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VIRTUE ETHICS AND MOORE'S CRITICISMS OF NATURALISM

by

BRANDON THOMAS BYRD

Under the Direction of Andrew I. Cohen

ABSTRACT

Several contemporary virtue ethicists have provided systematic presentations of normative virtue ethics. The virtue ethical literature, however, does not contain much information on the meta-ethical roots of virtue theories. The present paper seeks to address this deficiency by examining the neo-Aristotelianism of Rosalind Hursthouse in an effort to ascertain what meta-ethical commitments are most consistent with her theory; these commitments are shown to be cognitivism, objectivism, and (in some form) naturalism. These positions are then put into dialogue with Moore's seminal metaethical arguments against naturalism and agent-relative value. Ultimately I show that the literature on normative virtue ethics is rich enough to provide powerful responses to Moorean criticisms.

INDEX WORDS: Virtue ethics, Metaethics, G.E. Moore, Hursthouse, Eudaimonism, Agent-relative value, Naturalism, Objectivism

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by

BRANDON THOMAS BYRD

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August 2007

To my

grandfather,

who impressed upon

me, from a very young

age, the importance of character.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 1

Virtue Ethics..... 3

Moore's Criticisms of Naturalism and their Application to Virtue Ethics..... 32

Conclusion..... 45

Virtue Ethics and Moore's Criticisms of Naturalism

Introduction

Perhaps the most seminal meta-ethical text in the English-speaking philosophical tradition is G.E. Moore's Principia Ethica.[1,2] In this work, Moore lays out his famed criticisms of naturalism and makes a case for why the property "good" must be a simple, non-natural property incapable of philosophical analysis. These arguments served, collectively, as part of the springboard that propelled meta-ethical debate into a position of contemporary prominence. Contemporary virtue ethics, by contrast, did not until recently have a work that could claim both systematicity and a relative degree of authoritativeness; the most important work in virtue ethics over the past century has been in the form of influential but non-comprehensive short pieces.

Complicating matters is the fact that "virtue ethics" is not univocal; rather, it is an umbrella-term encompassing a variety of approaches that, while bearing a great deal of similarity to each other, are distinct from one another. For instance, one can (and should) distinguish between the neo-Aristotelian approach of philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre and the agent-based approach to virtue ethics advocated by Michael Slote and others. Each of these variations on the virtue-ethical theme has its own set of commitments, advantages and disadvantages. But what they share, in addition to their theoretical overlap, is a

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[1] Many contemporary introductory books to meta-ethics begin with considerations of Moore's arguments here. As an example, see Miller, Alexander. An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

[2] All quotes hereafter from Moore are from Moore, George. Principia Ethica. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1988).

conspicuous absence. What is absent from virtue ethics, generally speaking, is a sufficiently detailed account of the meta-ethical views with which virtue-ethical theories are most consistent. Some may be skeptical of the need for this type of systematicity, but I'm going to operate under the assumption that a normative theory, even if it happens to be adequate in its own right, cannot be fully understood unless one also grasps the way it is supposed to meta-ethically map onto the world. That's just to say that it is difficult or perhaps impossible to gain a deep and full appreciation of an ethical theory without also surveying the theory through the lens of meta-ethics; undertaking such a survey gives one a richer understanding of both the theory's foundational structure as well the meaning of its key terms .

The current lack of such a meta-ethical survey of virtue ethics is doubtless the product of the relative novelty of its approach. Indeed, one might argue that it makes little sense – at least from a pragmatic standpoint – to go through the bother of working out unique and elaborate meta-ethical arguments designed to ground and support a normative theory when the details of the normative theory have yet to be fleshed out. There have been a few recent attempts to provide a systematic overview of normative virtue ethics, of which Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* is, in my opinion, the most accessible.[3,4] This essay is an attempt to examine the meta-ethical implications of

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[3] Michael Slote's *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), for instance, is largely concerned with distinguishing his version of virtue ethics from Kantian, utilitarian, and commonsense ethics, showing why he regards his theory as the superior alternative. Hursthouse's book is much less focused on providing criticism of alternative theories, and as such avoids many technical issues of secondary importance to presenting an initial account of virtue ethics.

[4] All references to Hursthouse henceforth are from Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Hursthouse's normative ethics, with special attention paid to those aspects that may be of critical concern for someone operating under Moorean assumptions.

I begin with an involved analysis of Hursthouse's virtue ethics in an attempt to uncover what, if any, meta-ethical roots her normative theory has (or, failing that, what set of meta-ethical commitments is most consistent with her normative theory). After this consideration of Hursthouse, I'll provide a brief explication of Moore's critical views of naturalism and agent relative value. Here I'll use his discussion of egoism as a paradigmatic example illustrating the most important of his contentions on these matters. Then I will suggest ways in which Moore's arguments might be applied to Hursthouse's arguments and indicate ways in which she would likely respond to them. The ultimate goal of this paper is to explore largely uncharted meta-ethical territory, or at least to view already familiar ground from the novel perspective of the virtue-ethicist, in a way that is as instructive as it is informative to those interested in arguing for the cogent foundations of a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic. In doing so, I hope to both foster a richer understanding of Hursthouse's normative theory and indicate ways in which it could be defended against Moorean meta-ethical arguments not directly discussed in her work – arguments that have the potential to shut down the virtue ethical approach altogether.

Virtue Ethics

Section Overview

My goal in this section is to examine Hursthouse's *eudaimonistic*, neo-Aristotelian normative theory in a manner that places special emphasis on the meta-

ethical positions that might underlie and motivate it.[5] I do not hope to be able to provide "the last word" on the meta-ethical foundations of her normative theory, but rather to indicate what aspects of her book I find to be the most meta-ethically salient. Having done so, I will attempt to reverse-engineer, albeit in a sketch-like fashion, a set of meta-ethical commitments with which her normative theory seems most consistent.

The outline of this lengthy section is as follows. I will begin by examining Hursthouse's account of right action, indicating what concepts have relative priority in her theory. I'll then briefly characterize her 'Neurathian' program for building an ethics from within an ethical viewpoint. From there, I will finish examining her normative ethics, including her enumeration of 'the four ends of ethical naturalism' and her account of the reasons virtuous agents have for acting. Throughout, I will be paying special attention to the hierarchy of her presentation in an attempt to discover what concepts are most foundational and how such concepts might connect with relevant meta-ethical perspectives. Finally, I will briefly flesh out and clarify the meanings of a few key meta-ethical concepts in an effort to see how they map onto Hursthouse's theory. By the end of this section I aim to have shown why (and in what sense) I regard Hursthouse's theory as one embracing naturalistic cognitivist objectivism.

Hursthouse's Normative Virtue Ethics

Hursthouse's substantive account of virtue ethics begins with the notion of right action. This is a fitting starting point for her presentation, since critics of virtue ethics have historically cited the theory's alleged inability to guide action (by determining what

[5] From here on, whenever I use the term "virtue ethics," I intend to refer exclusively to neo-Aristotelian theories.

actions are right or appropriate in particular circumstances) as being among its largest weaknesses. The account she provides consists of two premises (one of which contains a sub-premise):

> P.1. – An action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.
> P.1a. – A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely, the virtues.
> P.2. – A virtue is a character trait that fulfills the criteria outlined by one of history's influential theories of virtue.[6]

As regards P.2., there are a number of possible conceptions of what qualifies a character trait as a virtue, but the one that Hursthouse prefers is the neo-Aristotelian account. She describes this account as involving a number of relevant features, but for our purposes here the important one is that virtues are considered as being necessary for living a *eudaimon* or flourishing life. These virtues are not just traits, but are also 'excellences of character' involving the employment and correct use of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in order to 'get things right' about matters regarding action.[7] Such practical wisdom involves, inter alia, the ability to recognize as salient the morally significant features of a relevant action, as well as the context in which the action occurs. So a right action, on her account, is one that would be performed by someone possessing both practical wisdom as well as the excellences of character conducive to and necessary for a flourishing life. At this early point, it is apparent that Hursthouse is a firm believer, although she does not address the matter directly, in cognitivism with respect to ethical utterances. By setting up these necessary and sufficient conditions for what qualifies an act as right, she establishes a set of criteria for evaluating ethical expressions as true or

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[6] p. 28-9.
[7] p. 12-3.

false; if an action is, in fact, what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances then this makes the moral proposition "The action is right" true and "The action is wrong" false.

