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# The Promise and Limits of Natural Normativity in a Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

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# THE PROMISE AND LIMITS OF NATURAL NORMATIVITY IN A NEO-ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS

by

TIMOTHY J. CLEWELL

Under the Direction of Andrew Jason Cohen

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I distinguish between two conceptions of naturalism that have been offered as possible starting points for a virtue based ethics. The first version of naturalism is characterized by Philippa Foot's project in *Natural Goodness*. The second version of naturalism can be found, in various forms, among the works of John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, and Rosalind Hursthouse. I argue that neither naturalistic approach is entirely successful on its own, but that we can fruitfully carve a path between both approaches that points the way to a positive ethical account. I then conclude with a brief sketch of what such a positive account of a virtue ethics may look like.

INDEX WORDS: Philippa Foot, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, Rosalind Hursthouse, Aristotle, Virtue ethics, Naturalism.

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TIMOTHY J. CLEWELL

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Georgia State University

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# THE PROMISE AND LIMITS OF NATURAL NORMATIVITY IN A NEO-ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS

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May 2011

I dedicate this thesis to Natalie. Its existence would not have been possible without your unwavering love and support. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to each of my committee members for their guidance and comments. It is because of Dr. A.J. Cohen that I chose to take up the contemporary discussion of virtue ethics as the topic of my thesis. I found it to be a rewarding experience, and for this I owe him thanks. I cannot overstate Dr. O'Keefe's contribution to my growth as a student of philosophy. While my thesis is on a contemporary debate in ethics, it is grounded in my interest in ancient philosophy. Dr. O'Keefe has been instrumental in furthering my understanding and love of ancient philosophy through the numerous classes I have had the opportunity to take with him. In *Natural Goodness* Philippa Foot echoes Wittgenstein's idea that "in philosophy it is very difficult to work as slowly as one should." I cannot claim to have always met this challenge, but I would like to thank Dr. Berry for keeping my arguments in check when they were moving a little too quickly, both in my thesis and in my reading of Nietzsche. I would also like to thank Dr. Rand for teaching me Hegel. Although his influence is not explicit in my thesis, my time studying Hegel has had an immense impact on my understanding of ethical philosophy as well as my philosophical interests in general. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow graduate students at Georgia State for making my time here both enjoyable and challenging.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

CHAPTERS

**I. Introduction - Two Sorts of Naturalism, Revisited** 1

**II. Towards a Natural Foundation for Normativity** 4

**1. Introduction** 4

**2. Foot's Natural Normativity** 4

**3. Foot's Teleological Move** 8

**4. The Metaphysical Presupposition of Foot's Argument** 11

**5. The Teleological Move as it Pertains to Humans** 14

**6. Natural Normativity in Action** 17

**7. Rationality and the Problems it Poses to Natural Normativity** 20

**III. An Internal and Evaluative Naturalism Through Neurathian Reflection** 24

**1. Introduction** 24

**2. McDowell's Argument Against and External View of Natural Facts** 25

**3. Nussbaum's Internal and Evaluative, "Self-Validating," Arguments** 27

**4. McDowell and Nussbaum: The Same Sort of Naturalism** 34

**5. What Sort of Ethical Realism?** 37

**IV. Finding a Way Between the Horns of the Dilemma** 42

**1. First Nature vs. Second Nature** 42

**2. Hursthouse's Answer to the Dilemma** 44

**V. Conclusion – Towards an Ethical Realism** 49

**1. A Lived Conception of Humanity** 49

**2. A Precedent Found in Nussbaum** 51

**3. Conclusion** 54

REFERENCES 55

## Chapter I: Introduction - Two Sorts of Naturalism, Revisited

John McDowell, in his paper entitled "Two Sorts of Naturalism," distinguishes his version of a naturalized ethics from the version espoused by Philippa Foot. According to McDowell, Foot seeks to ground her ethics in a scientific realism that is wholly external to our own human perspective. In other words, Foot's ethical position is grounded in extra-ethical scientific facts, facts that do not require our understanding or knowledge in order for them to be true. McDowell counters this form of naturalism with his own version, which takes for its ground the internal and evaluative ethical perspective of the practically wise agent, or *phronemos*. Naturalism, as it is commonly understood, aligns most closely with Foot's project, and part of the task of this thesis will be to show how McDowell's project can be productively understood as a form of naturalism. The more important consideration, however, is which of these projects offers the most promising starting point for a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. It is the aim of this thesis to revisit the distinction that McDowell has introduced in order to investigate the promise found in both versions of naturalism as well as their respective limitations. For the most part my argument will be negative, pointing out what each respective theory cannot do. Ultimately, though, I see great promise for a naturalized virtue ethics and it is the goal of this thesis to point to what such a naturalized ethics must look like.

I begin my thesis with an account of Foot's version of a naturalized ethics. This account will follow closely the text of her most fully developed position as it is laid out in *Natural Goodness*. Part of my argument in this chapter hinges on what I take to be an unclear picture of nature and what sort of access we have to it in Foot's argument. I believe Foot's naturalism relies on a metaphysical realism in the form of natural kinds. If this is the case then her position can be criticized from two sides. First, a robust metaphysics is serving as an assumed premise in the rest

of her argument. While this is not a reason to reject her position outright, it does give us reason to expect an argument for such a metaphysics, an argument that she does not provide. This leaves her position incomplete, possibly irredeemably. Second, even if we allow the metaphysical premise, it is not clear that natural kinds can be used in the same way, or are as normatively illuminating, when the discussion shifts from plants and animals to humans.

While I take the above criticisms to be compelling reasons to call into question a large portion of Foot's argument, I believe there is still a great deal of promise in her project. Her book can still be useful in understanding how a theory of normative agency can be given if we have the sort of access to natural facts that Foot believes we do. In short, even if we reject Foot's stable, scientific version of natural human life, her account of rational agency still gives us a promising framework in which to understand moral actions otherwise grounded.

One may ask what other form of moral ground is open to us from which we could find Foot's depiction of moral agency useful? The answer, I suggest, following McDowell, is a form of moral realism that develops out of our already-acquired ethical perspective[1] when it undergoes a Neurathian-style evaluation. A description of such a process forms the third chapter of this thesis. In this chapter I will argue that McDowell and Martha Nussbaum give us an illuminating description of how we pre-theoretically undergo the process of moral development. However, both McDowell and Nussbaum want to claim that from this description of moral development, coupled with ethical reflection that takes place within the ethical framework itself,[2] a form of moral realism can be offered. I will argue that McDowell and Nussbaum have weakened ethical stability to an extent beyond which any reasonable conception of moral realism can be applied.

I do not see this as a fatal flaw in their argument, though—a point I will take up in the

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[1] This is an ethical perspective with which we are always already engaged. McDowell takes the stance that our pre-reflective ethical beliefs cannot simply be discounted in favor of some purely theoretical stance.
[2] What McDowell likens to Neurathian Reflection.

fourth chapter. I look to Rosalind Hursthouse as a philosopher who has recognized the limitations on both sides of the naturalism debate and has tried to find a way between them. Ultimately, I will argue, she falls into a similar trap as McDowell and Nussbaum; however, the attempt she makes points in the correct direction. In the concluding chapter I take these limitations and Hursthouse's suggestion to get past them and try to carve out a possible positive account of the virtues from a qualified naturalist position. I offer only a sketch to be further developed, but I see in an earlier paper by Nussbaum a helpful precedent for such a project.

## Chapter II: Towards a Natural Foundation for Normativity

### 1. Introduction

Philippa Foot has written recently about how natural facts concerning what it is to be a human can play a foundational role for our understanding of the virtues. In *Natural Goodness,* Foot attempts to ground our moral statements on natural facts about our species. In the same way that an oak tree is good only insofar as it has the traits that allow it to flourish *qua* oak tree, a human is good insofar as she has the traits that allow her to flourish *qua* human. Shifting the conversation away from what she takes to be non-natural, metaphysical conceptions of good and bad and placing the emphasis on evaluative conceptions of good and bad as they pertain to natural facts, Foot believes she can account for human virtues and vices in a way that avoids the challenges presented by non-cognitivists specifically and moral skeptics generally. In this chapter, I will argue that Foot's depiction of a natural normativity provides us with helpful guidance in our moral conversation, particularly in that it provides a framework for moral evaluation that is firmly rooted in experience. Ultimately, however, I will argue that Foot inadvertently slips back into an assumed metaphysical position, replacing metaphysical conceptions of good and bad with a reliance on a metaphysical realism in regard to natural kinds.

### 2. Foot's Natural Normativity

Foot is looking for what she calls a "fresh start" for moral philosophy. She hopes to extricate moral philosophy from what she believes is a wrong-headed approach taken by subjectivists, prescriptivists, and expressivists, all of whom she places under the banner of non-cognitivism.[3] Foot acknowledges the difficulty non-cognitivists are trying to tackle, which she

[3] Placing all these theories under the category of non-cognitivism is problematic. Subjectivism, the position that most closely aligns with Foot's subsequent description, allows that moral statements can be true or false for the

describes as the Humean requirement for our moral philosophy to be practical, or action guiding.[4] However, she believes that non-cognitivists went at the problem from the wrong "side." She writes:

> What all these theories tried to do, then, was to give the *conditions of use* of sentences such as 'It is morally objectionable to break promises' in terms of something that must be true about the speaker. He must have certain feelings or attitudes... *Meaning was thus to be explained in terms of a speaker's attitude, intentions, or state of mind*.[5]

In short, if someone makes a claim that uses moral language, what they are actually saying is that they have some reason to act in that particular way. Foot begins by pointing out a problem with such a theory. She argues that a gap opens up between moral judgments and assertions. An assertion can be true so long as it corresponds to some fact out there in the world. But moral judgments, on the non-cognitivist view, have reference only to subjective states. They are true only insofar as they correspond to the mental state in the subject. Such a view may be able to describe the action-guiding nature of claims such as "It is morally objectionable to break promises" but it fails to capture the truth of the statement. The truth of such a statement, Foot believes, is to be found external to the will of the subject and in the world in which the action in question is to take place. Foot concludes: "It is the mistake of so construing what is 'special'

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subject who makes them. Non-cognitivism holds that moral 'statements' are not statements, strictly speaking, at all, because they are not truth functional. As such, prescriptivism and emotivism fall under the heading of non-cognitivism while subjectivism remains importantly distinct. However, this important distinction is not acknowledged by Foot, who writes: "This is the subjectivism—often called 'non-cognitivism'—that came to the fore with A.J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson, and Richard Hare, informed the work of John Mackie and many others, and has lately appeared, refreshed, in Allan Gibbards 'expressivist' account of normative language." (Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 8). For the purposes of this thesis (and, arguably, for Foot's project as she has in her argumentative sights both subjectivism and non-cognitivism) this oversight is not problematic. However, I think it is important to flag.

[4] Hume writes: "'Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it. In order, therefore, to prove, that the measures of right and wrong are eternal laws, *obligatory* on every rational mind, 'tis not sufficient to show the relations upon which they are founded: We must also point out the connexion betwixt the relation and the will; and must prove that this connexion is so necessary, that in every well-dispos'd mind, it must take place and have its influence; tho' the difference betwixt these minds be in other respects immense and infinite" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* 3.1.1.22). Of course Hume concludes that no move directly from the rational to the willed can take place.

[5] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 8.

about moral judgement [sic] that the grounds of a moral judgement do not reach all the way to it."[6] Someone may coherently reject the moral judgment of another simply because they do not share the requisite feeling or attitude. In Foot's words they lack the "'conative' state of mind" that is required for moral agreement as well as to explain the action guiding nature of the moral judgments necessary if we are to account for moral failures.

