

Ethical Naturalism and the Justification of Claims about Human Form

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ABSTRACT: Recent defenders of Philippa Foot, such as Michael Thompson and John Hacker-Wright, have argued that it is a mistake to think that Foot aims to justify a substantive conception of human soundness and defect. Instead, she relies on the acceptance of certain groundless moral norms to underwrite her views about what is characteristically human. I maintain that this is a weakness and that the Footian-style proponent of natural normativity needs to provide a story about how we might achieve justified self-confidence regarding moral norms. In this paper, I offer a coherentist model for doing so, thereby addressing the justification gap.

RÉSUMÉ : Des défenseurs récents de Philippa Foot, comme Michael Thompson et John Hacker-Wright, ont affirmé qu'il est faux de penser que Foot vise à justifier une conception substantielle de ce qui est sain ou défectueux dans l'être humain. La conception de Foot repose plutôt sur l'acceptation de certaines normes morales dénuées de fondement afin de soutenir ses vues sur ce qui est typiquement humain. Je maintiens qu'il s'agit là d'une faiblesse, et que ceux qui suivent le raisonnement de Foot sur la normativité naturelle doivent expliquer comment on pourrait atteindre une confiance en soi justifiée en ce qui concerne les normes morales. Dans cet article, je propose un modèle cohérentiste pour y parvenir; ce qui me conduit à aborder l'écart de justification.

Keywords: ethical naturalism, human life form, natural normativity, Neo-Aristotelianism, Neurathian justification

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[T]he self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.¹

—Alasdair MacIntyre

Our treatise proposes to find a line of inquiry whereby we shall be able to reason from opinions that are generally accepted about every problem propounded to us [R]easoning . . . is ‘dialectical’, if it reasons from opinions that are generally accepted.²

—Aristotle

Introduction

Critics of the version of Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism on display in Philippa Foot’s *Natural Goodness* complain that grounding moral norms on natural facts about human nature leads to an objectionable moral standard.³ If normative standards derive from that which is *empirically typical*, they argue, then one seems committed to morally offensive claims. For example, empirical work in the life sciences suggests that humans are characteristically xenophobic and that the physical abuse of women is a natural strategy employed by males in a competitive sexual environment.⁴ In response, defenders of Foot—most notably, Michael Thompson and John Hacker-Wright—have shown that the conception of human nature she employs is not that which is empirically typical.⁵ Instead, they contend, she utilizes a normatively-laden, non-observational conception of human nature.⁶ One of the central and mistaken assumptions that has led critics astray is the thought that Foot aims to justify a substantive conception of human soundness and defect, whereas, defenders contend, she counts on “our recognition of certain moral norms to validate her views about the

¹ *After Virtue*, 221.

² “Topica,” 100a20ff. See also, *NE*, 1145b1-7.

³ See, e.g., Slote, “Review: Natural Goodness”; Andreou, “Getting on in a Varied World”; and Millgram, “Life and Action.” The same basic critique is evident in MacIntyre’s free-rider thought experiment. See, “Virtues in Foot and Geach,” 627ff.

⁴ See, Woodcock, “Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and the Indeterminacy Objection,” 24. See also, “Philippa Foot’s Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles’ Heel,” 459; and Wilson, “Foreword,” viii.

⁵ See, e.g., Hacker-Wright, “What Is Natural about Foot’s Ethical Naturalism?”; Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”; *Life and Action*; “The Representation of Life.”

⁶ See, e.g., Thompson, “The Representation of Life,” 284–285 and Hacker-Wright, “What Is Natural about Foot’s Ethical Naturalism?,” 315.

characteristic human life,” and she believes that certain claims about human nature or form are “self-validating” and “at a certain level ... groundless.”⁷

If Thompson and Hacker-Wright have correctly interpreted Foot’s position, as I believe they have, then an obvious question arises. How does one justify the moral norms that people in fact recognize, which in turn validate views on genuinely natural behaviours for the human life form? I contend that one may not simply claim that such moral norms are self-validating. One needs to tell a story about how humans may achieve justified self-confidence regarding moral norms. And, as the proponent of natural normativity regards moral goodness to be a species of natural goodness, what we turn out to be aiming at, on the Footian account, is a justification of a non-observational conception of human nature or form. Unfortunately, this story is conspicuously missing in the literature, resulting in what I call the ‘justification gap.’ This is a pressing concern for a Footian-style proponent of natural normativity.

The following passages offer one plausible story regarding how a Footian-style Neo-Aristotelian may achieve justified self-confidence about her normatively laden, non-empirical interpretation of human form—the form in light of which she makes judgements about human (moral) goodness and defect. In doing so, I provide a response to the justification gap, a response necessary for any satisfying defence of Neo-Aristotelian natural normativity. Following John McDowell, I provide an essentially Neurathian and coherentist justificatory model. However, scholars have different ways of cashing out the details of a Neurathian procedure, and McDowell is often overly vague about the details of his own. Thus, I turn to what Richard Kraut calls Aristotle’s ‘*endoxic* method’ as a promising way to fill in the specific details of Neurathian justification.⁸ I first provide a brief description of coherentist approaches to justification. I then rehearse and explain the central features of Aristotle’s *endoxic* method as outlined by Kraut. Next, I apply the *endoxic* method specifically to the justification gap, showing how it can provide justified self-confidence for one’s normatively laden, non-observational interpretation of human form. Finally, I respond to a common objection to Neurathian procedures, namely, that they yield overly conservative ethical outlooks.

⁷ Hacker-Wright, “What Is Natural about Foot’s Ethical Naturalism?,” 315; and Thompson, “Three Degrees of Natural Goodness,” 7.

⁸ For Kraut’s account of Aristotle’s *endoxic* method, see, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle’s Method,” 76–95. For McDowell’s reflections on the Neurathian method, see, “Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle’s Ethics,” 34ff; “Some Issues in Aristotle’s Moral Psychology,” 36ff; and “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 187, 189, 191, 194, 197. There is a large, ongoing debate over the proper interpretation of Aristotle’s *endoxic* method. I utilize Kraut’s interpretation because I find it most congenial to my account of the justification of claims about human form. For my purposes, in this paper, I remain agnostic on the interpretive question.

