

Hursthouse's Virtue Ethics: Neo-Aristotelian or Post-Cartesian?

KEVIN E. O'REILLY

*Milltown Institute
Dublin, Ireland*

IN HIS magisterial study, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre shows how it was the rejection of Aristotelianism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that provided the background to the Nietzschean morality of the will to power and ultimately to the emotivist attitude that characterizes the contemporary moral landscape. With the fragmentation of what up to then had been a unified moral tradition the role that virtue played in theorizing was to all intents and purposes vitiated. Recent decades have however witnessed an attempt to restore virtue ethics to its rightful place in moral theorizing and debate. Those philosophers who have contributed to this attempt—Anscombe, Foot, Murdoch, MacIntyre, McDowell, Nussbaum, Slote, to name a few—have all absorbed Plato and Aristotle. Some, but by no means all, have displayed a certain familiarity with the thought of Aquinas.

Among the names just cited, that of Rosalind Hursthouse ought to be included. Her book, *On Virtue Ethics*,¹ has been well received and rightly so; it has indeed much to recommend it. As well as engaging in a lively conversation with Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, Hursthouse effects a certain rapprochement between an Aristotelian-inspired virtue ethics and Kantian deontology. In addition she offers stimulating discussions of various issues such as moral dilemmas, virtue and the emotions, and moral motivation. In this essay, however, I wish to focus my attention on some of Hursthouse's reflections concerning various issues in practical ethics, particularly that of homosexuality. These reflections occur during her

¹ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

consideration of the important contribution that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has to make to the issue of the objectivity of morality. The views that she advances with regard to various practical ethical issues are arguably inconsistent with the logical demands inherent in Aristotle's own philosophical thought. The reason for her mistaken reasoning in this regard is grounded in her conception of human nature, a conception that is demonstrably not Aristotelian. While Hursthouse does not explicitly delineate the kind of philosophical anthropology that in fact undergirds her ethical theorizing, it is not difficult to deduce it from her comments.

In this article we first turn our attention to the notion of ethical naturalism as expounded by Hursthouse, for it is in relation to this idea as applied to human beings that she makes comments about various practical issues. In order to critique her arguments, we will then have to examine briefly Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between body and soul and its unfulfilled implications in his ethical theory. Subsequent developments in the Aristotelian tradition, particularly as it arguably reached its culmination in St. Thomas, saw this lacuna in Aristotle's ethical thought filled in, as a short treatment of Thomas's natural law theory will seek to demonstrate. Examination of Hursthouse's contribution to the literature on virtue ethics in the light of our engagement with the thought of Aristotle, Thomas, and more recent exponents of this tradition—particularly John Paul II—will lead us to question whether her thought is really neo-Aristotelian, as she claims it is, or whether it is in reality some form of post-Cartesianism.

Hursthouse on Aristotelian Naturalism

Implicit in the ethical naturalism developed by Hursthouse is the claim that we can know reality as it is and that reality is imbued with a structure that, when perceived, translates in some way into ethical demands. Ethical evaluations, in this way of thinking, are analogous to evaluations of tigers (or wolves or bees) as good, healthy specimens of their kind. This view is in fact taken from Philippa Foot who argues that "a moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of a matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a particular subject matter."² Why, asks Foot, should evaluations of the human will not be determined by human nature? In other words, the contention seems to be that the rightness and wrongness of human actions is in some way determined by the concrete datum of human nature, a nature that possesses a discernible structure of universal extension.

² Philippa Foot, "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?" *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 15 (1995): 14.

Hursthouse adopts the same approach to ethical naturalism as Foot, beginning with plant life, passing on to a consideration of animals and completing her considerations with an examination of human beings. Time and space do not permit a summary of Hursthouse's lengthy treatment of naturalism. For the purposes of this essay, it suffices to highlight an important dis-analogy that she notes as obtaining between animals and human beings. Human beings do not possess characteristic modes of behavior in the same way that animals do. The characteristic human mode is rational: Our actions are dictated by the reasons that we have for acting. Continuing her line of thought, Hursthouse argues that ethical evaluations cannot therefore be "a branch of biology or ethology because neither we nor our concepts of 'a good human being' and 'living well as a human being' are completely constrained by nature."³ Further, she states that "it is an open question whether *any* human being is good, or living well, given what we could be, not something that has already been determined by nature."⁴

Hursthouse does not flesh out the foregoing claim in terms of concrete illustrations, but what she does say reveals the influence of contemporary politically correct agendas on her moral theorizing. In a brief consideration of feminist concerns, she denies any validity to the notion of "essentialism." In other words, she does not believe that it is in the nature or essence of female human beings that they are bound to do whatever women have always done. "We can do otherwise."⁵ What exactly she means by her rejection of essentialism is not totally clear as she does not state her position in unequivocal terms. The analogy that Hursthouse draws between women and female cheetahs—or, more precisely, pregnant female cheetahs—affords some space for interpretation. Female cheetahs have "a rotten life" in comparison with their male counterparts. Hursthouse illustrates this point in a footnote with a factual account of the hardships experienced by female cheetahs when searching for prey during pregnancy. These cheetahs can of course do nothing to change their conditions; their lot is determined by nature. When Hursthouse posits that female human beings are not constrained in the same way as cheetahs, it is difficult not to detect an implicit reference to control of their reproductive powers. She is after all rejecting essentialism, and essentialism has nothing to do with any accidental aids that may be provided to a woman to render her pregnancy more comfortable. This interpretation seems to be borne out by her assertion that "[o]ur concepts

³ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 228.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 228–29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

of 'a good human being' and 'living well, as a human being' are far from being completely constrained by what members and biologically specialized members of our species actually, or, at the moment, typically, do."⁶

Earlier on Hursthouse raises the issue of homosexual practice and maintains that any arguments condemning it as ethically bad or defective are not based on premises that derive straightforwardly from ethical naturalism. And, indeed, the arguments that she puts forward on behalf of those who do regard homosexual activity as ethically problematic certainly do not issue directly from considerations of ethical naturalism. To ask whether or not "practicing homosexuals were all wildly, willfully promiscuous (and thereby licentious and thereby lacking in temperance)" and whether or not "anyone who went in for sexual activity with their own sex was *thereby* lacking in temperance or *thereby* licentious (albeit not in the usual way)"⁷ is really beside the point and does not address the serious arguments that have been adduced by those who espouse one form of ethical naturalism or other.

In order to assess the merits of the foregoing claims on the part of Hursthouse, I propose first of all to look at Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between body and soul. As already stated, Aristotle did not draw out the implications of this aspect of his thought for his ethical theory; later contributors to the tradition, however, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas, made good what was lacking in this respect, as we shall see. At the term of our examination of Aristotle and Thomas, we will return to Hursthouse in order to appraise her virtue theory with due reference to the issue of homosexual activity.

Aristotle on the Relationship Between Soul and Body

Aristotle's account of the relationship between the soul and body is both cryptic and subtle and has been the subject of various interpretations on the part of commentators.⁸ On the one hand he claims that the soul is an immaterial substance, thereby rejecting the notion that soul and body are identical and the contention that the body constitutes the soul. On the other hand, he regards souls as ontologically dependent on bodies, and so he cannot be regarded as some sort of Cartesian dualist. We must therefore agree with Christopher Shields that although "Aristotle regards

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 215, original emphasis.

⁸ See, for example, Christopher Shields, "Soul and Body in Aristotle," in *Aristotle: Critical Assessments*, vol. 3, *Psychology and Ethics*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–31; also, Jaegwon Kim, "Psychophysical Supervenience," *Philosophical Studies* 41 (1982): 51–70.

soul and body as one in some important and intimate way," there is "reason to suppose that they are one in some way short of identity."⁹

The important point remains, however, that for Aristotle an intimate union does indeed obtain between body and soul. His insistence that mental states are conditioned in a fundamental way by physiological states is an affirmation of this contention. In this regard he is surely correct, for if Cartesian dualism were true we would have to expect, as Paul M. Churchland rightly points out, that reason, emotion, and consciousness would be "relatively invulnerable to direct control or pathology by manipulation or damage to the brain."¹⁰ The influence between body and soul however is not simply a unilateral one, having the body as its source and the soul as its terminus. A dynamic of reciprocity obtains between them. One need only note the physiological impact of various psychological states on the human body in support of this claim.

In spite of Aristotle's philosophical commitment to the ontological oneness of the human person, his ethics can nevertheless be characterized as "an ethics of the mind," that is to say, "a rational ethics."¹¹ For although our moral life includes an activity of desire perfected by virtue, this activity itself is nonetheless executed under the guidance of reason. In spite of this emphasis on the primacy of reason in the moral life and on the fundamentally rational character of the moral life, Aristotle nowhere tells us why such conduct is rational. As R.-A. Gauthier states, "Aristotle establishes his ethics on the rule which reason enunciates"; he nevertheless "refuses to go beyond that and establish this rule itself."¹² Aristotle's ethics in effect stops short and fails to implement the implications of his psychology and metaphysics. On the one hand, in reaction against the pessimism of Plato's first teaching, he aims to do justice to the body and its relationship to the mind. Since the body is necessary to the mind, which it serves as its instrument, so also are the external goods that are necessary to the well-being of the body. On the other hand, Aristotle ends up by making the body not merely the instrument of the mind but falls foul of a latent Platonism according to which man is his mind. Consequently, in the final analysis, the only fully human value for Aristotle is necessarily, as Gauthier puts it, "that which alone is the value of pure mind, contemplation." An unavoidable

⁹ Shields, "Soul and Body in Aristotle," 21.

¹⁰ Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 20, quoted in Shields, "Soul and Body in Aristotle," 23.

¹¹ R.-A. Gauthier, "On the Nature of Aristotle's Ethics," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Issues and Interpretations*, ed. James J. Walsh and Henry L. Shapiro (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1967), 28.

¹² Ibid.

consequence of this primacy of reason is that “the properly moral values connected with the body must necessarily be relegated to the instrumental level.”¹³ If Aristotle had developed and carried through the implications of his hylomorphic psychology, his ethical theory would perhaps have been spared many of its inconsistencies.

Aristotle is aware of the fact that his pioneering work in ethics has its shortcomings. What he offers is a rough sketch whose details can be filled in later. Nevertheless, he is at the same time conscious of the value of this summary account. Hinting very strongly at the genius of his contribution he states: “[I]t 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 anyone can add what is lacking.”¹⁴ In the course of time the Stoics, with their discovery and elaboration of the concept of natural law, go beyond Aristotle. They discern laws in the very structure of human being, expressing themselves in the very tendencies of our nature; and they see these laws as the expression of reason itself, that is to say, God’s reason. Thus, for the Stoics, the natural law governing human behavior is grounded in the eternal divine law. The contribution of the Stoics is transmitted down through a line of theologians, including St. Augustine, to St. Thomas Aquinas. It is to the thought of Thomas, in which the Aristotelian tradition of ethical theory arguably reached its climax, that we now turn.

