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VIRTUE ETHICS IN SEARCH OF A DECENT NATURALISM¹

New possibilities of studying the activity of the human brain and new technologies of human enhancement have intensified those voices calling for a greater role for natural science in the field of ethics. This postulate often implies embracing a version of naturalism. The recent revival of virtue ethics seems to strengthen this trend and make it more promising. Joining contemporary virtue ethics to naturalism, however, is highly problematic. In this paper, I reflect on several conditions for a happy pairing of virtue ethics with naturalism. In the first part, I refer to Jonathan Haidt's proposal as an example of a couple that is both promising and problematic and focus only on one element that could weaken virtue ethics in an undesirable way. In the second part, I indicate how this element might be modified. This modification could be beneficial also to another general problem with contemporary naturalistic ethics, namely, its relation to religion. Scientifically-oriented authors love to denounce prejudices and questionable presuppositions in what some conservative ethicists have written. These presuppositions are sometimes identified as religious. A scientific orientation, however, does not necessarily protect anybody from other prejudices and questionable presuppositions — including religious ones. I suggest that reading some older religious texts might help us to detect such influences.

I. VIRTUE ETHICS AND NATURALISM (OR: WHOSE VIRTUE ETHICS? WHICH NATURALISM?)

It might be argued that thinkers working within consequentialist and deontological normative moral theories tend excessively to limit the scope of morality,

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and that virtue ethics can be an antidote to this tendency. Virtue ethics, however, seems to require something that would prevent it from succumbing to opposite tendencies, namely, from becoming too lenient with reasons that seem moral but are expressions of sheer prejudice or from becoming too hospitable to lofty metaphors that could turn ethics into poetry devoid of any solid normativity, or again from becoming too creative in perceiving analogies and complexities where simplicity is needed. This is one of the reasons why many authors are convinced that virtue ethics should be coupled with some kind of naturalism, that is, a theory that would keep virtue ethics close enough to empirical research or in continuity with natural sciences.²

Yet naturalism is sometimes seen as eliminating virtue ethics. One can find this suggestion in many publications that cite, for example, the situationist challenge.³ There is a large body of empirical research in social psychology, recently propped up by neuroscience, which is understood to favor skepticism as to whether there really are virtues in the sense required by virtue ethics. If this is true, the whole project of virtue ethics collapses: virtue ethics has no meaning and would more accurately be called “phantom” ethics.

An attempt to answer this difficulty might consist in pointing out that there is another, surely less vocal but certainly serious, body of research that shows evidence to the contrary.⁴ Alternatively, one might ask what kind of virtue ethics is vulnerable to such a challenge. Virtue ethics has been understood so diversely

² “[...] since human beings are not transcendental selves outside nature, virtue ethics must turn, then, to some form of ethical naturalism. That is why the failure of agent-based virtue ethics is an important and interesting failure: it reveals why virtue ethics needs naturalism.” — DANIEL C. RUSSELL, “Agent-Based Virtue Ethics and the Fundamentality of Virtue,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (2008): 344. Among neo-Aristotelian or neo-Stoic virtue ethicists, some kind of naturalism seems to be the default position, although whether to embrace naturalism or not is a controversial issue in ethics. See for example PHILIPPA FOOT, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); ROSALIND HURSTHOUSE, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); JULIA ANNAS, “Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?” in Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.), *Virtue Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 11–29; STEPHEN R. BROWN, *Moral Virtue and Nature: A Defense of Ethical Naturalism* (Continuum: New York — London, 2008); WILLIAM D. CASEBEER, *Natural Ethical Facts: Evolution, Connectionism, and Moral Cognition* (Cambridge, MA — London: MIT Press, 2003); ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago–La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1999); LAWRENCE C. BECKER, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); LARRY ARNHART, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

³ For an overview and discussion, see, for example, KWAME A. APPIAH, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴ See GEOFFREY MILLER, “Kindness, Fidelity, and Other Sexually Selected Virtues,” in *Moral Psychology*, t. 1, *Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.–London: MIT Press, 2008), 209–243 [especially 228].

as of late that the term suffers from an inflation of meaning.⁵ It is sufficient here to say that there are versions of virtue ethics that are not only immune to the situationist challenge, but would actually anticipate the results brought about by the experiments used in this challenging research.⁶ The interpretation of the results is, of course, different in the writings of virtue ethicists than in those of situationists.

Naturalism also has many incarnations. Obviously, not all of them can be regarded as a fit candidate for a happy marriage with virtue ethics. Only naturalism which is both open enough to let virtue ethics flourish and respectful enough to be a true partner, lover and friend — as opposed to an owner, rapist or despot — that could be admitted to courtship. Virtue ethics requires a naturalism that assures some continuity, and intimate familiarity with what can be known from natural or social sciences. Yet those versions of naturalism that would destroy, debilitate, or devitalize virtue ethics should be excluded from this competition.

An illustration of the latter (honestly, a caricature that seems useful in this context) would be a naturalism that confesses the gospel of exclusive scientific rationality. This gospel is preached in the imaginary Church of Science, a secular or post-secular quasi-religion where, instead of Christ, Science is the savior. This savior does not need to listen to anybody because Science knows everything and only that which Science says is true. Those who accept the word of Science will be saved from the darkness of nonsense, prejudice, and superstition.

