
HUMAN NATURE AND MORAL SPROUTS: MENCIUS ON THE POLLYANNA PROBLEM

BY

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Abstract: This article responds to a common criticism of Aristotelian naturalism known as the Pollyanna Problem, the objection that Aristotelian naturalism, when combined with recent empirical research, generates morally unacceptable conclusions. In developing a reply to this objection, I draw upon the conception of human nature developed by the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, and build up an account of ethical naturalism that provides a satisfying response to the Pollyanna Problem while also preserving what is most attractive about Aristotelian naturalism.

Let this serve as an outline of the good; for we must presumably first sketch it roughly, and then later fill in the details. But it would seem that any one is capable of carrying on and articulating what has once been well outlined, and that time is a good discoverer or partner in such a work; to which facts the advances of the arts are due; for any one can add what is lacking (Aristotle).¹

If one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human (Mencius).²

1. Introduction

In step with the rise of contemporary virtue ethics, Aristotelian naturalism has undergone a revival in recent years.³ Although far from occupying a dominant position within contemporary moral philosophy, it has been defended by several prominent and influential contemporary thinkers

including Alasdair MacIntyre, Rosalind Hursthouse, Michael Thompson, and Philippa Foot.⁴ Of this distinguished group, however, it has been Philippa Foot's version of naturalism (drawing upon the work of Thompson) developed in the course of her book *Natural Goodness* that has been the subject of most discussion, as well as the target of greatest criticism. In this article I want to explore one common objection raised against Foot's account of ethical naturalism (and Aristotelian naturalism in general) known as the 'Pollyanna Problem,' the objection that combining Foot's neo-Aristotelian framework with data from contemporary empirical science yields morally unacceptable conclusions.

While attempts have been made to respond to the Pollyanna Problem, some solutions come at the cost of potentially undermining key points that any form of Aristotelian naturalism should preserve. For example, Micah Lott answers the Pollyanna Problem by severing the tie between Aristotelian naturalism and empirical science by rejecting what he calls the Empirical Science Assumption:

In formulating Aristotelian categoricals about the human will, we must rely on the same type of procedures and considerations we rely on in formulating categoricals about other life forms in the natural, or empirical, sciences.⁵

While I agree with Lott that we cannot simply read off an account of Aristotelian categoricals from the data obtained in the empirical sciences, I believe that some version of the Empirical Science Assumption is necessary for maintaining one of the central ideas of Aristotelian naturalism: that the criteria for moral goodness and defect is given its objective foundation in facts about human nature.

The goal of this article is to offer a response to the Pollyanna Problem that does not rely on rejecting the Empirical Science Assumption, and keeps Aristotelian naturalism's focus on nature as the source of normativity. To develop this response, I turn to an account of ethical naturalism offered by the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius and argue that Mencius provides the resources for a satisfying solution to the Pollyanna Problem.

The structure of the article is as follows: In the following section I give a basic outline of Foot's neo-Aristotelian framework. Then, I turn to Elijah Millgram's articulation of the Pollyanna Problem, offering some possible lines of response. Next, I discuss Mencius's account of human nature, and show how it resolves the Pollyanna Problem in a way that maintains some of the most attractive features of Aristotelian naturalism.

While addressing the Pollyanna Problem is insufficient for establishing the truth of Aristotelian naturalism, providing an adequate response to it is an important step in defending Aristotelian naturalism's viability.⁶

2. *Background: Philippa Foot's ethical naturalism*

In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot argues that moral judgments pertaining to virtue and vice fall under a broader class of judgments concerning natural goodness and defect. Foot supports this position by arguing that the goodness and defect in both plants and non-human animals are determined by the characteristic life-form or what Foot, following Michael Thompson, calls 'Aristotelian categoricals' (or 'natural-history propositions') and applying this framework to generate facts about human goodness and defect. Aristotelian categoricals are represented by statements of the form 'S's are (or have) F' (e.g. 'Male peacocks have colorful tails') or 'S's do V' (e.g. 'Hummingbirds gather nectar from flowers') that pick out characteristic features of particular life-forms. As Foot is careful to point out, these features are not simply marked out by identifying what is, unique, most common, or statistically normal, but rather, by identifying those characteristic features of a particular species that are necessary for flourishing *qua* member of its species. For example, 'Owls see in the dark' or 'Male peacocks have colorful tails' are Aristotelian categoricals because they mark out characteristics that are necessary for owls and male peacocks to achieve those ends that are constitutive of their flourishing, such as self-maintenance and survival. These are not, however, universally quantifiable statements since an owl could have defective eyes or a disease may have deformed a particular male peacock's tail. Judgments, therefore, about the goodness or defect pertaining to a particular organism must appeal to facts about the kind of species to which the particular organism belongs. So, for example, if we are looking at a particular creature that is unable to fly, we cannot judge whether this inability counts as a defect in the creature unless we know what kind of species it falls under – whether, for example, it is a hummingbird, a dog, or a dolphin.

It is important to also notice that on this picture, even the evaluation of goodness and defect in plants or non-human animals requires us to draw upon an interpretive understanding of the nature or characteristic life-form that the organism instantiates; goodness and defect in living things can only be determined in light of the larger context of the sort of life that is characteristic of things of that kind. Deep roots and leaves that can absorb sufficient nutrients or sunlight are good for trees, and the ability to fly and see in the dark are good for owls, because these features are needed for achieving those natural ends determined by their particular natures. These ideas about the determination of goodness and defect in non-human living entities enjoy a certain intuitive appeal and are often accepted even by those who ultimately reject Foot's ethical naturalism.

