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'Aristotle for the modern ethicist'

Abstract

Elizabeth Anscombe and Mary Midgley discussed Aristotle's ethics as an alternative to modern moral philosophy. This idea is best known from Anscombe's 1958 paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. The mainstream response has been to design a normative theory of 'virtue ethics' to rival deontology and consequentialism. This essay argues that that response is inadequate; it misses Anscombe's point and obscures various aspects of Aristotle's ethics, in particular his emphasis on friendship and human interconnectedness. This element of Aristotelianism was favoured by Midgley. By returning to Midgley, with the support of Aristotle, it is possible to find an alternative modern Aristotelianism in ethics.

'Aristotle for the modern ethicist'

Introduction

A familiar story in the history of twentieth century ethics is that G.E.M. Anscombe's 1958 paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (MMP) sparked a new trend in normative ethics, so-called 'virtue ethics'. Although virtue ethics is associated not just with Aristotle but also Plato, the Stoics and eastern philosophy, Anscombe refers only to the philosophy of Aristotle. In this essay, I will support Anscombe's viewpoint, which is that Aristotle offers us a radically different way to do philosophical ethics. This is not, however, anything like normative virtue ethics, as it has become known today, but rather closer to Aristotle himself. Currently, scholars who recognise how different Aristotle's ethical stance was from contemporary neo-Aristotelianism focus on what the latter misses out about the intellectual and goal-orientated life of the individual, aiming for *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing). This essay will instead discuss Aristotle's emphasis on human beings as social or political animals, an aspect of the human condition that has been side-lined in contemporary ethics.[1] Going back to Aristotle can help towards incorporating the interdependency of human lives into philosophical ethics, counteracting overly individualistic tendencies. The Aristotelianism I suggest makes the sharing of lives with others central; human ethics is fundamentally based on interpersonal intertwinement, rendering isolated self interest anomalous.

I will first (I) set out how contemporary virtue ethics, even if inspired by Aristotle, failed to be as radical as Anscombe suggested and also that it is fundamentally unAristotelian. Section (II) will explain the importance of friendship and social relationships to Aristotelian ethics. It is this aspect of his thought that most interested Anscombe's friend and one-time

colleague, Mary Midgley. Section (III) will take up Midgley's reflections on human interconnectedness and its implications for grounding ethics in biology and it will be shown how much truer to Aristotelianism this viewpoint is. The final section (IV) follows Midgley's lead by attempting to undercut foundational difficulties for Aristotle's vision of humans as 'political animals', so as to allow for a way forward for 'human social ethics'.

I. Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy', Aristotle and Virtue Ethics

Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' includes many themes, but perhaps the strongest is a critique of consequentialism, a term she coins in the essay (Doyle 2018: 28, n.2), which Anscombe identifies as common to all philosophical theories of ethics since Sidgwick (1958: 9-10). In particular, Anscombe was adamantly against any 'system' of morality that could allow for the sacrifice of innocent victims for some imagined better consequences.[2] She also argues that 'morality' and the 'moral' are pseudo-concepts empty of meaning, and so without the 'mesmeric force' (1958: 8) they purport to have. The seeming power of a 'moral' comes from its operating like a command, only there is no authoritative backing.[3]

If morality has no authority, then how can Anscombe maintain that those with the views she abhors show 'a corrupt mind' (1958: 17)? One thought is that Anscombe did not think that we ought to talk any more in terms of morality but focus instead on ethics, and the way that individuals live their lives in accordance with their values. In this, she was no doubt influenced by Wittgenstein[4]; explicitly she refers only to Aristotle.

> 'Anyone who has read Aristotle's Ethics and had also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them. The concepts which are prominent among the moderns seem to be lacking, or at any rate buried or far in the

background in Aristotle. Most noticeably, the term "moral" itself…just doesn't seem

to fit, in its modern sense' (1958: 1)

Anscombe shared Wittgenstein's scepticism about the possibility of moral theories, taking

our attitudes to be embedded in a worldview or way of living and acting. For Wittgenstein,

as for Aristotle (*EN* II.2, 1103b26-1104b11), there could be no guide for how to act because

that challenge involves a 'confrontation with questions of value' (Christensen 2011: 799).

Individuals form a personal worldview which is ultimately displayed in their actions.

Wittgenstein's point of view on ethics may clash with Aristotle's in being radically

relativistic; meeting someone whose worldview is different from our own results in

confusion or denial without any possibility of a clear resolution (Christensen 2011: 811). And

yet, the similarities attracted Anscombe to point the reader towards a consideration of

ethics that did not look like a normative theory detached from a person's point of view and

the values she has cultivated.

Anscombe's suggestion that going back to Aristotle would be the way forward for modern

philosophical ethics was much more radical than has often been supposed.[5] The

establishment of a third branch of so-called normative ethics, to set beside deontology and

consequentialism, was not then a direct response to the tenor of the paper.[6] Virtue ethicists

undertake a different kind of project, more in line with contemporary philosophical ethics.

Rather than think directly of consequences or rules to guide action in perplexing situations,

the virtue ethicist uses the virtues. Virtues are taken as primary and from them one is meant

to derive action guiding principles or duties.[7]

'Every virtue generates a positive instruction (act justly, kindly, courageously, honestly, etc.) and every vice a prohibition (do not act unjustly, cruelly, like a coward, dis-honestly, etc.)' (Hursthouse 1991: 227)

Much contemporary virtue ethics was designed to fit a modern project which Anscombe had no sympathy with and Aristotle would have found incomprehensible.

