

Introduction: Toward Re-Enchantment

This book, not unlike many other works of philosophy, grew out of a sense of dissatisfaction. In particular, while I have been drawn to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics and find much that is congenial in the revival of this tradition in the last half-century or so, I have also been dissatisfied with a flatness in the dominant approach among neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists. This dominant approach emphasizes an observational (or disengaged) standpoint rather than a participative (or engaged) standpoint, as seen in the stress it puts on an analogy between human flourishing and the flourishing of other living things, and thereby it overlooks many of the meanings by which we live and after which we seek. In other words, the dominant approach fails to account properly for our distinctive nature as *the meaning-seeking animal*.¹ And it has thus offered an overly disenchanting understanding of our human form of life. This book seeks to overcome this constriction and argues for a *re-enchanting* Aristotelian perspective; that is, it aims to give better recognition to the meanings by which we live and after which we seek.

Although I believe the dominant approach has been overly disenchanting, at the same time it is also the case that neo-Aristotelians have been concerned to respond to the modern problem of disenchantment, that is, the perceived loss or at least threat of a loss of meaning or value (used equivalently), especially due to the rise of the modern scientific worldview.² In the field of meta-ethics, this problem has expressed itself in the supposed fact-value divide – the divide between *is* and *ought* – which informs prominent subjectivist accounts of value. But, more generally, the problem of disenchantment arises from the prevalence of various forms of scientism in modern intellectual life. In responding to the problem of

¹ I borrow the term “the meaning-seeking animal” from Sacks 2011: ch. 1, though I fill it out in my own way.

² The concept of “disenchantment” is derived from Weber 1946 [1919].

disenchantment, all neo-Aristotelians can be seen as seeking varying degrees of re-enchantment (and so none endorses a completely disenchanting perspective). The central task of this book then is to articulate and defend an even fuller kind of re-enchantment than is found in any of the major views on offer.

I distinguish my position from two main strands of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. The first is the sort of ethical naturalism that was suggested by Elizabeth Anscombe and subsequently defended by Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others. It is the dominant approach and the one I am most concerned to go beyond. Those who adopt this approach can be seen as seeking a minimal form of re-enchantment in that they attempt to overcome the supposed fact-value divide by defending a conception of natural normativity according to which ethical evaluations of human beings are understood on analogy with our evaluations of other living things with respect to whether they are good specimens of their kind. The second strand is the sort of expansive ethical naturalism that is defended by John McDowell, who appeals to an account of an acquired “second nature” that brings into view normative demands that are seen as being “there in any case,” and he explicitly regards this account as seeking to keep nature “partially enchanted.” My position has most in common with McDowell’s position, but I also seek to go beyond it in a number of important ways.

The key thesis that I seek to defend is that any adequate neo-Aristotelian ethical perspective must take account of the way in which human beings are fundamentally and distinctively the meaning-seeking animal. I focus on three aspects of meaning-seeking here: First, it is distinctive of our human form of life that we seek meaning *in* life, and in particular strong evaluative meaning, that is, meaning or value that involves qualitative distinction (e.g., between higher and lower, noble and base, sacred and profane, etc.) and specifies that with which we ought be concerned and that toward which we ought to orient our lives (e.g., the higher, the noble, the sacred, etc.).³ Since these strong evaluative meanings – the noble, the sacred, etc. – require a certain life-orientation, there is, secondly, a concern with a meaningful *life*, that is, the concern is with the *overall* meaning of

³ On strong evaluation, see Taylor 1985: Introduction and chs. 1–2; 1989: pt. I. As will become clear, my approach in this book – especially in regard to philosophical anthropology – is indebted to Charles Taylor’s work in significant ways, though he himself does not engage much with contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

our lives. Finally, it is also distinctive of our human form of life that we can be and often are concerned with *the* meaning of life; we are concerned with how our lives fit into the grand scheme of things and whether there is a cosmic or ultimate source of meaning to which we must align our lives. I show how this concern for *the* meaning of life is rightly connected to a concern for meaning *in* life and a meaningful *life*.

Given this account of our being fundamentally and distinctively the meaning-seeking animal, we can see why the problem of disenchantment – the perceived loss or at least threat of a loss of meaning – is such an acute problem. In this context meaning-seeking will thus need to involve seeking re-enchantment. My own account of what this should look like will emerge over the course of the book, but a few clarifying remarks are necessary here at the outset.

