Is Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism Compatible with Moral Universalism? A Response to Christopher Gowans

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Abstract: Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism aims to provide a naturalistic, objectivist approach to metaethics that takes seriously our animality and our rationality. It holds that moral virtues are natural excellences of the human will and practical reason. Recently Christopher Gowans has argued that Aristotelian naturalism is incompatible with moral universalism—the thesis that every human being has moral worth and deserves serious moral consideration. If Gowans is right, naturalism has a large and bitter bullet to bite. To my knowledge, Gowans' objection remains unanswered. In this paper I attempt to answer it. I argue that Gowans' argument is unconvincing. It presupposes some account of how the virtuous agent weighs reasons for action, but it is not obvious what this account is supposed to be, and Gowans neither articulates nor defends it. Until Gowans provides such an account, the naturalist need not fear his criticism.

1. Introduction

The philosophical tradition known as neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism (henceforth: Aristotelian naturalism) aims to provide a naturalistic, objectivist approach to metaethics that takes seriously our animality and our rationality. It holds that moral virtues are natural excellences of the human will and practical reason.¹ Aristotelian naturalism has long attracted a variety of criticisms. One class of objections maintains that Aristotelian naturalism is implausible because it generates immoral ethical conclusions.² Recently, Christopher Gowans has offered a novel form of this type of objection. He argues that Aristotelian naturalism is incompatible with moral universalism—the thesis that “[e]ach human being has moral worth or standing, and hence deserves serious moral consideration.”³ If Gowans is right, Aristotelian naturalists have a large

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¹ The three main figure-heads of the view are Philippa Foot (2001), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) and Michael Thompson (2008). Younger defenders include Hacker-Wright (2009) and Lott (2012a) and (2012b).
² For this style of objection, see Andreou (2006), Millgram (2009), Slote (2003) and Woodcock (2006).
³ Gowans (2008: 40). Actually, Gowans' means to establish the more general claim that Aristotelian naturalism is not a helpful way to understand the virtues (2008: 50). His primary argument for this general claim is
and bitter bullet to bite. To my knowledge, Gowans’ objection remains unanswered. In this paper I attempt to answer it.

I argue that Gowans’ criticism is unconvincing because it presupposes an account of how a virtuous agent weighs reasons for action, yet it is not obvious what this account is supposed to be, and Gowans neither articulates nor defends it. Until Gowans provides such an account, the naturalist need not fear his criticism. In §§2-3 I lay out the essentials of Aristotelian naturalism and explain Gowans’ central argument for its incompatibility with moral universalism. I follow Gowans in focusing on Rosalind Hursthouse’s version of naturalism. In §4 I distinguish between having and weighing reasons, and argue that Gowans’ lynchpin premise presupposes an account of how the virtuous agent weighs reasons. In §5 I show that Gowans neither articulates nor defends the account of reason-weighing he needs in order for his argument to work. I close in §6 by clearing Hursthouse of Gowans’ charge that she tacitly denies moral universalism.

2. Hursthouse’s Aristotelian Naturalism

According to Gowans, Hursthouse’s naturalism has three main theoretical elements. The first is a certain conceptual structure of evaluation. If I say “this plant is a good one,” and mean it will prove an effective poison for my rich uncle Bob, I am evaluating the plant relative to my interests. If, on the other hand, I mean the plant is a good one of its kind—say, as a good specimen of poison ivy—then I must be evaluating it relative to something other than my desires or interests. I am evaluating it, claims the Aristotelian naturalist, relative to certain facts about its species.

that Aristotelian naturalism generates the wrong results with respect to our beliefs about moral universalism. I shall focus only on this particular argument.
Hursthouse maintains that these sorts of evaluations exhibit a recognizable conceptual structure. When we evaluate a plant as a good one of its kind we are evaluating how well its (i) parts and (ii) operations contribute to the two ends of (1) individual survival and (2) continuance of the species. So, for example, a plant that cannot metabolize nutrients, or disperse seed, is a defective or bad one of its kind. For animals, the structure is more complex. Since most animals move, act, and feel in a way no plant can, our evaluations of them must take into account more aspects and more ends. In the case of the more sophisticated social animals,

a good social animal…is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to (i) its parts, (ii) its operations, (iii) its actions, and (iv) its desires and emotions; whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group—in the ways characteristic of the species.⁴

Gowans calls this evaluative structure the *Teleological Framework*. Items (1)-(4) we may call the *natural ends* of a creature.