Self-styled 'Neo-Aristotelians' see themselves as updating Aristotle and are content to acknowledge the dissimilarities. They take a less complicated version of parts of Aristotle's ethics to achieve particular goals. But what they leave out is arguably important, some of which Anscombe would have left in. Anscombe's plea to consider the philosophy of Aristotle gestures to something more transformational than attempting to squeeze the idea of virtue into a modern framework. It is likely that she saw promise in the manner in which Aristotle makes ethics central to a person's way of life. Aristotle's ethical and political works are not designed to provide guidelines,[8] and it is probable he did not think that a philosopher ought to do so, since this would in fact undermine one of the most important points these works emphasise, which is that each person needs to think for herself, fulfilling her capacity for practical intelligence (*phronêsis*) in each situation (*EN* VI). The use of a set of rules would undermine this skill, the exercise of which must be continual in any good life. As for learning this skill, this requires interpersonal relationships. Guidebook learning would not work to develop the capacities for feeling and acting correctly that are aided by the right explanations of the proper reasons for action but also crucially by the feelings the younger person has for those that nurture them, wishing to please them, feel pride in themselves and avoid shame.[9]

What, then, can we gain in trying to decide how to act by looking to Aristotle? When thinking of how to describe Aristotle's (or Plato's or the Stoic's) virtues, many classify some as 'character virtues' (e.g. friendliness) and others as 'moral virtues' (e.g. generosity, courage). But no such distinction exists in Aristotle's texts and it is problematic to import one.[10]

The term 'morality' was coined in the fourteenth century. Although it had roots in the Latin 'mos', which had a similar meaning to the Greek 'ethos', it came to have connotations of external rule rather than internal character (Oxford English Dictionary). The key to something being a 'moral' virtue is its fitting to what the modern reader considers to be in the province of morality, i.e. what we would count as other-regarding and obligatory. Anscombe's argues, as noted earlier, that the terms moral and morality are empty pseudo-concepts and urges us to return to Aristotle because he did not use these terms (1958: 1). Anscombe's radical suggestion is that you can do ethics 'without' morality 'as is shown by the example of Aristotle' (1958: 8). This, she predicts, will require 'an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human "flourishing"' (1958: 18).

If the Aristotelian point of view on ethics is to be taken more seriously, it requires taking on board much more than a certain way to determine how to act in particular situations. In parallel with the 'form of life' idea of Wittgenstein, Aristotle requires us to consider a particular perspective by which an individual negotiates everything he or she encounters in the world. Aristotle treats ethics as the study of human character. He considers what it is to be human, providing an account of the best-case scenario of a good upbringing and fulfilled existence. Thus, Aristotelian ethics requires us to engage with the thought that

human beings are supposed to be a certain way, something that supposedly clashes with modern scientific biology, in which our bodies and minds have been shaped by the mindless forces of evolution. Added to that difficulty, Aristotle's idea that the good life requires practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) combined with all of the character virtues (*tas êthekas aretas*) seems be almost impossible to achieve.[11] *Phronêsis* itself may even demand that we have an intellectual grasp of the overall good for each of our decisions, aiming for a 'final end'.[12] The desire to simplify Aristotelian ethics for modern tastes is therefore all too understandable. In going back to Aristotle, and taking up Anscombe's more radical challenge, it is impossible to avoid this more robust Aristotelianism however. The rest of this essay will not focus directly on the final end but rather on the 'first start', that is, how humans must live as part of a community interconnected with others in order to develop their way of life.

In an Anscombian and Wittgensteinian spirit, I will set out how ethics requires the development of an individual within a community and interpersonal interconnections.[13] In using reason in a uniquely human manner (*EN* I.7), people must respond appropriately to the whole situation of life. On this reading, ethics is not purely self-concerned. It requires responses of regret, shame, pride and pleasure in action in conjunction with or in the presence of others. As political animals our goals are closely bound together and it is this intertwinement of concern that can ground our ethics.

II. Aristotle on human interconnectedness

Aristotle's starting points for ethics are fundamentally biological. We are human animals, with a natural course of development; within this lifespan a human way of living naturally fits. Furthermore, Aristotle's treatment of human ethics is in some sense on a par with his treatment of the 'ethos', character, of other animals. In the *Historia Animalium* Books VII

and VIII, Aristotle gives an overview of different character traits and intelligent propensities, noting the role these play in animal's 'activities' (*praxeis*) and 'ways of life' (*bioi*).[14] As in all of his biological investigations, Aristotle begins with an examination of a mature, flourishing, or fully operational specimen of the kind. It would be confusing to begin with pairs, groups or pathologies. Thus, also, in his ethical and political works Aristotle focuses on individual human beings – as intelligent and fully virtuous, fulfilling their human way of life. In contrast to the brief survey of the characters of non-human animals, which lacks any explanatory account in the *HA*, Aristotle delves more deeply into human character and provides broad explanations based on theoretical reasoning.[15]

The fact that Aristotle focuses on individuals in the first part of *Nicomachean Ethics* and other ethical works does not mean that he considers the individual to be the most important aspect of the study of human ethics. Animals' characters are partially determined by whether their 'way of life' (*bios*) is solitary or gregarious (*HA* I.1, 488a33-34). Gregarious animals live together and can be subdivided further into political or sporadic, the political undertaking some 'work' (*ergon*) or goal in common (*HA* I.1, 488a8-9). As in other political animals, human intertwinement with others puts pressure on any neat and simple individuation. Individual members of a kind are of course crucial in scientific explanation, each possessing the form of the kind, and living out their way of life according to that inbuilt plan. But isolating this from the environment in which the animal develops, although heuristically useful, is ultimately untenable; animals respond to and develop within their local environment, interacting with other living beings, particularly those of their kind (*HA* VII). All animals that reproduce sexually (which Aristotle thinks is the norm) must meet with the other sex to produce young. Most have longer lasting social relationships, particularly with their offspring.

