

THE WILL AND THE GOOD

by

Jennifer Ann Frey

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This dissertation was presented

by

Jennifer Ann Frey

It was defended on

August 27, 2012

and approved by

Michael Thompson, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

John McDowell, Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

Stephen Engstrom, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

Kieran Setiya, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

Anselm Müller, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of Trier

Dissertation Director: Michael Thompson, Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh

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Jennifer Frey, Ph.D.

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Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism is a program in normative ethics that attempts to explain moral goodness by showing it to be an instance of natural goodness. The ethical naturalist argues as follows. An activity is naturally good for a living thing if it is characteristic of the species. If virtuous activity is characteristic of the human species, then it is naturally good and normative for human beings. Virtuous activity is so characteristic, and therefore is morally good.

Ethical naturalism has seemed implausible to most moral theorists, because it does not seem to take adequate account of the fact that we humans, as rational creatures, must make up our own minds about how to live. Our conception of human goodness, and the good human life, is a rational one, and so the norms that govern its construction are formal and universally binding for all rational beings. Indeed, it is because we are rational that the norms pertaining to us as members of a determinate animal species cannot be morally relevant. I call this the *irrelevancy objection* against ethical naturalism.

My dissertation argues that the irrelevancy objection is predicated upon a false dichotomy between reason and nature. On the positive account of practical reason and will put forward

here, practical reason cannot operate in absence of some general knowledge of the end for the sake of which it came to be: human form. In practical reasoning, this knowledge of human form is practical—it is the cause of that very life whose understanding it operates under. My claim is that reflection on the nature of action, which is a material reality constituted by an order of reason, shows that there is a formally distinctive practical mode of reasoning that cannot be explained without an appeal to a power of will that naturally tends to certain ends because of the knowledge that they are good. This picture of the will and practical reason shows us how we can block the argument from irrelevancy, and in turn, how we can be ethical naturalists.

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PREFACE

I left my undergraduate days thinking that I wanted to be a crusty Medievalist. I entered graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh two years later, wondering how exactly I had arrived there, and having no clear idea what I was going to do. One decade later I find myself at the very same place I began: thinking and writing about St. Thomas Aquinas. No matter how much contemporary philosophy I absorbed, I was never shaken of the conviction that we have much to learn from him.

I consider myself especially lucky to have studied philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, where I was not only free but explicitly encouraged to engage with historical figures in a critical way. I am particularly grateful to those who have helped shape the ideas that appear in this dissertation, most especially: Alp Aker, Ian Blecher, Matt Boyle, Karin Boxer, Stephen Engstrom, Anton Ford, Matthias Haase, John McDowell, Jessica Moss, Kieran Setiya, and Joshua Stuchlik.

I must single out my gratitude in a special way to my dissertation advisor, Michael Thompson. If I have become anything close to a decent philosopher, it will be on account of the relentlessly high standards to which he has held me over the years. I am quite sure I never met them, but I have certainly become better for trying.

I have also benefitted greatly from philosophical friendships and exchanges that extend well beyond Pittsburgh. In this regard, I am most indebted to Fr. Stephen Brock, Mandel

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I have benefited from sharing portions of this dissertation with larger audiences of philosophers. Portions of what follows were presented at Boston College, Johns Hopkins University, Mt. St. Mary's University, University of Amsterdam, University of Chicago, University College Dublin, and the University of Notre Dame. I am grateful to the members of those audiences for helping me to clarify my own view.

The last two years of my graduate career were spent in Chicago so that my husband could begin his academic career. This meant that I had to give up my funding from my own department, my opportunities to teach philosophy, and much else besides. I would not have survived that period without Thomas Levergood, the executive director of the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago. I am tremendously grateful to him for counting this project worthy of his ongoing support.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family and friends. Both my mother and mother-in-law have logged countless hours watching my four children while I was squirreled away somewhere writing. My brother, Mark Bullio has very patiently edited the first three chapters of this dissertation, as well as provided valuable insight. Thanks are also in order to my sister-in-law, Bridget Bullio, for her friendship and her keen interest in the person and

philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe. And to all my friends who have sustained me over the years, my gratitude is immense.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my husband, Chris Frey. His criticisms of, comments on, and suggestions for my work over the years have been most useful. More importantly, he always had confidence in me when I needed it the most. This dissertation is dedicated to him, in love and gratitude for all he sacrificed to make its completion possible.

1.0 A DIVISION WITHIN REASON

Raphael's *School of Athens* is one of the most famous depictions of wisdom—that which the philosophers is supposed to love above all else. At the center of the fresco we see the figures of two of the greatest philosophers of the Western tradition, Plato and Aristotle. Plato is holding a copy of his cosmological treatise, the *Timaeus*, while Aristotle is holding a copy of his ethical treatise, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In addition to holding two very different kinds of texts, the two philosophers are seen gesturing in opposite directions. We see Plato gesturing vertically and upward along the picture plane, pointing up into the unseen heavens above him; next to him we see his student Aristotle, who gestures horizontally at right angles to the picture plane, as if simultaneously pointing downwards and out beyond the painting itself, into the world.

Though it is often suggested that these differences in text and gesture are meant to represent the contrast between Plato's rationalism and Aristotle's empiricism, a more interesting (and far less philosophically suspect) interpretation is that each philosopher represents the two different manifestations of reason's perfection, wisdom itself. On this interpretation, because he points up to the eternal heavens, Plato represents *sophia*, or theoretical wisdom, while Aristotle, because he points out to the world of action and change, represents *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

Understood in this way, the painting is an especially vivid articulation of a venerable tradition of thought about the nature of the power of reason and its two modes of perfection. According to this tradition, in the theoretical order of reason, the mind seeks to distance itself from the material particulars it encounters through the senses in order to comprehend the universal forms (or concepts) under which each particular is rationally cognized. Theoretical reason is, fundamentally, a movement *away* from particular material things towards a general apprehension of reality on the whole. It is reasoning towards truth and concerns the unity of being, or *what is*. Its work is complete once being can be comprehended as a totality, grasped according to universal first principles of understanding.

In the practical order of reason, by contrast, the movement of thought runs in the opposite direction, from universal first principles down to the particular, material actions in the world that in some way instantiate or preserve them. Practical reason is the movement of thought *towards*, rather than away from, material particulars. As I shall argue in what follows, practical reasoning is a movement from general knowledge of what is good and how to live, towards the production of the kind of life that is essentially characterized by such knowledge. When it is done well, what is understood is the same as what is produced: human form or human life.

So the practical order is meaningfully different from the theoretical order of reason, though they are orders of one and the same power. They differ according to their ends, and therefore according to their formal objects. The practical order is not essentially the order of reality and truth, but the order of action and the good. It is not the order of the explanation of form, but the order of the *exemplification* or *realization* of form.

In what follows, I argue that if there is a genuine, philosophically significant division within the activity of reason, it must be as Raphael so memorably depicted it: one grounded in

the two distinctive ways of directing the human capacity for knowledge, either toward the truth about being (what is), or towards the realization of what ought to be (the good).

2.0 ACTION, ETHICS, AND HUMAN LIFE

Since man is, for better or worse, and by the most distinctive impulse of his nature, a reflective and interpretive animal, always seeking *rerum cognoscere causa*, to find in the bare data of experience more than meets the eye, the record of the reactions of his intellect upon the brute facts of his sensible existence constitutes, at the least, as essential a part of the natural history of the species, or sub-species, which has somewhat too flatteringly named itself *homo sapiens*; and I have never been able to see why what is distinctive in the natural history of that species should appear—especially to a member of it—a less respectful subject of study than the natural history of the paramecium or the white rat.

Alfred O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*

Action theorists tend to think of their discipline as neatly carved off from moral theory; moral theorists, in turn, often proceed as if the question of the nature and explanation of action is, if not unimportant, at least off stage. And almost no one seems to think that either discipline is concerned with concepts that are specific to human life. In what follows, I am going to argue that these standard assumptions are all mistaken. I will argue that it is impossible to understand the action of a living thing without reference to the life form for the sake of which the action comes to be. If that is the case, then it is impossible to explain human action except by reference to the human life form, which is the unifying end for the sake of which all action and desire is ultimately explained. Moreover, I argue that to reference human form is to reference human excellence or the human good, and that human goodness just is moral goodness. And if it is correct to identify human form, human good, and moral good, then the explanation of human

action necessarily involves reference to moral goodness, and action theory and moral theory are not as separate as analytic philosophers have always assumed.

The argument proceeds in several stages. I begin by discussing *ethical naturalism*, a moral theory that attempts to identify human goodness and moral goodness, by utilizing the concept of natural good and defect. The promise of ethical naturalism is that it will show us that human goods are objectively grounded in facts about human life, and that right practical reasoning will secure these goods for us when we act in accordance with reason's grasp of these facts, which is to act in accordance with virtue.

The ethical naturalist's master thought is this: man needs the virtues just as much as a bee needs its sting. Such a thought is intriguing insofar as it takes the ethereal and elusive 'moral ought' and brings it back down to earth, by locating it within a wider structure of evaluation we already readily grasp and acknowledge as objectively valid. It is also intriguing as it holds out the promise of explaining why certain human goods are intrinsically valuable in a way that is consistent with explaining how the goods of any form of life are intrinsically valuable to it. It should be no more or less surprising that human beings seek the goods that pertain to their form of life, than that any other living thing does.

In the third chapter I consider an objection against ethical naturalism, which I call the *irrelevancy objection*. The worry the objection articulates is fairly simple. Though there may be natural norms that pertain to human life, insofar as the human will is governed by norms of reason, goodness of will stands in need of a *sui generis* account which will hold for all rational beings. In order for the ethical naturalist to block this objection, I argue that she must be able to show that practical norms are not species transcendent, but norms that govern our specifically

human form of life. This is no small task, and upon scrutiny, I argue that the ethical naturalist does not manage to carry it out effectively.

Rosalind Hursthouse tries to meet this requirement by showing that the virtues are necessary for the attainment of the four ends shared by all sophisticated social animals, which maps out the basic structure of goodness for that form of life. We achieve these ends through the virtues, which is the rational way characteristic of our species. Hursthouse's view fails on several counts, the most problematic of which is that she is unable to show how an appeal to these norms can be made salient from a practical point of view. Hursthouse's norms appear to be natural but not practical.

Philippa Foot runs into similar problems. Unlike Hursthouse, she recognizes that natural norms *must* appear salient from a practical point of view. Foot tries to meet this condition by understanding practical reason as a recognitional faculty that tracks intrinsically valuable human goods (i.e., facts about the natural history of human beings). Such an account shows how the norms that govern the will are natural, because they are internal to the natural history of our life form. Such norms are also practical because, as objects of practical reason, they have an "essential connection with the will" and are intrinsically motivating. Action springs from practical insight into the human good.

Although Foot's account may initially seem promising, it fails because it tries to meet the practicality requirement by invoking human goods as the special subject matter of practical thought. I argue that practical thought is not practical in virtue of its content, and thought about human goodness is not intrinsically motivating, not even to the virtuous person. I argue that however thoughts about the human form are related to right practical reasoning, it cannot enter at the level of content, because it cannot enter our practical reasoning as a premise.

The trouble the ethical naturalist faces is that the kind of third personal facts about the species that one finds in a theory of natural normativity has its natural home in theoretical, rather than practical thought. So long as the only picture we have of these facts is third personal and theoretical, they are plainly irrelevant to moral theory. I end chapter three with the conclusion that if ethical naturalism is going to be a plausible alternative to Kantianism or Humeanism, then the ethical naturalist must be able to show how the knowledge of our life form can be *practical*.

At the beginning of the fourth chapter, I pose a dilemma for the ethical naturalist. I argue that if she takes the first horn, and stresses that ethical naturalism provides objective, natural norms as the ground of our moral beliefs, then she fails to meet her own practicality requirement. If she takes the second horn, and stresses how ethical naturalism yields a picture of knowledge of human form that is practical because it comes through virtue, then we lose our grip on how the knowledge is based on natural, objective facts about the species, potentially accessible from a third personal, external perspective.

I then proceed to show that Aquinas has a theory which shows us how we might resolve this dilemma, as he provides an account of the teleology of practical reason that is ultimately grounded in the natural *telos* of human nature, which is the integrated good of the human life form, or happiness. On his account, the will is a natural, vital power, because it has a natural or inherent tendency towards the integrated, complete good of man, which in turn provides a criterion for right practical reasoning. And practical reason is a natural, vital power that is naturally apt to recognize certain ends as good.

I do not argue that Aquinas's theory is true, because we cannot know if it is true until we have a theory of the kind of knowledge of human nature on which it rests. This knowledge is

practical knowledge of human nature, and Aquinas thinks that every sane, mature adult possesses it, for the simple reason that human action is impossible to explain without an appeal to it.

In my fifth and final chapter, I begin to give an account of such knowledge, starting with the knowledge that we have of our own actions. I argue that reflection on the explanation of intentional action shows us that an action is a material reality whose principle comes from an act of practical reason and will. In understanding action, we see how practical, non-observational knowledge of the end is necessary in order to explain a material reality. This fits within a larger picture of the movements of living things in general. In order to have this practical knowledge of particular ends, one must have general knowledge of the ends of one's life. For us as agents, this knowledge is practical knowledge of our own nature and ends. I argue that such knowledge is not practical wisdom. Rather, it is the knowledge that any human actor has insofar as he acts intentionally: practical knowledge of life form, or the general good for man.

3.0 NATURAL NORMATIVITY AND PRACTICAL NORMATIVITY

3.1 AN OBJECTION TO ETHICAL NATURALISM

In her famous critique of various “modern” presuppositions in moral philosophy, Elizabeth Anscombe argued that philosophers ought to give up on the idea that there is a sense of ‘ought’ that is specifically *moral*, as we no longer have available to us a notion of divine law that could possibly ground its legitimacy.¹ Moreover, even if we could somehow make sense of an appeal to such a categorical ‘ought’ without wading too far into theological waters, she urges us to notice that moral philosophy can get along rather well without it. She suggests that we look for the ground of normative claims regarding human life and action in our knowledge of our own “species,” when this is understood “not just biologically, but from the *point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life*.”²

Anscombe’s suggestion that we look for the sources of practical normativity in the idea of the human species or human nature has been taken up by an increasingly diverse group of moral theorists, often referred to as the “Neo-Aristotelians.”³ Neo-Aristotelians attempt to ground their accounts of the goodness of the virtues in some idea of human “flourishing,” “living well,” or simply, “living a good human life.” The virtues, the Neo-Aristotelian argues, are the

1 Anscombe (2005, 169ff).

2 Anscombe (2005, 188, emphasis added).

3 Some philosophers that can be grouped under this heading are: Peter Geach (1977), David Braine (1988), Warren Quinn (1994), Alasdair MacIntyre (1999), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Philippa Foot (2001), Julia Annas (2005), Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008), and Michael Thompson (2008).

states of character that make living a good human life possible. Without the virtues, we simply cannot live and act well.

On these accounts, what one ‘ought’ to do, quite generally, is what the virtuous person would do in similar circumstances, where the virtuous person is a representation of the ideal human being, one who most fully exemplifies human life or human form. Thus, when we say that one ‘ought’ to keep her promises, the ethical naturalist wants to say that we do not mean that she has a special, ‘moral’ obligation to do this. Rather, what we mean is that it befits or is especially suitable for her to act from the virtue of fidelity, just as it befits or is especially suitable for her to eat fruit in order to maintain her health. The norms at play here, the ethical naturalist suggests, are not as different as we might be initially inclined to think. We might even say, with Plato, that virtue is the healthy state of human beings, while vice is a kind of disease.⁴

The ethical naturalist is not content with vague analogies to health. She wants to make a direct comparison between judgments of how human beings ought to live with judgments about living things in general: just as a virtuous man is one with good dispositions of will in a man, which are the dispositions necessary for a good human life, a good oak tree is one that has strong, deep roots, which are the kind of roots necessary for a good oak life. Here the sense of necessity is taken from Aristotle, and means that “without which good cannot be or come to be.”⁵ Goodness of will is a form of natural goodness, then, because the capacity to will in a human being, like the capacities of growth in an oak tree, is a natural, vital capacity, whose acts can be judged good or bad as necessary for a good human life. Because of the emphasis it places on *natural goodness* and vital powers, let us call this view *ethical naturalism*.

⁴ See *Crito*, 47c8-48a-4 and *Republic* 403c-404e.

⁵ *Metaph.* 1015a20-27. See also Anscombe (1981c, 15). The idea is that the virtues are necessary for human goodness to be or come to be, just as strong deep roots are necessary for Oak goodness to be or come to be.

The ethical naturalist's master thought is that judgments of practical normativity—about what it is good for us to be, do, and have in general—are just one species of a much broader genus, judgments of natural normativity.⁶ On this account, moral virtue is an instance of natural goodness while vice is an instance of natural defect—specifically, defect of will and practical reasoning. Since moral judgments are judgments of good and bad action, they are judgments of whether a natural power is operating well or badly. Thus, Philippa Foot argues that

evaluations of human will and action share a conceptual structure with evaluations of characteristics and operations of other living things, and can only be understood in these terms.⁷

And also that

there is no change in the meaning of 'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will.'⁸

Foot insists that the only real change when we make the transition in thought from plants and animals to human beings is one of "context" and "purpose."⁹ The formal account of natural goodness and normativity remains exactly the same.

The ethical naturalist's claim that moral judgment is of the same logical type as judgments about the life of the species is obviously controversial, and objections against it immediately begin to crowd in from all sides. The objection that has gained the most traction, I think, is what I call the irrelevancy objection. Suppose that we grant the ethical naturalist her theory of natural normativity, and suppose that we grant her that there are many natural norms that govern human life (norms of physical health, say, and bodily integrity).¹⁰ We might still deny that the norms that govern the power of will and practical reason are or could be natural

⁶ Philippa Foot puts it this way: "Moral judgment of human actions and dispositions is one example of a genre of evaluation itself actually characterized by the fact that its objects are living things." (2001, 4)

⁷ Foot (2000, 5).

⁸ Foot (2000, 39).

⁹ Foot (2000, 39).

¹⁰ Of course, many will not. See especially Williams (1985, chapter 3) FitzPatrick (2000), and Murphy (2003).

norms that pertain to our species alone. Though it is *natural* to man to reason about how to live—all properly constituted human beings do this—the account of this has nothing to do with substantive facts about the specific sort of material life form we bear. Assuming that “the activity of thought and choice” Anscombe underscores are activities governed by norms of reason, then the good that is central to the project of moral theory does not appear to be naturally constituted at all.

We tend to understand rational norms as formal canons that are universally binding on all beings with a power of reason. If this standard account of the norms of right reason is correct, then nothing about the vicissitudes of one form of material life over another could possibly make a difference either to the constitution or force of such norms.

The *irrelevancy objection* questions the importance of the concept ‘human being’ for a properly philosophical theory of ethics, because it looks like a mere placeholder for something more interesting and important: rational agency, or a rational form of life. Rational norms, which by definition are purely formal and universal, appear to supplant natural norms in an ethics that is not merely empirical and anthropological.

Besides looking to Kant as a source for this line of resistance, one might turn to Aristotle himself.¹¹ After all, in his ethical treatises, Aristotle does not concern himself with different species of living things at all. Rather, he speaks about different levels or kinds of life: vegetable, animal, rational. And the upshot of his famous “function” argument is that the standard of a good human life and action just is “activity of the soul in accordance with reason.”¹² But if living well as a human being just is to live in accordance with reason, then it looks like what we ethicists should really be after is a theory of *rational* norms, or a theory of a power of practical

¹¹ Certainly, this is how Christine Korsgaard reads Aristotle. See Korsgaard (2009, chapter 4).

¹² NE, 1098a4-5.

reason and will that might be present to guide any manner of different material forms of life. But whether reason and will breaks out in a featherless biped on earth or a lizard-like creature on Mars, it will be governed by the same canon of formal norms—consistency, coherence, universalizability, and so forth—and its commands, though they might be materially differentiated in various ways, will all have the rational form in virtue of which they are genuinely obligatory.

If we put this line of objection into the form of an argument against ethical naturalism, it would look like this:

- 1) All norms of reason are formal, and so species transcendent. They are the same norms for any finite, rational being.
- 2) Natural norms of the human species are not species transcendent, by definition.
- 3) So, natural norms of the human species are not norms of practical reason.
- 4) A rational will is good iff it adheres to the species transcendent norms of practical reason.
- 5) So, natural norms of the human species are irrelevant to the goodness or badness of the will.
- 6) Moral judgments are about the goodness or badness of the practically rational will.
- 7) So, natural norms of the human species are irrelevant to the soundness of moral judgments.
- 8) Moral theory is concerned with the principles for making sound moral judgments.
- 9) So, natural norms of the human species are irrelevant to moral theory.

The burden is on the ethical naturalist, I take it, to show that premises one and four are false. And she clearly *must* be able to show this. For so long as it remains open to us to think that

practically rational norms are species transcendent, then we will inevitably conclude that whatever natural norms are to be found in human beings, they can have no bearing on our assessment of the rational will.

The irrelevancy objection is clearly just a more sophisticated version of an accusation of committing the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ But rather than reject *any* move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, the irrelevancy objection merely blocks the inference at one crucial juncture—the inference from the ‘is’ of any particular species of living thing, to the ‘ought’ that governs the rational will as such. The challenge for the ethical naturalist, in light of this move, is to be able to say that it is a philosophical error of some kind to think that we can separate a theory of the rational will and the norms that govern it, from reflection upon the human life form. The ethical naturalist must show that rational norms are natural norms; that is, she must show how it can be possible that the norms that govern excellent practical reasoning and willing are norms of specifically human life. When we look to the writings of the ethical naturalists, however, we find no account of the error in question, and no convincing argument as to how practically rational norms can be natural. In this chapter, I argue that what the ethical naturalist fails to show is how we can reconcile two seemingly opposed forms of teleology—that of life, on the one hand, and that of rational choice on the other.

Before we can arrive at this conclusion, however, we must first become clearer about our target.

3.2 VIRTUES AS NATURAL GOODS

The goal of this section is to be clear about what ethical naturalism claims about moral judgment, and to show that these claims rest upon a theory of natural goodness. This is a somewhat difficult task, as there are notable points of divergence between different ethical naturalists.¹³ In what follows, I do not exhaustively canvas the literature. Instead, I elaborate the strongest account that I think can be culled from it. I then show that ethical naturalism, as it is articulated so far, lacks the conceptual resources to meet the irrelevancy objection head-on.

3.2.1 Natural Normativity

The easiest way into any account of natural goodness and defect comes by reflecting on the reality of defect, lack, failure, harm, and disability in the realm of the living. We all know from everyday experience that many living things fail to be good exemplars of their kind: we see crops that are brown and disease ridden, animals that have missing limbs or poor eyesight, and cases where nature has gone totally awry, sending forth conjoined twins or two headed snakes. What the ethical naturalist has noticed is that it is impossible to identify defect, disability, or harm in any *particular* living thing, except against one's general knowledge of the species the particular exemplifies or instances (albeit highly imperfectly).¹⁴ And that's because what it is for any

¹³ Some ethical naturalists, like Stephen Brown (2008), argue that ethical naturalists should be reductivists, while others, like Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) and Julia Annas (2005), seem to offer a kind of quasi-reductive account by focusing on the importance of our *mere* animality for moral theory, where *mere* animality is construed as some kind of sub-rational metaphysical foundation upon which our rationality is somehow super-added. It is a virtue of the theory of Alasdair MacIntyre (1999), Philippa Foot (2000) and Michael Thompson (2004) (2008) that they resolutely locate ethical thought in our capacity for practical reason, and do not seem to want to seek a ground outside of it.

¹⁴ This knowledge can be vague and inarticulate (and most often is). We needn't be expert gardeners or botanists to judge that a flower is faring well or poorly. Sometimes we must be—for example, upon encountering some kind of

particular living thing to be defective in some respect, is just for it to fail to have, be, or to be able to get for itself what it *needs* in order to be what it is, at least in the fullest sense.

In order to be able to recognize an *F* as a living thing with specific needs, one must already have some general knowledge of what it is to be an *F*. More specifically, one must have some kind of general knowledge of the tendencies and activities that are characteristic of the species to which it belongs—that it tends to bloom in Spring, for example. This is not the knowledge of a highly trained specialist. This is the sort of knowledge any human being will come to possess quite a bit of, just in virtue of growing up in a world that is full of living things.

Seeing as we do live and come to acquire language in such a world, we know that living things have *needs*, and we know that in the absence of whatever is necessary to fulfill them, these living things are straightforwardly harmed. A plant without sunlight or water is unable to carry out the activities that characteristically exemplify plant life. The details of this are played out at the level of the individual species, and sub-species. For example, sunflowers, in absence of exposure to sunlight for most of the day, will develop a weak stem that eventually breaks under the weight of the flower's enormous head. Since this sunflower needs a robust and strong stem in order to maintain its form of life, a weak stem is a defect in it. This separates the sunflowers from shade plants like pansies, which would wilt in those same conditions. A pansy has a short and flimsy stem, and unproblematically so. Of course, one who knows nothing about pansies or sunflowers will not know this.¹⁵

rare jungle plant whose flourishing appears to the uninitiated as some form of disease—but for the most part we can tell, just by looking, how things are going for it generally.

¹⁵ Even more specifically, one must have some knowledge of this particular species of pansy in order to know whether those brown spots on its leaves are normal for it, rather than a sign of distress.

Because this general knowledge of life forms is so central to an account of natural normativity, it will benefit the discussion to briefly (though incompletely) characterize what a life form is and what sort of judgments we make of them.¹⁶

Suppose you see some green stuff stuck to a rock and you want to know whether it is alive and growing on the rock, or whether it is something that has merely been stuck there, like some gelatinous slime from a kid's toy box, or a bit of chewed up gum. Suppose you come to realize that the stuff is Spanish moss. Your ability to do that depends upon your seeing in the particular something general—what Anscombe calls the species, and what Thompson calls the life form.

A life form is something general, knowledge of which is always implicit in the representation of an individual of its kind. A life form is a kind of substance sortal, susceptible to classification such as

“This *a* is an S.”

A substance sortal is characterized by what David Wiggins calls “some particular way of behaving, coming to be, being, being qualified, or passing away.”¹⁷ So we can use it in kind characterizing generic sentences such as:

“S's are (have, do) F.”

“The S is (has, does) F.”

“An S is (has, does) F.”

Michael Thompson calls these “natural-historical judgments,” since they register facts about the life form that falls under the subject term. Such judgments yield informative sentences that Thompson calls “Aristotelian categoricals.” Some examples are:

¹⁶ My goal in this discussion is to say just enough about this category to be able to comprehend it. For a robust defense, see Michael Thompson (2004) and (2008, chapter one).

¹⁷ Wiggins (1997, 417).

“Beavers build dams.”

“The beaver builds dams.”

“A beaver builds dams.”

