

## After Ethical Naturalism

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Piotr Makowski (2012). *Po metaetyce. Dobro i powinność w etykach naturalistycznych* [*After Meta-Ethics. Goodness and Duty in the Naturalistic Ethics*], pp. 290. Cracow: Universitas.

Modern ethics has to face the problem of how to accommodate the requirement for intersubjectively justified and accepted (valid) moral norms and values with the high-paced development of science and knowledge-based societies. This highly discussed opposition between what is morally eligible and what is scientifically correct may lead to stating that modern ethics is – rhetorically speaking – a dying figure. For it is impossible – after the Kantian-Copernican turn in epistemology and ethics – to defend the theological view that there exist certain universal and objective moral obligations. Yet, due to the rapid development of experimental sciences and the accomplishments of analytic philosophy, modern ethics are faced with the threat of either being reduced to a descriptive field of knowledge or becoming a shadow of its own past glory with no significance. Under these conditions, an attempt to defend ethics in its naturalistic form seems out of question. Still, the ethical naturalism may prove that – in the given state of social, scientific, and philosophical development – it is possible to successfully defend the view that ethical sentences express a certain type of proposition that may be proven true due to some objective natural features, independent of human opinions.

Piotr Makowski's<sup>1</sup> monograph *After Meta-Ethics. Goodness and Duty in the Naturalistic Ethics* (2012) defends the view that it is possible to assume that “Modern

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ethics is not dead, as some wish to believe. (...) Naturalism, which emphasises critical reflection, independent of metaphysical phantasms and theologically charged constructs and which guards the correspondence of understanding of what is practical with the scientific view of the world while evading scientist reductionism, is nowadays an adequate philosophical position of understanding ethics and *solving practical problems*." (Makowski 2012, 266). In his work, Makowski aims to prove that it is eligible to discuss moral problems of the modern world from a naturalistic point even though some wish to alienate ethics from any kind of non-subjective validation.

Makowski starts his reflection with a discerning effort to enumerate different possible meanings of "goodness" and "obligation." Parting from Ancient Greek conceptions of Aristotle through classical views of George E. Moore and Richard B. Brandt to the modern thought of Richard Hare, John Mackie, Paul Ziff, and Peter Geach, he shows how the term "goodness" may be used in non-ethical and ethical contexts. The ethical context of goodness may have an adjectival or substantival usage. As an adjective, goodness – in order to be properly understood – has to be inseparably tied to a certain "horizon of subjective references: either directly to a relevant individual (as in the case of individualistic ethics, presupposing the self-interest of an individual) or indirectly to a certain individual or group of individuals (as in the case of moral philosophy, concerning the interests of others, which are different from the interests of an individual)" (Makowski, cf., 26). As a noun, *goodness* refers to a multitude of goods of different kinds: moral and beyond-moral. A similar path is taken when discussing "duty:" Makowski discusses possible differences between obligation and duty, showing how they may have an ethical and non-ethical meaning. In the first chapter, Makowski reaches two major conclusions: "The notion of goodness may be defined – in the most general way – as something that meets certain requirements, understood as wantings, willings, or interests. While the notion of duty may be understood – in general – as a practical necessity of action/behaviour, which leads to a certain (at least presupposed *implicite*) positive aim" (cf., 46). Furthermore, Makowski shows that goodness and duty are, "despite the possibility of fully independent usages – visibly correlated notions" (cf., 46).

In the second chapter of his book, Makowski discusses the concept of ethical naturalism. He addresses the classical oppositions towards naturalism: the open-question argument of George E. Moore and the Is-Ought problem formulated by David Hume. From a critical point of view, Makowski addresses the so-called "naturalistic fallacy," proving that, in fact, it is not a dysfunction of naturalistic theories, but a general feature of all ethical theories whatsoever:

The term *goodness* is a part of the basic language of ethics; if it is not possible to find any synonymous expressions for this term, then on the semantic level, ethics remain an

autonomous field of reflection. (...) except from highlighting the semantic specificity of uses of the term *goodness* and its variants, Moore's argument does not show anything else. *Moore's Test* does not undermine the possibility of giving a definition for the concept of *goodness* in the terms of liberal regulatory-contextual definitions, but only in the terms of *identity definitions* [in Ajdukiewicz's sense] (Makowski 2012, 60).

The Is-Ought gap does not retain also its destructive power: Makowski proves that, in certain conditions, "reasoning passing from description to duty is authorised. These conditions are specified by a certain semantic, volitional-emotional context of a certain agential subjectivity" (cf., 67). Finally, through an exhaustive typology of different possible notions of naturalism, Makowski shows how certain modern ethical and philosophical theories (certainly those of Philippa Foot, Rüdiger Bittner, and Hans Krämer) may be discussed as being of a naturalistic orientation.

