

## **ETHICAL NATURALISM AND HUMAN NATURE\***

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Why is Human Nature still an interesting topic? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Human Nature is expected to serve both as an anchor of ontological explanation and as a compass for action orientation. In its double role, human nature provides ample room for intellectual manoeuvres, but little prospects for a pleasant philosophical journey.

This point can be illustrated with reference to the recent adventures of ethical naturalism. After considering a recent attempt to reduce normative discourse to a descriptive jargon, I point to a lacuna in the argumentation for identifying normative with natural properties, and I examine whether this lacuna might be filled by an appeal to notions related to human nature. Finally, I show that the proposed filling, instead of closing argumentative gaps, might imperceptibly, though fatally, infect the roots of reductive naturalism in ethics.

### **1. Prescription and Function**

We may approach reductive naturalism through an analysis of the classic distinction between descriptivism and prescriptivism. Prescriptivism understands normative judgements as expressive of a choice of action; it claims that in calling an action 'right' we encourage or demand its performance. In uttering a normative sentence, the speaker is taken to issue a command. The conceptual link between commands and normative sentences presents the latter as a type of imperatives. As imperatives, normative sentences are primarily concerned not with theoretical but with practical correctness: their target is right action.

Descriptivism conceives of normative judgements as factual statements that attribute certain characteristics to the objects of moral discourse. It asserts that in calling an action 'right', we are doing what we seem to be doing, namely we ascribe the quality of 'rightness' to an action. In uttering a normative sentence, the speaker is taken to express his belief about reality. For descriptivism, normative sentences are concerned with how things are: their target is truth.

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The meta-ethical divide between prescriptivism and descriptivism is based on a prior, linguistic distinction between 'prescriptions' and 'assertions'. However, this distinction is far from clear. It has been argued that "*as forms of speech*, prescriptions are assertions that have the same logical structure as ascriptions of function."<sup>†</sup>

If correct, the analysis of prescription as a type of ascription will remove the semantic ground under ethical prescriptivism. Even if normative sentences are initially considered as prescriptions, given that prescriptions are a subset of functional ascriptions, normative sentences should be conceived as functional ascriptions. But functional ascriptions are a type of descriptive sentences. Hence, normative sentences are ultimately descriptive. Therefore, descriptivism offers the best analysis of the meaning of normative discourse.

The descriptivist reinterpretation of prescriptive sentences can be illustrated as follows. Consider the normative sentence:

1. "Helping others is right".

According to prescriptivism, this sentence amounts to the prescription:

2. "You ought to help others".

How should we analyse the meaning of the latter, prescriptive sentence? Perhaps, by making explicit the context and the standards involved in addressing an ought-statement to a particular person. According to this view, the sentence 'You ought to help others' just means that:

3. "When you have a certain *function* or *role*, in a particular *situation*, in the context of a *culture*, relative to a particular *purpose* or *goal*, you are to help others".

The essential ingredients of this long descriptive sentence are the ascription of a *role* or *function*, to a *human being*, relative to a *goal* or *purpose*. And the crucial

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<sup>†</sup> Bloomfield (1998), 5.

implication is that if, for any reason, this human being fails to help others, it has not acted out its role, or performed its function, as set for the particular situation in a particular culture.

We are thus presented with an analysis that purports to identify the meaning of a normative sentence with that of a descriptive sentence. The principal question I wish to address is whether the descriptivist reinterpretation of prescriptive sentences can provide an adequate framework for the reduction of the ethical to the natural.

Before we answer this question, we need to clarify some basic terminology. By 'normative sentence' I mean any sentence about what is *right* or *ought to* be done. By 'evaluative sentences' I refer to sentences about what is *good*. The essential, if unenlightening, connection between right and good, in the present context, is that something is good if it functions in the right way, while something functions in the right way if it contributes to the good. What *is* right and what *is* good are the staple of ethical discourse. A general answer to these topics is provided by the theory of ethical naturalism, according to which ethical sentences describe moral facts that are identical to natural facts pertaining to human well-being. Ethical naturalism comes in various stripes. In its reductivist form it aspires to provide an analysis that is free of reference to the concepts of the target class. Reductive naturalism will be here understood as the doctrine that respects the principle of non-circularity: the analysis will count as reductively naturalistic if and only if the main concepts appearing in the analysans are not ethically loaded.