What is much more controversial is the claim that human or *moral* goodness and defect is determined in this way. For even if it is granted that

evaluating goodness and defect in non-human living organisms can be carried out by observing how well a particular feature is conducive to ends such as survival, self-maintenance, and reproduction, one can deny that this same methodology can be applied to human beings since what is morally good or bad may not always be conducive to the attainment of these ends. For example, it may be morally good for someone to go on a hunger strike to protest an unjust law, even at the cost of her life. Such a person, we wouldn't say, is acting defectively as a human being. But Foot in fact agrees with this point, for she also does not believe that those non-moral ends (e.g. self-maintenance and survival) that determine the criteria of goodness and badness in non-human living entities sufficiently determine the goodness or badness of characteristics and actions of human beings. This is because, unlike other living organisms, human beings possess the ability to reason about how to live and act. And this capacity to reason reflectively is not one that is simply *tacked on* to those other aspects of human life such as the appetite for food and sex, or our perceptual capacities, in the way that blocks of Lego can be stacked on top of one another. Rather, our rational capacity permeates every aspect of our nature so that how we eat, sleep, or reproduce is done in a way that is intelligibly *human*, in light of those reasons and values that we come to possess through the development of practical intelligence.⁷

3. *The Pollyanna Problem*

While a number of objections have been raised against Foot's naturalism since the publication of *Natural Goodness*, one objection that has been repeatedly made by her critics is what Elijah Millgram has dubbed the 'Pollyanna Problem'.⁸ Here is how he describes it:

The problem is that what Aristotelian categoricals are true of human beings is an empirical question (the sort of question that is assessed not by counting heads – remember that Aristotelian categoricals need be true of no member of the species – but by going and looking, in just the way that natural historians do). Now, when natural historians do take a close look at humanity, what they find is not necessarily justice: for instance, it has been argued by those who work on such things that human females are fine-tuned by natural selection to murder their infants in a suitable range of circumstances (Hrdy, 1999; for related work that can be used to make the same point, see also Hrdy, 1981); that human males are fine-tuned by natural selection to rape women in a suitable range of circumstances (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000); that humans value occupying dominant positions in hierarchies to a degree not compatible with justice of any kind (Frank, 1985). Hrdy and the rest are making claims that are not in the first place statistical, but rather about how the species works: that is, they mean to be advancing claims of just the type that is at issue, supported by just the right type of evidence for such claims.⁹

The main thrust of the objection is that empirical research shows us that immoral characteristics such as injustice, at least under certain conditions,

serves a useful function in human life, and since the Aristotelian categoricals are constituted by characteristics that are constitutive of human flourishing, it looks like sometimes injustice will count as an aspect of human, and therefore, moral goodness. But since injustice cannot be morally good, it looks like Foot's natural goodness framework (and Aristotelian naturalism in general) when combined with our current knowledge of empirical facts, will generate morally unacceptable consequences.

There are at least three possible responses that can be made against the Pollyanna Problem. The first is to argue that the research that the Pollyanna Problem relies upon is dubious. In fact, the most recent empirical research (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000) that Millgram cites as support has been severely criticized or outright rejected, by many prominent scholars from a variety of disciplines.¹⁰ Since a close examination of all the empirical research Millgram appeals to would require substantial work that cannot be carried out here, let us suppose that at least some of the empirical data do support the idea that immoral traits can sometimes serve a beneficial purpose or role in human life.

The second possible reply is to simply dissolve the Pollyanna Problem by showing that it mistakenly assumes that Aristotelian naturalism depends on the data gathered from the natural sciences. As I noted earlier, some recent philosophers (e.g. Micah Lott) have taken up this approach, severing the tie between Aristotelian naturalism and empirical science. One notable feature of this response has been to emphasize the centrality of practical reason for obtaining our knowledge of the Aristotelian categoricals. However, it seems that in claiming that empirical research is generally irrelevant for understanding human nature, I think this line of response is problematic and theoretically less satisfying. For the denial of the significance of empirical research or observations has the potential of undermining one of the central ideas of Aristotelian naturalism, which I describe as follows:

Central Point of Aristotelian Naturalism: The criteria for goodness and defect of any species X are given its objective foundation in facts about the nature of X.

The significance of this point lies in its connection to one of the most attractive features of Aristotelian naturalism, a unifying formal criterion that conceptually links together our evaluative judgments of all living entities. If we were to abandon the idea that empirical research or observation can provide us with knowledge about what human beings are like – in the sense of what the human life-form is – it seems that we would also have to give up the idea that human nature provides us with a normative foundation. After all, one important reason why we think that our understanding of goodness and defect in non-human living entities can be, and indeed, *must be*, established through empirical observations is precisely because we believe that each species bears a characteristic life-form that is empirically realized

by actual organisms and can be apprehended through observation and analysis.¹¹

The third possible reply is to argue that even if the empirical research does show that there are conditions under which acting unjustly can serve a certain purpose, this does not go against Aristotelian naturalism since what counts as characteristics that fall within the scope of Aristotelian categoricals are only characteristics that serve a function or role for human beings under *proper or normal* conditions, and that the cases Millgram appeals to all involve extraordinary and defective circumstances. I believe that this reply can, with some work, provide some resistance to the Pollyanna Problem, and I will direct my attention to this line of response in my discussion of Mencius.

It is worth addressing a point that is often stressed by those who seek to disconnect Aristotelian naturalism from the natural sciences, which is that the process of understanding ourselves as human beings is importantly different from how we understand the life-form of non-human animals since we have available to us the knowledge we gain from our own life experiences, or *first-personal knowledge*. The data that we accumulate from the empirical sciences will need to be integrated with the first-personal knowledge that we gain through experience and observation, as well as non-observational knowledge of ourselves (gained through subjective experience) as human agents.¹²

While this is a significant point, we must acknowledge that there is a limit to how far non-observational knowledge can take us, especially given all the ways self-deception and biases can afflict the accuracy of our own mental states.¹³ If we completely detach our understanding of the human life-form from empirical facts, as Elijah Millgram warns us, ‘you lose the anchoring provided by natural-historical observation, and there is nothing to keep your a priori self-descriptions from sliding into mere wishful thinking.’¹⁴ One of the advantages of ethical naturalism over various forms of intuitionism is the avoidance of this kind of danger, by taking seriously the need to integrate theory with ground-level observations.