The second theoretical element in Hursthouse’s naturalism is an account of what makes a trait a virtue. Since in the Aristotelian tradition a virtue is a good-making feature, and since the Teleological Framework explains what makes a creature good, we might expect the Teleological Framework to inform Hursthouse’s criterion of virtue. And so it does. According to Gowans, Hursthouse’s criterion of virtue can be represented thus:

*Teleological Criterion* (TC): A character trait C is a virtue only if (a) C promotes in a substantial way at least one of the four ends, and (b) C does not significantly inhibit the four ends; and if two character traits, C₁ and C₂, in competition for the status of virtue,

both meet conditions (a) and (b), but C1 promotes the ends in a more substantial way
than C2, or inhibits them to a lesser extent, then, all other things being equal, there is
more reason to regard C1 as a virtue than C2.\textsuperscript{5}

We justify or validate a putative virtue by showing that it meets the Teleological Criterion.

Finally, the third theoretical element is the claim that the standard list of virtues does in
fact meet the Teleological Criterion. Gowans calls this claim the \textit{Justification Thesis}. I turn now
to Gowans’ argument that this naturalist picture does not support moral univeralism.

\textbf{3. Moral Universalism the Teleological Criterion}

Gowans begins by marshalling evidence to show that Moral Universalism is deeply rooted in
ethical thought across diverse traditions. He suggests, and I agree, that it is a moral position we
should not easily give up.

If a virtue ethics like Hursthouse’s is to explain why “[e]ach human being has moral
worth or standing, and hence deserves serious moral consideration,” it must do so by reference to
one or more of the virtues and the moral injunctions they generate. The virtue of charity seems
the best candidate here, for charity is the virtue that attaches us to another’s good. It disposes us
to see others’ good as rationally compelling, as giving us reasons to respond positively to it in
some way.\textsuperscript{6}

Gowans claims that Hursthouse’s naturalism cannot validate a conception of charity
strong enough to require acting in accord with Moral Universalism. On the other hand, a
conception of charity that \textit{is} strong enough cannot be validated by the Teleological Criterion. So

\textsuperscript{5} Gowans (2008: 37).

\textsuperscript{6} Hursthouse (1999: 209). Philippa Foot holds a similar view of charity; see Foot (1977: 54) and (2001: 12).
if we want to retain our grip on moral universalism, we must release our grip on Hursthouse’s naturalism. We may render Gowans’ argument thusly:

**P1** *Moral Universalism* (MU): Each human being has moral worth or standing, and hence deserves serious moral consideration.

**P2** Charity can be construed broadly or narrowly:

**P2a** *Universal-charity*\(^7\) requires giving every human being serious moral consideration.

**P2b** *Narrow-charity* requires giving only one’s social group members serious moral consideration.

**P3** The possessor of narrow-charity will promote the four natural ends better than the possessor of universal-charity.

**P4** Hence, TC validates narrow-charity, not universal-charity.

**P5** But narrow-charity does not require acting in accord with MU.

**P6** Therefore, TC validates a conception of charity that does not require acting in accord with MU.

We should be careful in the way we understand the problem not to over-exaggerate the theoretical distance between narrow-charity and universal-charity. Gowans grants that universal-charity would indeed serve all four ends, including the good functioning of the social group.\(^8\) So both traits are candidates for virtue status. The problem arises only because the two traits compete for virtue status, and the Teleological Criterion does not allow us to regard both as virtues.\(^9\) Hence, **P3** is the lynchpin of Gowans’ argument. Let us see how he supports it.

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\(^7\) ‘Universal-charity’ and ‘narrow-charity’ are a slight formalization of Gowans’ terminology.

\(^8\) Gowans (2008: 43).

\(^9\) Actually, this isn’t quite true: TC does not disallow regarding both traits as virtues. It implies only that we have more reason to regard narrow-charity as a virtue than we do to regard universal-charity as a virtue. This is
First recall the Teleological Criterion’s third element, the part that tells us how to adjudicate between competing traits. We are to regard as a virtue the trait that “promotes the ends in a more substantial way” than its competitor or “inhibits them to a lesser extent.”

Gowans claims that when we compare universal- and narrow-charity against TC, universal-charity loses. This is because universal-charity would dilute and interfere with its possessor’s contribution to the good functioning of her own social group. Expanding the scope of charity too wide, it seems, would require the charitable person to direct her attentions beyond her own social group. This would diminish her contribution to the good functioning of her social group. The possessor of narrow-charity, on the other hand, faces no such distractions. Her attentions will not be diluted by concern for non-group members, and thus it seems she would contribute to the good functioning of her social group better than the possessor of universal-charity. So Hursthouse must reject a conception of charity that requires giving serious moral consideration to all human beings. Call this the dilution argument.

