

**THE SPECTER OF RELATIVISM:
A CRITIQUE OF ROSALIND HURSTHOUSE'S *ON VIRTUE ETHICS***

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ABSTRACT

Virtue ethics has been a major ethical theory from Antiquity to the present. Despite its persistence on the philosophical scene, in recent years (especially after the publication of *After Virtue* in 1981) it has been severely criticized for being open to the charge of relativism. In this thesis, I focus on Rosalind Hursthouse's reconstruction of Aristotle's enterprise. In the first chapter I examine her aspiration to explain right action solely in terms of the virtuousness of moral agents. Unless Hursthouse concedes, at least to some extent to the moral relativist, I conclude that it is not possible to articulate the rightness of action on a virtue-based account. Hursthouse also rejects the very existence of second order rules and principles which guide moral agents when moral virtues and their corresponding v-rules have an adverse claim upon us. I will demonstrate that Hursthouse's rejection of the codifiability thesis, again, forces her to concede even more to moral relativism.

The inability to fill the gap between the virtuousness of a moral agent and the rightness of her action is not the only aspect of Hursthouse's version of virtue ethics that is open to relativism. She also fails to provide a viable procedure for validating moral virtues. In the second chapter, I concentrate on Hursthouse's reconstruction of Aristotelian ethical naturalism which is one of the most significant attempts to ground moral virtues independently of any moral rules and principles. I demonstrate that the naturalistic validation of moral virtues is susceptible to the cultural context in which virtues are supposed to be validated. In the framework of ethical naturalism, we are *social* animals. When normative virtues are presumed to be based on our *being*, it is inevitable that our sociality, and thus our cultural background, permeates the naturalistic moral virtues.

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Introduction

For more than two millennia, before getting eclipsed by deontology and consequentialism, virtue ethics was the only grand theory in moral philosophy.¹ However, in the second half of the twentieth century, virtue ethics, after almost two hundred years of being latent, gradually came back to the main stage of ethical philosophy. The starting point of its revival is widely considered the publication of an essay by G. E. M. Anscombe titled “Modern Moral Philosophy.”² Nonetheless, the most elaborate defenses of virtue ethics have been articulated by other philosophers. Some of these defenses come from Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, Julia Annas and Rosalind Hursthouse. After the publication of *After Virtue* in 1981, a controversial and influential book by Alisdair MacIntyre, it is noteworthy that a provocation of discussion and debate on virtue ethics occurred. As interest in his tradition-based version of virtue ethics has dwindled,³ other approaches have been developed. Now virtue ethics, as a general approach with several variants, stands alongside consequentialism and deontology as one of the major theses in the philosophical debate on morality.

Most prominent modern versions of virtue ethics⁴ have preserved the main features articulated by its most authoritative proponent in antiquity: Aristotle.⁵ Aristotle’s ethical enterprise centres on three concepts: virtue (*arête*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and happiness

¹ Here I consider natural law ethics as a branch of a general theory called virtue ethics.

² Peter Geach also has an important role in revival of virtue ethics. Especially his paper titled “Good and Evil” (1956).

³ This decline is partly due to MacIntyre’s overemphasis on the role of tradition in the shaping and development of the virtues which allegedly results in incommensurability of the virtues fostered in disparate cultures and thus leads to cultural moral relativism. I will discuss this issue later in this thesis.

⁴ In recent years some non-Aristotelian virtue ethics has come out which I do not address them in this thesis. For one of the ‘radical’ departures from Aristotelian Virtue Ethics see Michael Slote’s *Morals from Motives*.

⁵ It is noteworthy to mention that ancient ethicists such as Plato and Aristotle did not necessarily self-identify themselves as virtue ethicists. Yet there is a clear continuity between their moral theories and modern ethicists who self-identify themselves as virtue ethicists.

or flourishing (*eudaimonia*). In general, the modern versions of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics (hereafter AVE in this introduction) have employed these three concepts as the foci of their ethical enterprise (Hursthouse, SEP, section one).⁶ The goal of human life is to achieve flourishing. To achieve flourishing we need some specific character traits (virtues or excellences) and possessing virtues is not possible unless one is endowed with practical reason.

Among these foci, *eudaimonia* is the one with the least agreement on its content and formulation among virtue ethicists. Perhaps because of this lack of agreement (in fact, because of the complexity of the Greek concept) its translation into English is moot. It has been translated as ‘happiness,’ ‘flourishing,’ ‘well-being,’ and some other turn of phrases coined in attempts to convey its original meaning and connotations in Greek. Different accounts of *eudaimonia* sometimes mark the difference between divergent versions of virtue ethics. For instance, MacIntyre argues that the concept and meaning of the human good (which is *eudaimonia*) is worked out through the practices of a tradition. In other words, our conception of good is being constructed, developed and modified through the practices in successive generations. Therefore, it is a historical/traditional concept. (*After Virtue* 181-224). Yet, if MacIntyre is right in this contention, one might argue that divergent conceptions of good and virtues in disparate traditions simply would not be commensurable. MacIntyre admits in the sequel to *After Virtue* (titled *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) that, from his theoretical point of view different moral traditions are incommensurable, and moreover, there is no universal/ahistorical rational principle which has the legitimate power to adjudicate between the rival conceptions of *eudaimonia*.

⁶ In this thesis I refer to the multiple works by Rosalind Hursthouse. The vast majority of the references will be made to Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* with the abbreviation of OVE. I also occasionally refer to Hursthouse’s article in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* titled “Virtue Ethics.” I use the abbreviation of SEP for this work. Note that due to the web-based publication of SEP, instead of page number, I shall refer to the sections of this work. Other works by Hursthouse will appear in their full name.

Different moral traditions, according to MacIntyre, embody incompatible rationalities. Nevertheless, he seeks a way to circumvent a completely relativistic position. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine MacIntyre's argument in which he argues for the superiority of his own Thomistic-based moral tradition. For now, suffice it to say that MacIntyre's argument in favour of the superiority of Thomism has often been considered a failure. It would be difficult to avoid relativism when rationality itself has been historicized and thus relativized.⁷

I have already presented moral relativism as a target of criticism. Here it is appropriate to answer an important question: what is moral relativism?⁸ Moral Relativism could be seen from two different levels. First from a descriptive viewpoint and second from a metaethical perspective. Descriptive Ethical Relativism (hereafter DER in this introduction) maintains that there are deep and vast ethical disagreements between different civilizations, cultures, societies, communities, groups, and even between individuals in one social group ("Moral Relativism" section two). At the level of cultures, which is the level that we are concerned with in this thesis, this position has been espoused by works of anthropologists and sociologists. In a general sense, according to this viewpoint, who counts as a virtuous person or what is a correct moral rule, have different characteristics and expressions in different communities of human beings. In disparate societies such as a tribal society in the Amazon rain forests, an Indian caste society, a Muslim Arab society, and a western society 'who is a virtuous person' and 'what is a correct moral rule'

⁷ For a brief discussion on MacIntyre's response to the charge of relativism see Gowans' "Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism" (398-402).

⁸ Generally, moral/ethical relativism refers to the claim that moral judgments are relative to, that is, depend on, personal, social, cultural or historical norms, concerns, circumstances and beliefs. That is, moral/ethical propositions are not true or false *per se*. According to this position there is no such thing as objective and ubiquitous moral truths. Among the various strands of moral/ethical relativism, that which maintains that an individual's behaviors and beliefs are relative to that individual's culture is known as 'cultural relativism.' In the following, I will provide a more nuanced understanding of both moral and cultural relativism. For a good discussion on the moral relativism see Gowans' entry of "Moral Relativism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The main structure of my discussion on this issue is taken from this entry.

are defined quite differently. Although it might seem that DER (at least at the level of cultures) cannot be doubted, it has been argued that it ignores the fundamental agreements beneath these seemingly deep disagreements. For instance, there is an ultimate agreement that one should respect her parents, yet the actual act of respecting one's parents in one society would be considered a serious insult in the other society. Notwithstanding, it seems that agreement at the general level about moral virtues or rules is not enough to refute DER. We should agree on the content of virtues or rules to justify the claim that DER is not veritable. If two different societies are in agreement on the importance of the virtue of chastity but one encourages marriage between close relatives, for instance between siblings as was the case in the pre-Islamic Iranian Zoroastrianism, and the other abhors and condemns this kind of marriage as incest, I do not think their claims about the importance of chastity could be cited as an evidence for refuting DER. (I shall return to this issue at the end of the second chapter of this thesis.)

One can accept the actual existence of DER and simultaneously maintain that there is a true moral theory which can be discovered or constructed through moral reasoning or revelation or other intellectual means. On the other hand, some writers not only claim that our present opinions about ethical matters diverge, but, furthermore, it is impossible that these opinions will ever converge. They argue that moral evaluative designations such as 'right' and 'wrong,' 'virtuous' and 'non-virtuous' (or simply 'good' and 'bad') are not and cannot become the subjects of universal truth conditions. The rightness or goodness of a specific action or character trait would likely change in respect to the practices of an individual, personal convictions, and membership in social groups, societies, cultures and traditions. The rightness of actions and goodness of character traits (if it is legitimate to use the terms such as good and right at all) depend on, and thus are relative to, these personal and cultural conditions ("Moral Relativism")

section two). This position is called Metaethical Ethical Relativism (hereafter MER). It can be clearly seen that there are different levels of relativism in MER. One might reject the idea that personal convictions, practices, and character traits would change the truth conditions of the moral actions. At the same time, he might argue that the truth conditions of moral actions are indeed determined by the cultural norms.

For instance, temperance in a conservative Muslim society means complete abstinence from alcoholic drinks. But in a Jewish society being temperate is compatible with a moderate drinking and even passing out during Purim. Being a teetotaler is the correct ethical behaviour for a conservative Muslim society and passing out as a result of consuming much of alcohol during Purim is completely acceptable (and even praiseworthy) moral behavior in a Jewish community. In other words, only within a moral tradition, can we figure out the meanings of moral expressions and, moreover, do moral reasoning. We cannot come up with a magic moral reason to convince a Jew in the Purim that getting drunk is not in accordance with the virtue of temperance. In the same way, it is almost impossible to convince a devout ancient Zoroastrian man that marrying his sister is not the most reliable marriage. For that man 'virtue of chastity' acquires its meaning with reference to his cultural norms. In other words, we can only justify a specific moral action by consulting the local standards of justification, not a universal one. To convince ancient Iranians that sibling marriage is abhorrent (indeed, they would need a word for the concept of incest in their moral vocabulary), we should change their local moral standard.

There are several arguments against MER at the level of cultures. For instance, it has been contended that it leads to moral conservatism: if the ultimate reference to the truth of a moral conduct is the accepted (or pervasive) standard of a putative society, how can one criticize the moral behaviors of her own society? We would have to exonerate people who commit a cruel

crime (such as honor killing) just because they did it within the accepted moral standards of their society. However, there are weaker versions of cultural MER which aim to mitigate the undesirable consequences of strong versions of MER. Obviously, weaker versions of MER can take several forms. For instance, a weaker version might maintain that there is indeed a universal moral framework which delimits what is acceptable as moral behavior in any moral system. For example, infanticide could not be justified from any ethical perspective. Or being an unabashed sexually promiscuous person would not be acceptable in any ethical theory. Nevertheless, what is a promiscuous sexual relationship would differ (to some 'limited' extent) from one society to another society. In one society polygamy (in a lawful manner) would not be considered as a promiscuous sexual behavior and in one society any form of polygamy would be considered as promiscuousness.

For a concrete grasp of the above claim imagine a weaker version of MER. This weaker version argues that although all moral judgements actually are made (or, perhaps, should be made) with reference to a certain moral code in some society, yet, any moral code should meet the minimum standard of rationality: any moral code should let a putative society to 'flourish.' Any moral code, to pass the standard of rationality, must provide its corresponding society a basic foundation from where people can individually survive. Moreover, it is rationally imperative to keep the society going through procreation, and that people can characteristically enjoy their life and cooperate collectively to maintain their society's operations. Although there are cultural values which determine partly what a moral code should be, the fact that any moral codes must provide us with our basic needs, vastly delimits the actual differences between culturally-based moral codes. If a moral code is malfunctioning with respect to the

aforementioned ends, we can dismiss it as a defective moral system (“Moral Relativism” section seven).

Weak MER allows its supporters to claim morality is objective to a certain extent; however, as far as I can see, weak MER would not avoid the putative problems of strong MER. Although it can be argued that there is a discernable shared foundation for all ethical systems – perhaps due to the simple fact that they were devised and amended throughout the history to sustain communities of human beings– yet, what is at issue is exactly the divergent embodied moral behaviors of cultures. All existing ethical systems would condemn unauthorized killings. However, the problem is that if we accept weak MER, again, we would have to admit that honor killing (or something similar to it that strongly defies our moral intuition) might be an acceptable moral conduct for a specific society. Inasmuch as these kinds of practices are exercised in the communities which historically prove that they meet the standard of rationality; they are flourishing⁹ (“Moral Relativism” section seven).

In any case, due to the problems mentioned above, being open to MER (whether in the weak or strong forms) is mostly considered as a serious defect for a moral theory. Now it becomes more obvious why having a concrete naturalistic concept of *eudaimonia* (in contrast to the tradition-based version of virtue ethics) would be attractive; for, at least *prima facie*, it would not be open to the charge of relativism. Ethical naturalism, elaborated originally by Aristotle, is

⁹ As it is clear, in this example I use the word ‘flourishing’ in a limited sense of that term. Indeed, this example of weak versions of MER is an ironic example. The ends offered as the shared ends of different societies, actually are the naturalistic ends which, as we shall see, Hursthouse claims can help us to validate moral virtues without falling victim to relativism. It should also be noted that at first place David Copp’s *Morality, Normativity, and Society* inspired me to come up with this example.

an ahistorical and rational enterprise to validate¹⁰ and justify ethical virtues based on a concrete and naturalistic articulation of human nature and its good.¹¹ In Aristotle's view every single living being has a *telos* and human beings, situated at the top of the pyramid of life, are no exception. In everyday life, teleological analysis is a useful method for evaluating inanimate objects. For instance, the *telos* of a knife is to cut, and by having this ultimate goal in view, we are able to evaluate any knife. In this vein, New Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism (hereafter NAEN in this introduction) maintains that this kind of teleological reasoning is the only way to bridge the modern gap between 'is' and 'ought'.¹²

Ethical naturalists claim by appealing to the nature of human beings we can define and articulate moral virtues. Through the naturalistic analysis of human nature, Aristotle, as the founder of ethical naturalism, gives a detailed account of cardinal virtues. As has been mentioned before, it seems that Aristotle thinks of his ethical enterprise as ahistorical, that is, the naturalistic moral virtues are good for us in any society and any age. However, the details of moral virtues that Aristotle offers clearly shows its limitation. For instance, he introduces the virtue of magnificence which seems particular to the ancient Greek society and cannot transfer to other societies (for more discussion on this issue see the second chapter of this thesis).

Following Aristotle, contemporary ethical naturalists hold that through analysis of the natural features of the human animals and deciphering its *telos*, they lay bare what good life consists of and articulate the ethical virtues that we need in our course of life. These ethicists

¹⁰ Contemporary virtue ethicists vehemently deny that happiness is a 'determinate state' based on which we can ground virtues. They argue that *eudaimonia* is a dynamic *modus vivendi* which already consists in virtues. Accordingly, I use the verb 'validate' instead of the verb 'ground,' for the former better reflects the dynamic state of *eudaimonia*. For an influential account on this issue see Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* (120-31).

¹¹ For a good discussion on Aristotle's ahistoricism see Macintyre's *After Virtue* (Chapter 12).

¹² For more detailed discussions see Hursthouse (*On virtue Ethics*, 195).

admit that elements of sexism, elitism and xenophobia are present in Aristotle's ethical enterprise. They also do not think that Aristotle's list and representation of virtue are not problematic. But they do not think these phenomena are "built into the very structure of his thought" (OVE 9). Indeed, similar to Aristotle contemporary ethical naturalists also maintain that their enterprise is vastly (if not completely) a non-historical, culture-independent ethical theory.

Despite this claim, alongside other strands of virtue ethics, one of the standard charges against NAEN has been its openness to moral relativism. One of the aims of this thesis is to address this charge at the level of moral virtues. It should be noted that in this thesis, I will confine myself to the rendition of NAEN undertaken by Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics*. I will argue that should the justification and validation of virtues be solely based on the natural features of the human being, as is the case for Hursthouse's version of ethical naturalism, it is inevitably open to the charge of cultural relativism. In other words, although Hursthouse version of ethical naturalism, presumably, rejects tradition-based versions of virtue ethics, when we embark on validation of virtues through her naturalistic enterprise, our cultural backgrounds and presuppositions surreptitiously permeate into the validation process. Thus we are covertly broadcasting and re-expressing our culturally-induced understanding of virtues. I defer treating this issue to the second chapter of this thesis.

There is another angle from which virtue ethics is seen as relativistic. The argument goes that even if we have the articulation of virtues at hand (whether they are culturally induced virtues or we finally come up with a procedure to articulate them regarding pure natural facts about human beings), virtue ethics does not provide an adequate action guidance instruction. For virtue ethicists take "certain *areteic* concepts (good, excellence, virtue) as basic rather than deontic ones (right, duty, obligation)" (OVE 25). Indeed, they claim that their formulation of

virtues does not presuppose (or incorporate) any moral rules and principles. As we shall see in the first chapter of this thesis, this aspiration worsened by “rejecting the idea that ethics is codifiable in rules or principles” (ibid) prevent virtue ethicists to equip us with action guidance; that is, what should one do in this or that moral situation.

In short, virtue ethics has been admonished for not providing adequate instructions for filling the gap between the good character traits and the normative question of what is the right action. In reply to this objection Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics indeed provides us with characteristics of correct action in this or that situation: “what a virtuous agent would, characteristically do in the circumstances” (OVE 30). This specification also engenders a plethora of prescriptions and prohibitions, called ‘v-rules.’ Therefore, the virtue of honesty implies that we ‘do what is honest,’ the virtue of temperance enjoin us to ‘do what is temperate,’ and the vice of callousness instructs us ‘it is callous! Don’t do that’ and so forth. As I will argue, if Hursthouse’s v-rules are indeed action guiding, she surreptitiously articulates the corresponding virtues in terms of moral rules and principles. That is, her articulation of virtues is circular. If she is committed to avoiding this circularity, that is, to formulating the right action only with reference to the virtuous character (independently of moral rules and principles), her articulation of virtues is highly susceptible to relativism.