But how exactly does empirical research contribute to our understanding of human nature? For our purposes, it will be helpful to distinguish between what is labeled as ‘first nature’ – those features that belong to human beings as such, and ‘second nature’ – those characteristics that human beings develop through habituation and culture. Although I do not accept a sharp line that divides first and second nature, this distinction helps clarify the concept of ‘human nature’ under discussion. For sometimes any pattern of widespread human activity is taken as exemplifying human nature, for instance, waging wars or writing poetry. But, such activities are the manifestations of our developed second nature, rather than first nature. First nature, rather, equips human beings with certain fundamental drives and tendencies, providing us with the psychological and physiological basis for further development through learning and habituation (thereby forging a second nature).

Any satisfying account of naturalism must demonstrate how, from the initial conditions set by our basic, first nature, we can come to possess a reflective second nature that enables us to live according to our conception of what is valuable and good. Recently, Christopher Toner explicitly formulated such a condition that any successful form of naturalism must meet:

Requirement for Naturalism: First and second nature must be related so that the second is a natural outgrowth of the first, and so that that in our given makeup is (first) natural which does tend toward an ethically mature second nature.¹⁵

By meeting this condition, Aristotelian naturalism can show how the various goods of human life constitutive of human flourishing are grounded in human nature, by demonstrating how those various goods arise from the satisfaction of the fundamental inclinations of our first nature. On the view that I seek to defend, it is in understanding our first nature that empirical observations will be most useful, for as we accumulate more accurate data about the kinds of basic tendencies and drives that human beings have in proper environments, we can also improve our knowledge of the basic inclinations that characterize our first nature.¹⁶

We now have the basic outline of a central project for ethical naturalism: to develop an account that accommodates the Empirical Science Assumption (thereby satisfying the *Central Point of Aristotelian Naturalism*) and the *Requirement for Naturalism*, while also providing an adequate response to the Pollyanna Problem. I will now turn to an account of human nature found in the writings of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, and argue that Mencius offers us the basic outline of a naturalism that successfully meets both conditions while also offering the resources for a satisfying solution to the Pollyanna Problem.¹⁷

4. *Mencius's account of human nature: toward a satisfying ethical naturalism*

Mencius (391–308 BCE) was an ancient Chinese philosopher who took himself as developing, refining, and extending the ethical tradition established by Confucius, most widely known today as ‘Confucianism.’ Mencius can be seen as filling out the details of Confucius’ moral vision by anchoring it in a sophisticated account of moral psychology and human nature.¹⁸ For example, Mencius defends the importance of ‘benevolence’ (*ren* 仁) and ‘ritual propriety’ (*li* 禮) advocated earlier in the *Analects* of Confucius by showing how such Confucian virtues are rooted in what he calls the ‘sprouts’ or ‘beginnings’ (*duan* 端) of human nature:

... we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of disdain, one is not human. If one is without the feeling of deference one is not human. If one is without the feeling of approval and disapproval, one is not human. The feeling of compassion is the sprout of benevolence. The feeling of disdain is the sprout of righteousness. The feeling of deference is the sprout of propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is the sprout of wisdom. People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. To have these four sprouts, yet to claim that one is incapable (of virtue), is to steal from oneself.¹⁹

From this passage it is worth noting two points that are relevant for our discussion. The first is that Mencius sees certain incipient moral (or perhaps ‘proto-moral’) feelings or inclinations as definitive features of human beings, and that these basic moral tendencies are directed toward particular excellences of character, and with the right kind of attention and effort can be developed into full-blown virtues.²⁰ The second point is that by drawing an analogy between the possession of these natural inclinations and the possession of human limbs, Mencius clearly recognizes that these natural inclinations, while a characteristic feature of normal human lives, may not be attributable to every human being, in the way that not everybody possesses two arms and two legs.²¹ Just as a person who fails to develop two arms and two legs (under normal conditions) suffers from a form of physical defect, a person who fails to feel alarm and compassion at the sight of a drowning baby also suffers from a kind of emotional or psychological defect. From this perspective, it seems quite plausible to take Mencius’s views about the moral sprouts as involving something like an Aristotelian categorical that aims to capture certain significant characteristic features of human lives, where the absence of these features (e.g. the moral sprouts) in a human being indicates some form of natural defect.

So Mencius holds a robust teleological conception of human nature; our nature contains certain moral inclinations directed toward moral excellence.²² Of course, these natural inclinations can be diminished or strengthened by numerous factors: the effort we make in cultivating our characters, the moral education we receive, the social, cultural, and political environment we inhabit. Although certain basic moral inclinations confer on us the capacity to develop into virtuous agents, a number of conditions must be satisfied if we are to fully actualize the moral potentialities that are in us. One method that Mencius offers for nurturing our moral potential is ‘extension’ (*tui* 徒) which takes our moral sprouts and through time and effort, develops them into reliable traits of character by, for example, reflecting on our compassionate tendencies and recognizing the need to apply them in other, morally relevant situations.²³

But as a follower of Confucius, Mencius was also firmly committed to the importance of developing an understanding of love and respect within the context of the family, and proper participation in ceremonies and rituals.

So while we are equipped with a moral nature that tends toward the good, our nature must undergo a lengthy process of moral development, obtaining the proper values through active participation in the life of the family as well as the practices of ritual, e.g. properly burying and mourning for deceased parents (*Mengzi* 3A2) or appropriately interacting with one's guests or the host (*Mengzi* 7B24.2). Such opportunities allow us to nurture and extend our moral sprouts and move us toward sagehood, the proper end of all human strivings, in which our desires, feelings, and values are appropriately synchronized. So while the sprouts provide us with the kind of nature that is directed toward moral goodness, we need to build up our nature through human effort under the right kind of social environment to achieve true moral excellence.

But, one might object, if we do have the sort of innate moral inclinations that Mencius posits, why do human beings still require such a lengthy process of moral education, and a variety of positive pushes in the moral direction?²⁴ In response, it is worth making a point that has become well appreciated by those working in moral and social psychology, as well as in the philosophy of science: What is part of our 'innate' or 'native' endowment still requires a proper environment for full expression. As philosophers of biology agree, genes cannot be correctly understood independent of the environment in which they are situated. Even on the now widely accepted view proposed by Noam Chomsky that human beings have an innate capacity to grasp grammatical structure, children can only come to understand a language through repeated exposures within a certain developmental timeframe.²⁵ The truth of linguistic nativism does not preclude the necessity of satisfying a host of external conditions for becoming a competent language-user.

