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## Review of “Teleology and the Norms of Nature”

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## Book Review

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*Teleology and the Norms of Nature* William J. Fitzpatrick. Garland Series: Studies in Philosophy. Robert Nozick (ed.). (New York, NY: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000). ISBN: 0-8153-3602-0. Pages: xi + 390. Price: \$90.00.

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This is a difficult book to classify. On the one hand it is a work in metaethics in which the claim that natural teleology provides a foundation for moral claims come under scrutiny. On the other hand, it is a work in the philosophy of the biology in which the author seeks to transform the way we regard natural organisms. The main thesis is concerned with the former, the bulk of the work – some 300 pages of it – is concerned with advancing the latter. The latter, however, is instrumental to the former insofar as Fitzpatrick's metaethical claim is that to make progress in developing a "viable neo-Aristotelianism in ethics" we need to free the effort from the "persistent but erroneous appeal to nature in ethical theory"(25). This is accomplished through showing the appeal to nature to have been built on poor biology, whereas a more informed biology shows natural teleology's irrelevance to ethics.

One way to conceive this book synoptically is to consider its influences. Although is by no means written as a dialogue, the whole of it can be seen as a conversation between Fitzpatrick and three main figures: Philippa Foot, Richard Dawkins, and Edward O. Wilson. Fitzpatrick tells us in the Preface that it was his studies with Philippa Foot that first directed his interest to the teleological foundations of morality. Although he eventually abandons her efforts to ground morality in biology because of its "ahistorical welfare-based approach" to biology, he retains his allegiance to a generally Aristotelian approach to ethics. It was his reading of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976) that prompted his break with Foot's efforts at grounding morality. Fitzpatrick tells us that he made the choice to stop doing "armchair biology" and to dig deeper. This digging led him to develop what he calls a "historically-informed system-oriented account" of biology. More on that presently. It is with Edward O. Wilson's *On Human Nature* (Harvard, 1978) that Fitzpatrick is debating with over the course of the last three chapters, charging him with an excessive attempt to ground the whole of our moral life in our causal history of biological adaptation. It is Fitzpatrick's contention that we are specifically moral insofar as we depart from biological teleology. This is not a departure from teleology altogether, though, since the fact that we can conceive of ends to direct ourselves towards suggests we ought to do just that. So it is with Dawkins that Fitzpatrick makes his intellectual break with Foot's efforts at grounding morality biologically, and it is by way of contrast with Wilson that he makes a rapprochement with Foot's neo-Aristotelianism.

Another way to conceive this book is through a sequential consideration of its contents. In chapter I Fitzpatrick introduces us to the notions of teleology, nature, and the connection to ethics, emphasizing Foot's welfare-based teleology in which the flourishing of an organism is tied to the satisfaction of its

needs. Chapters II-V serve to develop Fitzpatrick's views on biology. The main idea here is that we should not think of an organism as a unified whole directed at its own welfare, but as a collection of different groups of genes each 'striving' to have itself replicated (100). Organisms "must be thought of from a *functional* point of view (as well as from the evolutionary point of view) as complex gene replicating systems, refined through generations of natural selection, and not ultimately as ends in themselves whose good is properly served by genes" (101). This last point is the punchline of Fitzpatrick's musings on biology, and is repeated many times throughout the rest of the book. Chapter VI explains in more detail what Fitzpatrick has already said about the difference between his views on biology and welfare-based approaches. Chapter VII brings out a few of the contrasts with Dawkins' own account. Chapter VIII makes the interesting point that an etiological and adaptational account of the development of an organism, or of the parts thereof, does not entail a functional reductionism. He argues persuasively that we ought not to reduce functional explanations to efficient-causal explanations. There is much overlap and repetition throughout these first eight chapters, which often makes for laborious reading.

It is in Chapter IX that Fitzpatrick at last turns his attention to biological teleology in human life. He argues that insofar as we are rational agents we transcend our biological teleology. He appeals to Aquinas in support of this position, quoting one of the places in which Aquinas explains the difference between natural and voluntary inclination. No doubt Aquinas would object to being appropriated by Fitzpatrick insofar as it is Aquinas' contention that it is by means of the same biological principle that we are both made alive and made capable of nourishment and self-motion, as well as rational judgement ( *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 79, a. 1). That is, for Aquinas it is our manner of living, or the human way of life, or what is natural to human beings, to be rational agents. Our rationality is an expression of our natural and biological teleology. Fitzpatrick wants to say that it is natural to us to be rational, but that this has nothing to do with our biological teleology except insofar as it is an accidental result of our biological development: "A more plausible account of our highly advanced mental capacities is that they are not themselves adaptations, but are rather *concomitant* properties of the kind of brain that evolved under hunter-gatherer conditions because of the evolutionary advantages of more general and straightforwardly adaptive properties, such as the capacities for complex spoken language and for rational thought of the sort relevant to improving the reproductive output of hunter-gatherers" (310). When we are exercising these more advanced mental capacities we are acting in a manner " *dysfunctional* from the point of view of the biological teleological framework" (316). Our distinctively human activities are the result of evolutionary excess.