Now, when such generic statements are “essence-expressing generics” as Julius Moravcsik calls them,¹⁸ they are not propositions about what individuals always and in every case have or do. For while it is true to say that ‘Horses have four legs’, this claim is not vitiated by an encounter (or even many encounters) with a three legged horse. Nor do these propositions express what members of a kind ‘typically do’ in a sense that is empirically informed by statistical generalizations. For while it is true to say generally that “Mayflies breed shortly before dying,” most mayflies die well before they breed. We cannot get to the truth of the proposition from a mere survey of what happens to be going on with populations of Mayflies at any point. This shows that these judgments have a unique logical form, and capture what Aristotle seems to have meant when he said that certain claims hold, not exceptionlessly or even in a statistically significant range of cases, but *hos epi to polu*, or “for the most part.”¹⁹

Though not empirical, neither do these judgments purport to describe things in some form of an idealized subjunctive that would express how things would be for members of a species in specifiable “ideal conditions.” And that is because the specification of “ideal” conditions, as anyone who studies physics knows, does not necessarily have any existential import, whereas what is specified by a natural historical judgment does. There must exist, or have at some point in history have existed, something corresponding to the subject term of the judgments in question; a natural historical judgment does not concern a mere abstraction or idealization, but

¹⁸ Moravcsik (1994).

¹⁹ This is not to say that something like a *ceteris paribus* clause is what restricts the generality. For a further discussion of the reasons against such a move, see Thompson (2008, 69-73).

something that is in some sense—either past or present—a real, material substance in the world.²⁰

Relatedly, these judgments are typically made in some form of a timeless present tense, and thus do not reference the here and now, but rather, something that can, in principle, be instantiated at various times and places. Though these judgments can be ordered in relations of before or after, they do not concern a specific occasion. Thus, we can say that our judgments reference what ‘beavers’ do in the course of a typical year of beaver life, but not what particular ones did over the course of this past year in Vermont, or in the summer of ‘75 in Yosemite.

Nor (and this cannot be stressed enough) are these judgments equivalent to hypotheses about the past, especially not to hypotheses regarding what accounts for the tendency of S’s to have or do F (say, on an account that appeals to a process of natural selection). The ethical naturalist’s category of species or life form is *not* the same as that employed by the evolutionary biologist, nor does it somehow stand in competition with that notion.²¹ The biological concept of species is a theory-laden concept that we need not (and of course, typically do not) deploy in order to make the kind of layperson’s judgments now under discussion.²² A representation of something as alive is logically more primitive than the concept of a biological species, since the evolutionary biologist would fail to have a topic of inquiry if she could not first merely represent

²⁰ The operative word here is “mere,” since there is clearly some bit of idealization at work in these judgments, as they can be said to describe what “typifies” or is “paradigmatic” of the species, and this is always in some sense to make reference to an ideal. The main point to stress is that such idealization is based on the existence of a concrete material substance. As Moravcsik writes, “A species is not just a property. It is a class of actual and derivatively possible entities, causally connected, and with a common causal origin” (1994, 232).

²¹ Many readers of Foot have failed to appreciate this point about the theory. See Murphy (2003) and FitzPatrick (2000), to take two prominent examples. Though his analysis is more nuanced, I would say the same of Millgram (2009), in so far as he takes it to be plausible that “evidence” of what is naturally normative for human beings must come from the empirical (and in particular, the biological) sciences. For an especially emphatic refutation of the idea that this knowledge could be based on observational evidence (let alone evidence that comes from the application of sound evolutionary biological principles), see Thompson (2004).

²² In fact, one could plausibly formulate the claim in even stronger terms: What I am calling a “life form” is necessary in order for the evolutionary biologist so much as to have a topic for study. For reasons of space, I will not here defend such a claim, though I think it is true.

something *as* a particular living being or life form. One does not need any such theory to experience certain things as animate in contrast to others as inanimate. What interests the ethical naturalist is this sort of representation, the pre-theoretical representation of life, or our encounter with life in what Sellars called “the manifest image.”²³

The biological notion of species is further differentiated from the category of life form in that it is an empirical concept, one that we come to possess through observation and inference. The notion of a life-form, by contrast, is not a concept at all, neither “innate” nor “acquired.”²⁴ Rather, much like Frege’s concept/object distinction, it signifies an *a priori* form of description or predication, one that we employ whenever it is possible to represent something as *alive*. The philosopher is able to articulate this form of description through rational reflection upon our deployment of it in our true judgments about living things. The idea is that when we reflect on our thought about the living in general, we can come to see that our capacity to represent something as alive—as engaged in any *life* process such as eating, growing, reproducing—is bound up in a certain *a priori* framework or of interrelated judgments. Making that framework of judgment explicit is not a project the evolutionary biologist is or should want to be engaged in.

I emphasize these differences because many ethical naturalists are not explicit enough about them, and this has led to some confusion about what the theory is really up to. I hope that by now it is clear why no empirical concept of species could play any role in a sound doctrine of natural normativity, and thus we do not need to look to biology, ethology, zoology, botany, or

²³ On the scientific versus the manifest image, see Sellars (1962). Whether we wish to reduce, eliminate, or throw a fictional operator around this image is a separate question that does not concern me here. All that I wish to point to is the fact that the ethical naturalist is interested in our common experience of things as living. This makes sense, since the ethical naturalist is interested in ethics and what is choiceworthy for the will. And from the point of view of choice is the point of view of tables, chairs, mid-sized objects, in addition to rights, contracts, and much else besides. This should also serve to block the sort of objections one finds against ethical naturalism from within the theory of evolution. For those objections, see FitzPatrick (2000) and Street (2006).

²⁴ Rödl (2007) and (2011) would call it a formal concept. I have found, however, that once the word concept is used, most philosophers will only ask whether it is innate or acquired. I find the term unhelpful for that reason.

any other science in order to construct a proper ethics. For it is supposed to be characteristic of ethical naturalism (as opposed to other forms of naturalism) that it is non-reductive in the strong sense that it affirms the following: any account of moral judgment cannot and does not need to be reduced to any form of explanation that pertains to any of the empirical sciences.²⁵ We cannot move from the ‘is’ of empirical science to the ‘ought’ of moral theory.

Of course, not all “essence expressing generics” demand explanation by a form of predication, but what is supposed to be special about what can fall under the subject term of a natural historical judgment is that it does. But the reason for this is not explained by anything said about them so far. What is predicated of the subject in a natural historical judgment is always such that it can be an element in a “natural history story,” because these judgments articulate the relations of dependence among the various parts, aspects, and phases of the activity of a given kind of life taken as a whole. Thus they can appear in teleological combinations, as in:

“S’s (have, do) F in order that S’s (have, do) G.”

- (1) Beavers have powerful jaws in order that beavers chop down trees.
- (2) Beavers chop down trees in order that beavers build dams.
- (3) Beavers build dams in order that beavers store food for the winter.

Such combinations form a system of inter-related judgments. ‘Why?’ and ‘What’s next?’ are questions that, when applied to the activity of any particular living thing, have answers that will

²⁵ Ethical naturalists are not always as careful about this point as they need to be. Hursthouse, to take one example, goes so far as to say that her claims are “objective,” precisely because “scientific.” (1999, 202). She does not seem to appreciate that (1) this is a contentious and radically un-Aristotelian account of objectivity, and (2) even if true would render her own theory basically useless. Julia Annas follows Hursthouse. In her article on virtue and naturalism (2005) we read that “the way we should live and act” should be informed by what we can find out from the sciences about nature, “including aspects of ourselves that form part of that nature.” (2005, 11)

take the form of natural facts about that living thing's general kind. A life form is what is suited to be the subject of just this sort of teleological system.²⁶

The preceding materials give us all the conceptual resources we need to define an abstract category of natural goodness and defect, by employing the following form of inference among the "facts" that natural historical propositions pick out.

"S's have F & This S has F." [natural historical fact & fact about particular of the species]

"S's have F & This S does *not* have F."

E.g., "Beavers have powerful jaws and this beaver has a powerful jaw."

E.g., "Beavers have powerful jaws and this beaver does not."

We can infer a normative judgment of natural goodness or defect from this:

This S is good in that it has F.

This S is defective, bad, or lacking in that it does *not* have F.

E.g., This beaver is good in that it has a powerful jaw.

E.g., This beaver is defective in that it does *not* have a powerful jaw.

That there are these two kinds of judgments of "facts" in relation to one another—natural-historical judgments, which relate *general* statements of facts about the life form as such, and judgments about the facts of what is happening with a *particular*, individual member of the species, here and now—is what makes judgments of natural goodness and defect possible. It is because we can say that 'A beaver has powerful jaws in order to chop down trees for its dams'

²⁶ Philippa Foot tries to capture this thought by talking about how some feature must serve a "function" in the life-cycle of S (2000, 30-32). I think this talk of function is a mistake for three reasons. First, because we are at present unable to disentangle the practical (and thus psychological) from the non-practical sense of the term. Second, even if we can hear this word in a non-psychological register, we are apt to confuse it with an account that ultimately reduces final causal explanation to efficient causal explanation or probabilistic explanation, if that is supposed to be something different. And third, this way of speaking makes "the life cycle" sound like some end over and above the activities in question, which it is not.

that we can say of *this* beaver that it is gnawing on that tree *because* it is building a dam, or that *this* beaver is defective in that it fails in this task on account of having a loose jaw.

That we do make such inferences from natural facts to normative judgments suggests that our description of what a life form is also provides a standard against which we judge whether it is doing well or badly. This standard of goodness or badness is immanent to the life form itself: to do well just is to most completely or most fully exemplify one's life form. No more, and no less.

3.2.2 The Logical Grammar of Natural Goodness

The fact that there are natural norms in human beings and living things more generally does not entail that ethical or rational norms are a species of natural norms; the burden is clearly on the ethical naturalist to establish that rational norms are natural norms. In Foot's case, the argument to this effect begins from certain commitments about the semantics of goodness in general.

Following Peter Geach,²⁷ Foot wants to exploit the fact that the adjective 'good', like 'big' or 'small' and unlike 'yellow' or 'straight', is logically attributive rather than predicative. An attributive adjective is one whose meaning is specified by the nature of that to which the substantive noun it modifies refers. On Geach's account, there is nothing that it is to be 'good' in general, as there is something that it is to be 'yellow' in general; good is not a separably definable property in the way that yellow is. This thought can be brought out by looking at the difference in entailments between propositions that use these two different kinds of adjectives. Consider that one can make the following pattern of inference with predicative adjectives:

From the truth of the proposition

²⁷ Geach (1956).

x is a yellow bird,

one can infer the truth of the following conjunction

x is a bird & x is yellow.

However, from the truth of the proposition

x is a good lawyer,

one cannot infer the truth of the following conjunction

x is a lawyer & x is good.

Perhaps x is a lawyer and is also quite bad—not as a lawyer, of course, but in some more substantive sense.²⁸

Geach concludes that we can only truly speak about there being goodness when we are speaking about a good such-and-such—a good knife, house, lawyer, or human being.²⁹ On this account, what is good for an F depends on what we substitute in for F , where F must be a “descriptive noun.” Good has no independent, “objective” meaning; rather, good has “descriptive force,” which depends essentially on the descriptive noun it is modifying in whatever context it is being attributed.

Though what is good for an F depends on what F is, not just any noun can be substituted in for F on Geach’s account. For example, there is no such thing as a good state of affairs, a good event, or a good possible world. These terms are far too general to have the necessary

²⁸ We can also make the point going the other way around. Suppose you start with the conjunction of x is a good tennis player & x is a chess player. This does not entail that x is a good chess player, whereas the conjunction x is a red car and x is a Mercedes does entail that x is a red Mercedes. I owe this example to Thomson (2008, 4ff).

²⁹ It is an important question whether this is the correct account of the logic of evaluation in general, or whether Geach has picked out just one kind of evaluation, the account of which fits alongside others (such as mere recommendation or subjective endorsement, which might depend on a predicative account in limited cases). After all, there are other ‘attributive’ adjectives: ‘big’, ‘tall’, ‘slow’, and ‘heavy’, to name a few. Though I cannot adequately argue the case here, I think the right way to understand Geach’s theory is to say that the attributive use of good is primitive or primary, in that any other account ultimately presupposes the truth of what he is saying. On this reading, while there may be cases where good functions predicatively, ultimately the account of why that is so will fall back on an attributive case, and that ultimately what is subjectively endorsed must be understood in terms of human projects and needs. We might say, following G.E.L. Owen (1960) that this is its “focal meaning.” Until this sort of case can be argued, R.M. Hare’s (1957) objections against Geach will be legitimate.

descriptive force. Likewise, we cannot speak meaningfully of a good smudge, stick, or dot, as these things are not what Thomson calls “goodness fixing kinds.”³⁰ Something is a goodness-fixing kind if being an F sets a substantive standard that any particular F has to meet if it is to be good *qua* F. This account of the grammar of goodness depends on an idea of an internal or immanent measure. A pebble has no such measure. There is nothing being a pebble is such that it sets a standard any pebble must meet if it is to be a good pebble.

What is especially noteworthy about this view is that it brings to light scores of cases in which the so-called fact-value dichotomy collapses. It allows us to say that something is good or bad by reference to what it *is*. This not only shows that we *can* be legitimately infer an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, but also that it is necessary to do so in a vast range of cases.³¹

As important as I take Geach’s point to be, I would caution against making too much of it. In particular, we should not be tempted to think that we can build up out of these materials a general theory of normativity, into which ‘natural norms’ will easily be subsumed. Judith Jarvis Thomson, for instance, writes as if being a toaster, umbrella, tennis player, liar, beefsteak tomato, tiger, or human being all equally fit her general category of “goodness fixing kind,” which serves as the conceptual foundation of her general theory of normativity. She does not at all seem impressed by the thought that there are any philosophically salient differences between the account of the goodness we would give of an artifact, such as a toaster, and the account of the goodness we would give of a living thing, such as a human being.³² This comes out especially

³⁰ (2008, 21ff).

³¹ Neither Geach nor Thomson has shown that this account defines all legitimate uses of good. On this point, see Hare (1957), and more recently, Smith (2010).

³² The only difference she mentions in this regard is that artifacts have “functions” because they are “manufactured,” whereas living things are not manufactured, and thus it makes no sense to ascribe a specific function to them. But since Foot is happy to talk about “function” with respect to activities and characteristics of living things, this does not really seem to get at the fundamental difference between the two. Hursthouse also speaks in the same terms (1999, 195).

clearly when we look at her account of virtue, which is based on her attributive theory of goodness and normativity. She argues that

being a courageous person—a conscientious person, a loyal person, a prudent person—is a virtue in a person. These are moral virtues, of course, but it is worth noticing that they are, also, (simply) virtues in their possessors, and that they are so in light of meeting the very same condition the meeting of which marks being a sharp carving knife as a virtue in a carving knife.³³

The difference between a “moral” virtue and any other is just that its explanation depends on a reference to “moral” capacities, rather than merely “physical” capacities.

However we are supposed to parse the division between the “moral” and the “physical,” I hope that we can already see how this line of thought goes wrong. Though a life form is certainly a “goodness fixing kind,” we should not think that we can take for granted a general notion of “goodness fixing kind” and then simply add to it whatever we think we need in order to get to a life form and the kind of goodness that pertains to it. That method of division will not help us. For we’ve already seen that the sort of goodness or badness that pertains to living things is supposed to be categorically unique, because it makes essential reference to a teleologically ordered system of judgments. And if that is so, then we cannot just slot them into a general theory of normativity that builds upon the idea of a goodness fixing kind. Likewise, if the virtues are supposed to be naturally normative for human beings, then we cannot just slot them into a general theory of virtue for all goodness fixing kinds.

Therefore our account of the goodness or badness of life forms must go beyond a merely attributive account of goodness. A life form is not just one more species of “goodness fixing kind,” it is a *sui generis* kind of kind and needs its own account. We can see this more clearly if we reflect upon the unity that defines a principle of life; although I will not argue the case

³³ (2008, 74).

exhaustively, I think that it is reasonably clear that we cannot grasp this unity from reflection upon the concept of “descriptive noun” or “goodness fixing kind” in general. The trouble with that approach is that it does not take into account that the very notion of ‘kind’ changes once we begin to talk about *life*.

To see this, we need to consider that a life form, unlike a knife, is a natural unity. Thus, its sense of good can only be understood in terms of the self-sustaining system of capacities that characterize the life form as such. Living things are comprised of a multitude of capacities, each of which has its own defining activity, but these capacities taken together constitute a natural unity. And this unity is such that the identity of any of its individual capacities presupposes an implicit reference to an already unified whole, for the sake of which each individual capacity comes to be in the first place.³⁴ The explanation and identification of any part of a natural unity presupposes the unified whole—the life form as such—for the sake of which any identifiable part comes to be and acts so as to achieve. Thus, when we speak of ‘flourishing’ we necessarily refer to this self-sustaining whole, even if the subject matter of our judgment is relegated to one particular capacity and its well-functioning.³⁵

A knife can be good or bad—that is, its blade sharp or dull—depending on whether it performs the “function” of a knife well, which is to cut. It doesn’t seem appropriate, however, to

³⁴ The same is true of any of its parts or organs. For example, think of what Aristotle says about the heart of a human being. On his view, the heart would not come to be at all, and certainly would not come to be as something that has the function it does—to pump blood—unless its coming to be was part of the coming to be of a particular living organism. For what a heart is, as a material organ, is determined by the specific life form of the organism for the sake of which it comes to be. And moreover, in order for the organism to come to be, a heart must come to be that pumps blood. What it is to be a heart depends essentially upon the larger life process for the sake of which it comes to be, and that larger life process just is the coming to be of some specific life form. In this explanation, the whole is logically prior to any part, because the whole—the principle of natural unity—is what explains the parts, which are not independently intelligible. For a more developed account of this relationship in Aristotelian metaphysics, see Frey (2007), as well as his unpublished manuscript, “From Blood to Flesh.”

³⁵ I do not necessarily mean ‘flourishing’ to be equivalent to the Greek *eudaimonia*, as the latter seems to me to import a notion of the divine that is inherent to a rational form of life as opposed to lower forms of life in an Aristotelian *scala naturae*. For my purposes, I just take ‘flourishing’ to be equivalent to ‘exemplification of life form’, as opposed to mere ‘exemplification of form.’

say that a sharp knife is “flourishing” *qua* knife, for the simple reason that propositions relating to any particular knife’s ability to cut do not (and could not) make reference to a self-maintaining system of powers that defines a knife as such. Here we begin to see the distinction between well-functioning and flourishing.

3.2.3 Natural Vs. Practical Unity

But it is *only* a beginning, and things cannot be as simple as I’ve currently described them. After all, there is no reason not to call a car or a steam engine “a complex system of powers or capacities” that come to be for the sake of the whole car’s well-functioning. A car is a complex teleological system of various capacities if anything is, and to understand how any part of it functions we need to make reference to the function or purpose of the car as a whole. And yet a car is *not* alive. After all, a wheel does not come to be for the sake of the car’s coming to be in anything like the way that a leg comes to be for the sake of a human being’s coming to be. For one thing, a wheel that has been removed from a car is just a wheel, easily interchangeable into other cars, and put to other uses. Moreover, a wheel can be and is manufactured on its own as a mere part, before the car to which it will ultimately be made from is fully fashioned. But Aristotle tells us that a severed human hand is not even a hand, let alone an autonomous part that is easily interchangeable.

Why does Aristotle say this? After all, if I lose my hand in an accident, I can have it re-attached or replaced by a mechanical one. Why, then, is a wheel just a wheel in whatever context we find it, but a hand is only a *human* hand properly speaking in a *living* human being? Though the answer is complex, here are three considerations I think can help to bring out the relevant contrast: (1) a severed hand is unable to perform the tasks that are characteristic of a

human hand *qua* human hand (tasks like grasping, holding, lifting, pulling, smoothing, and the like); (2) a severed hand almost immediately begins to decompose, and thus to cease even to have the *appearance* of being a hand, let alone perform the tasks that human beings need hands to perform. (3) You cannot assemble a human being out of its severed parts, for a simple reason: in a living organism, the whole is not the sum of its parts. Rather, the whole explains its parts, for the sake of which the parts come to be. This is not the case with a wheel. The matter of man is *informed* by the end for the sake of which it comes to be in a way that is not true of a wheel, or any part of any product of *techne*.

However we theorize these differences, we must conclude that at least part of what it means to say that something is a *natural unity* is that its movements have a single, internal principle of motion and rest as their source and occur for the sake of a single, unitary end: the life form as such. The fact that every part comes to be and operates for a single, unified end explains why its organs and parts come to be what they are *qua* organs and *qua* parts of *this particular kind of living thing*, and in no other way, and also why such parts exist *qua* parts of this integrated whole, and could exist *qua* organ or part in no other way.

A car, by contrast, is something that is assembled from parts that can and do exist as parts independently of the whole, since they come to be in accordance with a judgment as to their suitability to carry out the ends of a pre-conceived design. A car and its part come to be on account of some judgment that it ought to take on a certain form. The car, we might say, is a unity by *courtesy* of practical reason and *techne*; a living thing, on the other hand, is a natural unity, a *per se* unity. The unity of the material parts of a living thing is not given to it by something from without;³⁶ the unity does not depend upon some judgment of the suitability of

³⁶ I take Aristotle to be making a similar point when he cites the fact that if you plant a bed, what grows is not another bed, but mere wood. See Phys. 2. 1, 193b10.

the part for the operation of the whole. Therefore the explanation of the parts of a living thing does not depend on any judgment of the goodness of their coming to be in the way they do. Those parts would exist, *qua* parts, whether anyone bothered to notice them at all.

Considerations such as this explain some ethical naturalists place so much emphasis on the idea that natural historical judgments must be elements of a teleologically ordered system, because there is nothing outside of that system which could make a normative claim upon anything within it.³⁷ Self-maintenance and reproduction describe nothing over and above the life-cycle itself, and the life cycle itself did not come to be in accordance with a judgment that it ought to come to be in just that way. A living thing “self-maintains” because its essential powers and parts come to be and exist for the whole system, and are interdependent in the strong sense that in coming to be they constitute themselves as parts of the whole interdependent system—the life form itself.

There is of course much more to be said about the division between natural and artificial unities, and therefore natural and practical teleological explanations, and I am certainly not putting forth a theory here that would adequately account for these differences. I bring up the division because an attributive account of the semantics of ‘good’ can tempt us into thinking that we can begin from a basic notion of ‘goodness fixing kind’ or ‘descriptive noun’ and work our way down to the idea of living thing. But if what I’ve said about natural unities is even close to correct, this method of division cannot be correct. For when we appeal to natural goodness, we

³⁷ See Thompson (2008, 78-79). We should not be concerned that such a view fails to place life forms within the wider context of the habitat in which they come to be and the other life forms on which they depend. Such matters will be part of the “facts” of the life form itself: where it flourishes, what other life forms it depends on for its flourishing, the world in which it comes to be, etc. And this has nothing to do with keeping the view properly naturalistic in some non-Theistic sense. In fact, if we think of God as alive (as many have) then this even allows for life forms to be dependent on God for their flourishing, if such dependence is rightly specified in terms of what the living thing needs. I take that to be something like the view one finds in the works of Aquinas. It also shows just how different the sense of “naturalism” is that we are now considering from the sort of theory that typically falls under that title.

are not just appealing to the concept of a “descriptive noun” that can somehow cover the differences between butcher knives and sago palms.³⁸ We must appeal to what can be the subject of a system of judgments, each element of which is part of a larger unity, where the notion of what is unified is as coming to be and persisting through time *through its own act* and in no other way.

Without some idea of a natural, *per se* unity, and the idea of flourishing that comes with it, the theory of natural normativity becomes nothing more than a vague appeal to functional teleology in general, and, I suspect, a philosophically useless one at that.³⁹

3.2.4 Moral Judgment and the Will

I have been arguing that an idea of natural unity is crucial to the logical grammar of natural goodness as distinct from a merely attributive grammar of goodness that is centered on the bare idea of a “goodness fixing kind.” Natural historical judgments and the facts they pick out depend upon the existence of material beings that have a natural, *per se* unity—a unity that does not depend upon an act of judgment. When we speak of any part, process, or phase of the life of such a thing as going well or badly, we are always referencing the life form as such, and this gives rise to a different sense of goodness that I have called “flourishing” or “doing well.”

³⁸ I think it would be best for the ethical naturalist to dispense with their talk of function altogether, as it invites the sort of comparisons I am being careful to rule out. Although I will not argue for this here, it seems to me we can say everything we need to say about natural goodness and normativity without appealing to a notion of function at all (in this chapter, I have tried to do just that). Foot herself is especially careless in equating function, purpose, and goodness of a particular activity with “teleological explanation” in general. (2000, 31-32, and 39-42).

³⁹ It would be useless precisely because it would be unable to distinguish between the natural and the artificial, and therefore unable to account for the difference between natural and practical teleology. Another example of an account that openly elides the two can be found in FitzPatrick (2000), who begins his attack on Foot with a notion of function that equally applies to machines and life forms, and then uses it to attack ethical naturalism. FitzPatrick’s criticism amounts to nothing more, I think, than a refusal to take the ethical naturalist’s central idea that life is a categorically distinctive form of representation seriously (I say this, because his only criticism of it is that it doesn’t fit an account of function it neither aspired to nor contended to fit).

Now, the ethical naturalist wants to say that a human action or disposition is good if it is a particular instantiation or exemplification of a flourishing human life, and bad insofar as it fails to be this. Facts about what constitutes a flourishing human life are facts about the life form—how it pertains to a human being to live, given that such-and-such natural history story is true of human beings quite generally. For instance, Foot argues that

a moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a *particular subject matter*, as do evaluations of such things as sight and hearing in animals, and other aspects of their behavior. Nobody would, I think, take it as other than a plain matter of fact that there is something wrong with the hearing of a gull that cannot distinguish the cry of its own chick, as with the sight of an owl that cannot see in the dark. Similarly, it is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species?⁴⁰

For Foot, moral evaluations have to do with a particular subject matter, the human will. Whatever complications come with their being *moral*, will just be complications having to do with the fact that they are evaluations of a power of will, rather than the power to digest, or the power to see or remember. What is it about the power of will that makes it seem that its goodness or badness cannot, in fact, “be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species?”

Before we can answer that, we should look at some of the “facts” that are supposed to determine these evaluations. Foot’s paradigm case of an ethically salient natural historical fact about human beings is that we are “social animals.”⁴¹ She argues that we, like other social animals, need to cooperate with one another and consider the needs of other members of our

⁴⁰ (2001, 24, emphasis added).

⁴¹ (2001,16).

species in order to live well together. Consequently, we need to perform actions that contribute to the well-functioning of the communities in which we live. This means, *inter alia*, that our habits of practical reasoning must be fundamentally other-regarding, such that the good of others is always taken into account. If we were not social animals these general claims about how we ought to think and live would not be true.

Another fact about the species Foot takes as a candidate to play this determining role is that we need to depend upon our ability to bind one another's wills through contracts and promises, because we cannot simply force one another to cooperate (the latter is, she thinks, an ineffective and inefficient means of control). If we had the power to bind one another's wills automatically, then promising would not matter to us, nor would the virtue of fidelity be of any importance to human life.

So Foot takes natural historical facts about the species to place quite definite constraints on (1) what we can take excellence of practical reasoning to be (it cannot be egoist), (2) what we can take to be the proper goods and ends of human life to be (one of these ends must be the good of the community as a whole), and (3) what the virtues are (justice must be one of them). Because natural historical facts play this role in determining what human goodness is via the concept of human life, and because judgments about human goodness are moral judgments, moral judgments are instances of natural normativity. On this account, although there is a change in the meaning of 'good' from 'good' knife to 'good' roots, there is no change of meaning of the word good when we move from 'good' roots, to 'good' dispositions of the will.⁴² It is the same notion of flourishing, applied to a different species of living thing.

