

# Should Intro Ethics Make You a Better Person?

Katharina Nieswandt, Concordia University, Montreal

**Publication:** *Teleological Structures in Human Life: Essays for Anselm W. Müller*. Ed. by Christian Kietzmann. Routledge 2022.

**Abstract:** *There is a common demand that moral theory be ‘practical’, voiced both in- and outside of philosophy. Neo-Humeans, Kantian constitutivists and Aristotelian naturalists have all advocated the idea that my knowledge that I ought to do something must lead me to actually do it—an idea sometimes called the “practicality requirement” for moral theory. Some university administrators apply this idea in practice, when they force students who violate the code of conduct to complete classes in moral theory, hoping that the knowledge obtained there would lead the student not to reoffend. I argue that the practicality requirement rests on a false understanding of the relation both between knowledge and motivation, focusing my critique on recent Aristotelian proposals.*

**Keywords:** *moral internalism \* practical reasoning \* motivation \* Aristotelian moral naturalism \* Kant*

**Acknowledgements:** *I’d like to thank Ulf Hlobil, Christian Kietzmann and Anselm Müller for comments on this paper, as well as audiences at the universities of Guelph, Pardubice and Leuven.*

## 1 Introduction

How does moral theory relate to individual actions?

1. Does knowledge of ethics systematically help individuals in specific life situations to act well? Do you think that you became a better person through learning about, e.g., Kant’s deontology, about the expressivist theory of the meaning of moral utterances or about Judith Thomson’s (1971) view on abortion?
2. Is this knowledge perhaps even required to act well? Suppose, Kant’s deontology is the correct system of normative ethics. Would reading Kant or taking a Kant class then be necessary for you in order to act well, or would it, at least, give you an edge over those who have to rely on their *lumen naturale* to discover the “moral law within” them (Kant, AA 5, p. 161)?
3. Should one aim of ethics be to make its student a better person? Would the teacher, hence, have failed if diligent students, who read all the texts and passed all assignments, left without an improved character?

My answer to questions number 1 to 3 is an emphatic “No.” Knowledge of moral theory is not practical in that sense. This paper attempts to show why. My answer to the initial question, “How does moral theory relate to individual actions?”, will be: in the same way that the Peano Axioms relate to calculating my annual taxes. I do not need to be conscious of these axioms for my calculation, not even implicitly or in the sense that I could be made aware of them, nor would being conscious of them help me with my calculation.

I proceed as follows: Sections 2–3 identify authors who argue that moral philosophy has to be practical in the sense I deny. On my analysis, this view is held by some contemporary Humeans and is wide-spread among contemporary Kantians and Aristotelians. Section 4 provides a formal version of the “practicality requirement” for moral theory as, e.g., Michael Smith (1994, p. 12) and Philippa Foot (2001, p. 9) have called it.<sup>1</sup> Sections 5–7 review proposals for understanding this requirement, focusing on the most recent, viz. the Aristotelian versions. I argue that all are implausible. Finally, section 8 provides general reasons to think that the demand that moral theory be practical in the discussed sense is misguided. The practicality requirement, I conclude, reveals a false understanding of the relation between knowledge and motivation.

Note that the view I reject is by no means purely academic. For instance, a small percentage of students in my annual *Introduction to Ethics* attend the lecture because they have violated the university’s code of conduct, and our school of engineering believes that listening to me (or Kant) will keep them from plagiarizing, sexually harassing others, and the like in the future. If my lecture has this effect, it must be through deterrence. Philosophers who hear about this disciplinary measure usually find the engineering perspective on ethics hilarious. Indeed, the more you think about the claim that moral theory should better its recipient, the odder this claim appears. For a start, this claim would have to apply not just to my teaching but also to my writing. After reading *this* article, e.g., you should be a slightly better person than before; just for having read it. Also, what if I don’t teach the correct moral theory but one of those that corrupt youth (Anscombe 2005a)—might my students end up plagiarizing even more? Yet, the idea that moral theory is practical in this sense is by no means a mere laypersons’ misunderstanding. As we shall see, many contemporary philosophers advocate a practicality requirement.

## 2 A practicality requirement for moral theory?

Over the past two decades, Neo-Humeans, Kantian constitutivists, and Aristotelian naturalists have advocated a practicality requirement, in the form of a narrow version of moral internalism. Michael Smith (1994, p. 12), e.g., takes it to be a conceptual truth that:

If someone judges that it is right that she  $\varphi$ s then, *ceteris paribus*, she is motivated to  $\varphi$ .

This is his version of the “practicality requirement,” which is one of three requirements for any plausible moral theory, he claims. One challenge for the moral philosopher, according to Smith, is to make this requirement compatible with one of his others, viz. the Humean claim that belief alone cannot motivate.

---

<sup>1</sup> Foot attributes the original version to Hume (T 3.1.1).

While Smith's titular *Moral Problem* only arises for Humeans, Smith is not wrong to present the above claim as a widely shared assumption, with a long philosophical tradition. According to Kant, e.g., a *Critique of Practical Reason* does not need a deduction (Kant, AA 5, pp. 42–49). This follows from a fact already pointed out by Aquinas (ST IaIIae, q. 3, art. 5, obj. 1), viz. that an agent, contrary to a believer, causes what they understand. Kant's "formula of humanity" (AA 4, p. 429) entails that I need to understand myself as a rational being in order to act well, and he claims that my action needs to be carried out from the motive of acting well and hence *from an understanding of what makes actions good*, if it is to have "true moral worth" (AA 4, p. 398). More recently, many Aristotelians advance essentially the same claim for "human being" instead of "rational being."