⁵To the extent that at one point MARTHA NUSSBAUM suggested that the category of “virtue ethics” should be abandoned altogether in teaching and writing, see her “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?” *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 163–201. It seems that her advice has not been taken so far. Jonathan Sanford, in his recent book *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), shows an impressive collection of many other authors who complain about widespread misunderstandings of what virtue ethics is or should be today. Moreover, according to him, several authors who are considered paradigmatic contemporary virtue ethicists explicitly reject such labeling. I agree that merely mentioning virtues, or even mentioning them more often than rules and duties (or as set against rules and duties), does not automatically create a moral theory virtue ethics. I agree as well that virtue ethics worthy of the name (that is, not merely another version of deontology or consequentialism) should be constructed as something fundamentally distinctive on many accounts. For the purposes of this text, however, we do not risk much misunderstanding when we content ourselves with a general and widespread grasp of what virtue ethics is.

⁶Several years ago, Julia Annas, an excellent specialist in virtue ethics, wrote: “By now claims that these experiments show that virtue ethics rely on a mistaken account of our psychology are generally seen to have been refuted” — JULIA ANNAS, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 173. Similarly, see, for example, NAFSIKA ATHANASSOULIS, *Virtue Ethics* (London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 103–120; DANIEL C. RUSSELL, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 239–331; NANCY SNOW, *Virtue as Social Intelligence: An Empirically Grounded Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Baptism in the scientific method will confer the noble name of an empirically informed discipline — a kind of sanctifying grace; a new life, totally opposed to pagan armchair philosophy. After baptism, one becomes a missionary. The mission consists principally in converting miserable philosophical pagans from their armchair thinking and bringing them to the light of empirical research. A secondary target of the mission is the coterie of believers in Science who dream about finding truths outside the church. They need to be persuaded that there is no epistemic salvation outside of the Church of Science (*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*). This gospel proffers a hope of blissful simplicity: no contrary voices will be admitted (because what opposes Science is incoherent), no external critique will be possible (because what opposes Science is implausible), and there will never be any need of anything other than Science itself (because nothing, except Science, has any epistemic value; what Science says is all one needs to know).

Most probably, a naturalism that confesses the gospel of exclusive scientific rationality would be too sectarian and too violent for virtue ethics. This kind of naturalism would not listen to virtue ethics at all, and the fear that this kind of naturalism would quite quickly strangle virtue ethics seems to be well-grounded.

Virtue ethics has recently been introduced to a naturalism that is less radical, apparently serene and humane, yet overly influenced by another gospel: the gospel of irrationality. We will also address this “gospel” to explain why, even if this kind of naturalism might seem appealing at first sight, it is currently unable to develop a responsible relationship with virtue ethics.

An example of an attempt to apply naturalist tools to the moral domain in this spirit can be found in many publications of the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt.⁷ He has joined the group of authors who acknowledge the need of broadening the scope of modern moral thinking and recommend virtue ethics as the most suitable for contemporary science. Haidt compares the moral domain to the variety of taste buds composing the sense of taste and criticizes both utilitarianism and deontology for focusing almost exclusively on one taste receptor while disregarding the rest. These “one-receptor” moralities are, according to him and several other authors, characteristic of western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (acronym: WEIRD) societies and of individualistic cultures where the human being is often seen through the lenses of the *homo oeconomicus* doctrine. These one-receptor moralities are excessively narrow and the food they offer is unpalatable in the moral mouth of the vast majority of the world. Haidt quips: “if you are *not* a liberal or libertarian Westerner,

⁷ See JONATHAN HAIDT, *Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), which also contains a bibliography with a list of his other relevant papers.

you probably think it's wrong — morally wrong — for someone to have sex with a chicken carcass and then eat it. For you, as for most people on the planet, morality is broad. Some actions are wrong even though they don't hurt anyone."⁸ Haidt eloquently calls for broadening our western understanding of the moral domain, repeating that there is more to morality than care/harm and fairness/cheating — the modules cherished in utilitarianism and deontology. Apart from his own experiments, he uses some evolutionary psychology and cross-cultural anthropological research in order to show that we should also include such modules as loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation, thereby joining the ethics of autonomy with the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity. And he thinks that virtue ethics can embrace and handle it all.

At hearing such a confession virtue ethics blushes and experiences spills and thrills. Who would be so churlish as not to like this sort of naturalism? It is so beautifully interdisciplinary, so rich and generous, so sensitive and open — so American! Not so fast, virtue ethics: there is also something worrying. In his version of naturalism, Haidt smuggles in a crucial thesis — one especially dear to him — that develops into a strong habit influencing his thinking and the way he interprets his data. Namely, Haidt tends to belittle rationality. Although he tries to deny it, and attempts to cover it up with many words, the reader finally has to face it: for Haidt, reason has to stay in the kitchen whereas intuition goes to work and rules over the moral house. His often-repeated claim that intuition has primacy but not dictatorship sounds promising, but such promises can wither away easily in practice. He concedes graciously that reason can be helpful, but mostly in situations when intuition is drunk or otherwise incapacitated. He compares intuition to an imaginary dog and reason to its tail.⁹ Intuition normally provides the right moral judgment promptly and with ease, whereas reason can usually provide only laborious post-hoc fabrications to justify this judgment.

This aspect of Haidt's proposal reveals some objectionable similarities with what John F. Kihlstrom called the "People Are Stupid" school of psychology.¹⁰ Kihlstrom says that, apart from the various widely-recognized schools of psychology, there is evidence of the emergence of another school characterized by a peculiar insistence on proving that people are fundamentally irrational

⁸ HAIDT, *Righteous Mind*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

¹⁰ JOHN F. KIHLOSTROM, "Is there a 'People are Stupid' school in social psychology?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27 (2004): 348. Cf. STEPHAN SCHLEIM, "Moral Cognition: Introduction," in *Handbook of Neuroethics*, eds. Jens Clausen and Neil Levy (Dordrecht: Springer Reference, 2015), 97–108 [here: 105].

