

## Commentary on Shonberg

### I. Shonberg on Hursthouse

As Hursthouse says:

A good social animal ... is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to (i) its parts, (ii) its operations, (iii) its actions, and (iv) its desires and emotions; and whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve (1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of its social group – in the characteristic way of the species.<sup>1</sup>

In his paper, “Human Rationality and the Four Ends,” Jordan Shonberg argues that the “characteristic way” mentioned can be identified with Michael Thompson’s concept of “natural history.” Once the two are equated, Shonberg argues that Hursthouse’s previously mentioned evaluative structure is “warranted in the context of non-rational social animals,”<sup>2</sup> but fails in the context of human animals.

Before I begin my criticisms, I want to say that I am impressed by the scope of Shonberg’s project. It is a failing of Hursthouse’s view that she fails to give a clear explication of the “in characteristic way of the species” proviso, and I think that an attempt to flesh out what exactly is by that proviso is an extremely worthwhile undertaking. Furthermore, I think Shonberg has gone about attempting to fill in the proviso in a very wise way. Hursthouse is influenced by Philippa Foot’s project and since Foot greatly relies on Thompson, filling in the confusions in Hursthouse with something in Thompson is a logical move to make. I also appreciate how Shonberg broke down every step of his project into its necessary and sufficient components. In *On Virtue Ethics*, Hursthouse occasionally leaves steps as implicit, and this proves

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<sup>1</sup> Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. 202.

<sup>2</sup> Shonberg, J. (2015). “Human Rationality and the Four Ends.” 1.

problematic when attempting to understand other parts of her view. The reader cannot go back to some of the necessary steps to understand later components since those steps are not there in the text. This is not the case in Shonberg's paper. Since Shonberg lays everything out, there reader is able to fully see the argument as it unfolds.

## **II. Criticisms of Shonberg**

### *II.1 – The Characteristic Way as The Natural-Historical Judgments*

There were, however, two central issues with Shonberg's paper that I wish to address. The first issue I wish to address is the motivation behind the claim that Hursthouse's "characteristic way" should be taken as Thompson's "natural-history judgments." I understand that Hursthouse is taking after Foot who relies on Thompson, but this alone is not enough motivation for believing the two concepts to be equivalent. The main thrust of Shonberg's paper comes from the following material conditional: if Hursthouse allows for the equivalence of her characteristic way with Thompson's concept of "natural history" then Hursthouse cannot justify her claims about what humans rightly have reason to do. Since the conclusion of the material conditional is that Hursthouse will be unable to justify her claims if she accepts the equivalence of her characteristic way with Thompson's concept of "natural history," it seems to me that she should just reject the equivalence of the two concepts. If she does this, then Shonberg's argument against her drops out.

There are other reasons to believe that Hursthouse does not intend for her characteristic way of being an animal to be equivalent to Thompson's natural-historical judgments. The characteristic way of being an animal sounds like one

thing, and Hursthouse acknowledges this for humans. Hursthouse notes that the characteristic ways of going on for animals generally are many. These are related to “such things as the acquisition of nourishment, mating, feeding the young, hunting, selecting leaders, etc. “ but the characteristic way of being human “is just one, which remains the same across all areas of our life. Our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way.”<sup>3</sup> This means that at least for humans “characteristic way” gets filled in with “rational way.” Natural-historical judgments are not a way of being. They tell us things such as “the wolf hunts as part of a pack.” It is unclear how to get characteristic ways of being out these natural-historical judgments, unless we are to take the set of these judgments and state that the characteristic way of being for a species is the set of its natural-historical judgments. If this is the case, though, then we already know that “characteristic way of being” cannot be equivalent with “natural-historical judgments” because it isn’t equivalent for all cases. We know it isn’t equivalent for humans because Hursthouse gives us the characteristic way of being a human, and it is distinct from natural-historical judgment of being human.

Shonberg notes that one reason for believing that Hursthouse’s characteristic way is equivalent to Thompson’s natural history is the fact that it gets the right results in the non-rational animals case. While this may be true, this does not show that Hursthouse’s characteristic way is equivalent to Thompson’s natural history. Natural-historical judgments may be true of species, but that does not make them the characteristic way of being that species. What it might show, however, is that

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<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. 222.

perhaps in the case of non-rational animals, the characteristic way of being a non-rational animal is via Thompson's natural history. If this is the case, then it would explain why the results fail to work when expanding to the human case. Building the natural history component into EC is what causes the issue when trying to reconcile EC with the human case, which is more evidence for the idea that the Thompson's natural history judgments apply to the non-rational animals and not to humans, and thus building it into the definition that applies to both is a mistake.