First of all, seeking re-enchantment does not mean a return to a pre-modern worldview. Modern, post-Galilean natural science has made progress precisely by offering mechanistic explanations of empirical phenomena rather than the sort of teleological explanations that were central to the pre-modern idea of a meaningful cosmic order (as in the idea of the “Great Chain of Being”; see Lovejoy 1936). Whether we can do entirely without teleological explanations is an issue we will have to consider. But the process of disenchantment so understood in many ways constitutes an improvement in our understanding of the world. However, it also brings with it difficult challenges related to how we are to understand our experiences of meaning or value. On one view of disenchantment, which we can call “extreme” or “total” disenchantment, the loss of the pre-modern idea of a meaningful cosmic order entails that all of our experiences of meaning or value are to be regarded simply as subjective projections onto a meaningless or value-neutral universe. The most extreme version of disenchantment combines such projectivism with a mechanistic view of human beings according to which our experiences of meaning or value are explained reductionistically in terms of our genes, or our brain “wiring,” or a stimulus-response mechanism, or something else of the sort. However, many want to resist such total disenchantment views – including the neo-Aristotelians under consideration here – and doing so can be understood in terms of seeking a kind of re-enchantment. As Charles Taylor puts it: “‘re-enchantment’ . . . doesn’t undo the ‘disenchantment’ which occurs in the modern period. It re-establishes the non-arbitrary, non-projective character of certain demands on us, which are firmly anchored in our being-in-the-world” (2011b: 117; cf. 2011a: ch. 12). One of the key issues to be explored here concerns how these

perceived normative demands (i.e., objective values or meanings) are best understood and defended.⁴

A second clarification: The language of “re-enchantment” is potentially misleading insofar as it might suggest that the world *is* completely disenchanted (i.e., devoid of meaning or value) and so we must create, bestow, or otherwise bring about meaning or “enchantment.” However, re-enchantment, as I understand it, is rather a matter of *discovering* (or *recovering*) something that is already there to be discovered in the world: namely, non-arbitrary, non-projective normative demands. The world is precisely *not* completely disenchanted and so seeking re-enchantment is a matter of defending the validity of these normative demands against the total disenchantment view. This will often also involve overcoming the ways in which these normative demands have been neglected and occluded by prevalent forms of scientism in modern intellectual life, which privilege a disengaged (or third-personal) standpoint that prescind from our engaged (or first-personal) experiences of the significance of our lives and the beings around us.

Despite the possible misleading nature of the language of disenchantment and re-enchantment, I use it here because of its place in the literature on modernity and also because, when properly understood, it can illuminate a central concern in the revival of Aristotelian ethics, and we can then consider what is the best path toward re-enchantment. In seeking to articulate and defend an even fuller kind of re-enchantment than is found in any of the major views on offer, my goal is to articulate and defend a fuller account of non-arbitrary, non-projective normative demands in terms of the strong evaluative dimension of meaning.

In Chapter 1, “The Human Form of Life,” I seek to establish the claim that we are fundamentally and distinctively the meaning-seeking animal through an exploration of the engaged standpoint from within our human form of life, where it can be seen that our human form of life is shaped by strong evaluative meaning, including the strong evaluative category of the noble, which is integral to Aristotle’s account of acting virtuously. I also show how this dimension of meaning is overlooked by the dominant neo-Aristotelian approach because of its emphasis on an observational

⁴ Closely connected to defending the validity of objective value or meaning, seeking re-enchantment can also be seen to involve an aspiration to self-transcendence, where this means transcending a “lower,” more enclosed mode of selfhood for a “higher” one that is properly responsive to such normative demands. Thus, we can say that if the process of disenchantment – especially in its most extreme forms – pushes toward self-enclosure, then re-enchantment must involve a move toward greater self-transcendence in concern for such normative demands.

(or disengaged) standpoint on our human form of life rather than a participative (or engaged) standpoint, and thus it does not provide us with an adequate philosophical anthropology and, along with this, it does not provide us with an adequate account of our reasons for the life of virtue. Moreover, I seek to counter a disenchanting move made by such neo-Aristotelians that involves denying any special realm of obligation. There is such a realm, I argue, and it is the whole realm of strong evaluative meaning, which includes more than just the domain of “the moral,” narrowly construed as concerned with what we owe to others.