(or thoughtless), behave almost as if on autopilot (that is, they are influenced heavily by anything but free will — because free will is an illusion), and are most often unconscious of their actions (so that the reasons people give for what they do are little more than post-hoc rationalizations of actions taken without reflection). Yet Kihlstrom claims that the experiments quoted to support the “People Are Stupid” school are often substantially limited:

the experimenter manipulates some aspect of the environment, and observes its effect on subjects’ behavior. Sometimes there were inferences about intervening mental states, but not very often — otherwise, the cognitive revolution in social psychology wouldn’t have been a revolution. Almost inevitably, the emphasis on how people are pushed around by situational factors led to a kind of “Candid Camera” rhetorical stance in which social psychologists’ lectures and textbooks focused inordinately on just how ridiculous — how *stupid* — people can be, *depending on the situation* — a situation that, in many cases, has been expressly contrived to make people look ridiculous and stupid.¹¹

This phenomenon of belittling human rationality might be regarded as inherent to naturalism and its inescapable result, but it might be equally true that this is an alien element that comes in as a remnant of cultural baggage, and quite possibly — as I will suggest below — might have its origin in a questionable religious belief.

Although not a perfect example, some affinity with this psychological “school” can be found in Haidt’s writings. A willingness to prove that people are irrational, or at least non-rational, or to indicate that people are not what they think they are, is conspicuously present in many philosophical publications, too, especially those that are said to be based on “empirical research” or “empirically informed.” One might say that the “People Are Stupid” school of psychology has a sister (or perhaps a mother?) in the philosophy department. Arguably there is a whole “People Are Stupid” family of thinking. This way of thinking sells well on the market of ideas, perhaps because it is reassuring to hear that others also sometimes act irrationally, or even that all of us do this almost all the time. It might be good news — indeed, a gospel for the multitudes. Of course, many people, perhaps most of us, often, perhaps most of the time, act irrationally. And we sometimes, perhaps quite often, do use post-hoc rationalizations to justify our actions — as Haidt and others argue. Studies that focus on these facts portray an important aspect of human functioning. Yet this is only one aspect. A fuller picture would be balanced by a description of those people who often, perhaps most of the time, are stable and reliable in acting

¹¹ Ibid.

wisely or rationally. Virtue ethics traditionally was and sometimes still is one of the ways of thinking that examine and foster precisely this characteristic.

Haidt selects David Hume as his hero for working on contemporary morality, appreciating his messy, pluralist, sentimentalist and naturalist approach.¹² This is not surprising, since Hume's moral thought, with his notion of reason as the slave of the passions, is easily amenable to the "People Are Stupid" school of thinking.¹³ However, Haidt's adoption of Hume as his moral hero is in a sense astonishing, since Hume's philosophy is clearly set against religion or divinity and is rather individualistic (or at least it is difficult to count it as community-oriented). Remember that Haidt calls for a broadening of our understanding of the moral domain and recommends caring not only for the ethics of autonomy but also for the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity. Hume's thought copes poorly with the latter two ethics, and is even in a sense antithetic (hostile?) to them.

Can we look at Haidt's naturalism in another way and shed some more warm light on it to preserve it as a candidate for coupling with virtue ethics? Perhaps Haidt does not belittle rationality, but simply uses rhetoric that is formulated infelicitously? He says many things about intuition as opposed to reason, but maybe his understanding of reason is... too narrow? Perhaps what he objects to in the moral domain ("the great narrowing" that happened in modern times and haunts us to this day¹⁴) applies analogically to him in the epistemic domain? Perhaps he could broaden his notion of reason or rationality a bit to include the act of understanding what should be done or what is wrong? Perhaps intuition is simply a virtuous act of reason, exercised quickly, effortlessly and with pleasure — which is what some authors of old claimed an act of virtue should look like? Obviously, in this act, emotions and even almost the whole body, along with the brain, are at play, but maybe we could take such intuition primarily as an act of embodied reason? In that case, we could agree that we are not angels and that our reason is not like angelic intellect: our reason is embodied, acting with and through our bodies.

It seems possible to suggest that the naturalism proposed by Haidt should go to therapy before marrying virtue ethics in order to straighten this pernicious

¹² See chapter 6 of his *Righteous Mind*.

¹³ Haidt even says that by 1999 he had found evidence for Hume's famous claim that "reason is the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" — see chapter 1 of his *Righteous Mind*. I do not claim Hume is a clear representative or forerunner of this "school," though in his writings he gave some basis for our contemporaries to be (probably mistakenly) read this way.

¹⁴ Cf. JONATHAN HAIDT and SELIN KESEBIR, "Morality," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, eds. S.T. Fiske, D. Gilbert, and G. Lindzey, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 797–832 [here: 798].

tendency of belittling rationality or narrowing down its functioning and scope, threatening by the same token the life force of its future spouse. Another important task of the therapy — closely related to the first — would be to get rid of the tenacious conviction that when somebody feels unable to spell out the reasons of his or her action in a manner that would meet the requirements of the inquisitive scientist, it means that such an action is not rational or irrational. Between what we understand and what we say or write, there usually is a big difference. Sometimes we understand properly and act suitably, but lack the intellectual tools to name, explain or justify what we do. (The opposite situation may occur as well: when we merely parrot words, sentences and arguments without proper understanding.) Sometimes we do have such tools and use them well, but the scientist misunderstands our own cultural codes, projects his own neat categories, and pigeonholes us as irrational or simply stupid.