St. Thomas on Reality as the Foundation of Ethics¹⁵

As we have already indicated, Aristotle’s ethical theory fails to take cognizance of the implications of his epistemology and metaphysics. In contrast, Thomas’s moral theory is radically informed by epistemological and metaphysical considerations, as we will presently demonstrate. Our discussion will also highlight the intrinsic interrelatedness of mind and reality as well as the ontological unity of theoretical and practical reason which for Thomas ground all moral imperatives. As will become evident, reality has a structure that speculative reason perceives and that practical reason translates into action. The moral value of such action is therefore measured by reality itself. Thus, for Thomas, reality is the foundation of ethics.

¹³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7, 1098a21–26.

¹⁵ The observations in this section are based to a large extent on Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth*, trans. Lothar Krauth and Stella Lange (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), a magisterial study of both speculative and practical truth in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

That reality is the foundation of ethics depends on two conditions: first, that the intellect can know things as they are, that is to say, that it can attain to the truth of things; second, that human willing and action are determined by knowledge. In relation to the first condition, Thomas states: "The intellect penetrates to the essence of the thing."¹⁶ As regards the second, he posits: "The will does not have the character of the first rule; it is rather a rule which has a rule, for it is guided by the reason and the intellect. This is true not only in us but also in God."¹⁷

In relation to the first condition, it is important to appreciate that Thomas's philosophical realism, which he inherited from Aristotle, is radically different to modern conceptions of the relationship between mind and reality. In his theory of intentionality, Thomas maintains an identity between the actualization of the capacity for thinking and the actualization of the object of thought. This identity arises from the fact that the intellect has no inherent structure or matter of its own, while the object of intellectual thought possesses no existence apart from thought itself. It is precisely in this assimilation (*adequatio*) of reality and mind that truth consists. And as Josef Pieper rightly points out, it is this assimilation and consequent identity that establishes reality as the measure of the intellect.¹⁸ Reality as the measure of the intellect furnishes the first condition of reality's also being the foundation of ethics. To understand why this is so, we must pass on to a consideration of the second condition.

The passage from the identity between mind and reality, occasioned by the act of intellection, to moral imperatives is explained by Thomas's profoundly unitary conception of human reason. We can discern two modes of operation of one and the same intellect. First, there is the speculative reason, whereby we contemplate the structure of being. Second, there is practical reason that governs human action. It is important, however, to emphasize that for Thomas these two modes of operation are grounded in one and the same intellect. For Thomas practical reason is in fact an

¹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 31, a. 5, my translation: "Intellectus vero penetrat usque ad rei essentiam." See also *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7: "The proper object of the human intellect, . . . since it is joined to a body, is a nature or 'whatness' found in corporeal matter" (Intellectus . . . humani, qui est conjunctus corpori, proprium objectum est quidditas sive natura in materia corporali existens.). The following translations of Aquinas's works are employed in this article, unless otherwise noted: *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Blackfriars (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964–1981); and *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Schmidt, S.J., 4 vols. (Cambridge: Hackett, 1994).

¹⁷ *De veritate*, 23, 6: "Voluntas autem non habet rationem primae regulae, sed est regula recta; dirigitur enim per rationem et intellectum, non solum in nobis sed et in Deo."

¹⁸ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 134.

extension of the theoretical.¹⁹ The practical reason presupposes the theoretical and is rooted in it. In effect, therefore, the reality that is perceived by speculative reason is translated into action by practical reason. At the same time therefore this reality constitutes the measure of human action. For reality is the measure of reason in its speculative mode of activity, while practical reason is grounded in and is an extension of speculative reason.

It becomes clear that Thomas's unitary understanding of the human intellect is crucial for his ethical realism. For the practical reason is the measure of right action precisely because it has received this measure from objective reality by way of the speculative intellect of which it is an extension. For Thomas ethical imperatives are founded upon ontological indicatives, that is to say, upon the way things are. Because of the ontological unity of the intellect, there can be no disjunction between "is" and "ought." The practical reason simply translates the knowledge of being gained by the theoretical reason into the realm of action. The penetrating insight of Goethe thus becomes more intelligible to us, namely that "[I]n our doing and acting everything depends on this, that we comprehend objects clearly and treat them according to their nature."²⁰

It becomes clear that reality grounds any action that can be called truly virtuous. Virtuous action is in effect faithful to the nature of things. This contention is implicit in Aristotle's virtue ethics, but as we have seen, it is not developed. Aristotle in fact recognizes that passions such as spite, shamelessness, and envy as well as actions such as adultery, theft, and murder are always bad: "It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong."²¹ Why such passions and actions are always wrong is grounded in the fact that they are out of sync with the nature of reality; in other words, as can be well appreciated from our delineation of Thomas's thought, they mistranslate the demands that issue from the very structure of all reality, in particular the reality of the human person. All things possess a structure that determines how they can fulfill their potential.

Human beings of course are not determined *ad unum*; nevertheless, the structure of human being, constituted as it is by an intimate connec-

¹⁹ ST I, q. 79, a. 11, s.c.

