

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-02672-8 - Character as Moral Fiction
 Mark Alfano
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction: tripartite naturalistic ethics

To translate humanity back into nature; to gain control of the many vain and fanciful interpretations and incidental meanings that have been scribbled and drawn over that eternal basic text of *homo natura* so far; to make sure that, from now on, the human being will stand before the human being, just as he already stands before the *rest* of nature today, hardened by the discipline of science, – with courageous Oedipus eyes and sealed up Odysseus ears, deaf to the lures of the old metaphysical bird catchers who have been whistling to him for far too long: “You are more! You are higher! You have a different origin!”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 230

I VIRTUE AND VICE TODAY

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams complains that the word ‘virtue’ has “acquired comic or otherwise undesirable associations” (1985, p. 9). Yet even the twenty-first century is rife with talk of virtues and vices.

On January 2, 2007, Cameron Hollopeter suffered a seizure and stumbled off the platform of the 137th-Street subway station in Manhattan. One bystander, Wesley Autrey, noticed the emergency and dove onto the tracks to save him from an oncoming train. Lacking time to lift the victim back onto the platform, he pinned Hollopeter in the drainage trench between the rails while the train straddled them. It came so close to crushing Autrey that it left grease on his cap. News of his deed spread quickly: two days later he was awarded the Bronze Medallion – New York City’s highest award for exceptional citizenship and outstanding achievement – by Mayor Michael Bloomberg; he was an honored guest on a number of television shows; his daughters were given scholarships and free computers; on January 23, he appeared at the State of the Union address, where President George W. Bush praised him as a “brave and humble” man.

On December 11, 2008, Bernard Madoff was arrested and charged with securities fraud. For decades, Madoff – a revered member of the New York financial elite – had been running a Ponzi scheme, deceiving his clients and investigators alike. Though the damage he wrought is difficult to assess, the total loss to investors has been estimated in the tens of billions of dollars – probably the largest fraud in the history of money. In the aftermath, his son and at least two of his clients committed suicide, and many charitable organizations, his favorite marks, were forced to close.

In January 2009, New Yorkers heeding President Obama’s call for a new era of responsibility donated a record 925,000 pounds of food to the *Daily News*-City Harvest feed-the-hungry campaign. Approximately one million needy residents of the city benefited from these donations, which were distributed by 600 community organizations. During the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, and at a time when New York City in particular was suffering job losses, this display of generosity impressed and encouraged.

On March 3, 2011, Karl-Theodore zu Guttenberg resigned from the Bundestag after a month-long public outcry over the plagiarism of his doctoral dissertation. He had cribbed whole passages from newspapers, editorials, speeches, undergraduate term papers, and even his own supervisor’s research, filling about half of his dissertation with unattributed material. The University of Bayreuth revoked his degree. Over fifty thousand doctoral students and professors signed an open letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel to protest her dilatory handling of the controversy. The German author Peter Schneider went so far as to draw a parallel with the impeachment of American President Bill Clinton over sexual improprieties. Why? Because both cases involved “the same question of honesty.”

Why did Autrey risk his life to help a stranger? Why did Madoff steal from his clients? Why did New Yorkers succor their neighbors? Why did Guttenberg plagiarize his dissertation?

One way to answer these questions and others like them is by appeal to character traits. Autrey exhibited courage by intervening even at high potential cost to himself. Madoff was greedy and dishonest, manifesting a shocking inclination to deceive and defraud. Ordinary New Yorkers were generous and humane, choosing to forgo their own material benefit in order to help those in need. Guttenberg lacked integrity; he preferred to violate German law, academic standards, and perhaps even his own conscience to save himself effort and time. Traits like callousness, courage, greed, dishonesty, generosity, and tact are dispositions to act and react in

Introduction

3

characteristic ways. The callous person sniffs at the suffering of others; the courageous person braves dangers to secure something valuable.

The fully virtuous person possesses all or at least a critical mass of the virtues, and so is disposed to do the appropriate thing in a wide range of circumstances. Such a disposition has counterfactual heft: the generous person, for instance, gives when presented with the opportunity, and she *would* give *were* she presented with a similar opportunity. This metaphysically robust property underwrites both the prediction and explanation of her behavior. It is therefore a presupposition of theories of virtue that moral agents have – or at least could have – counterfactual-supporting dispositions.