Foot denies that such a gap between moral judgment (here beliefs about what is right and wrong) and assertion (here statements that connect with facts about what is the case) exists. She believes that "Hume's demand [that moral claims be action guiding] is met by the (most un-Humean) thought that acting morally is part of practical rationality."[7] If our practical rationality is to be action guiding**,** it must have some criterion by which it guides our actions rationally. This criterion, Foot maintains, is wholly natural. She believes that moral statements such as "It is wrong to break promises" and prudential statements such as "One should not live a sedentary lifestyle" have the same rational basis in human flourishing. Failure to recognize the rational basis that grounds either statement will result in one's failure to flourish as a member of the human species. It is on this point that moral judgments are supposed to connect with facts about the world. Much of this discussion relies on Foot's use of G.E.M. Anscombe's description of "Aristotelian necessities". An "Aristotelian necessity"[8] is something that is necessary for a particular thing, insofar as it belongs to a type, in order for it to be a successful member of the type in question. For this reason 'good' attaches to these necessities.[9] For a bee to be a successful bee it must be part of a colony. It is then good for a bee to be part of a colony, and for its behavior to conform to its role in the colony. Foot believes that this can be extended to the

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[6] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 8
[7] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 9.
[8] These are sometimes called "Aristotelian categoricals." I will use these terms interchangeably throughout the thesis.
[9] See Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 46; Anscombe, "On Promising and its Justice," 18.

discussion of what we are as humans and what Aristotelian necessities we may, therefore, have. She points to such things as memory and concentration, which allow us to learn a language. She also points to our social nature and our dependence upon one another. This dependence leads to an other-regarding attitude that is necessary for our own success. If I know I depend on other people to flourish, then it would be irrational not to act in certain ways that take others into consideration, for instance by telling the truth and keeping promises. Here we can see how Aristotelian necessities link with what is good *qua* human in the very natural sense that they promote human flourishing. Dispositions to tell the truth and keep promises, insofar as they promote a human life that is choice-worthy, map onto what we refer to as virtues, while dispositions that tend to hinder flourishing map onto what we refer to as vices.[10] A human being should cultivate those dispositions that promote a flourishing human life if she is to act in accordance with practical reason.

Again, much of Foot's discussion here can be understood in light of historical differences in our usage of so-called moral terms such as 'should' and 'ought' pointed out by Anscombe in her paper, "Modern Moral Philosophy." In this paper Anscombe argues that 'should' and 'ought' lack any special moral sense in Aristotle's ethics. Instead, they are better understood as indicating what is good or bad in a prudential sense. It is bad for machinery to run without oil, so we ought to keep our machinery oiled. There are certain behavioral or intellectual dispositions in humans that are bad for their development or flourishing, so we ought not develop such dispositions.[11] In modern moral philosophy, however, this understanding of terms such as 'should' and 'ought' has taken on a new, law-like conception so that when it is said that someone

[10] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 15-16.
[11] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 30.

ought to perform some act, a sense of obligation is implied.[12] It is this sense of 'ought' that allows the much-discussed gap between 'is' and 'ought' to open up.

As Hume rightly points out,[13] there is no necessary connection between what is the case and what "ought to be"—what we are under obligation to do. One is not obligated either to maintain or change what is the case; what is the case says nothing, or nothing necessary, about what ought to be the case.[14] What motivates human action is whether or not we want something to be the case. However, if we keep to the Aristotelian sense of ought, as Anscombe and Foot suggest, we can still speak of what ought to be the case in regard to what is necessary for successful operation or flourishing without making the illegitimate move Hume warns against. Here we can say: "If one wants the machinery to keep running then one ought to put oil in it." This statement is action guiding only if the agent wants to keep the machinery running, but it is true insofar as it is the case that oil is necessary for the machinery to keep running. The judgment now is of one's practical reason given one's desire to flourish.

**3. Foot's Teleological Move**

Naturalism in teleological ethics, then, is supposed to indicate what is necessary in order for a human to flourish. But what is it for a human to flourish? In order to get some indication of how Foot answers this question we first need to look at her conception of natural teleology in general. There are two ways in which we can speak of an oak tree being good. We can discuss

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[12] Anscombe tracks this shift in meaning through our religious history and its incorporation of ethical notions in divine law.

[13] I recognize that to assert Hume is correct in this matter is a contentious presupposition on my part. I feel I am justified in making this presupposition on the basis that if we reject Hume's dilemma, claiming we can move readily from an "is" to an "ought," then the majority of the issues this thesis is dealing with, as well as the issues the authors with which this thesis is concerned are dealing with, become non-problems. By working from within this presupposition I hope to provide a meaningful discussion of neo-Aristotelian ethics regardless of the position one holds in regards to Hume's dilemma. The best way to do this is to argue from this, more difficult, perspective

[14] Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature,* 3.1.1.27

what a good oak tree is as it relates to human projects. A good oak tree to someone who runs a sawmill is one that is straight and thick such that it provides a valuable source of lumber. Or, if the human is an artist, a good oak tree may be dead and interestingly gnarled such that it provides an aesthetically pleasing subject matter for a canvas. In each of these cases**,** one answers what is good in an oak tree, or what ought to be the case in an oak tree, with a *qua* X statement where X is some project other than the oak tree's flourishing. To put it in terms used above one may state: "If one wants to produce lumber, then the oak tree ought to be thick and straight." But what is it to be a good oak tree *qua* oak tree? This is not a fundamentally different question, but it requires us to shift our perspective from that of human projects to that of the life of an oak tree. What sort of life is a good life for an oak tree? A life of successful survival and reproduction form the most direct answer to this question and as such can be seen as the *telos* of oak trees. A good oak tree is one that has the characteristics that enable it to survive and produce more oak trees. We can meaningfully speak of the function or purpose of particular tree activities in light of such a *telos*. As such, for an oak tree to have roots that are strong and spread out in such a way that they effectively pull nutrients and water from the ground, and to have leaves that are green and broad so as effectively to pull in energy from the sun, is to have the characteristics that make for a good oak tree *qua* oak tree. It is, therefore, from something's *telos* that evaluative accounts concerning characteristics or attributes can be given.[15] It is important to note here that an aspect of Foot's theory is that the species in question directly informs the way the *telos* can meaningfully be fulfilled. An oak tree that failed to produce acorns but successfully reproduced in some other fashion could not be said to be fulfilling its *telos* as an oak tree.

Teleological explanations of this sort are easily given for something as simple as an oak tree. However, these sort of explanations get more difficult as the species under discussion

[15] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 46-47.

becomes more complex, a fact that Foot only indirectly touches upon. Bees, for example, have different roles to play in regard to the success of the hive and so different characteristics are good depending on what that role is. Here, for instance, we may be able to give a general description of a good bee as one that acts in such a way that it benefits the hive in regard to survival and the production of more bees. Particular characteristics such as being a good gatherer of pollen and being effective at communicating to other gatherers where the pollen can be found would be characteristics by which we would evaluate whether a worker was a good worker bee. However, if we were to evaluate a drone none of these characteristics would describe what it is to be a good drone. From these distinctions we can see that we can give natural descriptions of normative characteristics with varying degrees of specificity determined by the complexity of species in question. Normative descriptions of bees in general requires a degree of generality to be built in. If we move to the particular, and question whether an individual bee is a good bee, this generality does not really get at the question. We need to take into account the complexity found in the species of bee, identify the bee in question in its relation to this complexity, and evaluate the bee in accordance with this more specific list of natural characteristics it ought to have.[16] Ultimately though, a set of characteristics is the set the bee ought to have because those are the characteristics peculiar to that type of bee insofar as they promote the success of the hive in general.[17] Despite the fact that the description of what characteristics a particular bee ought to

[16] In actuality the complexity that would be necessary to describe accurately what characteristics are good characteristics for particular types of bees to have, be they drones, workers, or queens, would also have to take into account the different jobs each type has at particular stages of development. Workers in particular have certain jobs that change as they mature. This fact goes some distance toward showing how natural descriptions of normative characteristics in particular members of a species can get extremely complicated very quickly.

[17] My point here is not that as we move to greater generality the goodness somehow detaches from the individual and is to be found instead in the hive. Rather, my point is that the characteristics of a particular bee that make it a good bee are only explicable in terms of the role those characteristics play in the community of bees that make up the hive. Foot makes much of Peter Geach's claim that "Men need virtues as bees need stings" (see Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 35). Bees only *need* stings if their life is to be understood, in terms of going well or badly, in a way that takes the success of the colony or hive as a relevant factor in this life.

have can get extremely complicated, Foot believes we can still say that what grounds that ought is a *teleological* claim about the bee species and the function that characteristic plays in regard to such a species.

**4. The Metaphysical Presupposition of Foot's Argument**

Foot's conception of teleology relies upon stable natural facts upon which she can base normative claims. However, one might reasonably think that placing nature into species and classes in terms of their characteristic ways of getting along might itself be a human project.[18] If so, then giving an account of what it means for a particular member of a species to flourish is a human understanding. If Foot's argument is to get off the ground she needs to cut off this possibility, claiming instead that there is a stable ordering of species external to both our own human conception of nature as well as particular instantiations of nature. In other words, our conception of nature seeks to mirror the external fact of the matter regarding species by extrapolating from commonalities found in particulars. But this fact of the matter of species is neither our conception nor the particulars from which our conception is derived. Foot's discussion of members of a species flourishing *qua* the species in question makes this reliance apparent. We cannot speak of a particular member of a species flourishing or failing to flourish *qua* the species in question and expect such a statement to have the sort of stability that Foot seems to think it has, if the conception of such a species does not exist external to our own project of describing nature in particular ways.

To give an example, tree squirrels live a predominately solitary life, they breed about twice a year and the female looks after the young. According to Foot, in order for a tree squirrel to be

[18] This statement can be taken in one of two ways. Either there are no natural kinds or understanding the world as if there are natural kinds is a human idiosyncracy. The implications of both possibilities will be taken up below.

described as flourishing it must be living a life where these characteristics are realized. This is not simply a claim about what is required for tree squirrel flourishing, it is also a claim about what we even mean when we say something is a tree squirrel. For this reason, if a male squirrel stayed with the female squirrel and they raised the young in tandem, we can make sense of saying the male squirrel is in some way defective and not flourishing *qua* tree squirrel (even if the male's behavior promotes the survival of the baby squirrels). We can do so by referring to the characteristics that play a role in the fulfillment of the teleology of members of the tree squirrel species. But the only way that such evaluations work is if there is some concept, external to all particular instantiations (of tree squirrels) by which the particulars are to be judged. A male tree squirrel, behaving in a way that it actually promotes the well-being of its offspring, would seem (at least on an account that takes into consideration its own particular goal) to be flourishing.[19] If one wants to say otherwise, the criteria by which one judges flourishing must be external to the apparent goal of the particular life about which a judgment is being made. In other words, the tree squirrel is defective only when considered against *our* understanding of tree-squirrel teleology.