Christine Korsgaard (2009) proposes a modern Kantian practicality requirement, by combining her claim that "We are conscious of the grounds on which we act" (sect. 1.4.3) with the claim that:

[T]he laws of practical reason govern our actions because if we don't follow them we just aren't acting, and acting is something that we must do. A constitutive principle for an inescapable activity is unconditionally binding. (sect. 2.1.7)

This, she says, "is where the principles of practical reason, the hypothetical and categorical imperatives, come into the story [...] by means of which we constitute ourselves as unified agents" (sect. 1.4.8). Korsgaard begins here with three relatively uncontroversial claims: that actions are intentional doings, that any individual action can be evaluated as to whether it complies with principles of practical rationality, and that human beings must act. On these, she rests a moral theory according to which individual persons build an identity for themselves by acting on said principles.

John Hacker-Wright (2012) applies Korsgaard's idea of principles that do not only provide norms by which to evaluate our actions but that actually motivate these actions to an Aristotelian framework. The view that he suggests "is practical and not merely theoretical" (p. 22), he claims, in the following sense:

To describe a person as acting, which is a prerequisite for being able to act, requires placing the person against the background of a form of life in which certain events constitute the making of an action. [...] [T]he categorical proposition that human beings are agents *cannot be the practically inert sort* [...]; it is unlike the categorical proposition that human beings are social, which can be practically inert. *We must conceive ourselves as agents in order to act, and in so conceiving ourselves, we take it to be an aspect of being good as a human being.* It is an aspect of our nature that we must value in order to be agents. (p. 17, emphases added)

The uniting feature of these proposals is that they require moral theory to be practical, in the sense that they require abstract thought on moral matters to ultimately bring about action.

The Kantian and Aristotelian proposals understand this requirement in a specific way, which sets them apart from Humeanism. In order for me to act well, they claim, my self-understanding as a creature of reason (either purely formal or specifically human reason) must somehow appear in my practical reasoning, and any moral theory that stands a chance of being correct must account for this. Conversely, that which I

understand in acting well would be formulated as central claims of the correct moral theory. Thus, according to the Aristotelian version, I cannot act well without understanding (in some to be further specified sense) that I am a human being and that (let's suppose) human beings need friends, and that which I understand here can be verbalized as the claim "Human beings need friends," which is a claim that would be contained in a comprehensive formulation of Aristotelian moral theory.

Section 3 surveys recent justifications for a practicality requirement; section 4 offers a formal version of this requirement. Ideally, such a formulation would cover all three traditions, as would then my evaluation of its plausibility. These traditions, however, differ too much in features that bear on a practicality requirement, beginning with their motivation to impose it and extending to framework questions, e.g., regarding the meaning of moral vocabulary. A practicality requirement so general as to fit all three would be too underdetermined, in both its presuppositions and its implications, to be evaluated. I shall hence concentrate on one version, viz. the Aristotelian practicality requirement—although you will see that many of my points probably transfer to the Kantian paradigm.

My reasons for choosing the Aristotelian version are threefold. First, the discussion within Aristotelianism is the most recent. Second, the case against an Aristotelian practicality requirement strikes me as particularly clear cut. As suggested above, the practicality requirement might be systematically built into Kant's original theory, but the Aristotelian practicality requirement is a recent add-on to the paradigm and, I shall argue, one that sits ill with some of the traditional components. Third, Anselm Müller, to whom this collection is dedicated, was the teacher who introduced me to the modern Aristotelian paradigm, particularly the pragmatist recasting of Aristotle's practical syllogism. Many of the works he encouraged me to read entail the rejection of a practicality requirement, e.g., Carroll (1895), Anscombe (2005b), Geach (1965; 1960), Kenny (1966) or Kripke (1982). I learned the same lesson from several of Müller's own works, such as "How Theoretical is Practical Reason?" (Müller 1979), "Has Moral Education a Rational Basis?" (Müller 1994), *Was taugt die Tugend?* (Müller 1998) or *Produktion oder Praxis?* (Müller 2008). The strongest arguments against a practicality requirement, I believe, come from the Wittgensteinian branch of the Aristotelian tradition itself, and Müller's contribution to this is particularly notable.

More formative for me than any particular paper of Müller's, however, was the philosophical method that he taught to his students and that he exemplifies in his own writings: to start from a gripping question or puzzle, discuss it in a historically-informed yet jargon-free way, and to end with a result that truly aims to provide a new intellectual insight to the reader. I was very fortunate to encounter such an exceptional philosopher during my early education. I truly hope that some of his qualities have rubbed off on me.

### 3 Consciousness of moral theory as necessary for good actions?

All of the Aristotelian proposals for a practicality requirement rest on some combination of the following claims:

1. Aristotle's (EN, 1094a1–3) claim that agents, by definition, regard their aims as valuable in some sense, i.e., the guise of the good.

2. Kant's (AA 4, p. 393–94) claim that the goodness of the agent's will must matter for the goodness of their action. Systems of ethics for which this is not true are "self-effacing" (Stocker 1976).
3. Elizabeth Anscombe's (1981a; resp. 2000, chs. 8 and 32) claim that agents have "non-observational" or "first-personal" or "practical" knowledge of their own actions.
4. Michael Thompson's (2008, p. 25; 2004, p. 63) claim that "species" or "life" designate logical categories and that the items in these categories, such as 'human being' or 'breathing', are non-empirical concepts.

These four claims, or a subset of them, are regularly used to defend some version of the claim that agents, if they are to act well, must understand the norms that apply to their actions and that this self-transparency consists in some piece of non-observational knowledge. Thus, Sebastian Rödl (2007, p. 49) writes:

But if someone's doing something has a true action explanation, then her doing it and her thought that it is good to do are *the same reality*. An action expresses a thought about what to do, not in the sense of being its effect, but in the sense of being this thought. Actions do not point to a state of mind as to their cause. Acting intentionally *is* being of a certain mind.