The gospel of irrationality might make the naturalist a domineering partner who debilitates or enslaves virtue ethics. Virtue ethics risks becoming a blind toy in the hands of the irrationalist; it would then have no power to criticize, no right to oppose, no right to think for itself or to present its own narration, but only to feel, to produce sentiments, and to satisfy the emotional needs of a scientist. Currently, without this suggested therapy, Haidt's naturalistic proposal seems to leave too little room for virtue ethics to flourish.

2. THE THERAPIST

I have suggested a course of therapy for Haidt's naturalism before it marries virtue ethics and before the two talk together responsibly about moral matters. Now, going further, I can recommend a therapist. The therapy could be provided by a distinguished scholar in many disciplines, including ethics and psychology, who is the author of many widely-read and commented-upon works, namely: Thomas Aquinas.

Yet Haidt's naturalism seems irrevocably attached to many elements taken from Hume. Will it ever be possible to present at least an appearance of coherence in an approach based on both Hume and Aquinas? Well, one could doubt that Haidt cares much for coherence in the moral domain, since he confesses to cherish Hume's messy, pluralist, sentimentalist, and naturalist approach. We might predict that adding Aquinas would certainly augment just what he likes: the messiness and pluralism, surely, although without precluding some beneficial effects on the sentimentalism and naturalism. Alternatively, in case Haidt cares for coherence, which is much more probable, one would suppose that there are more elements that Hume and Aquinas would share in common than is usually suspected at first sight. Besides, we are not obliged to treat either of

them as our guru or prophet. We may allow ourselves not to mimic everything they do or repeat their every word. We can afford to treat the authors of former ages as our therapists or regard what they say as, in a sense, heuristic devices to discover our own way of thinking that corresponds best to our experience and courageously to question our entrenched presuppositions, joyfully do away with our too-narrow stereotypes, and duly correct our remaining unjust or simply silly attitudes.

Taking inspiration from the works of an author who lived over seven centuries ago is troublesome, but overcoming these obstacles might be worthwhile. Earlier, I said that virtue ethics seems to need naturalism. Was Thomas Aquinas not an explicitly religious thinker? How can we square that with naturalism? Apart from being religious, he was also a convinced Aristotelian, hence much of what he wrote can be characterized as Aristotelian naturalism. Also, Aristotle is sometimes considered the father of naturalism, in both science and ethics. It seems important therefore to explain briefly what Aristotelian naturalism means.

Nicholas Sturgeon defines ethical naturalism as the doctrine “that ethical facts and properties are, specifically, natural facts and properties, and that they are knowable in basically the same way that other natural facts and properties are known.”¹⁵ If we accept this definition, Aquinas — like Aristotle — can be counted (arguably) as perfectly naturalist in ethics; it can be said even more broadly that, in a sense, Aristotle and Aquinas were methodological naturalists, that is to say, they urged keeping methodological order within autonomous particular scientific or philosophical disciplines (for instance, that one should explain one’s subject with the help of proximate and proper causes).¹⁶ Yet before

¹⁵ NICHOLAS L. STURGEON, “Ethical Naturalism,” in *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 91–121 [here: 94–95].

¹⁶ Aquinas obviously did not write any work on naturalism itself, although this conclusion can be taken from reading several of his writings, especially his commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, but also his early commentary to Boethius’s *De Trinitate* (all these writings are available online in good versions: <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/> — and a list of the best hard-copy editions can also be found there). John Haldane shows that there are grounds to place Aquinas together with Quine on the same side as philosophical naturalists: “the medievals had a view of epistemology that the moderns rejected but which has surfaced again in this century in the writings of one of America’s greatest philosophers, viz., Quine. [...] Whatever differences separate them, philosophers of the modern period — both Empiricists and Rationalists — share an important feature which distances them from the medievals. It is the common assumption that the project of philosophy is to secure the groundwork of knowledge. This shift from naturalised to foundationalist epistemology had several consequences not the least of which was the emergence of inductive scepticism. [...] the fact that neither he [Aquinas] nor Quine is troubled by, nor even acknowledges, a general problem of inductive scepticism registers an important point of agreement between them. They are both philosophical naturalists. Certainly Aquinas’ commitment to revelation and divine science takes him beyond this, but if we restrict ourselves to his philosophical theology this eschews rationalist apriorism (recall his rejection of

proposing this definition Sturgeon writes: “A naturalistic worldview, however, is virtually always understood to be one that at the very least rejects belief in the supernatural, so part of the issue under debate is what place there is for moral values and obligations in a world without a God or gods and without supernatural commands or sanctions.”¹⁷ This rejection of belief in the supernatural or the existence of God would obviously be problematic for Aristotle and Aquinas, hence it is impossible to present them as ontological naturalists.

Haidt and other authors who call for broadening our understanding of the moral domain make it sufficiently clear that virtue ethics would also have similar problems with this rejection. Haidt emphasizes rightly that virtue ethics needs to include the ethics of divinity to respond plausibly to the moral experience of the vast majority of people in the world. It does not mean that virtue ethics itself must be religious or confessional. It seems sufficient when it is coupled with a naturalism that recognizes philosophically-respectable ways of thinking about God and worshiping him. Otherwise, virtue ethics would be forced to treat wise, noble and religious people dismissively, adding still another motive to develop a “People Are Stupid” school of thinking. Thereby, virtue ethics would be condemned to derogating or flatly rejecting the ethics of divinity.¹⁸ I suggest it is possible to find some intellectual tools in Aquinas’ writings to avoid these undesirable consequences and shape naturalism into a fitting partner for contemporary virtue ethics. In this context, the potentially problematic fact that Aquinas was a religious thinker can become his great asset when he is considered as a therapist for Haidt’s naturalism.