Someone may counter, and in fact Foot does, that all we need is a general enough account of what is necessary for a particular species to flourish. She writes: "The history of a species is not, however, the subject with which Aristotelian categoricals deal. Their truth is truth about a species at a given historical time, and it is only the relative stability of at least the most general features of the different species of living things that makes these propositions possible at all."[20] This general account would allow for aberrations in behavior so long as that behavior could still be seen as, in some way, fulfilling some, more general, Aristotelian categorical. But such a

[19] See Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 42. This point will be taken up further in the next section.
[20] See Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 29.

solution weakens the teleological description of a species to such a degree that it leaves it without any explanatory power. Foot wants to determine species by their life form, here understood as Aristotelian categoricals and the functional role those categoricals play. Continuing in Foot's words: "[A]ll the truths about what this or that characteristic does, what its purpose or point is, and in suitable cases its function, must be related to this life cycle. The way an individual should be is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction: in most species involving defense, and in some the rearing of their young."[21] If we characterize species in this way we seem to lose the explanatory power we think we have in species descriptions. Any behavior or characteristic that I can in some way describe as contributing to a particular animal's reproduction or survival qualifies as a species description. But this cannot be right as it allows for far too much variation.

So it seems we are left with a claim by which species descriptions include behavior and characteristics which are only arbitrary (in the sense that they could be otherwise and not effect the survival or reproduction of the particular animal, but that these characteristics still count as characteristics of the species in question). Only by maintaining this claim can we maintain species parameters understood as common (but not universal) behaviors and characteristics of living things. This claim, while by no means absurd, can only be supported from two possible positions. The first is that there is a form of "tree squirrel" out there in the world in some sense that the particular squirrel is imperfectly instantiating. If this is the case, then one would expect some argument from Foot for such a strong metaphysical position.[22] I am not here making any

[21] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 32-33.
[22] This would also put Foot precariously close to a Platonic conception of forms, which would, I think, be absurd. But it seems clear to me that she is tied to a type of species realism, probably one that puts her closer to the second possibility I take up.

claims concerning the possibility of such an argument;[23] I am merely pointing out that if this were her position, it would not be convincing until such an argument is given. The other option is that the concept 'tree squirrel' is an artifact of human science, and by the lights of this science this particular squirrel is acting deficiently. In this case it is not a tree squirrel[24] teleology that is in question but rather a human concept. If this is the case then Foot's teleological arguments speak more to what we are as humans than what nature is like in itself. I mention this objection here merely to show that, as it is, Foot's natural teleology is incomplete.[25] In the next chapter I will provide an argument for why I think any attempt to complete it will confront problems. I move now to a discussion of how Foot implements her teleological framework for human normativity. I think this argument runs into a separate problem, but I want to emphasize that ultimately I think Foot gets something right. Precisely what this is will become apparent through the course of the thesis.

## 5. The Teleological Move as it Pertains to Humans

I briefly sketched above[26] how naturalism is supposed to answer the non-cognitivist's and moral skeptic's challenge: Hume demanded that morality be action guiding. Non-cognitivists answer this challenge by arguing that when moral language is used by a speaker it expresses some attitudinal or intentional state of mind within the speaker, and it is this intentional state that explains the reason the individual has to act "morally." But, as Foot argues, this is hardly satisfying to anyone who wants to say that morality provides reasons to act in a certain way,

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[23] McDowell does argue against the possibility of any such argument, which I will take up in the next chapter.
[24] One could argue that I am not even justified in using the term 'tree squirrel' to denote anything other than the scientific concept of tree squirrel as it grounds our linguistic use of 'tree squirrel'. Such a view would only confirm my claim that when we talk about success and failure in species we are only doing so in regard to human understanding and never getting at nature itself.
[25] Or, possibly, looks a lot more like McDowell's naturalism than either would want to admit.
[26] See Section II.

reasons that are communicable to others. A non-cognitivist may simply shrug her shoulders and say she is not moved by those reasons because she lacks the requisite intentional state. Foot introduces practical rationality within a teleological framework as the answer to the Humean challenge. It is not the attitudinal or intentional state that should be action guiding, it is practical rationality. Of course, in order for our rationality to guide us it needs certain criteria. Such criteria are found in Aristotelian necessities. An Aristotelian necessity is something that is necessary for a particular thing, insofar as it belongs to a type of thing, in order for it to be successful in what it is. This brought us to a discussion of 'should' and 'ought' and the peculiar shift in meaning these terms have undergone in modern moral philosophy in that they have acquired a sense of obligation. This sense was distinguished from the non-obligatory, project-oriented sense that can be seen in sentences that take the form: "If one wants to φ then one ought to Ψ." To Ψ is not obligatory, but if one does in fact want to φ then one has a practical, action guiding reason to Ψ. Foot's natural teleology fills in φ with "flourish" as it pertains to each particular species in question. These Aristotelian necessities refer to the teleological project of flourishing as it is understood in the species in question, and the actions of any particular member of the species must be evaluated based on this species-centered teleological project.

Foot believes that this natural normativity framework can give us a meaningful, action-guiding justification for why we should cultivate certain character traits (i.e., 'virtues') and reject others (i.e., 'vices'). The question is whether such a teleological understanding of species can be made to fit human nature in the same way it does species in the non-rational botanical and zoological worlds.[27] It is important to note that when filling in the sentence: "If one wants to φ then one ought to Ψ" in light of a particular non-rational individual in a species, we cannot

[27] Bracketing my concern in the last section and allowing that Foot's natural teleology does in fact work in these cases.

legitimately say that the individual recognizes a practical, action-guiding reason to Ψ. *We* can recognize that there is such a reason, but the individual can be judged by us as good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, only in terms of its successful (or unsuccessful) fulfillment of its *telos*. But when it comes to humans, we are capable of recognizing practical, action guiding reasons for Ψ-ing. Furthermore, we are the species for whom projects are an open question. I can choose one project[28] over another and have that project be part of what it means to be a flourishing human being. Foot writes:

> What conceptually determines goodness in a feature or operation is the relation, for the species, of that feature or operation to survival and reproduction, because it is in that that good lies in the botanical and zoological worlds. At that point questions of 'How?' and 'Why?' and 'What for?' come to an end. But clearly this is not true when we come to human beings.[29]

If an individual human cannot reproduce that may be seen as a defect;[30] however, a human can choose not to reproduce and it not be a defect. The questions to ask at this point are, "What is it about humans that makes this possible?" and, "Does this possibility prevent us from applying the criteria of natural normativity, understood as teleological explanations for certain necessary features, to humans in the same way we have done to botanical and non-rational animals?"

Foot believes the difference between human and non-human animals (and plants) comes down to complexity. As such, no fundamental changes need to be made when applying the same natural teleological arguments to either non-rational animals or humans, so long as the complexity of a human life is taken into account. On my reading of Foot, in the same way that it is more difficult to give a proper account of the features or characteristics that go into a

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[28] It seems every human action can be explicable in terms of a larger project, which in turn is explicable as being part of one's sense of a good human life.
[29] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 42.
[30] This too is open to debate. One aspect of this chapter that I want to emphasize is its focus on the human ability to evaluate one's own life and find meaning given the facts of that life. Someone may find equal or greater meaning in the adoption of a child than they would have in giving birth to a child. This ability consciously to shift one's projects in light of environmental developments seems uniquely human.

description of a good bee (given the different ends each particular bee may have) than it is to give the same type of description in regard to an oak tree, it will be more difficult to give a proper account of what characteristics or dispositions humans should have in order to flourish, given the complexity of what it means for a human to flourish and the different means each human may take in order to realize such flourishing, than it is to give any such account for non-rational animals. In Foot's own words:

> In spite of the diversity of human goods—the elements that can make up good human lives—it is therefore possible that the concept of a good human life plays the same part in determining goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals.[31]

This is a rather optimistic view, and in order to support it one hopes that Foot would give a description of what goes into a flourishing human life or *telos*. It is my contention that this hope is realized only imperfectly in Foot's account. Before I move on to this argument, though, it will be helpful to show what sort of detail Foot does provide for her project.

## 6. Natural Normativity in Action

I begin this section with a lengthy quote from Foot, because I think it shows clearly what she leaves open in her investigation of human good. She writes:

> [The h]uman good must indeed be recognized as different from good in the world of plants and animals, where good consisted in success in the cycle of development, self-maintenance, and reproduction. Human good is *sui generis*. Nevertheless, I maintain that a common conceptual structure remains. For there is a 'natural-history story' about how human beings achieve this good as there is about how plants and animals achieve theirs. There are truths such as 'Humans make clothes and build houses' that are to be compared with 'Birds grow feathers and build nests'; but also propositions such as 'Humans establish rules of conduct and recognize rights'. *To determine what is goodness and what defect of character, disposition, and choice, we must consider what human good is and how human beings live: in other words, what kind of a living thing a human being is.*[32]

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[31] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 44.
[32] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 51. Emphasis added.

She moves from this statement concerning the human good to a discussion of practical rationality, understood as the capacity to recognize reasons for particular actions in light of their relation to the human good. But we still have to ask the question: Where have we established what the human good, the good that practical rationality is supposed to direct us to, is? She writes[33] that she has already suggested the grounds on which a human being could be appraised as a bad (defective) human being, namely, that which does not promote the human good, but such an answer is not informative.

It may be possible to glean, from certain examples used by Foot, a meaningful description of how she views the human good. She has, for instance, at several points gestured at what may be a start to pinning down specific Aristotelian necessities for the human good. In this section, I will attempt to derive from these Aristotelian necessities a sketch of what the good may look like.

One example Foot uses is the type of larynx that allows for the production of sound necessary for language, as well as the mental capacity such that we can understand language and use it ourselves.[34] She writes:

> There are, for instance, physical properties such as the kind of larynx that allows of the myriad sounds that make up human language, as well as the kind of hearing that can distinguish them…Without such things human beings may survive and reproduce themselves, but they are deprived. And what could be more natural than to say on this account that we have introduced the subject of possible human defects; calling them 'natural defects' as we used these terms in the discussion of plant and animal life?

From this we can gather that Foot believes language plays a role in the good human life and certain necessary features (larynx shape, ability to hear, and mental capacity) need to be present if the human has any hope of achieving this good life.

She takes this argument a step further, bringing her comments closer to our general notion

[33] See Foot, *Natural Goodnes*, 53.
[34] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 43.

of morality, when she discusses promise keeping. Here she focuses on our social nature and remarks that "much human good hangs on the possibility of one person being able to bind another's will by something in the nature of a promise or other contract."[35] She goes on to characterize promising as "mak[ing] use of a special kind of tool invented by humans for the better conduct of their lives, creating an obligation that (although not absolute) contains in its nature an obligation that harmlessness does not annul."[36] I have certain reservations about agreeing with Foot's discussion of our capacity for speech as an Aristotelian necessity,[37] but her comments concerning promising seem absolutely correct to me. There remains a question, however, as to what makes them correct. Foot alludes to,[38] and here I will expand upon, the fact that humans are a remarkably needy species. Human infancy is extremely long when compared to the infancy of other species, and it takes years for us to reach a level of maturity at which we can be self-sufficient. In addition, we have needs for food and clothing, shelter, as well as education.[39]

All of these factors point to a great degree of complexity in our relation to our environment and our survival. Furthermore, as Foot has already pointed out, while survival in one sense is necessary for the human good it is not all that goes into the human good. We have to add to this certain other factors, for instance friendship and love, as well as the ability to enter into personal projects not directly pertaining to survival. All of these things rely on our ability to trust others. Humans need to delegate tasks to ensure that all our needs for survival are met. Trust that these jobs will be completed requires the "tool" of promising. Finally, if we have any hope of

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[35] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 45. Again Foot notes her indebtedness to Anscombe's "On Promising and its Justice."
[36] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 51.
[37] I will take up this discussion below.
[38] See Foot, *Natural Goodness,* 45.
[39] "Education" does not need to be understood in any academic sense. Rather, it can be seen as teaching the next generation how to provide food, clothing, and shelter.

achieving not just survival but also a good life that contains creative projects, we need leisure time. This leisure time can only be ensured through cooperative efforts within the society. From this, we can see that the tool of promising plays an extremely important role in human life.

