**How To Be An Ethical Naturalist**

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“It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St. Thomas’s ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer.”--Philippa Foot.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moral judgment is an inescapable practice. We call certain actions, attitudes, and dispositions good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust, and it is almost impossible to imagine getting on without continuing to do this with relative ease and confidence. Moral philosophers are typically charged with the task of giving an account of these judgments, and thus of our entitlement to use words like ‘good’ and ‘ought’ regarding human actions and acts of will. More specifically, the moral philosopher is supposed to show how there can be objective truth conditions for such claims. What normative standard licenses these judgments, and how are we to think about that standard?

Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalists attempt to answer these questions by utilizing the concept of natural goodness and defect. To put the evaluative scheme of natural goodness in the simplest possible terms, we can say that an action is naturally good insofar as it exemplifies the life that is characteristic of the species in question, and bad insofar as it fails to do this. Just as strong, deep roots are naturally good for the oak tree, since they are necessary to carry out the activities that constitute oak life, so too virtues like justice and prudence are naturally good for human beings, since they are necessary to carry out the activities that constitute human life. Life, on this account, is a form of intrinsic value, since the goodness of the activities that constitute a form of life does not go beyond the fact of the existence of that very form of life. The promise of ethical naturalism, then, is that it will show that virtuous action is intrinsically valuable because it aids in the exemplification of a form of life—our very own.

The ethical naturalist asks us to take seriously the idea that practical norms—norms that license our talk about what it is good for us to be, do, and have in general—are a species of natural norms.[[2]](#footnote-2) Or to put it another way, that moral goodness and badness is a kind of natural goodness and defect in the life of a certain animal—viz., we human beings.

Philosophers have, by and large, balked at this suggestion, and for disparate reasons. For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on one particular line of resistance. The objector I have in mind does not want to deny the ethical naturalist her theory of natural normativity in general, nor does she want to deny that there are natural norms that pertain to specifically human life. Rather, she denies that the standards that govern the operation of a power of reason can be specified in terms of the characteristic ends and activities of just one species of animal. Though it is of course quite *natural* for human beings to reason about how to live and act (all mature human beings have to think about what to do to a certain extent), the objector contends that the account of whether one reasons well or badly has nothing to do with any substantive facts about the material form of life we happen to bear. We typically think of 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.

Besides looking to Kant as a source for this view, we might also look to Aristotle himself.[[3]](#footnote-3) After all, in his ethical treatises Aristotle is not at all concerned with different species of living things; instead, he focuses on different levels or kinds of life—vegetable, animal, rational. And the upshot of his famous “function” argument is that the standard of good human life and action just is “activity of the soul in accordance with reason.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Now, if living well as a human being just is to live in accordance with the norms that govern a power of reason, then it looks the search for the norms of good or bad human action is just the search for rational norms, which are valid for all rational creatures.

We can put this line of resistance into the form of an argument against ethical naturalism. It runs as follows.

1. All norms of reason are formal, and so species transcendent. They are the same, universally binding norms for all forms of finite rational agency.
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.

In short, the objection questions the relevance of the concept ‘human being’ for a properly philosophical theory of ethics, because it looks like a placeholder for something more interesting and important—‘rational agency’, or ‘rational form life.’

The irrelevancy objection is a more sophisticated presentation of the so-called ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ But rather than crudely rejecting any move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, it merely blocks the inference at one crucial juncture—the inference from the ‘is’ of the species, to the ‘ought’ that governs the rational will. Given the presumptive authority of the objector’s conception of rational norms, the burden is on the ethical naturalist to show that premises one and four of the argument are false. The ethical naturalist must be able to show that we cannot separate a theory of practical normativity from natural normativity. More specifically, she must argue that we cannot understand the norms that govern the power of *practical* reason in a living thing apart from substantive reflection upon the life form for the sake of which that power operates and comes to be.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The structure of this essay is as follows. In the first section, I consider whether the two most prominent accounts of ethical naturalism on offer contain within them the resources to address the irrelevancy objection, and conclude that they do not. In the second section, I argue that this failure exposes a second, and potentially more difficult version of the original objection. In the third section, I articulate a dilemma for the ethical naturalist, and argue that any future attempt to rehabilitate the view must show how this dilemma can be resolved. In the fourth section, I argue that we can find a resolution to the dilemma if we reflect upon the account of practical reason and will articulated by Thomas Aquinas. I claim that Aquinas’s theory shows us how we can reconcile what on that face of it appear to be two opposing teleological forms—that of life, on the one hand, and that of rational choice on the other. Finally, I conclude that the only viable way to be an ethical naturalist is to set out to further articulate and defend something in the neighborhood of Aquinas’s account.

**1. Moral Judgment and Human Nature**

In order to answer the irrelevancy objection, we need an account that shows how practically rational norms can be natural norms. In this section, I contend that ethical naturalists have failed to give us an adequate account of practical norms. I will not reach this conclusion by exhaustively canvassing the literature, but rather by focusing on 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.

**1.1 Hursthouse’s Naturalism**

Setting aside many of the details, Hursthouse argues that virtues like charity and justice are morally good character traits because they are necessary for the attainment of the four ends that define the life of a general, goodness fixing kind under which our own form of life can be subsumed: ‘sophisticated social animal.’ Thus, she argues that ethical evaluations of ourselves as rational social animals will look like our evaluation of the lives of other sophisticated social animals we discover in ethological field reports.[[6]](#footnote-6) Her account of the ends that govern this general category 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 (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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A character trait will be good, on this account, just in case it can be shown to serve the four ends appropriate to higher social animals in general. And we can justify our belief in the goodness of the traditional virtues by looking to this naturalistic scheme in order to determine that these four common ends are promoted by virtuous actions.[[8]](#footnote-8)

And that’s exactly what Hursthouse sets out to do. Charity, on her account, turns out to be vindicated as a virtue because it helps human beings “live longer, avoid some suffering, [and] enjoy more.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Justice is also a virtue on this evaluative scheme because it “enable[s] us to function as a social, co-operating group.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Impersonal benevolence turns out not to be a virtue, precisely because there is no evidence that it functions to promote any of these four ends.