He calls this the "nexus of self-consciousness and reason" (p. ix) and rejects "the opposition of first-person and third-person standpoint [...], often represented as an opposition of the practical, deliberative, and normative on the one hand and the theoretical, explanatory, and descriptive on the other hand" (p. x). Similar points are made by De Anna (2020), Frey (2018), Haase (2018), Kietzmann (2015) and Micah Lott (2012), who argues:

To possess a virtue is to know how a human should act. However, to know how a human should act is to know what counts as living and acting well for a human being. And knowledge of how the human lives well just is knowledge of a characteristically human life—that is, knowledge of human form—with respect to the sphere of human life at issue. Thus to possess a virtue is also to possess, to some extent, an understanding of human form. (p. 423)

The source of most of these proposals is Thompson's "Apprehending Human Form," where he combines the third and fourth above claim. "[W]e have, if you like, ways of knowing our life-form 'from within,'" Thompson (2004, p. 72) argues, because:

In the self-conscious representation of myself as thinking, as in all my self-conscious self-representation, I implicitly represent myself as alive, as falling under life-manifesting types. And in bringing myself under such types, I bring myself under a life form. [...] *Self-consciousness is thus always implicitly form-consciousness*. I might now engage in the skeptical doubt whether this life form of mine has any other bearers [...], but I bring the basic duality of life form and individual bearer into the picture. Whichever path we take, it seems to follow then that every reflective human being is able to lay hold of the human life form through something other than observation [...]. (p. 68, emp. added)

On my reading, all that Thompson claims to show—and all that his argument could show—is that rational beings *can* have non-observational knowledge of their own species. Hacker-Wright (2012, p. 17), Rödl (2007, p. 164), Lott (2012, pp. 414–16) and others, however, seem to read Thompson’s paper as establishing that any rational being, in carrying out any action, must be conscious of this species knowledge and even be (partly) motivated by it. The uniting idea is that there are pieces of knowledge which would both be mentioned in the true and comprehensive ethical theory and would at the same time be practical, in that possessing them would motivate one to act upon them. (Note that this use of “practical knowledge” bears little resemblance to Anscombe’s above-cited definition.)

The strongest arguments against a practicality requirement, I said, come from within the Neo-Aristotelian tradition, and the following discussion is intended in the spirit of a friendly critique. I will rest my case on presuppositions that the criticized authors should be able to accept. In particular, the following points should be noted: First, my conclusion is not to reject Aristotelian moral naturalism—Foot (2001, ch. 4), e.g., offers a version that does not attempt to be practical in the above sense (see section 8). Second, I shall spend no time defending the presuppositions of Aristotelian moral naturalism, such as that there is a universal human nature or that we can infer ‘ought’ from ‘is’. Third, I do not reject any of the four above-listed claims. I simply doubt that these claims license a practicality requirement, and I reject the very idea of such a requirement—for Aristotelian moral naturalism as much for any other normative ethics.

## 4 The practicality requirement formalized

Different authors suggest or imply different versions of the practicality requirement, and sections 5–7 will evaluate these options. The formulation below, however, should be minimal enough to include all those referenced in the previous section.

Let  $T$  be the correct theory of normative ethics,  $K$  be a kind of good action (e.g., keeping promises),  $k$  be an individual action of kind  $K$ , and  $J$  be  $T$ ’s justification for why actions of kind  $K$  are good (e.g., that the maxim behind any  $k$  could be universalized). Then, those who insist on a practicality requirement for  $T$  demand the following:

*Practicality Requirement (for Any Theory of Good Action that Will Be Able to Present Itself as Correct)<sup>2</sup>*

$J$  must be such that anyone who understands  $J$  will, in appropriate circumstances,  $k$  from this understanding that  $J$ .

To expand a little on our example of promising:

$T$ ’s justification for why those who keep promises act well must be such that, if I understand it, I will, if I yesterday promised Jane to help her move today, help Jane move today—and I will do so from my understanding of  $T$ ’s justification for why those who keep promises act well.

---

2 Henceforth *Practicality Requirement*.

If we allow the additional assumption that  $k$ -ing for other reasons would at most be “in accordance with” but not “from virtue,” *Practicality Requirement* entails the following conception of good actions:

*Good Action*

$k$  is a good action only if the agent  $k$ 's from their understanding that  $J$  (i.e., from an understanding of the correct justification for what makes  $K$  good).

You might wonder what exactly “understanding”  $J$  means. What kind of consciousness is necessary to lead a “Practically Self-Conscious Life” (Haase 2018)? Do I need to actively think about that which generally makes faithful actions good, for instance, each time I act faithfully? Or do I only need to be able to refer to  $J$  in case Anscombe poses her “Why?” question? Perhaps the envisaged criterion is even less demanding, and I wouldn't need to possess the concept of faithfulness at all, as long as I could give Anscombe reasons for my action that she could understand as falling under this heading? We shall look at these and other conceptions of “understanding” in sections 5–7.

If true, *Practicality Requirement* would imply that the answer to my three numbered questions in section 1 is “Yes.” For some understanding of some of the justifications discussed in ethics classes would then be needed to act well. This applies with certain qualifications: For a start, the class would need to teach  $T$ , the correct moral theory. Furthermore, the above practicality requirement does not limit opportunities of learning  $T$  to classes or even reading philosophical texts; sincere exercise of one's *lumen naturale* might suffice. The stance of my colleagues in engineering, however, appears well-reasoned once we subscribe to *Practicality Requirement*. Students need to learn  $T$  somewhere—so why not in Intro Ethics? Especially those whose code violations indicate that their *lumen naturale* is slightly defective might appreciate my guided tour!

## 5 Our options

Advocates of *Practicality Requirement* demand that moral theories be practical in the sense that the true and complete theory would comprise claims which led people who understood them to act from this understanding. (As discussed, people might develop this understanding through other means than academic study.) The criterion *Good Actions* implied in this requirement says that I can only act well if I act from an understanding of that which would also be part of the content of the correct moral theory.

*Practicality Requirement*, we saw, is underdetermined as regards the term “understanding.” The recent literature proposes two options for substantiating it, which I briefly outline here. In sections 6–7, I then go through various recent proposals and give reasons to reject each. Some authors will be cited more than once, as their proposal seems to hover in between multiple logical possibilities. In section 8, I provide general reasons why the very idea of a practicality requirement for moral theories should be rejected.

