Ergon and practical reason. Anscombe's legacy and natural normativity

Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, Università di Genova

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Abstract

One of Elizabeth Anscombe's most decisive legacies is the rejection of modern legalistic morality, in the name of a rescue of Aristotelian-inspired natural normativity. However, as I will argue in this contribution, this legacy does not seem to have been fully collected, neither by those who, like Philippa Foot, are explicitly inspired by Anscombe's work, nor by those who, while apparently opposing its assumptions, have also somehow recovered it by different routes, as emblematically does Christine Korsgaard in her constitutivist proposal. In more detail, I aim to explore the relationship between teleology and normativity at the crossroads between neo-Aristotelian naturalism and constitutivism: both theories, though opposed, rest normativity on a link between function (the Aristotelian *ergon*) and practical reason and fail precisely in declining this relationship convincingly.

1. Anscombe's call to arms

Elizabeth Anscombe's celebrated 1958 article, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, marks the birth and provides the cornerstone of virtue ethics. Nevertheless, surprisingly enough, it does not provide any theory of virtue but rather prepares the ground for a possible revival of this paradigm through some suggestions intended to establish a "philosophy of psychology" and a critique of so-called modern moral philosophy.

The main thesis defended by Anscombe in the text is famously that

> the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought", ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier co ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it[1].

The reason for such necessity lies in the waning of the idea that had made the «earlier conception of ethics»[2] possible, namely that of a divine lawgiver. Consequently, for Anscombe, ethicists should abolish the «mesmeric force»[3] of duty, abandon the concepts of duty and moral obligation, stop believing in their supposed mysterious force, and begin to employ different, "thick" aretaic concepts whose applicability to the context depends on careful characterizations. Thus, the descriptive and the evaluative blur until they merge, and no hypnotic and mysterious duty intervenes, as it were, "from the outside", to colour otherwise neutral facts with normative light. Toward the end of the article, Anscombe wonders if her analysis leaves no opening for the use of normative terminology. In response, she considers three possible ways of recovering such a conceptual apparatus: self-legislation, the contractual foundation, and the natural normativity of virtue.

The latter option is the only compatible with the paradigm shift advocated by Anscombe; she will not be the one to develop it directly, but how, in a few dashes, she outlines its essential features is

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[1] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958*)*, in *The Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe III: Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, pp. 26-42, qui p. 26.
[2] Ibid.
[3] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 32.

nonetheless decisive: it is a conception of the «*species* man, regarded non just biologically»[4], that can ground a form of normativity that is not moral in the modern sense of the term, but, precisely, natural: that is, conceived as a form of practical necessity rather than a law, and therefore not in need of other foundation outside itself.

Naturalistic theories of normativity, such as the one advanced by Philippa Foot, set out in the wake of Anscombe's program and would be hardly intelligible without the background of this "conceptual cleanup" and the final call for a naturalistic shift.

2. Ergon, natural goodness, and self-constitution

Philippa Foot was the first to take up Anscombe's call to arms and formulates a theory of normativity in which norms do not take deontological form but depend on the fulfilment of the human *ergon*. Starting with early essays such as *Goodness and Choice* of 1961, then with the naturalistic turn carried out in *Natural Goodness*, Foot proposes a theory of natural normativity according to which goodness is the teleological tension of every being toward its perfection, and moral evaluation is a particular case of the evaluation of the functioning of living things. Therefore, the dispositions of the will (virtues) are good or bad as they promote (or fail to promote) the goodness of human beings, understood in terms of the functioning of one particular living being: a human being qua a member of a species[5]. Such a proposal constitutes a revisitation of the Wittgensteinian idea of life-form, declined in a biologistic sense and deeply indebted to Michael Thompson[6], and that of "Aristotelian categoricals" and "Aristotelian necessity" of Anscombean derivation. This form of naturalism, whereby it is the relevant facts relating to the species' form of life that determine its standards of goodness, aspires to preserve the objectivity of the good, establishing it on a foundation rooted in biology and the exercise of natural functions.

Nothing more than Korsgaardian constructivism seems to be far from such a naturalist theory of normativity. Korsgaard herself, in *Sources of Normativity*, advocates an anti-realist and anti-naturalistic conception of objectivity rooted in the sovereignty of practical reason. What Korsgaard calls "dogmatic rationalism", that is naturalism, assigns reason just the task of tracking an objective order of values existing prior to and independently of agents and their reasoning and describes moral agents as grasping the ends of action through an intellectual act but without really "using" practical reason. They are "affected" by moral truths and accept and enact them almost passively.