Putting this into Foot's discussion of natural normativity, the ability to make and keep promises needs to be present if we hope to achieve a good human life. Practical reason is supposed to recognize promise keeping as an Aristotelian necessity and guide actions accordingly. Presumably, what grounds this whole framework are the natural facts concerning the particular neediness of humans in regard to our relationship with the environment, taking into account as well the needs beyond survival that must go into a description of the good human life.

**7. Rationality and the Problems it Poses to Natural Normativity**

In the last section, I looked to Foot's examples to build an explanation for why promise keeping is an Aristotelian necessity, which, when recognized as such by practical reason, becomes action guiding in that it is a disposition one ought to promote. I now want to go back to what I said earlier concerning Foot's belief that the distinction between natural evaluations of plants and animals and natural evaluations of humans is one simply of complexity. What grounds the evaluative criteria of natural normativity is the teleological description one can give for each species. The end is flourishing, and what goes into this flourishing will depend on the species. In order to begin to give a description, we have to ask what characteristic way of living that species has.

Now the question is: Can we give the same sort of description of a characteristically human way of living? There are facts about our existence, but it seems impossible to give an account of the necessary role these facts play in a human life. We adapt and change, often finding new and

better ways to live. We are not static in the way we live as other animals are. What makes plasticity in human life possible is that we can rationally investigate the way we are living and make changes where we think changes are called for. This ability to re-evaluate on-the-go, so to speak, makes it very difficult to give any general description of human life.[40] If we cannot give such a description then it seems Foot's project, while possibly supporting virtue-type language,[41] fails to fix what those virtue terms mean in particular situations.

Looking back to the example Foot uses concerning an ill-formed larynx**,** we can see that individuals with such 'handicaps' often live remarkably flourishing lives, and this is possible not despite their 'handicap' but because of it. When someone confronts a physical abnormality in such a way that it is made into an asset we can see where the analogy between human and non-human animals breaks down. A mute human who embraces the mute community and who finds meaningful work in aiding others to embrace their physical abnormality in the same way can be seen in many ways as being better set up to develop the dispositions or character traits necessary to live a flourishing life than some individuals who do not have any such abnormalities.[42] Given the openness of possible human lives, sometimes it is the case that having an abnormality that must be either embraced or overcome can serve to make apparent to the individual what is important and what is not when evaluating one's life. Those who have never been forced to perform such an evaluation of their own life may in fact be at a disadvantage. This possibility is one Foot seems to ignore. For this reason an abnormality need not always be described as a

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[40] Beyond its simply being guided by reason. Foot clearly wants more than this, and for good reason. Why reason alone cannot be the answer I hope will be seen to be a common thread throughout this thesis.

[41] "Virtue-type language" because the virtue terms we use would only be temporary place-holders for particular dispositions that could fall out of favor given the way human life develops. What I want to do is find some way to fix certain dispositions as virtues, making the claim that no human life can flourish without such a disposition.

[42] I do not mean to belittle the challenges that face individuals with different capabilities. Nor do I mean that taking such a stance on one's abnormality is particularly common. My point is only that sometimes when these difficulties are overcome a rich and flourishing life is made apparent, and this possibility only exists for those who first have an obstacle to this flourishing that needs to be overcome.

handicap, and, most importantly, we can make sense of a person who claims she would not exchange her life with the abnormality for one in which it was absent.

In plants and animals, abnormalities may arise that cause us to question what is or is not naturally normative for a species in terms of the teleological account of that species. Ultimately, though, we think there is a fact of the matter in this regard. However, by means of our rationality, we humans actively redefine our conceptions of natural human behavior and the ends towards which it ought to aim. Rosalind Hursthouse describes the problem thus: "But in virtue of our rationality...we are different [from animals]. Apart from obvious physical constraints and possible psychological constraints, there is no knowing what we *can* do from what we *do* do, because we can assess what we do do and at least try to change it."[43] Alternate possibilities can always present themselves to our rationality. What at first may have appeared to be an Aristotelian necessity (the shape of a human larynx for example) can drop away in a new, still human, form of life.[44] John McDowell takes this point a step farther, writing: "As soon as we conceive nature in a way that makes it begin to seem sensible to look there for a grounding for the rationality of virtuous behaviour, the supposed grounding is in trouble from the logical impotence of 'Aristotelian categoricals [necessities].' Reason enables a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements."[45] Human functioning is remarkably varied, and trying to pick out certain traits that make for optimal human functioning seems to be a lost cause. We can always take certain ways of living and improve upon them, or see opportunities for living better in situations that at first seem to inhibit

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[43] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 221. She is not making the claim that I have no way of distinguishing my actual from my possible actions; rather, her claim is that when we do something we can always rationally evaluate our action and ask whether it was the best possible action. I take this evaluation to allow for a recognition in the agent of multiple possibilities from which they *must* choose. This gives rise to a uniquely human predicament where the goodness or badness of my life is made up in large part by the choices I make.
[44] What allows for the continuity in regard to it being a new human way of life will be discussed in the next chapter.
[45] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 173.

flourishing. For this reason, it seems there is no one recipe for the best way to live a human life in the same way that there is for plants and non-rational animals.

## Chapter III: An Internal and Evaluative Naturalism Through Neurathian Reflection

### 1. Introduction

In the last chapter I argued that Foot's naturalism relies on a teleological account of species realism concerning human nature that exist external to our own moral outlook. By external here I am referring to Foot's belief that a general enough statement can be made concerning human nature that, regardless of what we believe to be ethical, that statement would hold true; or, to put it another way, if our ethical beliefs are true they are so because of these natural facts. I suggested that such a view becomes problematic when we allow for a pluralism of types of human lives and the role reason plays in overcoming what would otherwise be considered obstacles to flourishing. Furthermore, I called into question the teleological framework Foot relies on in order to express stability in nature, stability that seems necessary if her project is to find objective moral truths.

In this chapter I will investigate how we might be able to provide a type of moral realism without reliance on teleological categorizations of nature. This argument relies on radical,[46] rational ethical reflection upon our own acquired moral beliefs. Several philosophers have offered versions of such a thesis, and part of my task here will be to put these different versions into conversation, piecing together what I take to be the most promising aspects of each in order to create a coherent whole. In order to do so I will first look at the positions put forward by John McDowell and Martha Nussbaum.[47] Ultimately, I will conclude that the type of naturalism presented by these philosophers does provide us with a criteria by which we can pick out virtues and vices, one that avoids the problems I have argued Foot's naturalism falls into. However, the claim that a full blown moral realism is achieved remains questionable.

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[46] "Radical" here is McDowell's description. I take it to be radical in the sense that it holds no principles as foundational and thus all principles are susceptible to revision.
[47] I look at Rosalind Hursthouse's position in the next chapter.

**2. McDowell's Argument Against an External View of Natural Facts**

John McDowell, in "Two Sorts of Naturalism," distinguishes between a naturalized ethics that seeks validation through "independent facts, underwritten by nature, about what it is for a human life to go well"[48] and a naturalized ethics that works from within one's formed character, seeking validation only in "radical ethical reflection" upon those same character traits and how they relate to one another, in order to understand what it means for a human life to go well. He worries, and I have argued, that Foot's position is aligned with the first form of naturalism. Moreover, he argues that a desire for such a naturalism comes from a misreading of Aristotle made possible by the effect Kant has had on our thinking. This misreading has resulted in a skewed understanding of objectivity. By recognizing the Kantian influence on our thoughts about nature, McDowell argues, we will be better able to confront the question of how Aristotle himself sees the virtues as naturally grounded.[49]

So, what is this Kantian influence that we need to recognize in order to escape? A full explication is beyond the scope of this paper and, of course, has already been given by McDowell himself in the aforementioned article. However, the crux of the issue, in McDowell's own words, is that "[t]he ineffable 'in itself' in Kant's picture performs the function of satisfying a felt need to recognize something wholly alien to subjectivity; and Kant's insight that the natural world, just because it is not ineffable, cannot take over that function."[50] A new way of looking at the world became possible with Kant's philosophy. We are asked to entertain the existence of the world devoid of our own, human, rational influence. Such a move makes

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[48] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 167-8.
[49] Both McDowell and Nussbaum give arguments for interpreting Aristotle in this way as well as for this project's being a more promising ground from which to build an ethics. For the purposes of this thesis I have bracketed the interpretive question. However, for narrative flow and in order to account for the language used in certain quotes, I have found it necessary for the time being to work within the perspective of the interpretive thesis. My argument in no way hinges on whether or not the position described here was actually Aristotle's project.
[50] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 180.

possible the position that the world as we know it is a product of this human rational influence, the stance taken by transcendental idealism. However, this leaves us with the realization that while we can entertain the possibility of the world existing devoid of our intellectual influence, we *a fortiori* have no intellectual access to this world. That our claims about nature are grounded only in our human understanding introduces a desire to give them further grounding in some objectivity external to this human understanding.[51] When we discover the 'in-itself' cannot serve this purpose, we seek "disenchanted nature" as the next best thing. This gives rise to the scientific approach and the pedestal upon which it is placed. McDowell writes: "The investigative stance of science discounts for the effects of features of the investigator, even his humanity ... [W]hat science aims to discover is the nature of reality in so far as it can be characterized in absolute terms: the content of the view from nowhere."[52]

McDowell argues that it is from the scientific perspective that we have interpreted Aristotle as seeking an objective natural ground for morality. The standard interpretation of Aristotle is that he is grounding his ethics on human nature, understood as certain objective facts discoverable by science about what we are and how we function. Foot, I have argued, can be understood as being tied to this line of argument. McDowell argues that if this perspective is peculiar to modern philosophy, it is illegitimate as an interpretive model for Aristotle. Furthermore, if it runs into serious issues concerning its viability as an ethical foundation, then we have good reason to look elsewhere to understand what grounds our normative statements. He goes on to suggest that if we remove the idealistic stance whereby nature is some conglomeration of the 'in-itself' and our own understanding, dropping this "hankering" for the

[51] Kant avoids this move, as McDowell rightfully notes, but the move itself is made possible by the separation that Kant introduces between the noumena and the phenomena. Ultimately, McDowell believes, it is a 'hankering' for the in-itself that dooms Kantianism as well.
[52] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 181.

'in-itself' altogether, then "the thesis that the natural world is in the space of *logos* [our understanding] need not seem to be a form of the thesis that thought makes the world."[53] By removing the idealistic thesis and allowing for a conception of objectivity that does not preclude the subjectivity of the thinking questioner we can come to an ethical validation that respects our being situated within nature.[54] Ethical reasoning then takes place from within this situated human perspective, and it has for its fodder those moral beliefs with which it is already engaged.