The first option, discussed in section 6, is to require that the agent, in acting, be conscious of relevant claims of the theory. This means people have to use these claims in their practical reasoning, at least implicitly. On this account,  $J$  must be part of the *content* of any sound practical inference that concludes in some  $k$ ; i.e.,  $J$  would need to be mentioned in a comprehensive formulation of all premises.

The second option, discussed in section 7, is to require that the agent, in acting, be (at least implicitly) conscious of something that determines the goodness of practical inferences. This can mean consciousness of the metaphysical facts that ground the goodness of these inferences, i.e., of the facts in virtue of which *J* is true. Alternatively, it is conceived as consciousness of that which makes it rational to take *J* to be true. In both cases, the consciousness is not of a content of a premise but of something that makes the inference a good piece of practical reasoning, and this consciousness is required to draw the inference; i.e., it is required for the *act* of inferring.<sup>3</sup>

## 6 Consciousness as holding a premise

What would it mean to include the justification for why actions of kind *K* are good as the content of a premise of a practical inference that concludes in *k*? Let me go through an example. I would consider the following a sound practical inference:

*Promise 1*

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| P1     | I promised Jane to help her move this Saturday. |
| P2     | It's Saturday.                                  |
| Action | <i>Helping Jane.</i>                            |

In specifying an example, I am forced to presuppose certain assumptions in normative ethics and philosophy of action. Here, I assume that, *pro tanto*, promises bind, and I assume that the conclusion of a practical inference is an action. I trust, though, that all authors from section 3 can agree.

Those who want to include *J* in the content will see *Promise 1* as incomplete; no general principle, no norm for the validity of inferences, or anything the like is being mentioned. This is the view that Rödl (2007, p. 39) appears to defend, when he says: “I speak elliptically when I say that I intend to do *B* because I promised to do it. A complete statement of my ground would determine the desirability of my action with respect not only to justice, but to a totality of ranked infinite ends.” On such a view, a more comprehensive statement of the inference might be:

---

3 There is a complex debate about the metaphysics of inferences—do they extend in time, e.g. (Hlobil 2015; Valaris 2016)? I do not wish to take sides in this and hence use the term “act” in a broad sense here, supposed to cover anything from Aristotelian *energeia*, to “mental acts” to processes. My interest is in the difference between the content versus the drawing of an inference, independent of what such drawing might consist in.



*Promise 2*

- P1 I promised Jane to help her move this Saturday.
- P2 It's Saturday.
- P3 Always act so that you can at the same time want for the maxim of your action to become a universal law.
- P4 I can want for the maxim "Do as promised" to become a universal law.
- P5 I cannot want for the maxim "Do not do as promised" to become a universal law.
- Action *Helping Jane.*

In this case, P3–5 together make up *J. Promise 2*, I suspect, models best what my engineering colleagues have in mind. As ethics teacher, I provide a missing piece of knowledge to the offender, viz. *J*, and suddenly the student can draw the correct conclusion, just as students become able to calculate the side-lengths of a right-angled triangle, once the geometry teacher has provided the Pythagoras Theorem.

Kant is not our only option here, of course; below are two Aristotelian solutions for complementing the initial *Promise 1*.

*Promise 3*

- P1 I promised Jane to help her move this Saturday.
- P2 It's Saturday.
- P6 Just human beings keep their promises.
- P7 I aspire to be a just human being.
- Action *Helping Jane.*

*Promise 4*

- P1 I promised Jane to help her move this Saturday.
- P2 It's Saturday.
- P8 The practice of promising is a vital contributor to human flourishing.
- P9 If I do not do as promised, then I damage the practice of promising.
- P10 It is irrational to do what damages a vital contributor to human flourishing.
- P11 I do what is rational.
- Action *Helping Jane.*

I could go on. Any of these would be a candidate if you believe that that which justifies promise-keeping needs to appear as the content of a premise in the agent's reasoning.

To me, *Promise 2–4* already sound absurd enough to rule out the content view, but not all readers will share this intuition. In Nieswandt (2018), I argue that inferences like these cannot possibly provide our model of sound practical reasoning. They have various problems; for a start, premises such as P9 will often be empirically false. Their main problem, however, and the one that affects all of them is that they identify the wrong reason for our actions. If I should indeed help Jane, then that must be because I promised Jane that I would help. In other words, the reason for me to carry out the action is my promise rather than some general principle of reasoning (such as Kant's categorical imperative) or some virtuous ideal which I want to realize or some potential benefit that my action brings to humanity at large. The strongest indication of this is the identity of the victim of my potential wrongdoing. Who would be wronged if I failed to help on Saturday? Jane, the obvious answer seems to be. If the reason why I should help were my action's general benefit to humanity, however, then the victim should be humanity, and if the reason were some principle of rationality or an ideal of agency, then I either don't wrong anyone or—even more absurd—I wrong myself in failing to help Jane.

You might object here that the general benefit to humanity or something else along these lines is still needed in order to make P1 combined with P2 into a justification. If I promised Jane to help her, then this earlier event is indeed the reason why I should help her today, but the event constitutes a reason only because events of this kind are related to humanity's well-being (or “the totality of my ranked infinite ends,” or whatever our alternative criterion) in a particular way. It is because promise-keeping *generally* produces a benefit, e.g., that *this* individual promise now provides a reason.

At this point, a Carroll-style regress threatens. For if I need to be conscious of the correct reason for taking the fact that I promised as a reason, wouldn't I then also need to be aware of the reason why that second-level reason is a reason, etc. *ad infinitum*?

