

Berryman, Sylvia. *Aristotle on the Sources of the Ethical Life*.
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In *Aristotle on the Sources of the Ethical Life*, Sylvia Berryman argues that Aristotle is concerned with giving an account of the origin of value and with establishing ethical truths. However, he does not attempt to derive substantive ethical advice from a value-neutral study of nature. Hence, Aristotle's metaethics is neither naive nor naturalistic in the "Archimedean" sense articulated by Foot and Williams (Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [London: Fontana, 1985], 28–29, 40–53; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]). Instead, argues Berryman, Aristotle's refreshing metaethical view locates

the sources of value in the structure of human action and assigns the justification of ethical norms to practical reason. The structure of human action shows that the practical good is distinct from the natural good, and it commits us to a project of constructing and investigating ethical norms. This project is the task of practical reason and of the practically wise person (*phronimos*), who at the same time discovers and constitutes the practical good.

Aristotle on the Sources of the Ethical Life is an extremely rich book. It contains a careful and illuminating study of the reception of Aristotle's ethics from Anscombe onward. It argues against Archimedean naturalism on the basis of textual analysis, of a study of the historical context in which Aristotle's ethical views were developed, and of a close look at the relationship between the three *Ethics* and the *Politics*. In addition, in this book Berryman aims at uncovering a metaethical perspective that will be of interest for contemporary theorists. She sees Aristotle as endorsing a constitutivist form of constructivism which derives value from the norms of human agency and not from deliberative procedures (183–89). This list of topics is sufficient on its own to show the ambition and the interest of this work, which I found very instructive and illuminating, even though, as the discussion below shows, I disagree with some of its central tenets. It will be of interest for ancient philosophers and contemporary ethicists alike, and it will refresh scholarly interest in discussions on the nature and the relevance of Aristotle's concern with the human good.

In chapters 1 and 2, Berryman sets the stage of her inquiry by looking at the controversies sparked by competing interpretations of Aristotle's ethical views in the twentieth century. Since Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," Aristotle has been summoned as a champion against noncognitivism, understood as the thesis that ethical claims are not truth-apt. However, this appropriation of Aristotle has taken radically different turns. According to some, Aristotle appealed to nature in order to justify substantive ethical advice. This appeal seemed promising to some but impossible to revive to others (Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*; Foot, *Natural Goodness*). In contrast to these views, McDowell argued that Aristotle's project is "Neurathian" and allows for revision and reconstitution provided that these do not draw materials from an external, value-neutral standpoint. Unlike us, Aristotle can be naive about his Neurathian approach because he does not feel the pressure to give external justifications (see, e.g., John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 126–29). Berryman's insightful reconstruction of the reception of Aristotle's ethics asks us to be suspicious of a lack of self-awareness on Aristotle's part, which of course revives the question about his appeals to nature. Thus, we are left with the two research questions that set the agenda for the following chapters: "We need to consider both whether Aristotle thought that ethical demands were somehow grounded in a biological notion of nature, and whether he felt a need to justify or ground the practice of ethics at all" (22). Chapter 3 shows that it is indeed plausible to take Aristotle to have felt the need to justify the practice of ethics given his intellectual background and historical context. I found the analysis at this stage especially illuminating, as it uncovers the plethora of different forces that challenged the status of ethical truths in the fifth and sixth centuries BCE: distrust in the gods as warrantors of ethical truths, challenges to the legitimacy of justice based on its conventional origin, Protagorean relativism, Cyrenaic Hedonism. Particularly helpful is the analysis of the self-conscious attempts to

justify the practice of ethics in Plato. As Berryman persuasively argues, in the *Laws* 10, Plato turns to metaphysical explanations to ground not only theology but also ethical norms. Having defended the unlikelihood of Aristotle's naivety, Berryman also shows that his conception of nature is sufficiently value-free to serve as an external anchor for the demands of justification of ethics.

This analysis makes a very good case against Aristotle's complacency. However, I am more skeptical that Aristotle faced the specific demand for explanation that is at the center of Berryman's investigation. Archimedean naturalism is meant to yield precise ethical advice, rather than merely giving constraints to ethical claims (79). It would have been helpful to see how this very specific demand for justification is called for by the different challenges to ethical truths that Berryman discusses. On reflection, these challenges may be refuted by appealing to a kind of naturalism that does not yield specific ethical advice. Take, for example, the challenge posited by the Cyrenaics, who claim that pleasure is the only good. Berryman suggests, persuasively, that the refutation of this view must show that there is a good beyond our present pleasurable experiences (37). However, showing that there is such a good is not yet the same as deducing specific ethical advice from its existence.