**3. Nussbaum's Internal and Evaluative, "Self-Validating," Arguments**

The Aristotle we get from such an interpretation is remarkably similar to the Aristotle described by Nussbaum in "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics." Nussbaum's paper targets Bernard Williams and his interpretation of Aristotle in particular.[55] She picks out three theses of Williams' interpretation against which she will argue, all of which, I believe, may be applied to Foot's position as well. William's first thesis, according to Nussbaum, is that the essential human nature[56] for Aristotle is a natural scientific fact that can be grasped from "the totally external viewpoint of a neutral observer—from, as [William's puts it in

[53] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 181.
[54] What this may look like will be taken up in what immediately follows.
[55] McDowell also points to Williams as someone who holds the Aristotelian interpretation he believes should be overthrown. Nussbaum acknowledges that Williams' interpretation is one that is "share[d] with numerous influential writers, past and present." (Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundation of Ethics" [hereafter "Human Nature"], 87, as well as footnote 2 (124), which contains a list of examples). One notable adherent to this reading other than Williams is T.H. Irwin who, in "The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics," traces what he believes to be the necessary foundation behind the concept of *eudaimonia* Aristotle uses in his ethics from the *Metaphysics* to the *Physics* and finally the understanding of the soul in *De Anima.* In so doing he argues directly against the *endoxic* approach McDowell and Nussbaum take. Irwin concludes: [Aristotle] is sometimes supposed to regard ordinary language and ordinary beliefs as the final arbiter of the correctness of an ethical theory; the theory should begin from the difficulties raised by common beliefs and try to make the beliefs coherent, pronouncing all or most of them true. This conception of ethical argument is not just the misinterpretation of readers anxious to find their respect for common sense and ordinary language reflected in Aristotle; Aristotle himself describes his method in similar terms (1145b2-7). If my argument has been sound, it has shown that this conception of Aristotle's ethical method is at best a half-truth" (Irwin, 50-51).
[56] "Essential" here meaning necessary in the sense of Aristotelian categorical as apposed to any reified essense.

*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*], 'an absolute understanding of human nature.'"[57] Furthermore, essential human nature, and the natural scientific facts of which it is composed, is stable (i.e., it cannot be changed by humans themselves). Second, essential human nature is not open to the same sort of controversy that ethical questions are open to. There is a fact of the matter concerning what is necessary for a good human life, and this fact is discoverable by scientific inquiry and is objective for this reason. And third, this essential human nature does important ethical work. Its source, external to human opinion, provides "fixed points that effectively rule out certain ethical alternatives."[58] Importantly, Williams argues that these are theses held by Aristotle himself, and ultimately it is the first thesis that, Williams argues, forces us to reject Aristotle's ethics.[59] Nussbaum counters that Aristotle has no such conception of an external foundation for ethics, nor even science for that matter. The type of investigation Aristotle pursues takes for granted that all investigation is performed internal to a human perspective. She writes: "to find out what our nature is seems to be one and the same thing as to find out what we deeply believe to be most important and indispensable [i.e. the internal perspective from which the inquiry begins]."[60] A little further on she writes: "Human nature cannot, and need not, be validated from the outside, because human nature just *is* an inside perspective, not a *thing* at all, but rather the most fundamental and broadly shared experiences of human beings living and reasoning together."[61]

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[57] My contention is that this use of 'external' maps onto McDowell's argument that we, in science, try to get outside of our own perspective and grasp the way things are in themselves. This perspective is often described as the view from nowhere. I will be using 'external' in this manner throughout this thesis. On a related note, I will be using 'internal' to indicate a perspective that does not try to strip away preconceptions, opinions, and beliefs; rather, the internal perspective seeks to test the coherence of these beliefs by examining their relation to one another. I see this as very much in line with Rawlsian "reflective equilibrium."
[58] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 88.
[59] Although Williams concludes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that all strong moral theses confront such limits, and that ultimately an Aristotelian-type ethics is probably the best we can do (minus the external foundation).
[60] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 106.
[61] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 121.

The question now turns to how we come to recognize these fundamental experiences that are to serve as the natural foundations for our ethics. Nussbaum seeks to show that Aristotle's ethics are grounded in *endoxa,* what she takes to be the reasoned beliefs of wise individuals.[62] She rejects any attempt to ground ethics on a foundation external to our own beliefs, and fully embraces the fact that a viewpoint is always already presupposed in any investigation into what it means to be human. In order to motivate her position, Nussbaum begins with some passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that discuss the proper way we should wish for the good of our friends and for ourselves. The passages are worth quoting at length as they introduce Nussbaum's strategy well. She writes:

> If it is well said that a friend wishes goods for his friend for that person's own sake, then that person will have to remain the type of being he is. Then it is to him as a human being [or: on condition of his remaining a human being] that the friend will wish the greatest goods.[63]

and

> Being is a good thing for the good person, and each person wishes good things for himself. But nobody would choose to have everything on condition of becoming other—as, for example, the god right now has the good. He will wish to have the good while continuing to be whatever he is.[64]

The important feature of both of these passages is that they point to a limitation concerning what can be considered good for a person. If what is wished for would prohibit someone from maintaining her identity as a human being, an identity that is based solely on one's beliefs about what it means to be a human, then it does not make any sense for that person to wish for that thing, because it would not be that person who succeeded in obtaining it.

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[62] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), 1095a15-1095b13 for some textual evidence for such a reading. While *endoxa*, strictly speaking, has a much larger extension than the reasoned beliefs of wise individuals, Aristotle, understandably, restricts his own ethical investigation to what he takes to be the most plausible and widely held beliefs. I take Nussbaum to be using this narrower sense of *endoxa* as a technical term that she has taken from Aristotle on the grounds of the above referenced textual support.

[63] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 90; *NE* 1159a8-12. Translation and bracketed comments are Nussbaum's.

[64] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 90; *NE* 1166a19. Again, translation is Nussbaum's.

Importantly, this identity must be established communally.[65] Nussbaum's next move is to give two paradigm cases for how we may acquire a communal conception of humanity that will serve as a foundation for non-relative moral beliefs. She frames these cases as "self-validating"[66] arguments for our rational and social nature. Aristotle defines a human being as a rational and social animal, so Nussbaum looks for *endoxic* foundations for components of our nature.[67] The first of these arguments looks to Plato's *Philebus* in order to illustrate the importance we place on rationality in our understanding of humanity.[68] The dialogue asks what the good is for a human being. The contenders are pleasure, knowledge, and some combination of the two such that, when they are put together, they form a third. In order to see whether pleasure or knowledge could be sufficient for the good of man, Socrates suggests looking at each separately from the other.[69] He asks Protarchus whether he would want to live a life experiencing nothing but pleasure. Protarchus answers in the affirmative. Socrates then asks whether he might have some need of knowledge or intelligence. Protarchus answers that he does not see why he would need either if his life was one of nothing but the greatest pleasure. To this, Socrates answers that if Protarchus were to be devoid of knowledge and intelligence he would also be ignorant about the very question of whether or not he was enjoying himself. Without memory, Protarchus could not experience anything but the present moment, so he could not say if he has enjoyed himself. Without the ability to judge, Protarchus would not be able to tell whether or not he ever is in fact

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[65] I mean communal in the broadest sense possible. Ultimately Nussbaum believes her position gives us reason to reject any sort of relativism.
[66] What she means by "self-validating" will be discussed below.
[67] I am using 'humanity' here to denote the necessary conditions for one's being a human being.
[68] One may reasonably ask why we need to look to Plato if the argument is meant to be Aristotelian. First, Nussbaum takes the *Philebus* simply to be a good example of the point Aristotle expresses in the above quotes. Perhaps Aristotle produced his own literary examples in some of his lost works, but as all that are left are his notes I think this is a justified supplementation on the part of Nussbaum. Second, my goal is to judge the promise of this approach in a contemporary ethics, so any interpretive qualms one may still have of Nussbaum's use of this example should not apply to my case.
[69] Plato, *Philebus*, 20e.

enjoying himself. And finally, without the ability to calculate, Protarchus could not look towards future pleasures.[70] From these results, Socrates argues "[y]ou would thus not live a human life but the life of a mollusk or of one of those creatures in shells that live in the sea."[71]

Nussbaum sees important ethical work being done in this argument. She stresses that Socrates' questions are always formed as direct questions to Protarchus. The question is not whether some hypothetical person could choose such a life, but whether Protarchus could. This, she argues, is part of the internal evaluative process that goes into the question of what is the human good. Protarchus cannot give an affirmative answer to the question whether he would choose such a life because he could not choose the life while maintaining his own conception of what it means to be human. He identifies himself as a member of human kind, and in wishing to live the life of pleasure alone he would be wishing to live a life that is outside of his own conception of what it means to be human. Protarchus could not choose such a life for himself because it would not be him who was successful in living such a life.[72] In Nussbaum's own words: "The good life for him (for us) must first of all be a life for him (for us)."[73]

The argument can go the other way as well. We could not live the life of pure intellect, a god's life, for similar reasons. The life of pure intellect fails because we cannot, as humans, choose such a life. Such a life would be that of some rarified being alien to humanity and all of its beliefs and concerns. One may be able to acknowledge the good of such a being, but it is not a human good, so one could never wish it for oneself *qua* human.[74] Here we find the boundary at

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[70] Plato, *Philebus*, 21a-d.
[71] Plato, *Philebus*, 21d.
[72] Note that this statement does not require any metaphysical notion of personhood. Protarchus would not be successful in living such a life because Protarchus has a certain conception of what sort of life is possible for Protarchus to live. He can fool himself into thinking that the life of a mollusk is such a life, but in the act of thinking he has already shown that it is not a mollusk.
[73] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 99-100.
[74] This may be passing over the question a little too quickly, particularly in light of what Aristotle writes in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* with emphasis on 1177b27-1178a9. The scholarly discussion over Book X's place in

the opposite end of the spectrum. It is as inconsistent for an embodied human to wish for the pure intellect of a god as it is for her to wish for the simple pleasures of a mollusk. Any definition of the good life for a human, *eudaimonia*, will fall somewhere between these two limits. Nussbaum calls this form of argument "internal" and "evaluative" because it never departs from the opinions held by the individual. What it does, is refine these opinions by making apparent the inconsistencies that they often contain; this refinement then makes clear to the individual that he or she already has internally motivating reasons for certain actions—reasons that were simply concealed by other pre-reflectively held opinions.

Above I said that Nussbaum describes the internal and evaluative position of human nature as "self-validating." Before moving to her argument concerning our social nature and mores, which are supposed to be self-validating in the same sense, I need to show what she is pointing to with this description. Nussbaum believes the argument's "procedures embody a respect for practical reason; they acknowledge the importance of practical reason to living humanly well."[75] When we perform the evaluative process, we place a degree of value on practical reason. That practical reason is then valued in our conception of what is required in order to maintain human identity should not be surprising. The position states that there is a circularity in our argument concerning what human nature is, but that this circularity is not problematic because it brings to light what we are unable to change without a complete shift in what it means to be human. We cannot enter into the investigation of what it means to be human without presupposing, and

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Aristotle's ethics is immense and beyond the scope of this paper. I will limit myself to pointing to what is said immediately after the above-mentioned lines. Aristotle remarks: "Life in conformity with the other kind of virtue [moral] will be happy in a secondary degree, because activities in accordance with it are human" (*NE* 1178a10-11). One cannot live a purely intellectual life and still be human. This does not keep us from recognizing the higher god-like good of the intellectual virtues and fostering them, but it does call into question whether or not it is at all rational to wish to be such a god oneself given Nussbaum's argument. It seems impossible that such a commitment could be held without self-contradiction and it is not clear that Aristotle himself is suggesting that it ought to be attempted. Regardless, such considerations fall under the interpretive question, which I have said is not part of my goal here.

[75] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 101.

giving a certain value to, practical reason as an integral part of the conclusion. This presupposition is brought to light through the investigation itself, but it is also confirmed in the investigation. For this reason, a rejection of the conclusion would have to be a rejection of the entire project because it would force us to say the very asking of the question is illegitimate. The answer to the question "what does it mean to be human?" is, in a crucially important way, built into the very asking.