It is important to note that Aquinas admitted hypothetically, again following Aristotle, that if we were unable to prove on the grounds of physics the

the ontological argument) or supernaturalist intuitionism, as do his ethics, politics, philosophies of mind and action, and general metaphysics. There is, of course, the important difference [...] whereas Quine is a reductive scientific naturalist (in the sense of science associated with physical theory), Aquinas is non-reductive and pluralistic in his understanding of the natural.” — JOHN HALDANE, “Insight, Inference, and Intellection,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 73 (1999): 31–45 [here: 37–39; emphasis added].

¹⁷ STURGEON, “Ethical Naturalism,” art. cit., p. 92.

¹⁸ An example of this consequence is clearly visible in OWEN FLANAGAN, HAGOP SARKISSIAN AND DAVID WONG, “Naturalizing Ethics,” in *Moral Psychology*, op. cit., 1–25. The authors define scientific and ethical naturalism mainly negatively, in opposition to supernaturalism and non-naturalism. They note, “A full 40% of the scientists listed in *American Men and Women in Science* not only believe in a personal God but also believe he listens to their prayers” and they wonder how it is possible to be both scientific/ethical naturalist and still believe in supernatural entities or forces. Then they present “a charitable interpretation” that such scientists believe only in a deist God (2–3). Such an interpretation does not seem charitable at all; it is insulting. I would suggest that the alternative “either atheism or deism” is simply false for most of those who both accept naturalism and believe in a personal God who listens to prayers.

first principle exists or that there exists a first cause of the natural world, then there would be no need for metaphysics: physics would take on the task of metaphysics.¹⁹ In other words, if they failed to prove the existence of the first principle, Aristotle with Aquinas would embrace a kind of physicalism.

Yet Aristotle and Aquinas both were convinced that we can prove this on natural grounds (that is, without any special religious revelation and without any extraordinary supernatural intervention), hence, besides physics or natural science or philosophy of nature (and these terms are synonymous for both thinkers) another philosophical discipline, metaphysics, is needed. What they claimed physics can prove, though, was quite modest: only the existence of the first principle or the first cause of this complex and changing world of nature. Note that the question they ask in their physics concerns the first cause, therefore they would take it as a sign of misunderstanding of this question to ask, once the positive conclusion is reached, what causes the first cause. Aquinas would say: if we agree that the question about the first cause can be asked (and, if not, there would have to have been some special restrictions on reason so as to keep us from asking), that means that we agree that this first cause is uncaused. In other words, first means really first in this case, since talk about the *causa sui* involves a contradiction in terms. Also, because we are asking about the cause of complexities and change, what is being sought in the question that physics ultimately asks is something absolutely simple and unchanging. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, physics has sufficient tools and is entitled to say: yes, there exists such a simple and unchanging first principle that is the cause of the universe, but on the grounds of physics we cannot say much about what it is.

It is helpful to be aware that this modest conclusion of ancient and medieval physics is widely accepted nowadays. It is accepted even by one of the most strident preachers of the New Atheism, Richard Dawkins, when he says, in *The God Delusion*:

There must have been a first cause of everything (...) but it must have been simple and therefore, whatever else we call it, God is not an appropriate name. (...) The first cause that we seek must have been the simple basis for a self-bootstrapping crane which eventually raised the world as we know it into its present complex existence. (...) To suggest that the first cause, the great unknown which is responsible for something existing rather than nothing, is a being capable of designing

¹⁹“Si non est aliqua alia substantia praeter eas quae consistunt secundum naturam, de quibus est physica, physica erit prima scientia. Sed, si est aliqua substantia immobilis, ista erit prior substantia naturali; et per consequens philosophia considerans huiusmodi substantiam, erit philosophia prima” (*In Metaph.*, VI, 1, n. 1170). Cf. *ibid.*, III, 6, n. 398; IV, 5, n. 593; XI, 7, n. 2267 and *In Phys.*, IV, 1, n. 1.

the universe and of talking to a million people simultaneously, is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation.²⁰

Having accepted the conclusion of Aristotelian natural science that there exists a first cause of everything and that it must be simple, Dawkins refuses to think further: he says that this first principle or first cause cannot be identified with God because, according to the image of God he has in mind, God is complex, capricious, nasty, and obsessed with sin.²¹ And he refuses to think about God as the Creator because, in his astonishing opinion, that would be to escape from the responsibility to find an explanation. Generally, Dawkins reacts allergically to any thought of God and multiplies versions of the sophism that identifies God (or religion) with its caricature.

Aquinas would agree wholeheartedly that the image of God that Dawkins depicts is delusional. He would unhesitatingly reject it. He would most probably share the same fear that this image might hinder the development of science or even eliminate the possibility of science and be dangerous or harmful in other ways. He was aware of many such images of God — from history and his own times — and he saw the pernicious consequences such images produce in human lives. However, for Aquinas, the possibility of having a delusional image of God is not a good reason to stop thinking about God or reject the existence of God, because there is no reason to suppose that this is the only way of thinking about God. For Aquinas, the conclusion that the first cause exists is the starting point: an invitation to work seriously on what can be known of it. Only after hard analytical work, both philosophical and scriptural, did he feel able subsequently to identify the first, simple, undivided, and unchanging cause — “the great unknown” — with the God who revealed himself to Jews and Christians. The image of God Aquinas presents is far removed from what Dawkins depicts.²² Divine revelation is conditioned by words and signs that can be interpreted wisely or stupidly: from the same text of the Bible people can draw both philosophically and scientifically respectable theories and insane absurdities.