The philosophical works of Foot may be described as a kind of foundation for contemporary virtue ethics. Despite the importance of Foot's philosophy for modern ethics, her thought is not temporally homogeneous. It is possible to retrace three general stages of her philosophy: The first stage ("early works") concentrated on – initiated by David Hume – notions of the practical character of morals and the necessary relation between virtue and self-interest. The "middle works," which mark the second stage of Foot's reflection, faced the fact that the virtue of justice is not compatible with self-interest – which thus demands denying the practical sense of morals. In her late works (or "third stage"), however, Foot showed great attention to the classical ethics of Aristotle, thus engaging in an effort to show that it is adaptable to a contemporary world view, and thus, that it could compete with such popular theories as modern deontological and utilitarian ethics. This shift in Foot's views and interests does not go unnoticed by Makowski. He shows, however, that in both stages of her philosophical and ethical thought, Foot presents a steady naturalistic attitude.

Makowski points out that Foot's middle works can be identified as naturalistic due to at least four reasons: (1) the notions and semantics used by Foot demonstrate that she rejects the idea of the naturalistic fallacy, retaining the semantic autonomy of ethics; (2) the knowledge of virtues is empirically based on the notions of "usefulness and pleasure" (cf., 147); (3) Foot recognizes virtues as being of natural provenance: "virtues have their rationale only because they are based on human nature, which is a invariant class of negative and positive traits of character" (cf., 148); and (4) to act morally, Foot believes, a moral motivation needs to be developed as an integral attitude of one's personal character.

The late works of Foot, though substantially different from her earlier works and thoughts, still bear the mark of naturalistic theory and are in fact explicitly affirmed by the British philosopher herself: "There is no change in the meaning of

'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will'" (Foot 2001, 39). Furthermore, Makowski points out that the aretaic theory of the later Foot is very cognitivist: "In her philosophy, Philippa Foot introduces specific, common-sense thinking based on biology which means, that she aims to explore practically and cognitively the same area of reality, which is the area of competence of science" (Makowski 2012, 162). In general, it is possible to conclude that – even though the naturalism of the "middle Foot" may be highly problematic due to its tendency to treat morals as contingent, subjective, and instrumental; her works remain an important milestone for contemporary neo-Aristotelians.

Rüdiger Bittner's naturalism approach significantly differs from that of Foot. The German thinker may be understood as an advocate of a radical ethics of prudence. As Bittner states: "Metaphysical ethics is all but dead. Emotivists and utilitarians, moral constructivists and moral nihilists all agree that what there is is silent on what we should do." (Bittner 2001, 41) Bittner's ethics may be reconstructed in the context of a story. A man is trying to grasp and understand the moral requirements with which he is confronted during his (conscious) life. By developing and applying different strategies of argumentation and justification, Bittner observes that there are, in fact, no sufficient reasons which may justify what morality requires, and, finally, he appeals to Kantian concept of autonomy. According to the re-interpretation of Kant proposed by Bittner, autonomy guides persons to acknowledge the existence of non-moral practical reason, which, in turn, guides them to perform actions that are based on (subjectively) valid rules of conduct which accomplish the ideal of happiness – thus funding the concept of prudence (compare in Makowski, cf., 170).

Makowski identifies that, in Bittner's philosophy, naturalistic orientation may be easily described through the moral epistemology of his thought. In Makowski, "the theory of radical autonomy and prudence, as well as the recognition of moral requirements should be understood – as Bittner himself noted – through the categories of broadly understood empiricism" (cf., 195). The naturalization of both prudence and moral requirements is based on the concept of the agent as the "natural object;" both non-moral practical reason and moral requirements may be identified and are, in fact, observed as empirical, "category [ies] from this world" (cf., 196).

Hans Krämer's integrative ethics aims to accommodate two general perspectives of ethics and moral philosophy. It is observed that, on one hand, we

find ourselves “always already fallen into the world,” and thus being subjected to different moral requirements and expectations. On the other hand, each agent has its own moral intuitions and preferences, leading to a vision of “good life,” which does not necessarily have to be in accordance with what is morally demanded. The task Krämer wishes to attend to is to prove that “Ethics has to – necessarily – operate on several plans at the same time, in order to comply equally the perspectives of duty and wanting” (Krämer 2004, 95).

The naturalistic content of Krämer's moral philosophy is identified easily in the “first-person perspective” of his ethics, concerning individual, subjective willings and wantings, taken in empirical terms. “Practical intelligence refers to a – empirically understood – subjectivity and its ‘Self,’” as Makowski states (cf., 246). It is also possible to identify moral judgements (which represent the “external” moral requirements) as a non-cognitivist naturalistic concept: “Acceptance of moral propositions *has* to be explained by referring to certain non-doxastic attitudes” (p. 247). These two reasons, supplemented by a comprehensive discussion by Krämer on the notion of the naturalistic fallacy, in Moore and Hume's terms, may be a solid proof for a naturalistic affiliation of Krämer's integrative ethics approach.

It is possible to say that the exhaustive and insightful research conducted by Makowski in his book *After Meta-Ethics. Goodness and Duty in Naturalistic Ethics* has shaken the once-stable perception of naturalistic ethics as a path leading nowhere. Through exemplifying how the modern ethical projects of Foot, Bittner, and Krämer embrace the notions generally attributed to moral naturalism, Makowski clearly demonstrated that discarding naturalistic affiliations in ethics might have a strong impact on the development of meta-ethics today.

## References

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