Foot without Achilles' Heel

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Abstract: It is often assumed that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics postulates an obligation to be a good human being and that it derives further obligations from this idea. The paper argues that this assumption is false, at least for Philippa Foot's view. Our argument blocks a widespread objection to Foot's view, and it shows how virtue ethics in general can neutralize such worries.

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1 Introduction

It can seem that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has a ready answer to the question "Why should I be moral?" namely: "You cannot be happy – i.e. flourish, i.e. be a non-defective human being – without being moral." That view provokes the reply: "Why should I care about being a non-defective human being? That virtue will make me 'happy' – in the rather artificial sense of 'non-defective' – doesn't answer my initial question." In this paper, we want to show that this reply is the result of a misunderstanding. In order to fix ideas, we take a concrete representative of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, namely Philippa Foot.

Here is the plan: We start by describing the kind of interpretation that we will argue leads to a misunderstanding (section 2). We then explain how this misinterpretation leads to a widespread criticism of Foot's view (section 3). Next, we show that this interpretation is indeed a misinterpretation (section 4). In section 5, we explain why Foot's view does not fall prey to the criticism presented in section 3. Finally, in section 6, we respond to a version of the criticism that is closer to home for neo-Aristotelians, namely the worry that merely natural facts cannot be rationally normative.

2 A Misinterpretation of Foot

Someone might think that in *Natural Goodness* Philippa Foot is defending a view like the following: There is nothing which is good (period), but only things which are good things of their kind . Hence, everything has to be evaluated *as the thing it is*. In particular, living beings can only be evaluated as members of their species. A good living being is one of which the teleologically related Aristotelian categoricals that describe its species (henceforth "life-form description") are true . Therefore, a good human being is a being of which the life-form description of the human species is true. However, "to speak of a good person is to speak of an individual not in respect of his body, or of faculties such as sight and memory, but as concerns his rational will" . A "good person" is a human being of which those parts of the life-form description that refer to the rational will are true. Now, we ought to be good human beings. Therefore, we ought to act like a human being with a good rational will – as measured by the human life-form description – would act. A human being whose rational will conforms to the human life-form description wants what is good for humans. Something is good for humans iff it promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form. Therefore, we ought to aim at whatever promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form.

According to this reading, Foot is committed to the following three theses:

(a) Everything has to be evaluated *as* the kind of thing it is.

(b) We ought to be good human beings.

(c) We ought to aim at, i.e. be motivated by, whatever promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form.

Allyn Fives, e.g., seems to understand Foot in this way when he attributes to her the following view: "[W]hat a person should do all things considered is that which he or she should do because human good hangs on it. Foot's argument is that human good provides the grounds of rational deliberation" .

3 A Problem Arising from the Misinterpretation

If the interpretation we sketched above were correct, a problem for Foot's view would immediately arise, namely "why I should especially care about being a good human" . Why ought we desire or be rationally required to be good human beings? David Copp and David Sobel claim that these questions pose a crucial problem for a view like Foot's. And Amy Lara writes:

> If someone who lacks all virtuous motivations can still fully grasp why human beings need the virtues, then clearly that knowledge of why the virtues are virtues is not necessarily motivating. It is worth considering what motivating reason we can give to such a person to cultivate the virtues. To fill in this motivational gap, virtue theorists […] are going to have to appeal to further values. Either they will have to say that it is a good thing that flourishing human beings exist, and thus there is a consequentialist reason for any individual to develop the virtues, or they will have to say that individuals are under a moral requirement to become good human beings, and then there will be a deontological reason to develop the virtues.

Thus, critics claim that Foot can provide no argument for her theses (b) and (c). The only reason Foot gives for these claims seem to depend on the truth of (a). However, (a) itself is

implausible. Even if we grant that there are things that have an internal standard of evaluation (e.g. a function in the case of artifacts), it does not follow that a thing ought to be in accordance with its internal standard of evaluation. It certainly seems coherent to say: "All these land mines are defective, and this is how they should be." So why ought humans to live in accordance with their life-form?

The source of the problem seems all too obvious: Foot wants to derive moral norms from natural teleology. Natural teleology does not have any genuinely normative import. For we can coherently judge that certain animals ought not to flourish, e.g. mosquitoes or dangerous bacteria. Hence, Foot has to smuggle in the required normativity somehow. She seems to do so by trading on the ambiguity of "good." She derives her claims in such a way that "good human being" can only mean "human being of whom the human life-form description is true," but she goes on as if "good human being" meant "human being such that everyone ought to be like her."