Hursthouse's account of right action differs in an important way from that proposed by Philippa Foot. In contrast to Hursthouse, Foot maintains that there are certain types of action that are *intrinsically* right or wrong and that a virtue ethical theory that does not recognize this fact fails to fully capture the moral reality of the world in which we live and act.[8] The intrinsic rightness or wrongness of actions that Foot seems to recognize here is not strictly a function of the character states or dispositions from which such actions arise (or would characteristically arise), but rather rightness or wrongness inhere – at least in some cases - in the action itself as distinct from the agent who produced it.[9] Her arguments here seem to suggest that there are at least some cases in which deontic properties (such as being something that one ought or ought not do) have either priority over or reductive independence from areteic considerations (like the virtuous states of character belonging to good people or the vicious states belonging to bad people). This is just to say that on Foot's account, some actions are bad regardless of whether or not a virtuous agent would characteristically perform them in the circumstances and, thusly, that areteic considerations don't always appear to be among the truth conditions for some evaluative statements. In Hursthouse, by contrast, the rightness of an action is extrinsic to the particular action itself, as it is a function of the

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[8] Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2001). p. 115.
[9] David Copp and David Sobel note this dissimilarity between Foot and Hursthouse in "Morality and Virtue" *Ethics* 114 (April 2004): 514-554.

areteic states of character that produce it (or would counterfactually produce it, since her account of right action is given in terms of what a virtuous agent *would* do in particular circumstances); in Hursthouse such areteic considerations are considered to always be prior to deontic ones, at least in her account of right action.

Now, the notion of a property or concept "having priority" over another is, unsurprisingly, not unambiguous. There are at least three different ways in which something can be said to have priority over something else. It can (1) have a larger amount of theoretical importance than that to which it is compared, (2) it can have conceptual or justificatory priority, in that the concept relative to which it is said to be prior logically or theoretically depends on the validity of the "prior" concept, or (3) it can be existentially prior, in that the "prior" or more basic property is considered to be a material condition for another property's existence.[10] For a simple example, consider for a moment G.E. Moore's ideal consequentialism. On his theory, the concept of "good" has priority, in the first sense, in ethics since it is "the only simple object of thought which is peculiar to Ethics." [11] Likewise, the concept of "good" has priority (2) with respect to "right action" since he defines right actions as those which are productive of the most good (meaning that concept of "rightness" would be unintelligible or impossible

[10] These senses of priority map on loosely to several senses of priority distinguished by Aristotle. (1) is similar to Aristotle's belief that essential properties have priority over accidental features (1065b2) since those things which have more theoretical importance within a theory are often, in virtue of this, more likely to be essential to the theory; (2) is similar to Aristotle's claim that certain things are prior in knowledge and definition (1018b30); (3) is relevantly similar to Aristotle's account of 'natural priority' (1010b37). There are some conceptual differences between my formulations and Aristotle's (largely stemming from my wishing to avoid some of his more esoteric metaphysical commitments) but I did take inspiration from him here; my distinctions here are somewhat more useful for the type of analysis I have in mind here.
[11] Moore, p. 5.

to justify without the concept of "good").[12] Finally, Moore's account of "good" seems to imply that "good" is not prior, in the third sense of the term, to natural properties since he seems to suggest that an object's possession of the property "good" is determined by its possession of certain natural properties.[13]

At this point, I'd like to indicate the nature of the "priority" Hursthouse's virtue ethical theory accords to character, in a better effort to understand the normative structure of her system (and from this try to infer some of her meta-ethical commitments). Given that a great many contemporary summaries of virtue ethics claim that character is the primary concept within virtue ethics, it may be tempting to believe that character is itself the basis for many (or even all) ethical properties or concepts. Since the aim of my discussion of Hursthouse is to determine what concepts or properties she believes are foundational, it will be beneficial to clear up exactly what is meant by the "primacy of character," to determine in what way character "comes first" and what, if anything it is supposed to come before it. On this she writes:

> So where do I stand on 'the primacy of character' [in virtue ethics, generally]? For a start, I need a phrase which explicitly disavows any foundational or reductivist role for it, so I shall say I subscribe to the thesis that the concept of the virtuous agent is the focal concept of ethics. [14]

This is a clear endorsement of priority (1), in that it grants that the issue of character (and its areteic cognates) is of primary significance in normative theory. Of course, Hursthouse's account of right-action is given in somewhat reductivist terms, since the

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[12] Moore maintains in §60 of *PE* that the only possible justification that can be given for an action is that it is productive of the most good.
[13] For more on this, see Moore's "The Conception of Intrinsic Value" in his *Philosophical Studies* K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, London: 1922.
[14] Hursthouse, p. 82-3.

"right" is simply "that which a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances." But she writes that although "virtue ethics may be committed to some sort of reductionism of the Right, it is far from committed to a wholesale reduction of other moral concepts."[15] So while some ethical properties, such as an action's "rightness," may be reduced to character in some way, this does not mean that all ethical properties can be. Hursthouse's position on whether or not character should be granted priority (2) is somewhat more underdetermined. On this subject, she claims that an understanding of character is needed "to understand both action guidance and action assessment, to understand why it is sometimes so difficult to see what should be done and why we accept advice, to understand irresolvable and tragic dilemmas and the unity of the virtues, and to fine-tune, and thereby fully understand, our virtue and vice concepts" as well as moral motivation.[16] She clearly regards character as playing a powerful role in rendering ethics intelligible and, though her list is not exhaustive of all the topics available in ethics, it would not be unreasonable to imagine her claiming that a knowledge of character is necessary for a *full* understanding (although perhaps not a basic understanding) of all ethical concepts. This seems to be consistent with (if not implied by) her earlier statement that neo-Aristotelian theories are not 'committed to a reductive definition of the concepts of *good* and *evil* in terms … of the *virtuous agent*, only to maintaining a close connection between them."[17] For these reasons, Hursthouse

[15] ibid.
[16] ibid.
[17] p. 81.

does not believe that it is appropriate to indict virtue ethics for using certain ethical concepts – both deontic and areteic – without providing them with reductive definitions.[18]

Neurathianism

Before examining in detail how Hursthouse proposes to analyze individual people (as well as biological organisms generally) it is worth considering some potential difficulties confronting theorists hoping to construct a naturalistic account of relevant moral terms, as well as any potential evaluative procedures in which these terms may be used. On the one hand, a naturalistic evaluative theory could attempt to use the explanatory framework and conceptual devices of the natural sciences, making use of only those ideas which are accessible from a seemingly evaluatively neutral perspective. Hursthouse finds this approach troublesome because she believes that if one attempts to maintain scientific objectivity by not importing intrinsically normative terms, it does not seem that one's theory will be able to get very far off the ground. Alternatively, one could simply work from entirely within some culturally available ethical viewpoint and seek to find, by appeal to the sciences, some sort of foundation or justification for these views. This, she argues, would also be problematic in that it would produce little more than a set of rationalizations for pre-existing moral ideas instead of providing a robust philosophical argument for them. Hursthouse's third alternative, the one she endorses, is to assume "without argument" what she calls a "Neurathian" approach to ethical inquiry

[18] Nicholas Sturgeon argues quite convincingly in "Moral Explanations" (anthologized in *Essays on Moral Realism* Sayre-McCord, Geoffery, ed. [Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1988]) that it is not a desideratum for naturalistic objectivist theories that they be able to provide reductive definitions for evaluative terms. This point will be taken up later.