At first blush this presupposition is uncontentious. How could one deny that people are, or at least could be, just, sincere, compassionate, chaste, considerate, trustworthy, courteous, diligent, faithful, tactful, valorous, and humble? We seem to understand ourselves and one another in terms of such character traits. Bernard Williams (1985, p. 10, n. 7) goes so far as to say that objecting to the notion of character amounts to “an objection to ethical thought itself rather than to one way of conducting it.” Yet skeptics such as John Doris (1998, 2002) and Gilbert Harman (1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006) argue that situational influences swamp dispositional ones, rendering them predictively and explanatorily impotent. It’s but a single step from such impotence to the dustbin.

Are individual dispositions really so frail? Are circumstances really as powerful as skeptics suggest? This book aims to articulate naturalistic answers to these and related questions.

2 WHAT IS NATURALISTIC ETHICS?

The word ‘natural’ and its derivatives can be used with both evaluative and descriptive force. Saying that a musician plays naturally means that her playing is graceful, unforced, and so on. Playing naturally is playing *well*. Saying that a dancer waltzes unnaturally means that he moves awkwardly, clumsily, and so on. Dancing unnaturally is dancing *poorly*. But saying that cats naturally have four legs simply means that cats have four legs ordinarily, genetically, or something like that. Naturally having four legs is neither *good* nor *bad*, despite what the pigs in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* might have decreed. Similarly, humans do not naturally have four legs, which means that humans do not have four legs ordinarily, genetically, or something like that. Naturally not having four legs is neither *good* nor *bad*.

This book is a project in naturalistic ethics, which prompts the question whether ‘naturalistic’ is being used with descriptive or evaluative force. I hope that you will be inclined to think that the answer is *both*, for this book is deeply entrenched in descriptive naturalism, and I believe such naturalism is appropriate, fruitful, and thus evaluatively natural.

Three key distinctions will help to explain what I have in mind by descriptively naturalistic ethics.

First, a theory can be *methodologically* or *substantively* naturalistic. *Methodological naturalism* involves using only methods consonant with the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology. Since the sciences would be impossible without the resources of mathematics and logic, methodological naturalism uses methods consonant with them as well. An ethical theory would fail to be methodologically naturalistic if it employed methods that are not only outside the sciences’ stable but incommensurate or incompatible with the sciences, such as divination, dowsing, and scriptural interpretation. Much contemporary ethics, especially in the Kantian tradition but also in some of the virtue ethical tradition, has been brazenly methodologically non-natural. I will not argue against such an approach between the covers of this book, but I do hope to show by example that one need not abandon naturalism to engage in a deep and fruitful way with ethics.

Substantive naturalism is a stronger stance, of which the varieties are arranged in a sort of spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, substantive naturalists commit themselves to the existence only of those entities quantified over by the best-established sciences. At the other end, I still consider it substantively naturalistic to commit oneself to the existence only of those entities that enjoy sufficient empirical support from the respectable sciences, or the respectable districts within each science. There is plenty of dissent within each scientific discipline, as the recent controversy over Daryl Bem’s (2011) unreplicable attempt to argue for paranormal psychology demonstrates. A type of entity or phenomenon does not become empirically admissible simply in virtue of being suggested by a single study, nor does it become empirically inadmissible simply in virtue of being inconsistent with a single study. As with anything of this sort, the key to interpretation is to generate several explanatory hypotheses that fit the overall pattern of evidence. Since evidence radically underdetermines theory, a unique explanation cannot be expected, but further argumentation, new research, and attention to theoretical strengths such as plausibility, simplicity, consilience, and so on, may tell for or against each of the potential explanations. In this book, I subscribe to a quite

Introduction

5

permissive substantive naturalism that countenances everything from quarks and ribosomes to expectations and preferences. A theory fails to be substantively naturalistic even on my relaxed view if it purports to refer to entities recognized by none of the sciences, such as deities, immaterial souls, or group minds.