⁴² See Foot (2001, 39 and 47). Again, this is a major difference with Thomson's view, who does not allow for a fundamental shift in the sense of good that applies to living things, as her theory is primarily attributive. She writes, "The adjective good is not ambiguous. It means the same in 'good government' as it does in 'good umbrella.' (Just as the word 'big' means the same in 'big camel' and big mouse'" (2008, 37).

Matters can't possibly be this straightforward, and almost as soon as Foot says that there is no change in meaning when we make this transition of subject matters she sets out to weaken the claim. She goes on to argue that when we make the transition to evaluating human beings, we do not evaluate the life form as a whole as we do every other species of living thing; when it comes to human beings we only evaluate acts of will.⁴³ Moral judgments only concern this power in isolation from the rest. Thus, in a sense that is not true for lower forms of life, the evaluation of human beings as good or bad instances of their kind is not concerned with the life form as such. Foot writes:

In so far as we do speak of 'a good S' in these other cases [plants and animals]...we are thinking about the plant or the animal as a whole; whereas to call someone a good human being is to evaluate him or her only in a certain respect...For to speak of a good person is to speak of an individual not in respect of his body, or of faculties like sight and memory, but as concerns his rational will.⁴⁴

Foot sees an asymmetry between rational animals and all other forms of life. If a tiger has poor eyesight or hearing, this makes it defective not just with respect to these senses, but as a tiger. For such a tiger will not be able to hunt well, and because tigers are solitary, a tiger with defective senses will certainly not make it except through luck and circumstance. But it doesn't seem like that with us. As the story of Helen Keller shows, a human being can be blind and deaf and yet still become an exemplar of human goodness. So human beings are evaluated as good or bad only with respect to the operation of a single power, in isolation from the rest: the 'rational will.'

⁴³ At least the ethicist is only interested in this power.

⁴⁴ (2001, 66). Similar thoughts are expressed in Hursthouse (1999), (2004) and Thomson (2008), though unfortunately cast in terms of a dichotomy between the "physical" on the one side and the "rational" or "moral" on the other. We should avoid speaking this way at all costs. Only the most hardened Cartesian would follow Thomson in thinking that "being good *qua* tiger is being a physically fit tiger," as opposed to being a good human being which is to point to some non-physical standard. (2008, 20) As if tigers do not have a conscious form of life that involves primitive forms of judgment and desire! Thomson should know better than to think that this is just "physical fitness." However we mark the differences here, it cannot possibly be this crude.

There is surely something right about Foot's conclusion. After all, whatever it is we value in the virtuous person, it is surely not her exceptional eyesight, her fine muscle tone, or the fact that she has attained perfect health. In fact, from the moral point of view we are not much interested in health, except insofar as it enables one to *execute* her good will more effectively. But this anodyne claim about the importance of the will somehow has to rest on a much more contentious one—viz., that the will is the power that explains why things go well or badly in a human being, even with respect to the well-functioning of all its other powers. Foot has to show that a good will is necessary for the well-functioning of all the operations of a human being in order for her claims to fit coherently into the framework of natural goodness and defect.

This is a tall order. But the ethical naturalist needs to fulfill it because she wants to show that moral goodness is a kind of flourishing. According to a theory of natural normativity, we cannot merely hive off specific capacities and evaluate them in isolation from the well-functioning of the living thing taken as a whole, because it is essential to the idea of a life form that the functioning of any power comes to be and operates for the sake of the well-being of the whole. Again, the idea of a natural, *per se* unity depends on the thought that every capacity, though it can be defined separately in terms of its object and act, is a capacity that comes to be and operates for the sake of a single end: the exemplification or flourishing of that kind of life. The very idea of life as self-maintenance depends on this.

Matt Boyle and Doug Lavin put this point nicely in their own account of self-maintenance. They write:

For any kind of living thing, we can describe powers that it has that subserve each of these two sorts of self-maintenance, powers whose various acts contribute to fulfilling the conditions in which life of that kind of creature can continue. And it is characteristic of these powers that they not only contribute variously to the maintenance of the kind of living thing in question, but thereby

contribute to the maintenance of themselves and one another in sound order: By seeking out and consuming nourishing food, a creature makes it possible for its injuries to heal; by healing its injuries, it makes it possible to seek out and consume nourishing food, etc. Indeed, this reciprocal interdependence extends to all of the essential powers of a living thing, for precisely insofar as they are essential, they are each needed to contribute to the maintenance of the system of which they are powers, but equally they each depend on all the other powers to operate in a way that maintains that system, and thus makes each power possible.⁴⁵

Boyle and Lavin make especially salient the reason why we cannot evaluate human life on the level of just one part or capacity: because each part or capacity is only intelligible as what it is when understood in terms of the role it plays in the self-maintenance of the whole life form. The evaluation of human beings in terms of the goodness of the power of ‘rational will’ cannot be an exception to this holistic form of explanation, at least not if we are to remain within the framework of natural normativity.

Consequently, the ethical naturalist cannot agree with Kant that goodness of will contains its value completely within itself, shining forth like a jewel even if it accomplishes nothing. However gratifying we might find this image, it cannot guide a moral theory that purports to take *life* as the standard of good or bad moral judgment. Life is not inner beauty, but activity. The will, insofar as it is a vital power, will be good insofar as it exemplifies the life form as such, and bad insofar as it fails to do this.

It can look like there is a tension here between maintaining the thought that human goodness is moral goodness, which is *only* goodness of will, and the thought that natural goodness is a kind of ‘flourishing,’ and necessarily references the life form as a whole. How, one might wonder, could it possibly be both?

⁴⁵ Boyle and Lavin (2010, 183).

Before we attempt to resolve this tension, it may help to clarify things to notice that the problem would not arise if we had a merely attributive account of goodness and normativity, which would not concern itself with an idea of the flourishing of a natural unity. Then we could just worry about standards internal to the descriptive noun “the rational will.” And supposing that we think the will is “nothing other than practical reason,” then we might think there are purely formal, universal principles or “laws” that govern its operation in whatever life form it might break out. On such a view, the facts about the material life of any living being are just so much matter on which pure reason operates. Such facts could in principle *make no difference* to the operation of reason, whose norms are formal, and thus always and everywhere exactly the same.

The ethical naturalist faces a problem. She wants to say that human goodness is moral goodness, and that moral goodness is the goodness of the ‘rational will.’ An ethical naturalist, however, insofar as she purports to be a naturalist, cannot take something so general as ‘rational will’ as the standard of evaluation for specifically human life and action. As we have seen, the relation between the subject and predicate in a natural historical judgment determines the subject concept as a life form or living species concept, and the reality to which the concept refers as falling under the logical category of concrete ‘living being.’ Moreover, only the combination of a natural historical judgment plus some fact about an individual member of the species can license an evaluation of natural goodness or defect. Thus the concept of the ‘rational will’ is not fit to be the subject of a natural historical judgment for two reasons. (1) ‘Rational will’ refers to a single power in a living being; it does not refer to any living being as such. (2) ‘Rational will’ is an abstraction, like ‘sight’ or ‘memory’ and could refer to a power of ‘sight’ or ‘memory’ in any living thing. Natural historical judgments, on the other hand, are necessarily life form

specific. Whatever we could say about the ‘rational will’ in general, would apply equally to all forms of life that bear it.

In denying that the ‘rational will’ is a suitable standard of evaluation for the ethical naturalist, I am not denying that we can say true things about it in general. On the Aristotelian picture the ethical naturalist wants to deploy, a capacity is defined in terms of its act, and its act in terms of its object. For instance, a capacity for sight is defined by its act, seeing, which is defined by its object, the visible. Something in the world is an object of a power of sight insofar as its visible properties are processed by the animal that be, through its visual capacity (or system of capacities).

Now this way of defining a capacity quite generally clearly yields some kind of standard, since any being with a capacity for sight could see visible properties to a better or worse degree. But we do not know, from reflecting on this fact, what counts as good or bad sight in any particular living thing. Consider any creature with astonishing powers of sight, like a mantis shrimp. Mantis shrimp have eyes that are so complex and powerful that they are able to perceive both polarized light and hyperspectral colors. In some sense, these remarkable crustaceans see the “best” of any animal we know of. But it would be obviously wrong to say that a human being is defective insofar as he cannot see hyperspectral colors.

This shows that a capacity of sight, when considered in general, simply cannot supply the standard of sight in a man, because sight in man operates for the sake of human life. If we flew and hunted with talons from the air, our sight would no doubt be different. Similarly, whatever holds of ‘the rational will’ generally, it will be too wide and too thin to generate a substantive standard of goodness or badness in the life of a human being.

Important as the preceding consideration is, it alone will not be enough for the ethical naturalist to argue against an attributive account of goodness of will. For if I understand them correctly, Kantians can concede that “a good life” in human beings will be materially quite different from “a good life” in Alpha Centaurians, or any other rational species. And Kantians can even agree that the two species might have different general ends. But if we concede that “the will is nothing other than practical reason because it is the power to act according to principles”⁴⁶ and if we think these principles are *purely* formal principles, then whatever ends turn out to be characteristic of specific forms of life, they can only be good ends insofar as they can be willed in accordance with “a universal law” or some other purely formal principle of reason. It is the formal principle that determines whether any end is good, not the life form as such.

These considerations show that Foot needs an account of goodness of will that does not suppose ‘the will’ is an autonomously intelligible capacity whose standard of goodness or badness is purely formal and life form independent. That is, it cannot turn out that we can specify “the form of the will” or “the form of practical reason” independently of what it is to live well as a human being as opposed to anything else, otherwise any appeal to facts about the life form are plainly *irrelevant* to the substance of that standard.⁴⁷

Only if the ethical naturalist can give us an account of the will that shows how the standard of its operation is *internal* to the natural history story of the life form itself—that is, how its norms explain *the self-maintenance of human form*—can she show that the meaning of the word ‘good’ does not change when we make the transition from oak life to human life.

⁴⁶ This is how Rödl (2011) characterizes Kant’s view. For a similar interpretation, see Wood (2003).

⁴⁷ For a recent attempt to isolate the form of practical reason as a standard of evaluation of goodness of will, see Engstrom (2009).

Unfortunately, I think it is reasonably clear that no ethical naturalist has managed to furnish any such account.

3.3 MORAL JUDGMENT AND HUMAN NATURE

We want to know how standards of a rational will can be *natural* standards—i.e., how they can be standards that describe the self-maintenance of a specifically human form of life. How does the ethical naturalist conceive of such standards? And how do we come to know them? These are difficult questions to answer, because ethical naturalists do not appear to think in concert on this matter. In the interests of space, I will consider the two most prominent and influential proposals currently on offer: the different versions of ethical naturalism we find in the work of Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot.

3.3.1 Hursthouse's Naturalism

First, let us consider the quasi-reductive naturalism advanced by Rosalind Hursthouse. Hursthouse argues that virtues are necessary for the attainment of independently specifiable natural ends: the four ends shared by all sophisticated social animals. She argues that “ethical evaluations of ourselves as rational social animals” will look like our evaluation of the lives of other social animals we can learn about from reading ethological field reports.⁴⁸ Her definition of this sort of animal life is as follows:

A good sophisticated social animal is one that is well fitted or endowed with respect to its (i) parts (ii) operations (iii) actions and

⁴⁸ Hursthouse, (2004, 268).

(iv) desires and emotions. Whether it is thus well fitted or endowed is determined by whether these four aspects well serve (1) its individual survival through its natural life span, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) its characteristic freedom from pain and its characteristic enjoyments, and (4) the good functioning of its social group—in the ways characteristic of the species.⁴⁹

A character trait will be a human virtue, on this account, just in case it can be shown to serve the four ends appropriate to higher social animals in general.

Hursthouse then goes on to “validate” the “most familiar” list of virtues by showing that each one can actually be said to serve these four, independent ends. Charity, on her account, turns out to be a virtue because it helps human beings “live longer, avoid some suffering, [and] enjoy more.”⁵⁰ Justice is a virtue on this evaluative scheme because it “enable[s] us to function as a social, co-operating group.”⁵¹ Impersonal benevolence, on the other hand, is not a virtue because it does not promote any of these ends. Hursthouse recommends that if we want to know if our belief in the traditional list of virtues is rational, then we have to look to this evaluative scheme and assess the results.⁵²

One benefit of Hursthouse’s view is that it makes especially clear what the natural standards of goodness are and the manner and context in which they are properly deployed. A disposition or character trait is good insofar as it fosters the four ends appropriate to a social animal, in the way “characteristic of the species.” Our characteristic way to attain these ends is by reasoning our way towards them. For Hursthouse, all that it means to say that we achieve these four ends rationally is that there is no fixed or biologically determined path for laid out in

⁴⁹ (2004, 268).

⁵⁰ (2004, 269).

⁵¹ (2004, 270).

⁵² Hursthouse believes that this investigation will proceed from within our well formed ethical outlook. By this she seems to mean nothing more than that we can only call particular virtues into question one at a time, rather than throw out the whole lot in order to build them up from scratch (though, notably, she does not rule out that the latter is possible).

advance for us to achieve them. We need virtues of intellect and will because unaided instinct is not sufficient for us to attain these ends.⁵³

On Hursthouse's view, the four ends of social animality are fixed points of right reasoning about human life and constrain what we can truthfully say about a good human will. Hursthouse argues:

I cannot just proceed from some premises about what it is reasonable or rational to do to some conclusion that it is rational to act in such-and-such a way, and thence that a good human being is one who acts that way. I have to consider whether the corresponding character trait (if such a thing could be imagined) would foster or be inimical to those four ends.⁵⁴

If the virtues are to hold up to reflective, rational scrutiny, it will be because they “benefit their possessor” in that each virtue allows its possessor to see reasons for pursuing virtuous activity.

Hursthouse avoids the argument from irrelevancy, because she has a picture on which there is a determinate structure of ends that are natural in the strong sense that they are shared by all animal life that lives in community with other members of its kind. In avoiding irrelevancy, however, Hursthouse ends up ensnared in worse problems. These problems are threefold: (1) the theory gives us account of human nature that is ultimately reductive and empirical, (2) the account of nature underwriting the theory is at the wrong level of generality to provide natural norms, (3) the theory fails to provide an account of the intrinsic value of virtuous action.

First, consider how Hursthouse arrives at her list of ends—by generalizing from our observational knowledge of all known species of social animals. Her idea is that we know what the general ends that constitute human life are by extending our observational knowledge of social animals in general to see that it is basically the same for us. This means that, at bottom,

⁵³ This is not too far off from the sort of view that Kant lambasts at the beginning of the *Groundwork* (A: 395), when he considers a “favored creature” for whom nature has determined all its ends but needs reason to figure out the means to achieving them. Such a creature would be better off, Kant argues, entrusting the means to instinct as well.

⁵⁴ (1999, 224).

fully justified ethical knowledge is a species of ethological knowledge. This is already a strange result, one that Hursthouse herself is deeply ambivalent about accepting.⁵⁵ Most moral theorists will reject the idea that we can gain moral knowledge by investigating what is going on at a high level of generality with wolves, beavers, or dolphins, and rightfully so.

Second, there is a concern about the account of ‘nature’ underwriting this particular brand of naturalism. The standards of practical rationality that Hursthouse identifies are not species specific standards; the ends that govern right practical reasoning are ends shared in common by all sophisticated social animals. The goodness fixing kind that is operative in this account is not a flesh and blood species such as ‘human being,’ but something far more general and abstract. This is already a departure from the theory of natural normativity as it was originally presented, and it difficult to square with its basic principles.⁵⁶ But the more pressing concern from our perspective is this: once we have made this generalizing move, why should we not think that the relevant generality lies somewhere higher up the *scala naturae* than Hursthouse suggests? Certainly ‘sophisticated social animal’ is not a category that Aristotle himself bothers with, and Hursthouse gives us no reason to favor it over ‘rational life.’ Why should we not be worried about the ends shared in common with members of that kind? Hursthouse has no compelling answer to this question, other than the former seems more “scientific.”⁵⁷

There is another reason to resist the generalizing move to ‘sophisticated social animal,’ which brings us to the third and final complaint. The promise of ethical naturalism is supposed

⁵⁵ On this issue, Hursthouse seems to be speaking out of both sides of her mouth. She wants to acknowledge to Aristotelian critics like John McDowell that naturalistic considerations do not convince anyone to change their basic moral beliefs or motivate them to action. But at the same time, she thinks that she can approach the Humean or the Kantian and argue for “the rational credentials” of our moral beliefs based upon a “scientific” and “objective” naturalistic account. It is unclear how she is supposed to satisfy both parties at once, and the tension remains unresolved in her own work.

⁵⁶ The original suggestion comes from Anscombe (1958), and is later developed by Geach (1977). The semantics of ‘good’ utilized by the theory is developed by Geach (1956) as well.

⁵⁷ Hursthouse (2004, 272). This is a line of justification also pushed by Annas (2005).

to be that it can make sense of moral judgment in objective terms. But moral judgments are typically thought to address the question of intrinsic value—activities and actions whose goodness does not consist in the fact that they are instrumental to some other good, but whose value is contained “in itself.” The value of the characteristic activity of one’s own form of life cannot be explained by some good external to that form of life; the good of it just is that it is the vital operation of the species in question. But Hursthouse’s picture is not like this. According to it, our rational activity is good when it serves ends that go beyond a description of our own form of life and its activities.

We can bring this worry into sharper relief if we consider that Hursthouse’s stated goal in providing this theory is to provide “a rational justification for one’s ethical beliefs.”⁵⁸ But her justificatory scheme yields that *the wrong kind of reason* to hold a moral belief. To see this, consider a basic human activity, such as leisurely play. Human beings engage in play from infancy on. By play, I do not mean highly competitive sports or the highly structured events when these take place, but just the way we often are in our leisure time, when we are not actively fixed on some kind of work to be done or task to be achieved. We are in these moments not concerned with our leisure or play *purposively*, say, in order to rest so that more work can be accomplished. We are content merely to have fun and enjoy ourselves.

Children, having a great deal of leisure time, are often engaged in this sort of purposeless human activity. In fact, this sort of imaginative, pretend play is as natural to children as running and jumping. A child who does not know how to engage in imaginative pretend play for no purpose (such as a child with an autism spectrum disorder), is a child who has a noticeable defect and will need therapeutic intervention. Such a child will have to be taught what other children naturally do, and such instruction cannot merely be given by the parent, but come in the form of

⁵⁸ (2004, 275).

theory-driven techniques aimed at incremental results. Likewise, an adult who could not play with a child for no reason other than the joy of it would be similarly deprived. A whole range of human activities lose part of their joy when they are done for the sake of something else: singing, making music, dancing, conversation, telling and hearing stories, etc.

Of course, we know that play is very important for proper intellectual, social, moral, and even physical development in children, and for the overall health of adults. Scores of empirically based psychological studies point to this fact. However, it would destroy both leisure and play if these were our *reasons for* engaging in them. If you told a child that you wanted her to play in order to increase her social and imaginative cognitive capacities, you would no longer be asking the child to play, because if done for the sake of those ends, what is done by the child would no longer be play. Rather, the play would be transformed into the *work* of becoming smarter, more empathetic, insightful, adaptable, and so forth. The play would become work because it would be for the sake of some end outside the activity of play, rendering it a means to some further goal. In providing this “rational justification” for play—either for oneself or for one’s children—play has effectively been destroyed and denatured.

I would like to suggest that Hursthouse is doing the same thing to virtuous activity that an overbearing parent might do to the play of the child in the nursery—destroying what is good in itself by trying to make it for the sake of something outside of it. This objection is not primarily a claim about psychological motivation, but about the nature of the activity itself. Play of the kind I am describing is a human good—it is an activity that exemplifies human life—and *as* such it *must* be done for its own sake and not for the sake of something else. The only reason to play is because play is inherently joyful. But this joy is not an end external to playing; the joy *is* the playing.

As an activity that exemplifies human life, there can be no further ground of the goodness of play. It just is one of the basic human goods. The extent to which we try to give it a further ground by trying to show how it meets an end external to it (such as one of the four ends of a sophisticated social animal) is the extent to which it ceases to be what it is and becomes something else. The goodness of play is, like the good of knowledge or friendship, *pure*.⁵⁹ But it is not pure as some kind of pure expression of rationality, whatever that would mean. Its goodness comes from nothing other than its being a realization or exemplification of specifically human life.

Hursthouse gets into trouble because she supposes that there is something we don't know—viz., whether there is a rational basis for our belief that they are good states of character for human beings. She thinks that naturalism might give us the proper theoretical context in which we can construct such a justification. Her caveat that our reflection on the virtues is from within our own moral outlook doesn't help her cause, because that doesn't address the basic problem I've addressed, which is that her sort of naturalism yields the *wrong kind of reasons*.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This is how the great Roman Catholic theologian Romano Guardini describes it. He writes, "The child, when it plays, does not aim at anything. It has no purpose. It does not want to do anything but to exercise its youthful powers, pour forth its life in an aimless series of movements, words and actions, and by this to develop and to realize itself more fully; all of which is purposeless, but full of meaning nevertheless, the significance lying in the unchecked revelation of this youthful life in thoughts and words and movements and actions, in the capture and expression of its nature, and in the fact of its existence. That is what play means; it is life, pouring itself forth without an aim, seizing upon riches from its own abundant store, significant through the fact of its existence. It will be beautiful too, if it is left to itself, and if no futile advice and pedagogic attempts at enlightenment foist upon it a host of aims and purposes, thus denaturizing it" Guardini (1935, 42).

⁶⁰ Hursthouse is not unaware of the tension, and she repeatedly insists that the reasons to do these things from a practical point of view are the reasons that the person with the relevant character trait does them. But she also qualifies this by saying that when we raise children, or want to reform bad characters, or when we do moral philosophy, we can provide this sort of justification for our moral beliefs. The trouble is that it is completely unclear how the two accounts are supposed to hang together, because it is unclear why when we are concerned with the truth of these activities (i.e., that they are really good human activities) we should give an account that looks radically incompatible with what we would say from a practical point of view, where we attend to something that is not supposed to stand in need of any such account. And again, if we look to Aristotle, this extreme tension between the practical and theoretical point of view is not present. For him, the difference between practical and theoretical reasoning is the end or aim; they are not, as it were, separate magisteria rendering incompatible pronouncements. And Aristotle speaks of a kind of truth that is practical, that is in accordance with right desire. But his account of

Thus Hursthouse goes very wrong, it seems to me, when she argues that her kind of “Neo-Aristotelian” naturalism will yield “motivating reasons” in children who are learning to acquire virtue, and in those who already have some semblance of virtue but might need extra justification in difficult situations. She writes:

I think that there are, indeed, contexts in which naturalistic arguments play a role in producing motivating reasons, most notably in the moral education of children. When we are trying to inculcate the familiar virtues in them, indicating the important virtues in them, indicating the important role that charity, justice, honesty, etc., play in human life is, I suspect, an indispensable part of that training. I might too, reflect on the naturalistic arguments to beef up my own motivation if I thought it was getting a bit slack.⁶¹

I find this account of moral upbringing troubling, as it seems self-defeating. Consider that if I tried to curb my daughter’s selfish tendencies by telling her that she ought to love others because if she does, she might “live longer, avoid some suffering, and enjoy more things,”⁶² I would obviously not be instilling charity in her. By providing those sorts of reasons I am effectively destroying the possibility of charity in her, which is to take the good of another as one’s own *without counting the cost or hope of good consequences*. And if I could only “beef up my own motivation” to be generous by telling myself that if I am not I will “miss out” on characteristic joys, then I am obviously not even close to being a generous person.

Moreover, the sort of naturalistic considerations Hursthouse offers are not what is going to help me to become generous or charitable. It will not help me to seek generosity for its own sake by being able to see how it instrumental to getting something else I actually want. I think it should strike us as a bad picture of moral justification if it goes completely dark from the

right desire does not appeal to something outside of the characteristic activities of man; rather, he thinks that acting from right desire and right reasoning just is one aspect of the characteristic activities of man, period.

⁶¹ (2004, 275).

⁶² (2004, 269).

practical point of view. It seems like whatever the moral theorist can offer as justification for moral belief should be something the virtuous person could accept, especially if we follow Aristotle in thinking that ethics is a *practical* science.

These reflections show that we need a very different understanding of how the norms that govern the will can be natural. Though Hursthouse has provided a theory in which it is clear how such norms are natural, she has not given us an account of these norms on which they are remotely intelligible from a practical, first personal point of view. This is a problem, because rational norms must be grasped from the deliberative, first personal point of view of the rational agent. I will assume that this is a condition for the possibility of being a proper ground of a moral belief or a reason for action.⁶³

3.3.2 Foot's Recognitional Naturalism

Philippa Foot purports to be giving a virtue ethics that is grounded in a notion of the human life form that will meet what she calls "Hume's practicality requirement."⁶⁴ And she does not seem to want to say that meeting the practicality requirement will require ignoring any appeal to natural norms from a practical point of view. Foot is concerned to show that the recognition of human goods can be practically efficacious and explain human actions.

Foot's account of practical rationality and will largely follows that of Warren Quinn.⁶⁵ Like Quinn, Foot argues that practical reason is distinguished from other kinds of reasoning in virtue of its distinctive subject matter: practical reasoning is reasoning *about* human goods and

⁶³ For clear arguments in service of the conclusion that reasons for belief or action must be accessible from a first personal, deliberative point of view, see Burge (2000), and Moran (2001).

⁶⁴ (2001, 9).

⁶⁵ (1994, chapters 11 and 12).

ends. On this account, practical reasoning is excellent when it arrives at true propositions about human goods and ends. On that point, Quinn is especially clear. He writes:

Practical thought, like any other thought, requires a subject matter. And for human beings the subject matter that distinguishes thought as practical is, in the first instance, human ends and action insofar as they are good or bad in themselves[...]An objectivism of the kind I wish to defend sees practical thought as deploying a master set of non-instrumental evaluative notions: that of a good or bad human act, a good or bad human life, a good or bad human agent, and a good or bad human action. Practical reason is, on this view, the faculty that applies these fundamental evaluative concepts.⁶⁶

On Quinn's account of practical rationality, its primary goal is to make correct use of evaluative concepts about a certain subject matter. Practical rationality is, by definition, the capacity to deploy such concepts and to make correct evaluative judgments. If I judge that some action is good, I thereby have given myself a reason to pursue it.⁶⁷

Foot accepts this account, and adds to it the thought that the notion of good it deploys is specifically natural goodness. She writes:

[T]he notion of practical rationality is correlative to that of goodness of action, so far as that consists in the proper following of reasons. What is 'proper' or 'good' here is determined by human life and its necessities, analogously to the way in which good or (proper) sight or locomotion or memory is determined in both animals and men. Thus practical rationality includes prudential self-interest, the weighing of advantages, the adoption of means to the securing of ends, but also such 'other-regarding' matters as care for offspring, fidelity to contracts, and mutual aid.⁶⁸

What we might call the Foot-Quinn account of practical reason is one variant of what Berys Gaut has called the *recognition model*.⁶⁹ Gaut defines this conception of practical reason as a capacity to recognize the goodness of certain actions independently of those actions being

⁶⁶ (1994, 233)

⁶⁷ Quinn also argues that we need an account of the will which would make it clear that it is "the part of human reason whose function it is to choose for the best," though he leaves this "part" of reason basically un-theorized. He seems to think it will naturally fall out of an account of practical reason. See Quinn (1994, 240).