On Coherentist Approaches to the Justification of Moral Beliefs

Before turning to Kraut's work on the *endoxic* method, it will be helpful to describe generally the coherentist approach to justification. Minimally, a coherentist holds that S is justified in believing *p*, if *p* coheres well with other things S believes. By contrast a foundationalist approach maintains that S is justified in believing *p*, only if either: 1) *p* is a member of an epistemically privileged subclass of non-inferential basic beliefs or 2) *p* is inferentially supported by such a belief. Characterizing these contrasting approaches to justification, Erik Olsson writes, "Rather than conceiving the structure of our knowledge on the model of Euclidean geometry, with its basic axioms and derived theorems, these [coherentist] epistemologists favor a holistic picture of justification which does not distinguish between basic or foundational and non-basic or derived beliefs, treating rather all our beliefs as equal members of a 'web of belief.'"⁹ The central difference between foundationalism and coherentism is whether there is an epistemically privileged subclass of basic beliefs and—especially as it concerns the minimal coherentism defined above—whether *all* other beliefs are justified in terms of their inferential relations to such basic beliefs.¹⁰ Some coherentists maintain that coherence is necessary and sufficient for justification, whereas others more modestly contend that coherence is merely sufficient for justification.¹¹ The difference here is what we might call 'strong coherentism' and 'weak coherentism.' Strong coherentists maintain that all of our beliefs are justified in a holistic fashion, whereas weak coherentists maintain only that some of our beliefs count as justified in virtue of their coherence with other non-basic beliefs. In other words, strong coherentism denies that one can ever be justified as the foundationalist would have it, whereas weak coherentism holds that some beliefs may be justified foundationally. My characterization of coherentism is designed to capture both of these types.

Different varieties of coherentism also fall out according to the way in which coherence is construed. For example, some understand coherence to be a matter of *consistency* and *logical deduction* such that for a belief to be justified it must be part of a set of beliefs that not only do not undermine each other but also follow logically from the other beliefs taken together.¹² Others understand coherence in weaker *probabilistic* terms: "*P* supports *Q* if and only if the probability of *Q* is raised on the assumption that *P* is true."¹³ An especially helpful

⁹ "Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification."

¹⁰ Sayre-McCord makes a similar point. See, "Coherentism and the Justification of Moral Beliefs: A Case Study in How to Do Practical Ethics Without Appeal to a Moral Theory," 113.

¹¹ See, e.g., Engel Jr., "Coherentism and the Epistemic Justification of Moral Beliefs."

¹² See, e.g., Ewing, *Idealism: A Critical Survey*.

¹³ Olsson, "Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification."

treatment of coherence for my purposes is that of Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. He argues that the “relative coherence of a set of beliefs is a matter of whether, and to what degree, the set exhibits ... *evidential consistency*, *connectedness*, and *comprehensiveness*.”¹⁴ A set exhibits *evidential consistency* if those beliefs do not “tell, on balance, against any of the others.”¹⁵ Notice that a set displays evidential consistency regardless of whether the beliefs in that set support one another. If they do support one another, the set exhibits *connectedness*. If a set remains evidentially consistent with the addition of more and more beliefs, it exhibits a greater degree of *comprehensiveness*. Sayre-McCord envisions the possession of evidential consistency as a kind of minimum threshold requirement for coherence, whereas the other two properties, if present, increase the relative coherence of the set. I utilize these features below; what is important for my discussion at this point is that, despite the ways in which they vary, there is a common core to these varieties of coherentism, viz., that at least some beliefs are justified just in case they cohere well with other things a person believes.

As we will see, the interpretation of Aristotle’s *endoxic* method here utilized is a species of coherentism, since it takes the justification of ethical beliefs to be a matter of how well those beliefs cohere with other things a person believes. What is distinct about this particular version of coherentism will emerge in the course of the discussion below, especially its social approach to belief and its concern to highlight the importance of coherence between our evaluative and non-evaluative beliefs.

Aristotle’s *Endoxic* Method

Relying primarily on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) but also drawing variously from *Topics*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Metaphysics*, *Rhetoric*, *Physics*, *Prior Analytics*, *On the Generation of Animals*, and *On the Heavens*, Kraut identifies no fewer than five steps in Aristotle’s *endoxic* method for justifying ethical propositions.¹⁶ The five steps are as follows: 1) gather the *endoxa* (“reputable opinions”) regarding the area under investigation; 2) work through the apparent conflicts the *endoxa* yield; 3) explain why the *endoxon* of a competent thinker goes astray; 4) impose a hierarchical order on the

¹⁴ “Coherentism and the Justification of Moral Beliefs,” 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ NB: Although Kraut offers his account as an interpretation of Aristotle, for the purposes of my argument, I am unconcerned with whether the historical Aristotle defended the position Kraut calls ‘Aristotle’s *endoxic* method.’ I am simply concerned with whether the method as described is a promising one for the Neo-Aristotelian to adopt vis-à-vis the justification gap. Nothing in my argument hinges on whether Aristotle actually subscribes to the *endoxic* method as described.

propositions under investigation; and 5) assess ethical conclusions against one's experience of life.¹⁷

The *endoxic* method begins with the "reputable opinions" about a given topic. Those opinions supply the basic data on which investigators in this mode reflect. Although it seems plain how to begin with a survey of opinions, less clear are the criteria that make an opinion *reputable*. For Aristotle, given his general confidence in human faculties and his optimism over the mind's aptness for truth, an opinion gains reputability because it holds for *all* people, *most* people, or the (reputed) *wise*. As he explains in the *Topics*, "*Endoxa* are what appears [*dokounta*] to all or to most or to the wise, and in these cases [i.e., the wise], to all of them, or most, or the ones who are most notable and reputable."¹⁸ Aristotle's explanation of "reputable opinion" still may invite a question: how does one know the difference between a genuinely wise person and an unwise person, whose opinion one need not waste time considering (e.g., one who is mad)?

If one includes within one's analysis the opinions of the many, the opinions of the genuinely wise, and the opinions of the reputedly wise, one may dismiss a genuinely wise person not reputed to be wise, thinking that person is mad. Kraut's gloss of "the wise" as "anyone who is undertaking a serious investigation of a subject" helps address that worry.¹⁹ For, no matter how outlandish a claim appears, an investigator must include it when initially gathering *endoxa* if one holds it who has seriously investigated a subject.

Many versions of coherentism begin with the beliefs possessed by an individual and then attempt to arrive at a coherent set of beliefs from inside that perspective. McDowell, for example, urges, "One reflects on one's inherited scheme of values ... from inside the ethical way of thinking that one finds oneself with."²⁰ By contrast, the *endoxic* method is notably different. Its starting point includes beliefs held by other individuals, groups, and cultures insofar as those beliefs qualify as reputable opinions. Indeed, if one's own opinions about some subject do not qualify as reputable opinions, then—at this point in the method—these opinions would not be among the data for which an enquirer seeks coherence. The scope of the beliefs to be harmonized, according to the *endoxic* method, is at once broader and more social in nature than many standard versions of coherentism. The version of coherentism I am advancing moves beyond the individual and incorporates the beliefs of others.