– an approach that follows, at least in pattern, a line of thinking originally laid out by Quine.[19]

The Neurathian approach to ethics proceeds by acknowledging that there is "no basing knowledge on an *independent* foundation."[20] To recognize this is just to affirm that there is no way to begin a philosophical project without bringing to bear, in an important way, what we already believe about a vast number of topics. This is not to say that foundationalism as such is somehow wrongheaded or otherwise misbegotten, but rather to point out that whatever foundations we may provide for a given set of views will be shaped by the set of beliefs that inevitably inform them, be they beliefs "about the world" or beliefs about the ways that language can properly be employed (including semantic and syntactic commitments). Within the Neurathian approach, we do not begin to philosophize tabula rasa and, as such, we cannot and should not attempt to absolutely purge philosophical theories of any and all beliefs that we came in with (or set them on a foundation that is independent of all such pre-philosophical beliefs). If this is true of philosophical knowledge generally, it entails that there is not some epistemically privileged view-of-ethical-space-from-nowhere from which we can value-neutrally establish the foundation of our ethical theory. This just means that when we begin the task of constructing an ethics, we should take into account the moral beliefs that we had coming into the project. This does not mean that we cannot have radical doubts about our moral beliefs, and neither does this that the project of an objective or naturalistic

[19] p. 193.
[20] p. 165-67

ethics is doomed from the outset.[21,22] Rather, it is possible for us to empirically and analytically revise our theories in light of relevant evidence (including scientific evidence) and experience in a reliable way that accurately and progressively captures more moral truth. This is, she claims, the proper pattern for ethical investigation to follow. First, we begin to philosophize within a pre-existing ethical framework, and proceed from a set of ethically neutral facts about the world that anyone could accept independently of moral beliefs. We then set up a dialectical process between the two in order to sharpen and make more accurate our understanding of the moral domain. Serious and radical ethical reflection, Hursthouse maintains, is entirely consistent with proceeding within an "acquired ethical outlook."[23]

Evaluation of Social Animals: The Four Aspects and The Four Ends

An account of normative ethics is largely concerned with providing an account of how we ought to evaluate particular actions, traits, people. In order to understand the overall structure of Hursthouse's theory, it is necessary to grasp how she believes the process of evaluation ought to proceed and what it ought to consider. It is, in my opinion, easiest to begin by looking at and analyzing those features of the world she considers to be most ethically important in order to start uncovering a meta-ethics consistent with her normative theory. Hursthouse provides an excellent summary of her views regarding how one ought to evaluate social animals, writing that a good one is "well fitted or endowed with respect to (i) its parts, (ii) its operations, (iii) its actions, and (iv) its desires

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[21] Indeed, Richard Boyd outlines a Neurathian approach (albeit within a meta-ethical context) in his article "How to be a Moral Realist" (anthologized in Sayre-McCord, 1988)

[22] By "objective" here I simply mean those theories which maintain that moral value exists independently of the affective states (as well as the beliefs) of particular individuals.

[23] p. 166.

and emotions; whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects serve (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group – in the ways characteristic of the species."[24] These last four elements (labeled with Arabic numerals) are the "four ends" by reference to which the first four elements (labeled with Roman numerals) are evaluated, in part, as either good or bad. Hursthouse does not believe, however, that a trait's status as a virtue is entirely determined by its relationship to these four ends. Recall that Hursthouse places a great deal of importance on how her theory begins from and works within an acquired ethical outlook; traits are evaluated both by reference to these four ends and to the acquired ethical outlook in a somewhat dialectical manner.[25]

At this stage, Hursthouse urges us to note several features about her account of evaluation, of which I will mention only those that I find to be most salient for the purposes of determining a consistent meta-ethics. Firstly, it is objective in the sense that the truth value of evaluative propositions is not in any significant way the product of the evaluator's desires or interests. I will return to what constitutes objectivity later on, since Hursthouse's views become less clear in light of her views about the role that the four ends play (or don't play) in the justification provided for action. Secondly, evaluating organisms by reference to her mentioned criteria is a somewhat sloppy business, and the

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[24] p. 202.

[25] That is to say, candidate virtues may be suggested by either a trait's contribution to the four ends or to its place within our pre-existing ethical views. In any event, the trait cannot be validated as a virtue unless it survives critical scrutiny from both sides of this evaluative fork (that is, that it is consonant with our considered ethical judgment as well as the four ends).

conclusions reached by this process are "riddled with imprecision and indeterminacy."[26] This means that even though are a number of moral propositions that are truth-apt, their precise truth-value may be elusive within particular circumstances. And finally, the truth of our evaluations of organisms depends on the needs of the type of organism in question, as well as (in the case of sentient life forms) their desires and interests.[27] This last element will come into play, in an important way, in my later discussion of how virtue ethicists might respond to Moore's criticisms of agent-relative naturalism.

This brief recapitulation of Hursthouse's views is, as it stands, insufficient to understand how she thinks we should evaluate human beings. Social animals that we are, there is something importantly special about us, about the way that is characteristic of our species, that distinguishes us from the other higher animals. Hursthouse calls this special attribute variously "rationality" or "free will" (though the use of the former is overwhelmingly more common).[28] For my part, I believe her usage of "free will" is largely motivated by her desire to capture the fact that as human agents we are capable, in at least some sense, of setting ends for ourselves on the basis of rational deliberation. Other animals, by contrast, seem to lack this capacity and are thus bound to blindly perpetuate the largely repetitious pattern of the species. Human behavior, unless perhaps it is viewed on an extremely high level of abstraction, is not simply the passive product of our natural propensities qua members of a particular natural kind. Instead we act on the basis of beliefs and desires that are influenced by our capacity for rational evaluation and

[26] p. 203
[27] p. 202-5.
[28] p. 221.

choice, and it is this feature of human beings that is largely responsible for the vast diversity apparent in human life, both across cultures and throughout history.[29] It is only fitting, then, that Hursthouse's ethics places significant emphasis on how beliefs come to motivate actions.

Reasons for Action

Hursthouse holds that "the virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions or at least one of a certain type or range of reasons, X" where "'the type or range X" is typical of, and differs according to, whichever virtue is in question."[30] To get a feel for what these "X reasons" actually look like, Hursthouse lists the following as reasons a virtuous agent might provide for an honest action: "It was the truth" ; "He asked me" ; "It's best to get things out into the open straight away." [31]

What is somewhat conspicuous about these reasons is that they do not involve, nor do they seem to bear any direct relation to, the four ends by reference to which virtues are established. Somewhat surprisingly, Hursthouse suggests that virtuous agents don't recognize the four ends as being compelling reasons for action. She writes that "what are recognized as reasons for acting are the reasons people with the relevant character trait do, or would, give … *not* the fact that the character trait in question sustains any of the four ends."[32]

Hursthouse's claim here seems somewhat problematic, at least at first, because she holds that the things which can and should provide people with motivations for action

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[29] p. 220-24.
[30] p. 127-8.
[31] Ibid.
[32] p. 234-5.

– that is, the relevant grounds that a virtuous agent provides as reasons for why she acts – are importantly different from those features of the action that make the virtue in question an actual virtue; it appears that the motivational beliefs underlying a virtuous agent's actions (or at least the reasons that a virtuous agent would characteristically provide for acting in particular manners and not others) are not tied to the meta-ethically salient (good-making) features of those actions, or of the states of character which dispositionally produce actions. On the one hand, Hursthouse seems to be claiming that the four ends her ethical naturalism contains provide the objective grounding for ethical propositions or concepts. On the other hand, she claims that these same four ends are not necessarily supposed to be invoked by the virtuous agent as the reasons compelling him to act; that is, a virtuous agent is not required to explicitly make reference to the four ends in an account of why he undertook an action. These two claims, while not straightforwardly contradictory, seem to be at least potentially inconsistent in an important way. The ways in which one goes about understanding or resolving these claims, can, I believe, lead to different attributions of meta-ethical positions. Thus, it is in my estimate *crucial* to have an accurate understanding of her views on this matter, lest one dramatically misconstrue those positions to which Hursthouse is actually committed or, worse yet, falsely claim that that her theory is compatible with positions it is not.

For instance, one might begin an argument with the following set of premises:

> P1 - Virtue ethics places normative priority, in some important way, on the virtuous agent.
> P2 – Virtue ethics regards areteic concepts (like "good" or "virtue") as conceptually prior to deontic concepts (such as "right") [an application of P1 to a particular case]

> P3 - Right action is conceived of in terms of what a virtuous agent (who is good) would characteristically do in particular situations.
> P4 – Virtuous rational agents act, mold their character, and choose their actions on the basis of rationally held beliefs (since something like "acting in accordance with what we see we have reasons to do" is our characteristic way of going on).
> P5 – X reasons are what should count as legitimate justification for an action, not the particular way that a particular action promotes one or more of the four ends.