One benefit of Hursthouse’s view is that it makes especially clear what the natural standards of good reasoning are. Our practical reasoning (and thereby our will and action) is excellent when it functions to attain the four natural ends she identifies, and it is defective when it does not do this. The ends of right practical reasoning are “natural” in some reasonably familiar sense: these are norms that pertain to all higher social animals, and there is an empirically grounded literature that can testify to this. Given this, we can say that virtuous activity is naturally good because it is necessary for the attainment of these ends that we demonstrably share without other intelligent social animals.

Whatever benefits can be gained from the clarity of such an account do not outweigh its substantial costs. I will argue these costs are threefold: (1) it gives us account of human nature that is ultimately reductive and empirical, (2) the account of nature underwriting it is at the wrong level of generality to provide natural norms, (3) it fails to be 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, 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.[[11]](#footnote-11) 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.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.[[13]](#footnote-13) 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.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

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 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.”[[15]](#footnote-15) 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 this kind of play from infancy on.[[16]](#footnote-16) 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 content merely to have fun and enjoy ourselves, for no particular reason. Play is just one of a whole range of activities that lose their joy and goodness when they are done for the sake of something else; other examples of such activities are singing, making music, dancing, conversation, and telling and hearing stories.

Of course, we know that play is very important for proper intellectual, social, moral, and even physical development in children, as well as for the overall health of adults. Scores of empirically based psychological studies point to this fact. However, it would destroy play if these were our *reasons for* playing. 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 that child to play. Because if done for the sake of those further ends, then the child would no longer by playing at all; instead, the child would be engaging in the *work* of becoming smarter, more empathetic, insightful, adaptable, and so forth. In providing this “rational justification” for play—either for oneself or for one’s children—play has effectively been denatured and destroyed. The only reason to play is because it is play—its meaning and value is inherent to the known experience of the activity itself. If play is an activity that exemplifies human life, then there can be no further ground of its goodness, and thus of its choiceworthiness.

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 some external, abstract good. To be “purposeless” in this way is not to act without meaning or value. It is only to recognize that the meaning or value of the activity cannot be explained outside the performance of the activity itself. By trying to show that virtuous activity is good because it helps us to attain the ends common to all sophisticated social animals, Hursthouse provides the *wrong kind of reason* to be virtuous.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Thus Hursthouse goes very wrong, it seems to me, when she argues that her 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.[[18]](#footnote-18)

I think this is a deeply wrong view of moral upbringing and moral motivation. 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,”[[19]](#footnote-19) then 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 not thereby becoming more, but rather less generous. It will not help me to seek generosity for its own sake by being able to see how it instrumental to getting something else that is *really* good (say, being a good ‘sophisticated social animal’). In general, it is a sign of weakness in a theory of moral justification if it goes completely dark from the practical point of view.

The problems with Hursthouse’s view are not slight. On her account of moral judgment, human nature only enters into it from an alienated, third-personal, utterly non-practical perspective, and only then as but one instance of something more general and putatively germane: higher, social animality. As a consequence, we lose any sense of how to understand virtuous action as an instance of intrinsic value, and the initial promise of ethical naturalism remains unfulfilled.

**1.2 Foot’s Recognitional Naturalism**

Philippa Foot purports to be giving a virtue ethics that is grounded in a notion of human form that will meet what she calls “Hume’s practicality requirement.”[[20]](#footnote-20) And she does not want to say that meeting the practicality requirement will require ignoring the appeal to natural norms from a practical point of view. Foot is concerned to show that the recognition of natural human goods can be practically efficacious—that it can serve to produce and prevent actions.

Foot’s account of practical rationality and will largely follows that of Warren Quinn.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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 ends (i.e., goods). On this account, practical reasoning is excellent when it arrives at true propositions about these ends. Quinn 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 […] practical thought deploys 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.[[22]](#footnote-22)

According to Quinn, practical reasoning is reasoning about human ends and actions as considered good or bad in themselves. What distinguishes thought as practical is that it has a species specific subject matter and deploys a species specific set of non-instrumental evaluative concepts. Practical rationality is the capacity to deploy such concepts and to reason about this subject matter correctly. To judge that some prospective action is truly good is to give oneself a practical reason to pursue it.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Foot accepts this account, but puts her own stamp on it by arguing that the good and bad in question is natural goodness and defect. She writes that

the 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.[[24]](#footnote-24)

What Foot adds to the view is that the objective concepts practical rationality utilizes are determined by facts about “human life and its necessities.”

The basic account of practical reason that Foot and Quinn are working with is a variant of what Berys Gaut has called the *recognitional model*.[[25]](#footnote-25) Gaut defines this conception of practical reason as a capacity to recognize the goodness of certain actions independently of their being objects of choice, and through that very recognition actually bringing it about that such actions are performed.[[26]](#footnote-26) There is no difference, on this account, between recognizing a reason and having a goal—they are one and the same act. What makes the performance of a certain action rational is the recognition that the action is really good, and this recognition is what primarily what explains the action’s coming to be.[[27]](#footnote-27)

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 Foot, 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 choiceworthy for human beings (the one who perceives the right reasons to act), and she is able to do this because she knows the correct facts about human life.

Let us call Foot’s own theory of practical reason *recognitional naturalism*, as it weds recognitional realism about practical reasons with a naturalistic account of the human good that is recognized. Recognitional naturalism understands moral judgment as a practical-natural judgment. That is, they are judgments about what is good or bad for a living thing, but since they are about the very living thing we are, they function to produce or prevent voluntary actions. 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. According to the recognitional naturalist, a virtuous person keeps her promises not because this is instrumental to being a good social animal, but just because she sees that it is a human good.

**2.0 A Second Argument From Irrelevancy**

Unlike Hursthouse, Foot provides a substantive alternative account of practical reason that shows us how its norms are norms of a species: practical reason is an efficacious recognitional capacity whose proper exercise makes correct judgments regarding the goods constitutive of human life. These goods are the standard of right reasoning, such that the reasoning is good if it serves to secure human goods and bad if it does not. The virtues are good because they dispose us to seek these goods.

