural facts exist, a sufficient ground for *EN*? No, because you can be an ontological naturalist and a moral contractualist as you can be a platonist and a moral naturalist. *EN* is not even internally linked with foundationalism, because you can be a coherentist and accept that

amongst the subsets of beliefs in your maximally coherent set of beliefs, there is one subset containing only propositions about natural facts that is sufficient to justify all the moral beliefs you entertain. No, the reason why facts must be *sufficient* is, as Dennett states clearly, that morality cannot stand alone and makes itself the justifying work. But we must be careful not to propose a 'greedy reductionism', that is a reductionism which 'rush from facts to values' to quote Dennett once more.

Let us come back to desires. A desire is teleologically structured, it is internally related to an *end*. So the doctrine of fundamental inclinations says that (a) there are ends we pursue naturally and (b) these ends are somehow normative.

I think that the first part of this thesis is uncontroversial. Of course, the pursuit of these ends takes many forms, depending on the social and cultural surroundings we live in; but this is quite natural too, because of 4. So our argument starts, and controversies with it, as soon as we ask, following the second part of the above thesis: are there natural ends we *ought to* pursue?

3. Natural Ends We Ought to Pursue

This too is in a sense not very controversial: even Kantianism which is usually considered as an anti-teleological doctrine, presents some ends as obligatory, i.e. the perfection of oneself and the happiness of others. And it is not surprising, because action is internally linked with end: every action aims at something. Therefore, the question is: *which* ends ought we to pursue? Kantianism could nevertheless disagree with the *natural* character of those ends, because it considers nature as essentially related to inclinations and desires that have non-rational aims. Implicitly, this is already an answer to the question: which ends? But we must not be too hasty.

So, to the question 'Are There Natural Ends We Ought to Pursue?', philosophers give frequently an affirmative reply, but differ as to the content of this reply. For a sociobiologist like Michael Ruse, this end is survival, for an egoist like (maybe) Bernard de Mandeville it is personal interest, for David Hume and the Scottish school it is the good of others, through the natural feeling of sympathy; for an eudaimonist like Aristotle, it is human flourishing and for a christian holiness. Nevertheless, are those ends really *obligatory*? and if obligatory, are they really *natural*? and if natural, is it because of this character

that we *ought to* pursue them?

To pass from matter of fact to duty is to commit crude *NF*. Moreover it is often a very dubious philosophical move. Think of the position of classical utilitarianism. In an attempt to justify the moral imperative that we ought to maximise the happiness of all, it is sometimes argued that if we must do it, it is because we all want to maximise our own happiness: normative utilitarianism is justified by universalizing psychological hedonism. But the truth of psychological hedonism is not evident, to say the least.

More deeply, the fact that there are certain ends we ought to pursue does not seem to be unambiguously tied with their natural character. As Elliott Sober states: 'I want to suggest that to the degree that "natural" means anything biologically, it means very little ethically. And, conversely, to the degree that "natural" is understood as a normative concept, it has very little to do with biology.' (1986, p. 234) For a Kantian, this is evident in the radical sense that 'natural' has nothing to do with ethics, as Mats Hansson noted: 'According to Kantian ethics, however, an argument that something is contrary to nature is not an ethically justified reason to prohibit it. Kant [...] affirmed, however, that everything perhaps, ought not to have happened which according to the course of nature has happened and according to its empirical ground was inevitable.' (1991, p. 182-183) But this attitude is not limited to Kantianism. Tristram Engelhardt once said: 'How [...] could one hold on nonreligious grounds that homosexuality is *unnatural* if human nature is the product of evolutionary processes that may even have developed genes for homosexuality? [...] In any event, the outcomes of evolution would be without intrinsic normative force.' (1986, p. 6, italics mine) But that was his view as a (kantian) liberal; as an orthodox christian, his position is rather different: 'Homosexuality, adultery, and fornication may in the context of this world be biologically normal and wholesome in the sense of being adaptive', but nevertheless it does not deprive them of their sinful character, because 'carnal desires other than between husband and wife are *unnatural* in being disordered, as aiming away from salvation.' (2000, p. 247, italics mine) Two occurrences of 'unnatural', and two very different meanings; the first refers to biology, it is a descriptive term, the second to eschatological destiny and divine will, and has a prescriptive function. More precisely, the first occurrence of 'natural' refers to some norm too: in his biological meaning, 'natural' means 'normal from the point of view

of adaptation', but this is not a *moral* norm for orthodox christianism. Could it be a moral norm for other versions of *EN*? As we shall see, an affirmative answer requires that we interpret 'nature' in an essentialist way and contrast it with a third concept, that of 'nature' understood in a completely non-normative manner, that is nature as the class of everything that we can encounter in physical reality (let us name this concept the *all-encompassing* one).

Act of will, says a kantian, versus fact of nature. But is not an act of will a *fact*? When I say: 'I want you to come soon', I utter an order, but this utterance is a psychological episode, so how can it acquire normative authority? Before examining this question, that is before coming to the heart of our problem, let us pause a while on this point: an act of will is a kind of fact. If we examine the justification ethical theories give to normative authority, we soon note that *every* moral doctrine refers ultimately to some fact. Society ought to promote the happiness of every human being. Why? Because every human being *desires* to be happy and human desires ought to be satisfied. But why? Because God *wants* us to love one's neighbour. Or because we *have* freely *decided* to help our fellow human beings when in need. Or because we *feel sympathy* for our fellow human beings when in need. Or because it is in *our interest* to help them (tomorrow, we will perhaps need their help in turn). Or because of our fundamental *inclination* to live in society. Each time, we invoke a justifying fact; even Kant speaks of the categorical imperative as a *fact* of reason (i.e. something tied with our rational *nature*) and his commentators does not hesitate to speak of rational anthropology⁴. So, in every moral doctrine, practical inferences have the same structure, and a structure that does not express a *greedy* reductionism:

- 1a. Description of the situation, observations.
- 1b. Justifying fact.
2. Normative conclusion.

It follows that differences between moral doctrines does not consist in differences between the form of the arguments they employ, but between the

⁴ See Kant, 1788, p. 53: 'Auch ist das moralische Gesetz gleichsam als ein Faktum der reinen Vernunft, dessen wir uns a priori bewußt sind und welches apodiktisch gewiß ist, gegeben'; and Pogge, 1998, p. 194: 'Kant takes for granted a general understanding of the laws of (human) nature or of the permanent conditions of human life.' But, as we have seen with Dennett, it is difficult to draw a precise conclusion from that, because we don't know if this general understanding is put in 1a or in 1b. For *EN* it must be 1b.

content of the justifying premise. They disagree about the nature of the justifying fact: which fact has normative force or authority?

A very widespread answer is, as we have already seen: *volition*, divine or human. That is not surprising, because in human affairs, will is the power to issue orders and commands. Of course, any act of will does not possess this property; to possess it, will must have acquired authority. But will is, so to speak, the natural bearer of authority.

Another widespread answer is: *reason*. Reason is linked with norms (the norms of rationality, and for many philosophers, rationality and morality are intimately related) and with authority, too. For Kant, will is simply practical reason. Usually, we distinguish the authority of will (deontic authority) from that of reason (epistemic authority) (Bochenski, 1979, p. 62), but not infrequently people who possess this second form of authority think that it gives them a deontic one, too (paternalism is a good example of that).

Compared with will and reason, human nature seems a poor candidate. Of course, like Engelhardt and the Scholastics, we can lend it on God, but this move is not allowed to a sociobiologist or to a modern neo-aristotelian. How then could nature bear normative authority? At first sight, naturalism appears to be hopeless: everything is in nature, but the task of morality is precisely to make discriminations between what is acceptable or permissible or obligatory and what is not. Let us elaborate on this argument.

In the first chapter of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls draws a distinction that has become classical between utilitarianism and deontologism. Utilitarianism, he says, seems more promising, because it proposes a conception of non-moral good or value (a monistic one: pleasure) and defines moral rightness as the maximisation of non-moral good: 'The good is defined independently from the right, and then the right is defined as that which maximizes the good' (1971, p. 24). William Frankena makes the same point, generalizing: 'A teleological theory says that the basic or ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong, obligatory, etc., is the non-moral value that is brought into being.' (1973, p. 14) By contrast, deontological theories do not. So, in teleologism, you begin with an axiology (a theory of values, values being properties of what is called 'a good') and then define norms (duties): *values precede norms*. On the contrary, in deontologism, you begin with norms, and what has value is determined by norms: *norms precede*

values. But, if classical, this story is not quite correct, because it does not take into account the distinction between non-moral and moral values. Take for instance the value of pleasure and the value of life. Nobody, be it a deontologist or a teleologist, will deny that we spontaneously or naturally value pleasure or life: pleasure and life are natural or non-moral goods. Morality begins when we say *which* non-moral good is to be promoted, protected or honoured⁵, that is which non-moral good acquires the status of a moral one (which non-moral good counts in or for morality) and so becomes a normative principle of action (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 24-25). Will and reason can do that, but nature? It seems hopeless, because natural belongs to non-moral: a natural good is a non-moral or pre-moral good. So a non-moral good is a good we often value naturally; we are wired to value it and as is well-known we are wired to value a lot of dubious moral things.

But, looking more closely, it is not as hopeless as that, because:

1. Will and reason are not such great sources for morality.
2. The different meanings of 'nature' give us some hope.

First, the perennial theological debates about the priority in God of his will over his reason and the calvinist thesis that God could have ordered us to hate one's neighbour show that will alone may not be a good candidate. And this is stressed if we move to the human realm: will must neither be arbitrary, irrational, nor evil, for it to have moral authority – Kant distinguishes sharply between *Wille* and *Willkür*; John Harsanyi excludes irrational and evil preferences from the felicific calculus and Christine Korsgaard states: 'The ability to reflect puts the will in a position of self-command' (1996, p. 220)⁶. Should we then conclude that rationality is the rightness-conferring property? It is the contention of many philosophers from the Kantian and Utilitarian school (Donagan, 1977, p. 215); but this claim too has been hotly contested.

Second, some domains of naturality seem not so bad suited as bearers of moral authority. Think of moral sentiments and especially of sympathy and benevolence, emotions and traits of character that are at the source of morality in David Hume and the Scottish school⁷. The Scholastics we have mentioned

⁵For those predicates, see Pettit, 1991, p. 231.

⁶ See also Kant, 1788, p. 38, and Harsanyi, 1977, p. 55.

⁷ See for instance Hume, 1748, p. 178: 'No qualities are more intitled to the general

spoke of four fundamental inclinations that possess moral authority, and it seems not an absurd idea to give our desire to live a high moral standing; is not this desire in good place to justify the right to life? More generally James Griffin thinks that moral force belongs actually to some desires: 'We have to get behind desires and expectations to the deeper considerations that show which desires and expectations have moral force' (1986, p. 40). 'Behind', because not all desires and expectations are normative, but only those linked with basic or fundamental human needs. What then is the criterium to classify a need as basic or fundamental and why is the basic character of these needs conferring value? Ultimately, the naturalist answer is: because they are tied to our *essential* nature. So, those natural ends we ought to pursue and cultivate would be those ends that are tied to our essential nature.

4. Ends that Are Tied to our Essential Nature

Essentialism is not a well-accepted doctrine; usually it is even rejected without argumentation. But on reflection it is easy to see that nobody can escape a soft form of essentialism, because as Bochenski told long ago in a debate in France with Quine, to separate the essential from the accidental is only to recognize that there exists different strata in (our apprehension of) reality (1962, p. 184-185). If we, as a species, could not discern the essential from the accidental, we had disappeared for long! In the same spirit, everybody acknowledges that all the ends we pursue have not the same importance for the person we are (psychologically) or for the person we ought to be (morally).

But what is our essential nature and how can it have moral authority? Alasdair MacIntyre, a well-known naturalist from the aristotelian camp, states: 'There is fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter.' (1985, p. 52) The argument is plainly aristotelian and distinguishes clearly between nature as what there is and nature as what we ought to strive to (our end or *telos*). And nature-as-telos, it is said, bridges easily the gap between

good-will and approbation of mankind than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species.'

'is' and 'ought'. MacIntyre, maintain Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, 'sees the concept [of *telos*] as vital to morality understood as a rationally justifiable or objective enterprise, because it alone can license immediate transitions from statements of fact to statements of value or obligation – transitions from "is" to "ought".' (1996, p. 79)

Douglas Rasmussen makes the same point: 'The neo-Aristotelian view of human flourishing [...] appeals to human nature in two basic ways: (1) it assumes that human nature is teleological, that is, that human beings have a *telos* or natural function; and (2) it assumes that this natural function has moral import.' (1999, p. 32) And Rasmussen underlies that it is important not to interpret this *telos* in the frame of the design theory: 'Teleology has a place in nature not because the universe has a purpose or because God has created and endowed each creature with a purpose. Teleology exists because the nature of living things involves the potential that is irreducibly for development to maturity' (1999, p. 35). Physical maturity, but moral maturity, too.

This statement of *EN* is still rather abstract, but it is echoed in many themes voiced by philosophers (and laymen). John Stuart Mill contrasts a dissatisfied Socrates with a satisfied fool (and a dissatisfied human being with a satisfied pig); R. G. Frey opposes the capacities of human beings to those of animals: 'While we share many activities with animals, such as eating, sleeping, and reproducing, no combination of such activities comes anywhere near exhausting the richness of normal adult human life, where love, family, friends, art, music, literature, science, and the further products of reason and reflection add immeasurably to our lives.' (1996, p. 207) Those passages are hierarchical in tone: human beings are superior to non-human animals, but it is not what matters to the thesis we examine now: the important thing is that the activities and capacities mentioned are typical to human beings and that there is little controversy on the fact that such activities and capacities represent what is crucial to be a human being.

It is very important to understand the precise limits of this concept of 'nature' and not to confuse it with the biological and the all-encompassing ones. A lot of objections against *NE* miss this point, as it is already visible in Sidgwick when he says: 'We find no design in nature, if the complex processes of the world known to us through experience are conceived as an aimless though orderly drift of change, [... so] I cannot conceive how it can determine the ends

of their action, or be a source of unconditional rules of duty' (1907, p. 81). And, no surprise, he adds: 'Every attempt thus to derive "what ought to be" from "what is" palpably fails'. Nevertheless, thirty pages later we read: 'It seems to me, however, more in accordance with common sense to recognize – as Butler does – that the calm desire for my "good on the whole" is *authoritative*; and therefore carries with it implicitly a rationale dictate to aim at this end' (1907, p. 112). But, as MacIntyre objects to Hume and the Scottish philosophers, it does not suffice to assert the authoritative character of some desire, because it is in need of justification, and from a naturalist point of view, only essential ends linked to human nature can do the work (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 49)⁸.

EN's argument is now clear: action has a teleological structure and morally good action must aim at certain ends rather than others. What characterizes actions as right is their contribution to the ends that are essential to a human being in that they are characteristic and crucial to the being he is (Hurka, 1993, p. 9-14). Those ends are therefore normative (in the sense that they are the source of moral authority: *authoritative*), they give our deeds a moral direction and provide justification for our moral beliefs. Truly, it is the life itself of living beings that is teleological: it aims at certain ends and the possession of those ends is not innate (although the capacity to reach them is innate and characteristic of living species). In a certain sense, this Aristotelian argument rejoins the sociobiologist position: each living being aims at survival, he wants to continue to live, but living the life of the being he is, that is, flourishing – biological nature becomes normative as far as it is tied with essential ends. Of course, ultimate essential ends are not objects of choice, as Aristotle stated (every human being wants *naturally* – so non-voluntarily – to flourish) and as Anthony Flew (1967, p. 143-148) critically remarked against some sociobiologists (if survival is our natural end, it is nonsense to urge us to survive), but the means and ways to aim at them – that is intermediate ends – are.

Even a neo-kantian like Korsgaard presents the normative question along those lines: 'A human being is an animal whose nature is to construct a practical identity which is normative for her. [...] When some way of acting is a threat to her practical identity and reflection reveals that fact, the person finds that she

⁸ David Wiggins makes a similar point against naturalists who look for the basis of ethics in 'brute nature' (1976, p. 183).

must reject that way of acting' (1996, p. 150). An animal is a teleological entity: its nature imposes tasks on him because it wants to flourish. A human being is an animal of a peculiar sort, endowed with free will, so he can choose his identity (i.e. the ends that are essential for the being he wants to be); but not any identity can do the job and as a *moral* being, he must endorse the identity of a denizen of the Kingdom of Ends.

Now, if you ask: what ends exactly our nature enjoins us to pursue, disagreements will emerge between naturalist philosophers; but if you ask a christian: what does God enjoin you to do? or to a contractualist: what are the duties the social contract make obligatory? disagreements will be frequent too. My point is only to show that Human Nature is as good a candidate as God, Will or Reason as the source of moral authority.

Several philosophers disagree. At this point, one argument is often voiced, pretending that human nature is not appropriate to explain the *deontic* character of morality. How can natural facts be at the basis of obligation? We can find such a charge in the writings of Richard Hare and of Charles Larmore. I cannot here answer to it in all details, because it would be necessary to investigate the nature of normative utterances and the relations between values (that are tied to ends) and obligations (Baertschi, 2001, p. 69-86). But I think that the teleological character of human life, that enjoins us to become really human, can be a first good answer (nature gives us a *task*). Another part of the answer will soon be given, when I will speak of the requirements *necessary* to lead a good life.

You may fear that there will be a high price to pay for adopting *EN*: if our nature sets what we ought to do, what we ought to do will be in our interest, because fulfilling his nature is in the best interest of the doer. But is not morality essentially altruistic? I hope that a short answer will be enough here: yes, it is self-interested, but self-interest is an inescapable feature of morality. The christian hopes to live in paradise for ever if he acts rightly; the contractualist wants to make a contract, that is an agreement that is for the benefit of all, including himself; the utilitarian is not altruistic, but impartial, and, finally, why be altruistic if the interest of human beings were of no importance? (Singer, 1979, p. 208-216). Of course, nothing here implies that self-interest must *motivate* actions; as I have said in introduction, nothing in my argument will pertain to the psychological question of moral motivation.

An action is right if it contributes to the realization of ends that are essential to a human being in that they are characteristic and crucial to the being he is, I have said. But in ethics, a lot of duties and rights we mention seem not to be tied to the essence of *man*, in that they pertain to basic needs we share with many non-human animals like needs concerning life, food, shelter and freedom from pain. Moreover, I have argued that the criterium to tell basic from non-basic needs was that the first were tied to our essential nature (as human animals); but if we follow MacIntyre, this claim misses the moral point, because what he says pertain much more to *perfectionist* needs than to basic ones. To do justice to this objection, I shall introduce a new distinction, that will bring my naturalist's argument to an end.

