

Article

A Virtue Ethics Interpretation of the ‘Argument from Nature’ for Both Humans and the Environment

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Abstract: Appeals to the moral value of nature and naturalness are commonly used in debates about technology and the environment and to inform our approach to the ethics of technology and the environment more generally. In this paper, I will argue, firstly, that arguments from nature, as they are used in debates about new technologies and about the environment, are misinterpreted when they are understood as attempting to put forward categorical objections to certain human activities and, consequently, their real significance is often overlooked. Secondly, arguments from nature, particularly as they are used in the context of debates over the use of new technologies, can be understood as appealing to human nature as a way to determine human limitations. Thirdly, arguments from nature can inform our discussion of what it is to be a human being or a person, and this kind of discussion can, in turn, inform our ethical deliberations in such areas of bioethics as euthanasia, abortion, etc. Finally, I conclude that a proper understanding of these arguments can help in establishing which virtues and which vices relate to our relationship with the non-human world—that is, which character dispositions are relevant to an environmental virtue ethics, with human nature as its foundation. A proper understanding of the argument from nature provides the basis for a ‘virtuously anthropocentric’ environmental ethics.

Keywords: argument from nature; environmental virtue ethics; human nature; ethics of technology; naturalness



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1. Introduction

Popular expressions of environmental concern often appeal to nature or naturalness as a kind of ethical guide or arbiter for human activity. Likewise, new advances in technology often elicit popular ethical responses that involve some appeal to the moral value of nature or naturalness. But, unlike the pressing global environmental issues and the burgeoning technological advancement that characterise the 21st century, this kind of ethical appeal to nature is not a recent development. Technological advances and environmental concerns have, for centuries, provoked questions concerning naturalness, and proposals to limit human manipulation of the natural world [1] (pp. 70–80). Claims about the connection between appropriate human behaviour and naturalness can be seen to have their roots in Aristotle’s virtue ethics, where he claims that ‘... for every being that is best and pleasantest which is naturally proper to it’ [2] (p. 341). And appeals to nature remain a significant intuitive response to considerations about our relationship with the environment and with technology, particularly in popular conceptions of ethical issues surrounding the use of various technologies. But arguments from nature are as much maligned as they are popular. It is a commonplace to point out that appeals to nature, or to naturalness, do not straightforwardly give us defensible categorical arguments for or against various technological activities—naturalness uninterpreted, it seems, is no ethical guide. The appeal to nature, when understood from within a virtue ethics context, does not provide straightforward grounds to specify some set of actions in preference to all others, just as virtue ethics, more generally, does not attempt to prescribe right, or proscribe wrong, actions in advance. This is at least partly because

such a prescription is not seen as being immediately derivable from the appeal to nature in isolation from other ethical commitments.

But if we accept that arguments from nature are neither coherent nor defensible, the question remains as to why they are still so common as a response to various technologies, and as a foundation for environmental caution. Is the role of the appeal to nature limited to being the first untutored attempt at argument by the Luddite or dogmatic environmentalist, or is there a way to understand the ongoing appeal of arguments from nature that grants them some coherence and defensibility? Here, I argue that if the appeal to nature is understood from within the context of Aristotelian virtue ethics (the tradition from whence it springs) it can be given a far more serious and interesting interpretation.

In this paper, I will take a departure from the standard definition of Environmental Virtue Ethics (EVE), which relies on the notion that nature provides an ethical guide for action. My argument is, in some sense, conceptually prior to the development of EVE and aims to understand how a kind of tacit version of EVE already operates in the way that many people intuitively think about the relationship between humans and the natural world and technological interventions. Because the argument from nature relates to human nature and not only ‘environmental’ nature, I propose that EVE should be based on an understanding of what it is to be a human being; thus, it can only be human-centered. In this sense, the scope of EVE could be extended to areas of bioethics such as euthanasia, abortion, and transhumanism.