⁶⁸ (2002(b), 173).

⁶⁹ Gaut (1997, 161-162).

objects of choice, and through that very recognition, bringing it about that such actions are performed.⁷⁰ What makes the performance rational is the recognition that the action is really good, and this is primarily what explains how we are motivated to act as well. And this seems to fit Foot's own characterization of her account rather well. She writes

Recognition of a [practical] reason gives the rational person a goal; and this recognition is[...]based on facts and concepts, not on prior attitudes, feelings, or goals. The only fact about the individual's state of mind that is required of the explanatory force of the proposition about the requirement of rationality is that he does not (for some bizarre reason) deny its truth.⁷¹

On this account, the recognition of a reason to act, which is a recognition that some action is good independent of any subjective attitude anyone has towards it, gives a rational agent a goal to realize it. Consequently, so long as one affirms the truth of a proposition, the content of which involves a reference to the goodness of the action, then one will be motivated to realize that content through one's own activities.

Obviously knowledge of human goods is doing all the heavy lifting on this account. Take Foot's example of the burglar who sits down to watch television in the house he is burgling, and is subsequently apprehended by the authorities. Foot identifies two faults in this man's practical reasoning: (1) he failed to see the fact that he had a reason not to steal; (2) he failed to see the fact that he had a reason not to risk imprisonment for a few moments of compelling TV.⁷² Practical failure for Foot is nothing more or less than failing to see that you have reason to do what you *truly* have reason to do. And this fits with Foot's idea that the will is nothing more than practical reason. If you *truly* recognize the right reasons to act, and are *truly*

⁷⁰ For other variants of recognitionalism, see Shafer-Landau (2003), Nagel (1970), (1986), and Dworkin (1996).

⁷¹ (2001, 23).

⁷² (2002, 172).

rational, then you will act on your reasons. Because, Foot assures us, “*the understanding of reasons can do that.*”⁷³

Since practical reason is a recognitional faculty that sees what is really good for human beings, we need an account of the ground of these perceptions. For Foot, that is supposed to be knowledge of the facts of human life, where these are the “facts” of the life cycle.⁷⁴

When we put this characterization of what it is to have a reason for action together with her account of the sort of facts about human nature that interest her, we arrive at the following picture of moral judgment within the schema of natural goodness and normativity. The virtuous person is one who makes true judgments about what is choice-worthy for human beings (the one who perceives the right reasons to act), and she is able to do this because she knows the facts about human nature, including, for example, that it is good to keep one’s promises. Supposing that the world does not conspire against her, this sort of person will live well.

Let us call this view *recognitional naturalism*, as it weds recognitional realism about practical reasons with a naturalistic account of the human good that is recognized. On such a picture, moral judgments are simultaneously judgments of natural normativity and practical normativity; they are judgments of natural normativity because they are judgments about what is good or bad for our life form, and they are practical judgments because they function to produce

⁷³ (2001, 18). Though she says these perceptions are intrinsically motivating because they have an “essential connection to the will,” Foot also wants to allow for weakness of will and shamelessness. But if the will is practical reason, then what explains the cases when a reason fails to motivate the will, and not by interference on account of some passion, but because of utter disregard for the reason itself, as must be the case with the shameless person? I do not see how Foot can account for this.

⁷⁴ Thus Foot is not giving us a kind of reductive naturalistic realism along the lines of Railton (1986), Boyd (1988), or Sturgeon (1988). Though these facts about human goodness are known through practical reason, they are not known by being constructed through some idealized process of rational deliberation. Foot would reject constructivism, because she argues that facts about human goodness are not objects of choice and deliberation, but rather necessary constraints upon good choice and deliberation.

or prevent voluntary actions. Thus knowledge of how to live is knowledge of how human beings ought to live.

On this account, reference to the human life form is built into the theory of practical reasons as its specific content: the goods of specifically human life are what practical thought reasons about. Practical thought is true if we get to what is true about human life. There is no question, on this account, of the norms of practical reason being “species transcendent.” What practical reason grasps is not “the good” or the “rational good”—there is no such thing by Foot’s lights—but the goods of specifically human life. Action springs from insight into human goodness, insight that is efficacious in itself and not because it is useful for the sake of something else. The virtuous person keeps her promises not because this will help her in some way, or because it contributes to the continuation of the species, but just because she sees that it is a human good.

3.4 A SECOND ARGUMENT FROM IRRELEVANCY

Foot’s account of practical rationality blocks the argument from irrelevancy from going through by defining practical rationality as an efficacious recognitional capacity whose proper exercise tracks the goods of human life. This blocks the first argument from irrelevancy by showing that practical norms are species specific, because practical reason is the capacity in us that recognizes the norms of the good human life. By solving the problem this way, however, it is unclear how it can meet a second argument from irrelevancy, which runs as follows.

1. Moral judgments must be practical judgments.
2. A practical judgment must satisfy “Hume’s practicality requirement.”

3. Hume's practicality requirement states that moral judgments function so as to produce or prevent voluntary action.
4. Natural historical judgments pertaining to the human life form do not have the function of producing and preventing voluntary actions.
5. Therefore, natural historical judgments are not moral judgments.
6. Moral theory concerns moral judgments.
7. Therefore, natural historical judgments are irrelevant to moral theory.

In order to block this argument, Foot clearly has to deny the fourth premise. But it is hard to see how she can.

Remember that Foot tries to meet "Hume's practicality requirement" with the idea that our thought is practical when it is thought about human goodness. This suggests that the difference in my evaluation of an oak tree's roots and a human being's action is a matter of the *propositional content* one considers. Practical reasoning is right reasoning about a certain thing: the very thing I am. It is life thought that is practical because it is thought about my own form of life.

Foot seems to take it for granted that thought about our own life form is practical because it is thought about *us*. Though my thoughts about norway rats, sago palms, and Alpha-Centaurians have no obvious motivational grip on human beings, we are necessarily interested in the goods of our own form of life! After all, we are all necessarily in the business of living human lives every day, and so we are necessarily invested in what is good for such a life to go well.

While it may be necessarily true that we are interested in human goods, it is not true that we are interested in them *because* we recognize that they are human goods—i.e., because we

have beliefs about them whose propositional contents reference human goodness or badness. That it is to say, it does not seem true that their goodness enters into my practical thought as its content.

I can think of at least three reasons we should reject this view. First, thinking that we can make a theoretical kind of judgment practical by slotting in the right content strikes me as not better than thinking that we can explain how we know our own minds by taking our visual capacity and turning it around so that it is directed back upon ourselves, so that we see the inner through the mind's eye. The correct response to this sort of view is to point out that the way I know my own mind is formally quite different from the way I perceive objects in the world.

Second, it makes no sense to divide a power of thought (and thus judgment and inference) by virtue of some special content. If this method of division were properly philosophical, then there would be no principled objection to speaking about “a mince pie syllogism,” which supposedly displayed the special form of reasoning that occurs when our thoughts turn to mince pies.⁷⁵

Third, it is implausible to think that recognizing the truth of certain facts about human goods is the same as having a goal to realize them. This might be true for a theory that takes the explanation of action to come by way of appeal to subjective attitudes whose causal powers—the attitude's “direction of fit,” for instance—can explain how an event under the description that matches the conceptual content comes to be.⁷⁶ But Foot does not seem to want to go in for either sort of view, especially not a Humean version that would appeal to the “direction of fit” of conative states. But then how do we explain the fact that an alien anthropologist could come to form true Aristotelian categoricals about human life and not be motivated by them? In fact, it

⁷⁵ See Anscombe (2000, 58).

⁷⁶ For an especially clear exposition of the direction of fit view, see Smith (1987), and Velleman (1992).

seems that the alien anthropologist could come to formulate true Aristotelian categoricals about human life, and to see who has reason to do what when down there on earth, and yet not take itself to be making moral judgments at all. Foot would appear unable to explain how this can be so.

The point is perhaps easier to see if we consider a more down to earth case. Suppose that I know it is good for human beings to consume antioxidants, because conducive to human health. Suppose further that I judge it is good for me to consume antioxidants, because it would be good for my health. Suppose I even judge that this gives me a reason to consume antioxidants. Nothing about action follows from this—I have merely had three true thoughts. We do not need to say that I lack prudence, am weak-willed, or that I am a Mafioso or a nihilist, or that I am alienated from my species being in order to explain why no action follows from my putting these two thoughts together. The explanation may just be that I am not thinking with a view to action at all. This already shows that thought is not practical in virtue of its being thought about a certain subject matter. Taking a proposition about reasons to be true, is not the same as *having* a reason to act, not even when the proposition expresses a thought about human goods that are intrinsically valuable, and you yourself recognize this.

Now suppose that I *am* thinking with a view to action. How would my reasoning go? Surely *not* like this:

Human beings need antioxidants

I am a human being

So I should eat antioxidants

Let us call this form of reasoning the “anthropological inference.” First, notice that the conclusion that follows from it is not an action or an intention, but just another true proposition.

Therefore it is a bit of theoretical, not practical reasoning. As a bit of theoretical reasoning, it looks to be both valid and sound. That is, there is no problem moving from human needs to the conclusion that something should be done. But this does not make the reasoning itself practical. Thought *about* action does not explain action.

Second, suppose for the sake of argument that I actually want health. Is this enough to make the anthropological inference efficacious? Consider the following syllogism:

I want health.

Consuming antioxidants are healthy for a man.

I am a man

Does an action follow from this? It would appear not. At best what follows is the thought that I should want to consume some antioxidants. But it isn't even clear that this follows, since there are plenty of ways for a man to attain health other than this. Appeals to human nature might get me to the thought that I ought to want something, or that wanting it or getting it makes a certain kind of sense. While this might be a necessary condition for action, it is certainly not sufficient. We still do not have practical reasoning.

Conversely, consider a young man who doesn't give one whit about his health. This is quite common. Indeed, let's suppose that some he abuses drugs wantonly, because he wants to live free and he doesn't care if he dies young. Would an "anthropological inference" about what is good for the species help him to change his mind? This appears highly doubtful. The problem is that when one thinks about how to live, one is plainly not thinking about what human beings in general need.

This is no accident. Practical thought is essentially first personal, and so what enters into it must take on that form. Thus, I can only come to see that I need health insofar as it fits in

squarely with the other ends that make up my general sense of how to go on.⁷⁷ But that conception itself is not captured in true Aristotelian categoricals, which are necessarily general. If you ask a reckless youth how humans in general ought to live, it's quite possible that he'll agree with a general account about the species that he doesn't apply to himself. He can admit that not everyone can go on in this way, and that not everyone wants the same things in life as he does. But, so what?

The trouble the ethical naturalist faces at this point is pretty straightforward. Third personal facts about what is good for the species have their natural home in theoretical, rather than practical, thought. And it is mysterious how such facts are supposed to make an appearance in practical thought. The thoughts, "we are social animals" or "how could we get along without justice" or "human beings need justice" look out of place from a practical point of view for at least two reasons: (1) Even if they were motivating, they look like the wrong kind of reason to be just; (2) It looks pretty implausible that they would be motivating, since (a) there is no essential connection between thinking thoughts of this general content and being motivated to realize those contents in particular actions, and (b) practical thought is essentially first personal, and life thought is not.

I hope these considerations suffice to show that however thoughts about the human life form are related to right practical reasoning, *it simply cannot enter into the picture at the level of content*, that is, it cannot enter into the structure of practical reasoning as a premise. So long as that is the picture, then natural norms are plainly irrelevant to ethical theory. The ethical

⁷⁷ To acknowledge this is not to espouse a kind of "internalism" about practical reason, as one finds in Bernard Williams (1981). It is just to register that practical reasoning occurs from a first person perspective, and begins from something that is wanted as an object of will. This is, I take it, Williams's essential insight. Saying that practical reasoning is a first personal act is compatible with saying that it can be exercised poorly in that one takes something to be a reason which is not a true or good reason. Williams goes wrong in denying that. He goes wrong because he does not see a way to say that the reasoning is valid but not sound, because its inputs involve false goods. This is discussed in much further detail in subsequent chapters.

naturalist has not given us any way to see how to get around the objection with which this chapter began.

We can end here with a very provisional conclusion. Insofar as Foot's ethical naturalism rests upon a conception of human nature that is primarily an object of theoretical knowledge, it must be abandoned. For there is no way to answer the argument from irrelevancy if our account of good deliberation is just one in which knowledge of human nature is supposed to figure somehow as a premise. In order for ethical naturalism to be a plausible moral theory, the ethical naturalist must be able to show that our knowledge of our own life form is *practical* knowledge. Such knowledge will be essentially first personal knowledge of human goods. It will also be, as Anscombe says, "the cause of what it understands."⁷⁸

It remains to be seen whether ethical naturalism is a plausible view, because it remains to be seen whether knowledge of life, and thus what is naturally good, *can* be practical. The ethical naturalist has not shown us how this is possible.

⁷⁸ Anscombe (2000, 87).

4.0 HOW TO BE AN ETHICAL NATURALIST

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophical ethics is, at its best, an attempt to understand why certain goods have intrinsic value for us. Ethical naturalism looks like a promising approach to this enterprise insofar as the theory of natural normativity upon which it rests shows that intrinsic value is not unique to us, since the entire animate world is shot through with activity that is good for the sake of nothing more than its being an exemplification of a specific form of life. In the previous chapter, however, we ran into a problem seeing how this schema of natural normativity could be salient from a practical point of view, and therefore relevant to moral theory by the ethical naturalist's own lights.

We have seen that Foot's attempt to show how norms of the species are practical failed, because she put forward a model of practical reason that looks too theoretical. It was for this reason mysterious how natural historical judgments could play any role in a theory of good practical reasoning, deliberation, and choice. This shows we do not yet know how a natural historical judgment about the self-maintenance of human life can be a practical judgment. We only know that the practicality *cannot* come just by shifting the subject matter to our own life form, as Foot suggests.

We might think that it remains open to Foot to say that we can only have knowledge of human form through the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom.⁷⁹ Then she could say that to possess practical wisdom is to know how a human being should live, and to be able to see that general conception of how to live in the particulars of one's own life. Since we cannot have practical wisdom without moral virtue, we cannot separate knowledge of the human life form from being inclined to the ends that make up a human life. On this picture, knowledge of the facts of human life, and the ability to specify those facts in true Aristotelian categoricals, only comes on the scene once one has come to have a well-formed "second nature."⁸⁰ Man's sub-rational first nature is, on this account, irrelevant to a theory of natural norms. Let us call this view, *second nature naturalism*.

This sounds promising, but let us follow the thought through. On this picture, one can only know human goods if one *already* values them, and thus is already strongly inclined to seek those goods. Coming to possess virtue is coming to see and take enjoyment in doing certain things, which is coming into possession of a human life, truly and properly so called. The virtuous person knows which actions accord with virtue and which do not, and because the virtues characterize what goodness of human action is, the virtuous person knows what counts as living and acting well. This is knowledge of the human life form, and it comes through practical wisdom.

One thing to notice straightaway about this account is that an alien anthropologist who came to study human life could presumably not come to make such judgments, as presumably it will, by definition, lack the virtues necessary for practical wisdom, which is necessary to have

⁷⁹ See Lott (2012) for a recent attempt to characterize ethical naturalism in this way. It is also, I take it, the view that John McDowell puts forward in "Two Sorts of Naturalism." McDowell (1998).

⁸⁰ For the full development of the idea of "second nature," see McDowell (1994) and (1998). For a critique of this idea from an Aristotelian-Thomist perspective, see O'Callaghan (2003, 275-298).

knowledge of human form. Thus the alien anthropologist cannot know the human good any more than a human being can see the world in hyperspectral color by studying the lives of certain shrimp.

This is a strange result because on a theory of natural normativity, though the good of the life form is internal to itself, knowledge of the good of the life form is obviously not. I can know the good of a sunflower, or a wolf, just by knowing what it is. I do not, as it were, have to step inside that form of life, or to have the dispositions or tendencies of that life to gain this knowledge. Similarly, we should expect an alien anthropologist would be able to come to make true natural historical judgments about human beings. Of course, it cannot come to know the subjective character of human consciousness, any more than we can know “what it is like to be a bat.”⁸¹ But an alien anthropologist should be able to formulate true Aristotelian categoricals about human life—the very same ones that the virtuous person could formulate if he were called upon to do so in a theoretical context.⁸² If knowledge of human life is just knowledge *through* virtue, however, then it is difficult to know how this is possible.

Notice that this is not just a problem for rational aliens. If only the virtuous know human nature through virtue, then the non-virtuous also do not have knowledge of their own form either. Perhaps one could come to discover one’s own form, should one happen upon a virtuous community like the men of Athens and be suitably instructed; or perhaps there is simply no hope for those who are not raised in the right way to begin with, as they are completely outside the

⁸¹ Nagel (1979).

⁸² It is this aspect of the theory that is supposed to differentiate it from constructivism. The constructivist argues that true normative judgments represent a normative reality, but denies that the reality represented is in anyway independent of the normative judgment itself. I take it that if ethical naturalism is supposed to be a meaningful alternative to constructivism, it must deny that the normative reality it is concerned with is a reality that is entirely constructed from acts of practical judgment and nothing more. For more on this structural feature of the constructivist project of explaining practical norms, see LeBar (2008) and Street (2009).

sphere of practical wisdom. It seems as though Aristotle thought many humans were like this: slaves, women, and Barbarians.⁸³

Though it would make sense of her confidence in the motivating power of the perception of facts about human nature, Foot does not give any indication that the knowledge she speaks of is mediated through virtue quite so thoroughly. At any rate, if this is her view, then the irrelevancy objection clearly defeats it. After all, the stated purpose of ethical naturalism is to show how “the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be determined by quite general facts about human beings.”⁸⁴ But if her idea is that the virtuous alone have epistemic access to these facts, then it becomes difficult once again to see how any appeal to them is supposed to be relevant to the determination in question. On the one hand, if you are already virtuous, then from your own perspective there is nothing to be determined. On the other hand, if you have been raised to be non-virtuous, you have no epistemic access to these facts, and then they cannot enter into your reflection and deliberation. Moreover, once you come to know them, they immediately become superfluous to you. As for the alien anthropologist, human life and action will, from its point of view, remain shrouded in mystery, as it cannot ever come to know these general facts, as it presumably cannot come to acquire *human* virtues.

On this new theory, there is absolutely no work for natural norms to do. Everything is known through dispositions of *right* practical reason, which any human being may or may not

⁸³ It is also unclear how this person is truly responsible for his bad action. I find this view strange in that it makes it seem as though being good is, to a large extent, being lucky that one was raised in “the right way.” Supposing that one is raised poorly, perhaps within a political community that is not governed by just laws, such a person will forever remain shrouded in blindness about its own nature. This may be Aristotle’s view (though I am not convinced of this interpretation), but it is certainly not the view of Aquinas, who thought that all human beings not only can, but basically do know what’s good for them in a very general and abstract way. Aquinas does not think we have a merely passive capacity for virtue, which may or may not be actualized by other members of a privileged community who know the right way to go on. He thinks we are actively ordered to our own good, just as anything else is. This is compatible with the thought (which seems obviously true) that we need proper training in order to achieve the good to which we are antecedently ordered.

⁸⁴ (2001, 45).

have, depending on whether he happened to be raised in the right community.⁸⁵ This is an unsatisfying result.

4.2 A DILEMMA FOR ETHICAL NATURALISTS

In thinking through the claims of ethical naturalism, we have come to see that, so far at least, we do not know how natural norms can be practical. We can put our problem in the form of a dilemma for the ethical naturalist. If she takes the first horn and stresses that ethical naturalism provides objective, natural norms of the species as the ground of our moral beliefs and judgments, then she fails to meet Hume's practicality requirement, because judgments about what is true of our own species are not necessarily practical. But moral judgment must meet this requirement, so the theory is inadequate. If she takes the second horn and stresses how ethical naturalism yields a picture of knowledge of human life that is practical because it comes through the virtues, then we lose our grip on how the knowledge is based on natural, objective facts about the species that are potentially accessible from the third personal standpoint of the alien anthropologist. And then the theory fails because the norms no longer appear to be natural—i.e., (at least potentially) accessible from the outside.

The problem our dilemma poses is how we can reconcile what on the surface appear to be quite different sorts of teleology: natural and practical. As we saw in the previous chapter, natural teleology is a form of explanation that describes the way things are independently of anyone's thought about them. What was supposed to be useful about adopting this model is that

⁸⁵ Of course, this is not to deny that human beings need to be raised in some kind of community. This is necessary for any rational animal, which is necessarily a linguistic animal. The trouble is that, according to second nature naturalism, he must be raised by the practically wise community. It is not enough to come into language and certain practices to have knowledge of human nature. One must come into just the right sort.

it provides a form of explanation that registers what is objective and intrinsically valuable for something. Anyone can come to see what is intrinsically good for some living thing just by coming to know the species or life form it bears. But what is good here is an object of theoretical knowledge, known through observation and discovery. From the perspective of theoretical thought and judgment, the facts about the life form are prior and provide its measure.⁸⁶ This implies that the facts about what is good are independent of the judgment that registers that good. And whatever the subject desires is irrelevant to the truth of the judgment of what is good.

But it is this feature of theoretical knowledge's objects, that their truth making features are independent of the thoughts and desires of the subject that registers them, that is so difficult to map onto the teleology of practical deliberation and reflection about action. In practical deliberation, one is concerned in the main not with how things are, but with how one might make them, *given what one is after* or what is *wanted* as an object of will. This is why Aristotle says that practical thought differs from theoretical thought in its end. Practical thought and practical reason is thought and reason *aimed* at action, not merely thought *about* action, and thus it is not finished until an action is completed. Consequently, practical thought considers potential actions insofar as they are, given one's ends, suitable or befitting. This is why practical thought cannot operate unless something is already wanted.⁸⁷ Practical thought does not consider things as they are, *simpliciter*. In this way, our practical judgments about what to do are very different from our theoretical judgments about the natural world. In practical judgment one creates facts, rather than tracks them. This explains, I take it, why Aristotle says that *practical* truth is not truth,

⁸⁶ This fits with Anscombe's famous account of theoretical knowledge in Intention. See Anscombe (2000, 57).

⁸⁷ This fact is shown very convincingly by Mueller (1979). See also Aquinas, ST I-II q. 8, a. 1, c.

simpliciter, but truth in agreement with *right desire*. This is why action cannot be explained in terms of applied theoretical knowledge.⁸⁸

Here we notice a change in the word ‘good’ that Foot simply does not account for. This is the change that we mark when we go from thinking of good as an object of the intellect to thinking of good as the *formal* object of the will. This sense of the word ‘good’, as what marks the formality of the relation between an object and a power of will, does not appear in the schema of natural normativity as it has been outlined thus far.⁸⁹ We need to try to find conceptual space for it.

In order to resolve the dilemma she faces, the ethical naturalist must be able to show how these two seemingly opposed teleologies (the natural teleology of life and the practical teleology of action) and these two seemingly different senses of good (the good we can derive from an account of what simply is and the good as practical goal) can be unified into one and the same account. That is, we need an account of natural normativity that will show us how the relation between a general judgment articulating some fact about a life form (a judgment about a fact that is potentially known from the outside) and a judgment concerning a particular bearer of that form in a particular situation, can take the form of a *practical inference* whose conclusion is an action that exemplifies that very same form of life.⁹⁰ To comprehend this, I take it, would be to comprehend the unity of the power of reason in a life form. But that unity is only displayed when the very same material reality—say, the human life form—can be shown to be apprehended in two fundamentally different ways.

⁸⁸ This is different from the highly influential critique of applied theoretical knowledge given by Christine Korsgaard. See Korsgaard (1996), (2009b).

⁸⁹ Michael Thompson is aware of this. He writes, “We are thus, I think, as far as can possibly be imagined from the category of intention or psychical teleology...” (2008, 78). Foot denies that we are quite so far, I take it, when she says there is no change in the meaning of ‘good’ when it is used in ‘good roots’ and ‘good dispositions of the will’. (2001, 39).

⁹⁰ I am indebted to Matthias Haase for coming to see the point in precisely these terms. See his (“Practically Self-Conscious Life,” unpublished manuscript, p. 10).

So far, such an account has not been forthcoming from any ethical naturalist. A unified account can be found, however, in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. For this reason, it makes sense to turn to Aquinas to see what we might learn from him. In the remaining parts of this chapter, I do just that. I argue that Aquinas provides an account of the teleology of practical reasoning according to which its starting points are basic human goods, which the human will is naturally inclined to seek. In this way, Aquinas thinks that all practical reasoning is ultimately reasoning for the sake of attaining or maintaining these ends. Consequently, all practical reasoning is ultimately for the sake of living the sort of life that pertains to man. Indeed for Aquinas, there could be no practical teleology without natural teleology, since there would be nothing to reason towards if the will were not by nature inclined towards the exemplification of human form.

Aquinas's theory shows how natural norms (the basic human goods the will is naturally inclined to seek) can govern right practical reasoning. Such norms apply only to human beings, and are practical in that they are "essentially related to the will" as the ends to which it is naturally ordered.⁹¹ Because these norms belong to the life form of man, they are norms that govern every human community, and can in principle be discovered by some other rational form of life.

4.3 AQUINAS'S THEORY OF WILL

In the previous chapter, we saw that Foot was not entitled to say that moral evaluations were evaluations of the capacity of the rational will alone, in isolation from the rest of the life form. It

⁹¹ (2001, 34).

was unclear, however, how she was going to conduct an evaluation of the will in any other terms. Aquinas shows us one way this might be possible. On his account, the will is a “natural, vital power,” and as such tends to the integrated, complete good of the human animal, taken as a whole.⁹² He writes, “Since it is by our will that we employ whatever powers we have, the human person is said to be good, not by his good understanding, but by his good will.”⁹³

There are many powers that make up human life: powers of reproduction, growth, perception, and judgment. The will is the power through which a person naturally tends to the goods of all these powers, in accordance with a rational conception of how they ought to be integrated into a whole. Aquinas calls this integrated conception of man’s good his happiness or final end. The will is the power that naturally seeks this end. In order to understand this view, which is in its essence Aristotelian but quite foreign to us, we have to see how it is situated within a much broader, explanatory nexus that relates form, inclination, and good.

4.3.1 Appetite: Natural, Sensitive, Rational

Aquinas, like Aristotle, understands inclination or tendency in terms of form. As we move up the Aristotelian *scala naturae*, we find more perfect forms of inclination, and thus more perfect forms of existence. Rational animals are not at the top of Aquinas’s great chain of being. Rather, they occupy a middle position between purely intellectual creatures (Angels) and mere brutes. For our purposes, we do not need to follow the links, either all the way up to the Divine,

⁹² (2001, 11).

⁹³ ST, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 3.

or all the way down to the elementary particles that comprise all physical things. Our task is far more narrow, and so we, like the ethical naturalist, can stick to the topic of life.⁹⁴

Aquinas argues that all living things are a self-sustaining system of powers that functions to bring the living thing into being and to sustain its being. The movement of any part of a living thing, at any particular moment, is necessarily explained by reference to the movement of the whole thing towards a single end: the coming to be, maintenance, or reproduction of *that very form of life*.

