"Traditional Naturalism"

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In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot repeatedly connects facts about human *needs* with facts about human goodness, or virtue. As a result both proponents and critics of her view tend to treat this connection as the core naturalist thesis upon which her theory principally rests, with proponents asserting and critics denying that human needs can indeed ground a substantive account of the virtues and of right action. John McDowell, for example, in his preemptive criticism of Foot's naturalism, takes needs-based naturalism as his target. And John Hacker-Wright, in a series of papers aimed at clarifying and vindicating Foot's approach, also takes as his starting point the connection between virtues and needs. Most other neo-Aristotelians also, in various ways and to varying extents, endorse this general thesis. [1]

In addition to her talk of what humans *need*, however, Foot also attributes a robustly objective, Aristotelian conception of practical rationality to human beings, according to which "there is no criterion for practical rationality that is not *derived from* that of goodness of the will"

[1] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995),149-80. John Hacker-Wright, "Human Nature, Personhood, and Ethical Naturalism," *Philosophy* 84 (2009): 413-27; "Ethical Naturalism and the Constitution of Agency," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 46 (2012): 13-23; and "Human Nature, Virtue, and Rationality," in *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Julia Peters (New York: Routledge, 2013): 83-96. G.E.M. Anscombe influentially discussed the needs of houseplants in "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19.

(11) and "no one can act with full practical rationality in pursuit of a bad end" (14). Foot's conception of practical reason is at least as important to her view as is her talk of needs: she presents it as central both to her conception of human goodness, and to her argument in support of an objective account of morality and moral evaluation (10-14, 53, 57-65). And while practical rationality itself has also received its share of attention from the other neo-Aristotelians mentioned above, questions remain about the role it can and should play in Aristotelian ethical naturalism. In particular, we can ask: what is the real theoretical foundation of naturalism's argument for the objectivity of morality? Are the standards for practical wisdom and thus for virtue set by the fact that humans are *by nature* practically rational, according to some specific conception of practical rationality? Or is it rather that humans are *by nature* constituted so as to need certain virtues in order to attain certain objective human goods, and thus we are rationally obliged to pursue those virtues? And if both theses contribute to the case for morality's objectivity, how are they related?

I believe that Foot herself was not entirely clear on the answer to these questions in *Natural Goodness*. Consequently, although I will briefly present the textual basis for attributing each thesis to Foot, in what follows my aim will not be primarily interpretive. Instead I will focus directly on the question: *which is the better view*? Is the objectivity of morality best grounded in an objective theory of practical reason and practical wisdom, or is it rather to be explained by a necessary connection between human needs and the virtues? I opt for the former view, proposing a form of Aristotelian ethical naturalism which I refer to as "traditional naturalism" because it is based on what Gavin Lawrence calls a "traditional conception" of

practical rationality.[2] Traditional naturalism is very much in the spirit of Foot's view. But it is not Foot's view in two significant respects. First, Foot's account of natural goodness and defect depends on a conception of natural normativity that she adopts (with some qualifications) from Michael Thompson, and I argue that this conception itself somewhat misunderstands the normative implications of species-facts for individual members of the species.[3] For this reason, as it stands her needs-based naturalism does suffer from what John McDowell calls a "structural" problem (155). Accordingly, I propose an amended account of the logic of natural normativity – and hence of the conception of natural goodness and defect – which is at the heart of Foot's account.

This change allows traditional naturalism to rely on natural normativity in explaining the objectivity of norms of action and of practical wisdom, *without* appealing to a needs-based notion of natural goodness and defect. While facts about human needs still have a role to play in traditional naturalism, their role is narrower and less fundamental to an account of ethics' objectivity. This shift in the explanatory basis of ethics' objectivity, however, comes at a cost: traditional naturalism is necessarily far more circumspect than needs-based naturalism promises to be, in its *substantive* characterization of what Lawrence calls "the practicable good".[4] That is, unlike Foot's view, traditional naturalism does not go so far as to claim that certain *particular* dispositions of the human will are virtues based on "quite general facts about human beings"

[2] Gavin Lawrence, "The Rationality of Morality," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89-147.
[3] Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 247-96. See also Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
[4] Quote Aristotle passage from NE.

(45).[5] