



NATURE, REASON,  
& the  
GOOD LIFE

*Ethics for Human Beings*

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ROGER TEICHMANN



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*For my daughter*  
*Emma*

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# Introduction

Man is a rational animal. This simple truth provides a sort of foundation for ethics, and much of the history of moral philosophy involves attempts to do justice to both aspects of the human: rationality on the one hand, animal nature on the other.

In more than one sense, human beings are animals first and rational beings second. Perhaps, in the mists of prehistoric time, there was some gradual process that could be called ‘the dawning of rationality’ in our primitive ancestors (already members of a definite animal species); but it is another sort of primacy of the animal over the rational that is of more fundamental importance for ethics. Rationality cannot in the end be regarded as a feature of something called ‘pure thought’, a sort of self-sufficient process going on *in* human beings and possibly *in* other creatures or entities. Rationality relates to the having of reasons, in particular reasons for believing things and for doing things; and having a reason is something essentially tied up with the phenomenon of *enquiry*. This shows up in the distinction between good and bad reasons, a distinction which rests upon norms that are shaped and constrained by facts to do with contexts of actual enquiry, contexts in which a person is asked, ‘Why do you think that?’, ‘Why are you doing that?’, and related questions. These facts include facts about what we, as human beings, need or want or get up to. Thus our empirical nature helps to shape and determine the norms constitutive of our rationality. And empirical nature means animal nature, since we are animals.

In Aristotle we find the notion that human beings have a first nature and a second nature.<sup>1</sup> Second nature is acquired, through training or learning; it is a second *nature* because its manifestations are as spontaneous and ‘natural’ as the manifestations of our first nature, the nature we are born with. The manifestations of our first nature include eating, sleeping, laughing—those of our second nature include writing, playing, blaming.

<sup>1</sup> For example, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7, x, 4–5. The terminology does not occur explicitly in Aristotle, I believe, though *consuetudo est secunda natura* (‘habit [or custom] is a second nature’) was a saying well-known in the ancient world. Augustine quotes it in *The City of God* (12.3).

In each case, it is a set of capacities we are talking about, and one can of course say that it is in our nature—it is part of our first nature—to be able to acquire certain capacities. We are born with the capacity to acquire various capacities. This fact indicates the primacy of first over second nature.

For Aristotle, ethics is about virtues or excellences of character. These, as he says, are settled dispositions acquired through training, typically in childhood. Ethical virtues are thus part of our second nature—or rather, part of the second nature of those of us who are virtuous, who have been trained to be virtuous. (Though you needn't be *especially* good to count as having absorbed such training.) The term 'training' should not conjure up a man at the circus holding a whip, nor yet some gentler character with a supply of carrots and sticks. Training is just the teaching of how to do something. The teacher will typically be another human being or human beings, but we should probably leave room for the notion of self-training, as something that can build upon the training received from outside. *What* you can be trained to do, or indeed to feel or to think, depends upon what sort of creature you are. The excellences available to a human being are different from those available to a lion or to an alien. What does a person learn who learns ethical goodness? Such a person learns how to be good, but also (and relatedly) how to justify, criticize, and assess the actions of himself and of others. In that sense, intelligent action and practical rationality come together in a single package.

I have sketched some considerations that would support the idea that our human, pre-rational nature underlies our rationality, i.e. our notions of good and bad reasons, and our notions as to what thoughts, feelings, and actions count as rational or reasonable or justifiable. This idea will be more fully defended in what follows. The role of first nature, especially as embodied in pre-rational impulses and attitudes to one another, is set forth in Chapter 1, and the subsequent chapters elaborate and build on that starting-point. As the investigation proceeds, the aspects of second nature with which ethics is concerned—or some of the main ones—come into view; and by Chapter 4, we will have ascended to the level of Aristotelian contemplation, or something like it, and hence to a point at which we are most distant from our animal brethren.

Possibly the most significant thing separating human beings from other animals is their use of language. Language is learnt; it is part of our second nature. It is also that by which and in which our reasons and our reasoning

primarily have their being. If this fact is lost sight of, our account of reasons for action will be in danger of suffering from either of two related defects: that of over-abstraction, and that of subjectivism or, as one might put it, first-personalism. ‘Why should I do that?’ asks for a reason; but what standard supplies the criteria for a reason’s being a good reason, i.e. a good answer to the ‘Why?’ question? I shall be arguing that the standard is supplied above all by the nature of the language-game in which such a question gets asked, and that the empirical and social nature of that language-game explains such facts as: that not anything goes when it comes to giving reasons for your actions—that giving a reason is not the same as reporting facts about your own psychology—and that the goodness of many reasons for action is closely connected with facts about human nature (since the language-game only has a point or purpose in so far as it relates to human needs or wants).

The name of John McDowell will be associated by many philosophers with the distinction I have mentioned between first nature and second nature. McDowell, however, thinks that reason, or *logos*, subjects first nature, and the natural needs and goods arising out of first nature, to a sort of ‘scrutiny’. Thus he writes:

In imparting *logos*, moral education enables one to step back from any motivational impulse one finds oneself subject to, and question its rational credentials. Thus it effects a kind of distancing of the agent from the practical tendencies that are part of what we might call ‘his first nature’.<sup>2</sup>

McDowell imagines a wolf acquiring reason, and states: ‘Having acquired reason, he can contemplate alternatives; he can step back from the natural impulse and direct critical scrutiny at it’ (p. 153). It seems that for McDowell the crucial point is whether an animal has the mere ability to contemplate alternatives, such as that of following some impulse and that of not following it—for this alone will be enough to give good sense to the animal’s question, ‘Why should I go along with that impulse?’

The scenario is of course fantastical. But we may allow it as a sort of heuristic device. The question is: what sort of answer is the rational wolf looking for when he asks ‘Why should I . . . ?’ It can’t just be that he is simply looking for someone to persuade him—why should he look for

<sup>2</sup> John McDowell, ‘Two Sorts of Naturalism’, in *Virtues and Reasons*, eds R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 170.

that, unless he already suspects his thinking might not be up to scratch? McDowell seems to imagine the rational wolf's question as a sort of *challenge*: 'Give me a reason why I should, and then I'll see whether I think it a good one.' But thinking a reason good (or bad) no more makes it good (or bad) than thinking that you are using a word correctly makes your use of it correct. The picture of reason we get from McDowell is strangely abstract, and the question 'Why?', being abstracted from any actual practices of enquiry, justification, or criticism, looks a very hard one to answer. Which can *seem* to make the sceptical wolf's position unassailable. And McDowell does indeed think it unassailable. Thus, another rational wolf might reflect on what its species needs, for example, and be led to see 'real reasons for acting', but for all that, such reflection

would not weigh with a wolf who has never acquired such a mode of evaluation of conduct, or who has come unstuck from it. And there would be no irrationality in thus failing to be convinced. (pp. 172–3)

The sceptical wolf's challenge, it seems to me, may well in fact be unreasonable, even irrational. The illusion that his position is unassailable comes from a picture of contextless enquiry that I criticize in Chapter 1, and the cure for the illusion is to remind oneself of the actual role, or roles, which the question 'Why?' has in human life. There is indeed *one* way in which 'Why should I go along with that natural impulse?' might be impossible to answer, in certain situations—namely, where the sort of natural impulse in question belongs to the very basis or framework of the language-game of asking for and giving reasons. A person in normal circumstances who sincerely asks 'Why should I eat food?' may well be said to have 'come unstuck', and this partly means unstuck from the ways in which reasons for action are assessed as good or bad. His question will, in that sense, be impossible to answer. Moreover, if you respond automatically to cries for help from the wounded, it would perhaps go against the grain to say that you have in mind the *reason* 'Those are human beings'; putting it that way is in danger of treating what is bedrock—'Human beings are important', or something like that—as if it were a rationally debatable proposition. And this means that a question like 'Why should I help those wounded people?' seems as peculiar, and hence as difficult to answer, as 'Why are *you* helping those wounded people?' (Again, these issues are discussed in Chapter 1.) What all this shows is not that the capacity for reason involves any distancing from first nature, but on the

contrary that reasoning, if it distances itself too much from nature, ceases to be reasoning at all.

McDowell alludes to the logical peculiarity of statements like ‘Human beings have thirty-two teeth’, as discussed by Elizabeth Anscombe and later by Michael Thompson,<sup>3</sup> a peculiarity that shows up in the fact that this last statement means neither ‘All human beings have thirty-two teeth’, nor even ‘Most human beings have thirty-two teeth’. Invoking this peculiarity, McDowell writes that ‘from “Wolves need such-and-such” and the fact that he is a wolf, our wolf cannot conclude that he needs such-and-such’ (p. 153). This is perfectly true, but would only be relevant if the question ‘Why should I do that?’ necessarily asked for a reason to do with what the agent himself needs (or wants, we may add). The social nature of the language-game of asking for and giving reasons militates against this subjective or first-personalist conception of reasons for action, in ways we shall see.

The reference to Michael Thompson allows me to illustrate further how an account of practical reason, etc., needs to refer to human language use; for in Thompson’s work, the account we find of human practices such as promising appears in the end rather mysterious, on account (it seems to me) of its silence about language. Thompson compares statements like ‘These creatures make and keep promises’ with ones like ‘These creatures are spiders’; for him, the concepts of a practice and of a life form belong to the same categorical framework: ‘One turn of the categorical framework gives us the concept of a life form or a living nature; the other gives us the concept of “form of life” or a “second nature”’.<sup>4</sup> The comparison is extremely interesting. And yet the normativity embodied in ‘You are meant to keep your promises’ and that embodied in ‘A spider is meant to have eight legs’ surely have quite different sources. Thompson’s account, in stressing the *sui generis* nature of natural-historical propositions such as the one about the spider, discourages us from looking for any source of normativity external to the propositions themselves (in this he is rather like McDowell). A thorough examination of systems of natural-historical propositions should, he thinks, enlighten us as to the kind of

<sup>3</sup> See Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Papers Vol. III* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 26–42, and Thompson, ‘The Representation of Life’, in *Virtues and Reasons*, p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> M. Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 208.

normativity we are talking about. This may indeed be so, and it is borne out by Thompson's attempts in that direction. But then if our interest is in the normativity associated with practices like promising, it will not be enough to discern structural or formal similarities between systems of natural-historical judgements and systems of judgements within a practice, as Thompson does. We will need to indulge in a thorough examination of (systems of) practice-based propositions, such as 'You are meant to keep your promises' and 'I did such-and-such because I promised to'; for the normativity involved in such propositions is no less *sui generis*, no less internal to the system, than is the normativity of natural-historical propositions. But to carry out such an examination of practice-based propositions will in fact mean looking at language use. A pertinent example would be Anscombe's examination of the nature of those bits of language she called stopping and forcing modals (e.g. 'You can't move that piece', 'You have to give that back', etc.).<sup>5</sup> As it is, a reader of *Life and Action* may feel it to be a rather strange sort of brute fact that human practices have the logical or categorical similarities to life forms which Thompson points out for us.<sup>6</sup>

These two examples from recent philosophy, McDowell and Thompson, instantiate the approach in ethics which may broadly be called 'Aristotelian'. It is an approach I believe to be essentially the right one to adopt; but—as the above remarks very briefly indicate—such an approach, if it is to be convincing, requires one to give due prominence to language, and to its social and empirical nature. I said above that language is that by which and in which our reasons and our reasoning primarily have their being. The Greeks had a single term for 'word', 'speech', 'account', or 'reason', a term of considerable importance in ancient thought—the term *logos*. This word nicely embodies the truth that reason and language are intertwined. And language, as Wittgenstein saw, is not to be conceived of as a sort of conduit or vehicle for inner processes of thought, but rather as a human product, whose nature derives from its place in human life. The tree of *logos* has its roots in the soil of that life.

The relevance to ethics of the fact that human beings have language is obvious, having many different aspects. In this book, the importance of

<sup>5</sup> See Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights and Promises', in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, pp. 97–103.

<sup>6</sup> None of which is to deny that Thompson's book contains much that is important and true.

language is acknowledged, and moral philosophy is taken to be continuous with philosophy of language, as also of course with philosophy of psychology. For this reason, some readers will be inclined to label the book a work of 'linguistic philosophy'. Given a certain reading, I am happy with this description, and in Chapter 5 I hope to indicate not only how 'linguistic philosophy' (thus understood) is superior to the philosophy of its most vocal attackers, but how an appreciation of the importance of language for philosophy actually helps one to see the relevance of philosophy to real life. Thinking about life and thinking philosophically turn out to be related activities, involving related traits of mind. This is an important fact, and one in danger of being obscured by prevalent ideas about the nature of philosophy.

A denial of the importance of language for philosophy is often associated with a distrust of, or hostility to, the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. Much could be said about this phenomenon. The kindest diagnosis will often be that of ignorance: people who have only a shallow acquaintance with Wittgenstein's thought don't usually have a good grasp of what he was on about, and this is as true of some of those who blithely quote him as it is of most of those who attack or sneer at him. Other diagnoses (than ignorance) of present-day hostility to Wittgenstein are touched upon in Chapter 5. I mention all this mainly because Wittgenstein's ideas do inform some of the arguments in this book, and although I hope that those arguments make sense on their own, their full force—such as it is—may well be more apparent to those who have some acquaintance with those ideas. That said, there is no compulsory reading attached to this course.

Wittgenstein did hardly any moral philosophy himself, though his thoughts on ethics and on the human condition can be found scattered among his writings.<sup>7</sup> In this he differs from his pupil, friend, and translator (not to mention literary executor), Elizabeth Anscombe, whose work in moral philosophy is of great importance. Anscombe realized the close connection between ethics and the philosophy of psychology, and her contribution to the former is embodied as much in works like *Intention* and 'Practical Inference' as it is in the more overtly 'ethical' pieces, such as 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. She can be seen as a sort of bridge between Aristotle and Wittgenstein, in so far as she applies to the concepts and

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3–12; *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).



claims of Aristotelian ethics insights and methods associated with Wittgenstein's philosophy. This description is not meant to indicate any lack of originality on Anscombe's part, for she was one of the most original and bold thinkers of the twentieth century. My debt to Anscombe is great, and a number of her ideas feature in this book, as also one of her aims. Like Socrates, Anscombe viewed the role of philosopher as being that of gadfly, at least on certain sorts of issue—the gadfly being a person who voices a critique of what appear to be current confusions or mistakes, not only among professional philosophers but in the culture at large. This sort of critical activity will usually be more useful than the providing of 'theoretical foundations' for prevalent nostrums, an essentially sleepy pastime. At any rate, an ethical theory or approach will have little value if it gives us no clue how it bears upon the world around us, and for that reason I have made use of a number of examples of recent or prevalent trends, within and without philosophy. The discussions of these examples are intended to be part and parcel of the philosophical argumentation: whether or not they are swipes, I hope they are not sideswipes.

Some of the material of this book originated in papers read at two conferences. Part of Chapter 2 began life as 'Practical and Theoretical Reasoning', a contribution to *Anscombe's "Intention" and the Renewal of Moral Psychology*, held at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, in February 2008; while part of Chapter 3 began life as 'Is Pleasure a Good?', a contribution to *Elizabeth Anscombe and Contemporary Philosophy*, held at the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, in May 2009. I am grateful to the organizers of those conferences for giving me the opportunity to develop my thoughts on the issues in question, as well as for the feedback I received and the hospitality I enjoyed.

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# 1

## Reasons and Reactions

Ethical thought concerns itself with a range of things. Birth, death, war, lying, government, sex, work, punishment—these are all ethical topics. Not so volcanoes, addition, Persian rugs, football. At any rate, volcanoes, etc., do not as such give subject-matter for ethical thought—though anything, or almost anything, can *assume* ethical significance within a particular human context. (The Persian rug might have been produced with child labour.) This last-mentioned fact may partly explain why some philosophers have suggested that ethics is not characterized by or restricted to a special subject-matter, but relates rather to a way of looking at things, or to a mode of practical reasoning, or to . . . But ethics does have a subject-matter, in a loose and broad sense of that term. Its subject-matter is human life and what is humanly important. Its *range* is thus vague, flexible, and open-ended. But for all that, it is limited, and at its centre stands the human being.

But what about animals?—or God?—or other intelligent life forms? Aren't these non-human beings of ethical significance?—Of course they are, those that exist; and those that don't exist would be if they did. But why do we want to mention *these* non-human items, and not, say, paintings or factories? The latter, it is natural to say, enjoy ethical significance only in relation to human beings and human affairs, whereas God, animals, and aliens have, or would have, 'intrinsic value'—so it might be claimed. As elsewhere in philosophy, this phrase, 'in relation to', can be taken in many different ways. 'Ethical value is relative to human beings', as an unexplained slogan, so far says nothing at all. Nevertheless, in ethics, I shall be arguing, man is indeed the measure of all things, despite what needs to be said about animals and others. In fact the ethical standing of

animals will turn out to confirm, rather than undermine, an anthropocentric approach, as we shall see.

The centrality to ethics of the human has two aspects. The first has to do with what I have been calling the subject-matter of ethics, namely human life and what is humanly important. The second is more general, and finds expression in such truisms as ‘Our concepts are *our* concepts’ and ‘Our thought is *our* thought’. These statements don’t belong in the same stable as old warhorses like ‘Only *I* can feel *my* pain’, for they do real work, for example in helping us to see why certain of our concepts and modes of thinking have the features that they do have. For we are not merely, or essentially, or even primarily, thinkers (*pace* Descartes), nor pleasure-seekers (*pace* Bentham), nor self-reproducing robots (*pace* Dawkins). We are a certain sort of animal (*Homo sapiens*), and our modes of perception, action, reaction, thought, and feeling are all determined in large part by our animal constitution—by human nature, that is.

These remarks will perhaps appear obvious. But as we shall see, the implications of such anthropocentrism as has been here sketched are far-reaching, and put paid to much ethical theorizing.

## I.

A judge finds the accused standing before him guilty. We object that the previous week he acquitted another person charged with the same offence, on the basis of identical evidence. The judge’s reason (confided, perhaps, to close friends) is that the person who appeared before him this week was black. His judgement is unreasonable, arbitrary, and unjust. We might say that the judge is guilty of ‘discrimination’.

‘Not the only one’, a philosopher tells us; ‘for many a judge will send one person to gaol, and let another walk free, simply and solely on the basis that the first person and not the second robbed a bank—though in all other respects the two people are identical’. Why is the philosopher’s argument absurd? Not because it’s always okay to discriminate on the basis of criminality: a doctor who refuses to treat a heart attack victim because he has robbed a bank acts unjustly. (If he has *just* robbed a bank, the doctor might also call the police, of course.) Nor, conversely, is it never okay to discriminate on the basis of skin colour: you might well interview only white applicants for the job of being a film double for Sean Penn.

The corrupt judge's reasons for conviction count as arbitrary because of the context in which he makes his judgement. The point of the legal proceedings in which the judge plays a part is to ascertain, if possible, whether the accused committed a crime, and to deal with him or her accordingly. These facts go to determine what reasons count as good or bad reasons, e.g. for sending someone to gaol.<sup>1</sup>

Consider now an analogous case. Two patients are wheeled into casualty, each with a head wound. The surgeon immediately attends to the one who is white, and does so *because* he is white. Note, by the way, that it's possible for the surgeon to attend to the white person first without acting unjustly, so long as her reason is not such a reason as 'Because he is white'. After all, she has to attend to *somebody* first. But as things are in this imaginary scenario, the surgeon's reason is 'Because he is white', and is consequently arbitrary and unjust. Our friendly philosopher intervenes: 'Similar things happen all the time. If the patient had been a dolphin with a head wound, you can be sure it would have been ignored in favour of a human being with one. Favouring patients just because they're white is racist; favouring patients just because they're human is speciesist.'<sup>2</sup>

If the argument rests on nothing more than a structural similarity of cases—'A and B were treated differently because A and not B had feature F'—then it is clearly as bad as the argument about the judge who convicts on the basis of criminality. But maybe the philosopher wants to indicate that 'It's a human being' cannot, in the medical context, function as a proper reason for action? One might respond that, just as the judge's brief related to dealing with criminals, so the surgeon's brief relates to treating human beings; that's what she's paid for. But this reply wouldn't get to the heart of the matter. After all, most of us would come to the aid of a wounded person rather than to the aid of a wounded dolphin, and our reason for doing so—'It was a human being!'—would be adequate regardless of our job, or of anything along those lines.

It won't do to try to explain all this by saying that we value human beings more highly than dolphins, or impute more value to them than to dolphins.

<sup>1</sup> In a full account of the matter, we would probably want to add that the institution itself (the law, or the particular legal system in question) is a good institution; i.e. good for a society of human beings to have.

<sup>2</sup> This now popular term seems to have been coined by Richard Ryder, who uses it in more than one place; e.g. in 'Experiments on Animals', in *Animals, Men and Morals*, eds S. and R. Godlovitch and J. Harris (London: Gollancz, 1971), p. 81.

Whatever such phrases mean—and they generally mean very little—they do not help us; for it is not as if there can *never* be good reason for preferring a dolphin to a human being—e.g. if choosing a creature to train to carry coded messages under water. Everything depends on context: on what is at stake, on the goal of an enterprise, and so on. If humans are more ‘valuable’ than dolphins, that presumably means: more valuable, full stop. But since we sometimes prefer human beings, sometimes dolphins, such ‘value’ cannot be the whole story, if indeed it is any part of the story.

‘Preferring’ is itself an odd term to use here. If you appeared on the scene of a bomb blast, and were confronted with wounded people and animals, let’s assume that you would go to the help of some person or persons—but would that be a case of *preferring* them to the animals (or to particular animals)? To choose to do X need not be to choose to do X rather than Y, even if you know that you could instead have done Y.<sup>3</sup> Maybe as you enter the bombed building you notice a picture on the wall hanging crookedly, which in normal circumstances you would have straightened. You do not choose to help the wounded *rather than* straighten the picture; though you do of course choose to help the wounded rather than choose to straighten the picture. (A scope distinction.) Someone who insists that you ‘must’ be choosing to help-rather-than-straighten is operating with a pre-cooked model of choice, one that is very likely set up so as to be immune to counter-examples. Such immunity is typically effected by postulating unconscious or subconscious mechanisms: you weren’t aware of any deliberations about human beings versus pictures on walls, so those deliberations (since they ‘must’ have been happening) were going on subconsciously.

If in the case in question you did in fact choose to help the human beings *rather than* the animals, perhaps later on explaining yourself by saying, ‘I decided to help the human beings rather than help the dogs’, that would suggest that your aim was something like: to reduce overall suffering here. And maybe you calculated that this aim could be best achieved by reducing human, rather than animal, suffering. With normal human beings, however, the impulse to help other human beings in dire need is typically more instinctive, and less calculative. This is not to say that

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Who is Wronged? Philippa Foot on Double Effect’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, eds M. Geach and L. Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), pp. 249–51.