5. The Two Layers of Morality

MacIntyre's realization argument is illustrated by Mulhall and Swift in the following way: 'We can move immediately from the knowledge that a knife is blunt and bent to the conclusion that it is a bad knife, and from the fact that it is sharp and evenly balanced to the judgement that it is a good knife' (1996, p. 79)⁹. But it is a little too hasty as a rendering of the argument from function (*ergon* in aristotelian language). A bad knife *is* a knife, but a picture of a knife is not a knife (remember the commentary on the famous painting of René Magritte: 'This is not a pipe'). If you make a 'knife' with paper (for that you would practice origami), it is not a *bad* knife; it is not a knife at all. To be a knife, an object must have the *function* of a knife: it must be able to cut; if it has not this capacity, it is not a knife, but something else, depending on the function it has. It is exactly the same with human beings: a morally bad human being (a moral fool, to speak *à la* Mill) – an evil one – is nevertheless a human being (and not a pig): he has human *telos*, but he does not succeed to attain it well. Rational and volitional powers like autonomy are capacities attached to the *possession* of this human *telos*, and they are at least partly constitutive of the *ontological* status of human beings, often named his *moral* status (Baertschi, 2008b, p. 77-78).

⁹ See MacIntyre, 1985, p. 58-59. To take a knife as a comparison underwrites the fact that concepts of moral evaluation are of the same kind as concepts of technical evaluation: both are practical and descriptive, as Anthony Quinton showed (1978, p. 122-123).

Because of the developmental character of human life, human beings, that is beings possessing a human *telos* and the capacities to attain it, can fail to reach it and stop somewhere in between.

This developmental character implies human functioning at two ends: beginning and achievement. For the beginning, some goods must be available (like food and shelter, but like liberties, too); without them, the capacities to lead one's life cannot be put in action, and this beginning can repeat itself several times (think of health and the institution of health care to help human beings, as far as is possible, to function well and to be 'repaired'). That is the lower layer of morality, so important for Human Rights and for human dignity (it is the source of many duties towards others, and maybe towards oneself). Once in action, those capacities to lead one's life can achieve their results, that is function, badly or well; whence a second layer (an upper one) of morality. It is the realm of *virtues* and of *perfectionist* values, as Thomas Nagel has called them (1979, p. 554)¹⁰.

In those two layers, normative authority resides in human nature, that is in what Scholastics termed fundamental inclinations (their list or another's, it doesn't matter). We can observe something analogous even in positions that are neither teleological nor naturalist in their structure. Think of what John Rawls says about primary goods: they are (non-moral) goods that 'every rational man is presumed to want' (1971, p. 62) whatever plan of life is his own; therefore such goods are goods that every human being needs in order to live a life characteristic of a human being – Griffin asserts explicitly that basic needs 'depend not upon this or that person's particular wish or purpose, but upon something deeper and objective – human nature' (1986, p. 42), even if he does not grant them the same importance as Rawls in ethics. In such a conception, what is left for justice is not the list of goods or their importance for contractants, but the manner to distribute them well when there are not enough of them in a situation of relative scarcity.

Briefly, an entity can function as a human being or not, and if it does, it can function well or not. Functioning is, for a human being, functioning human-ly, and good functioning is flourishing; to flourish, human beings must have

¹⁰ See also Mark Timmons, 2002, p. 68: 'The goodness of a knife, then, is its being in a state of perfection, and to be in a state of perfection is to be able to perform its function well'. It is a remark on Aquinas' ethics.

essential needs satisfied, basic as well as perfectionist ones. As Griffin states: 'What count are what we aim at and what we would not avoid or be indifferent to getting' (1986, p. 22). Moreover we are *moral* beings, so we cannot flourish as human beings without fulfilling our duties towards ourself of course (think of gluttony) but towards others, too.