2. The Argument from Nature as a Foundation for Important Ethical Debate

2.1. Arguments from Nature and Their Problems

Issues concerning the value of naturalness regularly arise in debates on the ethics of both biotechnology and the environment. Claims that certain technological processes or their products are ‘unnatural’ feature strongly in the social responses to, and philosophical debates over, IVF (in vitro fertilisation), stem cell research, genetic modification and many other biotechnologies. Such responses to new technologies are so common that they have been dubbed the ‘argument from nature’ [3] (p. 223) or ‘the argument from what is or isn’t natural’ [4] (p. 19). In these debates, the objections to various technologies based on appeals to the value of naturalness tend to take the general form of ‘if x is unnatural therefore x is wrong, or bad, or unadvisable’. Such reasoning has been characterised by de Sousa, in his article entitled ‘Arguments from Nature’, as the ‘negative argument from nature’ [5] (p. 169). A version of the *negative* argument from nature has also arisen in religious responses to such things as homosexuality, and abortion.¹ On the other hand, in debates concerning the protection of the environment, reasons used to support the preservation of the wilderness often appeal to the notion that it is best to allow natural creation to proceed unhindered. De Sousa characterises the general form of this kind of argument, the ‘positive argument from nature’, as the following: ‘if x is natural therefore x is right, or good, or advisable’ [5] (p.169).² And something akin to this argument is found in the aforementioned quote from Aristotle’s ethics: ‘... for every being that is best and pleasantest which is naturally proper to it’ [2] (p. 341). We must, however, be careful not to assume that these latter two arguments are exactly equivalent and thus that criticisms of one immediately apply to the other. While de Sousa runs these two arguments together, there appear to be good reasons to think that the ‘positive naturalist argument’, as he calls and characterises it, is not coherent or defensible, while not thinking that the Aristotelian argument falls prey to the same criticisms so straightforwardly. To some extent, the recent development of EVE may seem to tackle the issue by reintroducing Aristotelian virtue ethics. However, the notion of environment is mostly addressed under a positive naturalist argument (see, e.g., Pouteau, in this issue) [6]. While EVE may provide an adequate basis to make sense of the argument from nature, a first requirement is to unravel the intricate threads of the appeal to ‘nature’, considering that nature is not summed up by the term environment.

A variety of versions of the negative argument from nature regularly arise in debates over the ethics of new technologies, and such arguments are often dismissed on the grounds that ‘nature’, on its own, does not provide us with any set of objective moral standards that we can use to decide between legitimate and illegitimate uses of technology. The argument from nature, when viewed as a method to deduce from objective premises uncontroversial conclusions about what we should or should not do, or what is or is not good, is clearly invalid. It is on these grounds that the argument from nature is almost universally rejected in bioethics. Concealed in this rejection of the argument from nature as a reasonable and meaningful response to ethical issues concerning technology, is the assumption that the argument from nature is *always* invoked in order to generate categorical and definitive ethical boundaries and, therefore, invoked in attempts to bring ethical discussion to a close. However, I would argue that the use of the argument from nature in these contexts is intended to have—and, furthermore, should have—the opposite effect, that is, to invite and encourage the discussion of fundamental issues beyond merely rights and consequences, in particular issues that might, arguably, be best addressed from within the framework of virtue ethics.

To use the argument from nature (or even the ‘playing God’ objection to technology [7]), as if it were a categorical objection, or to interpret objections of this kind in this way, can have a further negative consequence. Apart from closing down the debate, an argument from nature when interpreted as making a categorical objection to a certain course of action based on some concept of a nature apart from human, not only expresses a deep and troubling conceptual (and perhaps material) alienation from the environment but, most importantly, expresses a failure of ethical understanding. That is, a failure to understand ourselves as the kinds of beings that we are, and a failure to consider that a proper understanding of ourselves is pivotal to our ethical deliberations. To understand the argument from nature in its virtue ethics context is to re-engage with our most fundamental ethical concerns in the terms that capture a true understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and the essential elements of our nature. The most fundamental ethical imperative is fundamentally anthropocentric—ultimately, *we* must decide what to do.³ Humans must decide what to do with an open acknowledgment and clear understanding of our own nature: as limited and capable; as, at the same time, one species among many and different from other species; as autochthonous and technological; as rational and ethical; and as mortal. The proper role of the argument from nature, then, is not to settle or end ethical debate over the environment and new technology by appealing to a categorical limit to human action imposed by nature, but rather to encourage the consideration of deeper ethical issues concerning how we understand ourselves, how we understand technology, and how we conceive of our relationship with the environment.

2.2. *Reasons for the Marginalisation of Ethical Consideration of the Relationship between Humans and the Natural World*

In response to the suggestion above, one might ask, firstly, why consideration of these ‘deeper ethical issues’ that arise within a virtue ethics approach to technology and the environment is so important and, secondly, why, if these issues are so important, they have been marginalised in contemporary ethical debate? Answering the second question may give us some insight into how to respond to the first.