Moreover, insisting on the uncodifiability thesis, (following McDowell in “Virtue and Reason”) Hursthouse rejects the existence of the second order moral rules (such as categorical imperative or the principle of utility) or any principles which ranks virtues. Yet she claims that a moral agent, equipped with *phronesis* comes up with a right way when different moral virtues have conflicting claims upon an agent (more on this issue in the first chapter). It is beyond the scope of my present project to discuss whether the uncodifiability thesis holds or if its rivals,

rule-centred ethical theories, are defensible. However, I shall illustrate that some relativistic corollaries are unavoidable if one adopts Hursthouse's uncodifiability thesis. Indeed, her enterprise might be open to the very fundamental MER, even if she provides us with a plethora of 'action guiding' v-rules.

Quite reasonably my readers may expect that we begin with Hursthouse's naturalistic validation of virtue. Since in the kind of virtue theory she advances, virtue is the focal concept, not actions. Yet, in *On Virtue Ethics*, perhaps due to the spectre of the utter inability to provide action guidance for desperate moral agents, Hursthouse begins with the question of right action to spell out our 'misunderstandings' at the outset. In the first chapter, I shall focus on Hursthouse's definition of right action and her counter replies to the objections. In the second chapter, I will examine the validity of her ethical naturalism.

Chapter 1: Am I Doing the Right Thing? That Is the Question!

1.1 Introduction

Before I begin the central discussion of this chapter, it is appropriate to clarify the fundamental difference between ethics of virtue and rule-based moralities. I use John McDowell's depiction of the difference, because, as we shall see, Hursthouse clearly subscribes to his view. Moreover, his concise and forceful explication of that fundamental difference facilitates my efforts to show the susceptibility of Hursthouse's enterprise to relativism. According to McDowell, in "Virtue and Reason," from the perspective of deontologists and consequentialists "virtue is a disposition (perhaps of a specially rational and self-conscious kind) to behave rightly. The nature of virtue is explained, as it were, from the outside in," whereas, in the framework of virtue ethics the "question [of right actions] is necessarily approached via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out" (331). The crucial question is that if we are supposed to explain the concept of action only in terms of a virtuous person, that is, what a virtuous person would do in the circumstances, is there any way to avoid relativism? Many philosophers think the answer is no. They maintain the only way for virtue ethicists to avoid relativism is to define the concepts of virtue and virtuous person with reference to moral rules and principles. The bulk of the first chapter of Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* aims to dispel the charge of relativism and the objection that asserts virtue ethicists simply go in a circle in defining the concepts of virtuous person; they surreptitiously define it by presupposing what is the right thing to do. Let us first examine Hursthouse's argument.

Hursthouse's arguments to show that virtue ethics has an efficient framework for determining what is morally correct should be viewed in the context of a greater debate between consequentialists, deontologists and virtue ethicists. We might find some problematic issues in the framework of virtue ethics. However, Hursthouse argues that the other general approaches in ethics also suffer from similar problems, or, if not, their seemingly better formulation for determining what is the right to do in a particular circumstance, simply leads them to other untenable positions.¹ At first glance it seems that consequentialism and deontology straightforwardly provide a moral agent with an answer to the question of correct moral behavior. For instance, in consequentialism, the formulation of right action is something such as "an action is right iff it promotes the best consequences" yet we have to specify what the 'best consequences' is. Thus we must provide a second premise such as: "the best consequences are those in which happiness is maximized" (OVE 26). In the same way, deontologists need to specify what is the correct moral rule in their second premise. The second premise for the deontologist might be specified in various ways: "a correct moral rule (principle) is one that is laid down for us by God" or "is universalizable/a categorical imperative," and so forth (OVE 27). Hursthouse maintains that there is not much difference between virtue ethics general framework for determining right actions and the other two main approaches. Talking about virtue ethics, Hursthouse suggests that: "an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances" (OVE 28). Take this as the first premise of virtue ethicists for defining right action. Obviously, to supplement this first premise, they do not define a virtuous person as one willing to do the right things according to the moral rules or principles. In this case, as Hursthouse notes, virtue ethics simply "collapses

¹ For instance, consequentialists solutions for moral dilemmas often are counter-intuitive.

back into deontology” (OVE 29). Therefore, virtue ethicists complete their first premise through another proposition: “a virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely the virtues” (ibid). At this stage virtue theory should provide us with the articulation of virtues. But, of course, there is some controversy over the explication of this latter premise. A new Aristotelian ethical naturalist, such as Hursthouse, completes this premise in this way: “virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well” (OVE 30). A virtue theory inspired by Hume will not agree with neo-Aristotelians on the definition of virtues. Indeed, there are rival accounts of virtues. However, consequentialists also may not agree on what are the best consequences. Hursthouse thinks that just as consequentialists can determine what is a right or wrong action once they have identified a specific state of affairs as the best consequence, so virtue ethics can say what is a right or wrong in the circumstances once we have determined the articulation of virtues. Hursthouse reminds us that critics would not give up easily. One might claim that virtue ethics’ account of right action is largely uninformative:

unless I am (and know I am) a virtuous agent myself—in which case I am hardly in need of it. If I am less than fully virtuous, I shall have no idea what a virtuous agent would do, and hence cannot apply the only prescription virtue ethics has given me. (OVE 35).

Hursthouse’s counter-reply is twofold. First, she invites us to remember an important and obvious feature of our moral life, that is, if a person is not virtuous enough, and he does not know the answer for what he should do in a moral situation, he simply can go and ask a virtuous person (ibid). She also brings to our attention the other important point that if we (as normal people) are not virtuous enough, certainly we do have an idea of what honesty, fidelity, courage, etc. are and what they demand. Indeed, Hursthouse denies the claim that virtue does not provide us ethical rules. Every virtue is a prescription: do what is virtuous, that is, do what is courageous,

honest, modest, etc. Moreover, definitions of numerous vices also provide us with clear prohibitions: do not act pusillanimously, dishonestly and so forth (OVE 36).

Here a critic would persist and argue that the sort of rules that virtue ethicists provide are not useful. ‘Do what is courageous’ will not tell me anything other than ‘do what is virtuous.’ If a child is drowning, yet by helping her I will endanger my life, the immediate question is should I risk it? We know that Aristotle defines virtue as a mean. If I endanger myself (and worse, lose my life), perhaps Aristotle might label me as reckless. According to this line of criticism, a deontic rule such as ‘do not tell a lie’ will straightforwardly guide a moral agent, but virtue rules (or simply v-rules) are expressed in *evaluative* terms and thus not action guiding as deontic rules (OVE 37). Hursthouse does not deny that v-rules are evaluative terms. At first glance, deontologist and consequentialist rules seem to be un-evaluative or simply value free. However, if we look at them closely, in deontology and consequentialism (at least in the most plausible versions of these moral approaches), there are some important evaluative concepts such as the higher and lower pleasures or the principles of non-maleficence and beneficence (ibid). Therefore, insofar as we can blame deontology and consequentialism for providing uninformative evaluative rules, we can also censure virtue ethics for this shared fault.

There is yet another issue. Virtue ethics admittedly rejects the idea that ethics can be codified into rules and principles. The codifiability thesis, according to Hursthouse, asserts that in normative ethics we should provide rules and principles with two important characteristics: “(a) they would amount to a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case; (b) they would be stated in such terms that any non-virtuous person could understand and apply them correctly” (OVE 39-40). Hursthouse claims that in recent years, especially due to the illuminative discussions in applied ethics, deontologists and

consequentialists have become more and more convinced that their abstract rules and principles cannot inform us of what one should do within the “complex particularity of concrete moral situations” (OVE 40). Moreover, as Hursthouse rightly notes, implementing moral rules needs moral virtues; for “the Devil, after all, can quote scripture to serve his own purposes; one can conform to the letter of a rule while violating its spirit” (ibid).

Before I begin investigating Hursthouse’s account of right action, it is appropriate to mention an important difference between modern and ancient versions of virtue ethics. As far as I can see, modern reconstructions of virtue ethics define themselves in opposition to the rule-centered moral theories such as consequentialism and deontology. This leads some virtue ethicists, such as Hursthouse and Annas, to an uncompromising denial of the necessity of independent moral rules/principles/laws for ethics.² However, this kind of hostility to rule-based theories is not evident in the writings of earlier advocates of virtue ethics.³ In any case the door is still open for a reconciliation between ancient ethics and modern rule-based ethical theories. We would see more philosophical efforts to bring Aristotle and Kant closer to each other, as we have already seen in the works of thinkers such as John McDowell and Christine Korsgaard.

In an earlier paragraph I mentioned Hursthouse’s rejection of the necessity of free-standing moral rules for ethics. At the face of it, denial of the objective moral rules is bound to the denial of intrinsic rightness or badness of actions. We have virtuous (courageous, generous, honest, etc.) actions on one hand and unvirtuous (pusillanimous, mean, dishonest, etc.) actions on the other. According to this line of argument, we often use the thin concepts of ‘wrong’ and ‘right,’ as substitutes for the thick concepts of virtuous and unvirtuous (vicious); perhaps only

² Independent in the sense that they are not defined on the basis of moral virtues and virtuous character.

³ Perhaps because there was no rule-based ethical theory in the philosophical scene of antiquity.

because they are convenient. This approach, which denies the necessity of coupling virtue theory to independent moral rules for evaluation of actions, indeed, aims to provide a comprehensive moral theory (Copp and Sobel 544). Therefore, it might seem that in the Hursthouse's version of virtue ethics we can eventually expunge the words 'right' and 'wrong' from our moral vocabulary. However, this conclusion is not quite correct.

Intuitively it seems some actions regardless of the character traits of their agents are utterly wrong. For instance, we do not need to analyze what happened in Auschwitz by looking into the various unvirtuous character traits to conclude that it is wrong. As Copp and Sobel note, Philippa Foot, one of the pioneers of reviving ethical naturalism in the 20th century, maintains that some actions are categorically wrong. She considers a doctrine which denies "intrinsic rightness or wrongness of kinds of action" as a "totally false doctrine" (*Natural Goodness* 115). Interestingly, despite her denial of the necessity of independent moral rules and principles for ethics, Hursthouse is indeed sympathetic to this idea. Defending McDowell, who has been criticised for maintaining an Aristotelian claim that "the best generalisation about how one should behave hold only for the most part" ("Virtue and Reason" 337), she asserts that "no one can cite Aristotle as their authority for denying that there are any such exceptionless or absolute rules" such as "do not sexually abuse children for pleasure" (OVE 58). As Aristotle maintains "not every action nor every passion admits of a mean," certain actions directly connote depravity (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a9–10). What is noteworthy about Hursthouse's view is that these kind of actions are absolutely bad since they directly connote depravity in the character traits of the people who commit them. In other words, she somehow attempts to show that the absolute

rejection of some action can be accommodated in the framework of virtue ethics.⁴ That is, although “there are cases where the concept of wrong action is needed,” characterizing some actions as categorically wrong is not “entirely independent of vice ascription” (Das 333). So with the caveat that Hursthouse allows for *ad hoc* independent rules to prohibit utterly ‘wrong’ actions, in the following, I will argue that the denial of the existence of objective moral rules (justified independently of virtuous character) is the main reason which gives rise to the problem of relativism in the framework of virtue ethics.

First let us review Hursthouse’s account of right action. She maintains “an action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.” Moreover, the list of virtues and vices provide us with ‘v-rules’ which determine what we should do, at least, in the straightforward circumstances. As has been mentioned, Hursthouse aspires to provide a comprehensive moral theory, that is, a theory which gives us an account of right action without any appeal to moral rules and principles. In the following discussion we shall see that if Hursthouse’s account of moral virtues is really independent of moral rules and principles, her formulation of right action, inevitably, is relativistic. That is, we cannot determine what a virtuous person ‘characteristically’ would do. Of course we may observe what a virtuous person does. Yet, if Hursthouse’s account of virtues and virtuous person really was independent of moral rules and principles, we would not have any reason to expect that two virtuous persons (and indeed one virtuous person in a specific situation but in different

⁴ In an illuminative footnote, Ramon Das in his paper titled “Virtue Ethics and Right Action” writes “In personal communication, Hursthouse has indicated that she thinks there are cases where the concept of wrong action is needed, corresponding to that part of our moral vocabulary dealing with the terrible or horrible or intolerable. Although she doesn’t think that characterizing acts in this way is entirely independent of vice ascription, she does think that the act description (‘wrong act’) in some sense comes first. And although she recognizes this need for the concept of wrong action, she actually doesn’t think there is a corresponding category of right action, at least not one with a similar basis” (333).

times) act similarly. Vice versa, if she wants to avoid relativism, she has to couple her account of virtue to a free standing account of right action. That is, she will have to define the virtuous person with reference to moral rules and principles. In this latter case, Hursthouse's aspiration to provide a comprehensive moral theory based on virtue will fail. Now, it is clear, then, that we should start the discussion by answering these questions: what is virtue? who is a virtuous person?

1.2 Virtues: A Skill Analogy⁵

Anyone who has worked as an engineer can easily grasp what I mean by skill analogy: the best rules and regulations are utterly useless at the hands of an incompetent engineer. A skillful engineer (or a group of engineers) will discern what the goals and problems of a project are and find the right action in a specific situation. There is no single pre-given answer to the practical problems which have yet to emerge and for the real-world questions which have yet to be asked. In teaching a practical profession, the primary goal is to instill the required skills in an apprentice to transform her into a skillful practitioner of that vocation (that is, she becomes capable of acting rightly in the domain of her profession). Similarly, one of the foremost concerns of Aristotelian virtue ethics is the question of what causes a course of good/right actions through the life of a person. The answer, from the perspective of virtue ethics, is, of course, a virtuous character.

In general, from the standpoint of virtue ethics, the moral life has some similarities with the questions that a practitioner of a practical skill encounters, insofar as I have a life which I should build. I know in advance that I am going to have a myriad of problems and choices. The

⁵ For a good account on the skill analogy see the chapter three of Julia Annas' *Intelligent Virtue*.

main goal of moral inquiry and moral education is to foster the moral skills (which include practical and intellectual abilities) in an agent to deal with these inevitable choices and problems in both predictable and unpredictable circumstances, not to provide a manual containing principles, rules and detailed instructions to be consulted. As we have seen, Hursthouse does not deny the need for some general rules and principles, she denies that these principles are the focal point of moral philosophy. She is also committed to the idea that these general rules and principles originate from virtues, not vice versa. This idea entails that we can substantiate and give content to moral rules only on the basis of virtuous character traits.

I believe the skill analogy can help us to understand how virtue ethicists can, in general, and with Hursthouse in particular, deal with the question of the rightness of actions and why virtue ethicists' treatment is inadequate. When we encounter a problem or question in the realm of a practical profession, two competent practitioners of that profession may come up with two different solutions. Suppose that our practical problem is to build an energy efficient house. One engineer may build a house which obtains the energy it requires through solar power. Another engineer may design a house which produces its necessary energy via the combination of natural gas and wind energy. Which one is a good house? Which one is the better one? Perhaps both of them are good. Moreover, we may not have the ultimate criterion to judge which one is better.

In a similar way, in the realm of ethics, two virtuous people could act differently in similar situations. Nonetheless, their different actions may not be in moral conflict with one another. Two generous women in similar situations might buy different presents for their children's birthday, and yet we would not interpret their actions as conflicting (OVE 66). In other words, different (and yet, not conflicting) moral actions may be considered as a right action in a specific moral situation. I call this position moral pluralism to distinguish it from moral

relativism. But what about the instances where the actions of two virtuous persons are in conflict, in a strict sense? Ancient epics are replete with the stories of ‘virtuous heroes’ whose fates were to encounter and sometimes kill one another. Now arises the question of who was right and who was wrong in those conflicts.⁶ How can we assess the actions of ancient heroes only based on their virtuousness? Let us first investigate in what way in the domain of practical skills we assess actions.

In the earlier example of the two engineers, one might reasonably claim that some higher standards, principles, and rules guide both of them, and that there are some clear standards (based on rules and principles) by which to compare their final works. These standards are independent of the skills of the two engineers; they originate from some relevant objective facts in the world. Besides, if one of the houses was deficient, the applicable rules and standards tell us why and how it is deficient. The dynamic and static stability of the houses ultimately depends on some relevant objective facts about the physical world. If the structure of one of the houses is unstable according to the relevant physical laws, the skillfulness of the builders and designers is irrelevant. The independent facts concerning the objective world are the ultimate criteria for judging the final work of an engineer. Moreover, in the realm of the technical professions, we are not only concerned with educating skillful practitioners for a specific career. We are also concerned with discovering, constructing, formulating and reformulating the objective rules, principles, and laws for guiding practitioners of a specific profession; indeed, these rules and principles define the skillful practitioner, and not vice versa. By applying this analogy to ethics, deontologists and consequentialists ultimately determine the picture of a virtuous person by

⁶ Indeed, from the perspective of Homeric morality, both Achilles and Hector are praiseworthy and the question of whose actions were right, would not even be raised from Homer’s outlook. Yet, we, at least in the realm of normative ethics, are concerned with the rightness and wrongness of actions.

employing objective ethical principle and rules. Who is the virtuous person? A deontologist or a consequentialist might reply, a virtuous person is the one who best implements our moral rules and principles.

As has been mentioned before, for Hursthouse ethical rules and principles originate in virtuous character; there are no independent moral laws in the world (including the rendition of the virtues in the form of imperatives, that is, ‘v-rules’). The nature of these v-rules and the rightness of an action should be explained with reference to virtuous characters⁷ and what a “virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances.” One may ask here why Hursthouse does not refer directly to the v-rules for defining right action? In response it should be remembered that these v-rules are not free-standing objective moral rules out there in the world. They are representations of the characteristic actions of a virtuous agent. Moreover, we should not forget that “the best generalisation about how one should behave hold only for the most part” (McDowell 337). At least in the case of resolvable moral dilemmas,⁸ to discern what is the right thing to do we should see what a virtuous agent would do in those circumstances.

Let us now analyse the claim that the right thing to do is “what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances” through a skill analogy. Suppose that Bernard is the best structural engineer in the city and he has built a house called A. House A is a good house if Bernard has built it in conformity with what he would characteristically build, that is, a good house. Therefore, if Bernard builds a bad house, we shall not confer to his product the attribute of goodness. This is trivially true. But how we can describe

⁷ As we shall see in Hursthouse’s naturalistic framework virtues are character traits necessary for a flourishing life.