4 Why is the Interpretation Incorrect?

The interpretation under consideration has some obvious problems: (i) Foot herself mentions the problem to which it leads several times, and she evidently thinks that she can answer these worries. She writes: "What does it matter to me what species I belong to?" . (ii) The only role that Foot's treatment of practical rationality can play, according to this interpretation, is to delineate the morally relevant aspects of the human life-form, and consequently the morally relevant properties of a human being. This seems strange, given the space that she devotes to the treatment of practical rationality. (iii) Foot nowhere claims that we ought to aim at being good human beings. (vi) Foot explicitly allows for the possibility of evaluating a living being by standards which are not given by its life-form: "[W]e also ascribe this secondary goodness to living things, for instance, to specimens of plants that grow as we want them to grow, or to horses that carry us as we want to be carried" . Hence, Foot does not hold thesis (a). (v) Why would Foot need to talk about

virtues at length, if she held the view in question? She says that those "who possess these virtues possess them in so far as they recognize certain considerations […] as powerful […] reasons for acting" . If, however, we act well just in case we aim at whatever promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form, then there seems to be no necessity to talk about particular character traits. After all, once we know what promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form, we know everything we need to know in order to act well. Why should we care about how one can describe the characters of those who are disposed to act well? At most, the inference patterns corresponding to particular virtues could be useful rules of thumb, and the connection between them and flourishing would anyway be a topic for empirical investigation. These considerations should give everybody pause who thinks that the reading we presented in Section 2 is correct.

Let us contrast the interpretation sketched above with what we take to be the correct reading. Foot holds that if a certain fact, say *p*, is a conclusive reason for an agent *A* to φ, then the question whether *A* should φ is conclusively answered by saying "Yes, because *p*." For instance, if the fact that *NN* helped me to get a job is a conclusive reason to express my gratitude, and *NN* really did help me to get a job, then I should express my gratitude. Or: If the fact that bringing my car to the garage will restore its proper functioning is a conclusive reason for me to bring the car to the garage and if bringing the car to the garage will indeed have those effects, then the question whether I should bring the car to the garage is settled.[1] In general, if *p* is a conclusive reason for *A* to φ, and it has been settled that *p*, then it has been settled that *A* should φ . The same holds in the case of theoretical reasoning: If *p* entails *q*, and it has been settled that *p*, then it has been settled that *q*. There are no further reasons one must appeal to in order to settle that *A* should φ or that *q* is true. There might be other independent reasons leading to the same conclusions, but there is no reason missing in the cases we described.

[1]There are complicated problems here arising from the defeasible (non-monotonic) character of practical reasoning, but these are problems for every meta-ethical theory and there is no reason to think that Foot's account is worse off here than other theories.

There is, of course, another question one might ask, namely: Why is it true that *p* is a conclusive reason for *A* to φ? This is the kind of question that Foot wants to answer . It is important to see that this is a *different* question. Anselm Müller summarizes Foot's answer to that question as follows:

> Good reasons are the ones that have to be acted on where a society of human beings is to get on well […]. [This] provides us with *something like* a criterion for answering the question: Is *R* a good reason for Φ-ing?

Of course, in *Natural Goodness*, Foot is not concerned with moral epistemology. She does not want to tell us how we can find out whether some fact is a conclusive reason for some particular action. Rather, she wants to tell us what is necessarily true if certain facts are conclusive reasons for a particular action.

A's not knowing the answer to the question of why *p* is a reason for *A* to φ in no way undermines *A*'s justification if *A* φ's on the grounds that *p*. Just as the inability to prove the validity of a theoretical inference does not undermine one's justification for believing the conclusion as a result of drawing that inference. In particular, if the reason why *p* is a conclusive reason for *A* to φ is *L*, then *L* is typically *not* (or at least need not be)[2] a reason for *A* to φ. If, at this point, some agent goes on asking and says "I know that *p* is a conclusive reason for me to φ because *L*. But I do not care whether *p* is a reason for me to φ, so why should I φ?", it is not clear what she is asking.

[2]If *L* is indeed a reason for *A* to φ, then we might, of course, still ask why it is true that *L* is a reason for *A* to φ. If, however, we think that *L* itself must be among the reasons for *A* to φ whenever *L* is the reason why *p* is a reason for *A* to φ, then we embark on an infinite regress of the same broad type as Achilles in Lewis Carroll's famous paper .