The theory I will adumbrate here is both methodologically and substantively naturalistic. I employ only methods consonant with those used in the sciences and refer only to entities countenanced by the sciences.

Second, a theory can be *merely consistent with* the natural sciences, *abductively suggested by* the natural sciences, or *outright derived from* the natural sciences. This distinction has to do with the logical relation of the ethical theory T_e to the conjunction of scientific theories T_s . If it's not the case that $T_s \supset T_e$, then the ethical theory is consistent with the sciences. This is a much weaker relation than outright derivation, where $T_s \supset T_e$. Between these two extremes lies the type of ethical theory that is an inference to the best explanation of what the (relevant portion of the) conjunction of scientific theories says. An inference to the best explanation is not merely consistent with what it is meant to explain, nor is it logically derived from what it is meant to explain. While an outright derived ethical theory would be interesting, I cannot imagine what one would even look like. My project is not that ambitious. Instead, I want to articulate an ethical theory that is abductively related to the rest of the sciences. What I propose here is the best explanation I can muster for the relevant evidence, taking into account as best as I can the philosophical arguments that have been made for and against various views in the last twenty-five centuries.

Third, a theory may be naturalistic in a *hard* sense if it draws only on the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry. By contrast, a theory may be only *softly* naturalistic if it draws on both the hard sciences and the soft sciences, including anthropology, psychology, behavioral economics, and biology.¹ While hard naturalistic theories are fascinating and allow for more certain predictions and explanations than their soft counterparts, physics and chemistry give us no grasp of what the good, the right, and the virtuous are. I think, and will attempt to show, that the social sciences to some extent do. Again, then, my project is less than maximally ambitious: I aim to present a softly naturalistic ethical theory.

¹ Presumably there is also room for theories that draw *only* on the soft sciences, but I can see no reason to restrict oneself in this way.

In short, I aim to promulgate an ethics that systematically explains as much as possible of two bodies of evidence: the relevant scientific data and theories, and philosophical intuitions and theories about moral conduct. The data are sometimes murky. Some scientific theories are inconsistent with themselves, or with other well-supported theories, or with relevant data. Philosophical intuitions and theories may be unfalsifiable (a direction in which much recent virtue ethics has sadly moved), easily falsified, inconsistent with other philosophical intuitions and theories, or inconsistent with well-supported scientific theories. There is no unique way to handle this cacophony. I will propose one that I believe harmonizes as much as possible of the evidence. Other, incompatible, explanations are surely possible, and in the spirit of collaborative inquiry I invite them. That said, the fact that such explanations are possible, and that for all anyone knows one might be better than the one proposed here, is not itself an objection. Theories are never defeated so easily. The only thing that can truly kill a theory is another theory.

To summarize, the theory to be presented in this book is descriptively naturalistic in four ways. It is methodologically naturalistic because it uses only the methods consonant with those of the sciences; it is substantively naturalistic because it purports to refer only to entities recognized by the sciences; it is abductively related to the rest of the sciences; and it draws on the soft sciences. I think that these four ways of being naturalistic are also theoretically desirable, so I contend that my view is evaluatively natural as well. I will not try to convince you of this now, but the hope is that as you proceed through the chapters you will recognize the value of my approach.

The remainder of this chapter grounds the rest of the book in a partition of ethics into three interrelated projects: normative theory, moral psychology, and moral technology. Normative theory identifies what would be good and bad, right and wrong, warranted and unwarranted. It tells us what may and should be, and (in its more ambitious moments) why it may and should be. Moral psychology explains and predicts how actual human agents conduct themselves in the moral domain, which includes how they see, construe, feel, think, deliberate, desire, act, refrain from acting, and fail to act. It identifies how we function and what we're capable of, morally speaking. Moral technology attempts to bridge the gap between moral psychology and normative theory by recommending ways in which we, as moral psychology describes us, can become more as we should be, as normative theory prescribes. Hitherto, ethicists have primarily concentrated on normative theory and moral psychology. By

Introduction

7

emphasizing moral technology as well, this project serves as a useful corrective.