What’s more, Gowans also claims that, notwithstanding passages that suggest the contrary, Hursthouse tacitly commits herself to the superiority of narrow-charity. We find this in her response to Peter Singer’s recommendation of impersonal benevolence. Hursthouse explicitly rejects Singer’s impartialism in favor of a conception of charity that regards the natural bonds between social group members as morally significant. Since these bonds seem to serve the four natural ends rather well, they should be incorporated into our conception of charity. By consistent with our having sufficient reason to regard narrow-charity as a virtue. But clearly Gowans’s argument relies upon a stronger version of TC that would preclude our regarding universal-charity as a virtue. Without this stronger version, the naturalist could claim that universal-charity is a virtue, notwithstanding our weaker reasons to regard it as such, and Gowans’ argument would lose its force entirely. That is why I represent the argument above as excluding universal-charity. Whether Hursthouse is in fact committed to this stronger version of TC is a question I cannot pursue here.

contrast, impartial benevolence forbids us to attend to these natural bonds in our deliberations. It thereby hobbles the agent with respect to the fourth natural end (contribution to the social group), and therefore should not be considered a virtue. In this dismissal of impartialism Hursthouse appears to reject a universal conception of charity in favor of a narrow one. Hence, Gowans argues, not only is Hursthouse’s theory incompatible with Moral Universalism; she herself seems at times to suggest this incompatibility.

Having before us Gowans’ argument, I shall now explain why I find it unconvincing. I will focus mostly on Gowans’ dilution argument. I address his claim that Hursthouse tacitly endorses narrow-charity in my closing remarks.

4. Having vs. Weighing Reasons

P3 claims that the possessor of universal-charity would characteristically contribute less to the good functioning of her social group than would the possessor of narrow-charity. Notice that this is a claim about how the trait-possessors will act. Now, how one characteristically acts (qua rational human agent) is determined by at least two factors: first, the set of considerations one takes to be reasons for action; second, the way in which one weighs those reasons in one’s deliberations. The first factor is already built into Gowans’ argument. P2a and P2b describe the rational considerations that correspond to each trait. There is nothing fishy here. Both Hursthouse and Foot agree that part of what it is to possess a virtue is to see certain sorts of considerations as rationally compelling; i.e., as reasons.¹³

What is not built into the argument is how the possessor of either trait will characteristically weigh those reasons. Yet, Gowans must assume some account of reason-weighing. Without presupposing some such account, Gowans cannot logically move from P2a

and **P2b**—i.e., premises about the set of considerations the trait possessor finds rationally compelling—to a conclusion about how the trait-possessor characteristically acts. Hence, **P3** presupposes an account of reason-weighing. In particular, it presupposes that giving each human being serious moral consideration involves weighing the good of others in a way that motivates one characteristically to engage in patterns of action the effect of which is to diminish one’s contribution to the good functioning of one’s social group. Why should the naturalist believe that giving every human being serious moral consideration would characteristically lead one to act in this way? Gowans owes us some explanation of what is packed into the notion of “serious moral consideration” (SMC). At stake is the plausibility of **P3**.

5. **The Requirements of Serious Moral Consideration**

Before I press Gowans on what he might mean by SMC, I want to generate some pressure to show that he does indeed owe us some explanation. Consider first the impartialist interpretation of SMC. On this view, SMC requires weighing the good of each human being exactly equally. This would indeed dilute one’s contribution to the good functioning of one’s social group. That’s why Hursthouse rejects it. Gowans, however, explicitly says that moral universalism does not require impartialism. This means that SMC is compatible with taking some human beings’ good to be more weighty than others’.

Let us then set impartialism aside and consider another rather extreme interpretation, this time on the other side of the spectrum. On this interpretation, one must consider non-group member’s interest, but they need not weigh very heavily in one’s deliberations. In fact, on this view, the consideration required by SMC is weak enough always to be swamped by the demands of one’s own social group. Now if this is all SMC requires, then there might easily be no

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behavioral difference between universal-charity possessors and narrow-charity possessors. So, on this minimalist interpretation, the naturalist may freely reject P3, and with it, Gowans’ argument. But let us reject this interpretation. It is admittedly a stretch to classify this minimal kind of consideration as “serious.”

So then, between these two views, where on the spectrum should we locate Gowans’ interpretation of SMC? Exactly how must one weigh the moral worth of others—especially non-group members—in one’s deliberations? Unfortunately we cannot answer this question on Gowans’ own terms because he does not tell us. He does, however, provide one example. Unfortunately it does not shine much light on the requirements of SMC, but it will be instructive to see why.

Gowans claims, plausibly, that serious moral consideration requires “proper treatment of prisoners of war.”15 This seems a good example of giving serious consideration to those outside one’s social group. It also corroborates Gowans’ dilution argument. Universal-charity arguably would require treating prisoners of war properly, and yet doing so channels resources away from one’s own social group. One needs prison guards to prevent escape, along with the food, water, shelter and healthcare necessary for “proper treatment.” By contrast, the narrow-charity possessor would see no reason to channel precious resources away from her own social-group. If one need not consider the good of non-group members, why keep them around?