'It would seem that nature resolves to prepare for there being a feeling of care for the offspring. This is created in inferior animals only until the birth, in others until development is complete and in those that are more intelligent (*phronimotera*), until they are brought up. Those with the most share of intelligence (*phronêseôs*), become intimate and friendly toward them after they have fully matured, as happens in the human kind and some tetrapods' (*GA* III.2, 753a7-10)

Those [animals] that have more understanding and possess some memory continue the association [with their offspring], and have a more social relationship (*politikôteron*), with their offspring (*HA* VII.1, 589a1-3; my translations)

Human beings require some of the most extensive upbringing and nurture. This means that they cannot exist without the social group. The human community is thus viewed by Aristotle as an extension of what is natural to us as human animals, just as an ant hill and bee hive are part of what it is to be an ant and bee. An ant without an ant hill does not make sense as an ant; so also with the lone human being.[16] Being the 'most political' of animals, human lives are intertwined and interdependent to a remarkable degree. This is in part due to our capacity to discuss things with each other:

'[T]he reason why human is an animal fit for the *polis* to a fuller extent than any bee or any herding animal is obvious…human beings alone among the animals possesses speech[17]…Speech serves to make clear what is beneficial and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For by contrast with the other animals human has this peculiarity: it alone has a sense of good and evil, just and unjust, etc. An

association in these matters makes a household and a *polis'* (*Pol*. I.2, 1253a7-18, translation after Saunders in Aristotle 1995).

Aristotle makes clear in his *Politics* that humans are not to be considered in isolation and any human that exists without the community will not be properly human, but 'a wild animal or a god' (*Pol*. I.2, 1253a25-37).

As we have seen, Anscombe's plea to consider Aristotle as an alternative to modern moral philosophy included the thought that we do away with the term 'moral' and focus instead on ethics or the study of character. The modern philosopher is immediately led to wonder how fulfilling one's character has anything much to do with treating others well, the moral obligations of traditional modern theories. The thought is that since Aristotle's theory is eudaimonistic-egoistical, it cannot provide any viable connections between happiness and actions we would consider to be morally required, such as helping others in need (Annas 2002, Doyle 2018: 13-20). If the idea of 'morality' is removed from Aristotelian virtues, then how does other-regarding concern make its way into them? The natural sociality of human beings is the answer. A human being aims to aid her community because not to do so would be not to live well as a human. The two are inseparable. Reinforcing this picture is Aristotle's extensive treatment of human friendship, the details of which undercut the sense in which a single person could even try to weigh up her own personal concerns against the well-being of others, so intertwined is her life with theirs. Eudaimonia becomes, then, a collective concern.[18]

Friendship is a part of the lives of all human beings from the moment of their birth until their eventual death. Aristotle introduces the topic by reminding us that friendship occurs in many animals and is ultimately based in biological parenthood (*EN* VIII.1, 1155a17-21). The

paradigm of equal character friendship must be set out in order to fully understand human ethics, according to Aristotle. This will involve three main theses:

(1) Close friendships are essential for the human way of life

(2) These friendships require existential intertwinement

(3) Living across others' lives is a key part of inter-generational interaction

Together (1)-(3) are a challenge to the idea of strict individuation and undermine the needed divisions between egoism and altruism which fuel dilemmas in modern moral philosophy.

(1) Of the three kinds, friendships based on pleasure, utility and character, it is character friendship that is complete and the paradigm (*EN* VIII.3, 1156b7-33), and a relation that all humans must have to some people throughout their lives. Aristotle makes clear that life would not be worth living without such friendships (*EN* VIII.1, 1155a1-6). By 'friends' here he means close friends who have a 'shared life' (*suzên*).

> 'It is absurd to make the blessed person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is political, tending by nature to share their life (*suzên*) with others' (*EN* IX.9, 1169b16-19; Cf. *EN* 1155a1-6).[19]

In sharing their lives, close friends enact their activities together. This involves exercising practical reasoning by deliberating and choosing the best courses of action. Many of their actions will be joint ones, since human being are the sorts of animals that have an activity and work (*ergon*) in common together (*HA* I.1, 488a8-9). For example, the goal of two parents in raising one child involves many joint decisions and actions.

(2) In *EN* IX Aristotle explains that the friend is another self, and that our perceptions of our friend's actions are in a way a recognition of our own activity.

> 'The virtuous person is related to her friend in the same way she is related to herself, since her friend is another herself. Therefore, just as her own being (*einai*) is choiceworthy for her, her friend's being is choiceworthy for her in the same or a similar way' (my translation, 1170b7-9).[20]

In deliberating, coming to decisions and acting together, the friends' inner lives are intertwined. Elizabeth and Mary discuss both philosophical ethics and childcare challenges. They develop their views together and put them into practice in teaching philosophy and raising their children. As Aristotle explains: 'we enlist partners in deliberation on large issues when we distrust our own ability to discern the right answer' (*EN* III.3, 1112b10). When Elizabeth sees Mary explaining to her child that he needs to think about the feelings of his siblings, Elizabeth feels a sense that this is something she can take pride in, since they had discussed how best to handle situations of sibling conflict many times. When Mary hears that Elizabeth has been awarded a teaching prize, she feels that she can take some credit since they often discussed together how to teach difficult topics in Aristotelian ethics. '[F]or what our friends achieve is, in a way, achieved through our agency, since the origin is in us' (*EN* III.3, 1112b27).