¹⁷ With the exception of the fifth step, which Kraut maintains is unique to ethical enquiry, Kraut asserts that this method is Aristotle's "*general* method of establishing what is true—general in that it applies to many subjects, not just to ethics." Kraut, "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method," 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁰ "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," 35.

It is thereby less solipsistic and more genuinely social in nature. This approach, as Kraut suggests, enables one to “get outside oneself and ... learn from others.”²¹

One notable implication of this social coherentism is that it is committed to a higher standard for justification than individualistic versions. For, to be justified, our beliefs must survive the kind of reflective scrutiny described in the method, and the first step involves the consideration of the reputed opinions of *others*. Thus, it is not enough to achieve internal coherence with one’s own beliefs if one has not also considered them alongside the plausible views of others.²²

After surveying reputable opinions, the second step is to identify any apparent conflicts between those opinions. In doing so, one distinguishes between genuine and apparent conflicts, and then resolves any conflicts that, on examination, turn out to be genuine.²³ Kraut explains that Aristotle rejects the existence of “a mechanical method” for resolving genuine conflicts among *endoxa*. The lack of a mechanical method leaves one needing to evaluate the strength of the actual arguments offered for the conflicting *endoxa* and to accept those that the argument best supports.²⁴ Kraut identifies one further centrally significant methodological point in Aristotle’s second step: Aristotle insists that one attempt to maintain as many of the *endoxa* as possible. This requirement is no doubt rooted in Aristotle’s general belief that the human mind is apt for truth just as his original decision to begin with a survey of *endoxa* is rooted in that optimism.

Although Kraut does not explicitly indicate one, I believe another criterion fits well with his methodology. This criterion, if present, would support the rational superiority of accepting one conflicting *endoxon* over another: when

²¹ Kraut, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle’s Method,” 95.

²² At this point, someone might object that, whatever we might call this view, it is a mistake to call it a version of coherentism. After all, my own definition of minimal coherentism is a view that holds that *S* is justified in believing *p*, if *p* coheres well with other things *S* believes. It does not run, “... if *p* coheres well with the reputed opinions of *others*.” I respond that, insofar as a justified belief on this view is still a matter of what *S* comes coherently to believe, and insofar as it is *S* who employs the *endoxic* method, it is still appropriate to speak in terms of coherence with other things *S* believes, even if *S* also includes the reputed opinions of others in arriving at *S*’s considered beliefs.

²³ Kraut explains that many conflicts among the *endoxa* turn out to be merely apparent due to the ambiguity present in language, specifically the “multivocity of our terms.” So, a central way of identifying merely apparent conflicts is by showing how “seemingly opposed *endoxa* are not really in conflict” when terms are construed properly. *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

adjudicating between conflicting *endoxa*, one should rationally prefer the *endoxon* consistent with a greater number of other currently undisputed *endoxa* to one consistent with fewer of the other *endoxa*.²⁵ Consistency with a greater number of *endoxa* provides one with some reason (justification) to accept one conflicting *endoxon* over another. In Sayer-McCord's terms, insofar as a set possesses a greater degree of connectedness, the relative coherence of the set is increased.

On this point, Aristotle's *endoxic* method is most recognizably Neurathian or coherentist. That is the case because the justification of the *endoxa* proceeds piecemeal, in relation to a wider web of *endoxic* beliefs. As McDowell explains, "Neurathian reflection on an inherited scheme of values takes place at a standpoint within that scheme; the scheme can be altered piecemeal, but not suspended in its entirety, with a view to rebuilding from the ground up."²⁶ Aristotle's *endoxic* method is Neurathian in McDowell's sense in that justification proceeds against the backdrop of a conceptual scheme that must remain largely intact while a small part of that scheme (i.e., the specific conflicting *endoxa* currently in dispute) is placed into question. As W.V.O. Quine originally put it:

We can change [our inherited conceptual scheme] bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher's task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea. We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit, while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality.²⁷

Although notable similarities obtain between Aristotle's *endoxic* method and McDowell's version of Neurathian reflection, let me highlight another difference between the two. Whereas McDowell focuses on the harmony among a more limited range of *evaluative* beliefs, the *endoxic* method concerns itself with constructing a consistent body of beliefs across all types of beliefs, recognizing explicitly that non-evaluative beliefs may have coherence implications for evaluative beliefs and vice versa.²⁸ Take a simple example. Suppose someone possessed the evaluative belief that God ought to be worshipped. Suppose also that the same person becomes convinced, say, by a certain formulation of

²⁵ Kraut implicitly alludes to this feature when he remarks that, for Aristotle, the construction of "a consistent body of beliefs" is a mark of "intellectual progress." *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁶ McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology," 37.

²⁷ Quine, "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis," 78–79.

²⁸ McDowell, "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," 35.

the problem of evil, that God cannot exist. Clearly, the non-evaluative belief that ‘God does not exist’ has coherence implications for the evaluative belief that ‘God ought to be worshipped.’ A belief set that included both of these beliefs would lack basic evidential consistency and would thus lack even minimal coherence. I return to similar reflections below in the context of our beliefs about human form. What is important to note here is the juxtaposition with McDowell, who confines his attention to a more limited range of evaluative beliefs. The *endoxic* method, by contrast, broadens the focus to include reflection not only on possible consistency or inconsistency within an evaluative scheme but also between an evaluative scheme and one’s non-evaluative web of beliefs.

The third step of the *endoxic* method requires one to explain how a competent thinker (‘competent’ because the opinion is, after all, a *reputable* opinion) is mistaken. Often this explanation shows how the thinker simply has too limited an experience with the phenomena in question. One can see an example of this in the *Republic*. In Book IX, Socrates offers the following argument for the thesis that the most pleasant life is the intellectual life:

1. As people disagree about what the most pleasant life is, one should trust the opinion of the one who has experienced all pleasures, because that person alone can make an informed judgement.
2. The philosopher is the only one who has truly experienced all types of pleasure.
3. Therefore, one should trust the opinion of the philosopher about the most pleasant life.
4. The philosopher says the intellectual life is the most pleasant life.
5. Therefore, the most pleasant life is the intellectual life.²⁹

Without necessarily endorsing this argument, one nevertheless should ask an important question. How may one explain how a thinker endowed with a mind apt for truth could go wrong in her opinion about the most pleasant life? By affirming premise one, Socrates straightforwardly explains why ‘the many’ are mistaken about the most pleasant life, namely, because ‘the many’ lack the requisite experience of all types of pleasure to make an informed comparative judgement about those pleasures.³⁰ In other words, they have too limited an experience with the phenomena in question (pleasure), given that genuinely different kinds of pleasure exist that one may or may not have experienced. In this case, the competent judge, the one whose *endoxon* is rationally superior, has a broader experience of the relevant phenomena. In this way, Socrates is

²⁹ Adapted from Plato, “Republic,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, 581c–583a.