⁸ I will treat the case of moral dilemma in the third section of this chapter.

Bernard as the best structural engineer of the city at the outset? As has been argued before, ultimately, objective principles and rules are the ultimate criteria to discern that Bernard indeed is a skillful practitioner of his profession. Hursthouse here might claim that at this point, skill and virtue are not analogous anymore. Unlike skills, we can independently⁹ determine virtuous character traits, and thus who is a virtuous person, and, regarding the moral conduct of the virtuous person, determine the right action. But the question is how?

James, who is an honest person, might tell an unjustified lie in a specific situation. Hursthouse will say that his action is not right because it does not accord with what he *characteristically* does (or another virtuous person does), that is, being honest. But how we can describe James as an honest man initially? If we have direct access to the psychic structure of moral agents, without appealing to the moral rules or principle, perhaps we could attribute honesty to some agents due to their specific psychic structure. Apparently, in our everyday life we describe someone as honest due to the observation of telling the right thing over the course of time, or some modification of this rule such as “he always tells the right thing without being economical with the truth”, or a combination of this rule with other deontic or consequentialist rules.¹⁰ Hursthouse, nonetheless, denies that virtues are reducible to the moral rules, or moral rules are essential parts of the virtues,¹¹ and therefore refuses the accusation that she surreptitiously defines virtuous character by employing the concept of right action in the first place. That is, when virtue ethicists want to see who is the person whose actions

⁹ That is, independent of moral rules and principles.

¹⁰ A moral law such as “tell the truth, unless it hurts people without promoting any goods.”

¹¹ Perhaps virtues are more than rational inclination towards acting in a specific manner. Virtue has something to do with our reason, emotions and desires. They should be in harmony with each other. One might rationally incline to tell the truth, yet his emotions are at war with his rational inclination. Thus the virtue of honesty is more than rational inclination to tell the truth. Indeed, Hursthouse denies that the moral command to tell the truth is an essential part of the virtue of honesty. For in this case we need an independent theory to tell us what moral rules are in the first place.

characteristically possess the attribute right, they do not simply define them as persons who tell the right things, who do not kill other people, etc.

Let us see how Hursthouse tries to defeat the objections which argue that the virtue ethicists definition of virtue is circular. Her response is that the apparent circularity will vanish if we reformulate the first and supplementary premises of right action formula in the framework of virtue ethics. The first supplementary premise should be reformulated in this way, “an action is right iff it is what an X agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.” The second premise also should be rewritten as “an X agent is one who has and exercises certain character traits, namely the Xs” (OVE 30). Hursthouse claims that by reformulating the first and the second premises in this way, it becomes clear that her account of right action is not circular. Unfortunately, as we shall see, this reformulation does nothing to save Hursthouse’s account of right action.

The question is how would Hursthouse define “certain character traits, namely the Xs” without evoking the concept of right action? For a moment suppose that Hursthouse does not talk about ethics. Her X agent is a robot and the X’s character traits are some robotic structural features. Let me rewrite Hursthouse’s formula: (1) an action has the property R iff it is what an X robot would characteristically do in the circumstances and (2) an X robot is one who has some specific structural features, namely the X’s character traits. It is certain that two machines with similar or identical features will do similar acts in similar circumstances. We can describe their actions as characteristically having the property R. But it is so¹² precisely because in defining

¹² That is, we can expect that two identical (or very similar) machines act similarly and their acts have the property of R.

and planning structural features of a machine, we first define its task (and thus what should be regarded as 'right action' for that machine).

Here, I guess Hursthouse rejects this analogy abruptly as irrelevant to her ethical framework. After all, according to ethical naturalists, *eudaimonia* for human beings is not composed of some tasks (such as telling the truth). We are to live well and to achieve *eudaimonia* we need X character traits. But, according to Hursthouse flourishing is a moralized state and this, as she admits on her widely anthologized article "Virtue Theory and Abortion," opens the possibility of circularity again (226-7). If *eudaimonia* cannot be discovered by a value-free investigation of human nature, then either *eudaimonia* consists of specific moral practices, or *eudaimonia* consists of possessing certain moral virtues. In both cases Hursthouse's account is circular. In the first case *eudaimonia* consists of moral practices and thus presupposes an independent account of right action. Therefore, she cannot claim that virtue is the fundamental concept in ethics and the concept of right action is the derivative one. In the latter case the question is how can we possibly validate moral virtues on the basis that they are conducive to our flourishing and at the same time maintain that moral virtues are constitutive of our flourishing? In response, the third part of *On Virtue Ethics* is an attempt to demonstrate that there is a possibility to validate moral virtues by employing the enterprise of ethical naturalism, even though *eudaimonic* living incorporates living in accordance to the virtues. Here I do not pretend to offer a conclusive argument against Hursthouse; I shall return to this issue in the second chapter.

Let us now, for the sake of argument, suppose that Hursthouse can come up with the certain character traits, namely Xs, which are not analyzable (reducible?) to the moral rules and principles. Moreover, moral rules and principles are not indispensable parts of these character

traits.¹³ Is it not puzzling as to how Hursthouse would reasonably know what X agent would *characteristically* do the action with property of R in a specific circumstance? She cannot sustain a logical linkage between these unanalyzable/irreducible character traits and the actions which arise from them. If we define the X character trait as the character trait which leads a moral agent to do a certain action in the specific situation, we can sustain a logical linkage between X character traits and certain property of the outcome action. Otherwise, the only linkage we can imagine is a statistical correspondence. That is, a person X who possesses the character traits Xs, frequently does action A in the circumstance B. In this case, presumably, Hursthouse provides us with the independent criteria for virtuousness of a person and statistically we can predict what he would do in this or that situations. Nonetheless, a disquieting question remains: why we should expect that person X, frequently/characteristically does action A in circumstances B? Why should it be the case that a statistical convergence occurs in the action of one person with the character traits of X in the circumstance B? Even if we suppose that for some reason the successive actions of person X, in the circumstance B, would converge, a question remains: what would be the reason for the convergence of X's actions to the actions of person Y (who possesses the character traits Xs as well) in the circumstances B? Perhaps because character traits X entails acting in certain ways, that is, in accordance to a moral rule, in the first place! It seems that Hursthouse cannot give any argument for this much-needed convergence unless she gives up her aspiration to provide us with a comprehensive moral theory. Otherwise, the adverb 'characteristically' is redundant in her definition of right action. In her earlier article "Virtue Theory and Abortion" Hursthouse writes "an act is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances" (228). Of course, she added 'characteristically' to avoid the openness of

¹³ See the previous footnote.

her earlier definition of right action to relativism. Unfortunately, adding ‘characteristically’ only complicates her definition, yet does not resolve the core problem of relativism.

Let us now summarize my discussion in this section. In this section, I have shown that if, indeed, the skill analogy reveals the essence of virtue, there should be some independent moral criteria (that is, moral rules and principles) to determine who is a virtuous moral agent. But in this case virtue ethics cannot be an independent moral theory. If Hursthouse finds a way to avoid circularity in her account of virtue, that is, somehow define a virtuous person not in terms of moral rules and principles, her account of right action is inevitably open to relativism. Since what two virtuous persons would do (and worse, what one virtuous person would do in the successive occurrences of one situation) may not converge. Indeed, Hursthouse’s use of the adverb of ‘characteristically’ in her definition of right action is redundant.

At the end of this section, some caveats are necessary. I do not think actions are analogous to the final products of a factory in which we need not know anything about the procedure of the production to judge on the final product. We need to know something about the virtuousness of the moral agent for action assessment. It does not seem that even consequentialism, albeit the current versions of it, claims that we can assess actions entirely regardless of the virtuousness of the moral agents. However, consequentialists and deontologists would be happy to articulate the virtuousness of a moral agent regarding moral rules and principles (and thus rightness of actions). On the contrary, virtue ethics (including Hursthouse) deny the very possibility of depicting a virtuous person in terms of moral rules and principles. They also deny that moral rules and principles are indispensable to identify who is a virtuous person. It should be noted that perhaps virtue ethicists are right in this contention. Indeed, in this thesis I do not have anything to say about the truth of this latter claim. Maybe we should rely on

what a virtuous person would do as *the* criteria of rightness of actions. However, I maintain that if our concept of virtuous person is indeed independent of moral rules and principles we have to cede, at least to some extent, to moral relativism.

1.3 Conflicting Moral Virtues: Virtue Ethics and Rejection of a Foundational Picture of Rationality

At the outset of this chapter I quoted McDowell who claims virtue ethicists aim to explain the rightness of an action “from the inside out,” whereas, deontologists and consequentialists describe the virtuousness of an agent “from the outside in.” I have already shown that this aspiration, forces Hursthouse to cede, at least to some degree, to relativism. It is noteworthy to mention that defining virtues independently of moral rules and principles is just one of the ways virtue ethics is vulnerable to relativism. In our everyday life, we encounter numerous cases that different virtues have, at least apparently, conflicting claims on us. In these cases, I shall argue, clinging to the idea that the right action should be explained “from the inside out,” that is, by virtuousness of the moral agent, again forces virtue ethicists to cede some other points to moral relativism.

The question is: when different moral virtues have conflicting claims upon us, how should we decide which virtue has priority over the other(s)? One might reply that any action should be just. The virtue of justice and its corresponding v-rule of “do the just thing” will tell us what one should do in the case of ‘apparent dilemmas.’ Unfortunately, Hursthouse does not undertake the task of defining the virtue of justice. Indeed, according to Hursthouse, justice

awaits “the virtue ethics’ account” (OVE 58).¹⁴ In the following discussion it becomes clear why Hursthouse (among other virtue ethicists) have not, and in fact, cannot come up with an account for this fundamental notion of virtue ethics. Any attempt for defining justice, in the framework of Hursthouse’s version of virtue ethics (which aims to explain the rightness of actions “from the inside out”) is bound to fail. That is, unless she modifies some of her central claims and opens room for objective ‘second order’ ethical rules and principles. This amounts to abandoning the goal of producing a comprehensive moral theory.

Mainstream virtue ethicists (including Hursthouse), following McDowell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s rule following paradox in “Virtue and Reason,” reject the idea that ethics is codifiable, that is, an adequate normative ethics should provide us with an ‘algorithm for life.’ They reject the idea that one of the main tasks of normative ethics is to provide (1) “a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case” through consulting with the universal moral rules and principles in such terms that (2) “any non-virtuous person could understand and apply them correctly” (OVE 39-40). In the following I will argue that rejecting the first putative characteristic of normative ethics, unavoidably leads Hursthouse to relativism. However, I am in agreement with Hursthouse in rejecting the second characteristic.

Let us first focus on the second characteristic. Indeed, I think no reasonable contemporary ethical theory would assume such a task for normative ethics. This is because a vicious or stupid person might stick to empty letter of moral rules and principles while violating their spirit, or simply, stumbling in applying them. Therefore, let me at the outset admit Hursthouse’s point “that arrogant, uncaring, dishonest, and self-centred” persons “could not be

¹⁴ *On Virtue Ethics* was published in 1998. To the best of my knowledge justice still awaits “the virtue ethics’ account.”

guaranteed to do what they should merely by requiring that they acted in accordance with certain rules” (OVE 40). The question is not whether or not we need competent persons (in the case of ethics, virtuous persons) for understanding and applying a set of rules and principles. Indeed, trivially and obviously, we need one who possesses discernment and is versed in applying that set of rules and principles. The fundamental question is whether or not the complex nature of moral situations and varieties of circumstances make them intrinsically uncodifiable. That is, our problem in ethics is not that we need virtuous agents to discover or apply what one should do in this or that specific situations. Any reasonable normative ethics would concur with virtue ethics in this claim. It seems to me that Hursthouse’s claim amounts to saying that moral rules and principles (including v-rules) must be wielded by the virtuous person in order to *construct* the correct moral answer (perhaps with the exception of simple and straightforward moral question). Let me explain this claim through an analogy.

Apparently, scientific problems, such as problems in physics, can be solved through consulting with, and referring to, objective general principles in a straightforward way. Of course, we cannot dispense with the role of a competent scientist in solving the problem. However, no one claims that the quiddity of the correct answer to a scientific problem is dependent on the scientific competence and knowledge of the scientist. We assume that there is a correct answer to our scientific question but this correct answer should wait for someone with relevant competence to reveal it. But what should we do if there is not any fundamental physical rules and principles in the world?

Suppose that we live in a world in which “the best generalisations” of the physical laws “hold only for the most part” (McDowell 337).¹⁵ In this relativistic world in which there is no veritable general rules and principles (indeed, it is almost impossible for me to imagine this world) a solution to a practical problem or an answer to a theoretical question offered by a competent physicist might be considered as the right answer or correct solution precisely because they are proposed by someone who is conversant with physics.¹⁶ In other words, not only does our competent physicist have an indispensable role in deciphering the problems and offering solutions, but her competence, at least partly, is constitutive of the correctness of her solution for a problem or the rightness of her answer to a question. In a world that the speed of light is absolutely X kilometer per second but there is no principle of relativity to reconcile the absolute speed of light with other physical phenomena, the ‘correct’ way of making an instrument which deals with those conflicting phenomena (if there is any ‘correct’ way at all) will depend ontologically on the competence of the physicist who makes it; in this relativistic world there is no objective higher principles for the correctness.

Let us for now come back to our nonrelativistic world. To be sure, there is a huge gap between consequentialist and deontologist methodology in ethics on one hand and scientific methodology in physics on the other. After all, physics is a positive science whereas ethics is a normative one. But deontology and consequentialism in their treatment of the question of right action are analogous to the scientific methodology, for, they too suppose there are independent

¹⁵ McDowell’s unbroken sentence in “Virtue and Reason” is: “the best generalisations about how one should behave hold only for the most part” (337).

¹⁶ Or, we can simply conclude that there is no absolute right answer or correct solution to the questions and problems in physics. Indeed, the meaning of these words (correctness and rightness) would be different in this relativistic world. Nonetheless, here I try to provide an analogy for better understanding the question at hand. Thus I suppose that we can apply the attributes of ‘right’ and ‘correct’ in that relativistic world (*mutatis mutandis*) as we can apply in our world.

and correct answers to the question of what should one do. A morally competent person or a competent physicist, by consulting the fundamental principles and rules (that is second order rules and principles), will find out what is the correct answer for their questions and problems when some first order rules are, apparently or really, conflicting. In the case of physics, fundamental principles are mathematical and in the case of ethics, the fundamental criterion is something such as the principle of the greatest pleasure (or some analogous principle, such as the principle of greatest happiness and the categorical imperative).

When different virtues have conflicting claims over us, the rejection of the validity of all-inclusive and independent ethical principles, precludes the possibility of answering the question of what should I do in this or that particular situation in a direct way. Indeed, as I have suggested through the analogy of a relativistic world, a rejection of the existence of fundamental ethical rules and principles threatens to relativize the very enterprise of ethics. Hursthouse, however, thinks that she can clear away this ‘misunderstanding.’ Let us now revisit Hursthouse’s argument to show virtue ethics is capable of providing a nonrelativistic action guidance in the case of moral dilemmas (that is, the cases in which moral virtues have conflicting claim upon us).

In the second chapter of *On Virtue Ethics*, following Aristotle, Hursthouse argues that we acquire *phronesis* over time; through life experience and moral practices we obtain moral wisdom and knowledge to act courageously, generously, and so forth. Therefore, the majority of cases in which moral virtues have ostensible conflicting claims upon us, if scrutinized closely, are not dilemmas at all. If you are not virtuous enough (perhaps due to lack of moral experience) you might have a difficult time to figure out “one does people no kindness by concealing this sort of truth from them” (OVE 53). In other words, the virtuousness of a moral agent in the virtue

ethics' theoretical framework works as a second order principle(s) in the rule-based moralities' ethical framework (such as the categorical imperative).

But an important question remains: how does virtuousness of a moral agent function this way? Apparently a virtuous person possesses *phronesis* (practical reason or wisdom) which is the key factor in solving resolvable dilemmas. But again, how should *phronesis* adjudicate between the rival claims of different virtues? On what basis should one's *phronesis* lead one to conclude that this terminal patient must be offered euthanasia? Or, in a much less complicated case, how can *phronesis* help one know when one should tell the truth if it causes harm? Remember that in settling the disputes, the highest court of *phronesis* would not and could not refer to a Hammurabian code to write its final verdict. In Hursthouse's ethical framework the final arbitrator is practical reason or *phronesis* alone. I do not think it is a convincing argument to assert that a virtuous person, through time and practice, obtains the wisdom which helps him to overcome the apparent moral quandaries. She owes us a philosophical explanation of what *phronesis* is and how this *phronesis* helps its possessors to judge consistently in similar situations (remember my discussions in the previous section). In the absence of this explanation, it seems highly dubious that practical reason, as an adjudicator, could settle the cases of dispute without referring to predefined and independent rules and principles. Without having these rules and principles close at hand, any decision would be arbitrary and thus open to relativism. Reason without higher principles looks like a judge without any code of laws.

Indeed, Hursthouse, sees the threats of relativism when our final appeal is intuition or exercise of judgment. Her strategy for spelling out the spectre of relativism is to remind us that some deontologists, such as Kant himself, believe in the exercise of judgment (and thus do not believe in the existence of an algorithm for life). She also advises us not to take lightly the fact

that applying the higher standard of act-utilitarianism in resolving moral dilemmas results in counter-intuitive solutions. In the solutions for hard moral cases, according to Hursthouse

we see that we bring a variety of considerations to bear on different cases; sometimes one consideration is centrally, even overridingly, important; on other occasions we just put it to one side, on others we do not worry about how important it is because it is combined with others in such a way as to settle the issue; on others it is important but nevertheless outweighed, in these circumstances, by a combination of others, and so on. That is just how things are (OVE 57).

This passage could be interpreted as a clear concession to moral relativism. It raises the crucial question of how, in the case of apparent or resolvable moral dilemmas, we can make sure that two different virtuous persons, actually, do arrive at the same conclusion (or similar conclusions) when they exercise their own judgments and discretions.¹⁷ But this is not the end of the story. It seems to me that Hursthouse implicitly thinks that when two different judges are close enough to the ideal virtuous person, they inevitably judge similarly, if not identically.