The second "self-validating" argument concerns our social nature and how we get brought into social mores through social situations themselves. Nussbaum begins this argument by pointing to the role that myths and theatre played in the ethical development of the ancient Greeks.[76] She argues that the fictional transformations from human to god, god to human, human to animal, and animal to human serve to delineate the boundaries between what can and cannot be given up or taken on without our ceasing to be what we are. When we see these lines crossed in stories and plays, we are forced to reflect on our own socially constituted beliefs concerning what is considered human. These definitions may be narrower than the ones discovered in Plato's *Philebus* because they entail a social conception that may be more refined. To take one example of several from Nussbaum, consider the Cyclops. These beings are described as mostly human in shape. Among the differences that distinguish the Cyclops from the human lie in the Cyclopses' complete disregard for one another. When we hear stories of the Cyclops, we can evaluate what it is about them that keeps them from being human. One necessary requirement for being human that the Cyclops fail to meet is found in their inability to enter into social engagements. We find such an ability peculiarly necessary for our identity as human. The process of reflection and evaluation itself is communal because it takes place within society. We

[76] Presumably this type of development, *mutatis mutandis,* can be shown in our own culture through our fairy tales, educational systems, modes of entertainment, etc.

go to the play to see the story, and in going we are surrounded by others. "The communal nature of this reflective process, and the fact that it works through emotional responses to tragic events, suggests that the process of participating in the exercise is already an affirmation of its content."[77] Once again, the means by which the argument is presented presupposes the commitments that we find necessary for our continued identity. "The 'argument' is self-validating in a deep way; you cannot withdraw your assent from its conclusion, without withdrawing from the entire form of life that, as a procedure, it embodies."[78]

Nussbaum believes that both "self-validating" arguments, the first for our rational human nature and the second for our social nature, are identical in form. This form consists in the necessary presupposition of the conclusion such that when the argument is complete and we recognize the circularity we gain a further understanding that the method of argumentation is what justifies our use of the conclusion as a premise. The argument could not proceed in any other way.

**4. McDowell and Nussbaum: The Same Sort of Naturalism**

While Nussbaum has provided us with a form for understanding the foundations of naturalism understood as internal to and evaluative of our own beliefs (*endoxa*), she only suggests what the content of such a naturalism may be.[79] What form does our social nature take, and, more importantly, is this the form it ought to take? Following Nussbaum we answer the first part of this question with our pre-theoretical social and moral beliefs. But this answer forces us to ask how we are to know those beliefs are in fact the right ones to have, which leads back to

[77] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 98.
[78] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 98.
[79] In the form of ancient examples. If we are to apply such an argument to contemporary ethical conversation we need to update the examples.

McDowell's discussion of conceptual schemes and the internal evaluation they undergo through Neurathian reflection. I turn now to a description of this process and an argument for how we can fruitfully see it as an extension of Nussbaum's foundation.

McDowell looks back to Aristotle's espoused method of investigation for his ethics. Aristotle asks whether we should start from first principles or work our way to first principles from what we already know, concluding that the latter method, working our way back to first principles, is the only feasible way to make a study of ethics. What are these first principles? Aristotle writes: "For the facts are the starting point, and if they are sufficiently plain to him, he will not need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting points."[80] One's upbringing is indicated as the starting point for all ethical inquiry, meaning one must always begin from an acquired ethical perspective. I take it that what is being suggested here is the way into the circle of the self-validating argument.

According to McDowell, we can then evaluate this acquired ethical perspective from the inside in order to determine whether or not it is correct. We can do so because our habituation into an ethical perspective is not simply rote learning or behavioral training. Instead it is an introduction into a conceptual framework.[81] We come to learn what actions are the right actions given the framework of the virtues. From this we come to an understanding of what McDowell calls the *that* of an ethics. We understand *that* this is the right action in this particular circumstance. Our upbringing allows us to pick out and take enjoyment in performing virtuous actions because such actions are understood as noble. When we have this sort of habituation we have the *that* of Aristotle's ethics.

If we left things here Aristotle would seem susceptible to a charge of leaving his ethics

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[80] *NE* 1095b3-6

[81] See McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology," 38-40. Much of his discussion concerning moral habituation and learning is in turn taken from Burnyeat's "Aristotle on Learning to be Good."

without any hope of objectivity whatsoever. However, McDowell's suggestion, and this seems supported by what Aristotle says at *NE* 1095b3-9, is that once we have the *that* of a conceptual ethical framework we can then move to the *because*, the point at which we come to understand why these virtues are in fact the right ones.[82] This move requires an honest examination of one's conceptual framework from the inside. McDowell likens it to Socrates' call to an examined life.[83] It is through this move that Aristotle escapes dogmatic acceptance of one's ethical perspective. Certain supposedly virtuous actions are called into question in light of our other beliefs. In this way we can internally evaluate what we have acquired through habituation.

McDowell introduces the model of Neurathian reflection to the ethical conceptual framework provided through one's upbringing to illustrate this point. If we cannot get outside of our acquired ethical perspective then we must try to fix it from the inside.[84] The metaphor of Neurath's boat is supposed to show how such an examination of our ethical beliefs is to take place. The idea is that once one has been brought into the conceptual framework, in other words once one can recognize, occasion by occasion, what the correct action is (the *that* or starting point of *NE* 1095b3-9), then one can begin to see how it all hangs together in a coherent ethical picture. Once one has reached this point the next move is to begin to question elements of that picture in light of other elements of that very same picture. McDowell writes: "In this version of the image [of Neurath's boat], the fact that the boat cannot be put ashore for overhaul stands for the fact that when one reflectively moves from mere possession of the *that* to possession of the *because* as well, one has no material to exploit except the initially unreflective perceptions of the

[82] See also Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," 72-74.
[83] See McDowell, "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," 212.
[84] Looking back to Nussbaum, its not just that we *can* give self-validating arguments concerning our nature, its that we *can* give *only* self-validating arguments concerning our nature. That we are unable to escape the circle is itself a natural fact.

*that* from which the reflection starts."[85] It is the task of practical reason then to facilitate the move from the *that* to the *because,* and in understanding the *because* one stands on firm ground concerning the truth of one's ethical perspective.

An important step is made in opening one's ethical perspective up to such a Neurathian evaluation and possible revision. According to McDowell it is in this that we are able to maintain a form of moral realism. He writes: "[I]f a collection of putative perceptions of the *that* has run that risk and passed muster, that is surely some reason to suppose that the perceptions are veridical."[86] We get validation of our ethics through such a Neurathian evaluation and we have no reason to ask for more (nor any evidence that more than this sort of certainty is possible).

**5. What Sort of Ethical Realism?**

Given such a picture of ethical discourse the question that needs to be asked is: How do we know when we are getting it right? If all we have are our beliefs, and any ethical discourse has commerce only in these beliefs, it seems that ethical discussions could dissolve into irredeemable relativism. To put the problem into McDowell's framework, there might end up being multiple, self-contained conceptual schemes, each giving their own definition of human flourishing in a language the others cannot understand. Continuing with the analogy of Neurath's boat, we can make sense of the crew repairing the boat only if we include some knowledge within the minds of the crew of what a boat is and how it is supposed to operate. The sailors must have an idea of the purpose or limitations of a boat before the repairs they make upon their vessel can be successful. In other words, there is a certain structure that makes a boat a boat, and before we go about making repairs we need to come to some understanding of this structure lest we wind up

[85] McDowell, "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," 213.
[86] McDowell, "Eudaimonism and Realism in Aristotle's Ethics," 214.

with an airplane when we are finished.[87] It seems that without this understanding there can be no repairs, only arbitrary changes. The situation is the same with ethics. We need some picture of what our ethics are supposed to do before we can go about repairing them, or have any sense of when we are successful. Aristotle places *eudaimonia* in this position; our ethics are a necessary condition for our living the good life for humans. I have been arguing that the main distinction between the naturalism offered by McDowell and Nussbaum and the naturalism offered by Foot can be traced to how we understand *eudaimonia*. Foot's naturalistic answer looks to external and objective facts concerning the human species. She argues that there is a characteristic way in which humans live their lives, and from this characteristic way we can develop a firm understanding of what *eudaimonia* is. McDowell and Nussbaum look to a socially constructed conception of *eudaimonia* that seems to lack any (necessary) sense of stability. If the concept of *eudaimonia* is an open ended one, subject to constant revision through the above described Neurathian reflection, then it can hardly serve as a blueprint for that very same Neurathian reflection. In this section I will investigate how much of a foundationalism we can ascribe to either McDowell or Nussbaum's position, and what this means for their ethics.[88]

Nussbaum claims to be providing a foundation through her account of self-validating internal arguments. However, even she recognizes that the foundation is not one that gets its strength from some inherent nature of human beings; instead, it gets its strength from the inquiry

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[87] If being finished is even a possibility.

[88] I take foundationalism here to be a solid ground from which we can then build an ethics. Its important to note that McDowell eschews any sense of a foundationalism in his ethics, arguing that investigations that take that as their goal have already gone astray. However, since I have tried to draw a parallel between McDowell and Nussbaum, and Nussbaum does believe she is offering a form of foundationalism for her ethics, some sense needs to be made of this point. The key, I believe, is to recognize that the two foundations Nussbaum offers can operate as foundations only in tandem. If we take rationality as the foundation without the social context within which it needs to operate, we are left with an empty formalism. If we take the social foundation without rationality, then the ethical question could never be asked. It seems clear that the type of foundation Nussbaum believes she is providing is very different from the sort of foundation generally considered to be the goal (as in Williams for example). For this reason, I think we can still make sense of McDowell's project and Nussbaum's as seeking the same sort of ground.

through which it is discovered. Looking back to the example of Protarchus in the *Philebus*, she writes: "[A]lthough it is, in principle, open to Protarchus to reject its conclusion [the importance of practical reason for living well], he cannot consistently do so without opting out of the form of life that the Socratic procedure exemplifies."[89] This shows that the foundation provided by Nussbaum is a foundation only for a human who accepts certain norms and practices already,[90] in this case the norms of practical reason, and not an understanding of being a human *qua* human (where 'human' here indicates some natural fact external to human beliefs). While this does indeed get us a good deal in terms of mapping out ethical inquiry, it also leaves us without a way to evaluate (and offer guidance to) humans who reject those norms outright. There is no small difference between Nussbaum's foundation of accepting practical reason as part of our self-given identity and Foot's maintaining that practical reason is a natural fact about humans. The distinction between Foot's naturalism and Nussbaum's has immense repercussions in regard to what we can say with certainty concerning morality. For instance, Nussbaum acknowledges that Philebus does "opt out" of the norms governing practical reason and ethical inquiry, and for this reason we cannot say that he is inconsistent. As such, our ethical evaluations do not really touch him. We are forced to say that Philebus' form of life lies outside our ethical purview of a human life ('human' here understood as the internal structure of norms that form our identity). The result is that Philebus is consistent, and I, in calling Philebus sub-human,[91] am consistent, but the two of us in relation to one another's respective beliefs are irredeemably inconsistent. That such radical ethical difference could exist between two beings seems highly implausible. On the other hand, Foot's naturalism, as it makes universal statements about what it means to be human, can still evaluate Philebus' life in light of its relation to what it means to be human. Most

[89] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 101.
[90] Or, in McDowell's terms, someone who has already been inculcated into a conceptual framework.
[91] Or, at least, non-human.

importantly, Foot's naturalism allows us to make moral judgments that touch other agents, even if those agents themselves do not understand how, or accept that they do.