> To ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must a priori have come to an end. And if he [the skeptic] goes on saying 'But why should I?', we may query the meaning of this 'should'. No doubt what our sceptic […] really means to insist is that we have not been able, in anything we have said, to touch his desires […]. But the fact that we might hunt around for something that has a chance of affecting his actions should not be taken as giving any support to a philosophy that takes practical reasoning to encompass only reasons of that kind.

Foot appeals to the human life-form in order to tell us what it means that certain facts are reasons to perform certain actions. Hence, considerations regarding the human life-form occur in the place of *L* in the previous paragraph. It follows that Foot need not hold that considerations regarding the human life-form give any individual a reason to perform any particular action. Foot can be agnostic about whether and under what circumstances such considerations are conclusive reasons for someone to perform some action.

> The question is not whether we have reason to aim at being good human beings, but rather whether we have reason to aim at those things at which a good human being must aim, as for instance good rather than harm to others, or keeping faith.

From this it is clear that Foot does not hold thesis (c), i.e., the claim that we ought to aim at (i.e., be motivated by) whatever promotes a life in accordance with the human life-form.

Is Foot committed to the truth of thesis (b), i.e., the thesis that we ought to be good human beings? That depends on how we read thesis (b). If we understand the "ought" in thesis (b) in the way we understand the "ought" in "Mosquitoes ought to have mouthpieces suitable for sucking blood," then Foot endorses thesis (b).[3] If we understand the "ought" as the "ought" of practical deliberation, then Foot is not committed to the truth of (b). The latter is true even if we understand (b) as claiming that we must be motivated by things that in fact promote a life in accordance with the human life-form (perhaps not under that description).

[3]Understood in this way thesis (b) follows immediately from "We are humans."

And the same goes for (c). After all, it may happen that humans must be motivated by things that do not promote a life in accordance with the human life-form "where a society of human beings is to get on well," as Müller puts it.

5 Why the Apparent Problem Does Not Arise

So the simple answer to the question "why I should especially care about being a good human?" is that Foot's account does not imply that anyone should care about being a good human being. Similarly, Fives is wrong in holding that "Foot's argument is that human good provides the grounds of rational deliberation" . Nothing in Foot's view rules out the possibility that human evil provides the grounds of rational deliberation, e.g.: "He killed my brother. Such-and-such is bad for humans. Therefore, I shall make him suffer such-and-such." Whether or not this deliberation is rational will depend on considerations that are quite independent from any "human good providing the grounds of rational deliberation." Lara complains that there is a "motivational gap" which Foot's theory cannot bridge, and that, therefore, Foot has to give either a consequentialist or a deontological argument for the conclusion that we ought to be good human beings. This is mistaken in two ways: First, Foot does not need the premise that we ought to be good human beings. Second, Foot holds that it does not speak against a moral theory that even people who have grasped the theory may not be motivated to act morally . Everyone who thinks that Foot is wrong about this should reflect on the fact that people who are not motivated to act morally are irrational according to Foot. (On this point, Foot agrees with Kant.) Insofar as people are sometimes knowingly motivated to act irrationally, an account of the standards of practical reasoning cannot be challenged by pointing out that it does not provide the resources to change the motivational state of everyone who happens to be motivated to act irrationally.

We can now see that the apparent problem that Foot does not give any reason why we ought to be good human beings arises from the assumption that Foot is committed to (b) and (c). Foot's critics confuse the giving of reasons for acting with the determination of the standard

of practical reasoning. Given this distinction, the problem described in Section 3 does not arise for Foot's view. Foot does not claim that the human life-form or the fact that an action would promote a life in accordance with the human life-form is a reason to perform the action or a reason to be moral. Rather, Foot holds that the human life-form sets the standard of what is good practical reasoning and, hence, what is a reason to do what. The question "Why should I be a good human being?" simply does not arise.

The reader may be worried that we missed a deeper worry behind the critics' objection. We will turn to this worry in the next section. Before we do so, however, another worry needs to be addressed. An opponent might object that if agent *A* knows that *p* is a conclusive reason to φ and knows that *p* is the case, then *A* can φ on the grounds that: *p*, and *p* is a conclusive reason to φ. Now, if Foot holds that *p* is a conclusive reason to φ iff humans have to φ on the grounds that *p* where a society of human beings is to get on well, then such a 'disquotational practical inference' involves taking "humans have to φ on the grounds that *p* where a society of human beings is to get on well" as one's reason to φ. Hence, we ought to be motivated by the prospect of the members of our society living a life in accordance with the human life-form.