While Foot’s account generates less problems than Hursthouse’s, we might still worry that the “practicality requirement” has not been met in a plausible way. To see this, consider a second version of the irrelevancy objection.

1. Moral judgments must be practical judgments, essentially such as to produce or prevent voluntary action.

2. Natural historical judgments in general (life form judgments) do not have the function of producing and preventing voluntary actions.

3. Natural historical judgments about human life do not have the function of producing and preventing actions.

4. Therefore, natural historical judgments about human life are not moral judgments, and irrelevant to moral theory.

Foot accepts the first two. According to her own theory of natural normativity, natural historical judgments register third personal, theoretical facts about the life form which falls under the subject term. It is no part of that view that such judgments are practical or have any motivational upshot. Like any theoretical judgment they merely register facts about the way the world is. Given that, Foot’s real problem is that she has to deny the third premise, and it is hard to see how she can. Foot’s recognitional realism suggests that the difference in our evaluation of the goodness of an oak tree’s roots and a human being’s action is a matter of the *propositional content* one considers. Practical thought and judgment is thought and judgment about a certain kind of thing—the very thing we are. Life thought is practical, on Foot’s view, when it is thought about our own form of life. I will go on to argue that this suggestion will not do.

**2.1 Natural and Practical Normativity**

I can think of at least three reasons to be doubtful that Foot has good grounds to deny the third premise. First, suggesting that we can make a theoretical judgment practical by providing the right content strikes me as no better than suggesting we can explain how we know our own thoughts by taking our visual capacity to know objects in the world and directing it inward, so that we can see the "inner" objects in essentially the same way.[[28]](#footnote-28)  The correct response to this sort of view is to point out that the mode by which I know my own mind is formally quite different from the mode by which I perceive objects distinct from myself.  It is not a matter of directing the same mode of knowing onto a different object.

Second, it makes no sense to divide a power of thought (and thus judgment and inference) by virtue of its 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.[[29]](#footnote-29) But this is absurd.

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 propositional content comes to be.[[30]](#footnote-30) But Foot does not seem to want to go in for this kind of explanation, especially not a Humean version that would appeal to the “direction of fit” of non-cognitive states. But if we leave the causal theory behind, then it is mysterious why judgment *about* the choiceworthiness of an action is practically efficacious. After all, Alpha Centaurians could surely make true natural historical judgments about the human life form and not be motivated by them, so why can’t this equally be true for human beings?

Foot simply takes it for granted that thought about our own life form is intrinsically motivating because it is thought about *us*. We care about human goods because we are human beings, so the comparison with the Alpha-Centaurian is not apt. We humans are all necessarily in the business of living human lives, 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, I would argue that 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 specifically human goodness or badness. That it is to say, it does not seem true that the fact that the goods are the good of humankind enters into my practical thought as its essentially motivating content. And for that very reason the appeal to humanity seems irrelevant.

For instance, 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 whenever I can. Nothing about action follows from this line of thought—I have merely had three true thoughts. We do not need to say that I lack prudence, or am thoroughly vicious or weak willed to explain why no action follows from my putting these thoughts together. The explanation may just be that I am not *thinking with a view to action* at all. Thus, taking a proposition about human goods, my good, or reasons to be true is not the same as *having* a reason to act. We can contemplate practical matters in a purely speculative mode. Acknowledgement of truth is not action.

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

Human beings need antioxidants to maintain their health

I am a human being

So I need antioxidants

We cannot say that the rational recognition of the need will lead to action. The conclusion reached is just another true proposition. Suppose this line of reasoning were to be taken up by someone who doesn’t give one whit about his health (this is not only possible, but rather common). Suppose that he wants to “live free and die young.” Would an appeal to health as necessary for the species help to change his mind? Of course not.

These are signs that the above mentioned line of reasoning is theoretical. There’s nothing we could add here to make the reasoning practical. To see this, consider that it will not help to suppose for the sake of argument that I actually want health. Suppose that I add this as a premise. Now we have

I want health.

Consuming antioxidants are healthy for a man.

I am a man

Does an action follow from this line of thought? I don’t see how. At best what follows is the thought that I should want to consume some antioxidants, as a true claim about the state I ought to be in given the presence of a certain desire. But it isn’t even clear that this much follows, since there are plenty of other ways for a man to attain health other than this, and it may be that antioxidants are less preferable given other considerations (such as cost, availability, and so forth). Moreover, the appeal to human nature here is simply idle. It looks like we could take it out and not be in a worse position as far as the explanation of action is concerned.

The trouble the ethical naturalist faces at this point is pretty straightforward. The third personal facts about what is good for the species have their natural home in theoretical reasoning about what is truly good for a life form, rather than practical thought about what to do. And it is mysterious how such facts are supposed to make an appearance in practical thought. The considerations that Foot gives, such as the fact that we are social animals or that we can’t get along without justice, simply look out of place from a practical point of view. Thus, 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 anyone’s practical reasoning as a premise. So long as that is the picture, then natural norms are plainly irrelevant to ethical theory.

We can at this point conclude 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.

**2.2 Second Nature Naturalism**

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.[[31]](#footnote-31) 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.”[[32]](#footnote-32) 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 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 not come to make any judgment of human life form, as presumably it will, by definition, lack the virtues necessary for practical wisdom, which is necessary to have knowledge of human form. Thus the alien anthropologist cannot know the human good anymore than a human being can see the world in hyperspectral color by studying the lives of Mantis 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 experience, anymore than we can know “what it is like to be a bat.”[[33]](#footnote-33) But an alien anthropologist should be able to make true natural historical judgments 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.[[34]](#footnote-34) 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 sphere of practical wisdom. It seems as though Aristotle thought many humans were like this: slaves, women, and Barbarians.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Though it would no doubt increase our confidence in the motivating power of the perception of human goods, I do not think it helps the Foot-Quinn model to think of knowledge of human form as thoroughly mediated by virtue in this way. Consider the irrelevancy objection. We must remember that 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.”[[36]](#footnote-36) But if the idea is that the virtuous alone have epistemic access to these facts, then it becomes difficult 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 version of ethical naturalism, there is absolutely no need for an appeal to nature—the gesture to nature is utterly unnecessary.