²⁰ Quoted in Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 108. Pieper offers an analysis of the structure of the extension of reason from the sight of the good to the command that is directed toward action (*Living the Truth*, 145–51). He does not however deal with the problem of bad choice or with the aporia of the apparent good. It is not possible in a study of this scope to deal with this issue. For a very fine treatment of the same, see Rafael-Tomás Caldera, *Le jugement par inclination chez saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1980).

²¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6.

tion between mind and body, certainly determines that while some courses of action contribute to its flourishing, others impede the fulfillment of its potential. This conclusion follows from an Aristotelian understanding of human nature in which the human substance is viewed as a unitary composite being in its ontological constitution. If the rational soul were to act contrary to the demands of corporeal matter, it would in a real sense be violating the very structure of its own being. Thus, although reason does transcend the physical limitations of bodily being, the good of bodily being is nonetheless integral to its (reason's) own well-being. This conclusion is based on the intimate connection between body and soul. Virtue demands that human physicality serve reason, but also that reason in turn respect and serve the physical structure of our being.

The Natural Law and Eternal Law

In the foregoing section we have provided a brief account of the metaphysical and epistemological background to natural law theory in the thought of St. Thomas, for as he himself states, "the natural law is constituted by reason."²² In this present section our task is to clarify Thomas's notion of natural law further by showing how it is intimately connected with the eternal law, since for Thomas "the light of natural reason whereby we discern good and evil is simply the imprint of God's light in us."²³ Indeed, one could ask how binding the natural law could be if it were not grounded in the eternal law.

According to Thomas the intrinsic forms²⁴ of created artifacts are patterned after the preceding original forms that reside in creatively knowing minds. The paradigmatic form in the mind of an artist can rightly be considered to be the "measure" of the created reality: The created object is measured by the extent to which it lives up to the demands of the paradigmatic form. At the same time we can say that the mind of the artist is present in the objective, material work. In other words, the work itself in some way reflects the mind of the artist. In a similar way all created things reflect something of the divine essence, according to Thomas, although "different things imitate the divine essence in different ways, each according to its own proper manner."²⁵ Indeed, Thomas states that the forms of things are "nothing else but the

²² *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 1.

²³ *ST* I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

²⁴ By *form* we mean the intrinsic principle that specifies a particular being, that is to say, that intrinsic principle that makes a particular being *what* it is.

²⁵ *De veritate*, q. 3, a. 2.

imprint of divine knowledge in things,”²⁶ for the primordial forms of things reside in God’s mind.

We have already highlighted the identity between mind and reality occasioned by the act of intellection. What the intellect knows are the forms of things, the very forms that are reflections of the eternal divine ideas. On account of its form, therefore, a thing itself is proportioned to the divine intellect as a product of art is to art. Because of the same form, moreover, the thing is able to conform our own intellect to it, insofar as its likeness, being received into the soul, causes the thing itself to be known.²⁷ On the basis of the foregoing assertion, Pieper concludes that “the truth inherent in all things in view of God’s mind is the foundation and root of their truth in view of the knowing human mind.”²⁸

In the light of the foregoing we can perhaps see the significance of Thomas’s assertion that the natural law is a “participation in the eternal law by the rational creature.”²⁹ Of course no one except the blessed, who see God in his essence, can know the eternal law as it is in itself. However, just as we can know the sun by the effects of its rays even though we are not looking at it, so too we can know some of the radiating effects of the eternal law. Our brief comments concerning the divine ideas as the eternal, preconceived forms of all created things and human intellection as being constituted in an identity between mind and reality ought to be sufficient to indicate how “every truth is a radiation and participation of the eternal law.”³⁰ The law that governs human nature “exists only in the mind of God, and not in created nature,” as Martin Rhonheimer rightly points out. Rhonheimer explains further: “This order [the natural law] . . . is not at all a ‘natural order,’ but rather an ‘order of the reason’ (*ordo rationis*) that exists from eternity in God, and which is then constituted, by the mediation of human reason, in acts of the will and in particular actions.”³¹ William Desmond expresses this same idea in completely

²⁶ *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 6. My translation.

²⁷ See *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

²⁸ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 52.

²⁹ *ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 2.

³⁰ *ST I-II*, q. 93, a. 2.

³¹ Martin Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 66. (In quoting Rhonheimer in this respect I do not wish to give the impression that I endorse his overall interpretation of St. Thomas on the natural law.) It should be noted that the precepts of natural law are based on the first principle of practical reason, namely that “we should do and seek the good, and shun evil” (*ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 2). This principle is in turn founded on the nature of the good, for the good is “what all things seek” (*ibid.*). A more exhaustive treatment of the

different terms when he asserts that natural law concerns a “grounding good as other to the human, not as a dualistic opposite but as the giver of the good within which we participate, and of which we are never masters.”³² This participation is of course by way of human reason.

At this point in our discussion we have shown, albeit in somewhat succinct manner, how Aquinas draws out the logical implications of Aristotle's understanding of human nature for an understanding of virtue. We have also briefly indicated how the structures that human reason perceives in reality reflect something of God's design for his creation. Human reason, by engaging with the forms of things, whose ideas have existed from all eternity in the divine mind, constitutes the natural law. It is now time to turn to a consideration of homosexual activity in the light of what we have said.