One reason that discussion of how we make sense of the role of human technology and of our relationship with the environment has been marginalised is that contemporary debate has focussed on the discourses of rights and utility, to the almost complete exclusion of all other ethical discourse. The rise of contemporary virtue ethics can be understood partly as a response to the fact that, while the theories of deontology and utilitarianism dominated the field of ethics, they did not seem able or willing to account for certain important moral issues. As virtue ethics illuminated certain of these important marginalised moral issues, deontologists and utilitarians sought to address them in the terms of their own theories. However, for certain of these issues, their natural home is undeniably virtue ethics. This is

particularly the case with issues about how we, *as human beings*, orient ourselves towards nature, and how we understand and make sense of our place in the world, and our use of technology—these issues, which are so central to our ethical self-understanding, are a crucial aspect of a proper virtue theory, but of only marginal importance in deontology or utilitarianism, if of any importance at all.

An objection might be made to the above claim that, rather than being unable to address the question of what we consider to be fundamental to the nature of human beings, deontology and utilitarianism intentionally set this question aside, because attempts to answer it are notoriously contentious and may act as a barrier to ethical agreement at a higher level. Without question, deeper ethical issues concerning the specification of human nature are difficult, controversial, and permit a measure of disagreement. In light of this, one of the great virtues of deontology and utilitarianism is that their specification of right action does not rely on a specification of human nature and, thus, they are libertarian on the topic of how humans (as humans) should live. However, the pervasive use of ‘arguments from nature’ in response to ethical issues concerning the environment and technology indicates that there is a widespread desire (and, by extension, a need) to engage in discussion of issues about how we, as human beings, orient ourselves towards nature, and how we understand and make sense of our place in the world and of our use of technology. Even if it is unlikely that a complete consensus can be reached on these questions, debating them is an important aspect of our ethical understanding in general, and of our ethical understanding of our relationship to the environment and technology, more specifically. Accepting virtue ethics does not mean we have to deny the significance and usefulness of deontology and utilitarianism. It means that, in addition to these ethical frameworks, we can affirm the importance of foundational discourse regarding the relationship between what we judge to be essential to human nature—by which I mean the most fundamental and universal experiences shared by all human beings—and the general specification of what constitutes a good human life. It is important to note here, firstly, that, while there may be some disagreement and difference across cultures and historical periods, it is undeniable that there is significant continuity at the level of the most fundamental human experiences, and it is from these that our specification of human nature is to be drawn and, secondly, that in virtue theory the specification of human nature is only intended to determine a way of life peculiar to humans at the most general level, and to act as a foundation for our attempts to determine the dispositions that we should cultivate in order to live a good human life.

A second reason that contemporary debate has marginalised these deeper ethical issues about how we collectively conceive of ourselves, and conceive of our relationship to the environment and to technology, might be found in the ascendancy of the claims of cultural and ethical relativism. One might argue that debate over human place and purpose within the non-human world has been marginalised as a result of the post-modern tendency to privatise value and to claim that all, or at least most, values are relative in some sense. This ethical climate has made it very difficult to engage in open debate about what is good for humans as a whole, or even for specific human cultures as a whole. When philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists claim that what is ‘good for me’ might not be ‘good for you’, any discussion of what is good for us as members of a species, culture or society, or what is good for society as whole, becomes problematic. The tendency to privatise values in this way has impoverished the debate over human ends and purposes and human flourishing, but this debate is essential for any proper assessment and understanding of human technology and of the place and purpose of humans in relation to the non-human world. It may be that there is no definitive or ‘objective’ answer to the question of what human purpose or flourishing might be. It might be that these things are to be decided on rather than discovered. It is, however, certain that the discussion of rights and consequences in any ethics relating to technology, whether environmental ethics or bioethics, would make much better sense against a background of serious discussion of the proper orientation humans should have towards technology and towards the non-human world.

One might claim that there is an inconsistency between the above claim for the negative effect of ethical or cultural relativism and the notion that the role of the appeal to human nature in virtue ethics proceeds from a concept of human nature that is not external or objective, but rather internal (or relative) to human culture, and they are easily shown to be consistent. In the case of the latter claim, one might interpret this as a kind of cultural relativism itself, or at least compatible with the claims of the cultural relativist. Certainly, as Nussbaum has argued in her article ‘Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach’, the use of the appeal to human nature to support a theory of human virtues founded upon the most fundamental and universal experiences of human life can incorporate the claim of the cultural relativist that even these most fundamental human experiences may be constructed differently, at least to some extent, in different cultures [8]. However, such an insight, she argues, only takes us so far. It is undeniable that there are significant parallels and similarities between different cultures, and across diverse historical periods, at the level of the most fundamental human experiences [9].⁴ There is always something fundamentally and universally human that we can relate to in the accounts of the experiences of even the most seemingly ‘alien’ cultures—what Aristotle called a ‘sense of recognition and affiliation that links every human being to every other’ [10] (p. 121). The appeal to human nature is not an appeal to an external, scientifically objective and determinate notion, but neither is it a vindication of an extreme version of ethical or cultural relativism. The appeal to human nature enters our ethical deliberation as a concept derived from the human experience of the context and content of human lives; it may evolve over time, but remains relatively constant across cultures and historical periods [10] (p. 121). The importance of the appeal to human nature as a foundation for ethical deliberation is that, while it can incorporate whatever is true in cultural relativism, it does not, by doing this, abandon the task of determining generally applicable human characteristics and values. Consequently, it does not collapse into an extreme privatisation of values where ethical decision-making becomes a private and discrete activity disconnected from a broader and democratically conceived conception of social ends and human flourishing.