Now, why does the contemporary naturalistic worldview reject belief in the supernatural and the existence of God? What is the reason for this rejection?

²⁰ RICHARD DAWKINS, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 155.

²¹ On p. 31, *ibid.*, Dawkins provides a handful of other epithets for the notion of God he has in mind. He briefly exposes some of the psychological roots of his allergy: “jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.” See also pp. 18, 37, 108 and 252.

²² For a brief and cogent presentation of Aquinas’ theistic proposal, see, for example, J.J.C. SMART AND J.J. HALDANE, *Atheism and Theism*, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

Is this rejection at the center of naturalism, a condition *sine qua non* of naturalism, or is it rather an element attached to it, easily separable from naturalism itself and not necessary? Why is naturalism so often defined negatively, that is, by negation of the supernatural; by denial of God? This kind of definition is clearly a reaction to something, and it might not be entirely clear at first sight what causes this reaction. On this point, Aquinas' writings and some history of theological disputes among Christians may be useful in exposing several silently-accepted presuppositions that seem crucial for this rejection.

One of the main declared reasons for naturalists to reject belief in the supernatural is to protect science and purely-human efforts to understand the world of nature. According to this view, permitting God or any other supernatural entity to intervene in the world would render scientific investigation of the world impossible. This explanation is given, for example, by Evan Fales, in his "Naturalism and Physicalism" from the *Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. For Fales:

inferences about the past (and future), indeed, inferences of any kind from known effects to unobserved causes, or known causes to unobserved effects, require that nature behave in orderly ways. So the very possibility of history — and of science generally — assumes that natural events are governed by laws without supernatural interference.²³

Fales admits that it is not necessary to think that the laws of nature entail perfect regularities; unfortunately, he does not discuss the vast consequences of alternative solutions. He admits as well that God's interventions might be rare, but for him the mere possibility of a miracle provides grounds for radical skepticism. This is why we should reject belief in the supernatural. However, he fails to mention that radical skeptics have several other arguments, and that it seems entirely irrelevant to their position whether God exists or not.²⁴ Moreover, it is difficult to accept that naturalists ought to be afraid of such speculative dangers — indeed, to be afraid to the point of making such sweeping and substantial philosophical claims as that there is no God.

In the times of Thomas Aquinas, there were extensive discussions among Christians about how to understand God and to what extent philosophical tools should be used to explain divine revelation. Schematically, it can be said that there were two main camps that differed merely in emphasis: those who primarily emphasized God's wisdom, the signs of which are visible in creation,

²³ EVAN FALES, "Naturalism and Physicalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118–134 [here: 124].

²⁴ There are interesting attempts to characterize skepticism as perpetual dissatisfaction with the cognitive situation of the human mind: this dissatisfaction seems to involve implicit rejection of our bodily condition and a fatal demand for angelic or divine knowledge — see FERGUS KERR, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 17–34.

and those who tended to emphasize God's almighty power, which is seen most evidently in the work of redemption. Aquinas belonged to the first, more rationalist, camp. He courageously took advantage of newly-rediscovered philosophical tools in theology. These tools were prominently Aristotelian, hence this camp was sometimes called "the Aristotelians." The other camp was more voluntarist and tended to distrust of the works of reason, since human reason is infected, vitiated or even perverted by the consequences of original sin. This camp was, at least rhetorically, more biblical. It based many teachings on the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo. Thus it was sometimes called "Augustinian." With time, the two camps tended to become more radical. In 1277, shortly after Aquinas' death, some Augustinians devised official ecclesiastical condemnations of a whole set of Aristotelian claims. (These condemnations were only local, but concerned the two most vibrant academic centers: Paris and Oxford). A large portion of these claims were attacked in order to protect the omnipotence of God from the influence of pagan philosophy, which postulated some limits to the possibility of God's interventions in the world. These limits consisted only of God's wisdom and love, but nonetheless the Augustinians were convinced that there could be no limit to God's power other than the principle of contradiction.²⁵ Later, the voluntarist camp became much more radical: they taught that God could change the laws of nature as he pleased, or decide that what was once wrong would be good heretofore, and vice versa. Perhaps the culmination of this kind of theology can be found in the writings of Martin Luther, who is known for his violent verbal attacks on natural reason (reason as "the devil's greatest whore" or "the most ferocious enemy of God") and Aristotelian philosophy ("the most artful corrupter of minds," "his ethics is the worst enemy of grace" and "all speculative sciences are not sciences but errors").²⁶ These attacks on reason, debasement of reason, and negation of its reliability were of course driven by good motives: mainly by the willingness to extol God's redeeming power, glorify the excellence of Christ's saving grace, and worship the mysteriousness of the works of the Holy Spirit. In simplistic narrations of this kind, any acknowledgement of natural value or natural goodness

²⁵ For more about the condemnations, see, for example JEAN-PIERRE TORRELL, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work*, Robert Royal, trans. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 296–316; EDWARD GRANT, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also an excellent work by STEPHEN BOUTER, *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), where the author shows how the effects of the 1277 condemnations might influence Hume and other authors, even contemporary ones, in such domains as epistemology, the philosophy of science and metaphysics (see especially chapter 4, "Theology's Trojan Horse").

²⁶ Quotations chosen from an ample collection in JACQUES MARITAIN, *Three Reformers: Luther — Descartes — Rousseau* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1929), 30sq.

was a threat to the greatness of the supernatural. In this perspective, the natural was regarded with suspicion or contempt, because original sin has infected or vitiated the human species and nature is deceptive and prone to sin so that, without supernatural grace, it is unable to do anything good but only to sin.