³⁰ Mill argues similarly in order to establish who is the competent judge regarding the ranking of pleasures as higher or lower. See, *Utilitarianism*, 8–11.

able to explain how a competent thinker goes astray, an explanation crucial for the *endoxic* method to arrive at justified confidence in one's beliefs.

Step four of the *endoxic* method requires one to impose a hierarchical order on the propositions under investigation, distinguishing between lower-level and higher-level beliefs. In any systematic understanding of a subject, lower-level beliefs take their place in relation to higher-level beliefs and ultimately in relation to the fundamental principle of the subject in question. Kraut explains that, for Aristotle,

[T]he fundamental starting-point that must be understood by the student of ethics, the concept on which all others depend, is the good of human beings. In order to understand the linchpin of the whole subject, the student must make his way through the *endoxa* and *aporiai*. He must show how the *aporiai* can be solved by a proper understanding of the human good; and how most, if not all, of the *endoxa* can be preserved; but, in addition, he must return to the starting-points of his inquiry—the *endoxa* he used as stepping stones on his path to the good—and come to a better understanding of them.³¹

Take, for example, the concept of the virtues and the human good. The concept of the virtues is lower in relation to the fundamental concept of the human good. Certain character traits are virtues just in case they are the traits needed to achieve the human good. Suppose a conflict among the *endoxa*—as in fact there is—regarding which traits are the virtues. For the student to arrive at justified self-confidence in her own views about the subject, she must show how a correct understanding of the human good sheds light on, and resolves, the disagreement.

Undoubtedly, one should also want to know at this point how to achieve justified self-confidence regarding one's beliefs about the proper understanding of the human good or, as I have been expressing it in the terms of the proponent of Footian natural normativity, justified self-confidence for one's normatively laden, non-observational interpretation of human form. I address this question directly in the next section. For now, my investigation explains what it may look like to impose a hierarchical order on propositions pertaining to a certain subject and how that could be connected to justification.

Whereas the first four steps of the *endoxic* method are parts of a general method Aristotle offers for establishing what is true in *any* subject, the fifth and final step is unique to ethical enquiry. The fifth step requires one to assess ethical conclusions against the lived experience of one's life. As Kraut puts it, "Even if it passes the many intellectual tests to which it is put, an ethical theory must fit with the way we experience our lives A theory about how human life should be lived has to pass [intellectual tests] . . . , but must do more: it has to be something we can live with."³²

³¹ Kraut, "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method," 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 91.

Say, for example, that a certain ethical outlook in which one rejects friendship as a basic human good survives the reflective scrutiny of the first four steps. The proponent of such a view may argue that the need to love and be loved makes one objectionably dependent on others—much better to be strong and independent than slavishly rely on anyone else for one's happiness. One could argue the so-called 'natural' need to love and be loved is actually an unnatural human defect that one needs to root out. Let us say that one applies the fifth step of the *endoxic* method to this ethical outlook. Even if *ex hypothesi* it passes the first four steps, one is justified in rejecting it insofar as one cannot square the rejection of friendship as a basic human good with what it is like for people to first-personally experience friendship as a necessity for their distinct life form. Indeed, Aristotle correctly observes, "For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods."³³ The test of lived experience suffices as a basis for rejecting the solitary life insofar as one would not choose to live without friendship.

Application to Claims about Human Form

Given the preceding account of Aristotle's *endoxic* method for justifying ethical propositions, one can now apply the method to the justification gap. Recall that the justification gap refers to the inattention by proponents of natural normativity to the question of how one may arrive at justified self-confidence for one's normatively laden, non-empirical interpretation of human form. I have suggested that Aristotle's *endoxic* method fills in this gap; this next section shows exactly how this might be done.

The first step of the *endoxic* method is to gather reputable opinions regarding the area under investigation. To apply this method to the justification gap, one first needs clarity regarding the specific topic about which one gathers the *endoxa*. For example, should one gather *endoxa* regarding which character traits are virtues or should one gather *endoxa* concerning the proper interpretation of human form?³⁴ As the justification gap pertains to a normatively laden, non-empirical interpretation of human form, it would seem as if the *endoxa* one gathers should be about human form. However, this task presents a challenge since any sufficiently mature understanding of human form proves complex and difficult, if not impossible, to state in a formula. Indeed, mature conceptions of human form are uncodifiable. In light of this difficulty, I suggest that one can make headway by attending instead to various catalogues of basic human goods, as these catalogues express a normatively laden, non-observational conception of the human form of life (i.e., a normatively laden, non-observational conception of what perfects human nature). But what is the reason, someone

³³ *NE*, 1155a5-6.

³⁴ For an account that directs its version of Neurathian reflection toward beliefs about which traits count as virtues, see, Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*.

might ask, that a catalogue of basic human goods can be understood to *express a conception of human nature*? What is the nature of the connection between the two? Since the type of Neo-Aristotelian position I defend holds that that which is good for a human depends upon what is perfective of a human, and that what is perfective of a human depends upon what human nature is, there is a tight conceptual relation between catalogues of basic human goods and conceptions of human nature such that these catalogues can be construed as expressing an underlying conception of human nature. Thus, the *endoxa* that one should gather should be reputed opinions regarding catalogues of basic human goods. For illustration purposes only—I do not pretend here actually to carry out a complete survey of *endoxa*—I turn to catalogues of basic goods offered by seven natural law theorists and a classical utilitarian.³⁵ The following table lists a specific theorist and the basic human goods included in each account. The table's penultimate account comes from an immoralist whom I presuppose has seriously investigated basic human goods and whose opinions the *endoxa* therefore should include.

Do any apparent conflicts arise among these *endoxa*? One may observe that some basic goods identified in some lists do not show up in others. For example, "appreciation of beauty" appears on Grisez's list but not on Aquinas's list. Thus, a conflict seems present in that Aquinas makes no mention of the appreciation of beauty as a basic human good, but Grisez adds it to his list. One easily resolves this seeming conflict by noting that Aquinas does not intend to provide a complete list of basic human goods. Therefore, one should not understand him to deny that the appreciation of beauty is a basic human good. Any seeming conflict between these catalogues based on the observation that a good appears in one that is absent in another is merely apparent insofar as the lists do not purport to give exhaustive accounts of basic human goods.