This objection fails for two reasons: (1) "*p* is a conclusive reason to φ" is a hyper-intensional context.[4] Hence, from the truth of "necessarily, *p* iff *q*" and the truth of "*p* is a conclusive reason to φ" one cannot infer "*q* is a conclusive reason to φ." Therefore, if Foots theory implies that "*p*, and *p* is a conclusive reason to φ" is a conclusive reason to φ, and if Foot holds that (necessarily) *p* is a conclusive reason to φ iff humans have to φ on the grounds that *p* where a society of human beings is to get on well, one cannot infer that Foot's theory implies that "*p*, and humans have to φ on the grounds that *p* where a society of human beings is to get on well" is a conclusive reason to φ. (2) The truth of a belief is independent of the inference that may have brought one to hold the belief. However, the

[4]This hyper-intensionality comes out clearly in the theoretical case. "That H_2O is water is a conclusive reason to believe that the water in my glass is H_2O" is true, but "That water is water is a conclusive reason to believe that the water in my glass is H_2O" is false, even though water is necessarily H_2O.

goodness of an action is not independent of the practical inference that brought one to perform the action. Therefore, it is unclear whether, and under which circumstances, 'disquotational practical inferences' are good inferences (even provided that their premises are true).

What we said so far strikes us as an effective response to the criticism voiced by Lara, Fives, and Copp and Sobel. Once we distinguish between reasons for action and reasons why something is a good reason to perform an action, the criticism is neutralized. An opponent might grant this but still hold that these external critics and the reply to them bypasses a deeper problem with neo-Aristotelean ethical naturalism. This alleged deeper problem comes into view once we ask whether the human life-form could set the standard of practical reasoning. Some philosophers hold that merely natural facts cannot have the rational authority to determine what is a reason for what. They ask: Why think that human nature can determine which actions are good? It is to this criticism that we now turn.

6 Nothing Rationally Normative from Something Merely Natural?

Sometimes, a version of the objection that is our topic is formulated by authors who are inspired by Kant and also sympathetic to some aspects of neo-Aristotelianism (e.g. John McDowell and Matthias Haase). These critics doubt that the standards of practical reasoning can be determined by the human life-form. They ask: How can merely natural facts about human nature have the normative authority to determine what is a reason for what?[5]

In this last section, we shall distinguish different versions of this objection and argue that, if we keep the distinction between reasons to act and reasons for why something is a good reason to act firmly in place, the worry dissolves just as in the previous sections.[6]

[5]Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

[6]Hence, our response is different from some previous neo-Aristotelian, e.g., by Micah Lott and Jennifer Frey .

6.1 The Objection: Nature Cannot Determine Standards of Reasoning

McDowell's version of the worry proceeds from the idea that, as rational creatures, we can and should step back and ask ourselves whether the standards set by the human life-form deserve our approval.

> Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species we belong to; it also enables and even *obliges us to step back* from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question.
> With the onset of reason, then, the nature of the species abdicates from a previously unquestionable authority over the behaviour of the individual animal. *We are supposed to be looking for a grounding for* the genuineness of *the demands* that virtue purports to make on reason, and while the search is on we may not appeal to those demands.

Lott puts the point thus:

> [I]f moral judgments embody the requirements of our human nature, then the authority of morality is derived from something given to reason *from 'outside'*—i.e. from our human nature. Thus it is not reason that is ultimately determining what counts as acting well, but our human nature. And why, the challenge asks, should we suppose that our nature, a product of evolution, should have rational authority over us, once we ask for reasons about how to live and act?

Similarly, Haase complains that if practical reasoning is understood as just another vital power whose standard is set by the human life-form, then the method for establishing which pieces of practical reasoning are good would have to be "an empirical investigation." He then repeats McDowell's point that, on Foot's view, ethical norms "seem to be grounded in facts about humans that come to our practical thought, as it were, *'from the outside'*" and that this will always put us in a position to step back and ask "Why should I do what humans do?" . The worry is that the natural norms that Foot describes cannot be apprehended by us in the right way from within the perspective of practical reasoning.

> Under the assumption that [the theory] abstracts from what is distinctive of us as practical rational animals [namely self-conscious rational thought], the respective theory of natural normativity can't be, to use Anscombe's phrase, "from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice."