Let us first elaborate further on the question of what could count as a rational judgement in moral issues. A moral judgement, at least *prima facie*, requires a major premise in the form of a general rule (in the form of an ‘ought’) and a minor premise (in the form of an ‘is’) which informs us about a particular situation at hand; a judgement (in the form of an ‘ought’) can be reached by combining these two premises. But this is exactly the picture of rationality that Hursthouse, following McDowell, rejects. As McDowell vehemently argues in the “Virtue and Reason,” what would be counted as the reasons to act on are the minor premises (some in the

¹⁷ One here might object they do not need to act similarly. As we saw in the example of two mothers buying different presents for their daughters’ birthdays, different moral actions may be considered as a right action in a specific moral situation. In response it should be noted that in the case of resolvable moral dilemmas, acting differently is equivalent to acting conflictingly. Either one should tell the truth or conceal it to avoid hurting others’ feelings.

form of 'is' and some of them in the form of 'ought'), since there is not any veritable major premise (336). Every fact about particular situations (in addition to some related v-rules) would count as a reason for a virtuous person to act. To clarify this claim let us consider a famous moral dilemma: the trolley dilemma. This dilemma could be formulated as follow: There is an escaped trolley which goes headlong towards five maintenance workers on a mini-wagon. They are condemned to be run over and die. Suppose someone is watching this situation and beside her is a lever. If she pulls the lever, the run-a-way trolley will be shifted to another set of tracks. Yet, unfortunately, there is a pregnant woman on the detour path. Therefore, she has two choices: (a) let the five maintenance workers on the first track to be killed. (b) Shift the trolley by pulling the lever; she kills the pregnant woman on the detour track. A consequentialist would not even see this problem as dilemma. The principle of the greatest pleasure (and thus lesser suffering) makes it clear what one should do. But how would a virtue ethicist solve the dilemma? Every fact in this situation, that is, the five workers who are in the main track, another pregnant woman in the side track, the particular situations of all the people who are involved in the situation (for instance the fact that the five people are working and the fact that the pregnant woman was not involved in the situation at the first place; she was just a pedestrian), and the related virtues such as compassion, justice and courage will be counted as reasons to act on.

Now arises the question of how should one assign weight to these apparently unrelated facts. By rejecting the fundamental picture of practical rationality (that is, the existence of higher standards in the form of rules and principles) it seems to me that Hursthouse's theory does not have enough resources to solve the dilemma. If two different virtuous persons act oppositely in this situation we either have to admit that both of them act rightly, which apparently means

yielding to relativism or deny that their actions can be conflicting at all.¹⁸ But interestingly Hursthouse now claims that ‘of course, two virtuous persons in this situation might act differently (and perhaps oppositely) and yet rightly’. For, as she discusses in the third chapter of *On Virtue Ethics*, there are irresolvable dilemmas in our moral life. In this thesis, I do not consider Hursthouse’s discussion on irresolvable moral dilemmas. Because, even if we accept that there are irresolvable moral dilemmas, I think Hursthouse’s theory does not even have enough resources to show us how in the case of resolvable dilemmas we might conclude that, for example, compassion outranks the virtue of justice. Or, to put it differently, when relevant reasons in a moral situation pull one in opposite directions, how we should allocate weight to them? It is not a convincing answer to assert that a virtuous person will see that the apparent conflict is not real or her *phronesis* helps her to allocate weights to the aforementioned reasons correctly. Moreover, we can easily imagine that in different cultures, different virtues would have different weights. Thus, a virtuous person in culture A would solve the dilemma in one way and a virtuous person in culture B in the opposite.

Hursthouse, in order to be saved from relativism, has to show us that in the case of resolvable dilemmas, actions of the two virtuous persons will inevitably converge. That is, when the actions of two different virtuous persons are ‘complete,’ namely “done from a fully virtuous disposition, one, that is, in which the reasons offered are unified and based on understanding and

¹⁸ One could object that (1) perhaps their characters are more or less the same but, in the case of moral dilemmas, since there is no clearly right action there is actually no relativism. One could even go so far as to say that (2) the virtue ethicist admits that actions are relative but the virtue or character from which they proceed is not. To the first objection I should reply that in the framework of the virtue ethics, the problem of action guidance and right action is not limited to the irresolvable moral dilemmas. In the course of every-day-life we can find numerous examples that different virtues have conflicting claims upon us. The question is how we can adjudicate between these conflicting claims. To the second objection I should reply that it is true that the ethical theory might confine itself to articulating moral virtues and accept that actions are relative, yet this way of understanding the enterprise of ethics clearly means yielding to what we call moral relativism.

the emotional and other responses are fully harmonized with the reasons held,” then, those actions will be similar and compatible if that two virtuous persons are fully informed. (Julia Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 168).

Readers who agree with my argument in the previous section would easily see why virtue ethicists need to wield their account of the virtuous person and *phronesis* to higher independent moral rules and principles in order to avoid relativism. Yet let us now advance a different argument (although in the same spirit of previous section) to show that Hursthouse’s claim does not hold. If two persons are supposed to act similarly in a similar situation, it seems to me that they should possess a kind of identical or very similar psychic structure. One of the options for having similar psychic structure is to suppose that the psychic structures (and, of course, the practical rationality) of the agents should be organized based on a normative principle such as Kant’s categorical imperative or the principle of the utility or some other normative principle. In *Self Constitution; Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Christine Korsgaard argues that our fundamental moral task is to constitute our ‘selves.’ This task is similar to the professed aim of virtue ethics: one should become virtuous through the course of time. Supposedly, in a natural state, we do not possess ordered selves. In a Platonic understanding of the human soul, we have three different parts in our souls: appetitive, rational, and spirited part. We must put these parts in the correct order, otherwise we do not perform ‘actions’ but merely ‘acts.’ In turn, actions come in degree exactly because the process of constituting the self for different moral agents are in different stages.

According to Korsgaard performing actions is self-constitution (24) and “[t]he categorical imperative...is constitutive of action” (52). Thus Korsgaard claims that Kant’s Categorical imperative is *the* principle that we should order our ‘selves’ by performing actions based on it. A

soul which is not unified under the normative principle of the golden rule (do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself) is fragmented and thus cannot be an integrated virtuous soul. We may agree with Korsgaard or not. A consequentialist might claim that a soul is in the ultimate psychic harmony (and thus unified) if it is completely disposed to follow the principle of utility: actions or behaviours are right in so far as they promote happiness or pleasure, wrong as they tend to produce unhappiness or pain. In any case, we have to define virtuous character based on a normative principle, a rule (or a set of harmonious rules and principles), to conclude that the actions of two (or more) virtuous character traits would converge in similar situations.

But if the psychic structure of an agent should be formed based on the categorical imperative or any other normative principle, Hursthouse cannot claim that her ethical theory is an independent moral theory. In that instance, as she admits, her enterprise will collapse back to some forms of deontology or consequentialism. At any rate, as far as I know, in Hursthouse (or other virtue ethicists) there is not any other argument showing that, two virtuous persons in the resolvable or apparent moral dilemmas will act similarly in a similar situation. It seems to me Hursthouse simply assumes that they act similarly (or, at least, not conflictingly), because she surreptitiously (of course, unbeknownst to her) defines virtues on the basis of moral rules and principles.

Final caveat: now it should be clear why we would wait forever until virtue ethicists provide us with a comprehensive account of the virtue of justice. *Prima facie* an action could be honest but callous. However, a just person is the one whose action is 'perfect' (not callous and honest at the same time). She is the person whose actions are in accordance with the aforementioned Annas' definition of complete action. But now we know that we need a

normative principle (or a harmonious set of normative principles and rules) to identify that just person.

1.4 The Ideal Type of Virtuous Person

In this section I turn to an important question ‘how virtue ethicists would define an ideally virtuous person in the first place?’ I have already laid out the charge against virtue ethicists that if their ideal type of virtuous person is independent of moral rules and principles, their treatment of the question of right action is open to relativism. Virtues can be adapted from ‘traditions’ as MacIntyre argues. In this case virtues are defined on the basis of ‘moral practices’ in a given tradition. Obviously, in the MacIntyre’s version of virtue ethics we are not at a loss to determine what is the right thing to do. We take the ideal picture of a virtuous person from the noble practices in a given tradition. However, as I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, tradition-based virtue theories are highly susceptible to relativism.

When the options of determining virtues in terms of moral rules and cultural norms are precluded, the only other accessible (and, of course, well-known) option is to invoke human nature. Ethical naturalists, such as Hursthouse, claim that moral virtues can be validated on the basis of natural facts about human beings. In the following chapters I look more closely at the naturalistic construction of the ideal virtuous person. I argue that this naturalistic picture of virtues and virtuous persons surreptitiously draws on our cultural background and other social variables. In other words, even if we grant Hursthouse that her formulation of right action, that is, “an action is right iff it is what an X agent would characteristically do in the circumstances” and “an X agent is one who has and exercises certain character traits, namely the Xs” (OVE 30) is not circular (because we validate Xs based on the human nature), still Hursthouse’s enterprise is susceptible to moral relativism.

Chapter 2: Ethical Naturalism and Openness to the Cultural Relativism

2.1 Who is the Virtuous? What is Virtue?

Following Aristotle, ethical naturalists aim to ground and validate moral virtues through teleological reasoning on the basis of our natural features. Aristotle believes human beings by nature have a *telos* (a goal) and an *ergon* (a function): achieving this goal by performing this natural function is our good. To demonstrate that a human being has a *telos*, Aristotle first remarks that our diverse activities are not aimless: “[e]very art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a). If we know our *telos* – and Aristotle argues that we can discern it through teleological reasoning – we can articulate and formulate the human character traits conducive to that goal. A person who, through moral reasoning, good upbringing, and appropriate moral education, possesses a set of excellences or good character traits is a virtuous person; she characteristically acts in a virtuous manner.

Among different strands of virtue ethics, ethical naturalists such as Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot revived and, at the same time, reconstructed Aristotle’s enterprise of naturalism. Neo-Aristotelian, “ethical naturalism hopes to validate beliefs about which character traits are virtues by appeal to human nature” (OVE 193). This approach assumes that on the basis of the unshakable foundation of human nature, reason can validate objective and detailed moral virtues. Ethical naturalists suggest that this objective ethical approach is an alternative to other moral approaches which suffer from not being based on ‘facts’ in the world. However, this

perceived difference does not mean that the enterprise of ethical naturalism is entirely based on ‘facts.’

We already know that, according to Hursthouse, *eudaimonia* is not a purely naturalistic concept; it is a moralized concept and entails virtuous living. To put it differently: *eudaimonia* depends partly on what kind of animal we are, and is partly constituted on a virtuous life. The question is how we can validate moral virtues, which are supposedly conducive to a *eudaimon* life, through the test that virtues are the character traits necessary for achieving *eudaimonia*? Here, there is either a logical flaw¹ in the validation of virtue in Hursthouse’s naturalistic framework, or, if Hursthouse really wants to validate moral virtues by their conduciveness to this value-laden concept of *eudaimonia*, then she must concede, at least to some degree, to moral relativism. Different forms of life (cultures/traditions) espouse different moral virtues, yet these virtues in their corresponding cultures/traditions are conducive to achieving the putative naturalistic ends. Interestingly, Hursthouse is fully aware of the threat of relativism. She writes:

[t]he worry about such ‘validation’ is that it cannot provide rational justifications at all, but is merely circular, doomed to be a mere rationalization of one’s personal or culturally inculcated values. And this, we might say, is the standard dilemma which confronts any attempt to say anything substantial about the rationality, or objectivity, of ethics. If, speaking from within our ethical outlook, we seek to validate our ethical beliefs, we shall merely be re-expressing that outlook, not subjecting it to any kind of genuine reflective scrutiny [...] So, it seems, our only alternative is to speak from outside our ethical outlook, from ‘the neutral point of view’; nothing short of that will do. And many philosophers believe either that that is impossible or that it can at best yield very little (OVE 165).

We are bound to begin our ethical enquiry to validate (and amend) moral virtues from within our ethical outlook (due to our cultures, upbringings, etc.). However, Hursthouse,

¹ There is a logical flaw here because moral virtues are supposed to be conducive to our *eudaimonia*, not some part of it.

following McDowell, maintains that “there is a path between the horns of this dilemma” (ibid). Although we cannot ground and extract ethical virtues by employing the enterprise of ethical naturalism, we can validate moral virtues and amend our initial ethical outlook ‘plank by plank’² (1) by appealing to one part of *eudaimonia*, that is, our naturalistic ends, and (2) through testing the beneficence of the virtues for their possessors. Human nature has an indispensable role in determining what are virtues.

One of the purposes of this chapter is to demonstrate how our cultural background, predispositions, and presuppositions determine the content of natural facts about human beings and the way that virtues benefit their possessors. Our initial culturally-induced concept of virtuous living profoundly reveals itself in the content of our fourth naturalistic end (good functioning of human social groups) and to a lesser degree in other naturalistic ends (such as the characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain). If I am right, it seems that the outlook is dim for validating moral virtues and modifying our acquired ethical perspective in a right direction simply through employing the Aristotelian enterprise of naturalism and the test that virtues are beneficial for their possessors. We probably merely rationalize the ethical perspective we began with or, at best, slightly rectify our initial ethical perspective. Again, we are forced to concede a great deal to moral relativism.

As we shall see, susceptibility to cultural relativism is not the only defect for which ethical naturalism has been admonished. Not only has the Aristotelian teleological understanding

² Following McDowell she attributes this position to W. V. O. Quine’s interpretation of Neurath (OVE 165): “we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher’s task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea. We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit, while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality” (“Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis” 78–9).

of nature been criticized, but the leap from naturalism to ethical naturalism is not without its problems. Indeed, Hursthouse's enterprise of ethical naturalism is structured so as to allow us, those who have acquired a *modern* ethical perspective, to validate our putative moral virtues. Surprising as it may seem, despite this convenient prearrangement, sometimes we cannot successfully articulate and give content to moral virtues in a way that is amenable to the canonical beliefs of our modern ethical perspective. This is the irony of ethical naturalism. On the one hand, it sometimes allows conflicting culturally-induced understandings of moral virtues to validate themselves. On the other hand, Hursthouse's enterprise sometimes overdetermines the content of virtues so that it precludes legitimizing practices which for us, those who have acquired a *modern* ethical perspective, are evidently acceptable moral practices. (Sometimes, this over-determination prevents us from denouncing some other practices which for us are manifestly abhorrent). The vast bulk of Hursthouse's third part of *On Virtue Ethics* is an attempt to demonstrate that the kinds of worry presented above do not endanger her enterprise of ethical naturalism. Thus, let us first lay out Hursthouse's Aristotelian enterprise of naturalism.

2.2 Function Argument and Hierarchy of Life: Revisiting Aristotle's Naturalism

In the Aristotelian ethical tradition, the basic question of what kind of person should I be, is answered through a functional argument. The functional argument is an evaluative analysis of objects in the world by means of their function. For instance, if we were to identify the function of a knife, the answer would be that a knife's function is to cut some specific object. Therefore, a good knife is a knife with appropriate parts and an appropriate relation between its parts such that, in their totality, serve for its specific function of cutting. Yet there is an important difference between the function(s) of an instrument and the function(s) of a living being. The function(s) of an instrument depend(s) on what function(s) we, as human beings and the users of that

instrument, assign to it, whereas an animal or plant, according to Aristotle, functions independently of our aims. If Aristotle is right that living beings have independent functions, he can legitimately expand the application of the function argument to plants and animals, as well. Thus, the aim of the naturalistic evaluation of a plant or an animal, say a horse, is not to assess how it serves our goal. Horses also have functions in and of themselves, independent of any goal which might be conceived for them by others. In the naturalistic appraisal of a living being, we are meant to discern precisely this internal function.

In the framework of ethical naturalism, in order to discover the independent function(s) of a living being, we must first answer the questions of what is a plant and what is an animal.³ In the same way, in the case of human beings, we must answer the question of what is a human. Only after articulating the answer to this factual question can the ethical and normative questions be answered. Such questions include how one should live, what kind of person one should be, what constitutes a good human, and what is good for humans. It is noteworthy that in addition to being one of the forefathers of Western philosophical thought, Aristotle is the forefather of the science of biology, and his response to the question of what is human being cannot be detached from his conception of the hierarchy of life. For Aristotle, human beings are situated at the top of the pyramid of life. At the base of this pyramid are plants and at the middle level are animals divided into solitary and social animals (OVE 200). Modern versions of ethical naturalism, for example that of Hursthouse, are loyal to this general categorization and maintain that by discerning the essential features of any category in this hierarchy (and thus their functions), we

³ This reading of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition has been challenged. See John Finnis, *Fundamental of Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1983). In any case, Hursthouse adheres to the traditional reading of Aristotle, and I follow her reading in this thesis.

shall be able to recognize which individual member of any species is good in its own right (OVE 202).

Hursthouse, following Aristotle, begins with the question of what is a plant. According to her reconstruction of Aristotle, plants are living beings which have two essential features. First, they can survive individually and, second, they partake in the continuance of their species (reproduction). From this perspective, a good plant is one that (a) can live, more or less, a characteristic life span of its species, and (b) contributes to the continuance of its species (OVE 198). In the case of animals, in addition to the two aforementioned characteristics of the plants, they can voluntarily move and perceive their environment. Consequently, Hursthouse adds “characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment” to the characteristics of a good animal (OVE 199). If an animal is a social one, contributing to “the good functioning of its social group—in the ways characteristic of the species” is the fourth necessary characteristic of a good social animal (OVE 202). It seems that through this analysis we can determine which plant and solitary or social animal is a good member of its species. For instance, a male peacock which does not show off plumage in a mating season and thus does not attract females for mating is a defective member of his species.

In relation to social animals such as wolves, a good wolf, in addition to his individual survival, will contribute to the continuation of its species, and its characteristic enjoyment (freedom from pain) will contribute to its social group as well. For example, a good wolf partakes in the group’s hunting and defence of territory despite the fact that partaking in such activities could be deleterious to her individual wellbeing. In this analysis, a free-rider wolf who does not partake in hunting yet takes part in the eating of a prey animal is not considered a good wolf. Here, one might ask why a free rider wolf is seen as a defective member of his species.