2.3. The Importance of Virtue Ethics to Foundational Ethical Debate

When looked at together, the dominance of deontology and utilitarianism in both bioethics and environmental ethics and the post-modern tendency towards ethical relativism can suggest why consideration of these ‘deeper ethical issues’ that arise within a virtue ethics approach is important. Together, these two problems have the practical consequence of making it appear as if each type and each instance of transformative technological and environmental practice that we engage in can be assessed in isolation from other instances of the same, and from other social, political, and ethical commitments. But our experience of environmental catastrophes such as global warming must show us, if nothing else, that our transformative practices inevitably have future consequences beyond those that we are both able and willing to foresee. More importantly, the global environmental problems characteristic of the Anthropocene should remind us that the world is one we all share and, thus, that all our decisions affect the environment and other people, now and in the future. Failure to engage in this foundational ethical discourse results in our interactions with the environment, and our development and use of technology, being nothing more than the unplanned outcome of a series of individual decisions made on the basis of individual desires. The ethical assessment of technology and the environment must be embedded in collective deliberations over what kind of lives we want to live and what kind of ends we are seeking, and must be clearly connected to our judgments regarding the proper orientation humans should have towards the environment and technology. Questions about whether the sorts of practices we engage in are the sorts of practices we want to engage in, or whether they are the sorts of practices that we should engage in, are rarely asked and, if they are, they are usually disregarded, or not subjected to open and democratic debate. Likewise, questions about what sort of world we want to live in, and what sort of environment we want to create, are rarely asked, answered or even

discussed. But these questions are central to any serious engagement with environmental and technological ethical issues.

The argument from nature, as it is characteristically employed in debates over the use of technologies, is best seen as a starting point for ethical deliberation, rather than as an ethical conclusion—invoking a version of the argument from nature invites debate rather than settles it. Arguments from nature can provide a background or foundation for debates over what we should and should not do—a background against which questions that we have traditionally addressed using deontological or utilitarian modes of ethical thinking can be answered. Deliberations about what we can and cannot do, or should and should not do, make better sense when answered against a background of serious consideration of the questions of how we should, as human beings, orient ourselves towards nature and how we should understand and make sense of our place in the world, and of our use of technology.

3. The Argument from Nature as an Appeal to Human Nature

3.1. Human Nature as the Limiting Factor

The second way that the appeal to nature (and, more generally, the virtue ethics context in which I have argued it makes proper sense) can be useful in debates about the ethics of technology is to provide a cogent interpretation of the objections to technology that attempt to place limits upon the kinds of ends we should seek, by appealing to human nature as the limiting factor. Arguments of this particular kind have been used for centuries in debates over new technologies and over modifications to the natural environment. These arguments are best understood from within the virtue ethics tradition and, in particular, in relation to the Aristotelian function argument. In what follows, I use Nussbaum's interpretation of the general approach taken by Aristotle towards deriving limitations on our ethical aspirations by appealing to human nature, in her article 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics', to suggest how such an argument might be fruitfully employed to inform our evaluations of new technologies [10].

As Nussbaum explains, Aristotle provides us with important insights about how we divide ourselves from the beasts and from the immortal, divine and self-sufficient beings (not necessarily real; they can be merely conceptual beings), and the way we use concepts of personal identity and kind membership to guide our normative evaluations and develop boundaries for our ethical aspirations.⁵ Aristotle's discussion of friendship (*philia*), in a series of passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII, gives us a picture of his general approach to such issues. Friends, Aristotle notes, generally wish for each other great goods; however, he observes, friends tend to confine their well-wishing to certain ways. One would not, for instance, wish one's friends to be transformed into gods, because the achievement of this wish would render them so different from what they are, that they could no longer be one's friends. The condition, then, of well-wishing for one's friends, Aristotle claims, is that 'that person will have to remain the type of being he is' [10] (p. 90). It is, thus, 'to him as a human being [or: on condition of his remaining a human being]' that one may wish their friend the greatest goods [10] (p. 90). Here, Nussbaum explains, we see Aristotle asserting a connection between kind membership and notional limitations upon ethical well-wishing. In a passage that occurs shortly afterwards, concerning well-wishing for oneself, rather than for one's friends, Aristotle asserts a similar connection:

Everyone wishes his own good—nobody would choose to have all good things in the world at the price of becoming somebody else (for as it is the gods possess the good), but *only while remaining himself*, whatever he is [11]. [my emphasis]

In this instance, the restrictions upon ethical aspirations relate not only to kind membership but also, more specifically, to continued personal identity.