Even some authors who defend Foot think that this points to a potential difficulty with Foot's view. Jennifer Frey , e.g., is worried that Foot's view is vulnerable to the following objection:

> 1. Moral judgments must be practical judgments, essentially such as to produce or prevent voluntary action.
> 2. Judgments of natural goodness do not have the function of producing or preventing voluntary actions.
> 3. So, judgments of natural goodness are not moral judgments or *practical* judgments.
> 4. Only moral or practical judgments are relevant to moral *theory*.
> 5. Therefore, judgments of natural goodness are irrelevant to moral theory.

The idea expressed by all four authors is that morality has rational authority over us, and this authority must be given to practical reason not "from the 'outside'," but 'from within' practical reason itself. It cannot be derived from something that is external to reason and certainly not from something contingent, such as natural facts about biology and evolution. Such facts cannot bear on deliberation and choice in the right way. Human beings can and should step back and ask: Do we really have good reasons to accept the standards of practical reasoning (allegedly) set by the human life-form? Why should we follow the putative rules issued by human nature—especially given that we seem to know human nature at least partly by empirical investigation?[7]

[7]A standard view here is that natural facts (which can be about human nature or about other natural things) are not the kind of thing that can justify or ground genuine norms. One version of this complaint says that natural facts and normative facts are "just too different" for the latter to be explicable by, analyzable in terms of or grounded in the former. Discussing this general worry here would lead us too far afield. Hille Paakunainen gives a helpful overview of that debate and convincing reasons to think that normative naturalism has ample room to maneuver in that debate.

These questions, the opponent continues, must be answered in an *a priori* fashion. The drawing or acceptance of a practical inference must contain an apprehension of the standards of practical reasoning, and these standards must be recognized as necessary because already contained in any act of reasoning. Appealing to an external standard would merely postpone the question until we step back from this further standard, which we must do eventually if we are rational.

In essence, Foot's critics have two worries: (A) that the standard of practical reasoning that Foot proposes is *external* to practical reasoning and (B) that this standard is *contingent*. We shall address these two worries in Sections 6.2 and 6.3 respectively.

Before we proceed, however, we briefly want to flag a potential source of confusion. Sometimes the above worry is illustrated with examples such as the following case by Foot: Perhaps the rules of dueling say that the fact that the other party has fired a shot is a reason to fire back. As rational agents, however, we can and should step back and ask: Do the rules of dueling have the rational authority to determine what is a good reason for me to fire at another person? Or should one perhaps reject the whole practice of dueling as foolish and irrational? Why care about the rules of dueling? Why, the opponent asks, should the standards of human nature be any different?

Such illustrations are, however, misleading because the two cases are not sufficiently analogous. Individual actions that happen within a practice like dueling—say, firing—are moves within a 'game'. We can either accept the rules of the game and ask for a justification of the move (firing), or we can ask for a justification of the game itself (dueling). What is demanded in the latter case, however, is different from what is at stake in the current debate. We are not asking for the justification of a particular 'game'; we are asking for the justification of the very standard of justifications for any action (viz. standards of practical reasoning). It is misleading to compare standards of practical reasoning to the rules of a social practice. Following the rules of a social practice is something we do (or at

least can do) intentionally and voluntarily; we cannot follow standards of practical reasoning intentionally or voluntarily (see R1.c below).

6.2 Response A: Why a Standard of Reasoning May Be External

Let us start with the demand that a standard of practical reasoning must be internal to practical reasoning. At least three arguments speak against this.

(I) Epistemologists and logicians disagree about whether we can comprehend the basic rules of good theoretical reasoning as binding for us 'from within' the perspective of theoretical reason alone, i.e. *a priori*. However, there is little agreement on whether that is possible and, if so, how . This disagreement, however, does not undermine the genuine normative authority that the rules of good theoretical reasoning have over us. It is hence unclear why we should accept this demand for practical reasoning.

(II) A requirement to always step back seems to be much too demanding. Must a person who draws a good mathematical inference, e.g., really be conscious of (or at least be able to become conscious of) the reasons why her inference is good? In what sense? Must she, e.g., be able to prove the validity of her inference? Or must she be able to specify where she learned this inference pattern and why the source seemed trustworthy? Any of these requirements seems too demanding. So why should analogous requirements be in force for practical reasoning?