In chapter 4, Berryman argues that some of the most naturalistic passages in the *EE* and *NE* do not provide an external Archimedean fulcrum that supports specific ethical advice. The function argument recommends a life of reason, but it does not indicate to us how exactly we should spend our time. The development of virtue does not presuppose an inner inclination for a certain life. Natural justice is contrasted to conventional justice because it is objective, not because it can be justified on the basis of an appeal to human nature. Chapter 5 argues against the case for naturalism in the *Politics* with an eye to Aristotle's justification of natural slavery, the hierarchy between men and women, and the natural development of the *polis*.

While the analysis of natural justice seems to me persuasive, I still see some form of Archimedean naturalism lurking in the study of the development of virtue and of Aristotle's account of the hierarchical organization of society. The impressive body of evidence recently analyzed by Leunissen suggests that in Aristotle's biological treatises, in the *Politics*, and in the *NE* certain bodily constitutions are preconditions for the acquisition of virtue (for the constitution of the blood, see *PA* 648a9–11, *PA* 686b25–27; for climate, blood temperature, age, and physical training, see *Pol.* 1327b18–38, *Pol.* 1337b22–28, *Pol.* 1338a31–b8, *Pol.* 1338b39–1339a10, *NE* 1121a20–21; see also Mariska Leunissen, *From Natural Character to Moral Virtue in Aristotle* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]). This evidence supports the thesis that Aristotle's biology grounds his account of moral luck. Berryman's response might be that a biological account of moral luck merely posits some constraints to Aristotle's ethical project. However, the exclusion of those who possess certain biological traits from virtue and from full citizenship is in fact a substantial ethical consequence. Another possible reply available to Berryman is that the claims about the nature of women and slaves in the *Politics* are not based on Aristotle's biological investigations, but they reflect socially accepted prejudices (92). This view seems to me to overlook the possibility that Aristotle's sexism and racism are at least to some extent grounded in his biological investigation, a biological investigation which is of course itself biased. This sort of view seems to emerge in passages like *Pol.* 1260a10–15, which attempts to

ground the submission of women on the lack of authority of their deliberative capacity. As Nielsen argues, this view seems based on Aristotle's account of the difference between the male and the female at *HA* 608a19–b13 (Karen Margrethe Nielsen, "The Constitution of the Soul: Aristotle on Lack of Deliberative Authority," *Classical Quarterly* 65 [2015]: 572–86).

Chapter 6 returns to the *EE* and *NE* to build the case against Archimedean naturalism. Following McDowell, Berryman focuses in particular on the noninstrumental value of the virtues, on the absence of a blueprint of the human good, and on the nondeductive nature of practical reason. Had Aristotle been an Archimedean naturalist, we would have expected him to assign to practical reason the task of deducing ethical norms from a natural blueprint. However, we have been warned that looking for such a blueprint in Aristotle's ethical system is hard and possibly self-defeating (Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 198–202). In addition, there are well-known problems with seeing practical reasoning as deductive, even though Aristotle sometimes presents it as following the deductive pattern of syllogistic reasoning (*NE* 1144a31). Finally, if our ends were naturally or biologically determined, Aristotle would have taken virtuous character traits and virtuous actions to be valuable because they are instrumental to our natural goals. Instead, he thinks that virtuous actions are chosen for their own sake (see, *inter alia*, *NE* 1105a32, *NE* 1144a19).

Despite these considerations, I remain doubtful that a definitive case against naturalism has been made. With respect to the noninstrumental value of the virtues, it seems to me open for Aristotle to say that the virtues constitute our natural good, thus being justified by naturalism without being pursued for an external end (see Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 147–49). Furthermore, universal facts about human nature may still have a role to play in deliberation even if practical reasoning does not simply deduce specific ethical advice from a set of principles. After all, Aristotle mentions the importance of knowing universals for both deliberators and political scientists (*NE* 1180b7–29, *NE* 1141b12–17). In addition, if we take practical deliberation to be analogous to the kind of deliberation we see in medicine, it makes sense to suppose that some knowledge of the human good contributes to it, just as knowledge of health contributes to medical deliberation (*Met.* 1032b6–26; see Jessica Moss, "Right Reason in Plato and Aristotle: On the Meaning of Logos," *Phronesis* 59 [2014]: 181–230). Berryman's interpretation of Aristotle's account of practical reasoning is based, for the most part, on a very clear explanation of McDowell's view and on a discussion of different kinds of particularism. While this characterization helps us to navigate the difficult secondary literature, it seems to me to suffer from a lack of textual analysis of the relevant passages in the *Ethics* and beyond.