The idea that people are in some sense part of each other is hard to accommodate in modern ethics, with the possible exception of accounts of romantic love.[21] Some scholars have associated these discussions, showing how Aristotle's account of friendship requires that some tasks and even some mental states are shared between people (e.g. Carrareas 2012). Others argue that Aristotle's description of character friendships blur the boundaries

between individuals, because close friends are literally extensions of the self (Sherman 1987: 590; Withey, ms: 26).

(3) The interconnection of the lives of people is also evident in the 'unequal' relationship between a younger person who requires the nurture of an older person who nurtures her (Connell 2019). In such friendships, the relation between the benefactor and beneficiary are likened by Aristotle to the relation between a producer and a product. The benefactor/producer is active, the beneficiary/product passive, which is why the former loves more (*EN* IX.7). This loving is the active exercise of their living capacity for nurture, which will make their lives go well, the good being both the realisation of this internal capacity and the actualisation of the good product outside themselves.

> 'Existence (*to einai*) is choiceworthy and loveable for everything. We exist in so far as we are actualised, by living and acting. The product is, in a way, the actualisation of the producer. Hence the producer is fond of the product, because he is fond of his own being. And this is natural. For what he is potentially, the product indicates in its actualisation. At the same time the benefactor's action is fine for him so that he is pleased by that person' (my translation, *EN* IX.7.1168a5-10).

The existence of the younger person is part of their own existence as active agent, shaping future lives. Thus, those who aid in developing younger people live on in the products of their nurture.[22]

When considering parts of the body, it is more straightforward to analyse individual animals in isolation as Aristotle does in his *Parts of Animals*. But when it comes to activities, ways of life and character (*HA* I.1), interaction with others cannot be omitted. Thus, one gets a false picture of human life by leaving out the friendships that give it shape and meaning.[23] All

human beings are involved in the lives of others. This is not simply through detached and rational economic or political exchanges, but through 'friendship' which must be close and personal. It is not just that no humans exist outside a broader group or community, but there will be no proper human who does not have close friends and is not considered a close friend by others, intertwining their lives in this manner.[24]

Close friendship does not exist between everyone in a community, but our general feelings of benevolence are grounded in these interrelations which shape our lives.

> 'It seems that it's friendship that holds together a city-state, and that legislators are more concerned about friendship than about the virtues of justice[25]…Moreover, suppose people are friends: then they have no need of the virtue of justice. But suppose they are just: they still need friendship' (*EN* VIII.1.1155a22-27).

III. Midgley on getting on with living and finding the good in each other

Due to understandable concern with individual freedoms modern philosophical ethics has tended to focus on mature agents. Little space has been given to the philosophy of childhood, upbringing and education (MacIntyre 1999: 81-81). However, it is a truism too little explored that no human society can function without extensive nurture of the young, which will be an on-going pursuit.[26] Both Anscombe and Midgley bemoaned that such truths came to be obscured in modern philosophical ethics and were right to think that they are less so in Aristotle.[27] Aristotelian ethics emphasises the developmental and intergenerational nature of ethics; all humans require and will have extensive care and nurture and all humans will also contribute to nurturing (Connell 2019; MacIntyre 1999: Ch.8).

Mary Midgley wrote about the importance of taking into account human interconnectedness when doing philosophy.[28] She argued that correct thinking itself could be 'weakened by isolation'. Emphasised the importance of 'playing a normal active part among other human beings', she was concerned in particular to include the experiences of women, many of whom at that time would have cared for young children:

> 'Philosophers have generally talked as though it were obvious that one consciousness went to one body, as though each person were a closed system which could only signal to another by external behaviour… I wonder whether they would have said the same if they had been frequently pregnant and suckling, if they has been constantly faced with questions like, "What have you been eating to make him ill?", constantly experiencing that strange physical sympathy between child and parent, between husband and wife, which reveals the presence of an ailment and often its nature when experience is silent; constantly lending eyes and hands to the child that requires them, if in a word they had got used to the idea that their bodies were by no means exclusively their own? That, I suggest, is a typical human experience' (8)

Midgley presents the interconnectedness that is experienced in the care for young children. Successful nurturing requires the ability to read the feelings of others.[29] Midgley's example of the breastfeeding mother is striking, where the effects of what she eats extend beyond her own welfare to directly affect the child who drinks her milk. This example is symbolic of a broader point about overlapping concerns which is close to Aristotle's account. Midgley second example shows that in undertaking important and difficult tasks in conjunction with others (as this husband and wife do here), interpersonal relationships involve flexible

boundaries of the self. The mother and father here have one joint goal, which they cooperate to achieve; thus they are existentially intertwined by their shared attitudes, choices and actions.