### *II.II – Terminological Confusions & Building the “Characteristic Way” Out of the EC*

My second concern with this paper may be a terminological confusion. As it stands now, Shonberg notes that the four ends<sup>4</sup> “are the characteristic ends for animals.”<sup>5</sup> Yet later, Shonberg mentions that, “determining the ends of a species is the first crucial step in constructing the concept of the natural history for that species.”<sup>6</sup> In this latter formulation, it seems that the ends of a species are not the four ends mentioned by Hursthouse, because if they were, we would not be seeking to determine them. Shonberg then goes on to say that, “the characteristic ends, in part, determine what enters into the characteristic way of a species.”<sup>7</sup> This is the point where the confusion arises. If the characteristic ends that determine what enters into the characteristic way of a species just are Hursthouse's four ends, then something has gone wrong here. Hursthouse has stated that the four ends structure applies to all animal species. What differentiates one animal species from another is

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<sup>4</sup> Individual survival, continuance of species, characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and the good functioning of the social group.

<sup>5</sup> Shonberg, J. (2015). “Human Rationality and the Four Ends.” 3

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 14.

not the structure, but the characteristic way of being the species with regard to that structure. If we are supposed to be using the four ends that apply to all animal species to generate the characteristic way of each species, there seems to be no way to do this. It does not make sense that the same structure would be able to generate multiple different ways of being a species. What makes “the way of being a species” for each species cannot be generated from something all animal species share. It must come from somewhere else.

Another point to note, if the characteristic ends that determine what enters into the characteristic way of a species just are Hursthouse’s four ends, then it also seems like we have lost track of all the work that the natural-historical judgment concept did for us. The initial project of the paper was to equate Hursthouse’s underdefined concept “the characteristic way of being a species” with Thompson’s concept of “natural-historical judgment for the species” to attempt to elucidate Hursthouse’s view. If we are now defining the characteristic way of being a species in terms of Hursthouse’s four ends, then we’ve lost Thompson.

This leads me to believe that the characteristic ends that determine what enters into the characteristic way of a species are something other than Hursthouse’s four ends. Based on the rest of Shonberg’s paper, I want to say that the characteristic ends that determine what enters into the characteristic way of a species are ends determined by the natural-historical judgments. This makes sense of the initial project of the paper and does not have the strange consequences just mentioned. I am not sure that this is what Shonberg goes for, though. Rather, it seems that Shonberg says that the ends that determine the characteristic way are

Hursthouse's four ends. Towards the end of the paper Shonberg makes the following three claims: "(1) Humans have the four ends as characteristic ends, (2) the four ends, in part, determine what humans rightly have reason to do, (3) the four ends constitute the complete set of (actual) human characteristic ends."<sup>8</sup> Here it seems that Shonberg is saying that the ends that determine the characteristic way of being a human are Hursthouse's four ends. It may be, though, that I have misunderstood this. As I already stated, it makes more sense that Shonberg meant to say that the characteristic way of a species is determined by the natural-historical judgments in some way. If this *is* what Shonberg intended, then I missed it somewhere, and my only concern with this paper is the one previously mentioned, namely, the motivation for why we need to treat "characteristic way of a species" as Thomson's natural-historical judgments.

### III. Concluding Remarks

Overall, Shonberg has not shown that Hursthouse's evaluative structure is "warranted in the context of non-rational social animals,"<sup>9</sup> but fails in the context of human animals. What he has shown, however, is that Hursthouse cannot identify her concept of "the characteristic way of being a species" with Thompson's concept of "natural-historical judgments for the species." This is still a noteworthy result because Hursthouse gave no explanation for what it means to be "the characteristic way of being a species." If Shonberg is able to motivate the claim that Hursthouse actually intends for her concept to be equated with Thompson's, then Shonberg has shown that Hursthouse will fail to get the results she desires. If, on the other hand,

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<sup>8</sup> Shonberg, J. (2015). "Human Rationality and the Four Ends." 17.

<sup>9</sup> Shonberg, J. (2015). "Human Rationality and the Four Ends." 1.

Hursthouse meant for “in the characteristic way of the species” to mean something else, then there is still no explanation for what she actually meant. Shonberg has taken one of her options off the table. It is now on Hursthouse to further elaborate her view using one of the explanations still available.