The Structure of the Homosexual Act and Its Ethical Implications

In the reflections that follow I agree with the assertion that a person's sexual orientation—whether heterosexual or homosexual or otherwise—“is a complex human and psychological reality which admits of no easy explanation.”³³ This fact does not preclude us, however, from engaging in a moral appraisal of acts that follow from this orientation any more than an individual's kleptomaniac or pyromaniac orientation disallows any evaluation of actions that issue from such inclinations.³⁴

I make no apologies for concentrating on the physical aspect of homosexual acts for, as we shall see, those who prefer to concentrate uniquely on the more “spiritual” dynamics of homosexual physical relationships ignore an important fact, namely that relationality cannot prescind from the corporeal conditions of our being. We simply do not relate to one another as disembodied spirits, but rather as body-soul unities. Indeed, it is to our bodies that others first relate as they come to know us as the physical-psychical beings we are.³⁵ As John Paul II puts it, “the body reveals

issue would demonstrate how what is truly good for human beings is proportioned to human nature and therefore facilitates the fulfillment of its potential.

³² William Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 193.

³³ Vincent J. Genovesi, S.J., *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 255.

³⁴ Homosexual orientation ought of course to be carefully distinguished from homosexual acts. Homosexual orientation in itself is not immoral, although it is objectively disordered on account of its intrinsic ordination to expression in acts that are themselves immoral.

³⁵ “Psychical” is here employed in accordance with its derivation from the Greek term, *psyche*, meaning “soul.”

man,”³⁶ thereby underlining the ontologically unitary nature of the human person and the fact that we come to know a person by means of his body that is partly constitutive of him as a person.³⁷ The incoherence of the position of those who maintain that if the body is meant to express the person then the individual should be able to choose the manner in which this expression is articulated ought to be apparent from my insistence on this point. How can we be slaves to the biological functions of our bodies if these bodies are partly constitutive of whom we are? Indeed, it is precisely because they are partly constitutive of human beings as psychosomatic unities that biological functions acquire a meaning that they do not possess in the case of the other animals. As Janet E. Smith tells us,

it is because of the nature of *Man*, not because of the nature of the biological processes per se, that Man must not interfere with these processes. It is because the generative biological processes of Man mean something much greater for Man than they do for animals that these biological processes are evaluated differently.³⁸

³⁶ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 47.

³⁷ In his earlier work, John Paul II offers a prolonged exposition concerning the nature of the complex relationship that obtains between body and soul, emphasizing once again the idea that the body is the means of expression of the person: “It is generally recognized that the human body is in its visible dynamism the territory where, or in a way even the medium whereby, the person expresses himself. Strictly speaking, the personal structure of self-governance and self-possession may be thought of as ‘traversing’ the body and being expressed by the body.” (*The Acting Person*, trans. by Andrzej Potocki [London: D. Reidel, 1979], 204). While highlighting the personal unity of human beings, John Paul II draws our attention to the fact that there is “intrinsically built into the personal structure of man’s unity, a structure that exists and is dynamized according to nature—in a different way than the way of the person” (ibid., 211). The author is however at pains to point out that “the human body does not constitute a separate subject standing apart from the subject that is the man-person. The unity of the body with the ontic subjectivity of man—with the human factor—cannot be doubted” (ibid.).

³⁸ Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 177. While the focus of Smith’s discussion in this book is contraception, what she says can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to homosexual acts. In both cases, however, accusations of physicalism—the idea that the biological structure of the sexual organs are of themselves morally normative—are completely out of place and betray a lack of appreciation of the anthropology that I have outlined. The following words penned by Elizabeth Anscombe in 1975 highlight the connection between contraception and homosexuality (as well as other forms of sexual activity) as being rooted in a view that ignores the procreative meaning of the sexual act: “If contraceptive intercourse

Thus, although knowledge of the ordination of the sexual organs is not sufficient for the moral evaluation of homosexual acts, they are nonetheless an essential component. It is necessary to be clear on this point: What I am presenting here is not an argument based simply on the natural ordination of organs. On account of the psychosomatic unity of human beings, the natural ordination of the sexual organs acquires a meaning that, although firmly rooted in their physical structure, nevertheless transcends it. As *Veritatis Splendor* states:

Only in reference to the human person in his “unified totality,” that is, as “a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit,” can the specifically human meaning of the body be grasped. Indeed, natural inclinations take on moral relevance only insofar as they refer to the human person and his authentic fulfillment, *a fulfillment which for that matter can take place always and only in human nature*.³⁹

If moreover, as Thomas Aquinas tells us, the forms of things are “nothing else but the imprint of divine knowledge in things,”⁴⁰ an important consequence ensues: Human beings are not the arbiters of their own nature and therefore ought not to act as if they were. This nature issues from the creative act of God and bears the impress of his reason, an impress that the human mind is capable of discerning when it genuinely

is permissible, then what objection could there be after all to mutual masturbation, or copulation in *use indebito*, sodomy, buggery, when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable (or in any case, according to taste)? It can't be the mere pattern of bodily behavior in which the stimulation is procured that makes all the difference! But if such things are all right, it becomes perfectly impossible to see anything wrong with homosexual intercourse, for example. I am not saying: if you think contraception all right you will do these other things; not at all. But I am saying: you will have no solid reason against these things. You will have no answer to someone who proclaims as many do that they are good too” (G. E. M. Anscombe, *Contraception and Chastity* [London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975], 18). Interestingly, this point is corroborated by Charles Curran, arguing from a diametrically opposed perspective: “Catholic theologians frequently deny the existing teaching of the hierarchical Magisterium on such issues as contraception, sterilization, artificial insemination, masturbation, the generic gravity of sexual sins. Newer approaches have recently been taken to the question of homosexuality. . . . All these questions in the area of medical and sexual morality are being questioned today because some theologians believe that the absolute prohibitions define the forbidden action in terms of the physical structure of the act seen in itself apart from the context, the existing relationships, or the consequences.” *New Perspectives in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 20, quoted in Smith, *Humanae Vitae*, 383, note 19.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §50, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 6, my translation.