While this outline of Mencius's account of human nature needs further development, I believe it offers us a form of ethical naturalism that satisfies the Requirement for Naturalism by providing a suitable link between first and second nature. By appealing to the moral sprouts, Mencius's account of human nature satisfies this condition since each of the moral sprouts that are constitutive of our basic first nature is directed toward a particular virtue that can only be fully developed by obtaining a mature second nature. In this way Mencius's naturalism provides an attractive way of forging a connection between the basic (first) nature that all non-defective human beings share with a developed (second) moral nature that is necessary for moral excellence. Furthermore, Mencius's naturalism also captures a significant aspect of Aristotelian naturalism that was described earlier, that the standard of moral goodness and defect for any given species is grounded in facts about its species-specific nature. Mencius believed that it is our basic capacity to feel, perceive, and judge that most significantly characterizes the human life-form, and that the achievement of a successful life was a matter of properly developing what Mencius calls our 'heart' (*xin* 心), a constitutive feature of our nature

as human beings given to us by heaven (*tian* 天) that serves as the seat of the four moral sprouts. Moreover, because the moral sprouts posited by Mencius properly fall under the category of moral feelings or emotions, rather than under the domain of rational cognition, they can more easily accommodate the view, supported by contemporary developments in moral psychology, that certain kinds of moral emotions such as empathy are hardwired into our psychological makeup and provide us with the proper moral equipment with which we can develop into virtuous moral agents.²⁶

Here we can see Mencius as filling in what I see as a gap in Aristotle's ethical theory. For although Aristotle does talk about the existence of certain 'seeds' of the excellences in children that can be fully expressed later in life, he does not draw attention to the kinds of moral or perhaps, 'proto-moral' characteristics that Mencius focuses on.²⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, who defends the basic framework of Aristotelian naturalism in his work on ethics, affirms certain basic natural inclinations directed toward life, reproduction, social living, and understanding. But like Aristotle, Aquinas also does not identify particularly *moral* inclinations as attributable to our first nature. So in positing the moral sprouts, Mencius's view about human nature demonstrates more clearly why human beings are, by nature, moral creatures – why we are naturally fitted for the virtuous life. In this way, Mencius's and Aristotle's conceptions of human nature are importantly different.

But whether Mencius was right about human nature, especially concerning the existence of innate moral dispositions, is not only a matter for pure theoretical speculation, but must be evaluated in light of our best empirical research. Of course, it is likely that even if Mencius's general picture of human beings as possessing natural moral tendencies is vindicated, his particular claims, say, about the nature of each sprout, will be in need of modification. But as noted above and will be discussed more below, some contemporary empirical research in emotion and cognition appears to give credibility to Mencius's basic view by supporting the existence of moral 'modules' or 'foundations' such as empathy and shame that appear to have been encoded into our basic nature through the process of evolution.²⁸ Assuming that Mencius's account is supported by empirical research, we have a form of ethical naturalism that not only meets the Requirement for Naturalism, but also accommodates the Empirical Science Assumption. Anyone inclined toward ethical naturalism, especially of the Aristotelian variety, has good reason to take seriously the account of human nature offered by Mencius.

5. *Mencius's naturalism and the Pollyanna Problem*

Let us now return to the Pollyanna Problem, the objection that by grounding moral goodness and defect (or moral virtue and vice) in facts about

human nature, ethical naturalism is open to falsifying data provided by recent empirical research. This research, as the objection goes, shows that vices such as injustice can under certain conditions also serve a useful purpose for human beings; injustice can sometimes be conducive to a flourishing life.

Earlier I noted some possible responses to the Pollyanna Problem, one that emphasizes the importance of normal or non-defective circumstances in determining what characteristic features should be attributed to human nature (or be marked as an Aristotelian categorical), and another that emphasizes the role of practical reason, a strategy taken up by Micah Lott. My aim is to answer the Pollyanna Problem by using the resources found in Mencius's naturalism in a way that satisfies the Requirement for Naturalism and preserves what I take to be Aristotelian naturalism's most attractive features.

Let me sketch a brief outline of an important dialectic that is quite common to the exchanges between Aristotelian naturalists and their critics. It often begins with the critics posing the following dilemma against the naturalist: either 'human nature' is a non-normative notion or it is a normatively loaded notion. If it is a non-normative notion, then it cannot serve as the foundation for ethics since no set of descriptive facts can generate a normative conclusion. If it is a normative notion, then Aristotelians must smuggle in certain values into their conception of human nature and so appealing to human nature will fail to provide a value-neutral foundation for ethics or normativity. One common reply to this dilemma by the Aristotelian naturalist is to concede that 'human nature' is a normative notion that is not reducible to a set of value-neutral facts. In my view, this is the right response to make.

But given that human nature is supposed to offer a normative foundation, it may seem that this view involves a vicious circularity. I do not, however, think that this point poses a substantive problem for the Aristotelian naturalist since one's conception of human nature is always revisable and is based on both empirical observations as well as non-observational knowledge. So although human nature is an inherently normative notion since it is conceptually linked to those characteristic features of the human life-form that grounds human goods and human flourishing, our understanding of human nature should not be constructed *a priori*, but needs to be supported by empirical observations and facts about how human lives are carried on. Our understanding of human nature and human flourishing is, on this picture, interdependent and must arise in tandem, and the claim that human nature grounds human flourishing should be understood as a metaphysical rather than an epistemological claim that is fully compatible with the view that a complete understanding of human nature cannot arise without (some) knowledge of human flourishing.²⁹

Here the Aristotelian naturalist would emphasize that in order to understand what is good or bad for *any* living entity, from plants to oysters to

wolves, we need an interpretation of the kind of life-form it bears, which *already* involves a conception of the features that count as goodness or defect for a thing of its kind. So even to see something *as* a cactus (rather than as a withering tree) or *as* a turtle (rather than as a defectively slow reptile) requires an interpretive understanding of the kind of life-form each living organism exemplifies. Since this methodology for understanding the nature of non-human organisms seems sound – what would an alternative methodology look like? – given that human beings are also a kind of living organism with an evolutionary heritage, there is at least a *prima facie* reason for applying this methodology to human beings. And just as most of us are not skeptical of our judgments about the life-forms of many non-human living organisms, there's no reason in principle for being skeptical of understanding the general features that characterize the life of human beings. Of course, the human animal is a much more complex organism, and the variations that are exemplified by different cultures and societies should not be ignored.³⁰ But the crucial question is whether there are certain identifiable characteristic features that all human beings would exhibit under normal conditions, in the way that under normal conditions certain types of spiders will develop the capacity to, and will, spin webs.