Even after the constitutivist turn, the distance between Korsgaard and Aristotelian-Anscombean objectivist naturalism does not seem to shrink. For example, in the opening to *Self-Constitution*, Korsgaard portrays the hero of virtue-ethical theories as a «Good Dog»[7] who no longer feels the force of normative necessity and wags his tail festively in the performance of his duty. Besides, she blames realism about moral facts for being a "homuncular" theory, whereby reason is merely the mouthpiece of an objective fact located «out there», a «little representative»[8] within us, and thus unable to explain the peculiarity of our feeling normatively bound.

However, in this work, the explicitly Kantian practical-deliberative point of view, favoured in *The Sources of Normativity*, is now situated within a naturalistic framework that partially alters its original meaning[9] since it locates the source of the categorical force of moral obligations in the constitutive

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[4] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 38.

[5] See P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; see also P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 1.

[6] Cf. M. Thompson, *The Representation of Life*, in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons. Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1995, pp. 247-296.

[7] Ch. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity and Integrity*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, p. 3.

[8] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 6.

[9] A very useful reconstruction of Korsgaard's argument can be found in G. Verrucci, *Azione come autocostituzione. Normatività ed agency in Christine Korsgaard*, in M. Meletti, *Ragione pratica e immaginazione*, Mimesis, Milano 2011, pp. 79-103.

[9] Ch. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, cit., pp. 14-18.

features of agency. In a singular synthesis, we witness the "embedding" of Kantian-derived categories within a general framework that rests on an explicitly Aristotelian teleological framework and pivots on the concepts of function, form and nature. It is the function of action – its *ergon* – that determines its normativity: thus, normativity derives from the constitutive elements of agency.

Just as the typical form of action is to be an end in itself and to bind an act to a purpose through an appropriate reason – a conception on which Aristotle and Kant allegedly agree – the form of the agent is doubly linked with the constitutive function of action: that is, action is part of the form of the agent and, therefore, contributes to defining and constituting it.

In a way, Anscombe's call to arms has been taken up as much by Footian naturalism as by Korsgaard's constitutivism[10], albeit in the latter case applied not to human beings and their supposed natural *ergon* but action and the relation between the objects of the world and the agent. Nevertheless, as I will argue, both proposals fail to adequately meet the challenge of successfully linking form and practical reason.

3. An excess of teleology or a surplus of rationality?

It would seem, at first glance, that the problem inherent in Foot's neo-Aristotelian naturalism is an "excess of nature," or, rather, of "first nature." This, at least, is the main line of criticism, emblematically represented by Julia Annas' and John McDowell's rejection of first-nature naturalism[11]. However, one should be careful to avoid a misunderstanding. Foot puts forth a theory of natural goodness as a form of excellence in the use of practical rationality, which makes it possible to distance oneself from markedly biological ends by a reflexive activity that is constrained by the ideal of excellence and in the meantime excels precisely as it can perform this distancing:

> What conceptually determines goodness in a feature or operation is the relation, for the species, of that feature or operation to survival and reproduction, because it is in that that good lies in the botanical and zoological worlds. At that point questions of 'How?' and 'Why?' and 'What for?' come to an end. But clearly this is not true when we come to human beings.
> Take reproduction, for instance. Lack of capacity to reproduce is a defect in a human being. But choice of childlessness and even celibacy is not thereby shown to be defective choice, because human good is not the same as plant or animal good. The bearing and rearing of children is not an ultimate good in human life, because other elements of good such as the demands of work to be done may give a man or woman reason to renounce family life. And the great (if often troubling) good of having children has to do with the love and ambition of parents for children, the special role of grandparents, and many other things that simply do not belong to animal life[12].

So, while on the one hand, Foot's proposal seems to fail due to "too much naturalism", on closer inspection, its most significant weakness is that the introduction of practical reason and its reflexive capacity breaks the enchantment of first nature. Moreover, on the one hand, this trait makes the theory decidedly more palatable, going in the direction of a "second-nature" naturalism, but, on the other, it contradicts its exquisitely first-naturalistic premises, making it fall into contradiction.

Similar objections strike the constitutivist phase of Korsgaardian thought. The most powerful one identifies the reason for the constitutivist project's failure in an excess of teleology. Silverstein,

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[10] This commonality, on which many interpreters agree, is strongly denied by Korsgaard herself. See, on this, Ch. Korsgaard, *Natural Goodness, Rightness, and the Intersubjectivity of Reason: Reply to Arroyo, Cummiskey, Moland, and Bird-Pollan*, «Metaphilosophy» 42: 4 (2011), pp. 381-394. However, such denial is highly problmatic, as I will show in the third section of my paper.