In a way that one could see as Aristotelian, Midgley related her insights about life in a family and community to socio-biology, seeking a natural basis for our altruistic tendencies. Midgley, more than any of her contemporaries, took up the study of biology with a passion, in self-conscious solidarity with Aristotle.[30] In her masterwork, *Beast and Man*, Midgley explores the ideas of the socio-biologist Edward Wilson who looks to human nature to explain aspects of human culture. For Midgley, insights from biology include the fact that '[s]pecies survive…by having ones who do something about the next generation' (1978: 92). This serves to undercut the view of many philosophers that humans are 'naturally unqualified egoists' (1978: 94). Indeed recent findings suggest that some animals are programmed to respond with empathy to others of their kind – a capacity that evolved in the context of parental care. These empathetic and benevolent motivations, some argue, form the basis for human morality (see Frans de Waal, 2006, 2008, 2019).[31]

Natural altruism in human beings is our best way to ground ethics of an Aristotelian variety.[32]

> 'Members of the same kind, and human beings most of all, have a natural friendship
> for each other; that is why we praise friends of humanity. And in our travels we can
> see how every human being is akin and beloved to a human being' (*EN* VIII.2,
> 1155a19-23).

Empathetic and benevolent motivations form the very basis of human success. No ethical theory should leave out the fact that humans are born, require extensive nurture and

training, and carry out these actions for others as a matter of course on a daily basis.[33] As

Midgley puts it: 'In all these [social] species, an individual is "shaped by this society" in the

sense that he needs it, he cannot grow up without it, and all the particular details of his life

are filled by it' (1978: 95). We will always need new people within our human communities

who do this irreplaceable task, and the rest to recognise and reinforce the importance of

patterns that support such work.

In this area of biology, Aristotle falls in with many modern theories; there exists this fact

about us as humans – we will tend to care for others in our group.[34] Some might argue no

value can be derived from this fact. Many other natural propensities or impulses, implanted

deep within our psyches, are not good and not conducive to happy lives. One could think of

the natural inclination to find the young and fertile sexually attractive or the urge to do

damage to one's siblings. These are perfectly natural, implanted in us by the forces of

evolutionary adaptation. To choose the nurturing impulse because it is natural and it will

fulfil our nature, looks questionable when this reasoning would require us to also fulfil these

others.

The difference between the socially destructive tendencies and the altruistic ones is that

humans choose, in a second order manner, to endorse the latter.[35] We do not endorse

altruism and choose to cultivate it because it is natural but because it is good. For Aristotle,

only humans are 'deliberative' (*HA* I.1, 488b24-5), using reason to self-consciously choose

whether to endorse natural propensities. Those that we come to see as bad, we can reject.

> There are three things through which people become good and virtuous. These three
>
> are nature, habit and reason. For to begin with, one must have a certain nature –
>
> that of a human and not of one of the other animals.…But in some cases no benefit

comes from having a certain nature, for habits make one change…Now, the other

animals live by nature most of all, and a small number of them live also by habit, but

human lives also by reason. For human beings alone have reason. Therefore these

things [i.e. nature, habit, reason] must harmonize with each other. For people do

many things contrary to their habits and their nature, because of reason, if they are

persuaded [by reason] that it is better to do otherwise (*Pol*. 1332a38-b9; translation

after Kraut in Aristotle 1997).

Only humans are able to understand why they care for others of our kind and endorse the

activities associated with this. When we apply this idea to the nurturing relation, for

example, it is apparent that the older person *choses* to value their natural impulse to help

those younger than themselves. If a person rocks a distressed baby, feeds a hungry toddler

or explain sharing to a seven-year-old, they cannot do so mindlessly but, using reasoning,

decide that it is best to perform such actions; these actions are part of a well living human

life, which practical reasoning controls. We have a choice, then, about whether to endorse

the goals implanted by nature. This endorsement could then be what biologists might call an

investment and what ethicists could characterise as a set of critical interests – those

interests which help to structure and give our lives value.[36] Investment in others who need

our assistance, particularly the young, provide us with something to strive toward and

opportunities for us to live our lives effectively. The propensity to love and live with others

is one that thinking animals jettison to their own detriment; it is not possible to live well

without opting in.[37]

It is necessary for a successful life – for any human being – to invest in others, and

particularly in younger members of our kind in part because we have these inherent natural

tendencies, implanted by nature or evolutionary forces. As Aristotle puts it (about a bird)

'she will be missing some part of her natural endowment' without the fulfilment of

nurturing (*GA* III.2, 753a14-17). Human beings just do care about others and when we

engage with this fundamental tendency, it fills our experience with investments that extend

beyond our own short lives. That our regard for other humans might come from an non-

rational, animal part of us is not problematic. It is our own uniquely human awareness of

the human animal condition that brings us to lead good lives of our kind. Unlike 'moral'

systems, Aristotelianism emphasises the mundane day to day nurture of young people and

ensuring that systems of governance continue to emphasise and endorse the crucial natural

tendencies we have for nurture, care, empathy and benefaction (in short, natural altruism,

Pol. VIII.1). Aristotle makes us look at ourselves as just a small part of a human whole that

will only go on and on. We live and work and act for the sake of those we benefit, so that

they can live good lives. The good lives of our beneficiaries include our hope that their lives

also include the activity of nurturing and teaching those even younger or future young

people; this is the way we ourselves have been nurtured in the past. For Aristotle, humans

will choose to self-consciously value the future of our kind. Rather than 'morality', it is

better to label this Aristotelian viewpoint as 'human social ethics'. Endorsing intraspecies

care is part of being human for Aristotle and need have no mysterious 'moral' force.