seeks the truth of human being. It is helpful here, I think, to invoke John Paul II's distinction between the order of nature/existence and the biological order. He tells us that "The order of existence is the Divine Order, although existence is not in itself something supernatural. But then the Divine Order includes not only the supernatural order but the order of nature too, which also stands in a permanent relationship to God and the Creator." In contrast, the biological order means "the same as the order of nature but only insofar as this is accessible to the methods of empirical and descriptive natural science, and not as a specific order of existence with an obvious relationship to the First Cause, to God the Creator."⁴¹ The human person stands in relationship to God the Creator as a psychosomatic unity, being neither soul alone nor body alone. We do not therefore possess our bodies absolutely since they belong to the order of nature, not only to the biological order. This conclusion has important practical implications: We cannot use the human body, that divine gift that partly constitutes us in our personhood, in ways that contradict the demands of its design. To do so would constitute an attack on one's own person, thereby undermining one's personal dignity. The medium of expression of one's person, the body, is endowed with a design that indicates how human flourishing—that is to say, the flourishing of the body-soul composite, that of the human person in his unitary entirety—can be realized.⁴²

It does seem reasonable to think that divine Wisdom has ordained that the authentic and complete fulfillment of human freedom is predicated upon the kind of beings we are, namely beings that are at once physical and spiritual. *Veritatis Splendor* draws attention to this point when it states that "[t]he natural law . . . does not allow for any division between freedom and nature. Indeed, these two realities are harmoniously bound together, and each is intimately linked to the other."⁴³ Manipulations of corporeity in the

⁴¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (London: Collins, 1981), 56–57.

⁴² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §48, expresses this point as follows: "The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator. It is in light of the dignity of the human person—a dignity which must be affirmed for its own sake—that reason grasps the specific moral value of certain goods towards which the person is naturally inclined. And since the human person cannot be reduced to a freedom which is self-designing, but entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods, without which one would fall into relativism and arbitrariness."

⁴³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §50.

form of homosexual acts therefore negate the eudaemonistic design of God for human nature while concomitantly undermining true human freedom.

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, this design bespeaks the complete self-donation of husband and wife to each other as being the only context in which sexual relations have a legitimate place. The body is the visible expression of the person and its actions therefore have a sacramental significance, that is to say, bodily gestures and actions that are knowingly and willingly executed are external concrete manifestations of a person's internal dispositions. In the absence of the reciprocal self-donation that can alone be offered and secured by the exchange of public marriage vows, the physical union effected in conjugal relations speaks the language of deception. The language of the body in this case affirms the existence of a total self-surrender of man and woman to each other, a reality that in fact does not obtain at all. Private promises are not sufficient to ensure the surrender of self to another that is proper to marriage and that receives its concrete sacramental expression in the act of sexual intercourse.⁴⁴ This conclusion is demanded by the logic of human personhood in which the body expresses that reality of which it is itself partly constitutive.

The embodied nature of the human condition necessarily endows it with a spousal significance. A complementarity obtains between the sexes, one in which male and female are exclusively ordered to one another. As

⁴⁴ As Richard M. Hogan and John M. LeVoir explain by way of comparison, "Even in the lesser self-gift which constitutes employment agreements, most would not trust a private, and therefore, non-binding agreement. How much more, then, when it is one's total self which is being surrendered, is it necessary to know with certainty that the other is truly giving himself/herself?" Public exchange of marriage vows serves to impress upon each of the partners the seriousness of the commitment being undertaken. "With that knowledge, each may be reasonably certain of the intention of the other. Each will have given his/her decision more careful consideration than they would a non-binding private act." ("The Family and Sexuality," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. [New York: Paulist Press, 1988], 170–71.) These comments of course relate to marriage in general and not specifically to the sacramental union of baptized Christians. In sacramental marriage the two spouses are united not only in a communion of persons between themselves; they are also united in Christ, who elevates this communion to a union in the Trinity. So, conclude Hogan and LeVoir, "If the *communion of persons* of the non-baptized requires a public act, how much more should the sacrament of Matrimony, an act of the Church, require a public act before a priest or, by a special dispensation, before another official. Obviously, Christians cannot express this union before it is present. Pre-marital sex is thus gravely wrong because it is a violation of the sacramental union as well as of the call given by God in His creative act to form a familial *communion of persons*" (ibid., 171).

Hogan and LeVoir put it, "The bodily differences between a man and a woman are the physical means by which the unselfish donation of love is made."⁴⁵ The sexual act therefore ought to be "the total physical surrender of each spouse to the other in all of his or her potentialities," thereby reflecting that total personal surrender of persons effected through the marriage vows. Sexual complementarity alone, moreover, can lead to the transmission of life. Thus, conjugal relations place a couple firmly within the succession of generations as well as grafting them into their community. By its very nature, in contrast, the sterility of the homosexual act is devoid of both historical and social meaning. In the words of Fabian Bruskewitz, "It remains locked in an unreal moment outside time and social responsibility."⁴⁶ It might perhaps be argued that it is in fact by virtue of their own ontological constitution that homosexual acts leave those who perform them with a sense of historical and social exclusion. Just as homosexual partners must struggle against the physical endowments of nature, so too are they confronted with the wider conditions of human being—conditions that are predicated upon the fact that the language of the body is that of sexual complementarity—that also prove to be insuperable for them.