Returning to the Pollyanna Problem, the objection that was raised by Millgram and Andreou was that contemporary empirical research suggests that human beings sometimes act in vicious ways and that these behaviors seem to serve a purpose in obtaining certain kinds of human goods such as survival or reproduction. Now, Mencius, despite his endorsement of the slogan that 'human nature is good' was himself all too aware of the nasty, vicious ways that human beings behave. (The 'Warring States period' that he lived in was one of the most war-torn and bloodiest ages in world history.) So why then did Mencius not see the widespread traits of viciousness as additional elements of human nature? Was he blinded by an overly-rosy picture of the world? A naïve, Pollyannaish wish to see human beings in a nobler light? I do not believe Mencius was guilty of these charges and that he could answer the basic challenge in the following way.³¹

First, he could argue that the various vices such as injustice or greed are not basic or fundamental to human nature, and that these characteristics are the product of social and cultural distortions. What we need to discover, Mencius could claim, are the *root impulses* that lie at the core of these characteristics. The method would involve carefully examining each vicious trait that the Pollyanna Problem appeals to and find the fundamental inclination or disposition that constitutes the basic core of each trait. The reason for taking up this method is that we should not seek to understand the disparate traits that can appear across cultures under specific social conditions, but those dispositions and characteristics that are constitutive of 'first' nature shared universally by human beings. Take, for example, racial hatred, which

most would regard as a vicious trait. Although the causal story of how this disposition arises in people will vary in its details from one individual to the next, it is plausible to think that its root impulse is the natural tendency in people for in-group and out-group behavior – a trait that some evolutionary psychologists would acknowledge as hard-wired into us.³² The fact that our natural tendency to categorize people into an in-group or out-group can give rise to such vicious traits as racism is often taken as implying that the very capacity for making such a distinction is intrinsically immoral. But on careful consideration, I think that *in itself* this tendency is not inherently bad, and is actually directed toward certain significant goods and serves an important function in human life, for example, by providing a powerful motivation to care for one's own child or community. Because of the tremendous sacrifices that parents must make in looking after their child, the lack of this kind of inclination may leave parents deprived of the motivational resources necessary to give children the attention and loving concern that is necessary for a child's proper development.

We should note that Mencius believed that our natural appetitive desires for things like food, sex, bodily comfort, and other kinds of basic pleasures were also fundamental components of human nature. This more expansive conception of human nature would allow Mencius to identify not only the four moral sprouts as basic aspects of human nature that can sometimes give rise to bad behavior, but also pick out basic bodily, psychological, and social desires as possible sources of distorted character traits. But, Mencius would claim, none of these moral or non-moral desires are in themselves bad; they all have a proper place within the economy of human life. Each non-moral desire, for example, are directed at some recognizable good or goods within the human life-form: the desire for food aims at health, the desire for sex aims at romantic union and children, and the desire for bodily comfort aims at physical security.³³ Employing this train of ideas, Mencius would argue that each vicious trait such as racial hatred could be broken down into either one of the four sprouts or a basic non-moral desire, and that in their basic, root form, such inclinations point toward a genuine good, despite their sensitivity to external conditions that can easily lead them to become misdirected. Problems arise when the basic desires or inclinations are disordered, for example, by attributing to them more weight than is appropriate. What is necessary, Mencius thought, is to properly organize the various desires or inclinations, with greater focus being placed on the ‘greater part’ of our nature, i.e. the inclinations toward moral virtue:

People care for each part of themselves. They care for each part, so they nurture each part. There is not an inch of flesh they do not care for, so there is not an inch of flesh that they do not nurture. But if we want to examine whether someone is good or not, there is no other way than considering

what they choose to nurture. The body has esteemed and lowly parts; it has great and petty parts. One does not harm the great parts for the sake of the petty parts. One does not harm the esteemed parts for the sake of the lowly parts. One who nurtures the petty parts becomes a petty person. One who nurtures the great parts becomes a great person. Suppose there is a gardener who abandons his mahogany tree but nurtures his date tree. Then he is a lowly gardener. One who unthinkingly ignores his back while taking care of his finger is a rabid wolf...It is not the function of the ears and eyes to reflect, and they are misled by things. Things interact with other things and simply lead them along. But the function of the heart is to reflect. If it reflects, then it will get it. If it does not reflect, then it will not get it. This is what Heaven has given us. If one first takes one's stand on what is greater, then what is lesser will not be able to snatch it away.³⁴

In the latter part of this passage, Mencius makes two important remarks. The first is that our non-moral desires, due to their non-rational character, can easily mislead us. The second is that 'reflection' (*si* 恩) is necessary to grasp the proper weight that should be attached to the various aspects of our nature, with the greatest weight being attributed to our moral inclinations.³⁵ The first remark returns us to the question of why Mencius believed that the vicious characteristics so frequently exemplified by people are not constitutive of human nature. The reason Mencius suggests is that our appetitive desires of the 'lower part' while serving an important function in life, can easily lead us to act badly and live a 'petty' human life. (Mencius elsewhere describes such a life as 'tragic.'³⁶) So although we can observe frequent cases of bad behavior, Mencius offers us an 'account of error' – an explanation of why, given that our basic inclinations are directed toward the good, it is so easy to fall into moral depravity. This account reveals why the moral vices are not fundamental features of human nature, but an improper outgrowth of basic inclinations that are, in themselves, good. While this answer might appear unsatisfyingly thin, Mencius has a further story to tell, by pointing out the various ways in which our cultural and social environment can impede us from proper moral growth. In a number of passages, Mencius carefully draws attention to how an improper environment can affect our character:

Mengzi said, 'The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day and night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain?'