Nussbaum demonstrates that we can derive an understanding of the general strategy Aristotle is using to affirm a connection between ethical well-wishing (the aspiration for the achievement of eudaimonia for oneself or one's friends) and the conditions of one's (or of one's friends' continued existence [10] (pp. 90–92). Aristotle is inviting us to reflect on the

question of whether this supposedly valuable life that we are wishing for ourselves, and for our friends, is a life that could belong to beings such as we are; beings, that is, who possess all those characteristics and dispositions that we believe constitute our identities. When we give this question due consideration, it might be that the life that we envisage for ourselves (or for our friends) would be so distant and different from the life we (or they) have, that we could not honestly envision achieving that life and at the same time remaining who we were before. Aristotle's central claim here is that there are changes that make someone a better person, or give them a better life, which are compatible with that person's continuing to be who they are (as an individual and as a human being) and there are some changes that, while they might appear to be very desirable, would bring into existence a new being that we would not consider to be the same as the original person to whom the changes occurred. It is from this kind of reflection—reflection upon the connection between what we deem to be our essential characteristics and what possible changes we could undergo whilst continuing to be ourselves—that we can derive limits upon what we should wish for and what kind of 'technological' changes to the human being our ethical theories can commend, and which they can censure, or discourage.

A criticism that can be made against this kind of argument is to ask why we should accept the claim that we should not try to change ourselves into something that we are not. Why, the sceptic asks, should we not try to transcend our limitations as human beings? Why do we have to accept these allegedly essential characteristics of ourselves, rather than rail against them or rise above them? An example of this is human mortality, both because it is a clear candidate for being deemed an essential characteristic of human beings and because it is something that some people (perhaps without due thought) consider to be an undesirable characteristic of human life.

Aristotle's argument might proceed along the following lines: to be the kinds of being that we are, we must continue to be mortal and, perhaps, our lives even have to have a certain kind of temporal trajectory; to desire for ourselves, or for our friends, that we are no longer mortal would be to want our friends to be other than they are and we would be wishing them, or ourselves, into non-existence; what we wished for would be some kind of being, but it would no longer be the kind of being that it was; and, therefore, it could no longer be that friend that we wished that good for.

Aristotle's argument is, admittedly, based upon an intuition that some people do not immediately accept—some people, it seems, do not consider mortality to be an essential feature of what it is to be a human being. One way to justify or support the moral intuition about the limitations on the kinds of ends that humans can seek is to appeal to cultural tradition. History and mythology is replete with cautionary tales about the human vice of attempting to go beyond, or transcend, our essential nature—not only the undesirable consequences that can result from this (Icarus, Prometheus, Dr Frankenstein's monster, etc.), but also the vice, hubris, that gives rise to it. Such stories provoke us to consider how much of what we truly value as essential to our characteristic way of being in the world is inseparable from our mortality, our finitude and our transience. An infinite life, as Nussbaum notes, would not contain opportunities (or would contain far fewer opportunities) for struggle, risk and sacrifice—features of finite and characteristically human lives that, in turn, produce love, friendship, accomplishment and virtue. Our limits, just as much as our capabilities, define who and what we are, and are to be cherished for the reason that these limits give rise to the practices and values that make our lives truly human [10] (p. 96).

Granted, for some people the restriction Aristotle places on ethical well-wishing—that it is directed towards someone only in so far as they remain the same individual and the same kind of being that they are—is also not intuitively acceptable. Why, one might ask, should I not wish my friend to become immortal, for instance? If my friend is truly my friend, then I surely want the very best for them. Is not my wanting my friend to remain the same individual, and the same kind of being, that they are merely a type of selfishness? If they became sufficiently different, I might no longer be able to be friends with them, and

that would constitute a loss to me, but would to take that as a sufficient reason not to want them to change appear to be selfish, if the change would be much better *for them*? The answer to this is ‘no’. There is, in fact, no person in existence for whom the change would be better. Aristotle’s argument is not against wishing oneself or one’s friends to succeed, advance or change. It is rather against the rationality of wishing for a good for someone who does not exist. The ethical intuition that is being expressed here is very much like that captured by what has come to be known in population ethics as ‘the slogan’, or the ‘person-affecting restriction’. The ‘person-affecting restriction’ in population ethics states that ‘one situation cannot be worse (or better) than another if there is no one for whom it is worse (or better)’; that is, the claim is that we cannot make assessments about well-being in the absence of an actual person about whom we are making the assessment [12] (p. 14).⁶ When we wish our friend be transformed into a god or made immortal, the future ‘better’ state that we are wishing for is one in which our friend, as an individual and as a human being, no longer exists and, thus, there is no one for whom this wished-for state is better.