(III) Finally, our main point is this: The McDowellian worry fails to make the distinction for which we have argued in Sections 4 and 5. More precisely, it fails to distinguish between, on the one hand, stepping back to ask for reasons for an action and, on the other hand, stepping back to ask for reasons to believe that something is a reason for that action. Either of these readings, however, undermines the worry. Let us label these two readings (R1) and (R2) and take them in turn.

(*ad* R1) The first reading says that we must step back from our reasons for action and ask for further reasons for the action. This reading runs into at least three problems:

(R1.a) *Infinite Regress 1:* Suppose there is a standard according to which *p* is a reason to φ. If that standard is correct, then *p* is a sufficient reason to φ. If we always need some further reason, *z*, to φ, which we acquire by stepping back, then no standard that we could check by stepping back can ever be found satisfactory by checking. After all, it will always have left out a further reason *z*.[8]

(R1.b) *Infinite Regress 2:* Suppose that a standard according to which *p* is a reason to φ has genuine rational authority only if we can step back and thereby acquire a further reason to φ or a reason to bring it about that we φ for the reason that *p*. Whether these further reasons are good reasons must be determined by some standard for good practical reasoning. But, according to Foot, the only standard of practical reasoning is the one set by the human life-form. So we would need to step back again, thus launching us on an infinite regress.

Perhaps the opponent would object that there is another standard of good practical reasoning, and that this standard can be comprehended as binding 'from within' the perspective of practical reason alone. That leads to a stalemate. The opponent is assuming the availability of a standard that Foot is explicitly denying. To assume that there is a standard of practical reasoning that is independent of the human life-form and can be comprehended as binding 'from within' the perspective of practical reason is question-begging at this point.

(R1.c) *Non-Intentionality of Reasoning:* Finally, φ-ing for the reason that *p* is not something about which we can deliberate "from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice." It is not something that we can choose to do; it is not an intentional action. At most, we can bring it about that we φ for the reason that *p* by what Hieronymi calls

[8]This is a version of the regress Lewis Carroll describes in .

"managerial control." Perhaps this is clearest in the case of practical reasoning . The drawing of a practical inference cannot be the conclusion of another practical inference. If it were, we could infer at will and, hence, intend at will. Whether we have a reason to do something that will bring it about that we φ for the reason that *p* is a question about how we best manage ourselves. Perhaps we will one day be able to take a pill that will make us φ for the reason that *p*. But whether or not we have a reason to take that pill should not be relevant for whether *p* is a reason to φ. (Perhaps someone offers us a lot of money to φ for the reason that *p*, or φ-ing for the reason that *p* is only worth doing if it is not the effect of a pill, etc.)

For these reasons the McDowellian worry fails if it is interpreted as requiring us to step back in order to ask for further reason for acting, i.e. under reading (R1).

(*ad* R2) Let us now turn to the second reading, (R2). According to this reading, we must step back from our reasons for action and ask for reasons to believe that these are indeed reasons to carry out the action. The worry is that Foot's theory cannot provide an answer at this point because our knowledge of human nature is not *a priori*, i.e., it is 'external' to the perspective of theoretical reason alone. So let's suppose that what we want when we step back from the standard provided by the human life-form is a reason to believe that those things that the life-form deems reasons to φ are indeed reasons to φ. That view is closer to how Foot herself thinks about what she is doing. She writes:

> It will be useful to begin by speaking about reason in general under the following headings:
>
> (A) Reasons for acting, which we may call practical reasons.
>
> (B) Reasons for believing, which we may call evidential or demonstrative reasons.
>
> As philosophers, and therefore theoreticians, our job is of course to give the second type of reason […]. But among these many 'philosophical' subjects we find that of the nature of practical reasons, and in this special case we shall have to give reasons of type B for theses about reasons of type A.

Foot thinks of her theory of natural goodness as providing us with theoretical reasons to believe theoretical claims about what is a practical reason to perform certain actions. These claims are not meant to be understandable as binding on us from within the perspective of practical reason. Rather, they are claims *about* good practical reasoning, meant to be understood by theoreticians in theorizing. Individual agents do not need to engage in ethical theorizing to act well, nor is it necessary to assume that such theorizing will make you a better person. Do studious readers of Foot (or whoever else holds the correct ethical theory) emerge as better agents from her book? Probably not. In the terms of Frey's argument above, we think that Foot accepts Proposition 3 but rejects Proposition 4 of that argument; i.e., life-form judgments are not practical or moral, but they are nevertheless important in moral theorizing.

Foot concedes that, in order to be rational, humans must have some grasp of the standards of practical reasoning and of why these are the way they are.