³⁵ Some might worry about the omission of Kant from my list of catalogues of basic human goods. However, as Kant explicitly rejects talk of the *human* good in his moral philosophy, it would be inappropriate to include it. The accounts appropriately included on my chart of basic human goods are those for which the concept 'human' is central. Thompson summarizes vividly just how objectionable an appeal to *human* goods is to Kant: "This is why Kant is so emphatic about dispensing with ... the concept human within practical philosophy; it is something alien, impure, empirical; to introduce it into our principles would be to sully them with empirical shit; we must replace this dirty concept with the *pure* concepts of a *rational being in general* or of a *person*." "Forms of nature: 'first', 'second', 'living', 'rational' and 'phronetic,'" 704. Although the concept 'human' is also not central to utilitarianism, I include it below as a position that might be construed (without too much distortion, I hope) as a view about basic human goods, maintaining that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and that pain is the only intrinsic bad.

Table 1 Natural Law Theorists and Basic Human Goods³⁶

Theorist	Basic Human Goods
Thomas Aquinas	Life, procreation, social life, knowledge, and rational conduct
Germain Grisez	Self-integration, practical reasonableness, authenticity, justice and friendship, religion, life and health, knowledge of truth, appreciation of beauty, and playful activities
John Finnis	Life, knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, play, friendship, practical reasonableness, and religion
Timothy Chappell	Friendship, aesthetic value, pleasure and the avoidance of pain, physical and mental health and harmony, reason, rationality, and reasonableness, truth and the knowledge of it, the natural world, people, fairness, and achievements
Mark Murphy	Life, knowledge, aesthetic experience, excellence in work and play, excellence in agency, inner peace, friendship and community, religion, and happiness
Alfonso Gomez-Lobo	Life, the family, friendship, work and play, experience of beauty, theoretical knowledge, and integrity
Callicles	Wealth, power, independence, strength, glory ³⁷
John Stuart Mill	Pleasure, avoidance of pain

One may also observe that, for example, whereas “harmony” shows up on Chappell’s list, “inner peace” makes it on Murphy’s. One resolves any seeming conflict here by demonstrating that, although the terms on the lists differ, they refer to the same concept. To take another example, it is plausible that the terms “appreciation of beauty,” “aesthetic appreciation,” “aesthetic value,” “aesthetic experience,” and “experience of beauty” on the respective lists of Grisez, Finis, Chappell, Murphy, and Gomez-Lobo all refer to the same concept. Hence, no genuine difference arises between or among their accounts

³⁶ The list of natural law theorists (excepting Callicles and Mill) and the basic goods included in their catalogues are taken from Murphy, “The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics.”

³⁷ Nietzsche is another figure who possesses a Calliclean sense of the basic human goods. See, e.g., *Beyond Good and Evil*; and *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

of this basic good. Such simple linguistic observations nevertheless help illustrate that seeming conflicts do not in fact exist between or among catalogues of basic human goods.

Now, consider a seeming conflict that is more plausibly a genuine conflict, namely, the appearance of “wealth” on Callicles’s imagined catalogue and the absence of “wealth” from the rest of the lists.³⁸ Recall that, for Aristotle, there is no “mechanical method” for resolving genuine conflicts among the *endoxa*. Often, one must rely simply on an evaluation of the strength of the actual proffered arguments for the conflicting *endoxa* and then accept those best supported by argument. In the case of “wealth” as a basic human good, then, one identifies any explicitly stated arguments for or against it as a basic human good. One need look no further than Aristotle’s observation that wealth is not something sought for its own sake but always for the sake of something else.³⁹ Wealth is not therefore a basic human good, because a basic human good is something worthy of choosing for its own sake.

Take another conflict that arises when comparing Mill with each of the other catalogues. Mill, a hedonist, maintains that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and pain is the only intrinsic bad. Thus, it is clear that (unlike Aquinas’s) the list should be interpreted as purporting to provide a complete list of basic human goods. Pleasure is the only value and pain is the only disvalue. This catalogue clearly conflicts with each of the other catalogues for which there are other basic goods beyond pleasure and pain avoidance. How might we resolve this conflict? Again, this is a matter of evaluating the position best supported by actual proffered arguments. Aristotle, for instance, contends that pleasure cannot be *the* good because that would require us to give up a distinction between honourable and shameful pleasures.⁴⁰ Notice that for its effectiveness this argument depends upon the hearer accepting that there is a genuine distinction between the two pleasures. In other words, it appeals to a background belief, suggesting that, in order to achieve evidential consistency, one would have to either give up hedonism or the belief that there is a genuine distinction between honourable and shameful pleasures, and Aristotle takes it that his audience, being who they are, will reject the former in favor of the latter. Mill, for one, does not appear to be willing to give up on a qualitative distinction between lower and higher pleasures, for he attempts to generate one by appealing to the judgements of a competent judge, reminiscent of the pleasure argument from *Republic IX*.⁴¹

Whether or not Mill is successful in generating a qualitative distinction consistent with his principles, we might imagine a hedonist biting the bullet and

³⁸ See footnote 47 regarding using ‘imagined’ cases.

³⁹ *NE*, 1096a5-10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1173b20-1174a.

⁴¹ See, *Utilitarianism*, 8-11.

denying the distinction between honourable and shameful pleasures.⁴² In that case, an *endoxic* enquirer trying to resolve the conflict between the utilitarian catalogue and the non-utilitarian catalogues might observe that people clearly care about things for reasons other than their hedonic value (e.g., friends, children, virtue), which demonstrates that there are other things that people do in fact take to be intrinsically good. Aristotle makes this point suggesting that there are some things we would pursue even if pleasure did not result.⁴³

Suppose, after surveying the available reputed arguments on whether pleasure is the only basic human good (such as the ones above), an *endoxic* enquirer was prepared to reject the classical utilitarian account because it fares worse vis-à-vis the strength of the actual proffered arguments. The *endoxic* enquirer would then be in a position to filter out the utilitarian catalogue of basic human goods from consideration. Now, I do not claim to have carried out a full survey of the reputed arguments pertaining to this dispute and so do not profess to have established the rational superiority of the non-utilitarian catalogues. I am simply attempting to illustrate how an *endoxic* enquirer might go about resolving genuine conflicts in the *endoxa* about basic human goods, which are themselves expressions of competing conceptions of human form.

I now focus on two additional conflicts among the *endoxa*. I regard both conflicts as genuine and significantly more difficult to resolve. I focus on them to illustrate how someone might utilize the *endoxic* method to move toward justified self-confidence in one's normatively laden, non-observational interpretation of human form. The conflicts concern 1) friendship and 2) religion.