When we consider what is present in people, could they truly lack the hearts of benevolence and righteousness? The way that they discard their genuine hearts is like the hatchets and axes in relation to the trees. With them besieging it day by day, can it remain beautiful? ... Others see that he is an animal, and think that there was never any capacity there. But is this what a human is like inherently?³⁷

The metaphor of the Ox Mountain captures the way that external forces can devastate the developmental process of moral growth in a way that makes human beings appear to not only lack the capacity for morality, but also naturally harbor vice. By drawing attention to this possibility, Mencius defends his view that our hearts carry a moral orientation and a natural tendency toward goodness, as also illustrated in the following passage:

Mengzi said, ‘In years of plenty, most young men are gentle; in years of poverty, most young men are violent. It is not that the potential that Heaven confers on them varies like this. They are like this because of what sinks and drowns their hearts. Consider barley. Sow the seeds and cover them. The soil is the same and the time of planting is also the same. They grow rapidly, and by the time of the summer solstice they have all ripened. Although there are some differences, these are due to the richness of the soil and to unevenness in the rain and in human effort.³⁸

Although barley seeds carry the potential for developing into a ripe harvest, the soil quality, climate patterns, and human effort are all significant factors that constitute the necessary conditions for proper growth. Mencius takes the development of human character, even with its direction toward goodness, as requiring the satisfaction of a host of conditions for full maturation. And although Mencius does not give a detailed analysis of exactly which social conditions must be met for the proper development of the moral sprouts, he identifies certain plausible necessary conditions, for example, the need to live in a society that is free from poverty and war.³⁹ (Given his Confucian values he would most likely have endorsed a good familial environment as well.)

The importance of the social environment for moral cultivation provides at least a partial response to the Pollyanna Problem by proposing that if we were to carefully look into the empirical data suggesting that certain vicious traits serve a useful function in human life, we will find that the circumstances in which such traits tend to arise are defective or improper in some way. Take for example Chrisoula Andreou’s appeal to the case of sociopaths, who ‘may be naturally sound given certain conditions during infant development.’⁴⁰ Andreou argues that because traits characterizing sociopaths such as callousness at the suffering of others may serve an adaptive role and therefore may count as ‘naturally good’ even if it is morally defective, “[w]ith the help of environmental cues, an infant might come to ‘recognize’ that the path of the sociopathic loner is the developmental path that is most ‘appropriate’ given his situation. These cues will trigger the ‘appropriate’ development.”⁴¹

Now the move that Mencius will want to make is to demonstrate that the environment under which sociopaths are raised is defective in some way. Andreou in fact anticipates this possibility and makes the following remark:

Now it might be suggested that the cues that trigger sociopathic development are cues indicating an abnormal environment. Perhaps the infant has no one to rely on but a neglectful mother. If it is only in abnormal situations that sociopathic development is triggered, this might be enough to warrant classifying sociopathic development as pathological, even if it is a naturally sound response. But what makes for an abnormal environment? What if the mother's neglect is prompted by a pathological mechanism that plays a crucial role in human survival and reproduction?⁴²

To this last question, Mencius could provide a quite plausible response by claiming that a case involving a 'pathological mechanism' prompting the mother clearly involves a defective or improper environment. We have very strong reason to believe that under normal conditions, mothers experience a powerful emotional attachment with their children, and it is difficult to imagine a case in which a mother completely neglected her child but did not herself suffer from some kind of psychological illness (e.g. depression) or improper social conditions (e.g. a famine that forces her into a 'Sophie's choice' situation). Now, while I cannot examine every single case that those like Millgram and Andreou have appealed to in motivating the Pollyanna Problem, it seems to me that a careful examination will reveal that the usefulness of certain vicious traits in these cases will often, if not always, involve an abnormal or defective situation. Admittedly, there is no simple procedure for determining whether a circumstance is normal or proper. All we can do is to examine each circumstance carefully and use our best judgment to decide on a case-by-case basis, in the way that we also figure out what conditions are proper or normal for non-human animals. But there are at least certain clear cases of defective circumstances that I think almost all of us will agree on: living under the circumstances of widespread famine, disease, or war, seem to clearly mar any situation in ways that would be difficult to deny.

So much for the Pollyanna Problem. There is, however, an important worry that arises from Mencius's account of sprouts and virtues: even if Mencius is right about the existence of the moral sprouts, they seem to radically underdetermine how they should be developed. While Mencius is confident that the sprouts are directed toward just those Confucian virtues that he (unsurprisingly) endorses, it seems quite possible that the sprouts can be directed toward ends that from both Mencius's and our contemporary perspective will count as inimical to morality. For example, the sprout of disdain could be developed into the virtue of righteousness, as Mencius proposes, but it may also be developed into racial hatred and employed in the service of genocide.⁴³ What reasons can Mencius offer to show that obtaining the virtues as he conceives them is the *right* or *proper* way to develop the sprouts?

This is a difficult problem, and one that Mencius simply does not address. The issue is a more specific manifestation of a broader challenge posed by moral skeptics for justifying a particular set of character traits as virtues. Call this broader challenge the *justification problem*.

While providing a satisfying response to the justification problem is well beyond the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out that Mencius's moral framework offers an interesting way of engaging this challenge. For whether or not we agree with Mencius about what the virtues are, if we agree with him that human beings carry certain incipient moral dispositions that provide us with the starting point of moral development, we at least possess some substantive material for reflection in determining the kinds of characteristic traits we should attempt to cultivate. Minimally, we can investigate which traits are more or less realistic for us, and – with the aid of other disciplines such as developmental psychology or cognitive science – grasp how different drives and impulses develop, interact, and coalesce in the process of character formation.