This kind of theology, and the voluntarist image of God it offered, had far-reaching practical consequences: it required particular piety and conduct, created strong cultural codes and lasting cultural baggage, and generated — which is understandable — self-protecting and even rebellious reactions. All of this may influence, albeit unconsciously, thinkers belonging to Western cultures. It is in fact probable that manifestations of these influences would be observed in the negative currents of modern and contemporary naturalism, just as an excessively negative comprehension of human nature, presented as infected or destroyed by original sin, shaped some modern and contemporary moral theories.²⁷ A similar mechanism may play an important role in fostering the “People Are Stupid” school of thinking, which is in essence an odd tendency to belittle human reason, to prove that people are fundamentally irrational and stupid, or to deny moral responsibility. In contemporary culture, the distorted image of Christ the Savior obviously has been replaced by the distorted image of the saving power of science.

Reading Aquinas, one sees that this voluntarist theology of God and overly negative perception of human nature are not the only games in town. In Aquinas’ writings we find an excellent alternative approach to religious thinking that renders the main worries and fears of the negative side of naturalism unnecessary, if not entirely empty. Aquinas provides a confirmation that it is possible fully to believe in Christian revelation (which means not only theoretical acceptance but also worship and conduct) and at the same time — or even because of this belief — to embrace the positive side of naturalism, that is, to respect and foster the rigor and autonomy of philosophical and scientific disciplines in view of maintaining continuity or intimacy between philosophy (including ethics) and science. Aquinas’ treatment of miracles shows, moreover, that science need not be threatened at all by the supernatural.²⁸ In Aquinas’ writings we find intellectual tools with which to argue for a contemporary naturalism that resists any

²⁷ On this last point, see, for example, FRANS DE WAAL, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially 6–39; IDEM, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), especially 3–12; and IDEM, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 25–54.

²⁸ See ALOÏS VAN HOVE, *La doctrine du miracle chez saint Thomas et son accord avec les principes de la recherche scientifique* (Bruges–Paris: Gabalda, 1927); FRANÇOIS POULIOT, *La doctrine du miracle chez Thomas d’Aquin: Deus in omnibus intime operatur* (Paris: Vrin, 2005).

flat rejection of religion or even the negation of the possibility of God's existence. Again, this rejection is perhaps warranted or understandable when a person believes that, through negations, he is disposing of a deeply unattractive image of God: a God who is changeable, capricious, nasty, and obsessed with sin. Yet why not, instead, acknowledge alternative images of God that do not provoke such negations or rejections? Is it not sufficient to define naturalism positively, without precluding the possibility of an account of God and religion that would comply with one's naturalist principles?

Talking to Aquinas the therapist may therefore balance the influence of the irreligious or anti-religious tendency characteristic of Hume and present in Haidt's naturalism. Indeed, these therapeutic encounters might not only balance but also diminish that tendency, exposing the probable roots of this rebellion. More than that, the therapy may channel the urge to reject God to argue in favor of some more beneficial forms of religion. Virtue ethics coupled with Haidt's naturalism thereby might be relieved of this looming conjugal problem of dismissive attitudes toward the religious sphere. It would enjoy the prospect of freedom while welcoming a fully-developed ethics of divinity. Aquinas might help in this task, too, since he elaborated an extraordinary virtue-based version of the ethics of divinity — or, conversely, elaborated an extraordinary version of virtue ethics *within* the ethics of divinity.²⁹ He might assist as well in creating the third ethics required by Haidt and others to complete an adequate answer to our contemporary understanding of moral psychology, namely, the ethics of community.³⁰

Another corrective that Aquinas might offer for Haidt's naturalism concerns the notion of reason that Haidt inherited from Hume. Haidt seems to lead basically the same fight Hume fought against a certain rationalistic arrogance that makes people claim to know more than they actually know. This arrogance is especially irritating, and in fact dangerous, when joined with some form of power. Hume's proclamation that reason is the slave of the passions was clearly a reaction to the hyperbole he detected in the rationalists of his epoch. This brings us to an interesting question: what image of reason was Hume fighting against?

Thomas Aquinas was long ago named *Doctor Angelicus* because of his perspicacious analysis of angels. This might be seen as theoretical folklore or an oddity

²⁹ See, for example, ROMANUS CESSARIO, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, Second Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); ELEONORE STUMP, *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 307–404; BENEDICT M. ASHLEY, *Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1996).

³⁰ See ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981); IDEM, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); IDEM, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1990).

of the Middle Ages. Yet in reading his analysis it is particularly useful to realize that the notion of reason that Hume was criticizing is very close to the notion of the angelic intellect that Aquinas was attempting laboriously to grasp. Aquinas' epistemology can be appreciated especially when compared with his theorizing about angelic and divine intellects. He began from the simple fact that we are living organisms — bodily beings — and thus we should resist the temptation (vividly present in the neo-Platonist tradition) to think about ourselves as if we were angels or gods who have been accidentally joined with some despicable stuff, that is, with the body. Succumbing to this temptation can cause one to ignore or disregard the body with its urges, passions, and emotions, which leads to false expectations and to frustration. Aquinas' explanation of the structure of the human being, that is, his insistence on the most fundamental sense of unity of the human being (the unity of substantial form) and his insistence on the epistemic and moral consequences of this unity (the role of the body and sensory cognition), were so shocking to the neo-Augustinians of his time that they vigorously attacked him. These explanations were some of the main targets of the 1277 condemnations.