Presumably, he enjoys his life more than those members of his species deemed effective on this scheme. Moreover, it is more probable that he attains the characteristic life span of wolf species. The defectiveness of the aforementioned wolf, according to Hursthouse, lies in the word ‘characteristic.’ She contends that an “infertile female cheetah, free from pain as her life may be, is not well endowed with respect to characteristic freedom from pain, nor the free-riding wolf with respect to characteristic enjoyment of available food, nor the stingless worker bee with respect to the characteristic way of attaining its natural life span” (OVE 250). Thus, as far as non-human animals are concerned, “the four ends of naturalism cannot fall apart; they are held together by what nature lays down as characteristic for the species” (ibid).

Now arises the question of what is a good human being based on a teleological analysis. Of course, we, as human beings, possess a crucial feature absent in other social animals: we are rational. We saw that “the aspects of creatures capable of pain (and perhaps pleasure) are evaluated in the light of the third end of characteristic freedom from pain and enjoyment; the aspects of social creatures in the light of the good functioning of the social group” (OVE 218-9). In the same way, it seems that our rational aspects should be evaluated “in the light of some fifth end which relates to this new, transforming, capacity” (OVE 219). However, Hursthouse reminds us that the possible candidates for the fifth end are controversial.⁴ Instead of adding the fifth end, she suggests that our additional capability modifies four naturalistic aims.

A good member of a non-human social animal species (1) has a characteristic span of life; and in the characteristic ways (2) contributes to the continuance of the species, (3) enjoys its life and is free from pain, and (4) participates in the social life of its social group. In contrast,

⁴ For instance, “[we] might say that the fifth end was the preparation of our souls for the life hereafter, or that it was contemplation—the good functioning of the theoretical intellect” (OVE 218).

perhaps except for the characteristic life expectancy, these characteristic ways are not discernible in the case of human beings. Given that humans are dissimilar to other animals, “the way human beings live varies enormously from place to place, from time to time, from one to another;” indeed, with respect to humans, nature is not normative (OVE 219-20). A male polar bear is determined by nature to attack and kill his offspring in order to mate again with the mother of his cubs. We do not assess a male polar bear as an especially good member of his species if he helps his mate in nurturing the cubs. He, surely, is a defective polar bear. However, if, supposedly, the male members of our species, in virtue of its nature, were more aggressive than the female ones, this fact does not justify the aggressiveness of the men. We are rational animals and thereby are not bound to pursue our natural inclinations (OVE 221-2).

Now the question is, in the absence of a characteristic way of going on, where is the “pattern of natural normativity” which presumably should be applied to any ethical evaluation of the rational-social animals as well? (see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 49). Hursthouse claims that, indeed, we have a characteristic way of going on; a rational way: “a ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do” (OVE 222). It is true that a significant number (or perhaps most) of the members of our species do not act rationally in the ethical realm (we shall see what this rationality means shortly). Yet we should not forget that we are not supposed to ground ethics on a neutral foundation in the way that we evaluate other plants and animals on the neutral and objective observation of their actual forms of life and patterns of behavior. We can, however, preserve the structure of naturalism in that “it is still the case that human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal, in the way characteristic of the species” (OVE 224). Our characteristic way of going on, contrary to other animals, is a normative concept and

not a natural one. If a member of our species behaves rationally, that is, possesses moral virtues conducive to the four naturalistic ends, she is a good human being.

Two clarifications are necessary. First, missing out on one or several of our natural ends probably deprives the putative member of a specific species from flourishing, but does not necessarily make one an ethically bad member of our species. To clarify this issue, consider this question: could a person who has been castrated, is mentally disordered and physically disabled be considered a flourishing human being? By applying the teleological analysis, it seems that the answer should be no. If someone intentionally, or due to some ethical failure, inflicts on himself physical or mental disabilities, these defects might somehow be considered ethical defects as well. Yet a consideration of context or circumstance suggests that the answer is not so simple. Suppose the aforementioned man is a war hero who was injured and disabled while he courageously resisted interrogation under barbaric torturing and guarded secret, vital information which could have permitted the complete destruction of his division, that is, massive loss of life. It seems that this man, though unfortunate, is a paragon of goodness; his physical and mental disabilities are marks of his virtue. In addition to internal goodness (possessing virtues), one also needs external goods or good fortune to fare well.⁵ The peculiar feature of Hursthouse's naturalistic framework is that virtues are validated precisely because they are our ethically relevant aspects (character traits) which are conducive to our four naturalistic ends. Nonetheless, possessing these virtues might occasionally deny their possessors from achieving those ends. When a moral agent reasons with herself about whether or not to do something, conduciveness of that action to our naturalistic ends should not be considered a moral reason. Hursthouse thinks

⁵ Some virtue ethicists such as John McDowell claim that "virtuous person sees things aright and that such a person would hold that if an action was necessary for the life of virtue it necessarily could involve 'no loss at all'" (Copp and Sobel, 531). It seems that McDowell sees the aforementioned war hero as *eudaimon*.

that we validate our perceived virtues with respect to our naturalistic ends and that these virtues and their corresponding v-rules should be seen as moral reasons for action. Here, the question arises about why I should not tell a small lie and become an honest person for the rest of my life when I know that that small lie will further my (and perhaps others') naturalistic ends. After all, virtues are in place precisely because they further those ends. To such an objection Hursthouse would reply that although virtues are partially validated due to their conduciveness to our naturalistic ends, we should aim at *eudaimonia* which is a moralized state. I shall return to this issue later.

The second clarification is about the transformation of our analysis from naturalism to ethical naturalism. As Hursthouse mentions,

one very obvious way in which our ethical evaluations are a bit different is that we hive off overall evaluations that supervene on our evaluations of our physical aspects—our parts and operations, at least—into human biology and/or medicine. The evaluation of someone as a good, physically healthy, specimen of humanity is, for us (as it was not, perhaps, for the ancient Greeks) quite distinct from those evaluations we call 'ethical' (OVE 206-7).

What we are concerned with in ethical naturalism (as opposed to naturalism *tout court*) is our ethically relevant aspects, aspects which give rise to (1) our reactions (of course, not purely physical ones), (2) our actions which spring from our desires and emotions, and (3) our actions which issue from reason (OVE 207). We already know that these relevant aspects are virtues and vices. Here, one might again struggle to discover the basis on which we leap from naturalism to ethical naturalism. That is, how and why we should ignore our physical aspects in evaluating a person as an overall good or bad human animal. I shall return to this question (and other related questions such as why we should evaluate plants and animals at the level of species and not at the level of subspecies or genus) later in this chapter.

2.3 Plato's Requirement on the Virtues

Let us now investigate how ethical naturalists come up with their list of virtues. In Hursthouse's analysis, moral virtues are validated based on two main theses and one supplementary thesis. She calls them "Plato's requirement on the virtues." They are as follows:

- (1) The virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*.)
- (2) The virtues make their possessor a good human being. (Human beings need the virtues in order to live well, to flourish *as* human beings, to live a characteristically good, *eudaimon*, human life.)
- (3) The above two features of the virtues are interrelated (OVE 167).

In addition to the naturalistic thesis discussed in the previous section (*i.e.*, thesis two) Hursthouse claims that virtues are beneficial to their possessor. For Hursthouse, being a good human and being good for humans mutually validate virtues. That is, to identify moral excellences and distinguish them from both vices and morally indifferent habits and skills, we employ two interrelated criteria: the moral virtues make us good as human beings (they are conducive to our naturalistic ends) and they benefit us.

Let us elaborate on the validation of virtues by looking at some examples. Consider the virtue of honesty. Honesty is a virtue because honest people generally flourish and live well; honesty tends to benefit its possessor. A dishonest person is always anxious and distressed about what he should or should not say. Nevertheless, people know that he just pretends. If he is beloved, he knows this love arises because of the façade he presents, and little can be worse than having this bitter knowledge (OVE 168). Hursthouse is aware that being honest (or courageous, trustworthy, etc.) on a particular occasion might severely harm its possessor (remember the war hero in the previous section). Yet she thinks being virtuous is the "only reliable bet" (OVE 172). (I will come back to this issue later in this chapter.) Moreover, relationships in a human social

group would collapse if there were no trust between its members. As she maintains, honesty “enables human beings to rely on each other, trust each other and form intimate relationships, learn from each other, do science, run various beneficial and/or worthwhile institutions efficiently” (OVE 168). Indeed, honesty makes its possessor a good human being, as well. By employing the two criteria of being beneficent and making a person good as a member of our species, Hursthouse tries to validate the standard list of moral virtues.

It is noteworthy that in the Aristotelian tradition, there is another line for validating virtues. If virtues are beneficial for a moral agent and make her a good human being, then they bring about psychic harmony for that agent; virtues have something to do with human emotions. This conduciveness to the psychic balance is why Aristotle argues that virtues lie in a mean (intermediate):

virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b15-29)

For example, the virtue of courage is related to the emotions of fear and confidence. Having no fear leads someone to be temerarious and rash; it is a moral defect equal to being a coward. It should be noted that “lies in a mean” does not mean “lies in the middle.” Perhaps being a courageous person is closer to being a rash person rather than to being a coward. It is the

job of a virtuous person's practical reason to discern where the mean lies. Below is a classic list of virtues identified by Aristotle:⁶

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	EXCESS	MEAN	DEFICIENCY
Fear and Confidence	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness/Self-indulgence	Temperance	Insensibility
Getting and Spending (minor)	Prodigality	Liberality	Illiberality/Meanness
Getting and Spending (major)	Vulgarity/Tastelessness	Magnificence	Pettiness/Stinginess
Honour and Dishonour (major)	Vanity	Magnanimity	Pusillanimity
Honour and Dishonour (minor)	Ambition/empty vanity	Proper ambition/pride	Unambitiousness/undue humility
Anger	Irascibility	Patience/Good temper	Lack of spirit/unirascibility
Self-expression	Boastfulness	Truthfulness	Understatement/mock modesty
Conversation	Buffoonery	Wittiness	Boorishness
Social Conduct	Obsequiousness	Friendliness	Cantankerousness
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness
Indignation	Envy	Righteous indignation	Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness

It seems that Aristotle thinks these character traits are good for us in any society and in any situation; thus, these virtues are ahistorical and independent of culture. However, the details of the moral virtues that Aristotle offers clearly show the limitations of this list, and thus, not surprisingly, modern virtue ethicists have modified Aristotle's list of virtues. They have also altered the content of the classical virtues when they think it appropriate. For instance, the virtue

⁶ These are Aristotle's virtues listed in *Nicomachean Ethics*. I used this website to prepare this table: https://www.cwu.edu/~warren/Unit1/aristotles_virtues_and_vices.htm

of charity is not in the original list proposed by Aristotle, but is inserted by later Christian thinkers and accepted by contemporary virtue ethicists.⁷ On the other hand, the virtue of magnificence in the sense that Aristotle understood it does not make sense in contemporary societies. In our contemporary understanding of virtue, the Aristotelian virtues of magnificence and liberality are modified and combined into the virtue of generosity.

To be sure, several virtues listed above are still considered virtues; yet it does not seem that their moral contents are independent of the culture in which they are practiced. For instance, Aristotle's account of courage emphasizes being a warrior, taking up arms to defend one's city-state. Being a pacifist, viewed from the perspective of those in ancient Greece, was equal to timidity. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi defines the character trait of courage as standing one's ground without resorting to any kind of aggressive measures. Being a warrior as in ancient Greece, viewed from the perspective of devout Hindus,⁸ is equal to being excessively aggressive. Now, one might conclude that Aristotle (as an ancient Greek man) was wrong or that Gandhi's understanding of courage was improper. After all, disagreement *per se* does not show that there is no correct moral view. Perhaps this example only shows how we begin with different moral perspectives (as Hursthouse admits). The question is whether Hursthouse's naturalistic enterprise has enough resources at its disposal to show that in situations where there are conflicting culturally induced moral views on virtues, one view is the correct one. Or, we might ask how it might at least bring these incompatible understandings of virtues one or two steps closer to one

⁷ Faith, hope and charity (sometimes love) are often referred to as the 'theological virtues' and were added to the classical virtues by Christian thinkers on the basis of revelation. In any case, contemporary virtue ethicists have good reasons for keeping charity in their own list of virtues.

⁸ It should be noted that there is a warrior tradition in India, yet, as far as I am concerned in this thesis, Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement was inspired by certain deep currents in Hindu thought.

another. In the rest of this chapter, I will concentrate on the three aforementioned Platonic theses for validating moral virtues to see whether they can save Hursthouse's theory from relativism.

2.4 How Virtues benefit Their Possessors?

As we saw, if in her course of life, one achieves the four aforementioned naturalistic ends in accordance with our characteristic way of going on, that is, in the rational way, she is, in Aristotelian terms, an *eudaimon* person. One can be a good or virtuous person, that is, possess moral virtues, yet still not enjoy *eudaimonia*. For, in the Aristotelian tradition, in addition to virtues, *eudaimonia* also requires external goods. If being virtuous is constitutive of the *eudaimon* life (that is, possessing moral virtues such as honesty, courage, modesty and so forth, is the necessary condition of being *eudaimon*), the question remains of how we can use this moralized concept of *eudaimonia* for validating moral virtues (on the basis of Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis). Apparently, we end in a circular argument. That is, in this case, we award a human attribute the title of 'moral virtue' because it is conducive to our *eudaimonia*, yet moral virtues already have been incorporated in the concept of *eudaimonia*. It seems that we simply beg the question in validating the moral virtues by claiming they are beneficial for us by enabling us to flourish. However, Hursthouse's position is complicated and needs clarification. As I have mentioned, Hursthouse thinks there is a 'third way.'

Let us now investigate *On Virtue Ethics* to see why and how Hursthouse thinks virtues benefit us.⁹ As I mentioned in the Aristotelian tradition, being virtuous is considered a necessary

⁹ Chapter eight of *On Virtue Ethics* sometimes reads as though Hursthouse simply uses a neutral concept of flourishing in validating moral virtues based on their beneficence for their possessors. Hursthouse's writing is so equivocal that Copp and Sobel, two prominent critics of *On Virtue Ethics*, write: "one of the advantages of Hursthouse's proposal, as we have been understanding it, is that it does not depend on a moralized conception of flourishing" (531). However, Hursthouse, in numerous places, explicitly rejects the idea of grounding virtue on a neutral conception of *eudaimonia*. It is also interesting that McDowell vehemently rejects any attempt to validate

condition for being *eudaimon*; nevertheless, one can be virtuous and thus a good human being and still not fare well. Hursthouse, however, claims that being virtuous is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for happiness (see Copp and Sobel 526). She appears to be saying that, for example, a Nazi who fled to South America with goods plundered from the murdered Jews and lived the rest of his life joyously (that is, with a conscience free of guilt), is a counter example for the necessity of virtue for a happy life (OVE 173). Hursthouse thinks virtue benefits its possessor in the way that observing a rigorous regimen helps the observant person to have a healthy life. Observing a healthy diet does not guarantee that one has a salubrious and vigorous life to a certain age, nor is it necessary for this kind of wholesome life. We might see people who smoke, consume alcohol immoderately, and are disposed to eat high-calorie and fast foods, yet they enjoy a vigorous life even in their old age. Similarly, Hursthouse argues, being virtuous is the most reliable and thus rational path towards wellbeing. Although it might be the case that being virtuous harms the possessor of the virtue, yet there is no other ‘reliable bet’ to benefit ourselves. Being non-virtuous in this erratic world would likely harm rather than benefit us. Apparently, when Hursthouse insists that being virtuous is the most reliable path towards happiness, she is somehow trying to show that possessing virtues, even if such possession is seen from a neutral perspective (that is, from outside of morality and not necessarily from the perspective of a virtuous person), benefits their possessors. I am not alone in this reading.¹⁰ For instance, Copp and Sobel, two prominent critics of Hursthouse, thinks she has an edge on

virtues on the basis of their beneficence for us exactly because of the fact that flourishing is a moralized concept. If virtue demands me to die, well, it is good for me. For McDowell, the question of beneficence of virtue is simply out of place. I will come back to this issue in few lines.

¹⁰ Indeed, Hursthouse’s regimen argument (and other related claims such as considering the aforementioned Nazi who fled to South America to be a happy man), gives the impression that Hursthouse tries to validate moral virtues from a neutral point of view. In the following, I try to reinterpret and modify Hursthouse’s argument to make it compatible with her professed aim of validating morality from within.

McDowell and Annas exactly because her argument “does not depend on a moralized conception of flourishing.” They write:

Julia Annas has claimed, for instance, that there is no adequate morally neutral conception of a *eudaimon* life, and that virtue is necessary for *eudaimonia* [“Virtue Ethics” 521]. John McDowell has claimed that a virtuous person sees things aright and that such a person would hold that if an action was necessary for the life of virtue it necessarily could involve “no loss at all.” [“The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle’s Ethics” 369]

But one of the advantages of Hursthouse’s proposal, as we have been understanding it, is that it does not depend on a moralized conception of flourishing (531).

Despite this advantage, Copp and Sobel think that, at the end of the day, Hursthouse’s first platonic thesis fails. They advance a persuasive argument doubting the viability of Hursthouse’s claim that possessing a full version of virtues benefits its possessor. They agree that being completely devoid of virtues would certainly be devastating for our wellbeing (527). Nonetheless, they argue that a certain degree of vices combined with the less-than-full-virtues is the most reliable path to happiness. In reply to Hursthouse, who takes the fact that most parents cultivate virtues in their young children for their own sake as a sign showing that possessing virtues tend to benefit their possessors (OVE 175), Copp and Sobel propose a counter-case. They argue that when a promising college student decides to participate in social activities to help poor but dangerous neighborhoods, the “paradigm of concerned parents” tends to modify their initial desire to cultivate a full version of virtues in their children (528). Hursthouse, however, has something to say about such objections. She argues that in vicious times (perhaps in an age when wild capitalism combined with racism results in rundown and squalid neighbourhoods), parents tend to cultivate a tailored versions of virtues in their children. Nonetheless, she thinks that the cultivation of the tailored versions of virtues indeed strengthens her claim that virtues benefit their possessors. Hursthouse contends that the aforementioned parents do not dispense with

virtues altogether because they hope that in the better time to come, their children will benefit themselves by restoring the full version of virtues in themselves (OVE 176). Here, it seems that Hursthouse surreptitiously invokes the conception of an ideal society when she talks about the better times which will come. She forgets that we begin our ethical inquiry from within an acquired ethical perspective. People living in vicious time and societies are supposed to construct this ideal virtuous society (in theory) by validating and amending their existing understanding of virtues through the Platonic theses. It is simply begging the question to claim that in a better time (in an ideal or near to ideal society) a full version of virtues benefit their possessors. Especially in the chaotic and vicious time, there is a superabundance of conflicting theories and dreams about an ideal society. Each group would inculcate in their children a tailored version of virtues in accordance with their own ideals. I will revisit the issue of vicious times and worried parents for a different purpose in this section. My argument that Hursthouse surreptitiously invokes an ideal society to justify her claim about what we can infer from inculcating a tailored version of the virtues in children in vicious times becomes clearer there.