**2.3 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, or how practical norms can be natural. 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 a third personal, observational standpoint. And then the theory fails because the norms no longer appear to be natural—i.e., (at least potentially) accessible from outside that form of life.

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. 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 it provides a form of explanation that registers what is objective and intrinsically valuable for something (the activities internal to a life form). 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.[[37]](#footnote-37) This implies that the facts are independent of the judgment that registers that good. And whatever the subject of the judgment wants or 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.[[38]](#footnote-38) This is why Aristotle says that practical thought differs from theoretical thought in its end or aim, and not merely in its objects (the latter distinction is logically secondary). Practical thought and practical reason is thought and reason essentially *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 suitable to the attainment of one’s ends. This is why practical thought cannot operate unless something is already wanted as an object of will.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Here we can notice a change in our use of ‘good’ that Foot does not account for, and that is the change that we mark when we go from thinking of good as an object of the intellect to thinking of good as an object of will—as an end, a thing to be pursued. This sense of the word ‘good’ is untheorized by Foot, and it is mysterious how it can enter into a schema of natural historical judgment.[[40]](#footnote-40) 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.[[41]](#footnote-41) 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.

**3.0 Aquinas’s Theory of Will and Practical Reason**

In the remaining part of this essay I am going to argue that we should take the advice Foot offers in our epigraph seriously, and seek out Aquinas as a source of insight into contemporary problems. To that end, I will argue that Aquinas’s account of will and practical reason point us towards an acceptable resolution of the dilemma the ethical naturalist faces by showing us that the supposed dichotomy between nature and reason is a false one. First, I consider his theory of will. There are two main respects in which his theory of will is useful to resolving our dilemma. First, it is an account of the will as a natural inclination or tendency that has the exemplification of form as its end. So the will has a natural standard of goodness or badness, which is supplied by the life form as such. Second, the will is a rational power, and its objects are determined through acts of practical reasoning. Thus we can only attain our end (the exemplification of our form) through acts of reason. The will then is a natural inclination towards the exemplification of form that necessarily pursues its objects under the formal aspect of the universal good, through particular judgments of practical reason. This will is thus a power of self-determination. But this self-determination is not total. To see why it is not, I turn to Aquinas’s account of practical reason. The starting points or first principles of practical reasons are the natural ends that are constitutive of human life. Practical reason presupposes ends, and our most general ends are constitutive of our form of life, and so shared in common by all mature, sane members of the species. Aquinas thinks that we have rational knowledge of these ends *qua* ends—we have a kind of *natural-practical* knowledge of them. Such knowledge is natural because all human beings have a natural disposition to acquire this knowledge; such knowledge is practical because the knowledge is of the end *qua* end—we know these ends as objects to be realized, and not as facts. This practical knowledge of our ends is compatible with the self-conscious and self-determined character of a power of reason because it is still necessary for the agent to order these ends, to determine the specific manner in which they will be attained, and by what means. On this account, self-determination (and thus free choice) is in the space between the general ends and the particular manner in which we realize them.

I conclude by pointing out that such a theory shows us a way to resolve our dilemma, by showing us how we can conceive of rational powers along the same basic model as all vital powers in a living thing: as ordered to the life form as such. And the promise of such a resolution, and with it the collapse of one of modern philosophy’s most sacred dichotomies, should be reason enough to give the theory our full attention.

**3.1 Appetite: Natural, Perceptual, Rational**

Aquinas, like Aristotle, 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*. 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 plants movements in terms of the single, unitary end for the sake of which they come to be and operate towards.[[42]](#footnote-42)

It is important to note that this natural inclination or appetite in 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, what the ethical naturalist calls the life form or species. 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.

It may be tempting to dismiss this claim as an instance of an outdated Scholasticism, but we should resist. Notice that it is very difficult to deny the fact that we need an account of *that for the sake of which* a natural movement is progressing in order to identify it as a movement of one kind as opposed to another. To see this, consider the process of mitosis in living organisms. As Michael Thompson points out,

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 the 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.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Thompson’s point is that if we stay at the level of observation of the here and now and do not take into account the determinate end towards which the vital, material process is progressing, then we will in principle not be able to identify the kind of process or change that is taking place. For the very same material process may be a phase of growth in one life form, and reproduction in another. And we cannot know whether what we see is growth or reproduction unless we know the end it serves: the life form as such.

Every movement or change in a living thing, *qua* vital movement or change, is for the sake of the life form. When the sunflower leans towards the sun, when it sinks its roots deep in the earth, when its cells split up and divide in such-and-such a manner, all these activities occur for the sake of a sunflower life coming to be and remaining in being. It is as a principle of explanation of movement and change that Aquinas invokes the concept of natural appetite (an inclination or tendency); it is not because he wants to anthropomorphize plant life, or because he has a fantastical or enchanted idea of nature. Obviously plants don’t have desires or goals, and Aquinas understood that as much as we do. In fact, he recognizes that plants don’t have a world at all. The attribution of appetite is made to account for the fact that the movements of any part or process of a sunflower are all explained by reference to a single, unifying end for the sake of which the system of powers itself comes to be and operates: sunflower life. This shows that the concept in question primarily picks out the idea of an explanatory principle of movement and change in a naturally organized being.

Now animals *do* have feelings and desires, and thus Aquinas is happy to say they have appetitive powers. In non-rational animals this is the power of perceptual appetite. Indeed, the hallmark of animality is the possession of perceptual powers generally, which can be sub-divided into two distinct kinds, cognitive and appetitive. Thus 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 a world distinct from itself and reacts to what it perceives through its senses by moving itself through the world, in order to pursue some things and avoid others. To have a perceptual powers is to possess a *conscious* form of life.