According to the logic of human embodiment the language of the homosexual act can never express a communion of persons, given that the very structure of this act precludes sexual complementarity. The inability of this act to attain the end inscribed in human nature as constituted in the complementarity of male and female means that the attempted simulation of sexual union is destined to failure and frustration. This failure is arguably not without its psychological ramifications. The metaphysical constitution of the human person provides a rationale for this assertion. In homosexual activity reason does not respect the physical structure of human being. Recognizing instead that it does in some way transcend the limitations of its material embodiment, reason attempts to subject the physical aspect of human being to its control and to manipulate it, regardless of the moral imperatives that issue from the very structure of human being in its totality. Given the intimate relation that obtains between body and soul, a relationship in which the good of each redounds to that of the other, it seems plausible to suggest that the kind of subjection and manipulation of corporeal being that is characteristic of homosexual activity can yield only negative results for the soul that animates it. Put differently, anthropological considerations lead us to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁶ Fabian Bruskewitz, "Homosexuality and Catholic Doctrine," *Position Papers* 371 (2004): 301–2.

understand how the frustration of the design inscribed within the being of the male and female bodies might have a negative impact on the mental state of the human subjects involved in homosexual activity.⁴⁷ This point is of course a speculative one and stands in need of verification—or falsification—by the findings of psychological research. Contemporary psychology and psychiatry, however, corroborate the view that objectivity is one the most important factors in maintaining—or reacquiring—psychic health.⁴⁸ And objectivity implies the dependence of moral conduct upon reason and the dependence of reason upon reality, and therefore the dependence of moral action on reality.

Hursthouse's Position: An Appraisal

We have already indicated that for Aristotle certain classes of action are always wrong. They do not admit of a mean because they “imply by their names that they themselves are bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them.”⁴⁹ It is his failure to draw out the implications of his hylomorphic theory that explains why he cannot account for this badness. Instead, as we have seen, he ultimately gives reign in his ethical theory to the Platonic view according to which man is his mind. Nevertheless, the primacy that Aristotle accords to human reason does not justify the claim that he relegates to the instrumental level the properly moral values connected with the body.⁵⁰ His claim is simply that the exercise of reason

⁴⁷ This frustration, and concomitant unhappiness, is further exacerbated by the impossibility of enjoying the fruit of the sexual design inscribed in the condition of human embodiment. Gareth Moore, O.P., in attempting to critique what he deems to be defective arguments concerning the morality of homosexuality, accepts this point. “Children are a great good in human life which homosexual men and women normally cannot share in, and that inability is regretted by many of them” (*The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism* [London: SCM, 1992], 207). The fact that some homosexual couples may seek to adopt children cannot take away from the fact that their own sexual activity, by its intrinsic ordination, can never produce offspring. While Moore offers spirited arguments, they ultimately fail because they remain at the level of phenomena and fail to address the anthropological foundations of sexuality.

⁴⁸ Thus, for example, Albert Ellis maintains that “REBT [Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy] holds that most neurotic problems involve magical, empirically unvalidatable thinking and that if disturbance-creating ideas are vigorously disputed by logico-empirical thinking they can be recognized as false and minimized.” (“Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy,” *Current Psychotherapies*, ed. Raymond J. Corsini and Danny Wedding [Itasca, IL: Peacock, 1995], 162.) See also Tom Gibert, “Some Reflections on Critical Thinking and Mental Health,” *Teaching Philosophy* 26 (2003): 333–49; and Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 173–74.

⁴⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6.

⁵⁰ Gauthier, “On the Nature of Aristotle's Ethics,” 29.

is the noblest of all human pursuits. Consequently, he who cultivates reason, namely the philosopher, will be the happiest of all men.⁵¹ Granted, Aristotle recognizes that those who devote themselves to contemplation require certain physical necessities to be taken care of. Here, however, we witness more a tacit recognition on his part of the composite nature of human being than of an instrumentalist attitude toward the body. Indeed, he comments that “the moral virtues must belong to our *composite* nature.”⁵² Nowhere does he justify actions that fail to respect the demands that issue from the physical aspect of this nature, supporting his position on the grounds that reason transcends the conditions of corporeality.⁵³

It is precisely in the foregoing respect that Hursthouse parts company with Aristotle in her exaltation of transcendent reason. The argument of the preceding paragraph rules out any claim to the effect that she is simply taking her cue from the equivocations that are present in Aristotle's own ethical thought. It seems that in spite of her best efforts, she has fallen foul of the philosophical attitudes of modernity and postmodernity. Such attitudes are described by William Desmond as “themselves the echo of philosophical, religious, and cultural formations shaping us behind our backs.”⁵⁴ In particular, I argue that she has succumbed to a Cartesian understanding of the relationship between body and soul along with its attendant consequences. Rhonheimer describes this understanding quite succinctly: “The Cartesian and post-Cartesian model of much modern thought assumes that the spiritual powers of the human *supposi-*

⁵¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁵³ The following words of Alasdair MacIntyre are very instructive in relation to the point just made: “But some commentators . . . have failed to ask the relevant questions about the relationship between our rationality and our animality. They have underestimated the importance of the fact that our bodies are animal bodies with the identity and continuities of animal bodies, and they have failed to recognize adequately that in this present life it is true of us that we do not merely have, but are our bodies. Other commentators have understood this. And it was his reading not only of Aristotle, but also of Ibn Rushd's commentary that led Aquinas to assert: ‘Since the soul is part of the body of a human being, the soul is not the whole human being and my soul is not I’ (*Commentary on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians* XV, 1, 11; note also that Aquinas, unlike most moderns, often refers to nonhuman animals as ‘other animals’). This is a lesson that those of us who identify ourselves as contemporary Aristotelians may have to relearn, perhaps from those phenomenological investigations that enabled Merleau-Ponty also to conclude that I am my body.” *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 6.