> [A] human being can and should understand that, and why, there is reason for, say, keeping a promise or behaving badly. This may seem a tall order, but this human understanding is not anything hard to come by. We all know enough to say, 'How could we get on without justice?'

However, this requirement is compatible with the idea that, in order to give satisfying theoretical reasons to believe that the human life-form sets the standard of human reasoning, one must appeal not merely to standards that can be comprehended as binding on us 'from within' the perspective of reason alone, i.e. *a priori*. Rather, we must also appeal to general facts about vital activities of living creatures and their evaluation. It is unclear why it should be problematic to appeal to such facts at this point. For, notice that when we give theoretical reasons for why *p* is a practical reason to φ, then we are not appealing to the standard of practical reasoning. Rather, we are appealing to whatever it is that fixes the standard of practical reasoning. Thus, we are not violating McDowell's injunction that "we may not appeal to [the] demands" that "virtue purports to make on reason" . It is unclear why we

should not appeal to the human life-form "while the search is on" if we are asking for a theoretical explanation of why the standard of practical reasoning is such-and-such. Plausibly, the only restriction on such an explanation is that it should be true.

Moreover, even if it should be the case that demands of practical reason can be known *a priori*, that does not imply that truths about what makes them demands of practical reason can be known *a priori*. You can have epistemic access to something without having epistemic access to its metaphysical explanation. Compare again the demands of theoretical reason. Perhaps we can grasp *a priori* (e.g. by rule-circular reasoning) that, given suitable circumstances etc., modus ponens inferences are good pieces of reasoning, and perhaps following the modus ponens rule in one's reasoning (to some extent) is constitutive of being a thinker. That does not imply that the fact that makes modus ponens inferences good reasoning can be known *a priori*. Sinan Dogramaci , e.g., argues that we must appeal to the positive effects of praising certain inference, which can only be known *a posteriori*, in order to explain what makes modus ponens inferences good reasoning. We disagree with Dogramaci, but the crucial point here is that Dogramaci's view cannot be refuted simply by showing that the standards of theoretical reasoning are *a priori*. Similarly, the neo-Aristotelian may grant, for the sake of the argument, that the standards of practical reasoning are *a priori* and still hold on to the claim that human nature sets those standards and cannot be grasped *a priori*.

Thus, the neo-Aristotelian is within her rights to appeal to human nature in giving theoretical reasons for why certain considerations are good practical reasons for certain actions. Consequently, she may reject the (Kantian) thought that a theoretical account of what fixes the standards of practical reasoning cannot appeal to anything natural or anything known merely *a posteriori*. In fact, the neo-Aristotelian can do that while acknowledging that if *p* is a practical reason to φ, then this necessarily holds for all human beings and does so independently of the wishes and inclinations of those beings.

At this point, our opponent might press the epistemological worry further and ask (with an incredulous stare): Are we really saying that one can find out what is ethically good behavior by empirical investigation of the human life-form? *Natural Goodness* does not provide a moral epistemology. We can, however, draw on what we said above here. Any plausible description of human flourishing must include a description of human practical rationality. We cannot identify flourishing humans, in order to study their life-form, without already knowing something about what is good practical reasoning. This limits the role empirical investigations can play in moral theory.

A Neo-Aristotelian should say here, we think, that the kind of knowledge of what is practically rational that we all possess and that is required to even begin to think about and investigate flourishing human beings is acquired by moral education, which crucially involves habituation. And the rational basis for this kind of education is probably very limited . If we already possess the right upbringing, we may be able to further our ethical knowledge by empirical investigation of human nature. But the role such investigations can play will always be limited by the fact that we cannot engage in them without already possessing a good deal of knowledge about what is a good reason to do what. Philosophers like McDowell and Haase seem to suggest that there is something deeply problematic about this view. We disagree, and we find it extremely plausible that empirical knowledge of human nature can play an important role in moral theory. Why not think, for instance, that empirical knowledge about the emotional and social needs of human beings should be taken into account by moral theory?

6.3 Response B: Why a Standard of Reasoning May Be Contingent

At this point, the opponent might modify her claim: The opponent might admit that what fixes the standard of practical reasoning need not be knowable from 'within the perspective of practical reasoning.' However, the opponent might still insist that the standard of practical reasoning cannot be contingent and, hence, cannot be fixed by contingent facts

about human nature. The opponent's idea is that something normative (such as reasons for action) can never be grounded in something non-normative and contingent (such as human nature).