The division between appetite and cognition is drawn according to a difference in formal objects. Aformal object is the formal or intentional character under which one and the same material reality is apprehended *qua* object of that power.[[44]](#footnote-44) To understand the division, we must return to his understanding of a power or capacity. Again following Aristotle, Aquinas speaks of powers in terms of their acts and objects. The act, operation, or exercise of a power is defined by its formal 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 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, 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.[[45]](#footnote-45)

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 of generality: cognition and desire belong to diverse *genera* of powers, under which particular species will be subsumed. Here the division is made according to the very idea of a formal object—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. Cognitive powers, on the other hand, are unified in virtue of their formal relation to truth (universal or particular).

There is much to be said here, but for our purposes it will be enough to stress the basic differences between these formal relations between power and object. For Aquinas, truth just is the name of the formal relation material things stand in with respect to a cognitive power (perceptual or intellectual). Cognitive powers are related to material objects not as material objects, but in accordance with perceptual or intellectual forms (concepts or forms of sensibility). Thus the truth is ascribed to the act of the cognitive and perceptual power directly, not to the material object of the power—I have a true judgment or perception of a dog, not a true dog.

With appetite, the opposite holds. Whereas in cognition an animal brings specific things in the world to itself, according to its own mode of apprehension, in desire the animal is ordered or inclined to specific things in the world, as they are in their material particularity. Here the goodness is not ascribed to the power in exercise—it is not a good wanting—but rather to the object of the power: the thing is wanted as good.[[46]](#footnote-46) For Aquinas, this is the essential meaning of good: that which is the object of appetite, its terminus or that in which the wanting finds its fulfillment.[[47]](#footnote-47) 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, and as an object of judgment).[[48]](#footnote-48)

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. The sheep perceives the wolf as dangerous, and non-accidentally so. An animal perceives particulars and is either inclined to seek or avoid them insofar as they are good, not for the well functioning of any particular power, but for the whole animal.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is because an animal goes after what it perceives as good for itself that Aquinas says it has a perceptual appetite; and it is because we can attribute this appetite to an animal that we can say that it acts. Though an animal has a world and acts based on his interactions in the world, it is not up to the animal to decide how to act, because it is not up to the animal whether it perceives any particular thing in a positive or negative light. That is a matter for instinct.

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. But the sheep is also inclined to avoid what it perceives as dangerous. So if on the way to eat some grass she encounters a wolf, the sheep will flee. The sheep cannot question whether she ought to flee the wolf, nor can she decide to be brave and face it down. 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).[[50]](#footnote-50) Though there is such a thing as a good sheep life, the sheep herself neither knows it generally nor is essentially guided by such knowledge in what she does. The sheep cannot acquire general knowledge; it can only cognize and remember particulars, and use that information in accordance with a system of instincts in particular situations.

Because an animal can only apprehend and react to particulars *qua* 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. In order to develop that kind of consciousness one would need powers of conceptual cognition and inference, which a mere animal lacks. To have conceptual powers of cognition and appetite is to have a *self-conscious* form of life, a rational form of life.

Rational animals, like any animal, have a natural inclination towards its good as a whole, and like lower animals this power is actualized through its 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.[[51]](#footnote-51)

This means that a rational animal does not merely act on instinct, because it does not cognize or desire in a pre-determined manner. 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. 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 any of its particular judgments, perceptions, and desires. Part of what it means to be self-conscious, I take it, is that one can reflect upon one’s own operations, and assess whether the act is good or bad. So our decisions and our inclinations can themselves become objects of rational reflection, and this implies that our capacities are self-determined (or at least potentially so). For instance, though I might immediately desire to eat the cake upon perceiving it, I can stop and ask myself whether consuming it is a good idea. I can determine myself to abstention or indulgence. Likewise, though I might be inclined to judge that a job candidate is less qualified because female, or that a stranger is more dangerous because of his skin color, but I can call these immediate judgments into question and determine myself to make a more thorough investigation. A rational animal does not just judge and desire in accordance with instincts; a rational animal needs a reason to judge and to act. Consequently, its form of life is not determined, because its operations are not determined.

Self-determination is essentially related to conceptual cognition, and conceptual cognition is what makes possible a rational form of desire (i.e., the will). Conceptual cognition brings with it, at minimum, the ability to apprehend particular objects under general concepts, and thus under different descriptions that can be inferentially related to other things he knows and pursues. 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,[[52]](#footnote-52) a human being might see the same thing in a myriad of ways: as a potential meal, as a potential gift and expression of gratitude, as a manifestation of injustice (because it is recognized as stolen), as a part of a science project, as a suitable vehicle of poison and the destruction of one’s enemy, and so on *ad infinitum*. The cognition itself is already, as it were, inferentially loaded, because it is connected to other perceptions and other ends in a systematic way (or, it is at least potentially so related). Therefore a rational animal is not inclined towards any particular thing in any one pre-determined way, and so needs a reason to be inclined towards or away from any particular it perceives. Consequently the principle of inclination in a rational animal—its rational appetite—requires an act of reason in order to be determined towards one end as opposed to another. An object of will, because the will is a rational power of desire, must be supplied by an act of practical reason (a practical judgment that some end is to be pursued through some determinate means).[[53]](#footnote-53)

Thus Aquinas argues that a rational animal must *determine itself* to move, in accordance with its conceptual understanding of what ought to be pursued, and it cannot do this without relating its general conception of what is good to the particular situation it faces. And so a ‘Why?’ question regarding the actions of a rational animal can be directly addressed to it, and an answer can be expected that will appeal, not to some brute disposition or pre-determined inclination, but to the agent’s own understanding 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.[[54]](#footnote-54) And it also explains why he repeatedly insists that “goodness of will depends on reason.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

So the appetitive and cognitive powers of a rational animal are conceptual, and therefore self-conscious and self-determined powers. This raises the question, however, how such a power can be susceptible to natural norms. That is, if a rational animal seeks its good in a critical, reflective, and self-determined way, then is it not the sort of animal that can call the norms of its nature into question and hold them up for rational scrutiny? Is it not thereby autonomous and free to decide for itself what its good is? If nature decided such matters, a power of reason looks utterly superfluous.[[56]](#footnote-56) How does this picture help us solve the problem facing the ethical naturalist? The answer to this comes, I think, from reflection upon the nature of practical reason.