The regress problem arises because the objection confuses two levels of justification, sometimes referred to as justification “within” and “of a game.” It effectively entails the view that whatever justifies the game as a whole or one of its rules also justifies any individual move within that game. Examples of leisure games are the simplest way to show that this view must be false. As Anselm Müller pointed out to me at an early stage of my philosophical education, I and others might be playing a card game for fun. But that doesn't allow me to make a bold, illegitimate move and, if the others protest, reply “Come on—we're doing this for fun, and I can see that you found that funny!” I instead need to do whatever the rules require at this point, even if I think it's no fun at all. (Suppose my required move makes me lose the game.)<sup>4</sup> It therefore is false that I need to help Jane because of whatever makes it, *pro tanto*, the case that people who keep their promises act well. Consequently, it is false that I need to be in any way conscious of said thing and act from that piece of knowledge in helping Jane for the right reasons, i.e., in acting well.

---

4 See Müller (1998, p. 91) for a written version.

I conclude that it is implausible to require  $J$  as the content of a premise. I move on to various proposals that spell out another option: that of requiring consciousness of the metaphysical or epistemic ground of  $J$  as part of the act of drawing the inference that concludes in  $k$ .

## 7 Consciousness as required to draw inferences

Most authors do not suggest that we make  $J$  the content of a premise. Instead, they rather require some form of consciousness of  $J$  during the act of inferring, i.e., some sort of “practical uptake” of  $J$ , one might call it. There are two versions of this view. The first requires consciousness of that which metaphysically grounds  $J$ , i.e., consciousness of that in virtue of which  $J$  is true.

Remember, *Practicality Requirement* says:

$J$  must be such that anyone who understands  $J$  will, in appropriate circumstances,  $k$  from this understanding that  $J$ .

The first version of the “act view,” as I shall call it, would substantiate *Practicality Requirement* as follows:

*Consciousness of Ratio Essendi*

To understand  $J$  is to be conscious of the metaphysical ground of  $J$ .

Applied to our criterion *Good Action*, from section 4, this yields:

$k$  is a good action only if the agent  $k$ 's from being conscious of the metaphysical ground of  $J$ .

Let's assume that that which grounds  $J$  are features of the human life-form, such as the basic human need to rely on others if  $K$  is keeping promises. To be conscious of human form then entails being conscious of these features. Such *Consciousness of Ratio Essendi* seems to be the view advanced by Hacker-Wright and by Lott in the above-quoted passages (see p. 3 and p. 5, respectively), who both see the question of how I gain knowledge of my own life-form as pressing for Aristotelian moral naturalism. Rödl (2007, p. 106, *emph. added*), too, advocates *Consciousness of Ratio Essendi* in some places:

*In doing something intentionally*, I not only fall under a normative order, and I not only *represent myself as conforming to this order*; rather, this representation and my action are the same act. With regard to a practical life-form, falling under it and bringing oneself under it are the same.

The claim that I need to understand grounding facts in order to act well, however, sounds too demanding. After all, we regularly understand things without understanding—and certainly without being conscious of—their metaphysical ground. I can understand that one must use water as medium in heating systems rather than air because water has the chemical property of releasing heat more slowly, without being conscious of the metaphysical ground of this property, viz. (let's assume) that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Why not think that, similarly, I can understand that I must help Jane because I promised I would help, without being conscious of the metaphysical ground for the promising game, viz. the general human need to rely on

others? Why not think that I can spend a complete life installing heating systems or acting well, without ever learning physical chemistry or metaethics, respectively?

In addition, the metaphysical facts of which I'd need to be conscious here seem non-obvious. Assume that Foot's theory, as set out in *Natural Goodness*, is the correct theory; i.e., Foot has proposed *T*. Doesn't it seem implausible that anyone who is to act well must therefore be conscious of the metaphysical facts of which it is a theory and, in this sense, possess the theory?

At this point, authors who claim that knowledge of my own life-form must shape my individual actions usually draw on Thompson's above-cited claim (p. 5) that I do not acquire this knowledge through observation. This reading of Thompson's, however, seems to unduly restrict 'knowledge' to two kinds: Either I learned something by observation or I know it in a first-personal way. Since I don't know from observation that one should keep one's promises, like I might know from observation that a certain species of jellyfish reproduces in June, I must know it first-personally. Obviously, however, there are many kinds of knowledge that fit neither category. Examples are mathematical knowledge, legal knowledge or knowledge of my mother tongue. Anscombe (1981b, p. 97), in criticizing Hume on promising, says that "no language is in Hume's sense 'naturally intelligible,'" by which she means that the classical empiricist account of language is false. It would be a huge leap, however, to conclude from this that the knowledge Anscombe had of English was first-personal, and then another leap to conclude that it was first-personal in the same sense in which her knowledge of her own actions was, viz. "the cause of what it understands."

I conclude that it is implausible to demand *Consciousness of Ratio Essendi*. The alternative act view requires consciousness of that which epistemically grounds *J*, i.e., consciousness of that which makes it rational to take *J* to be true.

#### *Consciousness of Ratio Cognoscendi*

To understand *J* is to be conscious of the epistemic ground of *J*.

Applied to our criterion *Good Action*, from section 4, this yields:

*k* is a good action only if the agent *k*'s from being conscious of the epistemic grounds of *J*.

This requires consciousness of the reasons that make *J* a justification for *K*. That is not to take these reasons as premises in one's practical inferences, which would just be a version of the content view rejected in section 6. It is to be conscious of more general facts about practical inference, such as that practical inferences are directed at the good or that this good is specific to the human life-form.

One could think, for instance, that I cannot understand the inference pattern of promise-keeping and why it is valid, without understanding its role in human life. Contrary to that, people arguably had a good understanding of what it is for an object to retain heat even before the modern science of physical chemistry. The kinds of justifications that metaethics offers might hence need to be known to a good agent, even though the justifications offered by physical chemistry do not need to be known to a mechanic.