2.1 *Naturalistic normative theory*

According to this way of carving up the ethical domain, normative theory is the project of identifying what, both in particular cases and in general, would satisfy the evaluative predicates ('good,' 'bad,' 'better,' 'worse,' 'best,' and 'worst'; 'right' and 'wrong'; 'impermissible,' 'permissible,' and 'obligatory'; 'virtuous,' 'vicious,' 'admirable,' 'exemplary,' and 'flourishing,' to name a few). Different theories answer in different ways. In caricature at least, consequentialism grounds the deontic terms ('right,' and 'wrong'; 'impermissible,' 'permissible,' and 'obligatory') and the aretaic terms ('virtuous,' 'vicious,' 'admirable,' 'exemplary,' and 'flourishing') in the state-based terms ('good,' 'bad,' 'better,' 'worse,' 'best,' and 'worst'). Actions are right because they lead to the best consequences. People are virtuous because they tend or intend to bring about good consequences. Kantian ethics grounds the state-based and aretaic terms in the deontic terms. Good consequences are the sorts of results aimed at by obligatory actions; bad consequences are the sorts of results aimed at by impermissible actions. A person is virtuous if she tends to act from duty. Virtue ethics – at least the agent-based virtue ethics of Slote (2001, p. 7) and Russell (2009, p. 74) – grounds the state-based and deontic terms in the aretaic ones. Actions are right because the virtuous person would do or recommend them, wrong because the virtuous person would avoid or recommend against them. Consequences are good because they are what a virtuous person would aim at when acting in character, bad because they are what a virtuous person would avoid when acting in character (or what a vicious person would aim at when acting in character).

Ordinarily, this part of the ethical project stratifies into three levels. At the most general level, meta-ethics provides an account of the meaning of the various evaluative terms. At the most specific level, applied ethics attempts to answer thorny questions about fraught issues like abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and so on. Between these two lies normative ethics, which provides a more substantive account than meta-ethics without descending to the nitty-gritty of applied ethics. All three levels are part of normative theory, however. While I do engage in much normative theory in this book, much of what I have to say is also about moral psychology and moral technology.

2.2 Naturalistic moral psychology

Unlike normative theory, which attempts to explain what makes things good, right, and virtuous, moral psychology enables us to describe, explain, and predict human thought, feeling, and action in moral contexts.² I'll use 'conduct' as an umbrella term to cover many aspects of the moral life, including seeing, construing, feeling, thinking, deliberating, desiring, acting, refraining from acting, and failing to act. All aspects of conduct are important. John Doris has been taken to task for often eliding the internal aspects of moral psychology and focusing on behavior; he, in turn, seems inclined to turn the tables and criticize his opponents for ignoring the external aspects of moral psychology. While I agree that behavior is important, I also recognize that what goes on inside counts. In this book, I try to give sufficient weight to the inside, the outside, and especially to their interaction.

This aspect of the ethical project is at least as old as the normative part, and perhaps older. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle seems to presuppose that his audience recognizes his catalogue of virtues, which does not stand in need of further justification. He devotes much of his effort to developing a rich moral psychology based on emotions, sensitivity to reasons, deliberation, and action. Other philosophers throughout history have articulated their own moral psychologies. In the *Science of Virtue*, Immanuel Kant frames his moral psychology in terms of the will, obedience to the moral law, and the sense of duty. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, David Hume grounds his moral psychology not so much in reasons and the rational will as in sentiments and feelings. Friedrich Nietzsche attacks his predecessors precisely on the adequacy of their moral psychologies throughout his oeuvre, and especially in the *Genealogy of Morals*, where he claims that the basis of most moral conduct since the rise of Christianity is a distilled and disguised sense of dudgeon and a delight in tormenting people, including oneself.

More recently, interest in moral psychology among analytic philosophers revived with the birth of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, non-cognitivist theories of the meaning of moral thoughts and statements, and worries about moral character.³ This project deals at length with that last issue, which has been raised most trenchantly by John Doris, Owen

² Some useful introductions to moral psychology include Doris et al. (2010) and Sinnott-Armstrong (2008).