⁵⁴ Desmond, *Ethics and the Between*, 18.

tum make use of the body 'for their purposes.'"⁵⁵ The kind of dualistic anthropology that Descartes bequeathed to Western civilization inevitably leads to an ethics that regards the natural as utterly disposable.⁵⁶ There has been a loss of a sense that there is a structure inscribed within the very being of things, a structure that can be discerned by human reason and that indicates the parameters within which good moral action necessarily unfolds. The human body is no exception to the metaphysical blindness that has so afflicted both modernity and postmodernity. Hursthouse's comments concerning homosexuality are a case in point.

Against Hursthouse I argue that while an Aristotelian must readily grant that the concepts of "good human beings" and "living well as a human being" are not completely constrained by physical nature, reason cannot so transcend and dominate the physical aspect of human nature in such a way as to force it to act contrary to its intrinsic inclinations; or, more precisely, a person cannot employ reason in this way and still remain virtuous. Being virtuous is acting in accordance with our highest principle, namely reason; and, as I hope to have shown, reality, reason, and action are intimately connected. As Pieper expresses it, "he who attempts to survey at one glance this circuit—reality, understanding, action—and to express it in one word, will find that evil ultimately proves to be an 'ontic' contradiction, a contradiction of being, something that opposes reality, that does not correspond to 'the thing.'"⁵⁷ The notion of morality as being concerned with the flourishing of the human person cannot therefore be divorced from considerations of the objective structure of human being. This is one way in which Thomas Aquinas developed the metaphysical implications inherent in Aristotle's ethical theory.

Conclusion

Although Hursthouse begins by taking some steps in the direction of acknowledging the necessity of metaphysical foundations if one is to defend the notion of objectivity in morals—evidenced by her treatment of ethical naturalism—she eventually succumbs to a Cartesian attitude when dealing with specific practical issues. Indeed, the subjective turn in her ethics reflects more Kant's Copernican revolution than Aristotle's attention to the nature of things. Blind to the exigencies of human being, constituted as it is as a composite of body and soul, her virtue ethics ends up in an attempt on the part of reason to master and to subvert the

⁵⁵ Rhonheimer, *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁷ Pieper, *Living the Truth*, 113.

corporeal conditions of personal being. These particular shortcomings of Hursthouse's attempt to construct a virtue ethics for our own times also arise from her failure to appreciate the implications of Aristotelian epistemology for ethical theory, in particular those of the identity of mind and reality in the act of cognition. Indeed, she never even refers to this aspect of Aristotle's thought. This failure is of course bound up with her lack of appreciation of the ethical implications of Aristotelian hylomorphism, that is to say, the theory of form and matter as it applies to the human person. It is precisely in engaging with reality that man's highest principle, namely reason, is actualized and realizes its potential. Given the identity of mind and reality in the act of cognition, *eudaimonism* cannot be dissociated from objective considerations, that is to say, reference to the structure of reality itself. Because of its intimate connection to the body, the flourishing of human reason depends on the extent to which it respects the ethical demands that issue from the body, in virtue of the tendencies inscribed within its physical structure.

Hursthouse in her ethical reflections ignores the deeper connections between being, the good, and the true. Indeed, in contrast to the Aristotelian tradition as it developed, there is no hint of belief that the ground of value is God. As for Kant external authority, even divine, can provide no criterion for morality. The precepts of morality, insofar as they pertain to the human body, are constituted by human reason; happiness, which is intrinsic to the proper functioning of man's highest principle, is invested with its contemporary, superficial meaning of subjective pleasure devoid of any objective reference. That attainment of a good proportioned to our human nature as a necessary condition for true happiness has been lost sight of.⁵⁸ The idea that God as the supreme Good is the final end of human activity to which all other human ends ought to be ordered is also absent. If time and space permitted, one could show how it is the failure of reason to operate within the existential tension of reality as posited in the created ontological space between the divine being as both first and final cause of all finite being that leads to the darkening of reason and a disordering of desire so characteristic of much contemporary moral debate.⁵⁹ In this regard, it is striking that the few concrete illustrations that Hursthouse offers in order to explicate how her version of virtue ethics deals with the human body all reveal the politically correct agendas of contemporary

⁵⁸ See *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 6.

⁵⁹ For some extended discussions of the notion of life in the divine tension as a prerequisite for the proper functioning of reason, see Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. Gerhart Niemeyer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978).

Western civilization, a civilization that has to a large degree withdrawn from life in that existential tension we have just mentioned. Her virtue theory, insofar as it deals with practical ethical issues, thus reveals itself to be subjectivist, immanentist, and socially conditioned. **N.V.**