Indeed, Hursthouse's problem is doubled. When Hursthouse talks about vicious times, her reader gets the impression that she lives in a virtuous society where being fully virtuous is the most reliable path for benefitting the possessors of virtues. Her remarks hint that the vicious times and societies were in the past or are somewhere else in the world. Yet in all actual societies, here and there, there are some vicious aspects even if we are not always aware of these aspects. Even if Hursthouse, in order to validate a certain understanding of virtues, shows us that adhering to those virtues in her own society is the most reliable way of benefiting its possessors, if her society is indeed a non-ideal society, the thus validated virtues would not be full-virtues. It is likely that those virtues go along with vicious aspects of her society. In a non-ideal society, a

non-ideal version of virtues would be the most reliable way to benefit its possessors. In any case, it is difficult to see how Plato's first requirement on the virtues can help Hursthouse validate moral virtues more than can a mixture of vices and virtues. What we have access to are these actual societies, and in these actual societies, Hursthouse's first thesis does not hold.

At this point, on behalf of Hursthouse, one might reject these objections by claiming that what we should aim at is not an instrumental good. After all, being virtuous is an integrated part of flourishing. We should not forget the wording of the first Platonic thesis: "The virtues benefit their possessor. (They enable her to *flourish*, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*)" (my emphasis, OVE 167). When Copp and Sobel claim that possessing a mixture of vices and virtues is the most reliable path towards happiness, they aim at an instrumental concept of good. Now, on behalf of Copp and Sobel, I reply that it is a trivial claim that being virtuous is the most reliable path towards virtuous life. Although being virtuous (call it internal good) is an integrated part of happiness, according to Aristotle, happiness needs, at least to some extent, external goods.¹¹ Should Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis have any use in validating virtues, either Hursthouse must demonstrate that being fully virtuous (possessing internal good) is the most reliable path for bringing about external goods or, at least, Hursthouse should show that being fully virtuous is the most reliable path towards achieving the first and third naturalistic ends (that is, individual survival, freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment which are related to individuals' gain). That is, the cases such as the aforementioned war hero and the Nazi in the South America are so rare that we can ignore them; generally, being fully virtuous facilitates our efforts to achieve those ends. In both cases, at least in our non-ideal societies, it seems Copp and

¹¹ External goods include material prosperity, good reputation, power, honor, friends, etc. We might think of goods of the body such as health, physical strength, agility, etc. as things between external and internal goods.

Sobel's less-than-fully-virtuous protagonist outdoes Hursthouse's fully virtuous character. Apparently, if one fosters in herself and her children less-than-full-virtues, she, as a result, does not consistently agonize over the vicious aspects of her society and will thereby enjoy more and suffer less. Again, by applying the first Platonic requirement on the virtues, we probably validate a mixture of vices and virtues. On the other hand, the adoption of a moralized concept of happiness as our goal makes trivial that virtues "enable their possessor to flourish, to be, and live a life that is, *eudaimon*" (ibid). We simply 're-express' our initial ethical perspective instead of validating moral virtues.

Hursthouse might still have a way of conceding some points and thereby saving the first Platonic thesis. As the reader may have already noticed, Copps and Sobel's semi-immoralist protagonist wilfully aims at being less-than-fully-virtuous. Let us simply dismiss the semi-immoralist personalities and confine ourselves to people who aim at being fully virtuous. For these people, it is enough to see that living virtuously generally benefit us. Perhaps, As Copp and Sobel argue, it is not the most reliable path for bringing about external goods or achieving the first and third naturalistic ends, yet it tends to bring about good rather than harm for us. This modification of Hursthouse's argument, I think, is compatible with her "programmatic" project (OVE 163). That is, we do not aim at grounding virtues through Plato's requirements on virtues. We inevitably start from an acquired ethical perspective. We already have a conception of the virtues in our mind, and we want to validate and amend our conception of virtue 'plank by plank.' Now suppose that we have a wrong conception of the virtuous life; we mistakenly take a life which is less-than-fully-virtuous as a fully-virtuous life. Perhaps we still consider honesty a virtue, yet our understanding of honesty allows us to tell a lie when doing otherwise hurts the feelings of the others. Conversely, we may have a mistaken understanding of honesty which

prompts us to recklessly refrain from silence when it is appropriate for the wellbeing of ourselves and others. We begin from an acquired ethical understanding of virtue (though a mistaken one) and we genuinely want to rectify it. The worry is that we can happily validate this flawed understanding of virtue by embarking on the first thesis of Plato's requirement on the virtues. Suppose I have a mistaken understanding of the virtue of honesty which prompts me to recklessly refrain from silence when silence is appropriate. If someone objects to me that this understanding of honesty is frequently harmful, I can firmly reply, "Well, I know. But I am honest in order to have a virtuous life; and being honest is an inseparable part of being virtuous. I do not mind if it sometimes brings about harmful outcomes. Being honest most of time is beneficial and it is enough for me to validate the virtue of honesty." I can also refer to the story of the aforementioned war hero to consolidate my point. In the opposite way, a person who thinks we can justifiably tell lies if doing otherwise hurts the feelings of others may validate her understanding of virtue.

At this point, in order to save the first Platonic thesis, Hursthouse might argue that we should begin by validating a virtue according to the second Platonic thesis (naturalism). Then we can apply the first thesis. By doing so, we might find out that the two aforementioned understandings of the virtue of honesty should be amended. We arrive at the third version of the virtue of honesty, and by applying the modified version of the first Platonic thesis, we consolidate our validation. In this regard, the third naturalistic end is noticeable (characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain). Two paragraphs earlier, I suggested that apparently if we foster in ourselves the attitudes amenable to the vicious aspects of our societies, we would fare better. Yet it still may be the case that people who possess a true and pure version of virtues will achieve an inner peace and psychic harmony that will be missed by those who lack this purity. If

psychology or any other empirical discipline demonstrates that a steadfast virtuous person, who wields a true comprehension of virtue, will have a better life (that is, a life of inner amity and harmony) in comparison to the less-than-fully-virtuous common people and the people who command a wrong conception of virtue, then Hursthouse can effectively use this empirical study to validate virtues in her programmatic enterprise.

Unfortunately, there is no such empirical study. Indeed, Hursthouse's example of the Nazi in South America and other similar instances suggest that we should not expect it, either.¹² Yet there is something in Hursthouse similar to the concept of inner peace which does a fair job. She introduces the 'smile factor' as "a shorthand description for the indications of enjoyment—that things are done with zest and enthusiasm, anticipated and recalled in certain tones of voice with certain facial expressions, and in a certain vocabulary, and so on" (OVE 185). According to Hursthouse, the fact that the life of virtue is satisfying and enjoyable "is not solely a matter of a special employment of the terms 'enjoyable' and 'satisfying' that only virtuous can understand" (ibid). We have shared ground with an immoralist. The immoralist understands that virtuous people enjoy themselves, though she might look at them with contemptuous pity. Virtuous people also understand that an immoralist, such as the aforementioned Nazi, is enjoying himself. Yet those who take morality seriously dismiss him promptly in virtue of his immorality. If virtuous people act in the way that an immoralist acts, they would hate themselves. They suffer. The immoralists, also, would agonize over acting virtuously. They would regret the missed

¹² Moreover, similar to the way Copp and Sobel show that being less than-fully-virtuous would be the most reliable path to benefit a moral agent, one might claim that being-less-than-fully virtuous would help an agent more fully achieve her naturalistic ends. To this objection Hursthouse can reply that virtues generally help the members of our species achieve happiness. If we find out a seemingly less-than-full-virtue is conducive for members of our species to achieve their natural ends, well, that seemingly-less-than-full-virtue is indeed a full virtue. Although it seems that this reply is satisfying, in the next section I shall argue that what is a less-than-full-virtue (or, even worse, is a vice) in one specific culture/form of life might work as a virtue in a different culture/form of life.

opportunities to benefit themselves. I grant Hursthouse that by employing this strategy, she can dismiss the immoralist without further discussion; she can validate morality from within. Moreover, she can dismiss Copp and Sobel's protagonist who knowingly aims at being less-than-fully-virtuous. However, this smile factor would not help people who unbeknownst to themselves possess a wrong version of virtues; such people probably could not correct their wrong concept of virtues even if they wholeheartedly aim at being fully virtuous. They probably are happy with their wrong understanding of virtue.

This latter point leads us to a greater problem with Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis. As I shall argue, Hursthouse's concept of the smile factor, in particular, and the first Platonic thesis, in general, are highly vulnerable to cultural relativism. That is, when we apply the first platonic thesis in the context of a specific culture/tradition, we likely validate the pervasive understanding of virtue in that culture. In other words, if, through the test of the beneficence of virtue for its possessors, we can rectify our initial understanding of virtues a plank or two, we amend it with respect to the norms of the culture in which we are immersed.

Before I investigate the vulnerability of Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis to cultural relativism, it is appropriate to prevent a possible objection. As previously mentioned, Hursthouse might argue that we should first validate virtues using the second of Plato's requirements on virtues and then check it by way of the first thesis. Even if I demonstrate the vulnerability of the first thesis to cultural relativism, virtues being beneficial for their possessors is just one line of the interrelated strategies in validating virtues. Being virtuous also make us good *qua* human being. Two points should be emphasized here. The first point is that, as I shall argue in the next section, the second thesis itself is open to the dangers of cultural relativism. If I am right in my contention that both the first and second theses are incapable of adjudicating between rival

culturally-induced conceptions of one virtue or set of virtues, then, likely, they are further incapable of adjudicating between those rival conceptions even when we simultaneously apply them in validating moral virtues. Secondly, in section seven of this chapter, I will argue that sometimes the first and second theses of Hursthouse's Platonic enterprise do not conform with each other. Sometimes, they move in opposite directions. These issues prevent Hursthouse from claiming that even if her Platonic theses are individually fallible, together they will do the job of validating a solid articulation of virtues.

Let us now come back to our previous discussion. Evidently moral virtues are primarily developed through moral education fostered in a culture. When we begin our ethical journey, the course considered as acting in accordance with, or contrary to, virtue, to a great extent is determined by the culture in which we are immersed. That is, for the most part, cultural norms specify our acquired ethical perspective; these norms define the content and meaning of moral virtues in the first place. Therefore, I interpret Hursthouse's concept of an acquired moral outlook as something social that *we* possess, and not something peculiarly individuated that *I* possess.¹³ When my ethical perspective differs from someone else's moral outlook, for the most part, it is due to difference between *our* shared form of life and *their* shared form of life.

If I am right in claiming that we primarily acquire our ethical perspective from our culture, it is imaginable that someone who acts immodestly from the perspective of my particular culture (call it culture A) may not consider himself as acting immodestly from the perspective of his culture (call it culture B); on the contrary, his culture might actually endorse and support his

¹³ I do not pretend that by these few sentences I have demonstrated that our acquired ethical perspective is a shared and social concept. Perhaps it needs another thesis to establish this point. Yet for the purpose of this thesis, it suffices to say that even if an acquired ethical perspective can be private, it only exacerbates Hursthouse's quandary of relativism.

actions. Thus someone from culture B (call it person β) acting in that way (which person α from culture A might consider immodest) would reasonably argue that his behavior benefits him (including enjoying the smile factor). Note that α and β might offer an identical (or very similar) argument in favor of their modesty to an immoralist. Yet can they offer each other a convincing argument so that one agent can replace a 'plank' or two of her ethical outlook in favor of the other person's outlook? Surely they can, but they cannot do so from within their own (disparate?) acquired ethical perspective in terms of the beneficence of virtues for their possessors.

Let me here make a bold claim: in a community of human beings, a web of value-laden concepts such as culture and socioeconomic structure determine what benefits us. Indeed, Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis should be corrected in this way: in order that virtues benefit their possessors, one should first be virtuous, and moreover, should happen to live in a sufficiently virtuous society in which one's concept of virtue is coherent with the established and shared understanding of virtue in that society. To illuminate why I corrected Hursthouse's first Platonic thesis, it is timely to come back to Hursthouse's discussion on being virtuous in evil times. Hursthouse writes:

In evil times, life for most people is, or threatens to be, nasty, brutish, and short and *eudaimonia* is something that will be impossible until better times come. And in the hope that better times will come, and that their children, at least, will live to enjoy them, many parents, living under the most oppressive and dangerous regimes, have still tried to inculcate some version of virtue in their children. No doubt they have taught them versions tailored to the extreme circumstances in which they live; no doubt they have to lay great emphasis on prudence, to teach a caution about, and detachment from, others that would count as lacking trust and being callous in a better society (OVE 177).

Here, Hursthouse claims that although in vicious societies and times, being fully virtuous would be deleterious for a virtuous person, let alone of benefit to her, yet, because virtuous people have the hope that better times will come, they eschew to aim at being completely

unvirtuous (for, in a virtuous time which is yet to come, their virtuousness would be beneficial for them). It was mentioned that Hursthouse's claim rests on a crucial presupposition: we know in advance what a vicious or virtuous society is and thus hope that the society becoming virtuous would benefit us. Yet she must argue for this claim. As I argued before, to know what is a virtuous society (and when is a better time) first we should possess a correct conception of virtues. That is, we should first validate and amend our initial version of virtues by employing the first and second Platonic thesis. Therefore, the question arises about whether we really know that we are captives of an evil time and are not, instead, vicious people who would despise the advent of this new, virtuous age. As will become clear through the examples which I shall offer, in vicious times and places, people often begin with a vicious acquired ethical perspective. Their flawed conception of virtues (or simply their vices), due to the structure of their society, benefits them. If it is so, the worry is how it is possible for them to take up the first thesis of Hursthouse's Platonic enterprise in order to assess and amend their initial perspective, it seems more likely that they would reinstate their ship-like ethical perspective instead of amend it 'plank by plank.'

Indeed, what one dreams of as an ideal virtuous society from the perspective of different ages and disparate communities may seem to be a nasty dystopia from the outlook of someone from a different community or another age. We might even grant to Hursthouse that in evil times "many parents [...] have still tried to inculcate some version of virtue in their children" and thus in a decent time most parents would aim to rear their children fully virtuously; however, this fact, if it helps to validate moral virtues, does so only from within a specific culture. Commonly, traditional parents who see the modern age as a vicious time inculcate some version of traditional virtues in their children in the hope that better times will come. Looking from within a traditional

perspective one might conclude that he validates traditional virtues by applying the first Platonic thesis.

Let me offer another example which will clearly illustrate the above point. From our modern perspective, what a vast majority of past societies understood as utopia, is now considered as promoting extreme forms of vice. For instance, racism and supremacism, as we define them today, were pervasive and accepted cultural norms even up to the middle of the twentieth century. Correspondingly, in those past times, it was not beneficial to cultivate positive attitudes towards complete racial equality in children who came from white families. Moreover, people raised in this culture would not have enjoyed the smile factor when they were forced to give up the slaves. Yet time passed, and in the new age the defeated southern racists at the time of American Civil War taught their children a tailored version of racism, that of white supremacism “in the hope that better times will come;” that is, a time when they will restore slavery, the full version of racism. From our perspective, slave-owners were less than fully virtuous, yet we obviously must acknowledge that their lesser virtuousness was beneficial for them, based on the view from within their own moral perspective. Conversely, from the perspective of the Confederates, we are less virtuous than they, yet they likely acknowledge that our being less virtuous would be beneficial for us (of course, from within our ethical outlook, they might look at us with a contemptuous pity), given the specific structure and values of a modern society in the twenty-first century. The question is how Hursthouse’s first Platonic thesis might possibly prompt either side to rectify their view on virtues. In fact, Hursthouse’s first Platonic thesis does not have enough resources to adjudicate between rival culturally-induced conceptions of virtues and virtuous life.

Further examples consolidate the above argument on the relativistic corollaries of validating virtues on the basis of their beneficence for their possessors. In a Middle Eastern society, many modern values, such as gender equality, are considered as vicious Western propaganda. Apparently, it would not be beneficial for a child in a strongly traditional society to be brought up with a positive attitude towards gender equality. Although many traditional families partially surrender to modern western values, they still dream about the revival of traditional values. For instance, in Persian-speaking societies, there is a concept which does not have a good equivalent in English: *gheyrat*.¹⁴ It has sometimes been translated as ‘jealousy’ or ‘zeal.’ However, in Persian-speaking societies *gheyrat* has a positive connotation and, in fact, is considered a virtue. From the perspective of a Westerner, this concept entails being overprotective about any sexual attraction towards one’s relatives, including one’s wife, mother, sister(s) and so forth. Yet in a Middle Eastern society¹⁵ people expect a man to react, even aggressively, against any inappropriate attempt to attract (sexually) his aforementioned relative’s attention. Being ‘*bi gheyrat*’ (*i.e.*, possessing no *gheyrat*) would be deleterious for males’ well-being in such societies. Here, of course, Hursthouse, as a modern philosopher, tends to think that in a vicious time (that is, in contemporary Middle Eastern society) people tend to be less than fully just, even with respect to gender equality. Yet the people living at the time of slavery in the United States, or at the time of *gheyrat* in contemporary Middle East, would not understand them as vices and, more importantly, their societies had and have been structured so as to give rise to these ‘seeming’ virtues. Moreover, when they argue from their acquired ethical perspective, they can simply dismiss modern Westerners as immoralists. In any case, founding virtues on the

¹⁴ In Persian *gheyrat* (غیرت) is a word with an Arabic root; however, in contemporary Arabic, the word *hamas* (حماس) is used to convey the meaning of *gheyrat* in Persian.

¹⁵ To be sure, due to the process of Westernization, in some Middle Eastern societies such as Iran the concept of *gheyrat* has been modified and diluted in favour of modern life.

benefits they yield for us makes Hursthouse enterprise susceptible to cultural relativism. Every culture has aspects that other might find quirky, even though having a positive attitude towards these aspects would benefit the agents who live in those societies.