Fitzpatrick tells us that he is not absolutely committed to this view – perhaps because there is hardly sufficient evidence for it – , but he nonetheless suggests it is the only viable view going: "It is not necessary for my purposes to insist that this account is correct, but since it is the only naturalistic account I know of with any plausibility, I will assume it is basically right" (311). Here is a point at which one of Fitzpatrick's fundamental prejudices becomes evident: his commitment to naturalism. To point this out as a prejudice is not to condemn it. But we should at least consider the possibility that naturalism has its limitations. After all, what naturalism is basically committed to is an attempt to explain natural phenomena wholly by means of nature. This may well be impossible. We should recall that Aristotle considered it one of the great findings of his investigations of nature that nature proves not to explain itself, that the principles of nature – the etiological account of nature – point beyond themselves to deeper causes and principles which are the first ones and which are the subject of first philosophy or metaphysics. Aristotle would never have played naturalism off of supernaturalism the way it is often

done today: The move from physics to metaphysics doesn't commit you to doing physics from a supernaturalistic perspective. My point is that trying to explain everything from an exclusively naturalistic perspective cuts you off from possible explanations that just might be the correct ones. Trying to find things that in fact lie outside the scope of your investigation is necessarily frustrating. After being frustrated for awhile you can either abandon the search altogether or widen the scope.

It is by means of our unique ability to be dysfunctional from the perspective of the normative claims placed on us by our biological teleology that Fitzpatrick finds the means to overcome what he dubs a "skeptical challenge" in the tenth and final chapter. His argument that our biological teleology provides no positive grounding for morality suggests the skeptical possibility that it does provide support for a negative conclusion about morality: "namely, that there are no genuine moral facts at all (unless they are just construed as our emotional reactions to things)" (365). Fitzpatrick considers this common challenge overstated. For, even if our distinctively human capacities are an unintended result of our adaptational history, they are nonetheless our distinctively human capacities with functions irreducible to their efficient-causal history. The point is just that the justification for these moral facts can't be grounded in biological teleology. And, even if no justification for these moral facts can be found at all, that doesn't mean that those seeming moral facts can't be genuine moral facts: it would just mean that they are unjustified moral facts. In any event, it is largely because of the fact that our specifically human capacities are not reducible to our biological history that Fitzpatrick finds a way to resuscitate teleology in ethics: "Because we are *able* to live our lives in such a way as to direct them toward what is good and worthwhile (at least to the best of our ability to determine this), it seems equally true that is only *fitting* for us" (369). After making this claim Fitzpatrick emphasizes that this is only a provisional claim, and that his main aim has been to argue that one cannot ground morality in human biology.

In the last analysis I should point out that neither Fitzpatrick's claim that teleological biology does not provide an adequate foundation for human morality of a neo-Aristotelian sort nor his suggestion that nonetheless one can have a neo-Aristotelian ethics that is still teleological are especially new. MacIntyre makes both claims in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1982), and the latter is developed extensively in his attempt to develop a sociological teleology which serves as the grounding for virtue. The former claim however simply takes the form of a statement in which MacIntyre asserts that we must reject Aristotle's biological teleology in order to revitalize his account of virtue (*After Virtue*, 162-3; MacIntyre's comments here should be balanced with his later work, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Open Court, 1999)). I suppose we could look at Fitzpatrick's book as an attempt to justify MacIntyre's claim, telling us why we have to abandon Aristotle's teleology. To view this attempt as successful, we would have to recognize what Fitzpatrick presents to be good biology. Some of it certainly seems to be good biology, but I wonder if Fitzpatrick thinks his biology is much more complete than it actually is. Claiming that an organism is not really a whole directed at its own welfare but rather a collection of genes directed at their replication undermines what seems obvious to us: that living organisms are unified wholes striving to live well in the way specific to their kind. Looking to the parts that make up a whole and focusing on the ways that the parts are working for themselves as well as some of the ways they contribute to the whole, does not do away with the possibility first formulated by Aristotle that the whole is achieved primarily through a unifying principle of motion and stability or that it is naturally directed toward an end that is good for it *qua* the whole it is.

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