From this set of premises, one might want to conclude that it is actually X reasons, and not any consideration of a trait's relationship to the four ends of ethical naturalism, that actually provide the foundation for normative appraisal of human beings and their actions.[33] X reasons, since they are what virtuous agents use to provide some sort of warrant for their actions, seem to have a higher degree of normative importance in everyday ethical life (in evaluating and providing normal accounts of why actions are permissible or right) than do the four ends. The worry here is that since X reasons have such a great deal more explicit practical import in our evaluative practices, especially as far as giving reasons for why an action was good or bad is concerned, they might be of more importance to Hursthouse's theory than she realizes. Might we not, since X reasons are the types of things that virtuous agents appeal to in order to explain their actions, grant X reasons the same type of semi-foundational status that the four ends are supposed to have? After all, X reasons are not just isolated propositions, but are supposed to be members of a particular *class* of reasons; it seems that one could unite what these X-reasons have in common (if there is something in common) through a process of abstraction and then consider this property as being foundational within the account of

[33] This was, incidentally, a viewpoint I thought followed logically from Hursthouse's position after my first encounter with it (though it obviously conflicts with some of other views).

evaluating actions. This seems to be quite consistent with the claim that the four ends are not part of (at least not directly) a virtuous agent's reasons for acting.

There are several problems with making an argument similar to that outlined above. The main mistake the argument makes is that it overlooks the fact that what makes a virtue a virtue is not the same thing as what makes a right or properly motivated action a right or properly motivated action. Hursthouse's account of right actions clearly assumes, in the senses outlined above, the priority of virtue or character relative to "rightness." But this relative priority of virtue is not unique to rightness; it extends to explanation or motivation (X reasons) as well. X reasons are stated reasons provided for action of "the type or range X" where that is "typical of, and differs according to, whichever virtue is in question."[34] This indicates that X reasons, even though the reasons may not explicitly make reference to a particular virtue, are only X reasons if they bear an appropriate relationship to a virtue. Another way of stating this point is that the virtues have conceptual priority (priority 2) with respect to X reasons. In both of these cases, virtue is the more basic concept with respect to the ultimate evaluation of actions.

Mere recognition of these errors, however, may not be enough clear up all of the confusion motivating the above argument. The above argument is essentially structured to answer affirmatively the following question: if virtues are to be ultimately validated (properly considered as virtues) by explicit reference to the four ends of ethical naturalism, shouldn't actions be as well? Or, more simply: Shouldn't Hursthouse make it a requirement that a stated reason for action, in order for it to qualify as a good reason,

[34] p. 128.

ought to refer to the four ends since those ends are part of what foundationally determine whether something is good or bad? If the answer to this question is no, as Hursthouse believes, does this mean that X reasons are sufficient to explain why an action is good or bad? And if so, then why don't we dispense with the four ends altogether and build a normative theory around X-reasons? Figuring out the correct answer to these questions (as well as the reasons why they are correct) is important if one is to understand the normative structure of her theory, lest one hastily grant motivation a more prominent role in Husthouse's theory than it actually deserves.

To begin to understand this a bit better, we'll begin by noting that Hursthouse does not believe that the reasons virtuous people provide for their actions have to appeal to the language of the four ends. The rationale for this position, however, is not immediately clear upon initial reflection. It is important, if we are to understand Hursthouse's argument, to figure out why the four ends, if they are somewhat foundational, are not to be invoked in a virtuous agent's stated motives for performing an action. The answer to this riddle is found, I believe, in the conjunction of three relevant factors, which I discuss below: (1) Providing a "four ends" reason for most actions places too much theoretical distance between the act and the virtuous agent's true reason for acting for it to be appropriately relevant (in a justificatory sense) to the action; (2) though an account of X reasons may somehow reduce them to the four ends, this does not entail that X reasons have to be *framed* in terms of the four ends; and (3) if virtue ethics demanded that motivational accounts of actions revolve primarily around the four ends, it would lose its distinctive character as virtue ethics (that is, it would turn into "mere"

consequentialism). Of these three, I regard the last as most important since it addresses considerations that are at the essential core of virtue ethics.

I'll begin my argument for (1) with an example. Imagine for a moment that there are two roommates involved in a minor dispute over the use of the only television in their shared residence. Kevin, one of the roommates, has spent several hours engrossed in a live broadcast from the floor of the North American International Auto Show. Sam, not sharing Kevin's passion for cars and not realizing the depth of his interest in them, eventually comes to request use of the television for an alternative purpose. After a bit of bickering, Kevin becomes irritated, claiming that Sam does not understand the moral character of his activity, which Kevin justifies on the grounds that watching the broadcast is "important to his life."

Now, on the face of it, this is a somewhat odd justification for action, and one whose true meaning was not immediately apparent. But upon reflection, Sam comes to understand that Kevin meant that his viewing of that particular program was importantly bound up with one of the long-term projects in which he was engaged – a project that Kevin regards as being a type of activity that was characteristically pleasure-promoting in a way that served to secure his enjoyment of life as a human being. Assuming for the sake of argument that the type of activity that Kevin engaged in is a species of genuinely virtuous activity (such as "productive non-passive use of leisure time"), it would have been sufficient, and much less queer, for him to have appealed to an actual X reason such as "I'd like to continue watching this because it matters for one of my hobbies." This does not mean that Kevin's proposed justification fails to do what it needs to do; rather, it

simply means that Kevin does not have to offer such a deeply foreign kind of reason in order to successfully get his point across.

The issue becomes even clearer when one considers that well-reasoned justifications for particular actions, X reasons, tend to be more or less local from a theoretical standpoint.[35] When someone asks "Why didn't you cheat on your wife when you had the chance?" appropriately local responses (that is, X reasons) would be something along the lines of "doing so would have been dishonest" or "because I love her."[36] It would be somewhat bizarre for a typical virtuous person to respond that infidelity would somehow fail to promote one of the four ends; indeed, if someone replied to the above question "Well, I didn't cheat on my spouse because that type of behavior would have deleterious effects on the ability of my species' social group to function well" I have the intuition that most people would be struck by how much theoretical distance is between the reasons he provides for action and the actual character of the act being committed. On the basis of such distance, I can imagine an ethicist (or a spouse, for that matter) finding "four ends" X reasons appalling rather than indicative of virtue.

The argument for (2) is for a relatively weak position, namely that a virtue ethical theory does not have to maintain that reasons for actions be *necessarily* framed in foundational language, assuming that there is some sort of relevant foundation. If it is the case that the four ends of ethical naturalism are what, in some way, ground ethical

[35] By "local" here I simply mean that there is little theoretical or conceptual distance between the subject under discussion and the type of language used to describe or understand it.
[36] These types of justifications are representative of the X reasons Hursthouse gives in her own examples.

judgments, this does not imply that X reasons must take the form “I was compelled to choose action A because it promoted the naturalistic end N” or something similar. To demand that reasons for action take that form is to ignore, in spectacular fashion, our standard practices of evaluating reasons.

For instance, assume that we are engaged in a discussion with a scientifically unsophisticated member of the folk, and they are providing us with a physical explanation for the occurrence of some phenomenon. It would be out of line to request that they furnish us with a comprehensive, reductive account for why some event happened as it did. If we asked this person why our vase was broken, he could easily satisfy us (quite reasonably) by saying that it broke because it was fragile and had fallen against a hard surface because it was knocked off its stand. No reasonable person in a scenario like this would require that this person provide us with a detailed physical account of fragility, what molecular structures are more stable than others, or why massive objects (like the vase and the earth) attract one another in order to be justified. These aspects, however interesting they may be to the specialist, are of little to no practical concern to the individual seeking a reason in these circumstances. Similarly, the reasons that a virtuous non-philosopher provides for action do not need to include justification at the foundational level, nor would we want them to. Just as it is absurd to demand a technical physical explanation of why unsupported objects tend to fall, it would be equally absurd to require that a virtuous person provide reasons for her actions that include explicit reference to the morally more basic features of the action before addressing more contextually relevant factors.

This takes us, finally, to point (3). It seems clear to me that reasons framed in the language of the four ends tend to take on a flavor more akin to consequentialism than to virtue ethics. This is unsurprising, given that the four ends are *ends* and that justification in terms of ends is characteristic of consequentialist normative theories. Though Hursthouse herself is not shy about adopting features present in other major ethical approaches (at one point, she invites us to "by all means stop caring about how we distinguish ourselves and welcome our differences") it seems that providing "four ends" based reasons for action, for all or even many actions, makes the virtue ethical position lose its distinctiveness.[37]

Hursthouse is careful throughout her work to indicate that the virtuous person's reasons for acting are not primarily instrumental reasons. To this end, she spends several pages discussing why and how virtuous agents choose good actions "for their own sake" and not for the explicit purposes of securing some end.[38] Virtuous agents don't choose (or need to choose) actions because of the ways they characteristically promote the four ends; rather, they choose them because they see the action as being worthwhile or good. Setting the issue up this way escapes two potentially negative consequences that might otherwise crop up in her theory; it stops virtuous agents from needing to be, at bottom, consequentialists, and it counters the unappealing implication that virtuous agents can only become, as Plato claimed, really or fully virtuous if they have engaged in a substantial amount of philosophical contemplation.[39] In any event, requiring that a

[37] p. 7.
[38] p. 126-131.
[39] p. 137.

virtuous agent provide a 'four ends' reason for action would manifestly contradict Hursthouse's views about *how* the virtuous agent regards his actions; namely, these actions would cease to be, in the mind of the agent, worthy of being chosen for their own sake and would instead be regarded as choice-worthy in virtue of their contribution to *eudaimonia*.[40] The manner in which the virtuous agent is supposed to act, including the way that he regards his actions, will become clearer in my later discussion of how Hursthouse thinks humans characteristically act. But for now, I will turn my attention away from Hursthouse's normative ethics to a consideration of what meta-ethical positions are most consistent with her views on morality.

Inferring a Meta-Ethics from Hursthouse

Objectivism

Summarizing the commitments of objectivism, Geoffery Sayre-McCord writes that objectivists "hold that the appropriate truth-conditions [for ethical propositions] make no reference to anyone's subjective states or to the capacities, conventions, or practices of any group of people."[41] This analysis of what objectivism entails is, it seems to me, too strong in its requirement that objectivist theories not take into account (in any way) the subjective states of persons or agents. If it were correct, Sayre-McCord's analysis would exclude, inter alia, virtue theories from qualifying as objectivist on the grounds that they take into consideration both the beliefs and subjective states of character of the group "virtuous persons" as part of the truth-conditions for ethical

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[40] I still have worries about the possibility of making sense of an action's being intrinsically choice-worthy (that is, choice-worthy in an agent-neutral sense) within the context of Hursthouse's full theory, but I cannot address these concerns here for reasons of scope.
[41] Sayre-McCord, p.19-20.

judgments. For instance, virtue ethical accounts of right action, and the moral propositions they generate, place a good deal of emphasis on the dispositional states of an agent, as well as their affective responses to the action-context (broadly construed). This seems to at least potentially compromise Hursthouse's commitment to objectivism.

For the sake of an example, consider for a moment the case of Aristotle's distinction between continent, incontinent, and fully virtuous agents.[42] The continent agent is, roughly, an individual who possesses correct judgment about what course of action to take and then takes it while acting against occurrent contradictory desires; an incontinent agent possesses the same (correct) judgment about what to do in a given situation, though she gives in to desire and chooses an inappropriate or wrong action; the fully virtuous (temperate) agent, like the other two, also has correct judgment about what to do, and this judgment is acted upon without interference from any sort of contradictory desire (indeed, the fully virtuous agent never has inclinations or desires to perform wrong or vicious acts). From these three concepts, which necessarily include information about the subjective states of particular types of agents, one can generate a number of ethical propositions such as: "the incontinent agent is not as good as the fully virtuous agent" or "the fully virtuous agent is morally superior to the merely continent agent." Aristotle himself, though he does not directly employ the vocabulary of continence, makes such claims, stating that "someone who does not enjoy fine actions is not good; for no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions, or generous if he did not enjoy generous actions, and similarly with the other virtues" (1099a17-20).

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[42] Trans. Irwin. This distinction is informally discussed in *NE* 1099a8-29, and it receives a lengthy treatment in Bk. VII.

I am not willing to concede (and neither, I believe, would Sayre-McCord) that Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical theories are not genuinely objectivist (on Sayre-McCord's definition) simply on the grounds that they incorporate desire-facts into the truth-conditions for certain of the ethical propositions they can generate. The main reason for my reluctance here is that under virtue ethical theories, knowledge of facts pertaining to relevant subjective states is alone *insufficient* to establish the goodness or badness of an agent or her actions. Under a somewhat crude cognitivist subjectivism, in contrast to which a cognitivist objectivism is supposed to stand, desires or attitudes are fundamentally the good-or-right-making factors that underlie the truth-value of moral statements. On such theories, the value or disvalue of a particular action is determined by the presence or absence of certain subjective states, and thus the truth or falsity of declarative moral sentences is determined by such states. If an agent wants to eat an apple, and this desire for an apple is congruent with his overall web of preferences and desires, then the apple and the action of eating it are, in virtue of the agent's desire, good. Consequently, the sentence "Evan's eating of the apple was a good thing" is true, provided that the relevant set of desires obtains. Within subjectivism (as I conceive it as being distinct from objectivism), desires, preferences, or other subjective states are constitutive of something's goodness or badness. Hursthouse's position is decidedly opposed to this type of reasoning. Even though the desires and beliefs of particular agents are taken into account for the purposes of evaluation, largely because we are biological entities who possess beliefs and desires, these are not what strictly determine the truth-value of the resulting evaluations.

Neither do beliefs and desires of any particular class of persons serve as good-making properties for things external to the persons who possess them, as is standard in the subjectivist scheme. We could live in a world without virtuous agents, a world populated by individuals who had nothing but inappropriate desires by the standards of our acquired ethical outlook and the four ends. What is good, by Hursthouse's standards, would not be considered as such by all the agents in this world; yet this would not rob these things of their goodness, on Hursthouse's theory. That particular things are not regarded as good by some (or even all) people does not mean that they are, in virtue of this fact, not good. Similarly, within a world populated by no one but virtuous agents it wouldn't be true that whatever they desired or believed to be good would be ipso facto good. It is in this respect that she writes that "'we,' whoever we may be, can no more decide [that is, we cannot 'decide' at all] what it is for a human being to be a good human being than we can decide what it is for a cactus to be a good cactus;" it is in this respect that her meta-ethical view qualifies as objectivist.[43]

Two Kinds Of Naturalism

In order to fully grasp what other aspects of Hursthouse's theory are meta-ethically interesting and informative, it will pay to examine in what sense, or senses, it qualifies as naturalistic. Virtue ethicists often pride themselves on being naturalistic, although naturalism is not a necessary feature of virtue ethics generally considered.[44] But what does "naturalism" really mean? The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry

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[43] p. 240.

[44] For more on this, see Annas, Julia. "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?" in *Virtue Ethics: Old and New* ed. Gardiner, Stephen. (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2001).

on naturalism makes it a point to emphasize that "naturalism" is not a univocal term.[45] Naturalistic theories can be those which do not invoke supernatural or non-natural properties in their explanations (that is, they can endorse ontological naturalism) or they can be naturalistic insofar as their methods are congruent with, and largely sympathetic toward, those used in the sciences (they can endorse methodological naturalism). Recognizing this ambiguity is crucial for understanding the projects of particular virtue ethicists. A critic of these theories who is not conscious of the dual senses of "naturalistic" could seriously misapprehend the ontological commitments of virtue ethics, as well as the character of its methodology.

On the more pressing meta-ethical question, there does not seem to be definitive, conclusive evidence that Hursthouse's normative theory is naturalistic or not. While she consistently maintains a tight link between obviously natural properties (such as the attributes of organisms) and obviously normative properties, she seems to make a conscious effort to eschew making identity claims between the two. She never claims, for instance, that 'virtue *is* such and such' where we come to understand that she intends an unambiguous and sharply defined natural property. Her theory seems to be at least potentially consistent with non-naturalism, though I think that it would be extraordinarily unlikely for her to endorse such a position (given the overwhelmingly naturalistic character of her philosophical method, her implicit disavowal of religiosity, and the style of her prose).

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[45] Papineau, David. "Naturalism" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/

If Hursthouse were to claim that moral goodness simply *is* a matter of an attribute, action, or state of character's promotion of one of the four ends, then this appears to challenge (at least potentially) her belief that ethical theories have to get off the ground in a way that explicitly recognizes pre-existing ethical concepts and practices. The four ends of human action are, in point of fact, accessible from a "value-neutral," scientific standpoint and a thing's contribution to the four ends is in principle ascertainable using neutral observation (that is, observation that makes no reference to our pre-existing normative framework). If this was all that is necessary for morality to get off the ground, then Hursthouse's Neurathian approach might be largely dispensable. Operating under the "moral goodness is simply a thing's contributing to the four ends" approach, all one would have to do to answer many moral questions would be to establish, through some form of analysis, what a particular candidate virtue or vice term actually means, then see what things in the world this meaning actually picks out, and finally see if these things do actually contribute positively to one or more of the four ends. On this model, our pre-existing normative framework (what we believe is right or wrong before we begin the task of philosophizing) would not have much substantial input into the ethical procedure, aside from, perhaps, suggesting certain candidate virtues or vices.

To vindicate Hursthouse's Neurathianism, though, one must remember that on her view for something to qualify as a virtue, it has to contribute to one of the four ends in a way *characteristic* of the species. Reiterating this point helps to make fully clear why the four ends are not ultimately foundational in Hursthouse's normative ethics. It is not enough for a candidate virtue to qualify as a bone fide virtue that it promotes pleasure or

contributes to an organism's individual survival; these things are of course necessary, and they importantly constrain what does and does not qualify. But just as important to a candidate virtue is *the manner* in which the particular trait contributes to the four ends. This is the point in Hursthouse's theory where we leave, at least in her view, the realm of the scientifically neutral and enter into the "avowedly normative."

Our characteristic ways of going on are, importantly "rational ways" – ways that *reason* can correctly identify as worthy of pursuit.[46] While statistically it may be the case that most people act in order to secure one or more of the four ends, and that they do so on the basis of deliberative processes (for instance, they might think about whether or not a particular action will bring them pleasure or pain) they do not do so because they think that its rational, but rather in a way that regards reason as merely instrumental. They often don't consider whether a behavior is something that can rightly be endorsed by reason, but rather simply use reason as a tool to secure things they desire. For instance, many of the people we interact with seem to deliberate about and choose different courses of action that, in varying ways and degrees, serve to promote their individual survival or the well-being of their social group. However, the reasons they provide for their action (as well as, more broadly, the motivational structure behind their action) are not rational in the way that I think Hursthouse has in mind here. The reasons that people of average moral worth provide for their actions do not characteristically reflect a full rational appreciation of the moral merit of the act; rather these reasons, when taken together, are often constituted by a mish-mash of conflicting desires, purposes, and

[46] Hursthouse, p. 222.

values. So while such individuals may, in fact, be acting in some (or even the majority of) cases in ways that secure the four ends of human action, the means that they employ to set these ends are by and large irrational in an important way. Because of this Hursthouse believes that they fail to act in accordance with our "characteristic way of going on;" consequently, she writes that maintaining that "'our characteristic way of going on' is to do what we can rightly see what we have reason to do, is to give up with a vengeance any idea that most human beings do what is 'characteristic' of human beings to do."[47] Thus a descriptive account of what most people typically do is not supposed to have much moral importance, even though this behavior may be in some (perhaps statistical) way characteristic of human beings. A theory built on such data would not conform to the ethical framework in which Hursthouse is working in a Neurathian way; that framework contains, as its most important element, the belief that human beings have a normatively characteristic way of acting and that it is a rational way. At this point, it would be wise to note that the two most important factors considered by Hursthouse's theory are (1) the four ends and (2) this normative conception of rationality; these correspond to the domains of the scientific and of the avowedly normative respectively. Since these elements are of primary importance, they ought to be given ample attention by anyone trying to uncover a meta-ethics consistent with her normative theory.

What makes her argument about our characteristic rationality somewhat hard to follow is that she does not offer up much of an explanation as to why rationality, as our characteristic way of going on, has some sort of normative authority over us. Moreover,

[47] ibid p. 223.

the precise nature of this normativity is not particularly clear. Is it epistemic? Is it more straightforwardly ethical? Is it both? Unfortunately the answers to these questions are not spelled out, since Hursthouse operates on the unargued-for assumption that importing an existing normative framework into her theory is unproblematic. Regardless of all this, the four ends are able to be considered scientifically and provided with a naturalistic definition, as is, at least in principle, "reason." If this last point about reason seems somewhat contentious, realize that all that I mean here is that reason is not – at least by a healthy number of philosophers – considered to be some queer supernatural or non-natural attribute that is not amenable to empirical study.[48] And though Hursthouse's theory imports normativity (which is arguably not the kind of thing that can be described in naturalistic terms) in an important way, she does not present at length what type of property normativity is or where it comes from. That is not really her concern, at least in the work at hand. So as it stands, Hursthouse's work is filled throughout with moral properties that are given naturalistic interpretations (wherever she bothers to give such interpretations) but these do not take the form of identity claims holding between evaluative properties and natural, non-evaluative properties (such as "goodness *is* X" where X is a naturalistic property).

To summarize, Hursthouse's normative theory exhibits features that ally it with cognitivism and objectivism. The ontological status of evaluative properties, however, is underdetermined by the arguments contained in her book.

G.E. Moore's Criticisms of Egoism and Naturalism

[48] There are, of course, a number who do not uphold this viewpoint but I'm only trying to indicate here that it is at least reasonable to maintain this position.

Laying out Moore's meta-ethical views, as well as understanding the problems he understands naturalism to have, is a task I will undertake by examining Moore's attack on hedonistic egoism. This version of egoism is naturalistic in that it identifies "good" with a natural property: pleasure. It is also naturalistic in that many questions pertaining to whether or not an action is right or good can be answered through the naturalistic and empirically-informed methodology of the sciences. That is, a philosopher operating under the assumptions of hedonism is in principle capable of looking at the world and studying certain aspects of it how particular properties, actions, or entities are conducive or deleterious to pleasure. Examining Moore's criticisms of egoism is especially important because egoism, as a theory which adopts the agent's own interest as being of fundamental significance, eschews the existence of "universal good" or of "good" which is fundamentally detached from the agent himself. Hedonistic egoism, as we shall see, importantly agrees with Hursthouse's virtue ethics with respect to both naturalism (in some way) and agent-relative (or agent-indexed) value.

Moore begins his criticism of egoism by claiming that ordinary language users tend to conflate the issue of "goodness" and "mineness" in a misleading way such that they regard things which are good-in-themselves as things that are "good *for* me." That people regard things other than pleasure as being egoistic values (personal advancement, a raise, one's reputation) is a consequence, Moore believes, of the failure to recognize that "that which is mine" and "that which is good" do not, when conjoined, produce "that which is *my own good*" in the sense intended by the egoist. When the egoist claims that something is "good for him" he seems to suggest that there is some property (namely,

"good") that is indexed or otherwise tied to him in some manner such that others do not have necessarily have to regard that thing as good when they examine the relevant moral features of the particular case in question. That is just to say that egoists seem to be committed to something like "there are things that are good for me that are not good for you." Moore believes this is a mistake, claiming that the goodness of my having X means simply either that X is good in itself, or that my having X is good in itself, or both. On this, he writes that "the only thing which can belong to me, which can be *mine*, is something which is good, and not the fact that it is good".[49] A good thing can belong to me, and the fact that a thing belongs to me can be good. In neither of these cases, however, is the goodness itself "mine" in any meaningful sense; neither the goodness of the object nor the goodness of the possession is exclusively private. The idea of "my own good," Moore claims, is only intelligible if it is taken to designate something that is "mine" and is also "good" – good absolutely, apart from any person. The egoist, on Moore's account, is not warranted in claiming that there are things that are themselves good but that this goodness is also somehow tied to distinct individual agents. In this respect, Moore writes that "the Egoist's happiness must *either* be good in itself, *and so a part of Universal Good*, *or else* it cannot be good in itself at all: there is no escaping this dilemma."[50]

In addition believing that the notion of "good for me" is incoherent, Moore also believes that the egoist's substantive and conceptual claims about what constitute goodness are open to criticisms that they commit the naturalistic fallacy and are subject to

[49] Moore, p.98.
[50] p.100, second emphasis added.

the Open Question Argument. Even if it is the case that all good things are those which stand or participate in a relevant naturalistic relationship to the moral agent, it does not follow that goodness *is* this relationship. The fact that a certain action *p* would promote an agent's interest or pleasure in some set of circumstances and the fact that *p* is, in any relevantly similar case, universally considered good does not necessarily mean that *p*'s goodness is an analytic/a priori consequence of this property's being there. It does not mean that "good" is conceptually identical with the relevant relationship; rather, it simply means that "goodness" is invariably concurrent with certain other predicates. Simply put, Moore would argue that egoism commits the naturalistic fallacy by identifying "goodness" with another distinct but concurrent property or state of affairs.