**3.2 Acting for Reasons**

We have seen that Aquinas believes that all living things act for the sake of a single, unifying end: the exemplification of its life form, or nature. Human beings are living things, and so the same is true for us, all of our properly human actions come to be for the sake of living a human life. This end is not chosen by us, we are naturally inclined to it. But our inclination to life is very general and basic, and it is up to us to determine how we will be so inclined. We must come to possess a general conception of human life. If we did not come into possession of such a general conception, then we could not live a characteristically human life (a life of rational, intentional action). Thus Aquinas takes it as a condition on acting for a reason that the agent has knowledge of that its natural end: knowledge of specifically human form.

Thus it is a condition on willed (i.e., rational or voluntary) action that an agent know his end *qua* end. An animal knows it ends (the sheep knows that it is fleeing the wolf *qua* danger), but this knowledge is not conceptual and general—it does not have thoughts that are systematically connect to its other thoughts, because they are positioned within a larger, inferentially related system. And so it neither needs nor can have a reason to adopt one end over another.

A rational animal, on the other hand, must have a reason to flee or hold its ground. Now this search for a ground is not confined to the space of the particular circumstances. The search for a reason is grounded in its consciousness of its other ends (general and particular), and how those ends hang together as a system of ordered goods. One chooses the end, here and now, and the determinate means to its achievement, in light of one’s other specific and more general ends. For instance, I will not go to the store if it means I will miss class, and I’m the sort of person who will not miss class, even it means I don’t eat and miss out on all sorts of other opportunities. Even our most mundane choices presupposes an ordering of the goods of our life and a judgment about the particular in light of the general order. Every action that is willed is willed in accordance with one’s sense of how the particular fits into this general structure of ends—it is willed, as Aquinas would say, under the aspect of the universal good. Without reference to that general structure, the notion of a practically rational ground loses its intelligibility.[[57]](#footnote-57) If I have no sense of how what I do, here and now, fits into my general sense of how I ought to go on, then my action is not rational, but based in some kind of sub-rational motivation.[[58]](#footnote-58)

A rational animal brings this general conception of how to live on the particulars of the situation in which it finds itself. And when he chooses an end and seeks to realize it, he knows that end in relation to this general system. But he also knows it practically: he knows it *as an end*. He knows what he is doing now because he has determined himself to pursue it in light of his general conception of how to live. In knowing his end, he knows what he is presently doing as a means to it, and he knows this because he has reasoned that these are the means, here and now, to attaining his end. He is realizing his will, and thereby realizing his life in accordance with his conception of how it should be so realized. Self-determination presupposes this practical knowledge of one’s ends, and therefore of one’s life and actions.

These reflections are necessarily abstract and schematic, but my hope is that they are sufficient to show that it is possible to understand 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 constructed in accordance with formal principles of pure practical reason. He does not think that “self-determination” goes all the way down. Some truths, he thinks we are naturally apt to know, and some ends we are naturally apt to desire. Thus on his account of practical reason, the determination of right reasons can never be given a formal account. So let us now turn to his account of the principles of practical reason, which are always species specific and never merely formal.

**3.3 First Principles of Practical Reason**

As we have seen, Aquinas argues that the will is a natural tendency towards the exemplification of human life. But since appetite always follows cognition, the will can only be moved by general, practical knowledge of this end. No human action is practically intelligible without attributing to the agent some general knowledge of human life, no matter how inarticulate, unsystematic, or unreflective it might be (and often is). Aquinas thinks that in coming to be a mature human being—i.e., one raised in a community of other human beings, and thereby coming into the possession of concepts, a language, and initiation into social practices—one necessarily comes into some such conception, and thus comes to act voluntarily, or in the manner characteristic of a human being. The characteristic activity of human life presupposes practical knowledge of human form.[[59]](#footnote-59)

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 one’s life implies that one has the capacity to order ends (and means to ends) and to adjust action and desire in accordance with the ends given priority. This very idea of rational action (the idea of ordering things to an end, and ordering these ends in light of an overall conception of the good) implies that general principles guide an agent’s determination of what is to be pursued and what avoided.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Now Aquinas does think that practical reasoning takes place in accordance with general principles. And the articulation of general principles presupposes knowledge of “first principles,” for theoretical or practical reasoning. Contemporary philosophers don’t make use of a concept of first principle,[[61]](#footnote-61) (it seems to be one of those concepts that has simply fallen out of favor) but the concept is central to the moral theories of Aristotle and Aquinas, and we need to lay hold of this if we are to understand their theories of practical reason. For the purposes of this essay, I limit myself to the task of showing that the concept of a first principle is necessary to the notion of practical intelligibility that must underlie any theory of practical reason that could possibly ground an account of ethical naturalism. I will not, however, attempt anything like an explicit defense.

The concept of principle at play in “first principle” is not familiar. We will be led astray if we think of it as a merely formal principle or imperative. Aquinas, following Aristotle once again, thinks of first principles of reason as its “starting points.” For practical reason, the starting points are the ends that constitute that for the sake of which the power of practical reason comes to be and operates: the life form as such. So, the starting points of practical reason—that towards which it strives in its operation—are the ends constitutive of human life. Aquinas identifies these ends: life, knowledge, friendship, family, political society, and so on. Aquinas thinks that the human mind is naturally apt to know these ends *as* ends—as objects of pursuit, and thus as good. And thus he says that the will is naturally inclined to them.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Aquinas thinks that we must presuppose such starting points, because practical reason presupposes that something is already generally wanted. Practical thought is necessary in order to see how such ends can be ordered and specifically attained. Practical reason is reasoning towards the realization of a goal, and Aquinas thinks it is obvious that some of our general goals are common to our nature as human beings. Thus he rejects the idea that our most general ends can be objects of choice themselves. And he rejects this because he does not seem to think that it is possible to have an idea of practical intelligibility without already making reference to the idea of general ends or starting points. His thought seems to be that the very idea of self-conscious, practical self-determination presupposes a notion of principle or ground, such that some grounds must serve as the fixed parameters in which particular acts of practical reason are possible. These fixed parameters are not merely formal by Aquinas’s lights—they are our natural ends (though as we shall see, natural ends that are rationally apprehended).