Moving along this line of thought suggests one possible way of responding to the justification problem that captures the spirit of the sort of ethical naturalism defended in this essay. For one point that emerges from Mencius's account of human nature, assuming he's correct about the existence of moral sprouts, is that while human beings are prone to a variety of moral errors and all too readily engage in malicious activities, we are nevertheless endowed with certain fundamental inclinations that suits us as social creatures, with other-regarding concern and feelings of compassion.⁴⁴ Of course, such feelings can be suppressed (and in extreme narcissists and psychopaths missing altogether) or overridden by other stronger impulses: jealousy, rage, or fear, to list a few. But, if Mencius is right, such feelings as compassion or empathy are also actively working in most of us. So while it may be true that the sprout of disdain could be developed into the vice of racism, Mencius could argue that this development would conflict with other sprouts, such as compassion, thereby impeding the full development of our nature as human beings. This is just one possible, admittedly speculative response, and defending it would require not only much more careful philosophical reflection on the nature, shape, and trajectory of the moral sprouts, but also a thorough empirical inquiry into the relevant aspects of moral education and developmental psychology.

6. Conclusion

In this article I offered a response to the Pollyanna Problem by drawing upon Mencius's account of the moral sprouts of human nature and his emphasis on obtaining proper social and environmental conditions. In doing so, I looked to find a way of preserving the connection between the human life-form (as normatively understood by Aristotelians) and empirical research. However, I have tried to argue that when it comes to understanding our 'first' nature, which sets up our initial animal condition as biological organisms, empirical research can enhance the understanding of our

fundamental needs and inclinations. Furthermore, while these fundamental inclinations and needs can all too easily become disordered, I have argued that they are not in themselves morally bad, and in fact point us toward genuine human goods.

Our normative ideal, however, will require us to reconfigure our basic inclinations – to shape and modify them in certain ways – so that we can achieve flourishing lives and communities. As for how best to achieve this, there are no easy answers. But working from a wide-ranging, comparative, pluralistic methodology seems to be in order, one that endorses the integration of the humanities and the sciences, and draws upon the best of anthropology, cultural history, psychology, evolutionary biology, literature, philosophy, and religion. Moreover, because we are social creatures, we must participate in the ongoing process of reflection, discussion, and dialogue that not only take place within ourselves, and our community and society, but also across different moral, political, and religious traditions, in a way that acknowledges our shared humanity. Although a pluralistic approach integrating knowledge from a variety of disciplines and traditions will undoubtedly raise new challenges by raising our awareness of the complexities of human life, the insights obtained from a diversity of sources will offer us the best chance of understanding the multitude of ways we can lead good lives, and keep us open to recognizing possibilities that extend the human good.⁴⁵

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NOTES

¹ Aristotle, 1984b, 1098a20–25.

² *Mengzi*, 2008, 2A6.

³ Unless noted otherwise, I will use the terms ‘ethical naturalism’ and ‘naturalism’ to refer to Aristotelian naturalism.

⁴ Thompson, 2008; Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999; MacIntyre, 1999.

⁵ Lott, 2012a, p. 10. Although I do not have the space to examine his views, John Hacker-Wright also appears to share Micah Lott’s conception of the relationship between ethical naturalism and empirical science. So at least some of the concerns I have for Lott’s view can also be carried over to Hacker-Wright’s account. See Hacker-Wright, 2009. My aim in this article is not to refute Lott’s position – I’m largely in agreement with his substantial points – but to identify a potential problem with his conception of Aristotelian naturalism (shared by John Hacker-Wright) and to offer a way of answering the Pollyanna Problem that avoids this difficulty.

⁶ Another important objection to the sort of neo-Aristotelianism espoused by Foot is that the notions of teleology and function that lie at the heart of neo-Aristotelianism are incompatible with evolutionary biology. This line of challenge is presented by Kitcher, 2006, and FitzPatrick, 2000. Foot only briefly discusses this issue explicitly in Foot, 2001, p. 32, fn. 10. Her main response is that the concept of ‘function’ she employs is different from the concept of ‘function’

discussed in evolutionary biology. For responses made on behalf of Foot, see Hacker-Wright, 2009, and Lott, 2012b.

⁷ What Foot acknowledges, therefore, is the significance of the rational will in the determination of moral goodness and defect. And it is the virtues – those characteristics of the human will that dispose one to feel, think, and act correctly – that enables us to act well and *ipso facto*, to live as a good human being, or more colloquially, as a good person. So the goodness of human beings lies primarily in exercising one's will properly, by acting according to the dictates of practical rationality.

⁸ For different articulations of the Pollyanna Problem see Andreou, 2006, and Woodcock, 2006.

⁹ Millgram, 2009.

¹⁰ In Davis, 2003, scholars from a wide range of disciplines including anthropology, biology, zoology, sociology, and psychology provide a variety of objections against Thornhill and Palmer's work.

¹¹ Of course, an adequate apprehension can be quite difficult since we need to also understand not only if a specific trait that a living thing exemplifies is a feature that is characteristic of its species-kind, but also whether the environment or conditions the particular entity occupies is proper or normal to things of that kind. (Our understanding of Aristotelian Categoricals is always revisable.) Observing a caged bat will not get us very far in determining the characteristic life-form of bats. This point will be explore further later in the essay. Cf. Lott, 2012a, pp. 8–9.

¹² For Michael Thompson's discussion of non-observational knowledge, see Thompson, 2004, pp. 71–2. The concept of non-observational knowledge can be traced back to Anscombe, 1963, §§8.

¹³ Schwitzgebel (2011) argues against the reliability of introspection for acquiring knowledge and has drawn attention to many ways in which even the understanding of our own emotions and other forms of conscious experience can be prone to error. For a related view calling into question the reliability of our judgments about our own levels of happiness, see Haybron, 2008. Both works are firmly grounded in contemporary research in empirical psychology and should be taken seriously by anyone inclined to put too much weight on knowledge gained through introspective experience.

¹⁴ Millgram, 2009, p.6.

¹⁵ Toner, 2008, p. 236. The distinction can be found in McDowell, 1996, and much further back, in Aristotle. Toner offers three other necessary conditions for a successful form of naturalism. But the condition I focus on seems to me at the heart of all the requirements that Toner presents and bears the most relevance for our discussion.

¹⁶ And none of these suggestions should undermine the significance of practical reason, for of course practical reason will play a crucial role in correctly guiding those fundamental inclinations toward a properly developed second nature, as well as providing us with the proper conception of the good life. Because the topic of practical reason, while crucial, is so complex, I must find another occasion to explore its role in Aristotelian naturalism.