Another worry for Nussbaum's use of such a conception of a foundation is that it sets her up for a form of historical relativism. If our identity is defined by our practices, and this identity forms the 'foundation,' what happens if our practices change over time? We could develop radically different practices and yet the narrative of these changes would remain intact. This means one identity is not given over to another, but rather the same identity undergoes fundamental changes over time. What was moral for humans at one time would no longer be moral, and we could not look back on humans in the past and judge them according to our contemporary norms.[92] These contemporary norms simply do not comply with the human identity at that past time. Without some fixed conception of what it means to be human such a predicament is possible given the foundation provided by Nussbaum.

Rosalind Hursthouse discusses this problem in relation to the Neurathian project. She writes: "For, in theory, Neurath's boat might, over many years, become like Theseus's ship, without a single plank of the original remaining. And then, in a manner of speaking, we, or our descendants, could look back at the ethical outlook within which we started and condemn it in retrospect as all wrong."[93] She follows this point up in a subsequent footnote, noting, "I say 'in a manner of speaking' because there is some question as to whether we, or our descendents, with our new outlook, could understand the original one well enough to describe it as 'all wrong'. We

[92] Strictly speaking we could judge them immoral but only in light of our own socially developed understanding of morality. This is akin to how I can judge Philebus as immoral (or at least amoral) and be consistent. The problem is that this consistency never touches Philebus or those 'humans' from the past. The difference between one internal point of view and the other does not allow for any communication between them (I take Gilbert Harman to be offering a relativism similar to this in "Moral Relativism Defended." *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 3-22. If there is no implicit agreement then there is no moral conversation, even though I can still shout judgments at the agent). We have, at the very least, pragmatic reasons to avoid such a relativism. I will show below that we also good reasons to think that such a relativism simply is not coherent from any perspective.
[93] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 166.

might just find it completely incomprehensible, and thereby neither right nor wrong."[94] One must ask whether any ethical project with this outcome could still lay claim to the name of realism. My immediate reaction is that it cannot. There are two reasons for why I have this reaction. First, to suggest that we descended from those who held such an incomprehensible ethical outlook seems to say too much. If their outlook truly is incomprehensible to us then there is no reason to think that our ethical outlook in any way descended from theirs. Second, and this is a point I will develop in the last chapter, it does not seem as though such a radical difference in ethical outlook is even possible given the necessary existential similarities between us and any other rational, temporally finite, subject of a life from which we have descended.

To sum up, the two weaknesses I see in Nussbaum's foundationalism, and by extension McDowell's Neurathian procedure, are that we are not provided with a way by which we can provide reasons for action to those who have opted out of our ethics (or, in McDowell's phrasing, our conceptual scheme)[95] and that we seem to leave open the possibility of an historical relativism. In the next chapter I will look to a way by which we might be able to avoid these problems.

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[94] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, footnote 5.

[95] I want to stress here that these reasons do not need to be accepted by the agent in question. Rather, the claim is that they should be accepted by the agent, and the agent, insofar as they do not act on those reasons, is wrong. In other words, an agent need not be convinced that they are wrong in order to be wrong.

## Chapter IV: Finding a Way Between the Horns of the Dilemma

### 1. First Nature vs. Second Nature

Thus far I have argued that the various forms of naturalized normativity offered by Foot, McDowell, and Nussbaum all run into problems. The two sides of the problem I think can be helpfully illustrated by a distinction McDowell offers between first and second nature.[96] McDowell writes:

> Nature controls the behavior of a non-rational animal. It seemed that reason compels nature to abdicate that authority, leaving a void that self-interest seemed fitted to fill. But now we can see that the way reason distances one from first nature need not invite a *coup d'etat* from self-interest. In acquiring one's second nature—that is, in acquiring *logos*—one learned to take a distinctive pleasure in acting in certain ways, and one acquired conceptual equipment suited to characterize a distinctive worthwhileness one learned to see for actions, that is, a distinctive range of reasons one learned to see for acting in those ways.... The dictates of virtue have acquired an authority that replaces the authority abdicated by first nature with the onset of reason.[97]

First order nature is the type of nature we discuss when we look at non-rational animals and how they behave. Their ends are dictated to them by nature and it is this dictation that makes possible discussion of Aristotelian necessities in reference to them.[98] In short, this is the side from which Foot seeks to ground normativity. Investigations into the first nature of such non-rational animals are the proper realm of science. Rationality, according to McDowell, severs us from first nature as it pertains to humans. In its place is what he refers to as our second nature. Second nature can be understood as the virtues. Knowledge of the virtues is acquired through our taking on a conceptual scheme in the process of our moral education. We are brought up in particular ways and taught to value particular things. It is this nature that informs our choices and the

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[96] McDowell's distinction can in turn be traced back to Hegel. Hegel writes in the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, "Ethical life, however, is the sense of duty (unquestioned, unconscious), the substantial law—a 'second nature,' as it has rightly been called (since the 'first nature' of human beings is our immediate animal being)" (Hegel 42). The sense of duty, according to McDowell, is developed through our moral education. Granted McDowell goes on to require a degree of questioning once the moral education has created a sense of duty in order for the Neurathian reflection to work.

[97] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 188.

[98] As I argued in the first chapter, even this is open to question.

rationality/morality of our actions.[99] Second nature is the proper realm of ethical investigation, and it is also that which we cannot escape. We cannot get a vantage point outside of our second nature, so all evaluation must take place from within second nature, hence Neurath's boat.

I have argued that neither form of naturalized ethics, beginning from either a first or a second nature, has been entirely successful in its goal, though both have a great deal to offer in their own way. The question that now needs to be asked is whether reason is really so caustic to first order nature that nothing from that realm passes into our second nature. Surely not, for while we are rational, we are also animals. McDowell seems to forget this at times, yet he does acknowledge that second nature cannot be the only story and accepts that first nature matters "because the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them."[100] He also writes that first nature facts can be part of what is taken into account by reflection.[101] Putting all this together leaves us with a rather confused picture of what first nature facts remain after reason has performed its reflection, how those first nature facts are supposed to limit what second nature ethical positions are possible, and, finally, how reason is supposed to combine first nature and second nature into a meaningful ethics. McDowell seems to discount the importance of first nature facts, placing all the emphasis on second nature and rational reflection; and yet on the other hand he acknowledges that it is our first nature that provides the shape of what type of life we can consider ethical.

The question is: Where do we place the emphasis in our ethical investigation? Should we look to first nature facts, as Foot does, or to second nature facts, as do Nussbaum and

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[99] Akin to Nussbaum's discussion of practical rationality, we also have the moral directive to evaluate our own moral beliefs, to "know thyself" so to speak. We can see this moral directive as a rational imperative not to hold inconsistent beliefs regarding what one ought to do (which in turn is given through our conceptual scheme of the virtues).

[100] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 190.

[101] McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 190.

McDowell? Are we to find our ethical foundations internal to our own beliefs concerning what it means to be human or is there an external truth concerning what it means to be human upon which our ethics can be grounded? The answer appears to be that neither the internal nor the external line of investigation are correct in themselves. What we need is some coherent combination of the two that acknowledges the importance of stable, universal facts concerning human nature while at the same time allowing for a dynamic, reflective, and plastic process for how norms can be built upon these facts.[102] We need to be able to account for a vast range of possible ethical lives while still being able to define the parameters of possible ethical lives by tracing the limits drawn by first nature facts.

**2. Hursthouse's Answer to the Dilemma**

Hursthouse gives the credit to McDowell for passing through the horns. She writes:

> For either we speak from the neutral point of view, using a scientific account of human nature—in which case we won't get very far—or we speak from within an acquired ethical outlook—in which case we will not validate our ethical beliefs, but merely re-express them.... I shall assume, without argument, that McDowell is right to claim that the Neurathian procedure in ethics provides a way between the horns of this dilemma. The pretensions of an Aristotelian naturalism are not, in any ordinary understanding of the term, either 'scientific' or 'foundational'.... But, for all that, it may serve to provide rational credentials for our beliefs about which character traits are the virtues, not merely re-express them.[103]

Hursthouse eschews any sense of a strong foundationalism in virtue ethics, yet she remains hopeful that meaningful criteria for ethical beliefs can be maintained via McDowell's Neurathian procedure. However, she takes it a step farther than McDowell, in that she tries to graft Foot's naturalism back onto this Neurathian procedure. She sees the goal of virtue ethics as picking out those traits or dispositions that make a person good *qua* human being. What is good *qua* human

[102] What is meant by 'facts' here is also a question, one which I will take up in the conclusion.
[103] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 193.

being is open for Neurathian debate, but there is hope that a first order naturalism can inform the debate in a substantial way.[104] She then notes that she has taken over for her own account of naturalism much of what is said by Philippa Foot, subsequently entering upon a lengthy exposition of Foot's position.[105] The hope, I take it, that Hursthouse has in utilizing Foot's naturalism is, looking back to Neurath's ship, to inform the crew of the purpose and blueprints of what a ship ought to be so that any repairs performed can be successful. Such a goal introduces an important distinction between Hursthouse's Neurathian procedure and McDowell's, a distinction that puts her in a better position to avoid the pitfalls that I have described. She sees the necessity of having a universal direction to the Neurathian procedure, and she seeks to justify that direction by adopting Foot's method, at least in part.

It may seem strange that Hursthouse sees in Foot's naturalism a helpful ally. After all, it is precisely such an external foundation in ethics that Foot is pushing and that Hursthouse argues is a non-starter. But what Hursthouse takes from Foot is the concept of a characteristically human way of going about things. After going through an explication of Foot's point that 'good' is an attributive adjective whose criteria for meaning can change with use, and following this point up with a discussion of how this is illustrated through how we speak of good specimens of plants and animals (to which she has no problem giving an external foundation; for, after all, they cannot choose to alter their way of life),[106] she moves on to question whether this use of 'good' can be extended to humans.

As I mentioned at the end of the second chapter, it is reason that Hursthouse recognizes as the characteristically human way of getting along. But her argument against Foot was that our

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[104] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 194.
[105] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 195-211.
[106] The status of the external claims, i.e. whether they are in fact external in the natural kind sense or whether they are external in the sense that they exist in our own human conceptualizations of nature, remains unclear.

reason calls into question any other characteristically human traits or dispositions. This is the negative side of reason's role in the development of a robust virtue ethics. Hursthouse argues that reason can also serve a positive role in fixing a conception of the virtues. She writes: "The very substantial effect of claiming our characteristic way of going on is in a *rational* way, that is 'in any way or ways that we can rightly see we have reason to do', is that it connects ethical evaluations, in our own mouths, with our own view about what there is reason to do."[107] Just as Foot confronts the practicality requirement placed on ethics by Hume, Hursthouse makes reason the arbiter between our second nature (with ethical claims concerning what dispositions are virtuous) and what we *believe* we have reason to do (in order to live a good human life).[108] I believe the point she is stressing is that our ethical claims (in the form of what we assert are virtues) are normative, and hence action guiding, only if they align with our beliefs concerning the good human life. If they fail to align with our beliefs concerning what we have reason to do as humans, then they are irrational. The only way to evaluate our ethical claims is by means of rationality. In this way normativity finds in rationality a fixed criterion.