To see this, we can make use of an illustrative example from Michael Thompson's work on life, which is in many ways in keeping with the sort of view Aquinas holds. About the material process of mitosis in living things, Thompson writes,

It may be happening here, under the microscope, in an amoeba; and there in a human being. In the first case, an event of this type will of course be a phase in a process of reproduction—one of the forms of generation available to that kind of thing. But in the case of the human it will rather be a part of growth or self-maintenance; reproduction is another matter, and has another matter, among humans. The distinction between the two cases of mitosis is not discovered by a more careful scrutiny of the particular cells at issue[...]⁹⁵

Thompson's point is that if we stay at the level of *mere* matter and do not take into account *that for the sake of which* the process itself unfolds, then we will not really know what sort of movement is taking place, because we will not know the end towards which it is currently

⁹⁴ For instance, if Aquinas had rudimentary knowledge of chemistry he would no doubt say that acids have a tendency to donate protons. For justification, he would point to the fact that this is what acids typically do when in appropriate conditions (in aqueous solution, in contact with zinc, etc.), and so long as nothing interferes with them. Furthermore, if an acid does not donate protons, this fact will demand some kind of explanation (say, its being placed in a sealed bottle by someone) that involves an external force acting on it. See ST I-II, q. 76, a. 1, c. It seems that Aquinas is wrong about the innocence of this way of speaking, and there are good reasons to avoid speaking of a tendency *in* the acid. But that is only because there is good reason to hesitate to attribute the notion of *form* to an acid. And for our purposes, it certainly does seem like a strain to talk of the acid's good, and relatedly, it seems wrong to say of an acid that is in a sealed bottle that it should be doing anything other than what it is doing. We do not need to follow Aquinas (or Aristotle) in attributing form to basic elements, though it has been attempted. For a recent attempt, see Makin (1989).

⁹⁵ Thompson (2008, 55).

progressing. In a living thing, the end determines what any presently occurring movement is. For this reason, we say that everything the plant does—every operation of every one of its powers—is for the sake of a single end, the exemplification of its own form. When the sunflower grows towards the sun, when it sinks its roots into the earth, when its cells split up and divide in such-and-such a way, all of these activities occur for the sake of a sunflower life coming to be and remaining in being.

Aquinas calls this system of powers each tending to their own ends for the sake of the whole the plant's *nature*, and thus he speaks of there being a *natural* inclination in the plant that explains each of the plant's movements in terms of the single, unitary end for the sake of which they come to be and operate towards.⁹⁶

It is important to note that this natural inclination or appetite is not itself a regulating power we can ascribe to the plant—it is not a kind of inner manager that oversees the whole operation. Rather, natural appetite is simply the name Aquinas gives to the system of essentially inter-related powers as a whole, the life form or nature. We might call it a principle of explanation, given that its role is to explain the movement and changes we see in the living thing itself. Aquinas thinks it is necessary to avert to this principle or tendency, because again, without it we simply cannot grasp what any movement of a living thing is.

In one sense, this talk of natural appetite is deeply misleading, since a plant obviously does not have *desires* for its end. But the fact that we can only hear words like 'inclination' and 'appetite' in a psychological key is not Aquinas's fault, and I think it is a prejudice we would do well to reconsider. Aquinas would agree with us that it is a category mistake to say that a sunflower *wants* to grow towards the light, if by this we mean that the flower somehow registers

⁹⁶ DV Q 22.a.4 Natura igitur insensibilis, quae ratione suae materialitatis est maxime a Deo remota, inclinatur quidem in aliquem finem, non tamen est in ea aliquid inclinans, sed solummodo inclinationis principium, ut ex praedictis patet.

a positive feeling or has an inner impression towards the light, which “causes” it to move toward the light. The plant does not apprehend or desire anything; thus Aquinas is very careful to say that it does not have a *power* of appetite. In fact, Aquinas is at pains to note that a plant has no window onto the world at all—it just has conditions in which it characteristically comes into being, maintains, and reproduces itself.

This shows that the term ‘appetite’, for Aquinas, has nothing in the main to do with some feelings or sense impressions of any kind, and everything to do with a principle that explains movement and change in a naturally organized being.

Of course, animals do have feelings and desires, and for this reason Aquinas says they have a “more perfect mode of inclination.”⁹⁷ Because the animal itself has appetites for specific things, unlike a plant, Aquinas attributes to animals appetitive powers, and he speaks of an animal’s *sensitive appetite*. Indeed, the hallmark of animality is the possession of perceptual powers, which can be further divided into two parts, cognitive and appetitive. The reason for the division between cognition and appetite is that an animal is more than just an integrated system of powers that operates for the sake of its own existence. An animal has external and internal senses, and so it perceives the world and reacts to what it perceives through these senses by moving itself through the world, in order to pursue some things and avoid others. Consequently, animals have a conscious form of life.

Aquinas recognizes that an animal is not neutral with respect to what it apprehends, but reacts in accordance with what it perceives in a way that is good for the whole animal. An animal perceives particulars and is inclined either to seek or avoid them insofar as they are

⁹⁷ DV, Q22.a.4 Dicendum, quod voluntas est alia potentia ab appetitu sensitivo. Ad cuius evidentiam sciendum est, quod sicut appetitus sensitivus distinguitur ab appetitu naturali propter perfectiorem modum appetendi, ita etiam appetitus rationalis ab appetitu sensitivo

suitable to itself. Thus an animal has a power of desire—its sensitive appetite—that tends to those objects that are good for the animal as a whole.⁹⁸ Plants do not.

So Aquinas, following Aristotle, marks a division within the powers that make up animal life: In the first group are the powers that animals have in common with plants, which pertain to growth and reproduction, and in the second group are the powers that pertain to it as an animal. This second group can be further divided into cognitive and appetitive powers. Aquinas draws this latter division in terms of a difference in formal objects, or aspects under which one and the same thing is apprehended *qua* object of that power. Aquinas writes,

What is apprehended and what is desired are the same in reality, but differ in aspect (*ratio*). For a thing is apprehended as something sensible or intelligible, whereas it is desired as suitable (*conveniens*) or good (*bonum*). Now it is diversity of aspect in the objects, and not material diversity, which demands a diversity of powers.⁹⁹

The division between cognition and appetite is not material, but formal; that is to say, it is attributed to the power itself and defines its act.

To understand his claims here, we must return to his understanding of a power. Again following Aristotle, Aquinas speaks of powers in terms of their acts and objects. The act of a power is defined by its object. For instance, the power of sight is defined by the object of its act, the visible (or colored). The basic idea is that material things are cognized (or wanted) under some specific formal aspect. For instance, the same material thing in the world, say a cardinal perched on a tree, can be cognized by different perceptual powers. Insofar as I see that it is red,

⁹⁸ Aquinas entertains the idea that we needn't attribute an appetitive power to animals, since each individual power can be said to be a tendency to its own end that comes to be for the sake of the whole. Aquinas responds that while it is true that each power, being of a certain form or nature, has an inclination to its own object, there is still the need for an appetite following upon apprehension by which the animal tends towards objects not just as suitable to a particular power, but as suitable to the animal simply or as a whole. See ST I q. 80, a. 1, ad 3.

⁹⁹ ST I Q. 80, a.1, ad.2 quod id quod apprehenditur et appetitur, est idem subiecto, sed differt ratione, apprehenditur enim ut est ens sensibile vel intelligibile; appetitur vero ut est conveniens aut bonum. Diversitas autem rationum in obiectis requiritur ad diversitatem potentiarum; non autem materialis diversitas.

it is an object of my visual power, which registers its visible properties. Insofar as I hear its distinctive call, it is an object of my power of hearing, which registers its audible properties. I cannot know that the bird is soft through my power of hearing, or that it is red through my power for touch.¹⁰⁰

This diversity of formal objects is a diversity of genus, as these are all objects of sensory powers. But the diversity between objects of cognition and desire is of a higher order. Cognition and desire belong to diverse *genera* of powers.¹⁰¹ In this case, the differences divide according to the very idea of an object, or the formal relation in which something stands to a power *qua* power of a living thing. Appetitive powers are unified in virtue of their formal relation to the good (universal or particular). Cognitive powers, on the other hand, are unified in virtue of their formal relation to truth (universal or particular).

This explains why Aristotle and Aquinas both speak of “parts” of the soul. There is the cognitive “part” wherein the powers can be grouped together under the formality of truth, and the desiring “part” where the powers can be grouped together under the formality of good. The division marks two fundamentally different orientations that an animal can take to the world. There is no need to mark such a division in plants, as a plant is not related to the world at all.

For Aquinas, truth just is the name of the formal relation things (being) stand in with respect to a cognitive power (perceptual or intellectual). Cognitive powers are said to receive things, not in the manner they exist in themselves (in their own material being), but rather according to the mode of the knower (sensible or intellectual being). Setting all manner of complicated details aside, Aquinas would say that truth is ascribed to the act of the cognitive

¹⁰⁰ A deaf person who claims to hear music through touch is not a counterexample to this claim. Rather, I take it to prove the point. A bit of music is always a material reality (vibrations in a medium) that can be accessible through other sense modalities. In the case of a deaf person who can feel the vibrations and process that information in order to create music can be said to “hear” it metaphorically. But her touch is not an act of hearing, it is an act of touch.

¹⁰¹ See Dewan (2008).

power directly, not to the object of the power, because in apprehending something the thing is brought into conformity with the cognitive power according to its own mode. It is therefore proper to speak of a true perception or a true judgment, not a true object of perception or judgment.

The other way for an animal to be related to something in the world is to seek or to tend towards it. Appetite is the power by which the subject is ordered and inclined towards external, particular things. When an animal desires something, it is inclined or ordered towards it, in accordance with how it is in itself, in its particularity and materiality. Here the goodness is not ascribed to the relation—it is not a good wanting—but rather the thing is wanted as good.¹⁰² In this act, the animal is directed away from itself toward the object of its desire, the particular thing as it is. For Aquinas, this is the essential meaning of good, as that which provides the terminus or end of a motion of appetite or inclination.¹⁰³ When we speak of the good, we mean something considered as an object of appetite primarily, and only secondarily good as an object of intellect (i.e., considered under the formality of truth).

Whereas in apprehension or cognition an animal brings specific things in the world to itself, in desire the animal brings itself out to specific things in the world. We separate these two for the sake of distinguishing them and noting the formal difference, but in actuality they are inseparable. For Aquinas, like Aristotle, thinks that an animal does not apprehend anything without being inclined towards or away from what it has apprehended, because an animal cannot

¹⁰² Anscombe has a brief discussion of the distinction between intellect and appetite in *Intention*, §40. I take her to be following Aquinas there. Though it is true that we sometimes speak of a good desire (as when we say that the desire was good though what came of it was bad), we say this only insofar as the object of the desire is truly good. But now we are making a judgment about some object of desire, instead of actually desiring it!

¹⁰³ SG 3.3.

be inclined to anything in particular without first having some kind of cognitive apprehension of it.¹⁰⁴

It is because an animal goes after what it senses or perceives as good for itself on the whole that Aquinas says it has a sensitive appetite; and it is because we can attribute this appetite to an animal that we can say its actions are voluntary. But only imperfectly so, as mere animals do not apprehend things universally (i.e., through the use of concepts) but as particulars. So, while an animal can regulate its behavior in terms of what is good for itself on the whole, it is not up to the animal to decide how things should be regulated, because it is not up to the animal whether it perceives any particular thing in a positive or negative light.

For instance, if a sheep comes across a patch of grass, she will be inclined to seek it, as a source of pleasure for itself (a relief of hunger). The sheep has a standing disposition to seek grass as a source of nourishment for herself, which directs her appetitive powers towards what is good for it. Now, suppose on the way to munch some grass, the sheep also perceives a wolf. Now she will be inclined to flee, as she will perceive the wolf as a danger or threat to herself. The sheep cannot question whether she ought to flee the wolf, and she cannot decide to be brave and face down the wolf. That is simply not an option available to her. The reason is that she cannot think of the particular harm (the wolf) in light of a general conception of what is good for her (the good sheep life).¹⁰⁵ Though there is such a thing as a good sheep life, the sheep herself

¹⁰⁴ This may at first seem like an extreme position. Can't I just think of things without being inclined to act? We can only understand the Aristotelian position if we have a suitably broad notion of act. Of course, we can think about things without a view to action, if by this we mean moving ourselves about the world for the sake of some specific purpose. I might, for example, just be sitting around thinking, without a view to anything at all. But I think Aquinas would say that whatever I contemplate, I am moved either to continue and rest in that object of contemplation (say, the Divine) or I am moved to contemplate something else, or to do something else altogether.

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas has fairly sophisticated explanation of animal movement and sensitive appetite, both in us and in lower animals. To get into this would be to wade in deeper waters than I can currently manage, having to do with the passions and animal movement in general. For further discussion, see Pasnau (2002, chapters 6-7), and Miner (2009, chapter 1).

neither knows it nor is essentially guided by such knowledge in what she does. The sheep cannot think generally, but can only cognize and remember particulars as this is regulated by instinct.

Because an animal can only apprehend and react to particulars as particulars, Aquinas argues that whether its life goes well is not really up to it. Everything depends on the particulars it encounters. No decisions are available to it, because the animal is not able to develop the consciousness that other alternative ways of going on are open to it, which is necessary in order for a decision to be made. For to develop that kind of consciousness requires powers of conceptual cognition and inference, which a mere animal lacks.

A rational animal, Aquinas argues, has an even “more perfect form of inclination.” Rational animals, like any animal, have a natural inclination towards their good as a whole, and like lower animals this power is actualized through their apprehension of things in the world. But Aquinas argues that a rational animal relates to the world through the application of universal concepts, and thus it is inclined to pursue or avoid things under an intellectual, universal apprehension of them. Thus, Aquinas says that the will is inclined towards its objects under the formality of the “universal good,” rather than the particular good.¹⁰⁶

This means that a rational animal does not merely act on instinct. The perception of something as dangerous (as an object of fear), though it may automatically *incline* a rational creature to avoid it, does not *determine* it to flee what it perceives. A rational animal can stand in the face of certain death if he judges that a greater good than his own preservation is at stake. And that is because a rational animal can put a certain distance between itself and its judgments and desires. Its decisions and its inclinations can become objects of rational reflection, and thus it can reflect on its own acts. For instance, though I might immediately

¹⁰⁶ ST I-II, q. 1. a. 7. This is the parallel to the intellect regarding its object under the formality of the universal truth, rather than particular, sensible truth.

desire to eat the cake upon perceiving it, I can always ask myself if the anticipated pleasure I perceive is a reason to eat it. Because a rational animal can separate himself from his immediate perceptions and inclinations in this way, its life is self-determined and free.¹⁰⁷

What explains this is the fact that a rational animal apprehends particulars universally, or through concepts, and thus under different descriptions that can be inferentially related to other things he knows and desires. For instance, whereas a dog can only see a bit of meat on the table as food, and he is automatically inclined to pursue it as such,¹⁰⁸ a rational animal might see a bit of meat on the table in a number of different ways: as a potential meal, as a gift and expression of gratitude to someone else, as a manifestation of injustice, as a part of a science project, as a suitable vehicle of poison, and so on *ad infinitum*. Any particular thing a rational animal perceives is potentially inferentially related to his other ends, and is immediately perceived as so related. Therefore a rational animal is not inclined towards any particular thing in any one pre-determined way. Therefore, a rational animal needs a reason to be inclined towards or away from any particular it perceives. Consequently the principle of inclination in a rational animal, the will, requires an act of reason in order to be determined to act. That is, any particular object of will must be given to it by an act of practical reason (a practical judgment that some end is to be pursued through some determinate means).

Because the object of a power of will comes through an act of reason, we can say that a rational animal *determine itself* to move, in accordance with its conceptual understanding of what is to be pursued for the sake of what. That is to say, a rational animal must act according to its reasons for so acting. And so a ‘Why?’ question regarding the acts of a rational animal can be

¹⁰⁷ Christine Korsgaard brings this sort of critical self-distance into relief convincingly. See (1996, chapter 1).

¹⁰⁸ Of course, a dog can be trained to avoid the food, against his instinct. Aquinas thinks this is because the dog can remember the pain he associates with doing certain actions if he is repeatedly punished for them. But the instinct to go after the food is still there, and its motive force still very powerful. The impetus for food can only be overcome by memory of something painful and to be avoided, such as bodily harm.

directly addressed to it, and an answer can be expected that will appeal, not to some brute disposition to act in certain ways, but to the agent's own sense of his or her reasons for thinking, desiring, or acting as she does. Thus Aquinas says that a rational animal determines its own inclinations, and is free.¹⁰⁹ This is why he also affirms that, "goodness of will depends on reason."¹¹⁰

4.3.2 The Will and the Good

We have seen, at least for living things, how Aquinas understands the scholastic dictum, *bonum est quod omnia appetunt*, or "all things seek the good." We have seen how animals are related to their own good in a sense that cannot be attributed to plants. Rational animals have an even "more perfect form of existence" and a "more perfect form of inclination" to their own good, because a rational animal can determine for itself what to pursue or avoid under the universal formality of good. But more careful attention needs to be paid to this notion of rationally apprehending the good, and acting on reasons.

Aquinas argues that a rational animal acts on reasons because only a rational animal knows its ends *qua* end.¹¹¹ A mere animal knows its ends and knows the means to pursue them, but it does not know its end as an end, and it does not know the means in relation to the end. To know an end *qua* end is to know it in light of one's (at least implicit) understanding that there is a potentially infinite number of things one might do in relation to the particulars one encounters in

¹⁰⁹ DV Q22.a4, ad 1 voluntas ab appetitu sensibili non distinguitur directe per hoc quod est sequi apprehensionem hanc vel illam; sed ex hoc quod determinare sibi inclinationem, vel habere inclinationem determinatam ab alio: quae duo exigunt potentiam non unius modi. Sed talis diversitas requirit diversitatem apprehensionum ut ex praedictis patet. Unde quasi ex consequenti accipitur distinctio appetitivarum virium penes distinctionem apprehensivarum, et non principaliter. See also ST I-II, q. 1, a. 2.

¹¹⁰ ST I-II q. 19, a. 3.

¹¹¹ ST I-II, q. 6, a. 1.

the world, and that one must settle for oneself what one will actually do, and through what determinate means. Whenever a rational animal seeks something, it knows that it is not absolutely determined to it; rather, it knows that it must determine itself. And it knows this, not because it was taught this, or because it has the proper theory of itself, but because it is not pre-disposed in any one way to react to particular things. Now, in order to determine itself, a rational animal needs a ground. It needs a reason for pursuing this rather than that. An animal who only cognizes particulars neither needs nor can have any such ground. This is why only a rational animal is free, because it must decide for itself how to go on.

But how does it so decide? How does it have a reason? The search for a ground of action is never conducted in isolation from its other pursuits, many of which are habitual and unchanging. This means that it must think through what it pursues, in light of what it is already pursuing (which will always be many different ends, and a variety of means to attaining or maintaining them). Likewise, it must think through which means are the best ones to take, given its other ends. This means, among other things, that rational creatures can weigh alternative means in light of an end, and weigh less ultimate ends in light of more ultimate ends (i.e., more specific ends versus more general ends).

Consequently, we can say that rational animals have an understanding of different levels of ends, and at least a vague sense of how they are supposed to hang together as a whole. This conception of how it all hangs together is what Aquinas calls the ultimate end—a rational animal's general, conceptual understanding of how to live or go on. Aquinas thinks that any sane, mature adult will *necessarily* have cobbled together some such conception. Aquinas calls this conception “the universal good”, and he argues that it is the will's proper object. Everything

that is willed is willed under this rational aspect of good, as *to be pursued* because *in accord with my general conception of the good*.

In fact, Aquinas thinks there could be no reasons unless a rational animal has a general conception of its own good, and thus a general sense of how to live. The will, as a rational capacity for desire, follows conceptual apprehension of things in the world. Rational cognition sees the general in the particular, and there can be no rational grasp of the particular without the general. The will must be understood in the same way. Whatever is an object of will, that is, whatever particular thing is wanted, is only wanted because it stands in relation to something general—that the particular thing can be brought under one’s general conception of the good.

We cannot understand what Aquinas is saying so long as we think of it in terms of having an evaluative belief about action (prospective or actual). This is not Aquinas’s point. In fact, his position has nothing to do with moral psychology at all and everything to do with the metaphysics of motion and tendency laid out in the previous section. Just like any living thing, Aquinas argues that we cannot explain the voluntary movements of a man (i.e., the movements that are explained by appeal to his will), without an appeal to the end for the sake of which they come to be; and since man is a living thing, and the will is a vital power of a living thing, then that end is the complete exemplification of its own form. Aquinas calls this end happiness, or *beatitudo*. And he argues that will is *naturally* inclined to it. But the will is a rational power, and so although it can be naturally inclined to the end of man it cannot be *blindly* inclined to this end. It has to be inclined by acts of practical judgment, which involves the grasping of practical reasons for acting in some ways to the exclusion of others.

Of course, Aquinas is not claiming that we are always thinking about our happiness, or even that for everything we do we can make a case that it contributes to our happiness. Rather,

it's that we have a general conception of what happiness is (though we may not call it *that*) and we pursue particular things in light of this general conception. Consequently, we can ask a rational animal why it does what it does, and it will in principle be able to give an answer that locates what it does within its general conception of what is to be done and what is to be avoided. If we did not pursue particular things in light of a general conception of what to pursue and avoid (i.e., how to live), then this practice of asking the 'Why?' question would make no sense. It is for this reason that Aquinas says that the movements of human beings are "perfectly voluntary," because in every such movement, the human being knows its end *qua* end, that is, in light of its general conception of what is good.¹¹²

Another sense in which a rational animal knows its end *as* an end, is because it can reflect on its reasons for acting in any particular instance. Suppose, for instance, that I am drawn to the bright bags of candy in aisle three, and I start to walk in that general direction with a mind to getting one of them. I can question this decision at any moment, even before I start to move. I can, as it were, hold it in abeyance in order to criticize it. I can ask myself whether the action conflicts with my other ends, more general (health), and more specific (goal of losing weight for a special event), and decide whether the satisfaction I seek in the candy is worth its known costs. I can question whether candy is really the best way to spend my limited funds, or whether it wouldn't be better to hold off on food all together until dinner. Or I can shrug all that off as basically not important, and go for it.

Now if I settle on the candy, purchase it, and eat it, then there will be some reason that explains this. The reason may just be that nothing occurring to me at the time spoke against it. The reason need not be that it was a means to something else I wanted, or that it played some role in a larger plan. It may have just immediately appeared enjoyable (most pleasant things do).

¹¹² On the "perfect voluntary", see ST I-II, q. 6, a. 2.

¹¹³ Being a rational animal does not mean that every moment of life is burdened by some finely tuned deliberative calculus. It merely means that what is pursued comes under the formal aspect of the universal good, some *ratio appetibilitatis* that can explain the agent's intentional pursuit of it.

Of course, Aquinas also recognizes there are lower appetites in us. We are driven by bodily needs that are often quite urgent, and we too have instinctual drives for sex, nourishment, and the like, and we have primitive impulses to flee and avoid what is naturally perceived as dangerous or repulsive, and to seek what is naturally perceived as pleasant or suitable. And these different forms of desire can come into conflict with one another. For instance, I might know that traveling by plane is safer than traveling by car. But I may also have a primitive and desperate fear of being suspended 30,000 feet in the air. And yet I can get on a plane despite this fear. I can argue myself out of acting on it, and engage in useful distractions on the flight so as to keep it far from my consciousness (I can cover the windows, avoid looking at the monitor that shows the plane flying over the Atlantic ocean, keep my mind deeply engaged in a novel, etc). An animal with merely sensory cognition and appetite could not do this. Even the most sophisticated brutes would have to be drugged or otherwise unaware of something they were fearful of. Only a rational animal can micro-manage its fears.

Similarly, only a rational animal can be continent or incontinent. Our ability to act against our general conception of the good presupposes two things: (1) that we do all have such a conception; and (2) that our typical way of carrying on is to act in accordance with it. Thus

¹¹³ Whenever one talks about the deliberative character of all action, inevitably two objections arise: (1) we don't always deliberate, and (2) oftentimes it is manifestly harmful to deliberate, as in activities that depend on skill, such as sports. See Arpaly and Schroeder (2012). Neither objection is a problem for Aquinas because he does not have a causal theory of action, according to which prior mental states explain actions as their effects. His point is conceptual. Insofar as an act is voluntary, it is potentially deliberative, not actually deliberative. Aquinas recognizes that skill and virtue often drive out actual deliberation.

weakness of will is not a counter-example to the view that Aquinas puts forward. Rather, it seems to prove the point rather well.

4.3.3 Goodness of Will

Aquinas argues that human goodness is goodness of will. He does not think this is because our other powers are irrelevant to the assessment of human life, as Foot has suggested, but rather, because it is “through the will that we employ whatever powers we have.”¹¹⁴ This claim will likely fall deaf on contemporary ears. We do not think that we need to appeal to the will to explain the operation of a power of judgment, say, or perception. What, then, are we to make of Aquinas’s claim?

Aquinas claims that properly human acts are voluntary acts. Acts and processes that merely happen in a man, such as the regeneration of cells, the circulation of blood, and the production of saliva, are not properly human because they are essentially such as to be outside of the sphere of practical reason and will. Properly human acts are voluntary insofar as they are potentially within this sphere. This needs to be explained.

Aquinas does not think that the will operates on its own. Obviously, I cannot walk upstairs just by willing it. Thus Aquinas speaks of the will “using” the other powers of a human being in order to realize its objects.¹¹⁵ This is not a homunculi theory of the will. To say that other powers come under the control of the will is just to say that their exercise is in accordance with what the will desires, and their form is provided by practical reason.¹¹⁶ In making a practical judgment and thus wanting to A, I thereby give all my other powers, as it were, the

¹¹⁴ ST, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 3.

¹¹⁵ This is in line with what Anscombe says about writing on the blackboard with one’s eyes shut. The essential thing, she says, I do without my eyes. And the essential thing she clearly has in mind is the act of will.

¹¹⁶ For his discussion of use as an act of will, see ST I-II, q. 16.

relevant practical context in which to operate: for the sake of A-ing. The movements of these other powers can only be explained by the fact that they are for the sake of A-ing. To register this, Aquinas would say that I am “using” them for the sake of A-ing. And the extent to which I use them in accordance with what I rationally desire, is the extent to which their operation is voluntary and explained by an appeal to the will.

Now, I obviously cannot use all of my parts or powers directly. The heart, for instance, pumps blood, with or without my consent, and the explanation of this involves no appeal to my power of will. But I can still use my heart for my own ends, albeit indirectly. Suppose I am plagued by nightmares and I rig a heart rate monitor so that it will trip a loud alarm on my computer, because I want to wake up when I am having a nightmare. Then when my heart rate rises during a dream, the alarm is tripped and I wake up, thereby stopping my dream. Here I am using my heart to do something else besides pump blood, thereby bringing it under the control of practical reason and will. But still, the heart is just doing what the heart does. My will obviously doesn’t control that.