Since first principles lay out the conditions of rational intelligibility (theoretical or practical), they cannot themselves be proven. If we can demonstrate their truth, it is only insofar as they cannot seriously be doubted. Take, for instance, the first principle of theoretical reason, which is known as the Principle of Non-Contradiction.

(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.[[63]](#footnote-63)

For Aquinas, this is primarily a claim about the intelligibility of reality, and secondarily a claim about our thought insofar as it is directed upon reality.[[64]](#footnote-64) For example, in order to doubt the truth of PNC, one would have to be able to conceive of a particular instance in which the same attribute might, at one and the same time, both belong and not belong to the same subject, in exactly the same respect.[[65]](#footnote-65) And one cannot conceive of this being the case. The idea is that one cannot truthfully judge or assert that Socrates is both sitting and not sitting at the same moment, for the simple reason that Socrates himself cannot be that way. The intelligibility of thought presupposes the intelligibility of reality, of what is. The idea that we can know the world presupposes that the world is such as to be known, that it contains a knowable order. The very idea of truth presupposes this.

Because it is a basic condition for the intelligibility of thought about the world, no one needs to be told to follow the principle of non-contradiction. Consequently, it is not something one learns, like the alphabet or multiplication tables. Our knowledge of it is *per se nota*—immediate and spontaneous upon encountering its articulation. It is not a proposition that we can reason towards, or that we know through the senses, testimony, or any canon of evidence. 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 reality. The principle of non-contradiction defines theoretical intelligibility in this sense: we do not have any hold on the nature of belief and reasons for belief without it.

The same sort of analysis must be given of the first principle of practical reason.

(FPPR) – Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided.[[66]](#footnote-66)

The analogy is this: just as thought is not intelligible without the PNC, so too action is not intelligible without the FPPR. This FPPR lays out the intelligibility of goodness as such, as object of appetite, or what is to be done and pursued. Just as one cannot judge that contradictory states of affairs equally hold at the same time in the same respect, so also one cannot pursue what one considers, at the same time and in the same respect, to be both good and bad. That is, 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, because one cannot apprehend a goal as something that should be pursued and be avoided at one and the same time.[[67]](#footnote-67) 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.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The first principle of practical reason gives a determinate sense to the concept of *practical intelligibility*.[[69]](#footnote-69) Something is a good if it is such as to be pursued. This renders the concept of a reason for action intelligible. Something is a practical reason for action if it speaks in favor of pursuing an action. It also gives us a sense of the intelligibility of the concept of practical reasoning and practical inference. Practical reasoning serves to preserve the good through the use of one’s own powers, and to avoid what is harmful to any aspect of this good. FPPR contains within it the idea that practical reasoning is goodness preserving, rather than truth preserving.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The FPPR is formal as stated, but it cannot remain formal. It is reasonable to suggest that any rational animal would share this formal notion of practical intelligibility. But the power of practical reason in operation always directs the animal towards the good of its own form of life, and so any application of the principle would depend on the ends that constitute “the good” in question. And Aquinas thinks that reason is naturally apt to know these ends, and the will is naturally apt to seek them. This is in keeping with his definition of a vital power in general.

The non-formality of FPPR distinguishes it from PNC. But this is what we should expect if we divide the power of reason in the traditional way, according to the difference in its ends or aims. Because the end of theoretical reason is to grasp the truth of things, it makes sense that its principles are formal, since what is sought is knowledge of things that transcends any particular perspective upon them (to the greatest extent that this is possible for a finite agency). Indeed, the goal of theoretical reason is to transcend the subject and to comprehend the order of things. But this is not true of practical reasoning. The work of practical reason is not to track the order of reality, it is to create a practical order and to realize that order in reality. Its objects are not things that already exist, but ends that are wanted. The goal of practical reason is to preserve or attain what is wanted (or good). Now, if we define the good in terms of the end, then it makes sense to think that practical reason will be governed by species specific norms, because the ends of a life form just are what define or constitute the life form. Therefore the ends that constitute the good that is to be pursued and avoided can never be formal. Practical reason aims at human goodness, and necessarily so.

So the norms are natural. Let me briefly say something about the manner in which Aquinas thinks we apprehend them: *qua* good. To apprehend an end *qua* good is to apprehend it as a goal, as an object for practical reason to determine how to realize in action. Now, Aquinas says that our practical intellect is naturally apt to know the ends that constitute the first principles of practical reason, and to know them *as* ends, or *as* good. It is not by accident that every human community has practices or institutions that attempt to preserve the family, political society, knowledge, friendship, and the like. We are naturally apt to know and seek these goods. And we come to know them not through observation or inference, but just in virtue of coming to be human beings, and coming to live the dimension of human life to which that particular good pertains. We know them, as it were, from inside. Thus, the grasp of these activities *qua* good does not require special instruction, theory, or prolonged habituation, because we apt to grasp them just by living a 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. Something like 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.[[71]](#footnote-71)

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. It is intrinsically valuable.

Considerations such as these suggests 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.

**4.0 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 here to show how we might resolve the dilemma that ethical naturalists face. Remember that we began the second half of this essay with the acknowledgement 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 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 orders the will to seek them. 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, the members of which are known by mystical intuition, 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 as premises. Rather, facts about human beings—spontaneous, non-observational knowledge of their most basic goods—define the starting points and limit of that structure itself, but in a practical mode. Consequently, we do not now have to show how knowledge of human life form enters into practical thought. On the account provided here, we reason from our general conception of this life, which is an incomplete practical knowledge of our own nature, down to particular actions that are ordered to its more attainment. Practical thought itself is structured by and ordered to human goodness, so there is no question of how it can fit into it.

Of course, I have not argued for the truth of Aquinas’s theory. My goal was far more modest. I have only articulated a theory that demonstrates how it is possible to be an ethical naturalist. The potential the theory holds for forging a reconciliation between reason and nature strikes me as reason enough to pursue it further on another occasion.