3.2. Limits on Changes to Human Nature

It might appear that this argument is more intuitively attractive on the level of the maintenance of personal identity than on the level of kind membership. Does the argument also work when we consider whether it is coherent for us to wish that human beings as a kind be transformed into a different kind of being? Human beings might, for instance, be better off if we were, even just a little bit, less aggressive or warlike or dogmatic, and a little more compassionate and generous. Whether these little changes to a universal human nature are consistent with our remaining human, is open for debate. However, there is good reason to suppose that, because all the aforementioned characteristics are existing characteristics of humans, such changes are consistent with our remaining the kinds of beings that we are. But when we consider an extreme case, such as whether we should wish for human beings to become immortal, it is far less clear that we, as a kind, could possess such an attribute while remaining the sort of beings that we are. Mortality is an integral part of human self-understanding. It may be that the world would be, in some sense, a better place if there were no humans and, instead, there was in our place a species of immortal beings, but in what sense could it be better? Here again, ‘the slogan’ is instructive—our ethical aspirations are restricted to those that affect persons. A possible world cannot be a better (or worse) place when it is not a better (or worse) place for anyone who, or any kind of being which, actually exists.

Aristotle is instructive on the subject of the connection between personal identity, kind membership, and those characteristics of our lives that we judge to be fundamental or essential. Nussbaum explains that the way our practical reasoning operates and the way that we seek a life of *eudaimonia* is, for Aristotle, incomprehensible without reference to a clear understanding of the particular conditions of human being-in-the-world, of our specific nature as human beings, of our abilities and of our limitations. These ‘facts’ about human beings—our appetites and desires, our pains and pleasures, our needs, our mortality, our physicality—are, for Aristotle, more than ‘external’; they are, rather, inferred from the internal perspective common to all human beings and they bear directly upon ethical questions concerning the limitations of our capabilities within the world [10] (p. 120).

Reflection upon these core aspects of our nature can contribute to debates over possible limits on certain ends we, as human beings, should seek. For instance, debates over the ethical aspects of the possible achievement of immortality, or greatly extended longevity, through human cloning or stem-cell technology. Aristotle would argue that the achievement of immortality is not a possible goal for us, as humans. Why not? Because in achieving that goal we would alter our very nature—the aspiration to become immortal is not one that humans can rationally hold, as, by achieving immortality, we would cease to be identified as humans. Nussbaum claims that this kind of argument strategy is self-validating at a deep level; Aristotle’s strategy is to make clear the idea that certain ethical choices do not

fit with our deep beliefs about identity. By reflecting seriously upon the choice of a life in which we are, for instance, no longer mortal, or the choice of a life which has a temporal trajectory so remote from our own as to make us unidentifiable with human beings, Aristotle demonstrates that, in choosing such a life, we would cease to be identifiable as ourselves individually or as members of our kind. Because questions of personal identity were not matters of fact for Aristotle, but rather matters of choice and judgment, the question of whether *I* survive in a life is intimately related to, and not easily distinguishable from, the question of whether *I* consider that life to be one worth living. Our answer to the question of whether a life in which we are no longer mortal or in which our life-span is significantly altered is a life we should seek, depends not only on whether we judge mortality to be so important to human life that its lack would render life no longer choice-worthy, but also on whether we deem that the lack of mortality would cause its possessor to cease to be what they are [10] (pp. 90–95).⁷

It is worth considering further how this kind of argument would apply to significantly extended human longevity, rather than immortality. The former is a real and present possibility (in fact, to some extent, it is already occurring) afforded by our advances in medical biotechnology, whereas the latter continues to remain unlikely. When we consider the case of extended longevity, as opposed to immortality, the conclusion of this kind of argument is less easily settled. The claim that mortality is an essential characteristic of human nature is more easily maintained than a claim that the current maximum lifespan of human beings is an essential characteristic. However, the extension of human life might reach a point where a life is of such a length that we judge it to be no longer consistent with human beings remaining the kinds of beings that they are. In debating this question, we would have to consider the effects such extended longevity would have on reproduction, child-rearing, population, and quality of life. Importantly, in the context of EVE, the myriad possible effects of extended human longevity on the natural/non-human environment would also require serious consideration. Other matters, such as whether the temporal trajectory and guiding narrative of a life of greatly extended length would be consistent with a life we would deem human, would also come into the debate. In deciding whether longevity, within a specific range, is an essential characteristic of human nature, we must focus on what we consider to be the most crucial and fundamental aspects of our lives. Most importantly, the question of whether there are, or should be, limits to the extension of human life must be open to debate. This debate should be of guiding significance in our deliberations about the kinds of ends we should seek for humans through technological innovation.