Similarly, though the eyes are the human organ of sight, human beings can and do put them to other purposes: to convey emotion, attract attention, make a point, and so on. And though I cannot decide how my capacity for vision actually operates, I can decide (to a certain extent) upon what objects I direct them. I can choose not to look at advertisements on TV, just as I can choose to avert my eyes when I encounter something grotesque, offensive, or otherwise displeasing. The same is true even for my thoughts. I can choose what to set my powers of contemplation and judgment towards, and I can even choose what I will allow myself to imagine and fantasize about.¹¹⁷ Similarly, though I cannot choose how my powers for digestion and

¹¹⁷ Consider the difference between the man who spends his time on the bus thinking about current events, versus the man who thinks about the latest gossip he read in a tabloid.

growth operate, I can choose to regulate them by taking certain medicines, by taking in certain nutrients and avoiding others, and by regulating my behaviors regarding the excretion of waste. This is the sense in which these powers are under what Aquinas calls the agent's *dominium*, or voluntary control: insofar as the exercise of these powers occurs because of a rational principle that plays an explanatory role in its operating in this way, here and now, and in accord with what the will desires.

Of course, this kind of voluntary control comes in degrees. It might be outside of my control whether I have certain inclinations, or whether I am prone to certain passions, some of which may be morally problematic, deeply vexing, or downright perplexing. But it is at least in principle within my control whether I act in some determinate way so as to satisfy their pull on me.¹¹⁸ It is up to me whether I rationally desire them—that is to say, whether I commit myself to searching around for the means to their pursuit. And while it is often outside of my control what is placed within the domain of my sensory apprehension, it is up to me to seek to remove something that I have a reason to avoid.

Because of the importance of the will in their exercise, Aquinas argues that voluntary acts are properly human or *free* acts.¹¹⁹ By this he means acts that are essentially such as to be brought under the control of practical reason and will. Aquinas also calls them *moral* acts. In fact, he argues that everything a man does voluntarily is done morally. He does not mean that everything a man does voluntarily is moral in our modern sense—done out of duty, say, in contrast to what is merely prudent or in one's self-interest.¹²⁰ Rather, his thought is that, because

¹¹⁸ Of course, in cases of “compulsive” action, the matter becomes quite difficult. For now I want to set such complicated matters aside.

¹¹⁹ Of course, this means that intentional actions themselves are also voluntary. But that is just the result we should have expected.

¹²⁰ Aquinas had spent too much time in the confessional to be a Pollyanna about human beings and the extent to which they are creatures that have “fallen” quite far from any ideal.

what we do voluntarily we do in accordance with what we will, and since our will desires things under the formal aspect of the universal good, everything we do voluntarily has a moral meaning or significance attached to it. There is, for Aquinas, no morally neutral human act. While a general act description can be morally neutral, if that description is a *voluntary* description of something that happens (or fails to happen), here and now, then it is bound up with a form of explanation that is moral through and through. The form of explanation of voluntary descriptions—as in accord with what the will desires—just is moral explanation. It is the kind of explanation that ultimately depends on my general sense of what I ought to do and what I ought to avoid. The question of how to live just is the moral question, and a human life just is the moral domain. Aquinas would not agree with contemporary philosophers that moral actions are a special kind of human action, partitioned off from the rest somehow. Rather, he argues that every human action is moral—either good or bad.

Even acts of twirling my hair, twiddling my thumbs, or counting blades of grass, which seem morally neutral from the perspective of their content, are fraught with moral significance and meaning just in virtue of the fact that they are voluntary acts. Suppose that I twiddle my thumbs while listening to a lecture. Well, that's a good human action by Aquinas's lights (an action is good if it is in no way bad). But suppose that I'm twiddling my thumbs when I ought to be taking notes, since I need to write a report on the lecture for the school paper. Then the action is bad, because I could and should have been making better use of my hands! Likewise, while drumming my fingers on the table seems to be neither here nor there when considered generally, the evaluation of human acts as good or bad is always in reference to the *particular act itself*. Perhaps I ought not to drum my fingers on the kitchen table while drinking my morning coffee—I know that it drives my husband crazy! Or perhaps I ought not to do it when taking an exam so

as not to disturb others. These judgments can only be made within the context of a particular human life.

So while we can say there are morally neutral act descriptions, we must still affirm that no particular human act or action is morally neutral, because everything a human being does voluntarily is done (or could be done) in accordance with his general sense of how to go on. We might put it this way: Every human act is moral because every human act exemplifies a human life, which is the moral domain. At any moment, a human being is either living well or badly.

Thus the “moral” character of voluntary acts has nothing to do with particular propositional contents—moral content, we might say—but in whether an act can be in accordance with what the will desires, the universal good. Voluntary acts, then, can always be explained by a practical judgment that this is the way to be going on, here and now. Such judgments are always made (at least implicitly) within the context of one’s life: one’s other ends, one’s circumstances, one’s powers, one’s commitments, one’s duties, the norms of the society and institution to which one belongs, etc. Thus making such judgments is always, at least potentially, a matter of fitting what one does, here and now, into one’s life as a whole.

The above reflections on Aquinas’s theory of will are enough, I hope, to show how he thinks of the will as a power that is naturally inclined to the human good in such a way that fits into the framework of natural normativity. But since man’s end can only guide action through a rational conception of it, we may still be inclined to think that such a conception could be constructed out of purely formal principles. And so long as that remains a possibility, ethical naturalism will not be a meaningful alternative in moral theory. But Aquinas does not think that this general conception of the end is either wholly constructed, or wholly a matter of second

nature in a more Aristotelian sense. In order to see this, we must turn to his understanding of the first principles of practical reason.

4.4 FIRST PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICAL REASON

Aquinas argues that the will is a natural tendency towards the final end of man—the fullest exemplification of human life. But since appetite follows cognition, the will can only be moved by a general conception of this end. He argues that no human action is intelligible without attributing to the agent herself some conception of this end, no matter how inarticulate, unsystematic, or unreflective it might be. Aquinas takes it for granted that in coming to be a human being—i.e., being raised in a community of other human beings, coming into the possession of concepts, a language, and coming to have a world—one comes into some such conception, and thus comes to act voluntarily.

Now, having a general sense of how to go on, and bringing this general sense to bear on this particular moment within the context of the rest of her life—all her other ends, commitments, and so on—implies that the agent is able to order her ends and to adjust her actions in accordance with those ends she gives priority. If she chooses to eat the cake because she's hungry, even though she knows that it is someone else's piece, then we can say that she is ordering her life incorrectly, since she ought to value fairness over fleeting pleasures of the belly.

This very idea of action (the idea of ordering things to an end, and ordering these ends in light of an overall conception of the good) through acts of practical judgment and choice, implies that general principles guide an agent's determination of what is to be pursued and what avoided. Aquinas does think that practical reasoning takes place in accordance with general principles.

For our purposes, we don't need to understand what these principles are, but only that from which he thinks they must be derived—viz., the first principles of practical reason, which correspond to the natural inclinations of the will. These first principles and natural inclinations, Aquinas argues, are common to all human beings, and do not come about through explicit training or instruction. In fact, Aquinas says we are naturally apt to know and want them.

Before we can explain this, we must first note that Aquinas has a very different conception of principle (*archê*) than modern or contemporary moral philosophers. One finds in Aquinas no merely formal principles of right reasoning (nothing remotely approaching the so-called instrumental principle, the supposed “sine qua non of having reasons at all”¹²¹), nor does he think of principles as yielding some kind of explicit decision procedure. Aquinas does not think of first principles (from which all principles are ultimately derived) as imperatives or commands. Aquinas, following Aristotle once again, thinks of first principles of practical reason as its “starting points.” For practical reason, the starting points are the most primitive human goods that the will is naturally inclined to seek: life, knowledge, family, friendship, play, political community, and so on. These are the ends that all human beings want for their own sake, as intrinsically valuable to them. And they want these things in a rational way—viz., because they have a conceptual apprehension that they are constitutive of their general good.¹²²

Although natural inclinations depend upon conceptual apprehension, we should not be tempted to think that they are objects of contemplation. These goods, as first principles of practical reason, are apprehended as ends—as objects of pursuit rather than as objects of contemplative knowledge. Aquinas thinks that we are naturally apt to know and thus naturally inclined to them. We should not be tempted, however, to think that we know them *because* we

¹²¹ This is how Dreier famously describes it (1997, 99).

¹²² It is a mistake, then, to think of natural inclinations as some kind of animal instinct.

are inclined to them; to think that would be to get the order of explanation backwards.¹²³ Rather, we are inclined or oriented towards these goods because we are apt to know them, through a natural habit of practical reason.

There is much to unpack here. To begin with, we need to understand the first principle of practical reason:

(FPPR) Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided.¹²⁴

This principle lays out the intelligibility of goodness as such, as object of appetite, or what is to be done and pursued. Although as stated, the principle is formal, it is not *merely* formal, because Aquinas argues that contained within it are all the “precepts of the natural law,” which are the basic human goods that, taken as a well-ordered totality, constitute the complete fulfillment of man’s nature.¹²⁵ Thus, what the first principle of practical reason points to is the natural end of the human will: the exemplification of human form, which is the integrated human good or happiness.¹²⁶

In understanding the first principle of practical reason in this way, we thereby understand the intelligibility of practical reasoning and practical inference. Practical reasoning is always the task of preserving the human good through one’s one activity, and avoiding what is harmful to any aspect of this good. Practical reasoning is, by its very structure and nature, goodness preserving, rather than truth preserving.¹²⁷ This is why its conclusion is an action ordered to some end (i.e., some good), rather than a true proposition.

We can usefully compare the FPPR to the first principle of theoretical reason:

¹²³ This is the position of the famous Thomist, Jacques Maritain. See Maritain (1951).

¹²⁴ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c. bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum.

¹²⁵ ST I, II, q. 94, a. 2

¹²⁶ ST I-II, q. 90, a. 2

¹²⁷ For a contemporary defense of this view, see Anscombe (1989/2005).

(PNC) It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong to the same thing, at the same time, and in the same respect.¹²⁸

This is the principle of non-contradiction. For Aquinas, this is a claim about the intelligibility of being, rather than the good.¹²⁹

Aquinas does not think that either principle can be proven, but he also does not think that either can seriously be doubted when applied to particular cases. For example, in order to doubt the PNC, or to take it to be false, one would have to be able to conceive of a particular instance in which the same attribute might, at the same time, both belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect.¹³⁰ But one cannot do this because the world itself (being) cannot be this way. I cannot truthfully judge or assert that Socrates is both sitting and not sitting in the same moment, for the simple reason that Socrates cannot be that way. Thus no one needs to be told to follow the principle of non-contradiction; rather, one can't help but follow it, because in applying the concept sitting, here and now, I am ruling out not-sitting. And that is not because of a funny fact about the concept, but again, because our concepts are supposed to bear upon what can be, in fact. Thus, PNC is not primarily a claim about language or thoughts, but about the nature of reality or being.

Of course, the world is not unrelated to our thought about it. The acknowledgement of PNC in particular cases just is the acknowledgement of it as articulating the limit of possible thought about the world. Whatever can be a thought must be in line with this principle (i.e., every thought must exclude its contradiction) because whatever is thought is ordered to truth, and truth is a relation between judgment and some being. The principle of non-contradiction

¹²⁸ The formulation comes from Aristotle. See *Metaph. Iv*, 6, 1001b13-14.

¹²⁹ My discussion of these principles is heavily indebted to the work of Kevin L. Flannery, S.J., and to private discussion with him on this topic. See Flannery (2001, chapter 6).

¹³⁰ *Metaph. Iv*, 3, 1005b19-20.

defines theoretical intelligibility in this sense: we do not have any hold on the nature of thought without it.

Likewise, the first principle of practical reason is not something that can be demonstrated or proven in general, but only seen in light of its truth in particular cases. This principle is meant to express the intelligibility of the good, or the intelligibility of action. Just as one cannot judge contradictory claims to both hold true, one cannot pursue what one considers, at one and the same time and in the same respect, to be good and bad. Just as thought is not intelligible without PNC, so action is not intelligible without FPPR. So, just as Socrates cannot both be sitting and be standing at one and the same time, and so no one can have a particular belief that he is; so also, it is impossible that something can both be an object of will and not be an object of will at one and the same time, while considered in the same respect. That is, one cannot apprehend a goal as something that should be pursued and be avoided at one and the same time. In one moment I might see it as good in some way, at another moment as bad in some way, but only insofar as I attend to different aspects of the prospective action at different times. I cannot at the same time will to go to the store because I need food while I will not to go there because I am tired. Practical reasons exclude their practical contradictories just as theoretical reasons exclude their contradictories. This has to do with the nature of what can be done, or the good.

It follows from these principles that some thoughts must never be formulated (because they are incompatible with the way the world actually is) and some actions must never be done (because they are incompatible with what is actually good).¹³¹

The first principle of practical reason gives a determinate sense to *practical intelligibility*.¹³² Something is a good if it is to be pursued by that which apprehends it.

¹³¹ Hence the very idea of moral prohibitions flows from the logic of practical reason and the intelligibility of the good. For more on this aspect of the Aristotelian picture, see Inciarte (1994).

Something is a human good if human beings are naturally inclined to pursue them, given what they are. Practical reasoning is a matter of getting what ought to be pursued, and is goodness preserving. This distinguishes it from theoretical reasoning. This shows that the FPPR is formal, but not merely formal. Any rational animal would direct his own activity in accordance with it, but what it would thereby direct would depend upon its own nature, and the goods internal to that nature. This also has to do with the intelligibility of the good on something like a schema of natural normativity.

Practical reasoning is not formal, as its principles are the good intrinsic to human life. These goods set definite limits upon right practical reasoning. Moreover, Aquinas tells us that these principles are “naturally known to us” and “every desire *for things that are ordered to an end stems from a natural desire for the ultimate end.*”¹³³

Aquinas says that the apprehension of these goods *qua* good—that is, as goals and general objects to which the will is inclined—is *per se nota*. What he means is that the goodness is grasped spontaneously upon one’s interactions with them. One does not grasp them through observation of human beings and then inferring what to do based on these observations. Rather, his thought is that one knows them simply in virtue of being a human being. In order to grasp each good, one must know the dimension of human life to which it pertains. But human beings know these dimensions of life because they live them. They know them, as it were, *from the inside*. Thus, the grasp of these activities *qua* good does not require special instruction, theory, or even proper habituation because we are naturally apt to grasp them just by living a

¹³² It is sometimes complained that philosophers with deeply Aristotelian sympathies often argue by appeal to a notion of intelligibility that is itself not exactly transparent. For a nice articulation of the worry, see Setiya (2007). I take this sort of complaint to be legitimate. However, the notion of intelligibility is well worked out in Aristotle and those (like Aquinas) who follow him, and it is far from indefensible.

¹³³ ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2, emphasis added.

recognizably human life. Aquinas calls this sort of knowledge *connatural*, noting that we are inclined to it by our very nature.

It is a consequence of this view that we do not deliberate about whether to seek these ends in general; we only deliberate about whether to seek any one of them in any particular instance of action. These ends are the fixed, unchanging limits of practical reasoning.

It seems to me that something of this view can also be found in Aristotle. Consider the opening of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle famously proclaims that

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things. (I.980a21)

Aristotle recognizes that though they are obviously useful and we cannot get on without them, we revel in the exercise of our senses for its own sake, precisely because through them we attain knowledge, which we also value for its own sake and naturally desire. Thus the delight we take in our senses is a kind of demonstration (for one who came somehow to doubt it) that knowledge is one of our basic ends or goods.

Considerations such as these suggest that the knowledge we have of our own nature—though imperfect and incomplete—is knowledge gained *from the inside*, just in virtue of being a man and living a human life. Aquinas argues that our knowledge of all the basic human goods is connatural in this way: we know these from the inside, just in virtue of being a man.

4.5 HOW TO BE AN ETHICAL NATURALIST

Obviously, there is much more to be said about Aquinas on the will and practical reason. I have only said enough to begin to resolve the dilemma with which we began.

We began by admitting that we did not know how it was possible to be an ethical naturalist, because we did not understand how practical and natural normativity could possibly be reconciled. We came to see that the ethical naturalist must be able to show how the natural teleology of life and the practical teleology of action, and the two senses of good that come out of them (the good that corresponds to what a thing is, and the good as goal or end) can be reconciled with one another. We are now in a position to say how this is at least possible. If Aquinas's view can be made defensible, then we can say that there are goods that are objective because it pertains to man's nature to pursue them, in light of a conceptual understanding of how they ought to be integrated as a whole. At the same time, these goods are objects of a distinctively practical apprehension that is ordered to the will, which is, a natural tendency to seek those very goods as an integrated whole. Such goods depend on what a human being is, but they are known by human beings as goals or ends, as their typical way of coming to mind is not in the form of some abstract list, but in the course of thinking about concrete situations of human life with a view to their fulfillment. An alien anthropologist would not know them as ends or think of them with a view to realizing them, but nevertheless could come to know them by being acquainted with the characteristic activities of human beings, by observing minimally functioning human communities.

In Aquinas, then, we find a theory of practical reason according to which we do not need to show how facts about human beings can enter its structure. Rather, facts about human beings—spontaneous, non-observational knowledge of their most basic goods—define the

starting points and limit of that structure itself. Consequently, we do not now have to show how knowledge of human life form enters into practical thought. Practical thought itself is impossible without some general knowledge of human life. We reason from our general conception of this life, which is an incomplete knowledge of our own nature, down to particular actions that are ordered to its more perfect attainment.

It remains to be seen whether or not this account of the will and practical reason is true. I will not argue that here. For one thing, it would involve understanding the very idea of a natural habit of reason. While we have explored the idea of a natural inclination, we have not yet understood the idea of connatural knowledge, or knowledge that is in accord with nature or natural inclination. To do so, I take it, would involve an understanding of habit in general and virtue, and that would be a treatise in its own right. What has been argued here is merely a propaedeutic to that inquiry. But I will at least note the following, as I take it to be the crucial next step in advancing the argument for ethical naturalism. Aquinas has a picture according to which we can speak of both an affective (*per modum inclinationis*) and a cognitive (*per modum cognitionis*) connaturality, as naturally tending towards its suitable (*conveniens*) objects. And though he thinks that virtue perfects what we are by nature inclined to know, we are by nature inclined to know certain things even without virtue (intellectual or moral). This sort of imperfect knowledge of our own nature, which we are by nature (*per modum naturae*) suited to grasp, is what Aquinas says is common to all men, and what makes human action possible.

What I will attempt, in the next chapter, is to show how we can see our way into this sort of view by reflecting upon particular human actions as they are happening. Aquinas articulates his theory from above, but I prefer to give an account of things *in media res*. Thus, in the next chapter, I will argue that intentional action depends on the agent's practical knowledge of the

end, which is the cause of what it understands. In turn, that knowledge of the particular end of one's particular action depends on general knowledge of the final end: human life as such. Knowledge of action depends, I argue, on knowledge of human form.

5.0 KNOWLEDGE OF ACTION AND KNOWLEDGE OF FORM

Just as the species of natural things are constituted by their natural forms, so the species of human actions are constituted by forms as conceived by reason.

Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 18, a. 10.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Two questions have recently exercised philosophers of action. The first concerns the nature of the connection between acting intentionally and pursuing what one takes to be good, and the second concerns the nature of the connection between knowledge and action. Both questions concern the definition of action and its proper form of explanation. Yet philosophers typically treat the two questions separately, as if one might understand an answer to the first without having to connect it to the second, and vice versa.

In this chapter, I argue that these two inquiries are inextricably linked. When appreciated together, they point to the following conclusions: (1) actions are material events that are constituted by a rational form, which can only come to be through a power of knowledge that brings the material parts of an action together in accordance with this form; and (2) actions can therefore only be made intelligible by a form of explanation that, when understood abstractly, articulates a specifically practical sense of good.

5.1.1 The Problem with The Causal Approach

At least since the publication of *Intention*, most philosophers of action have followed Anscombe in thinking that intentional actions are somehow explained by their connection to practical reasons.¹³⁴ And at least since the publication of Davidson's seminal essays on action, most have thought that having a reason for action, or taking something to be one's reason for action, is best understood in causal-psychological terms. On a stronger reading of the causal theory, we must identify some mental state (or some combination of mental states) that stands on one side of the causal relation between agent and action; on a weaker view, while reasons might not be causes *per se*, action explanation is still a species of causal explanation in the standard sense.¹³⁵ Following convention, let us call this *the causal theory of action*.

Setting the real disputes between them aside, all causal theorists agree that the real work of action theory is the explication of the true psychological or motivational causes of actions, which are metaphysically distinct existences from the events in the world they bring about. Kieran Setiya sums up the causal theory well when he writes that, "[T]he intentionality of action consists in psychological motivation...and motivation consists in a certain kind of efficient causation."¹³⁶ This explanation by motivation typically comes by way of detailing the causal properties that define the type of state in question, along with the relevant propositional content that can rationalize the bodily movements they bring about.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ (2000, 9).

¹³⁵ See Alvarez (2007, 105).

¹³⁶ Setiya (2003, 348).

¹³⁷ For our purposes here, it does not matter whether we think that reasons just are mental states, facts about mental states, or whether we think that what it is to act for a reason (i.e., to act intentionally) is a matter of having certain psychological states that must play a specific efficient causal role in the production of action in virtue of their propositional contents. All three variations will fall under the scope of the present critique.

The causal theory is not without its problems, of course.¹³⁸ But let us set these problems aside, since they are only the symptoms that reveal a much deeper problem. Anscombe hinted at the deeper problem in several papers. The basic thrust of her objection is methodological:

I conjecture that a cause of this failure of percipience is the standard approach by which we first distinguish between “action” and what merely happens, and then specify that we are talking about “actions.” So what we are considering is *already given as—in a special sense—an action*, and not just any old thing which we do, such as making an involuntary gesture.¹³⁹

The deep problem with the causal account, by Anscombe’s lights, is that it presupposes precisely what it is supposed to explain: the nature of intentional action. The causal theorist takes it for granted that he already knows the difference between an action and “what merely happens,” and asserts that he is interested in explaining action. The causal theorist takes some notion of action as primitive, and explains it in terms of its relation to reasons.¹⁴⁰ But that leaves the action itself basically un-theorized.

Though Anscombe would agree that we cannot understand what an intentional action is without knowing what a reason for action is, she does not think we can take either notion as primitive in our theory. She plainly thinks we do not understand that notion of reason for action unless we understand what it is a reason for—actions. Likewise, we do not understand what an action is unless we understand what a practical reason is. The one reality is, on her account, only illuminated only insofar as the other is.¹⁴¹ This is why she says that her special sense of the question ‘Why?’ defines a form of explanation. An action is something to which this question

¹³⁸ High on the list of worries are that it reduces our understanding of mental agency to the causal interaction between states of mind, thereby leaving the agent herself either superfluous altogether, or excessively limited to some managerial role over the causal arena that is her mental life. And of course there is the notorious problem of deviant causation: sometimes mental states with the relevant causal properties and propositional contents cause actions completely by accident.

¹³⁹ Anscombe (2005, 111), emphasis added.

¹⁴⁰ The causal theorist also typically takes a notion of event and cause as primitive as well.

¹⁴¹ For arguments that Anscombe’s reasoning here is sound, see Boyle and Lavin (2009, 170-174). See also the main source of these arguments in Michael Thompson (2008, 120-128).

can be applied, because an action is something that is capable of being caught up in this form of explanation. Or, as Anscombe sometimes puts it, this form of explanation, which is explanation that reveals one's practical reason, describes "a form of description of events."¹⁴²

5.1.2 A Knowledge Requirement on Action Explanation

Anscombe argues that intentional actions are events "to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application," where a positive answer to this question reveals an agent's "reason for acting."¹⁴³ But when is the question given application? Anscombe says that the agent herself must give it application, and she begins her account by inquiring into the differences between the case where the question is and the case where the question is not given application. Her thought seems to be that if we comprehend what the cases where the question is refused application lack, we might be in a better position to know what the positive cases must (at least partially) consist in.

On this matter, Anscombe takes it to be obvious that the 'Why?' question is always refused application when the agent's response indicates a lack of knowledge of the description of her action under which the question is posed to her. Her thought is that if you don't know what you're doing, you simply can't be doing it intentionally. This shows that she sees a *knowledge requirement* on action as essential to understanding what it is. An action is something that is essentially known by its agent.

However obvious this seemed to Anscombe, many philosophers from Davidson to the present have found this knowledge requirement dubious. Although they will happily grant that

¹⁴² (2000, 47).

¹⁴³ (2000, 9).

in a statistically significant number of cases an agent does know what she is doing when she acts intentionally, they contend there are obvious and easily multiplied counterexamples that vitiate any claim to their being a necessary requirement.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, these philosophers wonder why an agent *must* know what she is doing. Why isn't it enough to one what one intends to be doing, or is trying to do, whatever actually happens?

Even those who are inclined to take the role of cognition in action more seriously tend to find Anscombe's own account of it far too naïve. For not only does Anscombe argue that one must have knowledge of her own actions, she also claims that such knowledge must be non-observational and non-inferential. In fact, she goes so far as to say that it must have *no evidential ground whatsoever*. But what sort of knowledge of *actions*—of material events that unfold in time, out there in the world—could have no evidential, observational, or inferential ground? With what conceivable right would we call such a judgment of things outside oneself knowledge at all? The consensus in the literature is that Anscombe is far too sanguine about our ability to know what we do. Whatever epistemology of action we come up with, surely it should be far more modest. We do not need to turn ourselves into omniscient beings just to explain action.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ See Davidson (1980, 50), where he famously argues that “A man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying.” Though Davidson thinks that an agent must know the description under which he acts, this description does not necessarily ick out the action itself, but rather that which the agent intends or is trying to do. Others who deny any necessary connection between knowledge and action on similar grounds are Donnellan (1963), Searle (1983, 90), Bratman (1987, 37-8), Newstead (2006, 183-187), and Paul (2009, 4-9).

¹⁴⁵ Again, Kieran Setiya nicely sums up the consensus view. He writes, “If there is a connection between doing ϕ intentionally and knowledge or belief that one is doing ϕ , it cannot be as simple as Anscombe takes it to be.” (2011, 172). Setiya himself backs away from the necessity of knowledge claims, and settles upon the necessity of a certain kind of belief (this is somewhat straightforward for him, as on his account intentions just are motivating beliefs that cause actions). Setiya also backs away from the claim that we know our actions, full stop. Instead, he opts for necessary belief about “basic action descriptions.” David Velleman, the other prominent “cognitivist” about intentional actions, settles for a claim with the form of a statistical generalization: we “almost always” know what we are doing and why we are doing it. See Velleman (1985, 36). It might be wondered, though, if the connection between knowledge and action is nothing more than a contingent statistical correlation, why we should treat it as a topic for philosophical inquiry in the first place.

In what follows, I am going to defend the knowledge requirement. I agree with Anscombe that so long as one does not know she is A-ing, she cannot be A-ing intentionally. But in order to defend this claim, it must be re-stated. For it is not merely a knowledge requirement that Anscombe is after, but a *practical knowledge requirement*. We are led down the wrong path if we think that the knowledge is specified because it is non-observational, non-inferential, or non-evidential.¹⁴⁶ The sort of knowledge that interests her cannot be specified in terms of some distinguishing mark. For that cannot explain many other features of it, such as that (1) when it fails, the mistake is not in the judgment, but in the performance; (2) the contradiction of a statement of this knowledge is not a contrary statement of fact, but the doing of an action whose intention contradicts it; (3) that the knowledge is comprehended only to the extent that practical reasoning is; and (4) that it is “the cause of what it understands.”¹⁴⁷

So we should not be distracted by the supposedly special marks of knowledge of action. What generically divides the knowledge we have of our own actions is that it is *practical knowledge*. It is because the knowledge is practical that it is non-observational, non-evidential, and much else besides. But it is precisely this fact, that the knowledge is formally distinct that philosophers of action have, by and large, failed to comprehend about her view. Anscombe’s diagnosis of the failure is disquieting. She asks:

Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely, what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such

¹⁴⁶ Rosalind Hursthouse (2009: 97) is one of many commentators who argues that Anscombe’s notion of practical knowledge is “special in virtue of being non-observational.” Kieran Setiya (2008: 389) and Hannah Pickard (2004: 218), meanwhile, argue that it is distinctive in being non-inferential. Velleman (1989: 30-42) argues that both traits are distinctive of practical knowledge, whereas John Gibbons (2010) takes the real issue at stake in understanding practical knowledge to be our privileged access to its object. All of these authors share the supposition that once we explain why this knowledge must be described in terms of one of these putatively special features, the knowledge we have of our own actions will thereby be explained.