[11] J. Annas, *Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?*, in S.M. Gardiner (ed.), *Virtue Ethics Old and New*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, pp. 11-29; J. McDowell, *Two Sorts of Naturalism*, in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons. Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1995, pp. 128-152.

[12] P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, cit., p. 28.

echoing and extending Enoch's famous critique[13], argues that where *Sources* rested on the need for the overcoming of an ethics of excellence, the Aristotelian constitutivism of *Self-Constitution* uses, not unlike standard naturalism, the concept of function to bridge the is-ought gap[14], and thus falls back on an ethics of excellence, making the whole project fail.

If the authority of the norms governing action flows from what is constitutive of agency, then every agent will necessarily act following those norms by the mere fact of being an agent: there is, conceptually, a lack of room for the possibility of bad or wrong actions. This problem has not so much to do with the *positive content* of the constitutive norm identified by Korsgaard (i.e., self-constitution) but with the idea of constitutive norms as Aristotelian forms. In short, what produces the short-circuit is the deadly combination of three elements, namely, (i) the application of the idea of a function as a constitutive norm to action, (ii) the idea that the constitutive norm of action is self-constitution, and (iii) the framework within which all this is framed, namely, that of a "weak teleology".

Unable to disavow (i) and (ii), which represent the very heart of the constitutivist proposal, the only possible option for Korsgaard to defuse the short-circuit would be, according to this line of objection, to rectify (iii), by introducing a surplus of teleology into the theory, that is, by landing on a robust (rather than weak) teleological conception, not too different, precisely, from Foot's.

Such an option would prove, however, not only more metaphysically controversial, but also inconsistent with the premises of constitutivism itself. As Korsgaard repeatedly states, what is constitutive of action is not simply the fact of *trying to* constitute oneself as an agent, but instead *actually doing so*. Since the core of Korsgaard's theory of agency is that agents constitute themselves by acting, the alternative view borders on incoherence. The problem is that if merely attempting to constitute oneself were sufficient to satisfy the constitutive condition of agency, one could satisfy that condition while failing to attempt to constitute oneself. In that case, the same agent would and would not be a unified self or agent.

It seems, then, that Korsgaard could introduce a further level of teleology, rectifying (iii), only by abandoning her view (ii) that action is self-constitution, which, however, is one of the two fundamental premises of the theory.

Here we come to a paradoxical point. On closer inspection, just as Foot's main problem is that, in order to avoid unacceptable drifts in her theory, she has to introduce a crucial role of practical reason that blurs the naturalistic scope of her framework, so Korsgaard's problem is that her theory could escape fatal short-circuits only by introducing a more robust teleologism, a hard choice indeed, since it would contradict her constitutivist starting point.

Conclusion

One could be inclined to conclude that the source of trouble, more than the excess of nature or reflexivity, is a shared tension between form (function) and practical reason. However, if this is true, between the normativity typical of the space of reasons and the natural normativity that descends from human form and function, the tension is radical and the distance unbridgeable, and any project that would set out to dampen that tension is doomed to failure[15]. So should we conclude that Anscombe's call to arms is bound to fall on deaf ears, whatever the declination of its reception? Indeed, much has yet to be done to plausibly recompose the rift that opens when one tries to link

[13] Cfr. D. Enoch, *Agency, Shmagency. Why Normativity won't come from what is Constitutive of Agency*, «Philosophical Review» 115/ II (2006), pp. 169-198.

[14] M. Silverstein, *Teleology and Normativity*, in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Metaethics: 11*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 214-240.

[15] On the naturalistic side, more promising proposals of "second nature naturalism" have been advanced by J. Annas, *Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?*, cit.; see also I. Liu, *Elevating Human Being: Towards a New Sort of Naturalism*, in «Philosophy» 92/IV (2017), pp. 597-622. On the constructivist side, a nice attempt at recomposing the rift is represented by Fischer's renovationist approach. See N. Fischer, *Natural and Ethical Normativity*, «The Southern Journal of Philosophy» 54/IV (2016), pp. 417-439.

ergon and normativity. Nevertheless, somehow healing this rupture sounds like a daring yet lofty and perhaps necessary task. In my opinion, the failure of the proposals discussed is a sign of such boldness.