Friendship is a basic good that appears on every remaining catalogue but Callicles's (assuming that 'friendship' is either synonymous with Aquinas's "social life" or is included under it). As I am imagining Callicles's understanding of the human form of life (which his catalogue of basic human goods expresses), one cannot chalk up the absence of friendship to the incompleteness of the catalogue, as one could with the example of the "appreciation of beauty." I imagine Callicles's position rejects friendship as something essentially perfective of human nature; thus, he would count what friendship entails, i.e., dependence on others, the need of close personal relationships, as a defect or loss. As Rosalind Hursthouse remarks about this kind of ethical outlook (one that takes power, strength, independence, and glory as basic goods), "Perhaps ... he regards ... [the loss of friendship] as no loss because he is strong and independent and doesn't need close personal relationships."⁴⁴ Thus, a genuine conflict appears between Callicles's view and the rest of the *endoxa* on the issue of friendship as a basic good. How may one resolve this conflict by using the *endoxic* method?

⁴² On 'imagined' cases, see footnote 47.

⁴³ *NE*, 1174a5.

⁴⁴ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 188.

Let us now suppose, in contradistinction to the wealth example, that no decisive argument can resolve the issue. Let us also suppose the non-existence of a neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate between these conflicting interpretations of human form (as the above proponents of natural normativity grant). Recall that one way to establish the rational superiority of one conflicting *endoxon* over another is to demonstrate greater consistency between it and other beliefs. Likewise, to prove an inconsistency between one of the conflicting *endoxon* and other beliefs provides some reason to reject it.

In the case of Callicles, one may observe that the pursuit of independence as a basic good is in tension with the pursuit of glory. For glory depends on the opinion and recognition of others. Commitment to an ethical outlook that consistently upholds independence as a basic good requires one to renounce glory as a basic good. Why? Because glory makes one slavishly dependent on the opinions and values of others. Now, suppose a person upholding the Calliclean evaluative outlook admits the incompatibility of a simultaneous commitment to independence and glory. That person then should reject one or the other ‘good’ in order to regain consistency, insofar as it concerns this particular example. If he rejects his uncompromising commitment to independence, then presumably there would no longer be the strong objection to friendship as a basic good. However, if he rejects his commitment to glory and retains his commitment to independence, then the original conflict among the *endoxa* would persist with no obvious rational winner in terms of the internal consistency of an evaluative outlook.⁴⁵

Barring the revelation of any genuine conflict internal to the evaluative outlook that endorses friendship as a basic good, that outlook is rationally superior to any outlook that contains genuine conflict. I do not pretend to have established the superiority of the friendship outlook. The example of friendship simply illustrates how one may apply the *endoxic* method to normatively laden claims about human form, so one can see how one might address the justification gap that exists for certain proponents of natural normativity.

Let us suppose for a moment that a certain Calliclean has seriously investigated the topic of basic human goods. Let us furthermore presuppose that he has rejected glory as a basic good. Finally, let us presuppose that he still upholds his commitment to radical independence such that he perceives the need for intimate personal relationships as a defect. This new evaluative outlook would now need to be considered among the *endoxa* regarding basic human goods. The *endoxic* method of justification is ongoing in precisely this way.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ NB: how the actual dialectic unfolds in thinking through these cases depends on whether any actual person holds the opinion in question and whether that opinion qualifies as reputed, for the method does not simply dream up logically possible positions, but works from opinions that the reputed actually hold.

⁴⁶ See footnote 50 in connection with the *ongoing* or *historical* dimension of the method.

For the sake of argument, let us assume no discernible internal inconsistencies in either the friendship evaluative outlook or the revised Calliclean evaluative outlook. One grants that an enquirer may be in no position to identify either of the conflicting *endoxa* as rationally superior at this point. However, the next step in the method is to develop a story that explains how the other goes wrong. One who upholds friendship as a human good may attempt to show that the revised Calliclean sadly never has experienced true friendship. One then may conclude that, because of this lack, the Calliclean has too limited an experience of the phenomena in question and that one should dismiss his opinion.

The revised Calliclean may attempt to refute the claim. He may argue that the proponent of the friendship outlook pitifully has been raised in a weak, co-dependent context that denied her the ennobling experience of genuine self-reliance and determination. Whatever story an enquirer tries to tell, this step is yet another place at which one attempts to discern rational superiority based on whatever actual accounts are on offer. One must search for the available arguments—but, of course, one follows this step against the backdrop of a web of beliefs. Thus, the enquiry is essentially Neurathian and must consider the relevant *endoxa*.

Let us suppose that, after all this reflective scrutiny, one draws the admittedly unlikely conclusion that the friendship outlook and the revised Calliclean outlook are both internally consistent and both offer equally compelling stories regarding how the other goes wrong. How should one proceed? Aristotle leaves investigators with a final test, the test of lived experience. Recall that this test maintains that one is justified in rejecting an ethical outlook, even if it has survived the other steps intact, if it requires one to accept something that contradicts the lived experience of one's own life.

Imagine, however, that both the proponent of friendship and the revised Calliclean appeal to individual life experience. The proponent of friendship would claim that life would not be worth living without friendship; the revised Calliclean would argue that life would not be worth living without independence.⁴⁷ In this case, presumably, both positions could be justified (so far) in their ethical outlooks insofar as they remain open to the ongoing process of justification. For justification within the *endoxic* model is provisional and requires one to be open to new *endoxa*, to new arguments and challenges, and to new insights regarding consistency across all beliefs. The only way to

⁴⁷ One needs to exercise caution with the notion 'imagine' here. For the *endoxic* method requires use of the actual reputed opinions of real people, not, say, the imagined constructions of philosophers. I imagine this case simply to illustrate how the *endoxic* method may be applied to justify a normatively laden interpretation of human form. I do not claim actually to justify such an interpretation, so my use of an imagined case preserves the point.

retain proper self-confidence about one's ethical beliefs is for those beliefs to survive the *ongoing* process of reflective scrutiny in the *endoxic* mode.

It may strike one as implausible that the two ethical outlooks may remain on a par with one another after subjecting them to the *endoxic* method. However, the *endoxic* method does not rule out this possibility *a priori*. This possibility, nevertheless, does not require the suspension of one's own ethical views given an important stipulation. One's ethical views must have survived reflective scrutiny and thus have responded to objections from another set of views that appear to have equal justification. As Kraut notes, the goal of Aristotle's *endoxic* method is not "to convince a real or hypothetical opponent" but "to achieve justified *self*-assurance."⁴⁸ Insofar as one's beliefs about basic human goods survive the reflective scrutiny described, one is entitled to the only kind of justified *self*-assurance available to human beings as historically situated enquirers.