Beyond that, Aquinas' explanation of human cognition can be appreciated even more when compared with some modern epistemologies which seem to require purely angelic or even divine achievements from human cognition, or treat reason as a separated spirit that is almost unsullied by the bodily condition. One of the results of failing to meet these elevated standards is skepticism. One of the results of considering reason as a separated spirit is excessive rationalism and an image of the body as a machine that is hardly connected to reason.³¹ Hume correctly called this separated spirit back to the living body, with all its passions, and Aquinas would applaud his reaction in this respect.

Aquinas would disagree with Hume, however, in another respect. Hume seems to exaggerate in the opposite direction. One tries in vain to read Hume and determine what the difference between reason and imagination is. Aquinas would say that, in this, Hume is like the ancient Stoics: they do not sufficiently distinguish reason from imagination.³² For Aquinas, this is a mistake that can also have undesirable consequences for moral theories. Yet as ancient Stoics extolled rules of reason at the expense of the passions (Aquinas calls this Stoic disdain for the passions *valde inhumanum* — excessively inhuman), Hume did

³¹ See JACQUES MARITAIN, *The Three Reformers*, op. cit.

³² "Stoici moti sunt ad ponendum intellectum esse fantasiam" (*In De An.*, I, 2) and "Antiqui enim philosophi naturales ... posuerunt quod intellectus non differt a sensu ... Hinc etiam processit Stoicorum opinio, qui dicebant cognitionem intellectus causari ex hoc quod imagines corporum nostris mentibus imprimuntur, sicut speculum quoddam, vel sicut pagina recipit litteras impressas, absque hoc quod aliquid agat" (*CG*, III, 84, n. 2591–2592).

the opposite: he dethroned reason and put it under the feet of the passions.³³ Therefore Hume's notion of reason is overly impoverished. It is inadequate to the wealth of human experience and theoretical possibilities. In fact, it seems too impoverished even to be adequate to Hume's own statements. When Hume says "reason is the slave of the passions" — what allows him to understand this claim? Is it reason or passion? It is inconvenient to admit that it is reason, so let us try to say: passion. What passion? Passion for truth. Then why not call this passion for truth 'reason'?

Reason can and should be considered as embodied, that is, functioning in continuity or close intimacy with the passions and emotions, yet it does not seem right to imprison it within the boundaries of the passions and thereby render it inefficient, impotent, or exclusively passive. In the Humean exaggeration one sees overtly a reaction to some overly rationalistic tendencies of Hume's contemporaries. The cultural influence of the doctrine of original sin may also have some role here.

* * *

Haidt's naturalism might profit from therapeutic encounters with the thought of Thomas Aquinas and thereby become a more fitting partner for virtue ethics. Virtue ethics needs some space to flourish and Aquinas' insights provide opportunities to render this naturalism more attentive to the philosophical advantages of a more balanced, non-angelic notion of reason and a saner theology. In addition, during such therapeutic encounters, Aquinas' writings could prove be useful in helping contemporary thinkers to acknowledge and incorporate the communitarian dimension of the moral domain. The ethics of autonomy, so dear to the modern mind, could thus be broadened and enriched, as Haidt and others indicate, by an ethics of community and of divinity.

Certain episodes in the history of the interaction between religious thinking and philosophy or science suggest that ignoring religion, shunning or fighting it, does not protect one from its influences.³⁴ Such influences usually come out of the social or cultural imagination and can manifest themselves either as some transposed structures of religious thinking, possibly even in its least attractive incarnations, or as an exaggerated and quixotic reaction to religiously-distorted claims. It seems probable that the more one tries to ignore religious thinking, the more one becomes vulnerable to such influences. Somewhat ironically, even transhumanists, who are so scientifically oriented and so enthusiastically

³³ See PAUL GONDREAU, "Balanced Emotions," in *Philosophical Virtues and Psychological Strengths*, Romanus Cessario, Craig S. Titus, Paul C. Vitz, eds. (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2013), 139–199 [here especially 155–160 and 175–182].

³⁴ For more on this, see, for example, DE WAAL, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, op. cit., 208–222.

welcoming of the enhancement of the human being through emerging technologies, have been denounced for generating new theologies — despite the fact that they are mostly atheists.³⁵ The writings of an author as religious as Thomas Aquinas will certainly not convince everybody, but reading them might at least help today's thinkers to develop a keener capacity for self-criticism.

VIRTUE ETHICS IN SEARCH OF A DECENT NATURALISM

S U M M A R Y

New possibilities of studying the activity of the human brain and new technologies of human enhancement have intensified the voices calling for more science in ethics. This often implies embracing a version of naturalism. The recent revival of virtue ethics seems to strengthen this trend and make it more promising. Joining together contemporary virtue ethics with naturalism, however, is highly problematic. In this paper, I reflect on several conditions for a happy pairing between virtue ethics and naturalism. In the first part, I mention Jonathan Haidt's proposal as an example of such a promising and problematic couple and focus on only one element that could undesirably weaken virtue ethics. In the second part, I suggest how this element might be modified. This suggestion could also be beneficial to another general problem in contemporary naturalistic ethics, namely, its relation to religion. Scientifically-oriented authors love to denounce prejudices and presuppositions in what conservative ethicists say. These presuppositions are sometimes identified as religious. A scientific orientation, however, does not preclude anyone from other prejudices and presuppositions, including religious ones. I suggest that reading some religious texts might help in detecting such influences.

KEYWORDS: virtue ethics, ethical naturalism, Jonathan Haidt, Thomas Aquinas, rationality, religion

SŁOWA KLUCZE: etyka cnoty, naturalizm etyczny, Jonathan Haidt, Tomasz z Akwinu, racjonalność, religia

³⁵ Cf. JAMES HUGHES, "Contradictions from the Enlightenment Roots of Transhumanism," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35 (2010): 622–640.