In Chapter 2, “Virtue, Happiness, and Meaning,” I show how this account of strong evaluative meaning allows us to overcome problems in prominent views among neo-Aristotelians of the relationship of virtue to happiness (e.g., instrumentalist accounts) by enabling us to regard virtue as *constitutive* of happiness understood as a normatively higher, nobler, more meaningful mode of life, and which I show is in keeping with Aristotle’s own view of *eudaimonia*. I engage here especially with Philippa Foot, since she has endorsed each of the prominent views I consider throughout her career. In making the case for my constitutive view I also seek to avoid McDowell’s problematic claim that “no sacrifice necessitated by the life of excellence . . . can count as a genuine loss.” My account of a meaningful life aims to address the problem of loss in human life, which I argue requires us to address the problem of *cosmodicy*: that is, the problem of whether we can affirm life in the world as worthwhile in the face of evil and suffering. This problem is taken up further in Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 3, “Other-Regarding Concern,” I discuss how strong evaluative meaning makes an important difference for a proper account of the nature and extent of the demands for other-regarding concern. The dominant neo-Aristotelian approach has regarded the other-regarding virtues (e.g., justice, generosity, honesty, etc.) as virtues primarily because of their role in promoting the “good functioning of our social group,” which is seen as important for achieving our own flourishing as rational social animals. I focus especially on MacIntyre’s account of other-regarding concern as rooted in social networks of giving and receiving in his book *Dependent Rational Animals*. What is overlooked in the dominant approach is the strong evaluative sense of human beings as being *worthy* of our concern *for their own sake* due to their inherent dignity (or sanctity) and that a normatively higher, nobler, more meaningful mode of life can be achieved through such concern. I seek to show the difference this makes for ensuring that we regard all human beings as fully amongst us, for

making sense of and defending moral absolutes, and for properly responding to the demands for universal and particular concern.

In Chapter 4, “Cosmic Outlooks,” I make the case that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists need to address the question of the meaning of life, that is, the question of how our lives fit into the grand scheme of things and whether there is a cosmic or ultimate source of meaning to which we must align our lives. I examine Bernard Williams’ forceful challenge that evolutionary science has done away with the sort of teleological worldview that is needed in order to make sense of an Aristotelian ethical perspective. I consider Hursthouse’s response to Williams’ challenge and argue that it is not sufficient. I also argue against McDowell’s quietism according to which we should remain content with the strong evaluative meanings that arise for us within a particular acquired ethical outlook (e.g., our sense of the noble) and not seek to provide any ontological grounding or justification for them beyond appealing to our second nature. I contend that what we need is in fact a teleological worldview. Against Williams, I argue that there is no necessary incompatibility between evolutionary science and a teleological worldview. Indeed, there are a number of recent and contemporary scientists and philosophers who argue against Williams’ sort of tragic cosmic outlook and instead see the cosmos as purposive in giving rise to life and then to conscious intelligence. I consider both theistic and non-theistic views of the meaning of life and seek to show how they offer support for a strong evaluative conception of what is most admirable about us as human beings. If all such accounts of the meaning of life are rejected, then, I suggest, we must accept Williams’ view that a neo-Aristotelian ethical perspective is no longer viable and only a significantly reduced form of ethics remains possible.

In Chapter 5, “*Homo Religiosus*,” I build on the preceding discussion of cosmic outlooks and explore the place of spirituality within a neo-Aristotelian ethical perspective. Among neo-Aristotelians this issue is often either ignored or excluded from consideration, which is strange given the place of spirituality in human life. I discuss why this is and also why it is problematic. More positively, I suggest how spirituality can play an important role in a neo-Aristotelian account of the good life. By “spirituality” I mean *a practical life-orientation that is shaped by what is taken to be a self-transcending source of meaning, which involves strong normative demands, including demands of the sacred or the reverence-worthy*. I argue that through an exploration of the strong evaluative standpoint from within our human form of life as meaning-seeking animals we can come to appreciate better the importance of spirituality for human beings throughout recorded

history up to the present and why we can be described as *homo religiosus*. In addition, I argue against the anti-contemplative stance of many neo-Aristotelians (in which they depart from Aristotle) and for the integral importance of contemplation for human life, and for the spiritual life in particular. I also discuss the draw of *theistic* spirituality, even though my account allows for both theistic and non-theistic forms of spirituality.

In the Conclusion I summarize my case for a re-enchanted Aristotelian perspective and suggest that if one rejects this perspective (or something like it) then this would constitute a significant loss, precisely because of our being the meaning-seeking animal.