## **2. Naturalism and Human Function**

The most interesting aspect of the descriptivist reinterpretation of prescriptions is the attribution of function to human being. Unfortunately, the semantic theory treats the notion of human function as conceptually basic; it does not analyse further this notion, and it does not indicate what corresponds to that notion in the world of natural facts. I shall try to fill these gaps by sketching a theory of human function that is in tune with the ideas of contemporary ethical naturalism.

Human beings engage in a variety of activities that aim to secure and promote their well-being. Human well-being results from the satisfaction of human needs.

What satisfies a human need is a human good. The cluster of human goods and the institutions or policies which support them, defines ethical goodness.<sup>‡</sup>

For ethical naturalism, human needs are discernible by means of scientific inquiry. The science of Biology is particularly important in this connection. It supplies examples of scientific statements that ascribe a function to the items of an organism whose well-being is ensured by the unimpeded satisfaction of its needs. The pores of leaves have the function of absorbing oxygen, thus contributing to the flourishing of a plant through the creation of chlorophyll. That “Plants need water, oxygen and sunlight’ is an objective natural fact”.<sup>§</sup> Similarly, that ‘Human beings need water, friends and justice’ is also an objective natural fact.<sup>\*\*</sup>

As the needs are discoverable through an objective naturalistic enquiry, so are the methods for the successful employment of our capacities in order to satisfy human needs. Given the particular nature of their needs and capacities, human beings are invariably dependent on each other. Accordingly, they have to cultivate certain attitudes, and to co-ordinate their activities, in order to ensure the unimpeded satisfaction of the needs of every member of the human kind. The interdependence of human beings generates a distinctive conception of human virtues: they are the qualities of functioning well in a way that is “appropriate to the common life”.<sup>††</sup>

The theory I sketched implies a conception of human function as the activity that contributes to human well-being. The identification of each function is a matter of determining the way in which an agent is to act, in the light of his external circumstances and personal capacities, in order to increase the satisfaction of human needs. The satisfaction of each human need amounts to a corresponding

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<sup>‡</sup> Boyd (1988), 203.

<sup>§</sup> Chappell (1998), 62.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Chappell (1998), 62-63. It should be stressed that Chappell’s theory purports to be naturalist but not reductivist. The cited claims are indeed neutral with regard to issues of reductivism. If I understand it correctly, Chappell’s theory aspires to show that ethical naturalism may not undermine the semantic and conceptual autonomy of morals; cf. the discussion below, in section 5, on the second horn of the ‘naturalist dilemma’.

<sup>††</sup> Pincoffs (1986), 6-7, 97-99.

number of human goods, which, in their turn, define ethical goodness. To state the function of an agent is thus equivalent to stating what the agent ought to do: which is precisely the point of the semantic analysis of normative sentences as a type of functional ascriptions.

The naturalistic theory aspires to resolve central issues in the metaphysics and epistemology of morals. If correct, the theory would allow us to move beyond the claustrophobic limits of ethical coherentism by grounding moral judgements in objective facts about the functions of human beings, as these are determined by their capacities and needs - in short, by human nature.<sup>††</sup>

However, as a *reductivist* programme, I am not optimistic about this approach. I think that its success is based on the assumptions that function has an unambiguous meaning, which ensures function a clear and legitimate place in a naturalistic universe, and, hence, that it is fairly unproblematic to ascribe a function to a human being. I find all three assumptions incorrect. The notion of function is subject to a variety of interpretations. The interpretation that would favour reductive naturalism is beset with difficulties. We may avoid these difficulties by acknowledging the normative and evaluative dimension of functional ascriptions. Hence, the ascription of function to human beings cannot serve the purposes of explaining the ethical in terms of something that is devoid of value and normativity. Or, so I shall argue.

### **3. Reductivism and Function**

The general problem with the reductivist appeal to 'function' is, in my view, that the notion of function is irreducibly evaluative. If this view is correct, then reductivism is a non-starter in ethical inquiry. The reduction of the normative to the natural alludes to 'function' as the common denominator between the ethical and the biological. Since the biological is thoroughly natural, and its examination requires nothing but well established procedures of scientific inquiry, it is expected that the ethical may likewise become the subject of a search towards the theory that best describes the distribution of the relevant natural properties. But invoking function and other biological notions would do the reductivist trick only if biological 'function' were definable without a reference to values. It

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<sup>††</sup> Chappell (1998), 58-60.

appears, though, that no such value-free analysis of function might be forthcoming: an item has a function if, and only if, its activity makes a positive contribution to the maintenance or increase of the *values* of a containing system that, in some way or another, is itself considered *valuable*.<sup>§§</sup>