I have focused on the first of two genuine conflicts in the original catalogues of basic human goods. This example helps to illuminate how the *endoxic* method might be applied to normatively laden interpretations of human form and to the justification gap. I now turn to the second conflict: the presence of religion on some lists and its absence on others. As in the friendship conflict, I imagine that one cannot explain away the religion conflict in all cases. Given the conflict between Murphy and Callicles, for example, one cannot dismiss the differences by arguing that the catalogues are not meant to be complete or that one simply uses different terms. Moreover, one cannot argue that, though religion appears nowhere on a certain list, some other good, like knowledge, for example, implicitly includes it. I presuppose two genuinely competing conceptions of human form such that one envisions union with God as perfective of human nature, and the other envisions it as a defective and deluded pursuit of the weak, deformed, and life denying.⁴⁹

To sketch more fully how *endoxic* justification proceeds, I focus specifically on how to apply only one of the method's tests in the case of the religion conflict. This application tests the consistency of one belief with *all* other beliefs. One begins by observing that justified self-confidence regarding whether religion is a basic human good depends on whether one inhabits a theistic or atheistic universe. For example, the lack of a justified self-confidence for inhabiting a theistic universe undermines the confidence one can have that religion is a basic human good. For example, suppose Callicles were to formulate a version of the problem-of-evil argument that no one could solve. In that case, assuming greater overall consistency across his web of beliefs, Callicles would have

⁴⁸ Kraut, "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method," 77, 95.

⁴⁹ The most powerful articulation of the latter view remains that of Nietzsche, one whose opinions, according to the outlined method, must be treated as genuine *endoxa*. See, e.g., *Beyond Good and Evil*; and *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

provided a reason for the rational inferiority of the opinion that union with God is a basic human good.

Take another example. Rational belief in God depends partly on whether one can give a compelling response to whether particular beliefs about the nature or actions of God in history can harmonize with the best scientific accounts of the universe. If, for example, one believes that God created the earth a little over 6,000 years ago, then the best scientific accounts—themselves having a coherentist justification—would conflict with belief in *that* God. Grant the premise that one is more justified to accept one's best scientific accounts of the universe than the belief in the God of young-earth creationists. Then, if one's conception of basic human good includes union with *that* God, such a postulate undermines justification for that specific conception of human good. For a moment, suppose that no other conception of God is on offer—something that is manifestly false—nor is one forthcoming. In that case, and *at that point in time*, Callicles would be more justified in denying religion as a basic human good than a young-earth creationist would be in affirming it.⁵⁰

One must take care to draw the central observation from these examples. As I highlighted above, *endoxic* justification depends on consistency across *all* types of beliefs, not just consistency among one's *evaluative* beliefs. For potentially many non-evaluative beliefs have implications on one's evaluative beliefs and vice versa, including one's evaluative beliefs about basic human goods.⁵¹

⁵⁰ My use of phrases such as 'at that point in time' and my gloss of the *endoxic* method as "ongoing" are indebted to MacIntyre's common locution 'so far.' See, e.g., MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, 64ff. MacIntyre's point in using this locution is to indicate that the justification of a conceptual scheme is partly a function of that scheme surviving a process of reflective scrutiny where other predecessors have not, and of that scheme continuing to meet new challenges in the future where others may fail. Justification is both dialectical and *historical* in this sense. As MacIntyre asserts, "The kind of rational justification which [first principles within a conceptual scheme] receive is at once dialectical and historical. They are justified insofar as in the history of this tradition they have, by surviving the process of dialectical questioning, vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors. Hence, such first principles are not self-sufficient, self-justifying epistemological first principles. They may indeed be regarded as both necessary and evident, but their necessity and their evidentness will be characterizable as such only to and by those whose thought is framed by the kind of conceptual scheme from which they emerge as a key element, in the formulation and reformulation of the theories informed by that historically developing conceptual scheme." In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 360.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Hursthouse's discussion on "what can be discerned to be a pattern in life, what is to be attributed to good or bad luck and what is 'just what is to be expected.'" *On Virtue Ethics*, 189.

When considering the conflict over friendship as a basic human good, I focused on a conflict *within* the evaluative beliefs of Callicles. However, the *endoxic* method also includes possible consistency or inconsistency between an evaluative scheme and one's non-evaluative web of beliefs.

I have now clarified how at least four of the five steps of the *endoxic* method might be applied to an initially inherited, normatively laden interpretation of human form—an interpretation that finds expression in one's catalogue of basic human goods. Equally clear is that the *endoxic* method does far more than leave enquirers with whatever set of inherited beliefs regarding human form with which they happen to begin. For, one can hardly imagine any inherited web of evaluative beliefs that require *no modification* when subjected to the kind of reflective scrutiny the *endoxic* method demands. However, let us suppose that one *is* fortunate enough to have inherited an entirely consistent set of evaluative beliefs. Even if that set of beliefs ends up rationally superior to any other set of evaluative beliefs that one must consider as part of the *endoxa*, the method still has a necessary condition. One must have engaged in that method to reach justified self-confidence such that one would occupy an epistemically different relation to one's beliefs before and after employing that method. After completing the method, in other words, despite the justification proceeding from within an inherited ethical outlook, one faces no danger of merely re-expressing one's inherited ethical beliefs.⁵²

Unlike Foot and Thompson, for whom claims about human form are in some, perhaps mysterious, sense self-validating, the *endoxic* method straightforwardly arrives at justified self-confidence regarding beliefs about human form. Thus, whereas a justification gap results from Foot's and Thompson's approaches regarding the substantive content of any specific conception of human form, the *endoxic* method fills in that gap and thereby helps solve a pressing problem for proponents of natural normativity.

In applying the *endoxic* method to interpretations of human form, I have not yet touched on the fourth step. Recall that the fourth step imposes a hierarchical order on the propositions of one's ethical theory, distinguishing between lower-level and higher-level beliefs. Although the present study cannot offer a complete account, I briefly sketch the architectonic structure of the version of natural normativity that I defend, so that one can better understand the precise role I envision for *endoxic* reflective scrutiny. The following six propositions express the structural relationship between some of the most central features of my account of natural normativity:

⁵² For a rejection of the claim that proceeding from within an acquired ethical outlook leads to the mere re-expression of that outlook, see Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 193 ff.

1. For the proponent of natural normativity to say a human is morally sound or defective is to say that she possesses a sound or defective capacity of practical reason.
2. A catalogue of virtues and vices expresses a substantive conception of a sound or defective capacity of practical rationality.
3. A catalogue of virtues and vices is objectively correct insofar as the virtues are the traits on which the human form of life depends, and the vices are the traits that undermine that form of life.
4. A catalogue of basic human goods expresses a normatively laden, non-observational conception of the human form of life.
5. One's conception of basic human goods, what the good for the human is, is given early in one's upbringing.
6. Although one's conception of the human good is given early in one's upbringing, one can subject that conception to an *endoxic* process of reflective scrutiny, and one has justified self-confidence about the evaluative outlook that survives that process.