Chapter 7 makes a fresh start with an articulation of Aristotle's non-naturalistic metaethics. First, Berryman argues that, at *NE* 1.6 and *EE* 1.8, Aristotle's critique of other metaethical views (mostly Plato's form of the good) leads him to introduce the key thesis that ethics is concerned with the practical good, that is, the good achievable in action. The introduction of the practical good calls for an account of its sources, which Berryman finds at *EE* 1222b15–1223a12. In this passage, Aristotle explains that human beings are controlling *archai* (principles) of action. Taking her cue from this characterization, Berryman argues that we

are controlling *archai* in the sense that we control the goals of our actions by reflecting on them. Therefore, we are the sources of the practical good in virtue of the fact that we are agents, not in virtue of the fact that we are members of a natural kind. The final argumentative step in this chapter is a refreshing analysis of the first line of the *NE*: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has been well said to be that at which all <pursuits> aim” (*NE* 1094a1–3; qtd. on 145). According to Berryman, here Aristotle does not attempt to draw a fallacious inference from the idea that every action aims at a good to the idea that there is one good at which all actions aim. Rather, Aristotle’s point is that since all actions aim at what seems good, the structure of action calls for a rational investigation about the true good. Thus read, the opening of the *NE* makes neither a substantive claim about the goods that our actions aim at nor a normative claim about the goods they should aim at. Rather, this passage proposes a formal analysis of action, according to which human action is characterized by the fact that it requires having a good in view (157–58). This thesis is trivially true in that it does not presuppose a substantive account of the practical good. However, argues Berryman, it is crucial because it introduces the practical good as separate from the natural good. In addition, it commits us to reasoning about the true good. On this view, the formal structure of human action is the source of the practical good, and practical reasoning provides the justification for ethical norms. In chapter 8, Berryman explains that on her interpretation “the norms inherent in ethical life are bootstrapped from the presuppositions inherent in action” (168). While the goal-directedness of human action introduces the practical good, the fact that we are also able to reflect on our goals in action commits us to evaluate whether or not we are aiming at what is truly good. The evaluation is performed by practical reason, whose endorsement provides the justification of ethical norms. As it becomes clear in the coda (181–89), the justificatory role of practical reason is constitutive of norms. Practically wise people do not merely get things right in matters of ethics. Rather, they play an active role in constituting the rightness of their judgment (184).

It is hard to do justice to this complex reconstruction of Aristotle’s constructivism and to its presentation as a promising candidate in the contemporary debate. While I found Berryman’s account very stimulating, I have doubts about the mere formality of the thesis that human action aims at what seems good and about the view that practically wise people constitute the rightness of their moral judgments. Berryman relies on an account of the practical good that is substantive enough to exclude the thesis that nonhuman animals aim at what seems good (see Jessica Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012]). As Berryman recognizes (158), the formal thesis is also substantive enough to exclude perverse actions, satanic actions, or depressive indifference (David Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” *Noûs* 26 [1992]: 3–26). Furthermore, in light of the passages in which Aristotle stresses the importance of perceptual training to recognize “the fine” or *to kalon* (*Pol.* 1340a10–b20, *NE* 1180a15–17), I remain convinced that the exercise of practical wisdom presupposes the existence of value in the external world (184). Thus, I am not persuaded that the practically wise person constitutes the rightness of her judgment. For these reasons, I suspect that, even on Berryman’s interpretation of the practical good, Aristotle is not really “bootstrapping” the justification of ethical norms from the formal structure of action. Rather,

he is inquiring on the substantial nature of the human good. Once the possibility for this sort of inquiry is reopened, it makes room for some naturalistic support for our study of the human good. In light of this, I think it would have been desirable to situate more in detail Aristotle's metaethics against the backdrop of a wider variety of naturalisms, including the ones that see an independent conception of human nature as supporting Aristotle's ethical claims (see, e.g., Irwin, *Development of Ethics*).

My lingering questions and objections certainly do not detract from the fact that I found *Aristotle on the Sources of Ethical Life* a pleasure to read and an illuminating resource. It helps to situate better Aristotle's position in the contemporary debate, and it offers a novel take on some of the central passages of the *EE* and *NE*. It is a thought-provoking book which I enthusiastically recommend to anyone interested in the sources of value for Aristotle and beyond.

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