On this view, I need to be conscious that (let's assume) the good human life determines the goodness of inference patterns and how, and I need a conception of this life. This might not require me to be aware of these things each time I act, but it would at least require me to have a conception of these things that I could become aware of if challenged to spell out my personal metaethics.<sup>5</sup>

*Consciousness of Ratio Cognoscendi* seems to be the view recently advanced by authors who regard moral skepticism as a serious threat to Aristotelian moral naturalism. Frey (2018), e.g., defends Foot against an “irrelevancy objection,” according to which “ethical naturalism [...] has failed to provide a convincing theory of practical reason that is guided by natural norms” (p. 50), so “we do not know how natural norms can be practical” (p. 66), i.e., how they appear in the practical inferences drawn by individual agents. Therefore, “what we need is an account of how our ends as objects of practical deliberation can be grasped as objects of natural goodness or defect” (p. 67). Her solution are Thomist *first principles*:

[T]he precepts of the natural law as Aquinas understands them spell out what is naturally normative for human beings, and *as first principles they are known in a practical mode*. (p. 78, emph. added)

On the account provided here, we reason from our general conception of this [i.e., the good human] life, which is an incomplete practical knowledge of our nature, down to particular actions that are ordered to its attainment in some matter. (p. 81)

On this picture, that which makes the inference from “I promised Jane...” to *Helping Jane* sound is known to me “in practical mode” and thus causes what it understands; i.e., it makes me help Jane. The diagnosed gap between knowledge and action is hence filled by a specifically practical uptake of the knowledge rather than by another piece of knowledge, as the *content* view in section 6 postulated.<sup>6</sup>

Haase (2018, pp. 125--26), building on ideas from Thompson (2013), wants to use Marx's *Gattungswesen* to bridge the same supposed gap:

Foot's thesis that justice is a norm for us cannot be derived from reflection on the general category of practically self-conscious life. It is an articulation of the knowledge she has as a bearer of the specifically human *Gattungswesen*. In Foot's *Natural Goodness*, this gulf between meta-ethics and ethics can seem unproblematic, since the practical character of this knowledge is obscured. But once ethical knowledge is defined as knowledge that is the cause of what [it] understands, the assumed strict division between the “formal” and “substantive” level of ethical naturalism becomes problematic.

This epistemic act theory, however, seems as demanding of agents as the metaphysical version. Let's again assume that Foot's *Natural Goodness* comprises *T*. Foot's central claims, such as that inference patterns are species-relative, are substantial philosophical theses. We cannot plausibly assume that you need to hold them, not even implicitly and subconsciously, in order to draw a sound practical inference. One way to think of Foot's project is that she gives an analysis of ‘practical consequence’—similar to Tarski's analysis

5 Lott (2012, pp. 427--28) appears to advocate this rather than the metaphysical view.

6 Some further bells and whistles need adding here—e.g., to leave space for weakness of will.

of logical consequence. Even if we assumed that Tarski (1936) provided the correct theory of the latter, it seems absurd to say that anyone who draws sound theoretical inferences (implicitly) holds Tarski's theory.

The cited authors might attempt to save the epistemic proposal by requiring less demanding knowledge. Perhaps I do not need to be or become conscious of philosophical theses about inference patterns and their quality, but I need to possess concepts such as 'conclusion' or 'human being' and need to conceive of these as related in a particular way. Some will want to say, e.g., with Thompson (see p. 5 above), that I necessarily conceive of myself as a human being in acting intentionally and thereby necessarily apply standards of human goodness.

Such a necessary self-conception, however, would hold for all kinds of concepts, not just central concepts of *T*. Thus watered-down, Thompson's claim seems no more informative than, e.g., the claim that, in acting intentionally, I necessarily conceive of myself as an object in time and space, i.e., that I bring myself under the concepts 'time' and 'space' in acting.

Proponents of *Consciousness of Ratio Cognoscendi* might object here that 'human', contrary to 'time', is a normative concept and one that provides reasons for actions, so that in applying it to myself I automatically understand myself as being subject to these norms and as having certain reasons. Therefore, they might say, their claim is indeed informative, compared with my claim about time. Let me hence try a more direct reply: It is far from obvious that Thompson's claim that self-consciousness implies consciousness of my life-form, even on its undemanding reading, is true.

I'd reconstruct the argument behind Thompson's claim as follows: (i) An action of mine is intentional only if I can become conscious of the fact that I'm acting thus. (An intentional action is one where the agent can answer Anscombe's "Why?" question.) (ii) This would be impossible for me if I did not know what I am doing. (iii) Many behaviors, however, can only be identified as behaviors of this or that kind if we know something about the respective being's life form. A behavior that looks like eating in many other living beings might be the take-up of materials for producing a self-protection fluid, the 'ink', in a squid (Thompson, 2004, p. 55). (iv) Since eating, at least in a human being, is an intentional action, claims i–iii entail that I cannot eat without knowing that I am a human being. Anscombe would ask me: "Why are you putting all these things in your mouth?" and I might say "Well, I'm eating—ah, no, wait; I'm producing ink."

As a counterexample to this conclusion, consider Wittgenstein's (1984, § 92) king, who has been brought up to think that the world began with him. The king, let's assume, conceives of himself a God rather than a human being. Couldn't he nevertheless conceive of himself as eating, in doing what all the human beings around him do when they eat? Either we say that he cannot, in which case we would be saying that he cannot eat intentionally, which is false; the king is a human being and he eats, just like any human being. Or we say that the king can eat, in which case you can conceive of yourself as eating without conceiving of yourself as a member of the human species. The same argument transfers to other actions.

I conclude that it is implausible to demand *Consciousness of Ratio Cognoscendi*, even if understood in the very weak sense of being able to become conscious of one's life-form, and certainly if understood in the strong

sense of being able to become conscious of the central claims of the correct moral theory. Thus, no version of the act view, as currently defended in the literature, is plausible, nor, as I argued in section 6, is the content view. In sum, the proponents of an Aristotelian practicality requirement have so far been unable to spell out a plausible version of the practicality requirement.

## 8 Acting well and thinking straight about it

The previous sections discussed Aristotelian moral naturalism, a discussion intended as a case study against a practicality requirement for normative ethics (see p. 4). In this last section, I want to offer some more general conclusions. What is the source of the demand that moral theory be practical, and why is this demand misguided? Why is the engineering attitude to normative ethics, with which I started (p. 2), absurd?