It should be emphasized again that if Hursthouse, through her enterprise of ethical naturalism, validates some virtues and their content, she has a way of avoiding relativism. If she first, on the basis of ethical naturalism, solidly defines the *eudaimon* person and the *eudaimon* society and then demonstrates that being virtuous in that society is beneficial for that person, the first Platonic thesis would reassure us that we possess a viable conception of virtue. It is not enough for Hursthouse to show that a group of people (call it group A) who have an acquired ethical perspective shared with Hursthouse, in a time they perceive as evil would cultivate tailored versions of naturalistic virtues in themselves and in their children “in the hope that better times will come.” Suppose we live in the time of dominance of the A’s version of virtues. If people of group A notice that another community (call it group B) of human beings considers A’s understanding of virtue as vice and tries “in the hope that better times will come” to cultivate a tailored B’s version of virtue in their children, then perhaps group A will seek to *ground* their virtues in something more solid than beneficence of virtues from within an acquired ethical outlook. We should first show to societies struggling in ‘their evil time’¹⁶ that something similar to Hursthouse’s naturalistic virtues is the true version of virtues and encourage them to instill in their children at least a tailored versions of these naturalistic virtues. That said, I now return to naturalism to see whether or not it provides a solid ground for validating moral virtues.

¹⁶ Perhaps a Middle Eastern society, from the perspective of Hursthouse.

2.5 The Aristotelian Teleological Evaluation of Plants and Animals: A Discredited

Approach

In the second section of this chapter, I discussed the naturalistic evaluation of plants and animals. By extending that analysis to human animals, virtue ethicists attempt to objectively validate moral virtues on the basis of natural facts. As I have explained, Hursthouse's second Platonic thesis for validating virtues asserts that "the virtues make their possessor a good human being." Virtues are character traits conducive to the four aforementioned ends of ethical naturalism. In the following, I will first criticize Hursthouse's naturalistic evaluation of plants and animals. I will then investigate whether or not extending this evaluation to humans is valid. I shall argue that this extension is not without its problems. In a third step, I will argue that even if we accept that the aforementioned naturalistic evaluation of plants and animals can legitimately be extended to the ethical evaluation of the human animal, it is nonetheless utterly incapable of adjudicating between incompatible understandings of virtue adopted in the different forms of life and cultures. For, as we shall see, our putative naturalistic ends are attainable in the different forms of life and cultures if a moral agent possesses a version of virtues fostered in the culture in which she happens to live. If it can be shown that Hursthouse's theory does not possess further resources to adjudicate between rival and incompatible forms of life (that is, to rule out one in favor of the other) we can safely conclude that Hursthouse's version of naturalism is open to cultural relativism.¹⁷

¹⁷ In this section I rely on David Copp and David Sobel's illuminating discussions of Hursthouse and Foot's naturalism. Their article inspired me to revise the earlier draft of this section. Yet my primary aim is to demonstrate the openness of ethical naturalism to relativism, an issue which is not a concern for Copp and Sobel in their article. (See Copp and Sobel, 532-543).

As I mentioned, my first aim in this section is to show why the naturalistic evaluation of a good plant and animal is problematic. In this regard, first, it is important to note that Hursthouse's appraisal of plants and animals is particularly at odds with what is now an established approach in the biology, the standard Darwinian theory of natural selection. Based on evolutionary theory, the chief goal of a biologic system is to transfer its genes to the next generation. If an organism evolves so as to have a very short life, yet is successful in gene transfer, from the perspective of an evolutionary biologist, it is much more successful than an organism which (1) preserves itself and (2) possesses "characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment" (OVE 202). In this vein, even conduciveness to the continuance of the species is highly problematic. Indeed, the persistence in transferring genes in a group of plants or animals can result in the emergence of a new species. It seems to me that the goal of nature (if we can legitimately use this term) is not the continuance of the species but the transferring of specific character traits which, in the long term, can bring about a sustainable life for the descendent organisms even if they are not of the same species as their predecessors (see Copp and Sobel, 535).¹⁸

In a similar way, it can be asked why the continuance of a subspecies is not the goal of reproduction. If mating between two subspecies can be conducive to the continuance of a species yet leads to the diminishing or even extinction of one of these subspecies, would Hursthouse recommend it as natural? Hursthouse's fourth criteria for evaluating social animals is equally elusive. She supposes that a good social animal should perform in her social group such that her performance be conducive to the first three criteria of the evaluation of animals. One might argue

¹⁸ For instance, it is a well-known fact that tigers and lions have a common ancestor, yet this ancestor is a separate species from both lions and tigers.

that when an alpha male in a group of lions is defeated, a lioness with cubs in that group should finally surrender to the dominant male and let him kill the cubs because, from the perspective of conduciveness to the survival of the species, if the lioness were to fight with the dominant male till she gets injured or killed, or otherwise saves her cubs, it would not be helpful for the continuance of the species. Suppose the defeated male lion belongs to the same subspecies as the lioness and the dominant male belongs to a different subspecies. It seems that we cannot easily take for granted that if the lioness stubbornly refuses to give up her cubs, she is a deficient lioness. In other words, it is not obvious that we should evaluate an individual animal at the level of its species and not at the level of its subspecies.

As Copp and Sobel maintain, “it needs to be explained why the species is the kind to focus on. That is, it will have to be better explained why [...] we should look especially to the evaluation of the individual as a member of the species, as Hursthouse recommends, rather than as the bearer of a specific genotype, as a member of the local herd or a local population, or as a member of a genus” (536). Indeed, Hursthouse’s analysis appraises an individual animal at the level of species precisely because it is helpful for ethical appraisal of human beings. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that in the case of human beings, assessment of an individual as a member of a species tacitly ignores the ethnic and racial differences between human groups. It is best fitted to the modern agenda of the equality between individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, creed and religion. They are assessed merely as human beings. We devised a theoretical tool—the enterprise of ethical naturalism—to validate (and amend ‘plank by plank’) our existing ethical outlook and its corresponding moral virtues. We did not discover a true theory to ground a new set of virtues from scratch. If this theoretical tool does not work, we shall throw it away: “if, as soon as we embarked on the naturalism project, it looked as though the character traits of charity,

justice, courage, honesty, etc. were not going to turn out to be good-making characteristics of human beings then, I would say, we had better give up on naturalism entirely” (OVE 211).

Although I do not think Hursthouse’s argument is persuasive for validating the framework of ethical naturalism focusing on our species, let us tentatively employ this framework in order to consider how it might validate moral virtues. Unfortunately, focusing on the human species has its drawbacks and cannot validate virtues in the way that Hursthouse hopes. For instance, it seems that the ethical naturalist framework can be interpreted such that it morally approves the gradual eradication of non-dominant cultures through social programs. *Prima facie*, this framework, in principle, can legitimize and perhaps morally recommend that some ethnicities and subcultures be assimilated by a more powerful culture and ethnicity if it can be shown that such assimilation is more conducive to the wellbeing and continuance of our species. For instance, consider the technological and cultural achievements of Western civilization. Apparently these achievements expand our life expectancy, secure the continuance of human race, and highly increase the opportunities for enjoyment and decrease the suffering of the people of the Western modern societies. Well, it seems that if we have an instrumentalist view to these ends, early colonizers had some moral grounds for their deeds. However, to use a contemporary moral issue in North America, one of the recent disasters in the history of the human species was white European settlers who tried to get rid of aboriginal culture and assimilate their race (sometimes through some social programs and sometimes by use of violence).

To be sure, Hursthouse rejects the above application of the naturalistic criteria. Indeed, she develops some interesting methods for validating moral virtues in the naturalistic framework which would help her to dismiss actions and practices which are apparently conducive for

furthering our naturalistic ends at the level of our species. However, as we shall see, Hursthouse's innovative method, though dexterous, is not successful in avoiding the aforementioned problems.

To see how Hursthouse tries to avoid such problems let us consider Hursthouse's defense of vegetarianism (in spite of her naturalistic rejection of Peter Singer's universal benevolence) and her claim that ethical naturalism does not denounce homosexual practices *tout court*.

Regarding vegetarianism, Hursthouse writes:

[M]ost of 'us' [...] act as we should when we refuse to eat meat and as we should not when we do not (in most, but by no means all, circumstances). And I do so (oversimplifying) on the grounds that (i) temperance (with respect to the pleasures of food) is a virtue, and (ii) that for most of 'us', eating meat is intemperate (greedy, self-indulgent). And ethical naturalism bears primarily on (i), not on (ii). I do not try to get to my ethical view about vegetarianism by starting with claims about how things are with respect to human beings eating meat (or not doing so). I start with (i)—a claim about how things are with respect to human beings being temperate, which, as it stands, says nothing about meat-eating at all, and it is that claim that (if ethical naturalism can fulfil its promise) I hope that it can help to justify. But, if it can, it would thereby have done most of its work; what can (if anything) justify (ii) will not, by and large, be drawn from ethical naturalism (OVE 227).

Hursthouse maintains that in the form of ethical naturalism she is defending "what is particularly evaluated are character traits, not, directly, actions or lives" (ibid). Thus, in the same way that she rejects meat-eating, she can legitimize homosexual activities, for "what is at issue is not a particular form of sexual activity or orientation, but character traits" (OVE 215). In Hursthouse's naturalism, we condemn a homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual person "who pursues sexual gratification as an end in itself, regardless of other considerations, who chafes at all abstinence, whose enjoyment is unaffected by the wishes of his partner" but not a homosexual or bisexual person because of his sexual orientation *tout court*; after all, he might be a temperate

person with respect to sex (ibid). On behalf of Hursthouse, one might argue that my claim that her ethical naturalism might allow eradication of non-dominant and unprivileged cultures and ethnicities is baseless. What is at issue are not the actions and practices that are helpful for furthering and improving the naturalistic ends for human species. That is, we might find abolishing subcultures and adopting assimilation policies towards other ethnicities as callous and unjust, even if such practices further the flourishing of our species in total.

Let us evaluate Hursthouse's strategy for validating moral virtues and assessing practices and actions based on thus validated virtues through another example. Suppose that we, as human beings, have the capacity to radically enhance our abilities for individual survival, profoundly improve our characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain, and thoroughly advance an individual function in a social group through employing genetic engineering, computer science, and neuroscience. As some futurists predict, these new enhanced abilities may end up creating something different from the human species. Indeed, it might result in the emergence of a new species which they call cyber-human –or, because of genetic engineering, future generations might be classified as super-human. If we were supposed to assess practices on the basis of their conduciveness or destructiveness to the four naturalistic ends, we apparently should conclude that although the aforementioned genetic and cybernetic enhancement would be helpful for the other three individual ends, they are not ethically permissible because such meddling with human nature might be completely destructive for the second naturalistic end of continuance of our species; we might thoroughly transform to another species.¹⁹ Yet it seems that by employing Hursthouse's innovative method in validating moral virtues, we should conclude that these kinds

¹⁹ Or, one might conclude that the four naturalistic ends do not hold together, and thereby the naturalistic enterprise collapses. I shall come back to this problem.

of interference with human nature, are praiseworthy and ought not to be condemned because there are several virtues such as compassion, charity, benevolence and prudence in tune with this move. As we can clearly see, Hursthouse's method for evaluating practices and actions might be paradoxical; that is, it approves of practices which result in total destruction of the second naturalistic end. The question is whether we can really validate moral virtues regardless of the related practices and actions which are conducive to, or destructive for, our naturalistic ends.

Let us put aside this question for a moment and consider another problem. As we saw in the case of cyber/super human, if we appraise moral practices and actions on the basis of their conduciveness to the four naturalistic ends, those ends might not hold together. Indeed, many examples could serve to illustrate that in evaluating familiar moral practices the four naturalistic ends might conflict occasionally with each other.²⁰ However, as we saw, Hursthouse can dismiss such examples by claiming that by applying the naturalistic framework, "what is particularly evaluated are character traits, not, directly, actions or lives" (OVE 227). Nonetheless, this problem will come back even if we aim at initially validating moral virtues through the naturalistic enterprise and then appraising moral practices and actions. Consider again those imaginary super humans, but this time suppose that they are not a different species; they are only a different kind of human being. The problem is that there would likely be a disparity between our natural ends and theirs. Perhaps they are Nietzschean-like super-humans, and a reader of this thesis may guess how much it would worry Hursthouse. Interestingly, Hursthouse considers this problem and writes, "we can interpret Thrasymachus, and more obviously Nietzsche [...], as saying that, rather like hive bees, human beings fall, by nature, into two distinct groups, the weak

²⁰ Specially the practices which are conducive to the first and third naturalistic ends, yet destructive to the fourth end.

and the strong [...] whose members must be evaluated differently, as worker bees and the drones or queens are” (OVE 255). For the Gaugin-like strong members of our species (or the super humans of the modern scientifically developed species) the “characteristic enjoyments are forms of self-realization or self-fulfilment.” These forms of self-realization, in their own right, may give rise to the “character traits which benefit the strong, enabling them to enjoy self-realization,” yet these character traits are in the standard list of vices for the human species (ibid). Hursthouse concedes that Nietzschean views pose a problem for the third naturalistic end of human species (characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain), yet she denies there is enough evidence for dismissing the third end. Let us grant to Hursthouse that we do not have enough evidence for discarding the third end of characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain till those *Übermenschs* come to the fore in the real world. Nevertheless, even if our species is not actually like bees, the important point is that Hursthouse clearly admits that unusual tendencies in some group of human beings threatens the consistency of our four naturalistic ends.

Now consider again homosexual behaviors. A disquieting question concerns how it is possible that in the case of homosexuals, for whom human nature is so devised that they do not aim at the second naturalistic end (continuance of our species), the putative naturalistic ends still remain unchanged. Instead of doubting the consistency of our putative naturalistic ends, Hursthouse simply modifies the centuries-held content of the virtue of temperance with respect to sexual behavior and happily validates her modern acquired ethical perspective. Moreover, as we saw, legitimizing action and practices regardless of the conduciveness of them to our naturalistic ends may result in odd outcomes (such as the eradication of our species). Hursthouse claims that homosexual practices are morally acceptable, although they are not conducive to and apparently are deleterious for our second naturalistic end (continuance of our species). It is

noteworthy that Hursthouse, by applying her method of validating moral virtues, also approves of the practice of celibacy. In the same way she approves of celibacy and homosexual behaviors, it seems that she is also committed to endorsing cybersex. That is, by adopting the method by which she validates the virtue of temperance with respect to the sex, we have no ground for disapproving of having cybersex with a robot or seeking sexual gratification using virtual reality simulators. At the time of writing this thesis (2016), we do not need to stretch our mind to the science fictions' land to imagine how much the spread of cybersex would be detrimental for the continuance and flourishing of human societies. This is why I find the claim that we can validate and give content to moral virtues regardless of the conduciveness of their related practices and actions to our putative naturalistic ends as utterly flawed.

To clarify this point further, remember how Hursthouse validates the virtue of honesty. According to Hursthouse's account, this virtue is conducive to one's individual survival and also helpful for maintaining the social order which is important to the continuance of our species and, presumably, to helping us be free of pain. Rejection of the practice of telling lies (at least, for the vast majority of cases) has already been incorporated into the concept and articulation of the virtue of honesty. If the virtue of honesty is devoid of approval or disapproval of certain practices and actions how we can make sense of it?²¹ Now arises the question of how Hursthouse

²¹ It seems to me that one of the reason that Hursthouse claims that in her version of ethical naturalism "what is particularly evaluated are character traits, not, directly, actions or lives" is her theory of right action and the corresponding claim that virtue is the primary concept in ethics. If Hursthouse rejects some practices (such as homosexual relationships) because they are not conducive to our natural ends, it tacitly means she gives up her aspiration to define right actions based on virtues. Therefore, along with the practices conducive to (or deleterious for) our putative naturalistic ends not being incorporated in the definition of virtues, approving or disapproving other moral practices are not constitutive of virtues, as well. If it is so, then the question of what is a virtue at all remains open. How can Hursthouse possibly make sense of it and explain a virtue to another person? In the first chapter, for the sake of argument, I granted Hursthouse that there is such a thing as character traits which are independent of the concept of right action and argued that articulation of the concept of right action on the basis of these independent character traits are inevitably relativistic. Now I want to take back what I have granted Hursthouse and claim that an

claims that despite the ostensible conflict of homosexual activities with the end of continuance of our species, we can somehow articulate and validate the virtue of temperance (with respect to sexual behavior) in a way that it is neutral to the practice of homosexuality.

It seems that either Hursthouse should reject homosexual activities (which is at odds with the canons of our modern ethical outlook) or she should concede that for some members of our species, the second and third ends are not compatible. They cannot mate with the opposite sex with characteristic enjoyment. This latter case endangers the integrity of the four naturalistic ends (as is the case if the category of human beings, like bees, are composed of different kinds with different natures). Accepting the former case may prompt Hursthouse to “give up on naturalism entirely,” for, embarking “on the naturalism project” leads us to some conclusion which is entirely at odds with our current moral intuitions (see OVE 211). In the same way, it seems meat-eating is contributing, at least more than vegetarianism, to individual survival, the continuance of our species,²² characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain²³ and good functioning of our social life. It strikes me as odd when Hursthouse claims that the content of the virtue of temperance (with respect to food) is independent of the practice of meat-eating so entrenched in our social life. Based on previous arguments in the case of homosexual behaviors and meat eating, I think it is clear now that Hursthouse would have difficulty showing that assimilation policies towards aboriginal people are morally unacceptable in her ethical framework. Let us now conclude this section by emphasising that founding ethics on the notions of human nature and human species will not validate virtue as Hursthouse expected. This fact

articulation of virtue which does not presuppose anything about what is right thing to do, indeed, does not make sense.

²² As I write, under a new law, Italian parents who impose vegan diets on their children could be jailed.

²³ Is it not an established evolutionary fact that our ancestors began eating meat several thousand years ago? Is it not a fact that such established practices, evolutionarily, have already shaped our taste?

becomes more worrisome if we notice how naturalism is a passé theory in evaluating plants and animals (in comparison to Darwinism) and how Hursthouse ascent from naturalism to ethical naturalism has been a shaky leap.