A thorough discussion of this general view of function would take us well beyond the ethical concerns of this paper. I will, accordingly, argue for a thesis that bears directly on the metaethical employment of biological function. I will argue that even if the naturalist were to hold on to a value-free account of functional ascriptions, he could employ this account only if he selected among functional ascriptions those that we deem positive for reasons derived from ethical reflection. The naturalist has to invoke evaluative and normative considerations in deciding which among the allegedly neutral functions should constitute the prototype on which human functions should be modelled. Hence, the naturalist cannot afford to exclude from his explanans notions that are ethically loaded. Therefore, an appeal to biological function cannot offer the right platform for the reduction of the ethical to the natural.

In order to keep this issue in clear focus, I shall outline a theory that appears to be as close to the reductionist's dream of a bald naturalistic account of function as possible. This theory is not put forward as the only theory that naturalists in general might wish to uphold. I simply want to show how a *reductionist* naturalist theory goes against some of our core intuitions in biological inquiry. Then I will note that this model can be improved by introducing an evaluative component to our analysis. Finally, I will suggest that this introduction of values creates a dilemma neither horn of which can support the program of reductionism in ethics.

The proposed theory defines function as the consequence of the presence of some item of a system whose activity in the past played an essential role in the causal history issuing in the existence of that very item. What explains the present activity of the item is the recent history of the system. The relevant

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<sup>§§</sup> See Manning (1997); Bedau (1992), Ayala (1970). The presentation of meiotic drive by Wilson and Sober (1994) aptly illustrates the significance of value considerations implicit in biological inquiry; however, in their theoretical discussions, the authors maintain a reductively naturalistic account of function, cf. Sober (1984).

history consists in the physical, chemical and other processes that result in the existence of the item performing the particular function.\*\*\*

This theory would explain the function of the human heart to pump blood by citing the physiological antecedents of the contractions of the heart, which cause the pumping of blood after a particular manner that results in the circulation of blood in our body. It would further connect this process to the fact that earlier organisms whose hearts were operating in this way survived and reproduced, thus creating the particular organism that inherited the item with the capacity to circulate blood.

In a similar manner, the theory could account for the activities of Segregation-Distorter Genes that induce sperm carrying the rival chromosome to self-destruct as they are formed. Segregation-Distorter Genes disrupt the special type of cell division that produces sperm and eggs. The disruption of cell division is what Segregation Distorter Genes do that explains their survival and proliferation. A particular set of Segregation-Distorter Genes currently exists because earlier items of the same type disrupted cell division, thus increasing the present number of Segregation-Distorter Genes at the gametic level. According to this theory, creating a mess of the being's gene pool or eliminating its chances of survival should be called the function of Segregation-Distorter Genes.

Finally, the theory could also illuminate us about a stick which, floating down a stream, brushes against a rock and comes to be pinned there by the backwash it creates. The explanation of why the stick creates the backwash is, mainly, that it is pinned in a certain way on the rock by the water. Why is it pinned in that way? Once pinned accidentally, part of the explanation for why the stick is there is that the backwash keeps it there, and being pinned there causes the backwash.+++ The function of the stick just is the creation of backwash.

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\*\*\* For background discussion see Wright (1973), Millikan (1989). This model acknowledges the significance of the recent-history aspect of functional ascriptions proposed Godfrey-Smith (1994). However, I am not sure whether the model presented here would be fully compatible with the emphasis on fitness as the hallmark of the biologically 'helpful' or 'constructive' functional ascriptions invoked in the Godfrey-Smith's presentation of the 'recent-history' account of function; for a related problem see cf. Griffiths (1993).

+++ For a brilliant discussion see Baude (1991).

#### 4. Limitations of the Reductivist Approach

I should emphasise that the present model requires only the existence of a causal link between the current state of the item and its physical or physiological predecessors. At the level of explanation, the theory invokes neither a purpose that the heart wishes to achieve, nor a world-order to which pinned sticks strive to contribute, nor a creator whose plans malevolent genes are eager to disrupt. The absence of any evaluative element in the identification of function makes this model the appropriate platform on which the reductivist account of the ethical might work.