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1. Foot (2002, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 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) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is Korsgaard’s reading of the function argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. See Korsgaard (2009, chapter 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *EN*, I, 7, 1098a8-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, if we give a “naturalistic” account of a power of practical reason we must give the same sort of account of theoretical reason. For the purposes of this essay, however, I limit my argument to the practical case (and even then my aim is only to show how it is possible to understand practical reason in this way). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hursthouse, (2004, 268). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (2004, 268). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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 from a morally neutral perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (2004, 269). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (2004, 270). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I explore the metaphysical implications of reverting to generic forms of life in another paper, “Practical and Natural Normativity” (unpublished manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hursthouse (2004, 272). This is a line of justification also pushed by Annas (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. (2004, 275). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Children, having a great deal of leisure time, are often engaged in play of this sort. In fact, this sort of play is as natural to children as seeking nourishment and protection from their parents. A child who does not know how to engage in imaginative 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 comes in the form of theory-driven techniques aimed at incremental results. Similarly, an adult who could not play with a child for fun would be a sorry sort of man. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hursthouse is not unaware of the tension between the reasons of virtue and the reasons of moral theory, 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, rather than naturalistic reasons. 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 its 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*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. (2004, 275). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. (2004, 269). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. (2001, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Quinn (1994, chapters 11 and 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. (1994, 233) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. (2002(b), 173). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gaut (1997, 161-162). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For other variants of recognitionalism, see Shafer-Landau (2003), Nagel (1970), (1986), and Dworkin (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Foot (2001, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The *locus classicus* of this critique of theories of self-knowledge is Shoemaker (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Anscombe (2000, 58). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For an especially clear exposition of the direction of fit view, see Smith (1987), and Velleman (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Lott (2012) for a recent attempt to characterize ethical naturalism in this way. I understand Lott to be developing an idea he finds in McDowell (1996) in a way that is not incompatible with ethical naturalism (i.e., on which the distinction between ‘first’ and ‘second’ nature becomes less significant, because ‘second’ nature norms are natural norms. For another attempt to collapse the distinction, see Thompson’s “Forms of Nature” (unpublished manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For the full development of the idea of “second nature” see McDowell (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Nagel (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I am not supposing that this would be easy, just not impossible. It is the potential to know human life from a third personal point of view that distinguishes ethical naturalism 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, see LeBar (2008) and Street (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It’s also pretty unclear how this person is responsible for his behavior. 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.” If you are raised by bad parents, perhaps within a political community that is not governed by just laws, then you are forever doomed to remain ignorant of your own nature. And it’s hard to argue that that sort of ignorance would not be exculpatory. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. (2001, 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This fits with Anscombe’s famous account of theoretical knowledge in *Intention*. See Anscombe (2000, 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Here we are talking about rational desire, but desire nonetheless. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This fact is shown very convincingly by Mueller (1979). See also Aquinas, ST I-II q. 8, a. 1, c. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 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, as she argues “there is no change in the meaning of ‘good’ when it is used in ‘good roots’ and ‘good dispositions of the will’” (2001, 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. I am indebted to conversations with Matthias Haase for coming to see the point in these terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. DV q. 22.a.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Thompson (2008, 55). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ST I q. 80, a.1, ad.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. 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! [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. SG 3.3 This is very different from what now passes as the “guise of the good” thesis. The contemporary thesis is about propositional attitudes and the contents. For a critique of such a view, see Boyle and Lavin (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Though we can separate cognition and appetite these 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 what it has apprehended, and that an animal cannot inclined to anything in particular without apprehension of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Aquinas has a sophisticated explanation of animal movement and sensitive appetite, both in us and in lower animals. For present purposes I am simplifying the account. For further discussion, see Pasnau (2002, chapters 6-7), and Miner (2009, chapter 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. I discuss this idea of an object of will much more in another paper, “Knowledge of Action and Knowledge of Human Form.” (unpublished manuscript, available for download at http://jennfrey.wordpress.com/research) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. DV q. 22. a. 4, ad 1. See also ST I-II, q. 1, a. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. ST I-II q. 19, a. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. This, of course, is Kant’s complaint at the beginning of the *Groundwork* (A: 395). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Some philosophers are willing to give up on the notion of practical intelligibility altogether, such as Setiya (2007: 63-65). I think to severe the notion of a reason from a robust conception of intelligibility is a mistake, though I won’t argue for that here. I will return to the notion of practical intelligibility, however, in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Of course, we are often motivated by sub-rational forces. But I do not see that as evidence against Aquinas’s position, since Aquinas happily acknowledges such forces by allowing for different forms of desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. I argue for this in much greater detail in “Knowledge of Action and Knowledge of Human Form.” [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Of course, not everyone thinks this. See Dancy (2004) for the opposing argument. I cannot attempt a response to Dancy here, but for now I merely want the reader to notice that his conception of a principle is very different from the one put forward in this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For an interesting discussion of the reasons why, as well as an articulation of one path towards a possible recovery, see MacIntyre (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. I should note, in order to avoid confusion, that I am not saying that we are naturally apt to know them because we are inclined to them. If we must insist on a logical priority, then cognition is always prior (logically) to desire. Temporally, however, there is no priority. In saying this, I reject Maritain’s highly influential reading of Aquinas. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The formulation comes from Aristotle. See *Metaph*. Iv, 6, 1001b13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. My discussion of these principles is heavily indebted to the work of Kevin L. Flannery, S.J., and to several discussions with him. See Flannery (2001, chapter 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Metaph.* IV, 3, 1005b19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c. bonum est faciendum et prosequendum, et malum vitandum. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Of course, in one moment I might see it as good in some way, at another moment as bad in some other way, but only insofar as I attend to different aspects of the prospective action at different times. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. This is compatible with the fact that I can have contradictory desires. I just cannot hold in my consciousness contradictory rational desires (i.e., acts of will). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. This is an idea that Anscombe suggests but does not herself defend. See Anscombe (1989, chapter 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. *Metaph*. I, 980a21. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)