³ See Anscombe (1958), Blackburn (1998), Gibbard (2003), and MacIntyre (1984).

Introduction

9

Flanagan, Gilbert Harman, Christian Miller, and Peter Vranas. All five question – in different ways and with different conclusions – whether people have the traits of character traditionally identified as virtues by normative theory. The worry is that if normative theory positively evaluates ways of being and behaving that are exceedingly demanding or perhaps even impossible for human agents to embody, then either we are doomed to inevitable moral failure or normative theory should rethink its prescriptions. One of the aims of this book is to adjudicate this dispute by weakening the stringency of normative ethical prescriptions while co-opting aspects of our moral psychology, an aim that falls squarely in the third branch of the ethical project: moral technology.

2.3 *Introducing naturalistic moral technology*

Normative theory identifies what would be good, right, and virtuous. Moral psychology describes, explains, and predicts human conduct in moral contexts. What more could there be to the ethical project? I believe that one key aspect remains. Namely, moral technology. This part of the ethical project is not about *identifying* the good and the right, nor is it about *describing*, *explaining*, and *predicting* how people will think, feel, and act when the good and the right are at stake. Instead, moral technology attempts to bridge the gap between moral psychology and normative theory by proposing ways in which we, as moral psychology describes us, can become more as we should be, as normative theory prescribes for us. Moral technology isn't about describing, explaining, or predicting what we are and do from a moral point of view, but about *controlling* or *guiding* what we are and do from a moral point of view. Moral technology subsumes the familiar field of moral education. Whereas moral education aims at, for example, inculcating outright virtue, moral technology aims at that in addition to mere action in accordance with virtue. Whereas moral education is typically reserved for the young or the novice, moral technology is for everyone.

In particular, I shall argue that though most people do not think, feel, and act in ways that traditional normative theory would describe as virtuous (or, for that matter, vicious), we should still attribute the virtues (but not the vices) to one another because these attributions tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Calling someone honest – especially when he has just done something that could be construed as honest – will lead him to think, feel, and act more honestly in the future. Calling someone compassionate – especially when she has just done something that could

be construed as compassionate – will induce her to think, feel, and act more compassionately in the future. Caveats and clarifications abound, of course, but the plausible, public attribution of virtues (including, as I shall show, intellectual virtues such as curiosity) tends to lead the target of the attribution to live up to the way she's been described. Furthermore, this effect is robust in at least two senses: it induces behavior in accordance with the attributed trait in a variety of circumstances (thus exhibiting cross-situational consistency) and it is long-lived, inducing behavior in accordance with the attributed trait for hours, days, even months (thus exhibiting temporal stability).

There is a near-universal presumption that if people are not virtuous, then they should not be told that they are virtuous. I shall argue on pragmatic grounds that we should, in the right circumstances and in the right ways, attribute virtues to people even if they might not have them. Aristotle thought that people became courageous by acting courageously; I contend that they become courageous (or near enough) by being called courageous. Aristotle claimed that people become courteous by acting courteously; I contend that they become courteous (or near enough) by being called courteous. Aristotle believed that people become creative by acting creatively; I contend that they become creative (or near enough) by being called creative. When this happens, I call it *factitious virtue*.

2.3.1 *Does moral technology need an introduction?*

I've claimed to be introducing moral technology, but it might seem that this aspect of the ethical project is as old as the rest. In one sense, I agree, as the examples adduced below will show. In another sense, however, I think that moral technology has gotten such short shrift, especially in recent analytic philosophy, that it can hardly be said to constitute a continuous thread of the ethical project in the way that moral psychology and normative theory can.

Most contemporary students of moral technology are not philosophers but marketers, charity workers, politicians, and pedagogues. Moral technology was not always so atrophied. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato described in (from a contemporary perspective, incredible) detail how to train the guardians of the ideal city, going so far as to say that an entire society would unravel if the wrong musical modes came into vogue.

In Chapter 8, I will show that Epicurus and his followers deployed a finely designed piece of moral technology in the Garden. Epicurus is reputed to have told his followers to behave at all times as if he were watching – a prescription of his normative theory. I will argue at some