However, it seems to me that this model is seriously problematic. It violates ordinary intuitions by committing us to the absurd view that an inanimate object, such as the river stick, has a function, i.e. creating backwash. To be sure, there are inanimate objects that can have functions: we call them 'tools', 'instruments', or in a word, 'artefacts'.<sup>+++</sup> However, this response is not available to a reductivist who wishes to exclude from his theory any notion of value. The explanation of the structure and behaviour of an artefact should appeal to a mental agent who uses or designs the object so as to ensure that the object's behaviour is controlled by the agent's conception of the *value* of its effects.

This theory appears to go equally against current scientific procedures, by endowing with function items whose operation is detrimental to human organism. Biologists would honour as functions neither the destruction of meiosis nor other deleterious effects - such as sterility or death - that may be due to the activity of Segregation-Distorter Genes.<sup>§§§</sup> However, the point is not so much that a philosophical theory does not fit scientific practice; *it is rather that the theory cannot account for the fact that we treat so differently processes that are in this context structurally the same.*

The question is why we are happy to accept that the heart has the function of pumping blood, but we are inclined to deny that a Segregation-Distorter Gene has the function of wiping out one's chances of survival and reproduction. The

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<sup>+++</sup> Cf. Bedau (1992).

<sup>§§§</sup> See Crow (1979); cf. Godfrey-Smith (1994).



answer, I think, is not hard to find. The pumping of blood makes a *positive* contribution to the states that we believe are valuable, while the development of Segregation-Distorter Genes may eventually deprive us of several activities or things we value - including, perhaps, the highest good of all.

## 5. Reductive Ethical Naturalism and Function

These considerations create for the naturalist the following dilemma. He can bite the reductivist bullet by claiming that anything can have a function in so far as its activity, or the relevant activity of its predecessors, is part of the explanation of its present state. In this case, the naturalist should accept that an appeal to function is *on its own* of little relevance in deciding any evaluative matter, since function could be morally pointless (recall the river stick), or downright negative (think of Segregation-Distorter Genes). Accordingly, the naturalist analysis of the ethical would need to invoke evaluative and normative factors that would filter in only functional claims that bear upon ethical considerations.

Alternatively, the naturalist may admit that value considerations are indispensable in deciding which type of activities deserves the title of function. In this case, though, the identification of ethical sentences with functional ascriptions could not serve the reductivist purposes, since an ascription of function would carry the value label on its sleeve.

So, in the first case the naturalist avoids value at the cost of rendering function irrelevant. In the second case, he acknowledges value at the price of making reduction impossible. In either case, the appeal to function eventually undermines the attempt to analyse the ethical in value-free terms.

It might be thought that the naturalist could avoid this dilemma by positing a certain conception of 'human well-being' as the goal with reference to which the function of an item should be identified. The pumping of blood is a function of the heart because it contributes to the fitness of human beings, whereas meiotic drive is not a function to be attributed to Segregation-Distorter genes because it has deleterious effects in the production of new organisms and in their survival. The notion of 'human well-being' would also enable us to distinguish between (i) items that have functions, even though they might occasionally malfunction (such as the human heart); and (ii) items that lack any proper function, even though

they may never falter in their activity (such as the self-replicating tokens of junk DNA).

The move of positing the organism's well being as the goal of its biological functions is not objectionable; indeed, it seems to be part and parcel of sound biological practice. However, it is not clear what problem this move is supposed to solve for a reductive naturalist.

First, and foremost, this move *exploits* the idea of well-being as the predetermined goal of the relevant activities, instead of *explaining* well-being in terms of those activities.\*\*\*\*

Secondly, the move reverses the order of analysis propounded by ethical naturalism. The naturalist account should proceed from a notion of need, to an analysis of the satisfaction of needs through the exercise of human capacities, to the identification of human good with need satisfaction, to the definition of ethical goodness with the cluster of human goods and the mechanisms which unify them.++++ By positing, though, human well-being as fundamental, the reductive naturalist effectively abandons the project of grounding ethical value on the allegedly neutral notions of human needs.

Thirdly, this move requires that the reductivist ascertain what is to count as a 'human being' in a way that is relevant to the determination of 'human well-being', without invoking any normative or evaluative considerations. The idea here is that the reductivist identifies the features of 'being human' that lie beneath any particular society, culture or ethical tradition; features which form a set of neutral data awaiting to be recorded, and whose collection would ensure the universality of the reductivist account. The need for food and drink are perhaps the main, if not the only, examples of such features. But beyond recording the undeniable biological basics, the problems for the reductivist approach abound.

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\*\*\*\* Cf. Manning (1997) on the problems of the causal role account of function pioneered by Robert Cummins (1975).