2.6 Incommensurable Forms of Life and Virtuous Character

As we saw in our discussion of the leap from naturalism to ethical naturalism, ethical naturalists, such as Hursthouse, maintain that in the ethical appraisal of human beings, the aspects which should be assessed are ethically relevant aspects and not human bodily characteristics. Moreover, human rationality marks a huge gap between us and other social animals. This rationality, according to Hursthouse, undermines the idea that “nature could be normative with respect to us” (OVE 220). We do not have a natural, characteristic way of going on which can tell us which members of our species are defective due to their violation of this natural characteristic way. Yet we do have a characteristic way of going on:

[O]ur characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do. Correspondingly, our characteristic enjoyments are any enjoyments we can rightly see as good, as something we in fact enjoy *and* that reason can rightly endorse (OVE 222).

Although “a ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do,” the naturalistic ends are still in place in the moral evaluation of a human being. A specimen of our species “is ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal, in the way characteristic of the species” (OVE 224). Indeed, because nature could not be “normative with respect to us” and because the “rational way is any way that we can rightly see as good,” as we saw in the previous section, Hursthouse thinks she can confer ethical legitimacy on the practices which *prima facie* are at

odds with our naturalistic ends (such as homosexual behavior) and she can repudiate practices which actually are conducive for naturalistic ends (such as meat-eating). Based on the observation that the vast majority of human beings are heterosexual and omnivorous, one cannot conclude that homosexual behaviors and vegetarianism are not ethically acceptable. After all, the majority of our fellow humans are not as ethically good as they should be. Contrary to Hursthouse, I have concluded that in the framework of ethical naturalism, validating virtues in a way that would legitimize practices at odds with the naturalistic ends and prohibit actions conducive to those ends, is highly dubious. Our naturalistic ends, as Hursthouse defines them, substantially constrain the content of what one “can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings” (ibid).

In this section, in some sense, I shall argue in an opposite direction. That is, it is not always the case that the four naturalistic ends over-determine or over-constrain the moral virtues in a way that would rule out practices which we intuitively consider ethically innocuous or, vice versa, approve practices which we immediately perceive as ethically wrong. On the contrary, sometimes, Hursthouse’s naturalistic framework, when applied to a specific culture, only reinstates or adjusts very little the initial culturally induced understanding of the virtues. The fact that nature is not normative with respect to us (which in its own right gives rise to the thesis that our characteristic way of going on is a rational way) transmutes our naturalistic ends. Our ends are completely dissimilar to the natural ends of other social animals. This case is especially conspicuous regarding the fourth naturalistic end of good functioning in a human social group. Our culturally induced values and acquired ethical perspective permeate into, and indeed, form the good functioning of human social groups. As we shall see, due to this fact, the virtues which

are allegedly validated based on our four natural ends, to a great extent, take their content from the traditions and cultures in which they are validated.

Here, on behalf of Hursthouse, one might argue that we could possibly show one specific tradition (perhaps modern Western tradition) is rationally superior to other traditions. If such is the case, although our naturalistic ends are susceptible to the cultural milieu in which we pursue them, we have a way of avoiding relativism. Yet such a claim will only take Hursthouse so far. First, it should be remembered that we are supposed to validate the moral virtues and based on this validation construct, in theory, an ideal/virtuous society, a society whose structures give rise or are amenable to virtuous living. Second, one should not forget that Hursthouse denies her enterprise of naturalistic validation of virtue is primarily concerned with practices. Indeed, she thinks that after the validation of virtues, we apprise practices based on these validated virtues. However, we know that, for the most part, traditions are an accumulation of practices. If good functioning in a human social group and probably other naturalistic ends are substantially determined by traditions/cultures in which Hursthouse's naturalistic validation of virtues is applied, Hursthouse's theory tacitly takes the morally right action from a tradition and, based on her choice of correct actions, defines the virtues. In other words, Hursthouse's theory cannot on its own determine the superior tradition/culture. If Hursthouse had a free-standing theory on right actions at her disposal, it would be easy for her to filter out some practices and, by extension, some traditions. However, we should remember from the first chapter of this thesis that according to Hursthouse, in virtue ethics, the fundamental concept is virtue, and thus she cannot use a theory of right action to rule out some practices in a tradition and thereby show that one specific form of life (traditions and cultures) is ultimately better in comparison to others. In other words, different forms of life are incommensurable (to a great extent) from the stand point of

ethical naturalism; that is, we cannot rationally favour one tradition/form-of-life over another. (A further argument consolidates this point in the following.) If I am right in these claims, it seems that Hursthouse must concede a great deal to moral relativism. Moreover, to consolidate my arguments in the first chapter, we can clearly see that her virtue theory is not independent of the concept of right action.

Before I begin my discussion about how our cultural background permeates the good functioning of a human social group, it is noteworthy to mention that at some points in *On Virtue Ethics* Hursthouse, if only tacitly, admits that her naturalistic framework is not immune to the charge of cultural relativism. Hursthouse claims that if our starting points are very different we cannot arrive at a similar understanding of virtue (OVE 240). She goes further by asserting that “one’s consequent judgement that someone is a good human being in so far as she possesses this character trait, or is not a bad one despite lacking it, will issue from a mixture of constraints imposed by nature and by the ethical outlook” (OVE 230). This assertion can be interpreted as a concession; that is, the enterprise of ethical naturalism cannot validate moral virtues on its own. At least certain elements of it are based on our previous moral outlook. Therefore, it might be the case that the rupture between factual and evaluative claims cannot be bridged, even ‘plank by plank.’ Even if we are persistent ethical naturalists, it might be the case that we cannot reach an agreement about moral virtues, notwithstanding the fact that we ameliorate our initial outlook through lessening the inevitable impact of our prejudices and cultural background by employing Hursthouse’s ethical naturalism. Let us take this concession as the pragmatist point that we are always in the middle, never outside a particular world view. Nonetheless, Hursthouse might argue that if our starting points, our acquired ethical outlooks, are very different (as is the case for disparate cultures) and thus we probably cannot eventually reach moral agreement, yet, at

least, we move in a right direction if we subscribe to Hursthouse's programmatic ethical naturalism.

Unfortunately, as we shall see, Hursthouse's naturalism cannot even assure us that we are moving in the right direction. As previously mentioned, ethical naturalism heavily draws on the sociality of human animals for its justification of virtues. A good human being should contribute to her social group. As much as a free-rider wolf is not a good member of its species, so a person who does not possess virtues conducive to our social life is not a good human. If we apply the analogy of the wolves to a group of human animals, we should remember that a pack of wolves defends itself against other packs of wolves. Analogically, we might say that a good human being defends his social group against other human groups, as well, and then note that human defence is not limited to the physical world; we also defend our common values and our shared form of life against other social groups. There is no natural fixed way of going on for human animals which constitutes and determines our social life. At least to some extent, what we "see as good, as something we have reason to do," is taken from our acquired ethical outlook. That is "our characteristic way of going on" which, at least partly, makes for our social life and determines the good functioning of a human social group, is constituted by our initial ethical outlook and our cultural background (see OVE 222).

There is a huge gap between human memberships in social groups and animals' memberships in social groups, and this gap has a crucial impact on the way we validate the character traits conducive to our natural ends. Let us first elaborate further on what constitutes a human social group or community in a concrete way. A social group of human beings is, for the

most part, a cultural entity; it is primarily defined by shared common values.²⁴ These values have something to do with our identity as a social group, such as being ‘Palestinian’ for the Palestinian people. These sort of groups strive to preserve their values, their culture, their language, their literature, their architectures and so forth. In short, as human beings, we often strive to maintain our shared form of life. Indeed, these shared forms of life, which are manifested in our everyday way and practice in our social groups, are the grounds on which one might reach the naturalistic ends. Perhaps because these social groups in our species are the basis for satisfying our basic needs, we are usually deeply committed to saving our shared forms of life. It should be noted that I am aware that there are some inevitable and gradual changes in any form of life. Indeed, there is sometimes a radical change in beliefs and practices of a social group, yet my point is not about the descriptive facts concerning gradual or drastic changes; rather, my point is about what is constitutive of the sociality of a community. In fact, this sociality rests on its members striving to preserve its central values and culture.

As I have previously argued, Hursthouse’s naturalistic framework cannot show that a specific form is a better way of life (in comparison to another form) with respect to its conduciveness to our allegedly naturalistic goals. Given this incommensurability, let us now investigate how this point impacts on the naturalistic validation of virtues. Indeed, the naturalistic end of good functioning in a human social community entails both implicit and explicit evaluative concepts which are not always shared by different cultures and forms of life. Such differences exist because a form of life/tradition/culture, for the most part, is actually an intertwined, complex web of practices. For instance, in validating the virtue of temperance with

²⁴ To be sure, some groups are defined through mere biological facts: women in general or 12 to 15 year-old boys. Yet here, we are not concerned with this kind of biologic membership, for this kind of groups are not the social communities which provide for us a milieu in which we can attain our naturalistic ends.

respect to sexual activity, the fact that a specific practice such as X in a certain situation in a specific culture gives rise to the emotion Y and has the meaning Z, to a great extent determines good functioning in a social group with respect to the virtue of temperance. On its face, this claim is bold, but this claim will become clear through examples given in the following discussion. The centrality of practice explains why, in the Polynesian society, what is considered as the virtue of temperance is different from what is considered as temperance in an Indian society. These different cultures have different initial moral perspectives which influence, and indeed determine, good functioning in a human social group. Yet Hursthouse might still insist that her ethical naturalism brings people with different initial ethical perspective closer to each other (instead of merely giving them terms allowing them to re-express their initial perspectives) due to the fact that we have four naturalistic ends. After all, the fourth naturalistic end of good functioning in one's social group is in place because it is conducive to the first three naturalistic ends of individual survival, contribution to the continuance of our species, and characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain). Unfortunately, this claim does not hold because, in the case of human beings, at least the second and third naturalistic ends, in their own right, are not merely biological ends.

In the case of participating in reproduction and continuance of our species, for instance, it seems that reproductive activities for human beings are not as purely a sexual activity as they are for non-human animals. In every culture we have specific norms which provide a backdrop for reproductive activities and bringing up children. It is a historically and anthropologically accepted fact that the Abrahamic understanding of the concept of 'family' pervasive in the West

is not the only way for giving birth to children or bringing them up. Some flourishing societies,²⁵ such as Polynesian societies, had a completely different understanding of sexual activities and the concept of family. In some societies, a broader notion of family is in place, with respect to sexual relationships and the corresponding responsibility for bringing up children. In these societies, the virtues related to sexual behavior, parenting, and so on have completely different meaning. As noted earlier, Hursthouse considers homosexual practices as a permissible form of sexual life if the person involved in the homosexual relationships is temperate with respect to sexual activity. Apparently, being temperate with respect to sexual activity, from Hursthouse's ethical outlook, entails not being promiscuous. Yet in Polynesian society, promiscuity is not a vice precisely because of their specific form of life. Quite the contrary, it is likely that being faithful to just one person is a vice. That is, being faithful to just one sexual partner suggests that that one is dodging the shared responsibility for the children of others. As seen, the second and fourth naturalistic ends in the case of human beings are intertwined in the complex web of practices in a specific form of life/tradition/culture. Consequently, Polynesians can embark on ethical naturalism and safely validate the 'virtue' of promiscuity from their own acquired ethical perspective. Indeed, an Indian, Iranian, or person having any other ethnicity or nationality can validate his own concept of the virtue of temperance in the same way.

To strengthen my point, let us consider the naturalistic end of characteristic enjoyment. This end is also strongly related to, and embodied in, the culture in which we happen to be immersed. In several cultures, dancing styles with explicit sexual themes would be considered both enjoyable and acceptable by social norms, but in a conservative Middle Eastern society, it would not. Indeed, such dancing is likely to be considered annoying. Numerous examples can

²⁵ Of course, in the context of this discussion, 'flourishing' is a value-laden concept.

dispel any doubt that our characteristic enjoyment is related to our sociality and is thus a value-laden concept.²⁶ Hursthouse supposes that in a programmatic way, ‘plank by plank,’ we can modify our initial outlook; however, the fact that our characteristic way of going on is a rational one, and therefore not determined by nature, makes the ends of good functioning of a social group, contributing to the continuance of our species, and characteristic enjoyment and freedom from pain value-laden concepts that are highly susceptible to the form of life which is already established in a community. We cannot validate the virtues in a specific society regardless of the well-entrenched practices in that society. Moreover, in the framework of ethical naturalism which Hursthouse offers, there is no objective criterion to measure which of these diverse forms of life better serves our allegedly natural ends. These issues severely undermine Hursthouse’s assumption that her method of validation has any vestige of objectivity. The enterprise of ethical naturalism does not possess enough resources to guide us in modifying our acquired ethical perspective for better ‘plank by plank.’

Others might disagree with what I have argued thus far. Based on some empirical observations, it might be argued that the disparate and conflicting practices that I have invoked are not as conflicting as they superficially seem to be. Critics might point to the example of different funeral practices. Although different societies engage in different funeral practices, all manifest respect for the dead. I would counter that my numerous examples show that, indeed, different forms of life in different communities give rise to different conceptions and articulations of virtues, even if the corresponding names of the virtues are the same. An old Durkheimian argument maintains that in the advent of human communities, what was helpful to sustain a particular society was not a specific totem they worshiped or the primitive religious

²⁶ Of course, we need basic physical and mental health to enjoy what is available in our inevitable cultural life.

beliefs they held, but the very existence of those totems and the very faithfulness of those people to their primitive religions that bestowed on primordial societies a pivot which consolidated the spirit of affinity and belonging to a common cause.²⁷ In the same vein, the validity and viability of particular cultural/moral practices and their corresponding moral virtues cannot be judged by natural facts about the natural/biologic stability of a particular human society. Indeed, the content of these moral and cultural practices is not decisive in the stabilizing of a human society; rather, the very existence of these moral and cultural practices is the stabilizing factor. To judge between these rival concepts of virtues, at the very least, we need some other ethical premises to amend and supplement the ethical naturalistic framework.

2.7 The Third Thesis of Plato's Requirement the Virtues

As we saw early in this chapter, Hursthouse claims that (1) “the virtues benefit their possessor,” (2) “the virtues make their possessor a good human being” and (3) these “two features of the virtues are interrelated” (OVE 167). Let us, for now, grant Hursthouse the viability of the first thesis, that virtues benefit the individuals who possess them. In this section, I will argue that a certain amount of individual vice might be beneficial and improve the good functioning of human social groups. In other words, it is not obvious that the first two theses of Plato's requirements on the virtues always move in the same direction. Sometimes, individual vices correlate positively with the collective benefits in a specific society.²⁸ That individual

²⁷ For a quick review of Durkheim's on totemic and primitive religions see Kenneth Thompson's *Emile Durkheim*, especially the third chapter pp. 98-117. In this book, Thompson quotes Durkheim as saying, “In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence” (99).

²⁸ Notice that here we are not concerned with collective or social vices. Ostensibly, collective vices become manifest in a society when the individual vices become tense in individuals and epidemic throughout the society. Thus, collective vices signify disorder in a society which needs to be treated. In contrast, as we shall see in the following discussion, it seems that our contemporary societies would fall into a state of disorder if they were completely devoid of the individual vices.

vices, in a greater community, can also lead to collective benefits and thus good functioning of a putative society can be shown by introducing some examples. For example, the vice of greed may have been necessary for the occurrence of the industrial revolution in nineteenth century Great Britain. If there had been no covetous industrialist at time who was willing to exploit the lower class for personal profit, then this industrial development might not have occurred. Of course, the collective benefits of industrialization are not obvious at all, especially from other, non-Western acquired ethical perspectives. From the perspective of indigenous Americans, surely the consequences of the industrial revolution (even the consequences which Westerners, after advent of environmentalism and green movement, still consider positive) seem devastating. Indeed, from the ethical perspective of aboriginal people, the modern attitude of putting nature on the rack to reveal her secrets is considered degenerate and despicable. Notwithstanding, I think from our Western ethical perspective, it is hardly deniable that the industrial revolution was, in general terms, beneficial for our social life. Such beneficial aspects can be noted by remembering that the social milieu which gave rise to anti-slavery and the women's right movements can be traced back to the consequences of the industrial revolution.

To offer another example, an example I discussed in a different context early on in this chapter, we can consider Paul Gauguin's life. On the face of it, his life was not virtuous. Yet, precisely due to his way of going on, his artistic life was fruitful. Perhaps his way of going on destroyed his personal life, but his messy life does not prompt us, at least those of us who look at the world from the modern 'aesthetic' perspective, to consider him as a less than exceptional and admirable member of our species. Now, one caveat is necessary. I do not pretend that I have offered a knock-down argument showing that Hursthouse's third Platonic thesis will inevitably fall apart. After all, one might show that Gauguin's art works do not promote any good in our

societies. In the same way, it may be possible to demonstrate that industrial revolution has had devastating consequences for the good functioning of our social groups and communities or even that the vice of greed is not, even partially, responsible for the industrial revolution. However, as things stand at present, it seems that Hursthouse must say more to save the third thesis of Plato's requirement on the virtues.

2.8 Conclusion

Ethical naturalists, such as Hursthouse, aspire to extract normative virtues from natural facts about the human species. Their strategy may initially seem promising. Yet, as we saw in the previous sections, what they consider as facts about humans are highly selective and carefully organised to ground the moral virtues that they endorse prior to their arguments. Even if we grant to Hursthouse that we should look for normativity in nature, the naturalistic ethical enterprise does not validate virtues in the way that Hursthouse hopes. I have shown that her validation of the virtue of temperance regarding homosexual behaviors and meat-eating practices is implausible. Moreover, naturalistic validation of virtues is not independent of the evaluative aspects of the cultures in which we happen to live. At best, the content of moral virtues "will issue from a mixture of constraints imposed by nature and by the ethical outlook." Contrary to Hursthouse's hope, the natural constraints of her ethical framework are too loose to help us rectify our ship-like ethical perspective by a plank or two. Hursthouse's claim that the "virtues benefit their possessor" is not helpful for the validation of moral virtues and only serve to shift the focus of her argument to further unstable ground. What is considered beneficial for a moral agent profoundly depends upon the social and cultural context in which a moral agent is immersed. This contextual dependency in its own right exacerbates the ethical naturalist's quandary of cultural relativism. Last but not least, certain amounts or kinds of individual vices

may, in certain circumstances, benefit us collectively and make for the good functioning of human social groups and communities. The third Hursthouse's Platonic thesis will not save her enterprise.

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