IV Ethical foundations

The contemporary perspective often presents this particular challenge to Aristotle: how can

he claim that being moral is required for human happiness and flourishing. Surely a hedonist

or a villain can flourish biologically, and may even do better than others.[38] The first way to

undercut this problem is to note that Aristotle does not feel the pull of a clash between

morality and human success because he does not have a concept of the 'moral'. In terms of

motivation to perform good actions, this is not for personal gain but a fulfilment of the

capacity to benefit others, which is part of living in human communities. Those who claim

that that their lives would go better if they grabbed and snatched more for themselves,

while harming others (e.g. Plato's characters such as Thrasymachus, Gyges and Callicles) are

deluded; they are stupidly ignoring the necessary social interconnections that brought them

into being and the need to continue beneficence in order for humans to flourish in the

future.[39] Plato's problem was to convince a young philosophical audience, corrupted by

persuasive sophistry, of what the common person knew well: that loving others is how to

live well. The modern world has its own sophistries, including the constant requirement to

justify any personal ethics that builds in altruism. As Sarah Broadie puts it:

> 'If we today are in certain personal respects like the individuals in Aristotle's
>
> audience, then we too will resonate to the equation [of flourishing and virtue]; we
>
> may feel it a very good thing that there are people who have the qualities in
>
> question; and we may be resolved to bring up our children to be the same. But as
>
> philosophers we are tempted to think that we do not know the truth of the
>
> equation' (2006: 345).

It is this modern problem that leads many contemporary scholars to treat Aristotelian

practical ethics as rational choice scenarios. For example, Hirji (forthcoming) attempts to

solve the 'puzzle' that virtuous action promotes a person's own *eudaimonia* by giving an

example of an agent building a house for someone who needs a house.

> 'What I want to suggest is that when a virtuous agent performs this virtuous action,
>
> she is at the same time engaging in an instance of "acting virtuously", and this

"acting virtuously" is a form of the excellent rational activity constitutive of happiness; specifically, "acting virtuously" is the full expression of her nature qua practically rationality. Indeed, I want to suggest that it is only when a virtuous agent performs a virtuous action…for its own sake, and from a firm and unchanging character, that she fully expresses this aspect of her essential nature' (2019: 18)

The social nature of human life is largely missing from this account. For Aristotle, this act of helping another is one of 'benefaction' by which the agent realises her own nature (*EN* IX.7.1168a5-10). Added to this, she will feel empathy and wish to help; she may even have certain goals in common with the homeless person, and so view this good she achieves as partly her own. Rather than a puzzle, Aristotle's ethics presents a key solution: thinking and acting well comes from being intertwined with others and their concerns.

When it comes to the problem of a foundation for ethics, Anscombe's paper suggests Wittgensteinian scepticism, a viewpoint which inspired McDowell's Neurathian option of a free floating critical self-scrutiny.[40] The gulf between Anscombe's own abhorrence of consequentialism on the basis of convictions such as those against 'murder' and her scepticism about the force of morals remains problematic.[41] One way to bridge this is to see the formation of human beings within a community as producing certain fundamental values. One might suspect that someone well brought up in any human community is going to abhor the killing of innocents; the interconnectedness they have with others makes them aware that cruelty is wrong. Aristotle thinks that all human beings have close personal relationships; these require understanding the feelings of others and so would make empathy with any victim inevitable.

Anscombe's references to Aristotle present us with the challenge of finding a richer picture of human ethical endeavours than those on offer in modern moral philosophy. Aristotle's biological perspective acknowledges fundamental interdependency and the value of the perpetuation of human goods across generations. And so his philosophy presents us with a way to resist the impartialist and univeralising tendencies in ethics and its narrowed focus on individual decisions in isolation from the world in which these are made. While modern normative theories start in crisis mode, with the hard cases, dilemmas and unrealistic scenarios, Aristotle starts out by considering a functional social situation. Thus going back to the biological foundations of sociality presents a viable alternative to modern theories that separate out individuals to a degree that sits ill with how humans actually live. This is also the viewpoint of Midgley who wants us to take seriously our social origins and our social reality.

> 'Solipsism is a philosophical muddle, the fruit of confused thinking. We have lived all our lives in a public world…we could not live elsewhere…It is a world of other people. And it is *we*…that live in it' (Midgley 1978: 98).

Midgley's Aristotelianism has certain features in common with McDowell's concept of 'second nature', which is a 'moulding of motivational and evaluative propensies' that although rational takes place 'within nature', that is within the community through 'moral education' (1995: 167). For McDowell, Aristotle offers us 'a model for a radical rethink of nature' (1994: 79) because human reason can be taken to be natural, although it also stands back and decides whether to go along with first nature. However, McDowell's view takes agents to be more radically individuated than the aspects of Aristotle Midgley encourages us to consider. We can see this in his rational wolf thought experiment. Although wolves are

co-operative by nature, we are asked to imagine a wolf becoming rational and asking 'why should I pull my weight' (1995: 153). The wolf's second nature is presented in terms of egoism versus morality. 'It would not be surprising if the deliberator wolf thought reason requires him to transcend his wolfish nature in pursuit of his individual interest' (1995: 154).[42] Once McDowell explains how second nature when properly developed can underpin wolf co-operative virtues, the motivation supplied is still wholly self-serving. The rational wolf would value cooperation if it was 'initiated into a tradition in which co-operative behaviour in the hunt is regarded as admirable' (1995: 172-3); the wolf's selfish concern is to be admired. What I propose is that ethics that most properly follows Aristotle on humans as social animals must abandon descriptions and justifications only in terms of radically individualist concerns, since for him, nobody really thinks like that. Anything a human values, considers, chooses in her ethical life will involve the lives and thoughts of others in her circle. Similarly Midgley wants us to consider that the 'self' of traditional philosophy is a misrepresentation of our actual way of living and disregards the intertwinement that nurturing and close love entails. Although modern ethicists such as MacDowell sometimes mention upbringing or 'coming to maturity' as important they do stop to consider how the lives of others shapes each person's beginnings and continue to affect their lives. The rational wolf would be a wolf whose attitudes were developed by interaction with others of their kind with a view to the continuation of wolves into the future, through intensive intellectual nurture; this wolf, in being liberated from first nature, would not think of themselves as a radically independent agent but would consider what its friends felt and let this shape their deliberations and decisions. The cares of rational social animals are almost never merely their own, as Midgley's everyday example of attending to an ill child so aptly illustrates.