Egoism is also subject to Moore's Open Question Argument. If one represents the natural property by reference to which the egoist defines goodness as "E," the egoist's position can be summarized as "whatever is E is good." If this account is correct, then sentences taking that form ("whatever is E is good") are analytic, implying that the question "are things that are E good?" must analytically be answered in the affirmative. Yet, Moore would claim, this question is not closed once one understands the facts of the matter; one can significantly ask that question without presupposing a conclusive answer. Thus "goodness" and "E" are not analytically interchangeable and are therefore not identical concepts.

This, in outline, is Moore's basic argument against egoism: it contradicts itself by positing multiple goods which are each "the only good thing there is." Over and above this, it is subject to the naturalistic fallacy and Open Question Argument.

Moore and Indexical Value

Moore's argument against egoism can be generalized to other agent-relative accounts of moral value, including (as we'll see shortly) Hursthouse's ethics. The reason for this is his insistence that the idea of an indexical value is fundamentally confused. His point there, stated in slightly more abstract language than it appeared originally, is that if something is good for some individual then it must be good in itself (a part of Universal Good) because the notion of being "good *for*" is incoherent.

The idea of a thing's goodness being relative to specific individuals simply doesn't make sense within Moore's model because to be good is to be good – period. Insofar as something exhibits the property "goodness," it is *intrinsically* good, good-in-itself, good apart from its relation to anything else. In other words, to be good is to be agent-neutrally good. This point, if true, causes problems for theorists arguing for the existence of specifically agent-relative values because it denies their possibility by asserting the premise that if something is good, it is necessarily agent-neutrally good (and *only* agent-neutrally good) in a way that remains normatively binding. The keystone of Moore's argument against "good-for-me-ness" is the belief that "good" is somehow simple, and therefore incapable of being broken down into parts.[51] If Moore were right about that, it would preclude the possibility inter alia of genuinely relational values as such, since relations are, by their very nature, complex (in that they hold between two or more entities or properties). Of course, even if Moore is right here there is the possibility that one could simply hold that "good" (or some other evaluative cognate) is a simple

[51] Moore, p. 6-10.

property which supervenes on, and only on, relational properties. Even if this were the case, however, the normative or evaluative property would not be, in itself, relational even though it supervenes on relational predicates. Correspondingly, the concept designating the property "good" would not be relational either.

Smith finds Moore's rejection of agent-relative values notable, and he cites an incongruity between commonsense morality and Moore's theory. He finds it queer that on Moore's account the special obligations we (operating under commonsense morality) believe we owe to our friends and loved ones are not created by our particular relation to them, but rather by the presence of some mysterious, intrinsically valuable metaphysical property.[52] We tend to believe that we owe particular people certain things (that we should act for their sake, at least in part) *not* always because doing so will create the most good in the universe, but rather because they are *our* friends, family, or lovers. Indeed, if Moore is correct in his belief that one is obligated to act for the sake of creating the most good in the world, one might be obligated to act in surprising ways within novel scenarios. For instance, it may be possible for an action (or set of actions) X to be maximally productive of good, minimally productive of evil, and nevertheless require us to divorce ourselves from (or even, perhaps, be injurious to) those dearest to us. This point is similar to objections levied against versions of act utilitarianism, wherein certain intuitively reprehensible actions are suggested as proper by the utilitarian calculus. But aside from the intuitive implausibility of Moore's theory, it nevertheless needs to be rationally answered in order for commonsense morality to be justified.

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[52] Smith (2003) p.582-3.

Moreover, if Moore is correct it is not only commonsense morality that becomes unjustified, but agent-relative theories of value as such. This is because Moore's argument does not allow for the possibility of non-agent-neutral values. The main reason Moore denies the existence of such value is that Moore considers goodness to be a simple property, a fact which (if true) would render any form of analysis of the concept impossible. His belief in the simplicity of "good" is ultimately what motivates his claim that "propositions about the good are all of them synthetic and never analytic…".[53] If Moore were correct, then whatever naturalistic property one were to posit as equivalent to "goodness" would always leave open the possibility that a person could know that a thing has naturalistic property *P* but also maintain without contradiction that he doesn't know that it is good. The argument against analysis is an enormous stumbling block for anyone trying to offer an account of what evaluative concepts conceptually contain, and it's one that any philosopher wanting to provide an indexical account of ethical terms must address.

At this point, it should be somewhat clear that that naturalists and agent-relativists (including egoists and, as we shall ultimately see, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists) need to make it a point to be conscientious of the perennial naturalistic fallacy and Open Question Argument, lest they be insufficiently agued-for. These are issues which must either be accepted on their own terms, in which case one's theory must ultimately be

[53] Moore, p.7.

consistent with them, or be rejected after uncovering some fundamental flaw in their reasoning which proves fatal for Moorean criticism.[54]

Applying Moore's Concerns to Virtue Ethics

Hursthouse's account of moral terms is, like egoism, importantly agent-relative in that according to it traits are judged to be good or bad by reference to the particular individual who possesses these traits. This conception of agent-relativity is one that focuses on how moral value, not motivations, is a function of the relationship between to things. What does this actually look like within the virtue-ethical framework? Virtue ethics begins with the supposition that things ought to be evaluated in ways that are appropriate to and commensurate with what the thing in question is. X's goodness is, on this account, determined importantly by what X is. Candidate virtues, for instance, are evaluated on the basis of whether or not they are excellences appropriate to the particular type of thing to which they belong; whether or not a candidate virtue qualifies as genuine is a function of the type of thing that instantiates the particular trait in question. So whereas sharpness is said to be a virtue in a knife, it is a defect or vice in a child's toy. Of course neither knives nor toys are agents, and thus the excellences or deficiencies that they exhibit cannot be said to be agent-relative unless one considers them in relation to particular agents who employ them. Evaluative terms, then, it would seem, are not agent-relative but rather kind-relative. However, since the domain of things subject to *moral* evaluation - the domain that Hursthouse addresses throughout her present work – is

[54] There have been many responses to Moore attempting to show why his arguments against naturalism fail, and the majority of them confront Moore with arguments that would not be of special interest to the virtue ethicist. For that reason, I will not consider them even though I believe that Moore's arguments are disastrously flawed.

populated by human beings, we can assume that moral evaluations are agent-relative (to the extent that humans are taken to be agents) to a significant extent.

The scope of this agent-relativity is somewhat different from that of egoism. Whereas egoism posits that moral value is a product of how certain things (such as actions or traits) contribute to an end (the agent's own pleasure) unique to specific individuals, virtue ethics holds that moral value is a function, at least in part, of how traits relate to ends which are by and large shared by the species (the four ends of Hursthouse's ethical naturalism). But this is not much of a concern for the purpose at hand, as it does not importantly alter how Hursthouse's theory might be attacked by someone sympathetic to Moore's project. This is because both egoism and virtue ethics are committed to holding that there are certain things which are "good *for* X" where X is a particular individual and a species respectively. Moore's attack on the idea of relative value seems to apply equally to both.