++++ Cf. Boyd (1988).

The most elementary but rather serious difficulty for the reductionist is that human well-being is undetermined by the biological needs. On the one hand, ensuring the satisfaction of the biological needs for food and drink leaves open a huge range of options - already tried out, or yet to be imagined - on how one should 'function' as a human being. There are many spheres of human life that give rise to fundamental questions of well-being, and which are not *ipso facto* related to the satisfaction of basic bodily needs. Indeed, some of these questions may arise only at the background of relative sufficiency concerning the basic needs. Questions pertaining to one's commitment to persons with whom there is no dimension of bodily contentment, or issues regarding the necessity of one's devotion to activities that bear no instrumental value, or, more importantly, questions pertaining to awareness of one's own death. In each of these areas we are presented with situations, which call for an appropriate way of response - the correct way of choosing and acting. Focusing on the biological need for food and drink is unlikely to enlighten us about this question.

On the other hand, bodily needs and desires are themselves moulded by one's ethical stance. It is not surprising that the study of history reveals neither a uniform ranking of bodily needs, nor an agreement on the ways appropriate for satisfying them. Think of a practice observed in various ways at different periods by a lot of people around the globe: the practice of fasting. What appears paradoxical about fasting is that it derives its worth from what it denies: certain needs, along with certain ways for satisfying those needs, are thought so valuable that to deliberately abstain from them is experienced as an achievement of an even higher value. Is it absurd to deny oneself for forty days the satisfaction of the need for eating meat? From the perspective of the practitioner, it seems perfectly reasonable to temporarily deny oneself various bodily satisfactions, if this is part of leading an overall meaningful life.

Indeed, from that perspective, the practitioner may not even feel restrained, since, during a religious Lent the sight of dead meat might strike him as distinctively unappetising. This remark could also speak for those who avoid eating meat, not because this would somehow offend against God's strictures, but because meat consumption is taken to vitiate a way of life devoted to psychical or spiritual harmony, or mental alertness, or universal respect for sentient beings - or all of the above. The moral of this example is that it is not possible to judge the right way of satisfying a basic human need, or even, to determine what

*precisely* is to be included in the set of basic human needs, in the total absence of ethical, political, or generally evaluative criteria.

The activity of fasting might seem idiosyncratic, but it is certainly not an activity without its reasons. Those reasons can be the subject of a critical discussion about the appropriateness of one's attitude towards food, in the light of our factual beliefs and evaluative commitments. As such, an informed debate about the justifiability of fasting is part of a more general inquiry into how one should live: it is, in other words, an ethical debate.

I should note that my argumentation does not purport to undermine the search for a common ground in assessing what is beneficial to a human being. I maintain, though, that it is not clear how we could determine what is appropriate for a human being to desire or need, without bringing into our answer a sense of things that are of fundamental importance to us, things whose loss would disqualify a life as being worth the living for a being like us. Although a list of such fundamental things might seem to be relatively short and stable over the centuries (including, for instance, the ability to give and receive pleasure, the capacity to reason and to communicate in language our thoughts and feelings to friends and foes), I would claim that these things receive a prominent place in most theories of human nature *because* we perceive them as valuable, and not the other way round.

My claim is not that our ethics could determine our physiology; my point is rather that what makes a conception of human nature to be at all relevant to questions of human well-being, is our commitment to what capacities something might have and what things might be able to experience in order to count as human.

## **Conclusion**

We began our discussion with the distinction between prescriptivism and descriptivism, and we presented a semantic analysis that undermines this distinction by analysing prescriptions as a type of functional ascriptions. We assumed that the semantic analysis is correct, but we inquired about its metaphysical implications. In particular, we asked whether the identification of normative sentences with ascriptions of function supports a reductionist account of morality. Having outlined a naturalistic theory around the notions of human

needs, capacities and functions, we focused on the status of functional ascriptions. We argued that talk of functional ascriptions could not sustain ethical reductivism because: (i) the most cogent theory of function shows that functional ascriptions involve evaluative commitments; (ii) the reductivist may hold on to a neutral conception of function at the cost of rendering functional ascriptions irrelevant to ethical reflection. Finally, we examined whether the reductivist might avoid these difficulties by positing a certain conception of human well-being as the end point of proper functions. We noted that this move would signal the end of the reductivist project since it would treat as an irreducible given the very phenomenon the project is supposed to explain.\*\*\*

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