3.3. *An Evaluative Process to Debate Human Limitations*

That there might be ethical disagreement over such a topic would, I suggest, have been of minimal concern for Aristotle. A key feature of this kind of ethical evaluation is that the role of ethical disagreement is a central part of the process. There is no ‘external’ arbiter to whom we can appeal, because resolving ethical disagreements of this kind requires our evaluation of what we judge to be the most important features of human lives. Nussbaum points out that an agreement, if there is to be one, will come from one party’s convincing the other that the internal view he holds of what is important in his life, and which drives his mode of acting in the world, is inconsistent with his theoretical claim about the possibility of having a significantly extended life (for instance) while remaining both a human being and the person he is [10] (p. 94). The process of deriving conceptions of human limitations from an account of the human experience of human life is fundamentally evaluative, and it requires ethical argument and deliberation. Limits to the kinds of ends we seek, as human beings, are not to be discovered; they are to be established by reference to an evaluative account of what we judge to be the truly fundamental features of human experience and human life.

Arguments from nature (and the ‘playing God’ objections to technology and environmental interventions) which attempt to place limits upon the kinds of ends we should

seek through technology, by appealing to a conception of essential human nature, can play a critical role in debates about the use of technology. Such arguments should not be understood as attempts to close down ethical discussion by an appeal to an ‘externally’ discovered limit upon human aspiration. Rather, they are properly employed when they encourage us to reflect upon what we truly consider to be the central features of good, fitting, or worthwhile human lives—lives that we judge to be choice-worthy and lives that we, as individuals and as human beings, could survive in. These arguments encourage us to recognise that certain possibilities are open to us, while others are not. There are ends that we should hope and strive for, and there are ends for which, were we to achieve them, we would have to forgo aspects of our lives that we truly deem to be constitutive of our being human and being ourselves.

3.4. *From Nature to Environment and Technology—Related Virtues and Vices*

Virtue ethics gives us the proper framework in which to debate questions regarding what we consider to be the essential properties of human beings. The appeal to human nature as a normative criterion for our ethical deliberations about the good life for humans requires that we make judgments about what we deem human nature to be. These judgements must be informed by our consideration of the question of which aspects of our lives, and the lives of human beings more generally, are so essential and significant that without them we would judge that the human being, human life, or individual person no longer existed. These are exactly the sorts of evaluative questions we are faced with in ethical discussion of bioethics, stem-cell research, abortion, and euthanasia, etc. Answering questions of this kind is always going to be, at its foundation, a matter of internal evaluation, rather than objective or scientific fact. When debated from within the virtue ethics framework, these questions are properly located, and clearly tied to their ethical conclusions. In debating these questions, such as where human life ends and begins (individually and as a kind or species), we are working in the Aristotelian tradition. What human nature is, and what makes a person a person, is an ethical question, not a purely scientific question. That certain lives are not the lives of human beings, or the lives proper to human beings, is an evaluative judgement. Further, questions such as these are matters for communal deliberation and judgment and not matters for independent, quantitative investigation and discovery. These questions cannot be taken as settled. Even if there is no clear answer to be discovered, or no ultimately definitive answer to be hoped for, these questions must be debated. Otherwise, our ethical understanding of human life, of technology, and of our relationship with the environment, will be severely impoverished.

Finally, the argument from nature, and virtue ethics more generally, can be of use in technological and environmental ethical debates by encouraging us to consider what kind of virtues might be relevant to our relationship with the environment, rather than our relationship with other people. What sort of dispositions can we cultivate towards the environment in order to achieve a life of flourishing and happiness? In what way might we orient ourselves towards the natural world in order to live a life in which we achieve *eudaimonia*? By reflection upon human nature, and upon those characteristics of humans which are so fundamental and important that by lacking them we would cease to be identifiable as human beings, we can begin to determine what kind of life (on a very general level) we lead as human beings, what central human characteristics we organise our lives by, and what character dispositions or virtues we promote in order to live flourishing lives. By focusing on questions about what kind of character traits we should develop and how we should live, environmental virtue ethics can help us to determine the proper orientation that humans should have toward both technology and the lifeworld [16]. Environmental virtue ethics can also provide for us a deep structure for discussing human flourishing in the salient context of a complicated and increasingly unstable and degraded ecosystem, rather than simply prescribing right or wrong actions in relation to a narrow conception of human concern [16,17]. The relatively recent and rapid development of virtue ethical approaches to the ethics of the environment provides clear support for this

claim—there now exists an extensive body of literature explicating EVE [18–21]. While the question of what particular character dispositions might be established as environmental virtues is beyond the scope of this paper, an increasingly rich literature on this topic is being developed in this area and, indeed, on the question of how we might best cultivate such virtues [16,22–24].