¹⁴⁷ (2000, 87).

by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we have found ourselves.¹⁴⁸

We find ourselves in “utter darkness” about the nature of action, Anscombe suggests, because we simply cannot fathom that there is any other way for an agent to know her own action—or anything else, for that matter—except by making a judgment about it that is in accordance with the facts, where the facts can be determined according to some measure wholly external to the agent’s will. This assumes that we can apply a general understanding of knowledge to a special subject matter, actions. This is not, Anscombe maintains, what ancient and medieval philosophers were talking about when they referred to practical knowledge.

When we remain within this contemplative framework of knowledge, the mistake we make is to assume that there are some independently accessible facts about what an agent is doing intentionally, and thus a ground, completely independent of the agent’s own will, for determining the proper specification of the action. Anscombe denies that there could be any such independent ground, or any such independently accessible facts. In order to see why she would deny this, we must return to the question that exercises Anscombe: What sort of event is an intentional action?

5.2 A FORM OF DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS

Anscombe says that an intentional action is an event to which a certain question is given application by the agent to whom it is posed. If practical knowledge is essential to understanding the general form of this event, then we should expect that an account of it will be related to an

¹⁴⁸ (2000, 57).

understanding of this question's sense, and thus the grounds of the question's proper application.

And indeed, Anscombe connects the two in just this way. She writes,

In the case of practical knowledge, the exercise of the capacity is nothing but the doing or supervising of the operations of which a man has practical knowledge; but this is not just the coming about of certain effects ... for *what he effects is formally characterized* as subject to our question 'Why?' whose application displays the A-D order which we discovered.¹⁴⁹

Not just any event or effects are subject to this question, but only those that come to be through a capacity for practical knowledge. And such an event is formally characterized as subject to the practical reason sense of the 'Why?' question, whose application to the event manifests the practical order that defines it.

This is related to her remarks from the previous section, where she says it is wrong to think that 'intentional' describes an extra property or feature we can always attribute to intentional actions, thereby differentiating them from unintentional actions. Instead, she argues that "the concept 'intentional' has reference to a form of description of events," whose general characterization is that of the "execution of intentions."¹⁵⁰ An action is an event whose general form is described as the execution of intentions. But this raises the obvious question: What is a *form of description of events*?

Anscombe has surprisingly little to say in the way of an explanation of this terminology. In order to understand what she means, it is helpful to return to Anscombe's earlier, more intuitive idea that when we act intentionally, we necessarily act "under a description." Her idea is that we act under particular, specifiable action descriptions, and further, that we accept or reject the 'Why?' question under those same descriptions. This means that the 'Why?' question can only be posed when the questioner has some antecedent sense of what the agent she

¹⁴⁹ (2000, 88), emphasis added.

¹⁵⁰ (2000, 86).

addresses is doing. For if I have no idea that you are A-ing, then I obviously cannot ask you *why* you are A-ing. So there must be some description of what you're up to that I can articulate in order to ask you why it is you're up to *that*. And this is how it is in the normal course of things, even if the only one of bodily movements like the raising of an arm.¹⁵¹

So the 'Why?' question is posed under a specific description, and it is granted or refused application under that very same description. This is one way into seeing the importance of one of the central assumptions of *Intention*, which is that "to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it."¹⁵² For, in doing anything intentionally I am always doing many things at once,¹⁵³ which means that one and the same action can have many descriptions that are true descriptions of what happens, though not all of them (or even most of them) will refer to what happens *qua* intentional action.

For example, it may be true that I am 'sawing a plank', but of course my doing this will also involve my doing much else besides, such as: 'sawing an oak', 'sawing one of Smith's planks', 'making a squeaky noise with the saw', 'creating a pile of sawdust on the floor', 'disturbing the cat', 'wearing down the blade', 'moving such-and-such muscles', and so on *ad infinitum*. But amidst this whirl of effects I am clearly bringing about, there is something that I can legitimately pick out and call my intentional action, those effects that I bring about *intentionally*.

¹⁵¹ Or the lack of such movements. Consider, "Why are you just sitting there?" asked by someone who clearly expects you to be doing something rather than nothing.

¹⁵² (2000, 29).

¹⁵³ This is true even of so-called "basic actions," like raising my arm. For it is true of the man who raises his arm that he is also, at the same time, 'flexing such-and-such muscles,' 'moving such-and-such particles about,' 'causing his shirt sleeve to move up his arm,' and so on. The idea that there is one description that is the privileged "basic action description" typically depends upon an unprincipled specification of what really counts as "basic."

The ‘Why?’ question is supposed to be the device that reveals “the order there is in this chaos.”¹⁵⁴ It reveals the order among all these effects by showing us which descriptions the agent is willing to accept as descriptions of what she is doing. An agent might give a true response to “Why are you sawing a plank?” (I’m making a tree house for little Suzy), while not having a true response to the question posed under other descriptions, like ‘making a squeaky noise’ or ‘disturbing the cat.’ Of course, an inability to apply the question to these descriptions does not show that she is not doing those things, for anyone with eyes can see that she is. It merely shows that she is not doing them intentionally.¹⁵⁵

I think what Anscombe is trying to articulate with this locution “under a description” is the distinctive *intentionality* of actions, or that formal aspect under which the agent grasps the manifold of what is happening before her as related to herself as an object of her own will.¹⁵⁶ If intentional actions are objects of will, and are apprehended under the formal aspect that defines this power, then there is no explanation of an intentional action that does not appeal to that power.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, any particular description of what happens will be an intentional description (i.e., will pick out what happens as the intentional action) if it can be brought under a

¹⁵⁴ (2000, 80).

¹⁵⁵ Even Davidson argued that we must have knowledge of the intentional descriptions of our own bodily movements, at a minimum. (1980: 50) Of course, he also famously thinks that what happens beyond the body is “up to nature” and we could not necessarily have knowledge of *that*.

¹⁵⁶ To speak of “intentionality” here, I mean to refer to an intentional object, or object of a specific power. This is in keeping with Anscombe’s remarks at the beginning of a later paper, “The Intentionality of Sensation”, where she argues that her “under a description” locution is meant to characterize intentional objects as such. She writes, “‘Intentional’ in these contexts is often spelt with an ‘s’. This was an idea of Sir William Hamilton’s; he wanted to turn the old logical word ‘intention’ into one that looked more like ‘extension’. I prefer to keep the older spelling with two t’s. For the word is the same as the one in common use in connection with action.” (1981: 4). While the use of ‘intentionality’ here is common to actions and other intentional objects, it is important to note that this use is distinct from that when we say ‘intentional’ action, as this is defined in particular by its relationship to a capacity of practical reason and will, while the former, broader sense, clearly is not.

¹⁵⁷ Moran (2004: 54-55) comes fairly close to this view, it seems to me, though he will not draw the same conclusions as I will from it, in part because he does not take seriously enough the idea that a capacity for practical knowledge produces its own intentional objects (i.e., actions), which have no intelligibility independent of its exercise.

general form of description of events—viz., that form of events which can generally be characterized as an object of the agent's own will.

Anscombe's use of intentionality is, then, closer to the Scholastics than our own. As an illustration of what she could mean, consider how the scholastics thought that an object of sight is intentionally related to our capacity of sight: something is an object of sight only insofar as it is cognized under the formal aspect of its being colored, and not in virtue of any of its other properties or qualities. Therefore, some specific material object comes to be cognized through a capacity of sight, but not in virtue of its other, non-colored aspects.

For example, suppose I see a red cardinal in my backyard. I can see its color, shape, and size, among other things. But I cannot *see* that it *smells* musky, or that it *feels* soft, or that the song it is singing *sounds* beautiful.¹⁵⁸ And so, while there are many descriptions of the bird that are perfectly true of it, only some of these can be given as descriptions of what I can see.

Likewise, what can be known as an object of will is known according to its own formal intentional character, and what can be an intentional object of this power is also related to it under this specific formal aspect. On my reading of *Intention*, intentional descriptions of an action are those that are related to a power of will by being those descriptions that are known under the formal aspect of the universal good.¹⁵⁹ It follows that intentional actions are the intentional objects of a power of will. Indeed, this is what makes the notion of intentionality applicable to the concept of action in the first place.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ I might be able to infer these things from what I see, if I have enough empirical knowledge about cardinals, but I am speaking about direct cognition of the object itself as an object of that power.

¹⁵⁹ In the following sections, I argue that this formal aspect is that of the good.

¹⁶⁰ I take this to be the upshot of her remark that, "The very same human proceedings may be questioned under the description 'X' ('Why are you X-ing?') and under the description 'Y' ('Why are you Y-ing?'), and the first question be admitted application while the second is refused it, so that the very same proceedings are intentional under one description and unintentional under another. It is clear that a concept for which this does not hold is not a concept of intention." (2000, 30). And again, see her remarks in "The Intentionality of Sensations." (1981, 4)

With this understanding of Anscombe's terminology in place, we are in a position to articulate (at least in a general and provisional way), what an intentional action is. An intentional action is an event that is formally distinctive in that it is susceptible to a certain form of explanation. Let us call this *explanation by practical knowledge*. The 'Why?' question is supposed to show us which particular descriptions of what happens can be characterized as objects of practical knowledge. An object of practical knowledge is an object of will.

This explains why Anscombe says that the term 'intentional' does not pick out a property or condition that an action must meet. Rather, it characterizes a "form of description of events," events of the sort that can only be explained by an appeal to the agent's own practical reason and will, because they can only come to be through the joint exercise of our capacity for practical reason and will. We do not understand what an intentional action is unless we understand how what happens can be brought under this special form of explanation by the same agent who brings that event into being.¹⁶¹ Then we can see that practical knowledge is necessary for intentional action explanation because without it, there simply is no intentional action at all.

¹⁶¹ If this account can work, then we will not explain actions by appealing to the propositional content of privileged mental states. This is important, because the "guise of the good" thesis is typically formulated in just this way, and the arguments against it typically involve a denial that the propositional contents in question need to make any reference to the goodness of what is done. This is what leads Stocker (1979, 738-53), Watson (1982, 205-20), Velleman (2000, 99-122), and Setiya (2010, 82-110) to suppose that the claim that in acting intentionally, we act "under the guise of the good", is meant to be a claim about the need for a positive evaluative judgment of or belief about one's action. Specifically, that in taking something to be my reason for acting, I take it to be a good reason, where "taking" here is cashed out in terms of the propositional content of one of my beliefs. Raz (2009, 11-117), for example, appears to hold such a view. This is not a view I wish to defend.

5.3 EXPLANATION BY PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

5.3.1 Actions Are Motions

A careful reader of *Intention* will notice that the ‘Why?’ question is almost always posed under a description in the present progressive.¹⁶² This is no accident. Action is motion. Once begun, an action is in progress towards a specifiable term of completion. Any action may be interrupted or interfered with, and remain incomplete or unfinished. For any action we can speak of a term of completion that can mark the transition in our thought from imperfective to perfective—from doing A (or A-ing) to having done or completed a (A-ed) successfully.

In language we capture this sense of ‘being under way’ in judgments formulated in the present progressive. And so it is no accident that Anscombe formulates her action descriptions in just this way. On her account, the canonical form of a representation of an intentional action is of something in progress and so not yet complete: X is *doing* A (Michael is writing the word ‘action’, John is drinking a cup of tea, Steve is riding his bike to the Cathedral).¹⁶³

¹⁶² (2000, 11-12, 30, 35, 38-40, 84-85). The philosophical importance of this is discussed at length in Thompson (2008, Part Two).

¹⁶³ As Michael Thompson has noted in his essay, “Anscombe’s *Intention* and Practical Knowledge” (2011, 198-210), one remarkable difference between Anscombe and Davidson’s theory of action is that in Anscombe all of her examples are formulated in the present progressive, whereas Davidson prefers the past perfective. This is no minor difference, and the implications of one choice over another are profound. Davidson takes his topic to be things that are already done or completed; this is why he thought he could give a theory of actions that quantified over events, of things that were completed or finished. For Anscombe, on the other hand, actions are things that are in progress or under way, and so they might be interrupted and remain incomplete. But even if my action is interrupted, it is still true that I was doing an action of a specific kind, on a particular occasion, at a particular moment, and in a particular way. I was still engaged in a particular act of walking to school, for example, even if I never actually arrived there.

Now, Michael Thompson argues that actions as individuals or particulars only properly applies to what has been completed; there was no particular action of walking to school, he argues, if Jones never actually made it there. So Thompson denies that, *qua* particulars, we necessarily have knowledge of our own actions. Rather, he argues that we necessarily have knowledge of what we are doing, and this is not knowledge of a particular, but knowledge of the general act type that is in the process of being realized by me on a particular occasion. What motivates Thompson to say this is the simple truth that a particular action, in all its excruciating particular detail, cannot be known in that detail until the action has been completed in just that particular way, because there is, as yet, no

Its essentially progressive character distinguishes the representation of an action from the representation of something as being in a changeable state, whose canonical form is: X is F (the chalk is white, the tea is hot, the spokes are rusty). In a judgment of stative predication one joins a subject under a contrast of past and present tense: a subject either is in/was in/or will be in a certain state at a certain time. By contrast, our judgments of actions display not only contrasts of tense but also aspect. When something is represented in the progressive—that is, with imperfective aspect—it is represented as presently occurring and incomplete: X is A-ing. A judgment with perfective aspect, on the other hand, represents its object as completed or finished: X A-ed (or X did A).

As Anscombe herself noted, a progressive judgment (X is A-ing) may be true while the corresponding perfective judgment (X A-ed) is false.¹⁶⁴ For instance, if there was a time when it was true to say that ‘Steve is riding his bike to the Cathedral of Learning’, this can be compatible with the corresponding perfective judgment’s being false at a later time—say, when the papers reveal that he never managed to get there, having been clipped by a bus on Fifth Avenue at 3pm. No matter Steve’s fate, it is nevertheless true to say that there was a time at which the statement ‘Steve is riding to the Cathedral’ was true, and so true quite generally that ‘Steve was riding to the Cathedral’, though it was at no time true that ‘Steve rode to the Cathedral.’

particular way that it has been completed. And unless it has been completed, there is no determinate particular way that it has been done. All this seems true, but I don’t think it should lead us to deny that practical knowledge is knowledge of a *particular* event that is under way, even if, *qua* particular, it is not yet complete. Nor do I think we should deny that there was a particular action of walking to school if it happened to remain incomplete. Just because an action is interrupted doesn’t mean that it can’t be a particular action that is interrupted, and that we can’t have knowledge of it as such. Moreover, not every particular detail is relevant to the sort of knowledge that interests Anscombe, nor to the idea of intentional descriptions quite generally. For example, in “The Intentionality of Sensation” she writes, “the descriptions under which you intend what you do can be vague, indeterminate. (You mean to put the book down on the table all right, and you do so, but you do not mean to put it down anywhere in particular on the table—though you do put it down somewhere in particular).” (1981, 4). And this seems true of all things we know as intentional objects. Just as any perceiver, in seeing that ‘it is snowing’, does not necessarily know how many snowflakes she sees, or their exact size or shape, or all sorts of particular details that do not figure in her judgment of what she is seeing, here and now; likewise, all that an agent needs to know in order to know her own particular action as it unfolds are the general descriptions that specify what she is up to.

¹⁶⁴ (2000, 37).

What this contrast between perfective and imperfective aspect shows is that the representation of action includes a principle of temporal unity—a principle that is supplied by the term of completion that is implicit in every progressive judgment. This captures the simple truth that an action is either under way or already complete. In either case, we must be able to specify a term of completion that can underwrite this transition in our thought from imperfective to perfective. It follows that a notion of temporal duration is essential to the representation of action, as it is to any motion or change.¹⁶⁵

What is of most significant for our purposes here is the fact that in making a progressive judgment our thought necessarily reaches ahead into an already specified future: our representation that X is doing A depends upon a corresponding representation of X's having done A, and non-accidentally so. It is my conception of the completion of the movement that governs my understanding of what is happening, here and now. The representation of something in progress includes a principle of temporal unity that is supplied by a term of completion.¹⁶⁶

These (admittedly cursory) reflections upon the contrast between perfective and imperfective judgment show that it is a condition on the possibility of specifying a happening that is in progress as one particular instance of a general kind that one have *knowledge* of the point of completion or end towards which what is presently occurring is an instance of a non-accidental progression towards. Knowledge of this limit is logically or conceptually prior to any

¹⁶⁵ This is not true of stative predication. Being in a changeable state does not imply a beginning, middle, or end. Of course, there may be degrees of being thirsty (I may be less thirsty after a sip of water), but there are not stages or parts of it, nor is there anything that counts as being done or finished with being thirsty, just as there is no sense to be made of being on the way to thirsty. There is only being F or ceasing to be F.

¹⁶⁶ Contrast this with the representation of something as being in a changeable state. The representation of something as being F does not contain within itself this reference to a point of completion. A mere representation of something as in a certain state does not, in and of itself, contain the materials for a conception of how long F will remain in that state, nor does it contain within itself a representation of what will follow it (at least, this is not contained within the logical concept of a state itself, but necessarily lies outside it. This is compatible with its being no accident that something in particular remains F for a given period of time—say, that John remains thirsty so long as he is in a state of dehydration—but this will always be due to the real nature of the subject of which the state is predicated, and has nothing to do with the concept of a state itself). The representation of something as in a state contains within itself no principle of temporal unity. See Sebastian Rödl (2007, 30).

recognition of something as a part or phase of what is progressing towards it. There is no such thing as progression *in abstracto*, but only progression towards something specific that is not yet complete.¹⁶⁷

The progression of the motion of a living thing contains more than a temporal order; the motions and changes that a living thing undergoes or initiates contain a natural order, and the explanation of them necessarily makes reference to the life form as such. This is what Michael Thompson notices in his discussion of the activity of living organisms. Take a basic vital activity, such as mitosis. Thompson notices that

It may be happening here, under the microscope, in an amoeba; and there in a human being. In the first case, an event of this type will of course be a phase in a process of reproduction—one of the forms of generation available to that kind of thing. But in the case of the human it will rather be a part of growth or self-maintenance; reproduction is another matter, and has another matter, among humans. The distinction between the two cases of mitosis is not discovered by a more careful scrutiny of the particular cells at issue[...]¹⁶⁸

Thompson's point is that if we stay at the level of *mere* matter and do not take into account *that for the sake of which* the process itself unfolds, then we will not really know what sort of movement is taking place, because we will not know the end towards which it is currently progressing. In a living thing, the end determines what any presently occurring movement is. For this reason, we say that everything a plant or animal does—every operation of every one of its powers—is for the sake of a single end, the exemplification of its own form. When the sunflower grows towards the sun, when it sinks its roots into the earth, when its cells split up and

¹⁶⁷ This is not just a statement about our judgments or concepts. Action is just one instance of motion or change. A motion is an imperfective happening that takes place between points or states of rest (non-motion). Motion is, by definition, something that is under way, developing, or progressing, and thus something that is not yet complete, finished, resolved or done (once it ceases to be done, it ceases to be a motion). Motion is a move in reality from imperfective to perfective, and our judgments capture this.

¹⁶⁸ Thompson (2008, 55).

divide in such-and-such a way, all of these activities occur for the sake of a sunflower life coming to be and remaining in being.

Like all representations of something in progress, the representation of an intentional action also contains within it a principle of temporal unity such that a non-accidentally specified point of completion necessarily governs an understanding of what is presently happening. And like all living things, the representation of intentional action in a human being contains within it a principle of natural unity such that the natural end—the life form as such—necessarily governs an understanding of what is presently happening.

In order to represent something as an intentional action that is in progress, one must have knowledge of the end that governs any particular action, but also the end that governs all subordinate ends: the life form as such. The appeal to temporality does not contain within it the conceptual resources to explain this. To represent an action in one's own practical thought, however, is *more than* to represent some change that is in progress, and so it requires more than knowledge of the end that explains what is presently unfolding. And that is because the way we know our own actions is fundamentally different from the way that we know other kinds of happenings that are presently in progress. It is not enough just to be able to say that I understand what I am doing now in light of that towards which I am non-accidentally progressing. After all, I may be able to see that I am non-accidentally progressing down the street at an alarming rate, because someone has put me in a cart and given it a good kick. In such a case, I *know* that I am hurtling down the street, and that because of this I am going to crash into the wall at the bottom of the hill. But certainly the way I know my own action is not at all like that. And so a progressive form of representation of events is not yet a *practical* form. All that the canonical

progressive representation of action tells us is something we took for granted all along: an action is an event, and thus a kind of motion or change.¹⁶⁹ But this is not what is distinctive of them.

5.3.2 Actions Contain a Rational Order

Frege argued that thoughts are structured; they are articulate unities or orders.¹⁷⁰ To grasp a thought must involve a rational appreciation of this unity or order, as this is what constitutes the thought as a thought. Anscombe argued for a similar thesis with respect to action. To do something intentionally just is to realize an order or unity that is specifically practical, an order that is just as internal to the action itself as an order is internal to thought for Frege. In this section, I argue that the order of action is a practical, teleological order: a unity of means to ends.¹⁷¹ Therefore, a representation of action is of a *practically* progressive form of events.

The conclusion that intentional actions do have an internal, means-end rational order is supposed to be demonstrated by Anscombe's famous example in which a man is replenishing the water supply of a house in order to poison the wicked Nazis who inhabit it. According to her example, there is a man who is moving his arm up and down repeatedly (doing A), in order to operate a pump (doing B), which he does in order to replenish the house water supply (doing C), which he does in order to poison the inhabitants of the house (doing D). These four actions (themselves each intentional) form a series of nested practical rationalizations: I'm doing A in

¹⁶⁹ This makes trouble for all those who seek to explain actions in terms of "propositional attitudes", since the essentially progressive form of the representation of action resists being captured in a propositional form. For a more detailed argument to this effect, see Thompson(2008, 127-128), and Boyle and Lavin (2010, 170-174).

¹⁷⁰ See Frege (1997), especially "Thought" and "Concept and Object."

¹⁷¹ It is tempting to want to call this an "instrumental" or even a "calculative" order, but I think we should resist this, as it tends to import with it ideas about practically reasoning as essentially instrumental or calculative that I would reject. Though I will do not have the space here to defend this view, I also reject the thought that the means-end order of action is likewise always an instrumental structure.

order to do B; I'm doing B in order to do C; I'm doing C in order to do D. The 'Why?' question applies to each part of the action as we move up in the series:

“Why are you moving your arm up and down?”

“In order to pump.”

“Why are you pumping?”

“In order to replenish the house water supply.”

“Why are you replenishing the house water supply?”

“In order to poison the inhabitants.”

This example shows us that the 'Why?' question is typically a solicitation of what one's end is in doing whatever one is presently up to. And, as we've seen, the end is itself always a part of what is done at any stage. For pumping his arms up and down, *here and now*, just is poisoning the inhabitants, because it is the means by which this man is currently attaining that end.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the series of 'Why?' questions from A-D also corresponds to a series of 'How?' questions when looked at in the reverse order, from D-A. So, looked at the other way around, we might ask our pumper:

“How are you poisoning the inhabitants?”

“By replenishing the house water supply.”

“How are you replenishing the house water supply?”

“By pumping water.”

“How are you pumping the water?”

“By moving my arm up and down in this way, which operates the pump.”

This shows that he knows how doing what he currently does is a means to achieving his end.

Now, one's ability to answer both questions, 'Why?' and 'How?' depends upon one's ability to answer a corresponding question that is logically prior to either of them: “*What* are you

doing?” For one must obviously know what one is up to in order to be in a position to answer either a ‘Why?’ question or a ‘How?’ question with respect to any part of his action. So the very asking of the ‘Why?’ question presupposes that an agent knows what she is doing.¹⁷² More specifically, presupposes she knows the description of her action under which the question is posed, in part because she knows how that description relates to something else she is trying to attain. And if she didn’t know this, the question would be refused application.

This shows that the ‘Why?’ question elicits a response about what one is presently doing as a means to doing something else, the end in doing it. What looks like a means from one point in the chain will look like an end from another; everything depends on whether we are progressing upwards or downwards along the chain. But these three questions—‘What?’, ‘Why?’, and ‘How?’—are what help us to determine what is a means from what perspective, and likewise, what is an end. This demonstrates, once again, the intimate connection between practical knowledge and the practical sense of the question that Anscombe seeks to articulate.

Now, if actions are constituted by a means-end order, we should have a general account of what it is to represent such an order in any of its particular instantiations.¹⁷³ Michael Thompson has given such a general account. He argues that whenever two actions are related as means and end, the end is always what is represented in our thought as what is presently

¹⁷² Anscombe does not dwell on the necessity of “know-how” or practical skill in her book, though she does acknowledge that it must necessarily be in the background. At the end of her discussion of practical knowledge, she writes, “Although the term ‘practical knowledge’ is most often used in connexion with specialized skills, there is no reason to think that this notion has application only in such contexts. ‘Intentional action’ always presupposes what might be called ‘knowing one’s way about’ the matters described in the description under which an action can be called intentional, and this knowledge is exercised in action and is practical knowledge.” (2000, 87).

¹⁷³ It is important to note that there is not one, single means-end order that can make up a human action. The way that a virtuous action relates to its end, for example, is not something that I will discuss here, but I should like to note that it is no less a means-end order, and it stands no less in need of a philosophical account. The A-D order of action that Anscombe discusses—and is my topic here—is that which is most basic to a capacity of will, if we take this to be a capacity to order my activity in accordance with the general concepts of means and ends. So what I am suggesting here is not an “instrumentalism” about practical reason, or even a wholly instrumental conception of action. What I am suggesting, however, is that the A-D order of action is primitive, or fundamental. Some chains must begin.

incomplete or unfinished. So, if some instance of a concept of doing A is to figure in thought as a *means*, with some instance of a concept of doing B as an end, then the latter must in principle figure in the past imperfective judgment ‘X was doing B,’ or in the present imperfective judgment ‘X is doing B.’ What a representation of something as an end cannot do is figure in the past perfective judgment that ‘X did B’ or ‘X B-ed’ For once one has attained, completed or is finished with doing B, it can no longer count as an end towards which one is progressing in one’s present action. So the content of the present tense imperfective judgment, ‘X is doing B’ can only explain that of the present tense imperfective judgment, ‘X was doing A,’ or that of the past tense perfective judgment ‘X did A.’ This yields the following temporal schema of the order of action: if X is doing A in the service of doing B, then doing A must non-accidentally advance the progress of B, which is at present incomplete.¹⁷⁴

For example, suppose that in flipping a switch in order to turn on the light, I also make a clicking sound; and suppose I know, antecedently, that the clicking sound will occur. So as I flip the switch I know that I am making the sound, and not by observation, inference, or evidence. However, because making a clicking sound is not something I do because it is progressing me towards turning on the light, it is not a means to my end. To see this, consider the truth of the following counterfactual: If for some reason the sound was rendered inaudible, or just failed to occur at all, the representation of my action *qua* intentional would not change. I’m still knowingly flipping the switch in order to turn on the light, whether the sound gets made or not.