¹⁷ Although I speak of the ideas and arguments of Mencius, it should be noted that these ideas and arguments are reconstructed out of the text, the *Mengzi*, which is generally thought by scholars to have been written by Mencius's disciples, possibly under the guidance of Mencius himself.

¹⁸ For a concise and lucid account of how Mencius develops and expands the philosophical ideas of Confucius, see Ivanhoe, 2000, pp. 15–28.

¹⁹ *Mengzi*, 2008, 2A6.

²⁰ See *Mengzi*, 2008, 1A7, 2A2, and 4A27.

²¹ This point has also been noted by Ivanhoe (2002a, pp. 222–23), in his discussion of Mencius. He calls these kinds of non-universally quantifiable claims 'generic claims,' drawing upon the work of Julius E. Moravcsik.

²² Mencius offers a variety of arguments for the existence of moral sprouts. The most famous is his thought experiment about a child crawling into a well and the feeling of alarm and

compassion such an image generates. For a categorization of these different arguments as well as textual references, see Ivanhoe, 2002b, pp. 39–40.

²³ The most widely analyzed example of ‘extension’ occurs in *Mengzi* 1A7 where Mencius tries to help King Xuan extend the compassion he has shown to an Ox on its way to being slaughtered to the people of his own land. But the correct understanding of ‘extension’ remains a matter of considerable controversy.

²⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this issue.

²⁵ Chomsky, 1986.

²⁶ See, for example, De Waal, 1996, and Haidt, 2001. Bloom (2013) argues that babies less than a year old also have the basic capacity to feel empathy. It is also worth citing the work of Michael Slote since he articulates a moral theory that sits firmly in the moral sentimental tradition that is represented in the works of Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Smith, and most powerfully, Hume. See Slote, 2001. While I don’t think Mencius is a moral sentimentalist since he takes the development of human nature and the flourishing life as the foundation for ethics, the significance Mencius attaches to certain basic moral feelings bears fascinating connections to the sentimental tradition that merits deeper exploration.

²⁷ The reference to ‘seeds’ of excellences appears in *Historia Animalium* (Aristotle, 1984a) 588a25–b3. In his discussion of the ‘natural virtues,’ Aristotle also states that ‘for from the very moment of birth we are just or fitted for self-control or brave or have the other moral qualities’ (Aristotle, 1984b, 1144b5). But this is a rather cryptic remark, and should not be taken literally. Even if Aristotle here is acknowledging the existence of certain basic moral inclinations in children, the surrounding context of the passage, which centers on the praise of practical wisdom, suggests that Aristotle does not mean to take them as playing a substantial role in his ethical theory.

²⁸ For support of moral modularity, see Mikhail, 2011, and Haidt, 2012. For a wide-ranging and helpful discussion of moral modularity and Mencius’s teleology, see Flanagan, 2014. Of course, the existence of moral modules remains a deeply contested issue. For arguments against moral modularity, see Mallon, 2008, and Prinz, 2008.

²⁹ On this point, I am indebted to the work of Rosalind Hursthouse and her helpful account of the Neurathian procedure in working out an account of Aristotelian naturalism. As I see it, by taking human nature as partially constituted by the moral sprouts, Mencius’s naturalism can help support Hursthouse’s assumption – which she claims is required by the virtue of hope – that human nature is harmonious and that the virtues benefit the possessors. I leave aside a more developed comparison between Hursthouse’s Aristotelian naturalism and Mencius’s account for another occasion. See Hursthouse, 1999, Part III.

³⁰ We should not, however, exaggerate the extent to which cultures are dissimilar. Some of the most influential research claiming to show the radical differences between cultures have been either heavily criticized or falsified. For example, Margaret Mead’s claim that the youth in Samoa enjoy anxiety-free sexual lives and the often repeated (though rarely questioned) statement that Eskimos have 22 words for snow, have both been clearly undermined by further empirical inquiry. See Van Norden, 2014, pp. 73–4. We now have strong reason to believe that at least certain traits are shared by nearly all human beings, for example, certain basic emotions and the facial expressions that correspond to them such as anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. See Ekman, 1994, pp. 15–9.

³¹ Of course, it is certainly *possible* that Mencius was motivated by this kind of bias. Owen Flanagan and Jing Hu argue that one of the reasons why Mencius’s view about the goodness of human nature was much more widely accepted than his adversaries’ views about the badness about human nature concerns what they call the ‘What Is Flattering is True’ bias. Even if they are right about how this kind of bias inclines most of us toward accepting Mencius’s account of human nature, this fact does not on its own undermine the truth of Mencius’s account, a point that Flanagan and Hu would I think agree with. See Flanagan and Hu, 2011.

³² Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph acknowledge Ingroup/loyalty as one of the five basic foundations for intuitive ethics. See Haidt and Joseph, 2007. Bloom (2013) has also argued that racial discrimination is a social and culturally learned behavior, most likely developed out of innate (biologically based) drive to form coalitions, a view that he calls ‘race-as-cue-to-coalition’ theory, proposed first by Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides, 2001.

³³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point. Of course, how we should specify the object of each desire is a question that should be left open for substantive debate.

³⁴ *Mengzi*, 6A14–15.

³⁵ Another important concept in Mencius’s moral system connected to ‘reflection’ is *zhi* or ‘practical wisdom,’ one of the four Mencian virtues. One function of *zhi* is to allow reflection on the other virtues as a sort of ‘meta-virtue.’ See Owen Flanagan’s discussion in Flanagan, 2014, pp. 81–89.

³⁶ *Mengzi*, 2008, 6A11.3.

³⁷ *Mengzi*, 2008, 6A8.1–8.2.

³⁸ *Mengzi*, 2008, 6A7.

³⁹ Given his views about the necessities of certain external goods as well as a good upbringing from an early age, Aristotle would also endorse the core of Mencius’s point.

⁴⁰ Andreou, 2006, p. 67.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion and helping me to think through this particular objection.

⁴⁴ Recall that the sprout of compassion, which leads to the virtue of benevolence, is one of Mencius’s core virtues.

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