So, virtue ethics is, perhaps, the ideal moral framework in which to tackle ethical issues concerning environmental behaviour and existential threat. However, it is important not to disconnect the issue of environmental nature and that of human nature. Instead of claiming that we first need to recognize values in nature, I believe that our first requirement is to come to terms with the recognition of values and limitations in human life. In this sense, environmental and technological issues would rely on the same essential core, so that environment and humans are not considered as separate issues. Thus, EVE may represent an appropriate framework for the consideration of bioethical issues, too.

4. Conclusions

The argument from nature, as it is commonly employed in bioethical and environmental contexts, makes proper sense only when understood as proceeding from a virtue ethics framework. The virtue ethics interpretation of the argument from nature can account for and make sense of moral intuitions about the value of nature and the place and purpose of humans in the natural environment. While the argument from nature (in any of its forms) does not allow us to deduce categorical ethical distinctions between technological acts or types of acts, the appeal to nature, as understood within a virtue ethics framework, can have a different and more foundational role in our ethical thinking about the relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world. While arguments from nature may not give us a method for making clear ethical distinctions between technological acts, they can inspire us to consider the role of human technology more generally—the place and purpose of humanity in the natural world, and the role of technology in helping us achieve our purpose and understand our place. It is fundamental to any ethics of human technology and the environment that before we try to develop a theory that prescribes or prohibits particular technological or environmental acts, we engage in debate about what sort of lives we live and what sort of ends we seek. That debate can, and should, appeal to an evaluative concept of human nature.

Understanding the argument from nature in its virtue ethics context, and as an appeal to ‘human nature’, allows us to ground ethics not in something ‘other than’ human, such as a notion of nature defined in opposition to the human, but, rather, to ground it in the human—that is, to put humans at the centre of our ethical deliberations—to be ‘virtuously anthropocentric’. It allows us to ground both environmental ethics and bioethics in an understanding of the human as human, and in an understanding of the normative implications of a deep (and debatable) conception of human nature; and to ground it in a conception of human nature that is already interpreted and evaluated, rather than sitting outside or external to human concerns. A proper understanding of arguments from nature can help in establishing which virtues and which vices relate to our relationship with the non-human world—which character dispositions are relevant to an environmental virtue ethics, with human nature as its foundation. And so, a proper understanding of the argument from nature provides the basis for a ‘virtuously anthropocentric’ environmental ethics. It is ultimately up to us to decide which environmental and technological practices to pursue, and which to eschew—and the best way to do this is by reference to an understanding of ourselves which recognises not only those aspects of our lives which we deem to be most important, but also our capabilities and our limitations, and the responsibility engendered by our unavoidable and constant engagement in making and re-making the world in which we find ourselves.

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Notes

- ¹ However, in such uses it is important to see that the term ‘unnatural’ is specifically defined as according to God’s will or law, and thus this version of the *negative* ‘argument from nature’ does not fall prey to the problem of distinguishing between what is natural and what is not, in the way that secular versions of the argument do.
- ² My exposition in this paragraph of the various versions of the ‘argument from nature’ was informed by §1 of de Sousa’s article.
- ³ This argument is slightly orthogonal to much of the work in EVE that endeavors to develop non-anthropocentric environmental ethics and to the work specifically on anthropocentrism.
- ⁴ See [9] for an argument of this kind made from the point of view of socio-biology.
- ⁵ The content of this paragraph is informed by Nussbaum’s discussion of Aristotle’s general argument strategy in [10] (pp. 90–91).
- ⁶ See also [13] (pp. 62–72) and [14] (*ad. loc.*). ‘The slogan’ is, of course, not uncontroversial, however it is generally accepted in ethics, probably because it captures a widely held moral intuition regarding the attribution of the terms ‘good’ and ‘better’. See [15] (pp. 93–116) for a defence of the slogan against some of the more common objections to it.
- ⁷ This paragraph is informed by Nussbaum’s characterisation of Aristotle’s strategy of argumentation in [10] (pp. 90–95).

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