Hursthouse would likely respond to Moore here by noting a logical feature of the way we use the term "good." Many contemporary virtue theorists (including both Foot and Hursthouse) as well as some of their immediate predecessors (such as G.E. Anscombe and Peter Geach) make it a point to note that the word "good" functions as an attributive adjective.[55] To illustrate the distinction between attributive adjectives and predicative adjectives, consider the following two propositions: (1) X is a silver sedan ; (2) X is an inexpensive Mercedes. The first proposition can be logically split into two

[55] This point was first made by Peter Geach in "Good and Evil," reprinted in Foot, Philippa (ed.) *Theories of Ethics* United States: Oxford University Press (1967). pp. 64–73. My explanation below follows the same basic pattern of his example.

predications: “X is silver” and “X is a sedan” in a truth-preserving manner. Because the word “silver” can be predicated on X apart from the particular noun it modifies (in this case, ‘sedan’) it is considered to be a predicative adjective. By contrast, the proposition “X is an inexpensive Mercedes” cannot be split into two predications; it cannot be split up into “X is inexpensive” and “X is a Mercedes” without loss. Whether or not something is inexpensive is, as this case shows, importantly tied to whatever it is we’re talking about. A $7.00 soda at the movie theater is surely expensive, regardless of the fact that it costs less than a relatively inexpensive $30,000 Mercedes. In order to accurately employ attributive adjectives, we need to know what kind of thing it is we’re talking about. If all we know about a particular case is that there exists some thing and that this thing has the price of $50 dollars, we are in no position to judge if it is or is not expensive; depending on whether or not the thing in question is a mansion or a trash heap, the answer to the question “is it inexpensive?” is importantly contingent. In the one case, one would reply “Yes, that’s quite inexpensive *for a mansion*” and in the other “No, that’s far too expensive *for what it is*.”

The term “good,” Hursthouse might likely argue (since she holds that it is an attributive adjective), is necessarily something which is relative to the thing in question.[56] The kind of the thing we are considering (be it a purpose, a member of a species, an artifact or something altogether different) is crucial for rendering its goodness intelligible. Goodness, on this account, is necessarily the kind of thing that “is *for*” and moral goodness is something that is good for an agent (considered in a particular way). In order

[5656] Hursthouse, p.195.

to adopt Geach's line of reasoning and use it to avoid Moore's criticisms, Hursthouse doesn't need to maintain that *all* instances of the word "good" function attributively; rather, she would only need to make a case for the existence of agent-relative value (and not claim that all value is necessarily agent-relative). Of course, such an argument for the plausibility and correctness of agent-relative value is only as strong as the logical arguments about the nature of "good" upon which it rests. While there are some worries in the literature about how much power Geach's argument actually has (and whether or not it is fallacious), it still seems as though there is a plausible case to be made for such value in a way that is amenable to the virtue-ethicist.[57]

Hursthouse's arguments are framed in ways that make it unclear as to whether or not she commits the naturalistic fallacy or could be countered by use of the open question argument. As I noted in the section on her naturalism, Hursthouse's book makes very few identity claims and those claims she does make are not so substantive that they equate evaluative properties with what we might consider to be value-neutral properties. In fact, most of the terms she defines are either somewhat uncontroversial (like what she means by "character") or are particular virtues (which are given in largely normative terms). This strategy is rhetorically helpful in that it allows her to clearly lay out the overall structure of her normative theory while staying on track and not going off into prolonged meta-ethical speculation. The strategy might be seen as somewhat aggravating, in that it leaves a substantial gap between her account of morality and its most profound foundations. While I am sympathetic to this aggravation, since I would

[57] For a counter-argument against Geach, see Pigden, Charles. "Geach on `Good'" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 159. (Apr., 1990), pp. 129-154.

have liked to have seen more identity claims made in Hursthouse's book, I don't find it to be particularly troubling as far as her naturalism is concerned. Though one might expect her, qua naturalist, to provide some account of how her theory's normative concepts reduce to physical (or otherwise natural) properties, this is not a desideratum for naturalism, as we shall see below.

Moore seems to believe that the naturalist, in order to succeed at her task, must make a conceptual claim that asserts a synonymy relation between certain moral predicates and certain physicalistic predicates.[58] That is, in order for a naturalistic analysis of moral properties to hold, Moore thinks that it must take the form of a reductive definition (equating moral and non-moral properties). This, he believes, is impossible because to do so would commit the naturalistic fallacy and render the proposed definition subject to the Open Question Argument.

The demand for reductive definitions of evaluative terms poses no real problem for the would-be virtue meta-ethicist (and, as I've already noted, Hursthouse is not particularly keen on providing them). This is because naturalists, in general, do not need to meet this demand for reductive definitions in order to remain consistent. Sturgeon makes this point by noting that even if physicalism and ethical naturalism are true, it does not necessarily follow that ethical/evaluative facts "can equally well be expressed in some other, nonmoral idiom"[59] This is just to say that there might very well not be any

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[58] This is where Moore's revised definition of 'naturalism' comes into play; no longer defined by reference to 'exists within time and space,' Moore ultimately regards 'natural' as "that which is dealt with by the sciences."

[59] Sturgeon, Nicholas. "Moral Explanations" (1985) in Essays on Moral Realism. Geoffery Sayre-McCord, ed.
New York: Cornell University Press. p.240.

non-moral terms in a language that refer to the same exact natural property to which moral terms refer (even though there might be other terms, properties, or consideration which are closely related to them, such as the four ends). If such circumstances actually obtain, then anyone wanting to refer to the property of "moral goodness" would have to do so with terms that are themselves moral. We have seen that Hursthouse is reluctant to provide reductive definitions, even within the domain of the avowedly normative. But, for the reasons just outlined, this is no challenge for her naturalism. Indeed, it seems as though Hursthouse could adopt the view that avowedly normative concepts (such as, perhaps, "our characteristic way of going on") do not fully map onto properties that fall into the domain of the sciences (which includes the four ends). Adopting this perspective would cast her moral theory as importantly naturalistic without requiring that she make the types of identity claims that are associated with the naturalistic fallacy.[60]

Additionally, it does not seem as though Hursthouse's theory, as it stands now, is subject to Moore's Open Question Argument. This is, again, in large part because of the paucity of identity statements included in her normative theory. Since she makes very few of these claims, there are very few questions to ask and even fewer which might be considered open. A good deal of this is a product of her unabashed use of unreduced, "avowedly normative" concepts; this insulates her somewhat, since the definitions she does actually provide are markedly less controversial than something like "pleasure *is* the good." But still Moore might raise an eyebrow at Hursthouse's four ends, given their naturalistic character. These ends, even though they play a central part in Hursthouse's

[60] This is, of course, assuming that Sturgeon is correct.

account of evaluation, are not the type of material about which one can ask "It promotes the ends, but it is it good?" in hopes of exposing a flaw with the theory.

In her discussion of the four ends of ethical naturalism, Hursthouse makes it clear that she does not think that a trait's contribution to these ends is sufficient to justify our belief that the trait is indeed a virtue. While the four ends importantly constrain what can and what cannot qualify as a virtue, they do not have the final say on the matter. Once we determine that a particular trait does foster one or more of the ends, we can still meaningfully ask whether or not the trait in question is indeed good without expecting a definite answer. This is simply a consequence of her belief that a trait's goodness is not identical to its relationship to the four ends. Once a trait meets the necessary criteria of fostering the four ends, it still needs to survive critical reflective scrutiny within our existing ethical framework. We may find a trait that promotes one of the ends yet properly classify it as a non-virtue from our guiding ethical perspective. So even though the four ends to play an important role in determining what we should and should not count as virtues, they do not bring with them the type of conceptual necessity (property identity statements) that is needed to fuel the Open Question Argument.

Conclusion

While Hursthouse's normative theories might be compatible with other metaethics incompatible with the ones I've suggested here, I have nevertheless shown that there exists a set of views that are consistent with her normative ethics. Over and above this, I have indicated some plausible strategies of argumentation that would be of use for someone wanting to defend Hursthouse's theory against Moorean criticism. My

work here is far from conclusive, which is only natural given the relatively immature state of modern virtue ethics; I do hope, however, that it plays some role in arousing interest in examining the way that foundational issues in meta-ethics relate to normative virtue ethics.