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[1] It is best represented by feminist care ethics. See Held 2006.

[2] Anscombe probably had in mind the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima during the second world war which she vehemently opposed. 'For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder, and murder is one of the worst of human actions', something she claims also 'throws a shining light on Aristotle's thesis that you cannot be or do any good where you are stupid' (Anscombe 1981: 64; see also Anscombe 1957: 267). She felt that important questions had been reduced to comic puzzles. Bemoaning Oxford philosophy in the 1950s, she wrote: 'if you had to move forward, and stepping with your right foot meant killing twenty-five fine young men while stepping with your left foot would kill fifty drooling old ones. (Obviously the right thing to do would be to jump and polish off the lot)' (1957: 267).

[3] Most interpret Anscombe (1958, 6) to be saying that morality has lost its force since the end of the Reformation, and the loss of the authoritative status of the godhead. See, for example, Pidgen 1988 and McPherson (forthcoming). Doyle 2018, however, convincingly argues that according to Anscombe the idea of the moral had always been a pseudo-concept and was only attempting to mimic the authority of divine commandments. For a rich account of this misunderstanding of Anscombe and how the abandonment of divine

command resulted in the formation of the pseudo-concept of morality see Dolye 2018: chapter 3.

[4] Anscombe had a long and enduring intellectual relationship with Wittgenstein which began in her twenties when she was a visiting student at Newnham College, Cambridge.

[5] I am sympathetic to Doyle (2018: Chapters 1-2) who argues that Anscombe's intention was to suggest getting rid of the pseudo-concept of the 'moral' which makes no sense in Aristotle's ethical thought.

[6] This is the mainstream way to understand the influence of Aristotle on modern ethics. 'The sort of ethical theory from Aristotle, various described as virtue ethics, virtue-based ethics, or neo-Aristotelianism, is becoming better known, and is now quite widely recognized as at least a possible rival to deontological and utilitarian theories' (Hursthouse 1991: 223).

[7] For Watson, 'the concept of virtue is explanatorily basic' (1990: 450). Hursthouse talks of 'v-rules' (1999: 55). See also Slote 1992; Swanton 2003 and McDowell 1979 as described in Doyle 2018: Ch.1. Although Anscombe notes the importance of considering a person's character in terms of 'unchaste', 'untruthful', 'just'/'unjust'(1958: 9, 16, 18) she doesn't suggest that the virtues themselves could be stand-alone principles of action.

[8] This point has been made by numerous scholars, most recently Hirji (forthcoming). As Henry and Nielsen 2015 point out, Aristotle's ethical and political writings are not guidebooks but treatises that analyse the theoretical considerations that are to inform the practice of legislators and politicians. The works are written for an audience of those who have already been well brought up (*EN* 1095b4-5; Broadie 2006: 345). 'Aristotle blatantly fails to produce the kind of position that it is a modern tradition to expect…of philosophical ethics' (Broadie 2006: 353).

[9] For an Aristotelian account of ethical education along these lines, see especially Burnyeat 1980. See also MacIntyre 1999: Ch.8.

[10] For a more extensive argument for this view see Doyle 2018: 16-17. See also Sherman 1987: 591 contra Irwin 1986. Scholars of Aristotle realise that they have to argue for him having a 'moral theory'. See especially Irwin 1977 and Annas 1993.

[11] *EN* VI.13, 1144b31-33. This is the so-called doctrine of the 'reciprocity' of the virtues.

[12] Baker 2013 explains how the idea of the good life as a 'final end' has been so difficult to incorporate into modern ethics.

[13] Another Wittgenstienian, Sabina Lovibond, explains the social origins of our ethical attitudes in terms of being 'successful initiated into a culture' or successful 'immersion in a community' (Lovibond 2002: 29, 33). Although this has been a part of some versions neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, it has very seldom taken centre stage. Hursthouse includes the 'good functioning of the social group' in her four ends for humans (1999:202). Nussbaum includes 'Affiliation' in her list of 'Central Human Functional Capabilities' (2000: 78-80) and Foot discusses the need for families and neighbours (2001: 44-45). So-called communitarians also emphasise the importance of the formation of character within a community; I consider myself to be following in this tradition, particularly the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.

[14] Aristotle applies the term 'ethos' to all animals in his *Historia Animalium*, where it can be translated as 'character'. Character differences are one of four sets of differences set out in that work which also include differences in parts (*merei*), activities (*praxeis*) and ways of life (*bioi*) (*HA* I.1, 487a10-11; Cf. *HA* VII.1, 588a17-19).

[15] Aristotle's biological works can be divided in two stages; they begin by acquiring knowledge of facts (the 'that') before seeking causal explanations (the 'why') (*A. Po.* 2.11.94a20-36). For Aristotle's ethics as theoretical see Henry and Nielsen 2015.