But why towards others too, and not only towards oneself? The naturalist's answer is rather short: because we are so wired that we have concerns for our human fellows. You may express it by invoking natural sympathy, the survival value of cooperation or the fourth fundamental inclination (echoing the aristotelian saying that a human being is naturally a social being), but those refinements do not change the thesis. If a critic finds such an answer too swift and too short, the naturalist will reply that even those philosophers who have the most carefully tried to justify our duties towards others have not infrequently offered finally a similar justification, if not in general, nevertheless for certain duties. Take first Kantianism. The categorical imperative expresses the requirement of universalizability and is forcefully opposed to inclinations and sensibility that are irreducibly particular and selfish; but when Kant comes to imperfect duties, and especially when he asserts that the moral imperative enjoins us to help our human fellows when in need (the duty of beneficence), his argument is only one of reciprocity (a kind of survival value): it is possible that in the future I need myself some help, so I must help others now¹¹. Take then utilitarianism. Its three pillars are maximization, impartiality and sentience. But why do I have the duty to promote the happiness of *all* sentient beings? Mill, after having proposed this inference: 'No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible

¹¹ '[...] indem der Fälle sich doch manche eräugnen können, wo er anderer Liebe und Theilnehmung bedarf' (1785, p. 281). Herman (1984, p. 143) has offered a more rationalist explanation of Kant's position on beneficence; but he too acknowledges that it is not disconnected from our condition of vulnerable and imperfect beings: 'It is a fact our nature as rational beings that we cannot guarantee that we shall always be capable of realizing our ends unaided, as it is a fact of our nature that we need things and skills to pursue our ends. [...] But we can call on the skills and resources of others to supplement our own.'

to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons' (1863, p. 36), concedes that it is not possible to give a genuine proof for a first principle and, finally, resorts to 'conscientious feelings of mankind' (1863, p. 30) widespread in humankind. Well, human nature in disguise (love of mankind, that is benevolence) on the basis of a form of naturalism: happiness is normative because everybody wants to be happy and because we feel sympathy with others. Rawls makes the same point when he states, discussing classical utilitarianism: 'Men's natural capacity for sympathy suitably generalized provides the perspective from which they can reach an understanding on a common conception of justice' (1971, p, 186).

Because of the fragmentation of value, some domain of it may not be covered by the argument from teleological nature, except in a trivial sense: when confronted with any normative demand, we can always answer that we are so wired that we tend to respect it. But this is too short an answer. Think of rights, of respect of human dignity or of deference to non-human animals interests. Of course, it is possible to use the Kantian strategy of indirect duties: looking for personal virtues obliges us to respect rights, dignity and animals, but this does not do justice to those moral demands. If the question of rights is rather easily dealt with, for rights can be justified by basic needs and fulfilling basic needs is a requisite of normal human functioning, it is not the case for human dignity and respect for animals. Those moral demands remind us that primary goods and perfectionist values are not alone in the realm of ultimate intrinsic values and duties towards other beings shows that, ultimately, we human beings are called out by those values. This paves the way for another answer: if we, human beings, react to moral demands as we do (if we are so wired), is it not because there exists in some sense a realm of values that *ought-to-be*, to use an expression of Max Scheler, a realm to which we are naturally sensible? Is this not the reason why Emanuel Levinas gives such an importance to the *face* of others?

6. Conclusion

By these last remarks, I don't want to suggest that every moral doctrine is a type of ethical naturalism, openly or in disguise, even if it seems to me that it is not possible to develop a complete moral theory without any recourse to some

claim about human nature in the center of the justification's process (in 1b and not only in 1a). Kant himself, when he contrasts conflictually nature and reason, excludes in fact not so much human nature as such than its non-rational part. But there is a long way from that to a thorough naturalism and its fundamental principle of *telos*.

In the end, I hope to have made a good case in favour of the thesis that *EN* is not in any worse position than the other main ethical theories, because:

1. Every moral theory needs to call for some basic factual premise in the process of justification.
2. The conception of a teleological nature is not problematic if properly constrained.
3. Duties toward others are not more difficult to account for in naturalism than in other moral theories.¹²

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