As Enoch (2006, sect. 2) shows in detail for Kantian constitutivism, many philosophers who advocate a practicality requirement ultimately aim to block a certain version of moral skepticism. Moral theory must not leave room, these philosophers worry, for a person who concedes the *theory* but lacks any *motivation* to comply with it. Müller (2018, sect. 4) calls such a person, who attempts to exploit a supposed “logical gap” between moral theory and individual actions, a “practical sceptic.” Copp and Sobel (2004) have advocated practical skepticism against Aristotelian moral naturalism. Neither Foot<sup>7</sup> nor Kant, however, actually leave an opening for a practical skeptic.

Foot (2001, p. 14), who explicitly draws on Kant at this point, claims to have shown that (some of) the norms for human beings that she advocates are norms of human practical rationality. Kant claims to advocate norms of universal practical rationality. Both authors might be wrong, but a *practical* skeptic is one who concedes that the philosophical theory in question is correct. Such a skeptic denies “that he has been given any reason to do what he has been given reason to believe he ought to do” (Müller 2018, p. 173).<sup>8</sup> This, however, misunderstands what theories do. For “who ever thought that philosophy could replace the hangman?” (Lewis 1996, p. 307).

The most charitable reading of both Foot and Kant on this point, I suggest, is this: “According to the proposed theory of practical rationality, practical inference pattern *I* is a valid one, and that is the sense in which *I* binds agents.” Assume, e.g., that that pattern which takes me from from “I promised Jane...” to *Helping Jane* is indeed a valid inference pattern, and it is valid for precisely those reasons that Foot or Kant, respectively, proposed. Then, if I hold P1 and P2 but *fail* to help Jane, I make a mistake, in the sense that I draw an invalid inference. To this, a practical skeptic replies: “I concede that—but why should I draw valid instead of invalid inferences? Perhaps I prefer to be a shmagent.”

Either, this question demands Foot and Kant show that it is right to do what they claim is right to do, but that is something the skeptic has already conceded. Or it is the demand that a theory of what is the right

---

<sup>7</sup> See Hlobil and Nieswandt (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Note that the practical skeptic’s worry differs from that discussed by Kolodny (2005) and others of whether structural rationality is itself reason-giving.

thing to do should make the skeptic do it—in the Humean sense that the moral theory should create a corresponding desire in its student which then causes the right action, e.g., or in the sense of a specifically practical uptake, as suggested by the various proposal in section 7. Since we do not demand of mathematical proofs that they motivate a mathematician, however, I see no reason to demand of normative ethical theories that they motivate a student. If you're not motivated to do what you agree is right, only a therapist can help. Therefore, *first principles*, *Gattungswesen* and the like are patches for a non-existent gap between theory and action, as are the many attempts to show that I have non-observational knowledge of my own species which should motivate me to comply with the species-specific norms explicated by the theory. Actual “ethics trainings” for offenders, in fact, recognize this. They draw on results from clinical psychology rather than Kant.

On a general note, I am surprised at how many authors (such as Smith, on p. 2 above) share the intuition that moral knowledge must move its student. How, I wonder, would any piece of knowledge, moral or otherwise, have an automatic effect on my behavior? Being told the medical theory of why I should eat my greens or how I should calculate a triangle's side-lengths moves me only in the sense that I understand what reasons there are for the recommended action. I might then *take* the advertised reason as my reason to do what the theory recommends (Hlobil 2019; 2020), in the appropriate circumstances and weighted against other reasons. This holds true for any kind of knowledge, including knowledge of right and wrong. Moral knowledge thus makes me act (or fails to do so) in exactly the same way other knowledge does; I cannot see why it would come with a special causal nexus (as proposed by Rödl, on p. 5 above), why I would need to possess it as “practical knowledge” (and what that is), whereas the same is not required for medical or mathematical knowledge. The philosophical push for a practicality requirement seems to rest on a false general understanding of how knowledge relates to motivation.

We can thus conclude that the practicality requirement is ill-motivated and probably superfluous. As a last step, let me point out two further problems with the practicality requirement that, I suspect, ultimately stem from the same source as those discussed. One is the requirement's “Platonic implication” that people who act badly simply lack knowledge an expert could provide (Williams 1993, p. 205). To assume “that a justification of the ethical would be a force” (Williams 1985, p. 26) thus has the unwelcome side effect of casting plagiarism, sexual harassment, etc. as effects of an unfortunate lack of information.

My other worry is that the requirement more generally misunderstands how normative ethics relates to deliberations about individual actions. If you have taught so-called “applied ethics” to philosophy beginners, you will know that the surest way to make it useless is to do one week each for the major views in normative ethics and then spend another week each trying to figure out what Aristotle, Kant, Bentham etc. would say on abortion, climate change, capital taxation etc. Instead, a philosophical approach to these topics asks questions such as what moral concepts are relevant to the topic (‘rights?’ ‘consequences?’ ‘innocence?’ ‘rationality?’), what general principles this-or-that position advanced in public discourse implies, or whether money and human lives are commensurate values. Knowing Aristotle can help you answer these, but mostly in that you know how to systematically deliberate about such questions, what the relevant concepts and choices are, what commitments you take on board if you subscribe to this-and-that



type of theory, etc. There will rarely be occasion to axiomatically deduce from Aristotelian first principles or to “apply” Aristotle, in the sense in which I apply my knowledge of the local traffic rules each time I drive. The idea that I apply general theories here is akin to the idea mentioned at the outset (p. 2), that I apply Peano’s Axioms when I do my tax return. I am not quite sure, though, what exactly the problem is here. Perhaps it generally is false to think of applied areas of a discipline as applying of claims from its foundational areas. Perhaps the problem is that ethics is not a *techné*.

In any case, the demand that ethics be practical reveals a misunderstanding both of how normative ethics relates to motivation and how it relates to individual actions. Neither can normative ethics be practical in the sense demanded nor is there reason it should be.