[16] In this sense, the *polis*, city, is prior to the individual (*Pol.* I.2, 1253a25-26).

[17] When concentrating on non-human animals in certain zoological contexts, Aristotle allows that some of them, particularly birds, have complex methods of communication. See Connell (forthcoming), Section 3.

[18] In this, I follow Sherman: 'friendship [in Aristotle's view] entails the weaving of lives together into some shared conception of happiness' (1987: 596).

[19] Translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are after Irwin in Aristotle 1981, unless stated otherwise.

[20] His and himself may be substituted for a male subject.

[21] There are also some theories of joint or collective intentionality (e.g. Gilbert 2014), which it would be profitable to explore in conjunction with Aristotle.

[22] See especially Scott 2000.

[23] Although Aristotle's account of friendship comes later on in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, its importance is noted earlier at several points (e.g. *EN* I.7, 1097b10, I.8, 1099a31-b6, III.3, 1112b10-27, IV.6, 1126b20-5).

[24] Aristotle argues that the thoroughly bad person not only doesn't have any close friendships, and is thus inhuman, but also cannot have any, due to a deep-set psychological dissonance (*EN* VIII.4, 1157a18-25).

[25]Politicians are also benefactors who gain more by their active loving of others than the beneficiaries. A politician or legislator's goal is to benefit people and good people will be the products of their activities (E.g. *Pol*. VII.4, 1325b40-1365a5).

[26] Psychology Professor, Peter Fonagy, in worrying about the effects on young people of interacting with peers on social media explains that: '[the human brain] is designed for a young person to be socialised and supported in their development by an older person' (Doward and Hall 2019: 3).

[27] In 'Modern Moral Philosophy' Anscombe uses the example of someone thinking about withdrawing support for a child (1958: 11). In another article she discusses who will look after someone's children after their death (Anscombe 1969). Midgley, when occupied with the care of her young children quipped 'animal behaviour going on all around me, upstairs, in the garden and on the hearthrug' (2005: 189), quoted in Lipscomb 2015: 214.

[28] In this, I am in agreement with Lipscomb that Midgley approaches ethics 'very roughly, how Aristotle approaches ethics' (2015: 208).

[29] Aristotle is well aware that empathy of this variety is present in many other animals. See Connell (forthcoming), Section 3 on 'Social Cognition'.

[30] Midgley felt her contemporaries neglected or misrepresented Aristotle and particularly his integration of biology and ethics. Why, 'do they suppose [Aristotle] took the trouble to write about four times as much on other subjects as on what they call philosophy?' It 'makes one scream', she wrote (1956: 161–2), as told by Lipscomb 2015: 214.

[31] This fits with evolutionary theory since it according with an increase in the parent's fitness in general.

[32] We might wonder why Aristotle, as an eminent naturalist, did not notice the aggressive and competitive tendencies in human beings. Williams' points to the human 'characteristic' of 'killing things for fun' (1972: 64), while Midgley notes 'exceptional ruthlessness to one's own species' (1978: 44). In his zoology, Aristotle sets out character traits in opposing pairs, with gentle and friendly at one extreme and aggressive and wild at the other (*HA* I.1, 488b11-20; *HA* VII.1, 588a20-21, VIII.1-2, 608b19-610b20) and places humans on the friendly side. This is indeed rather puzzling; one reason might be that he was viewing the best-case scenario. It is also striking that he tends to view aggression as a lack of cultivation, as a 'wild' untamed trait. That trait could only be applied to humans by him in a pathological sense (*Pol*. I.2, 1253a3-7; VII.2, 1324b36f.). On human 'brutishness' see Pearson 2018.

[33] MacIntyre notes that 'the extent of our dependence on particular others' is 'so evidently of singular importance that it might seem that no account of the human condition whose authors hoped to achieve credibility could avoid giving them a central place'. He bemoans that 'the history of Western moral philosophy suggest otherwise' (1999: 1).

[34] Thus, humanity is not 'wholly plastic and transformable into anything at all' (2005: 22).

[35] For MacDowell, this is one aspect of his concept of 'second nature', i.e. the 'distancing of the agent from the practical tendencies that are part of…"his first nature"'. He also notes that 'the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them' (1995: 170-171; see also MacDowell 1994: 84).

[36] For the idea of 'critical interests' see Dworkin 1994: ch.7, p.199f.

[37] My reading here is close to Foot's case for classing free-riders as 'defective' members of social species (2001: 16). However, my emphasis on using reason to endorse our altruistic

tendencies, leading to a better life, follows more closely MacDowell's view that the social animal has to become intelligent and aware of its own nature (1995: 154).

[38] The criticism comes from Williams as noted earlier and is taken seriously by Broadie 2006: 344.

[39] This is also why Williams' claim that a ruthless 'achievers' are 'by any ethological standard of the bright eye and gleaming coat dangerously flourishing' (1985: 46) misses the mark. See also another viewpoint on the necessity of human nurture in the Aristotelian sense in Hacker-Wright (2009), who argues that our care for our children means that we cannot adopt a Calliclean self-interpretation.

[40] See McDowell 1994: 81; Lovibond 2002, 136. Lipscomb argues that this is also one of the goals of Midgley's philosophy (2015: 219).

[41] McPherson (forthcoming) argues that Anscombe is committed to anti-naturalism in the idea of absolute prohibitions.

[42] This challenge, thinks MacDowell, is one that Aristotle is not 'invulnerable' to (1995: 155); the only reason given for his disregard of it is a certain 'smugness' (McDowell 1994: 81; 1995: 177).