Useful though it seems in straightforward cases like this, the trouble with Thompson’s formal schema is that considerations of temporality are not enough to capture the representation of something as a means or an end. Taking a means to my end is more than just knowing that some doing is non-accidentally progressing me towards something that is presently incomplete.

¹⁷⁴ See Thompson (2008, 122-134).

To see why, it is useful to borrow an example from Michael Bratman.¹⁷⁵ Suppose that there is a runner who knows that in running a marathon he will thereby wear down his shoes. Despite the fact that he does not want to wear down his shoes (he has no reason to do this, in fact he has reasons not to do it), he decides that this is just the price he pays for his sport, and he decides to go ahead and run it anyway. Now, our runner, at the twentieth mile, knows that what he is currently doing (i.e., running the marathon) is non-accidentally progressing something else he is doing (i.e., wearing down his shoes), which further thing is not yet complete. It looks as if we have a case here of an “explanation by imperfective.”¹⁷⁶ But surely no one wants to say that his running the marathon is a means to his end of wearing down his shoes.

¹⁷⁵ Bratman (1987, 123)

¹⁷⁶ It will not help Thompson here to say that on his view the runner is clearly not doing A *in order to* do B (I’m running the marathon in order to wear down my shoes) or that he is not doing A *because* he’s doing B (I’m running this mile because I’m wearing down my shoes). It is true that we are clearly supposed to think, by Thompson’s own lights, that Bratman’s case will not fit into the general formula of a naïve rationalization. But my whole point here is that we cannot give a philosophical account of why it doesn’t fit it if we only have Thompson’s general temporal schema at our disposal, or his account of “explanation by imperfective” in mind. The “because” and the “in order to” here clearly involve more than just the notion of non-accidental progression towards something that is as yet incomplete, and to give a proper account of the work they are doing here, we need to bring in more than the temporal unity of an action. We need to show the unity is specifically *practical* in its form. But this is precisely what goes missing in Thompson’s account.

To be fair to Thompson, he does recognize that a crucial part of the story must be about the dependence of the action on thought—on practical thought and calculation in particular—and that the sort of connection that he is discussing is one of “rationalizations.” But he takes these notions for granted, and does nothing to explain them; it is a happy coincidence that the examples he chooses illustrate the issues without raising any thorny questions for the reader. For instance, in his characterization of the category of naïve rationalizations, he writes, “X’s doing A is an intentional action (proper) under that description just in case the agent can be said truly, to have done something else because he or she was doing A” where the “intended sense of “because” is the one deployed in rationalization.” (2008, 112) But as Bratman style cases show us, all the work is contained in what we mean by this “because” and what sort of thing can fit under “doing A.” Thompson seems to think that he can leave questions about practical knowledge and practical thought offstage altogether, as if they were elements merely in the background of the true account, which has fundamentally to do with the temporal structures he articulates. Thus, he writes, “Of course, this particular etiological relation of happenings to an imperfective present over-arching process—the relation that constitutes the unity of such happenings with one another in an intentional action—cannot be supposed possible except where an agent’s thoughts have come potentially to subserve it. It is plain that our formula “explanation by the imperfective” can stand only as the isolation of a genus, and that the specific difference of straightforward rationalization will emerge properly only with its intellectual aspect. This last, though, is a matter I have put outside the scope of the present investigation.” (2008, 133). What I am arguing here is that insofar as the topic of practical judgment and knowledge and its relation to the constitution of the formal representation of means-end structure of intentional action are outside the scope of his inquiry, he’s not really doing action theory at all.

So Thompson's general, temporal schema cannot be the complete story, because it does not manage to pick out the specific kind of non-accidental unity of an intentional action, nor does it show that the representation of the means-end order is specifically practical, rather than merely progressive in its form. To represent doing A as a means to doing B in practical thought is more than just to be able to know how doing A non-accidentally advances the progress of doing B, it is to know how doing A is *practically necessary* to doing B, and the source of such a representation could only lie in a self-conscious act of practical reason. For the sort of causal nexus exhibited in Anscombe's example—between an arm raising, a handle pumping, a replenishing of the cistern, and a poisoning of some Nazis—could in principle only be supplied by a capacity to rationally determine such an order, as well as a capacity of will to be moved to produce the order that has been so determined. The A-D order of action is practical, then, because it comes to be (and could only come to be) through a self-consciously determined act of practical reasoning, and a power of will that is moved in accordance with it.

To see this, let us return to Anscombe's gardener. He wants something general: to kill some party chiefs. This wanting is an act of will; specifically, it is an intention towards some end the agent is seeking to attain. But there are many ways one could set about doing this, and the gardener must choose some specific, determinate way of bringing it about. Now, his choice of the means he will take is constrained by many factors: his circumstances (including the material resources he has at his disposal), his practical skills, his other ends, needs, desires, and so on. And assuming that he does not kill party chiefs every day, he is going to have to deliberate about how best to make the object of his general intention a concrete reality, here and now. Let us suppose, in keeping with Anscombe's example, that he wants to kill the Nazis in the least conspicuous way, as the last thing he wants to be is a martyr for his cause. Since he is the

house gardener and it is part of his usual job to pump water into the cistern, he decides that the best way to get what he wants is to poison the water supply of the house, by pumping water into the cistern, which has been contaminated with a deadly cumulative poison, the effects of which are unnoticeable until the damage is irreversible. This is how he deems it best to “polish that lot off”, here and now. He makes a practical judgment to do this specific action, and his will is moved accordingly. In the act of practical judgment—the judgment of choice or decision—the end is willed, no longer generally, but through some rationally specified means. The object of this judgment is the whole action: its means-end structure. His will, being a capacity to be moved in accordance with such judgments, is moved accordingly, and straightaway he acts: He begins to do whatever is necessary to operate the pump.¹⁷⁷

What I want to stress here is that our gardener could not know that in beginning to operate this pump he is killing some Nazis except through a self-conscious determination of his own practical reason and will.¹⁷⁸ For there is no other way to connect these four action concepts—moving a handle up and down, operating a pump, replenishing the house water supply, and poisoning some Nazis—together and make them into one single action, except by way of a practical judgment that I *ought* to take these particular means to attain this end, here and now, in these circumstances.¹⁷⁹ Such a practical judgment reflects what Anscombe called an “Aristotelian necessity.” That is, the judgment that I *ought* to do A, here and now, is a representation of necessity in the sense of the necessity of that which it represents (doing A) on

¹⁷⁷ This “straightaway” talk comes from Aristotle, but it is not meant to mark temporality. Rather, it meant to indicate the end of practical thought and the beginning of the action.

¹⁷⁸ Though my account relies upon an *explicit* bit of practical deliberation or reasoning, the practical order of an action that I have identified does not depend upon a prior act of such deliberation. Virtue and skill often drive out deliberation in favor of an immediate perception of what to do, and my account can accommodate this fact. I have brought out an act of deliberation here to make explicit what is often merely implicit: the rational structure of action. This structure is easiest to see when deliberation is explicit.

¹⁷⁹ A full account of practical judgment would relate it to the intrinsic aim of practical reason, and would lay bare its different forms. Such an account, however, lies outside the scope of this chapter. It is enough for now, I hope, to see how actions are related to a *potential* practical syllogism, as Anscombe suggests.

which the attainment of some further good (doing D) depends. Such a practical judgment is necessary precisely because there are many ways to kill some Nazis, just as there are many ways to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. If one is to have such intentions at all, one must make judgments about the specific means to achieve them.

A practical judgment of the suitable means is made in light of one's general conception of the good as this bears on what is wanted, here and now, and cannot be made intelligible independently of such a conception. The judgment of means is grounded in considerations that go beyond what is contained within the end to which they are ordered. The determination of suitable means is made taking one's other ends (to which one's present intentions are typically related), needs, desires, feelings, circumstances, practical capacities, etc. into consideration. This means that the principle that unites the parts or phases of one's action is more than a principle of knowledge that grounds the temporality of the action; it must be a principle of knowledge of the practical necessity of taking these means to a specific end, given all the other practical considerations that are in play in a human life. Only an unwarranted empiricist tendency to consider actions in isolation from the rest of one's practical life would make it seem so natural to suppose otherwise.¹⁸⁰

Now, the will, as a capacity for rational desires, is moved by one's practical judgment of specific means, and thus the will is a capacity to bring about what a practical judgment represents as necessary to do. An act of practical judgment supplies the will with an object to realize. Because the will can only seek an object that has been determined by an act of practical

¹⁸⁰ The isolationist tendency fits hand in glove with another empiricist tendency, which is to think that the proper understanding of practical thought must account for the lowest common denominator between bad and good practical thought. For a paradigm example of this strategy, see Setiya (2007). I think this strategy rests on a vulnerable metaphysical assumption, which is to think that we can specify what practical thought independently of an account of what good practical thought is. I think that is no more or less mistaken than to think that we can specify what a man is in absence from any account of what a good man is.

reason (i.e., practical judgment), its object is self-consciously known, because the object of every judgment of reason is self-consciously known. And so it is right to say that the will is a capacity of practical knowledge: It tends to actualize an object that is self-consciously known through reason's own act of judgment that it should be so actualized.

I have argued that the order of an intentional action is a self-conscious, self-determined order of an act of practical reason. Thus, what is distinctive of the way we know the end in practical knowledge is that the source of our knowledge of the end comes from a determination of our will through an act of practical judgment. The end is something known, because the end is something intended to be brought about through some specific means; and the means are something known, because the means are chosen through an act of practical reasoning. The sort of unity of an intentional action is thus more than a temporal unity of parts and phases—it is a practically rational unity of means and ends, ordered to one another for the sake of attaining something the agent intends, such as the death of some party chiefs. This is why Anscombe says that practical knowledge—“the agent’s knowledge of what he is doing” is that which “gives the description under which what is going on is the execution of an intention.”¹⁸¹ Because whatever is known as an object of will or practical knowledge is known either as a means or an end, and thus something being done in execution of the agent’s will. And to know something as either a means or an end, is to know it as practically necessary or good.

We are now in a position to see why an understanding of practical knowledge is necessary for an understanding of the guise of the good thesis. For unless we understand why an action is an intentional object of a capacity of practical knowledge, the thesis that agents must represent their actions *sub ratione boni* amounts to nothing more than a claim about the beliefs of intentional actors, and a deeply suspicious one at that.

¹⁸¹ (2000, 87).

5.3.3 Whole Prior to Its Parts

I have argued that the will, as a capacity for practical knowledge, constitutes the material reality of the object it produces, and that the reality it produces has an essentially rational constitution. But I have also claimed that intentional actions are all ordered to a single, natural end: the life form as such. But how can something with a rational constitution also have a natural constitution?

One way to begin to see this, I think, is to notice that no part of an intentional action is independently intelligible as a part, aside from an exercise of practical knowledge of the action as a whole. Because an act of a capacity for practical knowledge constitutes the whole action, it also constitutes its parts. Hence, the manner in which a self-conscious act of will, as a capacity for practical knowledge, constitutes the material reality of action is analogous to the way that a living organism constitutes the material reality of its parts.

Consider how Aristotle understands the relationship between a living organism and its organs or parts. On his view, the heart would not come to be at all, and certainly would not come to be as something that has the function it does—to pump blood—unless it were the coming to be of a living organism. For what a heart is, as a material organ, is determined by the specific life form of the organism for the sake of which it comes to be. In order for the organism to come to be, a heart must come to be that pumps blood. Thus, what it is to be a heart depends essentially upon the larger life process for the sake of which it comes to be. In this sort of explanation, the whole is prior to its parts, because of a principle of natural unity—its nature or life form. Indeed, we can go further and say that the whole is the cause of its parts, which are not intelligible as parts independent of the whole.

Analogously, an intentional action, as a certain kind of material event unfolding in the world, can only come to be for the sake of the act of practical reason that determines it as coming to be for the sake of a certain end that the will desires. So unless an agent has, through a determination of practical reason, the intention to poison some Nazis, there would be no arm moving up and down that came to be for the sake of it. In intentional action the whole is also prior to the explanation of its parts, and the cause of their coming to be as parts—that is, as means to a specified end. So just as the nature of a living organism is the most formal or defining element of its material organs or parts in Aristotelian natural philosophy, so the intention in acting is the most formal or defining element of the means or parts of an intentional human action—of the determination of its very material reality. And just as there are, strictly speaking, no parts or organs at all apart from the living organism in which they function (a dead hand, Aristotle tells us, is not really a hand, but just a lump of decomposing material elements), so too, there are no independently intelligible intentional actions that stand as parts or means to an end apart from an act of will that determines them as means that come into being for the sake of that end. A part of an action as means is only intelligible in light of one's knowledge of one's end, and the coming to be of some part of an action as a means is only metaphysically possible if it is the coming to be for the sake of the end. And that could only be the case through an act of will that is productive of its own object, which as an object of a rational power, must be self-consciously known.

To see this, let us return to a variation of Anscombe's case of the gardener who poisons the house water supply. In the second case, Anscombe imagines a slightly different gardener, one who replenishes the house water supply with water he knows has been poisoned by someone else. This second, indifferent gardener does *not* replenish the house water supply in order to kill

some wicked Nazis; he's just doing his usual job in the usual way. Of this other gardener, Anscombe writes:

[A]lthough he knows concerning an intentional act of his—for it, namely replenishing the house water supply, is intentional by our criteria—that it is also an act of replenishing the house water supply with poisoned water, it would be incorrect, by our criteria, to say that his act of replenishing the house supply with poisoned water was intentional. And I do not doubt the correctness of the conclusion; it seems to show that our criteria are rather good.¹⁸²

As Sarah Paul has pointed out, Anscombe's indifferent gardener knows, just as much as the original gardener did, that 'poisoning the inhabitants of the house' is a true description of his action.¹⁸³ But I think Paul is wrong to argue that it must be an *intentional* description, and for precisely the reason that the indifferent gardener rejects the 'Why?' question under the description "Why are you poisoning the inhabitants?" "I didn't care about that" the gardener snarls in response. "I just wanted to do my usual job." He does not give a reason in response to the question, because there is no reason to give. And he does not have a reason, because his will was never to poison the inhabitants to begin with. Rather, 'to do his usual job' is his main intention, in that it governs the rest of what he does. And if that is the case, then he does not need to deliberate about how to take the means to achieve it; he'll just do whatever he normally does to finish his usual job.¹⁸⁴ And if that is true, then he will make no practical judgment that using poisoned water is best to achieve his end; after all, he knows full well that any old water will do. Nor does he represent the fact that the water is poisoned as practically necessary to

¹⁸² (2000, 42).

¹⁸³ Paul (2011, 4-7).

¹⁸⁴ Skill, for example, drives out deliberation. Whenever one talks about the deliberative character of all action, there inevitably arises two objections: (1) we don't always deliberate, and (2) oftentimes it is manifestly harmful to deliberate, as in activities that depend on skill, such as sports. See Arpaly and Schroeder (2012) for the most recent articulation of this objection. Neither objection is a problem for this account because the role of deliberation is conceptual. Insofar as an act is intentional, it is potentially deliberative, not actually deliberative. It is such as to be bound up in the agent's own deliberation should the occasion call for its deliberative structure to be made explicit. And this is compatible with its being the most utterly spontaneous act one can imagine.

attaining his end. In fact, that someone else has poisoned the typical water supply appears to play no role in our gardener's practical judgment about what to do, and it is not represented in his thought as practically necessary or good. Therefore although he knows that he is, 'poisoning the inhabitants by refilling the cistern', this is not a description of what is an object of his will, and so is not a description of an object of his practical knowledge. Just as we said that making a clicking sound is accidental to illuminating the room in our earlier example, so we can now say that poisoning the inhabitants is accidental to the gardener's intention in replenishing the house water supply. And just as we did not say then that the agent was making a clicking sound intentionally, so we should not say now that the gardener is poisoning the inhabitants of the house intentionally. The 'Why?' question would rightfully be refused in both cases.

It follows that once the gardener begins moving his arm up and down, it would be incorrect to say that the intentional action being brought about is a poisoning. For this pumping is not coming to be for the sake of a poisoning; it is coming to be for the sake of the replenishing of the house water supply—no more and no less. And that is entirely compatible with its being perfectly true, and a part of his knowledge, that it is also a poisoning. But the poisoning is not intentional, because not an object of the gardener's will.¹⁸⁵

But notice that the sort of knowledge the indifferent gardener has about the water's being poisoned is not practical; it is not "the cause of what it understands" in Anscombe's sense. Anscombe is clear that in acting intentionally we deploy both theoretical and practical forms of knowledge. When I check to see how things are going, I am observing what is happening and this knowledge is theoretical. Likewise, my general causal knowledge of the world, such as that poisoned water will lead to death, and that this water has been poisoned, is also theoretical

¹⁸⁵ Of course, this does not get the gardener off the hook, morally speaking! He does, after all, knowingly kill some people by doing his usual job, and he could have and should have prevented that from happening. We are morally responsible for the known side-effects of our intentional actions.

knowledge. It is theoretical because these facts are prior, and independent of my will. But my knowledge that I'm "doing my usual job" isn't at all like this, and it is this knowledge that determines the nature of my action. And so it is this knowledge that is essential to the question of which descriptions of the action are the intentional ones.

And all this shows that not everything one knows about one's action is an object of practical knowledge, nor is the mark of the unintentional mere ignorance. What is an object of practical knowledge is an object of will. An object of will, as we have seen, is a representation of something to be realized as good. Poisoning of the inhabitants does not stand in this intentional relation to the indifferent gardener's will. As he admits, he "doesn't care about that." An intentional description of an action is one that is an expression of one's intention or aim, and of what one knowingly does as a means to attaining that aim. What lies outside an exercise of practical knowledge could be a foreseen side effect of what one does intend, but in general it is any description of one's action that is not suited to fit into practical thought as either a means or an end.

These reflections also contain all the necessary materials for saying that knowledge of intentional action depends upon knowledge of how to live, and thus that rational action depends upon a natural end: living as a human being. For to understand the difference between the indifferent gardener's action, and the murderous pumper's action, which at one level of description appear to be one and the same, is to understand the difference between their general ends, or that for the sake of which they typically act. Both, of course, are in error about how to live, as neither knows which particular actions are ways of being just. But perhaps the indifferent gardener does not have justice as one of his ends. Perhaps he "doesn't care about that," but just wants to do his job, support his family, and live a private life in pursuit of his own

enjoyments. In order to know, we would have to press our question ‘Why?’ further. If we press the question further, at some point the question will bottom out in something that we naturally know to be good. Anscombe does not want to do that, but the fact that we manifestly *can* press the question further, and *can* expect an answer that displays the same connection between practical knowledge of the end and knowledge of the means, is enough to prove the general point.

5.3.4 Action Can Be Contradicted

Now we are finally in a position to understand why statements of practical knowledge are subject to a uniquely practical form of contradiction. A statement of practical knowledge is not contradicted by another statement of fact, but by the doing of another action with a contradictory aim. If in response to the question ‘Why?’, I assert that I am replenishing the house water supply, I am making a statement of practical knowledge; the contradiction of this statement, Anscombe claims, is not “oh no you aren’t, the *fact* is there is a hole in the pipe”, but rather, “oh no you aren’t” as one sets about making a hole in the pipe. (§31, emphasis added) And this is because a statement of practical knowledge is not contradicted by observing what the facts are on the ground, for the simple reason that, as we have already demonstrated, there are no independently intelligible facts on the ground which could stand as evidence against a statement of practical knowledge. This was one of the lessons of the last two sections. Rather, a practical contradiction is one that involves the doing of another action, which would prevent the action that is being contradicted from becoming fully realized. Thus, I contradict someone else’s will not by demonstrating that the facts are not actually in accordance with his statement about what he is doing (i.e., appealing to facts to prove that it is not true), but by doing something that

prevents this statement from remaining true (i.e., by doing something that thwarts his will and prevents it from being realized).¹⁸⁶

Because an expression of practical knowledge can be contradicted in this way, this gives us a clue into one way to check the truthfulness of someone's response to the question 'Why?', which is to see if doing something that stands in opposition to what one has expressed as a statement of knowledge of their will (and thereby, their action) does constitute a genuine practical contradiction. Take the case of our indifferent gardener again. If his response to the 'Why?' question is sincere, then the following conditionals will be true: (1) If the house water supply does not in fact get replenished with poisoned water (say, because someone else comes along and puts in another agent that neutralizes its poisonous qualities), then the gardener won't consider his action to have been thwarted. Accordingly, he will not feel or act frustrated by any infringement upon his will. (2) Supposing he does manage to get the poisoned water into the cistern, if, nevertheless, the Nazis are never poisoned (say, because they were tipped off and decided to drink bottled water instead), our gardener won't set about doing other things to make sure that the poison somehow gets ingested by them. In fact, he will do nothing in addition to whatever it takes to finish his usual job. (3) If, in the end, all that ever happens is that the house supply is replenished, and no one dies or is poisoned or is even remotely inconvenienced by what the gardener has done, and the Nazis keep going and the war doesn't end, then our gardener will still feel satisfied with a job well done, and not seek to correct anything. If these conditionals turn out to be true, then it is clear that the act of replenishing the house supply with poisoned water was not a means to any end of the gardener's, and thus that he was not engaged in an

¹⁸⁶ Anscombe also says that it is a contradiction of another's intention to say that the object of will won't come about, even if you take the intended means to it, or that it will come about regardless if you take the intended means or not. Again, her main point is that what is contradicted is not some independently accessible fact, but the object of will itself.

intentional poisoning of the inhabitants of the house. In that case it will be clear that he really was just doing his normal job.

5.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that the will is a self-conscious capacity of desire, which is rightly characterized by Anscombe as a capacity for practical knowledge, because its object is given to it through a self-conscious act of practical judgment, which it is the nature of the will to seek to actualize. Such an object, I have argued, is formally represented under the aspect of some good. I arrived at this conclusion by arguing that to act intentionally necessarily involves knowledge of the means-end order that one is realizing through one's own activity, which is the same as to know the action itself. Such knowledge is practical knowledge in Anscombe's sense: it is the "cause of what it understands." This knowledge in turn depends on knowledge of a final end: human life. Thus knowledge of human life is also the cause of what it understands: the intentional actions of human beings.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This dissertation advances a point of view that is very much against the grain of prevailing trends in contemporary moral theory, philosophy of action, and what has come to be known as the “meta-normative” project.¹⁸⁷ So perhaps it is worth teasing out some of the implications that I see for all three.

First and foremost, I am arguing that ethical norms are “first-nature” norms, because rationality pertains to our first nature, simpliciter. We are not merely potentially rational until we come into a language and concepts. We are essentially rational animals. The space of reasons and the space of human life are one and the same. In order to return to such a picture, we will need to return to a vocabulary that is presently out of fashion: power, act, object, end. In particular, if we want to be ethical naturalists, we cannot make the case in any other terms.

I am also arguing that we should take seriously the idea that human norms are both natural and rational in the following sense: the norms that govern human life are the norms of our own nature. But the way we know our nature, and thus know these norms, is fundamentally different than the way that any other rational being could know them. And yet what is known is one and the same.

If a theory like this can work, then it shows that it is a mistake to define normativity in terms of rationality, insofar as this is supposed to be something above, or over against, or in

¹⁸⁷ For a description of this meta-normative project, see Evans and Shah (forthcoming).

some other way opposed to what *is*. This is, of course, the normal way of proceeding. Joseph Raz, for instance writes that:

The normativity of all that is normative consists in the way it is, or provides, or is otherwise related to reasons...[so that] ultimately the explanation of normativity is the explanation of what it is to be a reason, and of related puzzles about reasons.¹⁸⁸

So long as this remains our starting point, we can never see how a rational power can be governed by natural norms.

This goes hand-in-glove with a certain conception of nature as form-less. Korsgaard expresses this conception well when she writes:

Reality is something hard, something which resists reason and value, something which is recalcitrant to form...[V]alue must find its way into the world somehow. Form must be imposed on the world of matter.¹⁸⁹

Obviously, I am resisting this notion of nature as formless and devoid of value. Moreover, I am resisting a picture of reason as something *pure* and that floats free from nature, and does not need to answer to it. The picture of rationality (and thus freedom) that I have articulated is one that can only be understood from within nature, not from without or above it. We might say that reason is the form of human action, because a rational principle defines our nature. But it is *our* own, human nature that is lived in accord with a rational principle. From a practical point of view, this means that it is distinctively human goods that must be brought into rational order.

Perhaps it is best to sum things up from where we began, by returning to Anscombe's suggestion that we stop searching around for an explanation of a supposedly special 'moral ought.'

¹⁸⁸ Raz (1999, 34-35).

¹⁸⁹ Korsgaard (1996, 5). Korsgaard backs away from this in her later work, though she does not back away from constructivism, for reasons having to do with her formal, Kantian conception of rationality.

What Anscombe wanted to avoid was thinking about morality in terms of special content, precisely because it is once we make that move that the thesis she wants to advance—that human acts are by definition moral acts—appears insane.¹⁹⁰ If morality has to do with what is especially important or weighty, then of course not all human acts are moral acts. What’s so moral about tying my shoes, or going for an afternoon stroll? But what matters to the morality of human acts isn’t primarily what they are about, but that in which they necessarily figure: a human life and a human society. And each action is only fully intelligible when understood in that broader context.

Anscombe considers this point throughout her writings. In a paper on promising, she writes:

It is clear that what you do is not a move in a game unless the game is being played and you are one of the players, acting as such in making the move. That involves that you are acquainted with the game and have an appropriate background, and also appropriate expectations and calculations in connection with, e.g., moving this piece from point A to point B. To have these is to think you are playing the game. That is to say, when we put our problem, “If to M includes thinking you are M-ing, what can M-ing be? For the account of it will include mention of it as the content of a thought and so no account of it can be given,” we made a mistake in supposing that the explanation of the thought of M-ing must include an account (of M-ing) as something *contained in the thought*.¹⁹¹ (1981,17)

Anscombe’s point is that when one is playing a game of chess, one is not thinking the thought, ‘I am hereby making a valid move in chess.’ Rather, knowledge of what constitutes a valid move in chess is part of general background knowledge I need in order to make any move in chess, including this one. No one can play chess without that knowledge. Likewise, when one acts, it is not as though one has the thought, ‘I am hereby acting well’ or ‘I am hereby living a good

¹⁹⁰ See especially “Good and Bad Human Action” and “Action, Intention and ‘Double Effect.’” (2005).

¹⁹¹ 1981b (17).

life.’ Rather, one has to have some knowledge of what acting well is, or how to live well, in order to act at all. I have argued that such knowledge will be practical knowledge of our own nature, and it will figure essentially in the explanation of human action.

Of course, the difference between life and chess is that I will necessarily come into a possession of such a conception insofar as I am a human being, which is to say someone who is raised in a human community, and not by wolves, or in social isolation, or is being kept alive in a merely vegetable state. To live as a human being just is to live in a human community, which just is to occupy a position in moral space. Everything one does is either good or bad in such a universe, because everything is either living well or badly.

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