## 9 Conclusion

There is a common demand that moral theory be ‘practical’, voiced both in- and outside of philosophy. Neo-Humeans, Kantian constitutivists and Aristotelian naturalists have all advocated the idea that my knowledge that I ought to do something must lead me to actually do it—an idea sometimes called the “practicality requirement” for moral theory. Some university administrators apply this in practice, when they force students who violate the code of conduct to complete classes in moral theory, hoping that the knowledge obtained there would lead the student not to reoffend. I have argue that no plausible version of this requirement has yet been presented, focusing on the recent Aristotelian discussion, and I have attempted to give principled reasons for why there might never be one and why none is necessary.

I began with a formal version of the practicality requirement and reviewed recent proposals to substantiate it. The first kind of proposal attempts to make that which justifies the action part of the content of any sound practical inference concluding in that action. I rejected this as leading into a regress and as confusing the justification of a practice with that of an individual action. The second kind of proposal attempts to make an understanding of that which justifies the action part of the act of inferring. This is then spelled out either in terms of metaphysical or of epistemic grounding. Both versions are cognitively too demanding of the agent and are vulnerable to counterexamples. As a last step, I provided some general reasons to reject the practicality requirement. An inseparable tie between knowledge and motivation, I argued, is as implausible as it is unnecessary.

## Works cited

- Anscombe, E. 1981b. Rules, rights and promises. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, 97–103. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Anscombe, E. 1981a. The first person. In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, 21–36. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Anscombe, E., 2000. *Intention*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Anscombe, E. 2005a. Does Oxford moral philosophy corrupt youth? In *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. Gormally, L. & Geach, M., 151–157. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Anscombe, E. 2005b. Practical inference. In *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. Gormally, L. & Geach, M., 109–147. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Aquinas, T., 1884. *Summa theologiae*. Rome: Forzani et Sodalibus.
- Aristotle, 2000. *The Nichomachean Ethics*, ed. Crisp, R. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, L. 1895. What the tortoise said to Achilles. *Mind* 4: 278–280.
- Copp, D. and Sobel, D. 2004. Morality and virtue: An assessment of some recent work in virtue ethics. *Ethics* 114: 514–554.
- De Anna, G. 2020. Normativity, volitional capacities, and rationality as a form of life. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46: 152–161.
- Enoch, D. 2006. Agency, shmagency: Why normativity won't come from what is constitutive of action. *Philosophical Review* 115: 169–198.
- Foot, P., 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frey, J. 2018. How to be an ethical naturalist. In *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, ed. Hacker-Wright, J., 47–84. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Geach, P. 1965. Assertion. *The Philosophical Review* 74: 449–465.
- Geach, P. T. 1960. Ascriptivism. *The Philosophical Review* 69: 221–225.
- Haase, M. 2018. Practically self-conscious life. In *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, ed. Hacker-Wright, J., 85–126. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hacker-Wright, J. 2012. Ethical naturalism and the constitution of agency. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 46: 13–23.
- Hlobil, U. 2015. There are diachronic norms of rationality. *Thought* 4: 38–45.
- Hlobil, U. 2019. Inferring by attaching force. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97: 701–714.
- Hlobil, U. 2020. Why you cannot make people better by telling them what is good. *European Journal of Philosophy* 28: 986–996.
- Hlobil, U. and Nieswandt, K. 2019. Foot without Achilles' heel. *Philosophia* 47: 1501–1515.
- Hume, D. 2000. *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, ed. Norton, D. & Norton, M. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. 1903. Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten. In *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. the Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 385–463. Berlin: Reimer.
- Kant, I. 1909. Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. In *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. the Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1–164. Berlin: Reimer.
- Kenny, A. 1966. Practical inference. *Analysis* 26: 65–75.

- Kietzmann, C. 2015. Lebensform und praktisches Denken. In *Lebensform und Praxisform*, ed. Kertscher, J. & Müller, J., 53–75. Münster: Mentis.
- Kolodny, N. 2005. Why be rational?. *Mind* 114: 509–563.
- Korsgaard, C., 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, S., 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, D. 1996. Desire as Belief II. *Mind* 105: 303–313.
- Lott, M. 2012. Moral virtue as knowledge of human form. *Social Theory and Practice* 38: 407–431.
- Müller, A. 1979. How theoretical is practical reasoning? In *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honor of G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Anscombe, E.; Diamond, C. & Teichman, J., 91–108. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Müller, A. 1994. Has moral education a rational basis?. In *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. Gormally, L., 203–225. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Müller, A., 1998. *Was taugt die Tugend? Elemente einer Ethik des guten Lebens*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Müller, A., 2008. *Produktion oder Praxis? Philosophie des Handelns am Beispiel der Erziehung*. Stuttgart: Ontos.
- Müller, A. 2018. 'Why should I?' Can Foot convince the sceptic?. In *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, ed. Hacker-Wright, J., 151–185. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nieswandt, K. 2018. What is conventionalism about moral rights and duties?. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 97: 15–28.
- Rödl, S., 2007. *Self-Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, M., 1994. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stocker, M. 1976. The schizophrenia of modern ethical theories. *Journal of Philosophy* 73: 453–466.
- Tarski, A. 1936. Über den Begriff der logischen Folgerung. In *Actes du Congrès International de Philosophie Scientifique*, 1–11. Paris: Hermann et Cie.
- Thompson, M. 2004. Apprehending human form. In *Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. O'Hear, A. & Chappell, T., 47–74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, M. (2008): The representation of life. In: *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*, 25–82. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, M. 2013. Forms of nature. In *Freiheit*, ed. Hindrichs, G. & Honneth, A., 701–735. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Thomson, J. J. 1971. A defense of abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1: 47-66.
- Valaris, M. 2016. What the tortoise has to say about diachronic rationality. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98: 293–307.
- Williams, B., 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. (1993): *Who needs ethical knowledge?*. In: *Making Sense of Humanity*, 203–212. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1984. Über Gewissheit. In *Werkausgabe*, ed. Anscombe, E.; von Wright, G. & Schulte, J. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.