This structure helps clarify that human form is both the central concept and the starting point for proponents of natural normativity. The lower-level concepts, such as virtue and vice, i.e., soundness or defect, depend on it. Judgements regarding defective human practices and actions are made in relation to it, and, insofar as a catalogue of basic human goods is an *expression* of a substantive conception of human form, that catalogue is dependent on it.

This structure also helps locate the primary role for *endoxic* scrutiny, namely, to provide justified self-confidence for reputed opinions *about human form*. Finally, this structure highlights that critical reflection on conceptions of human form begins from the particularities, as the opening quotation suggests, of the moral identities inherited “in and through [our] membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighborhood, the city and the tribe.” Let me hasten to add that, on the *endoxic* model, the envisioned starting point for reflection moves beyond the reflective *individual's* beliefs about human form. The starting point includes alternative, initially inherited, and subsequently refined, beliefs about human form held by other individuals, groups, or cultures if those beliefs qualify as *endoxa*. Aristotle's *endoxic* method, then, *pace* most other versions of coherentism, is distinctly social in nature and makes clear how one might “get outside oneself and ... learn from others.”⁵³

Is the *Endoxic* Method Overly Conservative?

Adherents of a Neurathian procedure of justification, as I have presented it or otherwise, often defend themselves against the objection that it produces an overly conservative ethical outlook. Some worry that adopting a Neurathian

⁵³ Kraut, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method,” 95.

procedure yields an ethical outlook that reflects, more or less, the inherited ethical outlook with which one begins life. In other words, the procedure merely generates justifications of the status quo and neither revises nor condemns genuinely immoral practices that a particular culture widely endorses. For example, Kraut maintains that, to some, the *endoxic* method appears “unduly conservative because it restricts one’s study of a subject to options that have already been surveyed by other people.”⁵⁴ Of the Neurathian procedure more broadly, Hursthouse explains, “The worry about proceeding from within an acquired outlook is that, for all we know, the one we have acquired through our particular upbringing in a particular culture at a particular period of human history might be ‘all wrong.’”⁵⁵ Finally, Christopher Toner formulates the objection as follows: “But is not [the Neurathian] approach circular, and in fact rather whiggish? Will it not be sure to justify our current character and culture and interpret human nature as whatever is, or is at least trying to be, like us?”⁵⁶

These worries are misguided for four reasons. First, as Kraut effectively argues, the *endoxic* method includes the opinions of “anyone undertaking a serious investigation of a subject.”⁵⁷ Thus, it considers even the most revolutionary of reputed opinions. Such opinions may lead to a radical revision of one’s ethical outlook. The method also makes room for any new opinion insofar as it qualifies as reputed; opinions are not restricted to what already has been thought. Second, the *endoxic* method could undermine the cultural status quo insofar as it must include the perspectives of alien cultures within its framework for reflective scrutiny and insofar as alien viewpoints may prove rationally superior according to the methodological criteria. Third, the *endoxic* method is radical enough to produce a total revision of one’s ethical outlook. As Hursthouse explains, “For, in theory, Neurath’s boat might, over many years, become like Theseus’s ship, without a single plank of the original remaining. And then, in a manner of speaking, we, or our descendants, could look back at the ethical outlook within which we started and condemn it in retrospect as all wrong.”⁵⁸ Finally, as fundamentally social in nature, the *endoxic* method shows how to get beyond the potentially parochial ethical outlooks acquired in one’s upbringing. Thus, enquirers can either exchange or incorporate the good insights of others into their views.

The preceding also clarifies how one might respond to a related worry, namely, that a Neurathian approach makes one overly confident in one’s own ethical outlooks.⁵⁹ This worry ignores an important claim from proponents of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁵ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 166.

⁵⁶ Toner, “Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory,” 236.

⁵⁷ Kraut, “How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle’s Method,” 92.

⁵⁸ Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 166.

⁵⁹ Toner accuses McDowell of overconfidence in “Sorts of Naturalism: Requirements for a Successful Theory,” 244.

Neurathian reflection. Those proponents insist that, whether *endoxic* or not, this form of reflective scrutiny is *ongoing*, and justification is always *provisional*. For example, McDowell explains, “Radical critical reflection is open-ended.” Highlighting the historical dimension of the method, MacIntyre asserts, “the overall schemes themselves are justified by their ability to do better than any rival competitors *so far*.”⁶⁰ According to the *endoxic* method, one retains justified self-confidence about one’s ethical views only if one remains continually open to reassessment and revision in light of new *endoxa* or in light of changes to one’s web of beliefs. Although such a justificatory model properly yields confidence, that confidence, as McDowell aptly characterizes it, is “inherently fragile.”⁶¹ Therefore, properly practiced, the *endoxic* method is in no danger of producing cultural imperialists who are overly confident about their own evaluative frameworks. Instead, consistently practiced, it promises to habituate intellectual and cultural humility.

Conclusion

Arguably, the most defensible form of Neo-Aristotelian naturalism currently on offer is that of which Foot and Thompson are the central architects. Their naturalism rightly rejects an empirical understanding of how one justifies claims about human form. However, it then becomes mysterious just how justification in this domain proceeds. Neither Thompson nor Foot has successfully addressed this problem, which results in a justification gap. In this paper, I offer one plausible way of filling that gap. I argue that Aristotle’s *endoxic* method provides a satisfying model for justifying claims about human form.

Mine is not the only model on offer, however. Hacker-Wright advocates for a more Kantian, transcendental model, insisting that any human being’s self-understanding requires certain necessary interpretations of human form.⁶² I have not addressed, much less resolved, the question whether the *endoxic* or transcendental model is best for defenders of grammatical natural normativity. An answer to this question depends on many other issues, including whether Hacker-Wright’s transcendental model can “yield a complete conception of justice” working from such a thin conception of agency.⁶³ By contrast, the approach

⁶⁰ McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 176; and MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, 64 [emphasis mine]. Although MacIntyre does not describe his own method as ‘Neurathian,’ the affinities between it and his tradition constituted enquiry warrant the connection I make here.

⁶¹ McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 176. Toner is thereby surely misguided to accuse McDowell of overconfidence in his evaluative outlook.

⁶² Hacker-Wright, “Ethical Naturalism and the Constitution of Agency”; and “What Is Natural about Foot’s Ethical Naturalism?”

⁶³ Hacker-Wright, “Ethical Naturalism and the Constitution of Agency,” 14.

sketched here begins with *endoxa* about basic human goods (which express a normatively laden, non-observational interpretation of human form) and works from there toward justified self-confidence. Rather, my goal has been to offer one plausible, sufficiently detailed model for justifying claims about human form.

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