To see why this objection fails, let's begin by noting that it would be a misreading of *Natural Goodness* to claim that Foot thinks of natural facts as non-normative. Foot believes that life-form judgments have immediate normative implications and are, in this sense, themselves normative. Regarding the latter point, she follows Michael Thompson , who argues that judgments such as "Human beings have thirty-two teeth" have a different kind of generality, namely one underwriting normative assessments, than judgments such as "All students in Intro Ethics forgot to bring their book today."

Now, a critic may point out that natural normativity is merely evaluative; i.e., it merely gives us a standard of defective versus non-defective. But there is nothing "full-bloodedly normative" about this kind of standard, to use one of David Enoch's terms. After all, it is not incoherent to say that all mosquitoes ought to be defective. And the fact that I cannot flourish in jail does not imply that I don't have good reason to turn myself in to the police if I committed a crime. So, the critic asks, how does the *evaluation* of human being as defective or non-defective, as measured by their nature, translate into *norms* for human actions?

The answer is that Foot connects evaluations of what is good in human beings with norms for how human beings should act via the concept of practical reason:[9]

[9] The combination of the two displayed claims is congenial to the so-called inferential account of permissibility, which says that an action is ethically permissible iff it could be the result of a good practical inference . In fact, we think that this is, at bottom, the same view because if there is no reason for you not to φ, then we think that this counts as a reason for you to φ. In other words, sometimes "I did it for no particular reason" suffices as a justification for an action; and if it doesn't, then this is because there was some reason for you not to perform the action.

Normative Reason: If *p* is a reason for me to φ (and *p* is not out-weighed and there is no equally strong reason to do something else), then I ought to φ.

Evaluation: The fact, F1, that *p* is a reason to φ is (or is constituted by, or grounded in)[10] the fact, F2, that *the piece of practical reasoning which has* p *as a premise and φ-ing as a conclusion is a non-defective exercise of practical reason*. F2 is determined by human nature.

Neo-Aristotelianism explains full-blooded normativity in terms of evaluative normativity as applied to practical reasoning.[11] In fact, this is the key move in *Natural Goodness*. Foot insists, in Chapter 4, that the capacity for practical reasoning – or the rational will or choice as she sometimes puts it – must be evaluated in the same way as other vital capacities are evaluated. "To determine what is goodness and what defect of […] choice, we must consider […] what kind of a living thing a human being is" . Thus, according to Foot, *p* is a full-bloodedly normative reason to φ (if it is) because it is a (merely) evaluative defect in choice to choose not to φ despite *p*. As Foot puts it, when we see someone's will (i.e. practical reasoning) as defective (i.e., as not living up to the natural normativity governing humans), then "we *therefore* say that he is doing what he has reason not to do" . Given that practical reasoning is not something that we can do intentionally, it is no problem that the norms governing practical reasoning are merely evaluative.[12]

Finally, let us note that the question of the contingency of human nature and morality in Foot's theory must be handled with care. According to Foot's view, it is necessary that the standard of human practical reasoning is as it is; this is because the standard is essential for the species. And insofar as we are all essentially and not accidentally human, it is necessary

[10] We do not need to come down on one of these disjuncts for our current purposes. So we stay non-committal.

[11] Here the neo-Aristotelian can adopt the so-called reasoning view of normative reasons .

[12] An opponent might, of course, disagree with the neo-Aristotelian explanation of full-blooded normativity in terms of natural normativity because she sees general problems with naturalistic accounts of normativity, but this would not be criticism that is specific to neo-Aristotelianism (see Footnote Error: Reference source not found).

for each of us that our practical reasoning is governed by that standard. What is contingent is that the human species evolved as it did. It was possible that a similar but different species, say human*, would evolve. If, and insofar as, we could be humans*, the standard that governs our practical reasoning could be different. But this does not undermine the authority of our reasons to determine what we ought to do (full-blooded normativity), and it does not undermine the claim that what those reasons are is determined by the natural norms fixed by human nature (merely evaluative normativity). Thus, the objection based on the contingency of human nature fails.

7 Conclusion

A full defense of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism is beyond the scope of this paper. We hope to have shown, however, that questions like "Why be a good human being?" or "Why care about the standards of practical reasoning (allegedly) set by the human life-form?" do not create problems for a view like Foot's. To neutralize the respective worries, we must be careful to distinguish between reasons for acting in a certain way and reasons why something is a reason for acting in a certain way.

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