But this fixed, first nature account of humans as rational doesn't get us any further than it did with Nussbaum's rational "foundation." Reason is placed between two contingent conceptual schemes both susceptible to revision. We have our second nature virtue scheme that we get through moral education on the one side and some pre-theoretic conception of what it means to be human and what goes into human flourishing on the other. We fool ourselves into thinking that the latter is our first nature when really our first nature is mere rationality ("mere" because it can only operate as an empty formalism) that only gets normative power when it evaluates the one side in relation to the other. This evaluation can go either way, meaning we can change

[107] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 232.
[108] Where what is meant by a "good human life" here I take to be a sort of contingent first nature susceptible to Neurathian revision in the same way our second nature is.

either our virtue concepts or our concept of human flourishing whenever we find that the two have some rational conflict between them. Thus the only grounds for moral reprobation on this view is if an individual's ethical evaluations and their beliefs concerning the good human life do not align with one another. So long as all of their beliefs do align, we have no way to say that they are still getting it wrong. Hursthouse sums the position up by making the point that "[t]o recognize a character trait as a virtue, on the grounds of ethical naturalism, is to recognize the X reasons for acting people with that character trait characteristically have *as* reasons, to recognize them as reasons for oneself."[109] She does not see this as a problem, but simply as an ethical state of affairs to be minimized through moral education. But when asked whether we could ever convince a mafioso to adopt our reasons for action she quotes Aristotle's statement that such a man "would not listen to an argument to dissuade him, or understand it if he did."[110]

What Hursthouse has left us with is a fairly thin conception of ethics. She leaves open the possibility that my reasons for action will have absolutely no pull on another if their moral education is fundamentally different from mine. In other words, pre-reflectively, we think that the mafioso has it wrong, but on Hursthouse's view the only support for such a claim is precisely that we have such a pre-theoretical moral viewpoint. If the lynchpin of an ethics lies only in rational coherence, then two equally coherent yet wildly different ethical systems stand on equally firm ground. They are like two Neurathian ships passing in the night, each undergoing their own internal evaluations. Despite all this I think Hursthouse has the right idea in trying to find some common ground between first and second nature such that we can at least define the borders of a possible second nature ethics using first nature facts. She simply needs a more

[109] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 234.
[110] *NE,* 1179b25.

robust conception of first order nature to give our rationality something to work with. In the conclusion I will gesture at what sort of ethics we may be able to derive from such a picture.

## Chapter V: Conclusion - Towards an Ethical Realism

### 1. A Lived Conception of Humanity

The title of this thesis is "The Promise and Limits of Natural Normativity in a Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics." Thus far I have focused almost solely on the limits. I have investigated two different conceptions of naturalism and the role they may play in devising a coherent virtue ethics and have argued that both have limitations that prevent them from being wholly successful in this role. My hope, however, is that I have also given some indication of what is required if we are to continue within a naturalistic framework in devising a virtue ethics. It is still my belief that naturalism provides the most promising direction to tackle the question concerning our access to ethical realism. In this final chapter I want to offer a brief sketch of how we may get between the horns of the dilemma that Hursthouse mapped out but which, I have argued, she has unsuccessfully navigated.

Both McDowell and Hursthouse recognize that first nature facts constrain possible conceptions of what is a good human life, but they are unclear as to what first nature facts are and they look to second nature as doing the important ethical work. Foot seems to be looking for first nature facts in her development of natural normativity, but she is never clear as to which specific facts she has in mind; or, when she does draw near to particular facts, they seem not to be general enough, such that rational doubt concerning their necessity for human life can sneak in.[111] We need to come to some understanding of what is even meant by first nature facts, an understanding that avoids the pitfalls of being scientific facts only properly accessed from some Archimedean perspective, but that also maintains a form of stable naturalism.

My suggestion hinges on a lived conception of what we mean when we say someone is

[111] The argument from here was that in order to get to a degree of generality that doesn't conflict with the variety of lives open to us given our rationality we must dilute natural facts to such a degree that they fail to offer us any real direction.

human.[112] There are certain considerations concerning our understanding of what we mean by human that need to be factored into any ethical perspective if it is to be plausibly adopted. These are not external scientific facts concerning our species but rather internal limits beyond which the term 'human' loses any recognizable meaning. Much of this is captured in Aristotle's own definition of a human as a rational and social animal. From such a definition we can derive many conclusions concerning what we can and cannot understand as a flourishing or *eudaimon* human life. For instance, a human who consistently fails to implement instrumental reasoning cannot be said to be a flourishing human. Beyond this, a human who fails to recognize the rationality behind being an honest member of society also cannot be said to be flourishing. This is not (or is not only) a failure of one's instrumental reasoning; it is also a failure that is made possible by a misunderstanding of something built into the very concept of a human being, a concept from which we necessarily begin. There is a pre-ethical fact concerning the nature of our concept of what it means to be human. We, as humans, understand a certain value inherent in truth. If we chose a life that rejected such a value in truth it may still be possible to flourish, but it would not be *human* flourishing. In the same way we distinguish non-human animal lives from our own, we can distinguish between our concept of "human" and a multitude of alternative moral lives that hang together but not in a human way. We include in our concept of a human certain dispositions that we have come to value as virtues. This becomes apparent when we say of someone that they have lost their humanity. In a way, they have ceased to be human because what they value and what we understand as valued by a human subject have come apart.

Linking this back to Hursthouse's statement that our Neurathian boat may become like Theseus's ship, it seems the analogy breaks down. The possibility that Hursthouse allows for in this argument requires that we don't simply swap plank for plank, but that we change the shape

[112] What I mean by 'lived conception' should become apparent as my argument unfolds.

of the ship completely. If what we value, and the virtues that fall out of such values, were to be replaced by different values to the point that none of the original values remained, the shape of our concept of a flourishing member of the species would no longer share any similarities with what we now mean by human flourishing. The moral life of such a being would not be the moral life of a human. This lived conception of humanity provides the blueprint for Neurath's boat. It may be argued that this only shows the contingency of any conception of being a human, but my response is that this contingency doesn't apply to *our* conception of being human.[113] That we include ethical considerations in our understanding of what it means to be human shows how the two (ethics and the concept 'human') rely on each other in such a way that to give up the one forces us to give up the other. To deny that our ethics plays such a role in our human concept is to proceed from some ingrained prejudice that our ethics can be jettisoned while our humanity cannot, but this simply is not the case. They stand or fall together. What we need is some middle road that takes seriously the way that non-ethical, natural facts already inform our ethics in a manner that outlines necessary boundaries for any concept of human flourishing. Importantly, these boundaries can only be discovered from within our own ethical perspective, not from some scientific project external to these preconceptions—the perspective I have argued Foot's position entails.

**2. A Precedent Found in Nussbaum**

There is a precedent for the approach I am suggesting. Martha Nussbaum, in "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," offers certain "facts" of a human life that may serve to delineate the parameters of a possible Neurathian project. This paper sits in a strange relation to her paper I was discussing earlier in my thesis, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the

[113] This "our" is not relative, as will be seen in the discussion of Nussbaum which follows.

Foundations of Ethics," in that she acknowledges in the former that "[Aristotle] was not only the defender of an ethical theory based on the virtues, but also the defender of a single objective account of the human good, or human flourishing," further noting that the objectivity of human flourishing is justifiable through reasons that cut across traditions and practices.[114] This seems at odds with her account of ethical evaluations being necessarily internal to our own particular ethical outlook as she maintains in "Aristotle on Human Nature;" yet she does allude to how these two articles can be brought together when she writes in "Aristotle on Human Nature" that Aristotle insists "that the characteristic operations and excellences of practical reasoning, and our sociability, are inseparable from the particular ways in which we find ourselves in the world, as both capable and limited."[115] She goes on to list (in "Aristotle on Human Nature"), briefly, several facts about human existence that perform such limitations upon human capabilities and inform our ethical lives. The examples she gives include our mortality, our ability to feel pain and pleasure, and that we all have certain appetites and desires. Interestingly, she classifies these facts concerning human nature as internal rather than external, but acknowledges that they are a "more or less permanent part of the internal perspective of human beings in many times and places."[116] These comments are made toward the end of "Aristotle on Human Nature," and she points to her earlier paper as the fully worked out version of these comments. So it is this earlier paper, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," to which I now turn in order to see how we may be able to bring these multiple threads of ethical inquiry together into a coherent picture.

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[114] Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach" (hereafter "Non-Relative Virtues") 33.
[115] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 120. Exactly in what way they are inseparable is what remains unclear in Nussbaum's account. My suggestion in the above section points to them being taken up in our conception of "human" in a similar type of argument as Nussbaum's self-validating argument. But Nussbaum's arguments only show the rational and social nature of our being, not what fills in the rational and social relation. My suggestion here is that she needs to take the argument one step further, something she has so far only done in an incomplete way.
[116] Nussbaum, "Human Nature," 120.

In this paper Nussbaum argues that Aristotle picks out particular common human experiences concerning which choices must be made. Every human being at one point or another is confronted with the possibility of bodily harm or death. Every human also experiences appetites for certain pleasures, has needs that can be met only by resources that are limited, and lives in a world populated by other humans who have similar experiences. Because these experiences are common to all humans and all require a choice of some sort, we can ask what it means to choose well in each case. The application of such words as "courage" when confronted with an experience threatening bodily harm or death, "moderation" in regard to our appetite for pleasures, "justice" in meeting one's personal needs when confronted with limited resources, give us a 'thin account' of the virtues that can be filled in by investigating particular instances and extrapolating from them a 'thick' understanding of what we mean. Nussbaum writes: "The job of ethical theory will be to search for the best further specification corresponding to this nominal definition, and to produce a full definition."[117]

Nussbaum goes on to give her own list of such experiences or features common to humanity. She includes on her list mortality, the body, pleasure and pain, cognitive capability, practical reason, early infant development, affiliation (a sense of human fellowship), and humor. These are, according to Nussbaum, all experiences or features that any human life will need to include if it is to be a fully human life, and ethical inquiry seeks to find the best way of accommodating for these necessities. After providing this list she sums up what she believes we can achieve from this line of inquiry. She writes: "We do not have a bedrock of completely uninterpreted 'given' data, but we do have a nuclei of experience around which the constructions of different societies proceed. There is no Archimedean point here, and no pure access to

[117] Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues," 35-35.

unsullied 'nature'—even, here, human nature—as it is in and of itself. There is just human life as it is lived."[118]

**3. Conclusion**

While the notion of naturalism we are left with in the project I have described may seem far removed from what many consider to be nature (understood as what is gotten at through science), in many ways I see it as a more consistent notion. We understand what it means to be human not through some pseudo-objective investigation,[119] but through actual lived experience. Granted this leaves any account open a great deal of interpretation; but I believe that so long as it is done in accordance with a rational, Neurathian style of reflection we have reason to believe that the ethics that result will not be relative in any pejorative sense.[120] We have then, in my "lived conception of humanity" and Nussbaum's universally lived experiences, a bridge between first and second nature. The promise then is that by means of this bridge we can develop a meaningful form of ethical realism that takes from both sides of the naturalism debate, and in so doing avoids each of their respective limitations.

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[118] Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues," 49.

[119] "Pseudo-objective" because it is my contention that any investigation into the content of the concept of 'human' necessarily carries with it the baggage of preconceptions that keep it from ever achieving objectivity in the sense that is taken for granted as the scientific goal.

[120] I make this qualification because the particulars of any ethical explanation will be different, but this is accounted for via a naturalistic description of differing environmental considerations humans need to confront. This allows for a great deal of variance in ways that an ethical life may appear on the surface while still cutting off the possibility of irresolvable ethical conflict.

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