This example, however, should not move the naturalist. In the first place, it tells us almost nothing about how to interpret SMC. It does suggest that in some cases SMC would require acting in a way that diminishes the good functioning of one’s social group. This rules out the minimalist interpretation above. But that is about all we can infer from this case. It is no surprise that in unusual circumstances a virtue might bring harm upon oneself or one’s social

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group. The fish with good eyesight is lured to the hook, while the myopic fish survives. The person who refuses to betray her friends is tortured to death while her accomplice spills the beans and walks free. Yet, good eyesight and loyalty are not thereby disqualified as excellences. “What is needed,” writes Hurthhouse, in a slightly different context, “is not just a few cases, but a clearly identifiable pattern.”\(^\text{16}\) If prisoner of war cases are exceptional, then it is entirely possible that universal-charity \textit{does} demand proper treatment of prisoners of war; that proper treatment diverts resources from one’s own social group; and yet that universal-charity is not thereby disqualified as a virtue. For it still could, in the long run, best contribute to the good of one’s social group.

One might object that, given the violence pervading human history, the naturalist has no business assuming that war is \textit{not} a characteristic feature of human life.\(^\text{17}\) So she cannot reject the example as an exceptional case. And if the prisoner of war case is representative of characteristic human life, then perhaps SMC does require \textit{characteristically} acting in a way that results in a diminished contribution to one’s social group. If so, Gowans’ prisoner of war example clarifies the requirements of SMC sufficiently to make \textbf{P3} plausible.

But it is not at all obvious who has the burden of proof in this case. Must the naturalist show that war is \textit{not} characteristic of human life, or must the objector show that it is? In favor of the naturalist, we might point out that even if war itself is a characteristic feature of human life, the number of individuals involved in prisoner of war situations is small, relative to the human population. This suggests we should avoid drawing general conclusions from Gowans’ example. Thankfully, however, we need not decide this question either way in order to see the more general point. The point is that the controversial status of the prisoner of war case is further

\(^{16}\) Hurthhouse (199: 174).
\(^{17}\) See Slote (2003: 134) for a similar objection.
evidence that Gowans simply does not say enough about the requirements of SMC to show that the naturalist must concede P3.

6. Closing Remarks

I now close with a brief summary of my argument and a response to Gowans’ charge that Hursthouse tacitly commits herself to narrow-charity.

In order to make P3 plausible Gowans would need to explain why he thinks that giving serious moral consideration to all human beings would characteristically generate actions the effect of which is to diminish one’s contribution to the good functioning of one’s social group. It is not obvious that SMC must, or characteristically would, have his effect. Gowans’, however, offers no such account of SMC, and we find little help in his one example. Absent an explanation of how a virtuous person’s reasons would characteristically translate into certain behavioral patterns, the Hursthousian naturalist need not concede that universal-charity fails the test of the Teleological Criterion.

Lastly, I turn to Gowans’ understanding of Hursthouse. Gowans claims not only that Hursthouse’s theory supports narrow over universal-charity; he also claims that Hursthouse herself tacitly endorses narrow-charity in her response to Singer’s impartialism. We should now be in a good position to see why Gowans interpretation of Hursthouse is mistaken.

Hursthouse rejects Singer’s impartialism because it undermines the natural bonds between social group members. Gowans thinks this signals a tacit commitment to the claim that narrow-charity serves the four ends better than universal-charity. But Hursthouse make no such commitment. In the first place, one of the bonds Hursthouse is explicitly concerned to protect against impartialism is precisely the bond between species members—not just social group
members.\textsuperscript{18} It would be surprising if she ended up committing herself to a conception of charity that excluded some members of the human species. More importantly, however, Hursthouse does not criticize Singer on the grounds that impartialism’s scope is too wide. Impartial benevolence is problematic, not because it requires giving \textit{everyone} moral consideration, but because it requires giving \textit{everyone} \textit{equal} moral consideration. It is the impartiality not the universality that undermines the natural bonds between people.

I conclude, then, that Gowans’ case against Aristotelian naturalism is unconvincing. Neither Hursthouse herself nor the framework she defends has been shown to be incompatible with moral universalism. Of course, this is not to say that Hursthouse, or any Aristotelian ethical naturalist for that matter, \textit{has} provided a convincing account of practical reasons and rationality that accords with the requirements of moral universalism. It is only to say that the way forward is not closed.

References


\textsuperscript{18} Hursthouse writes: “Could impersonal benevolence, as a character trait of human beings, foster these two ends [continuance of the species and the good functioning of the social group]? …[O]n the face of it, it rather looks as though the \textit{species} and familial bonding that are part of our biological, animal nature, and make us ‘partial’ to our own species and children, play an essential role in sustaining these two ends” (1999: 225).


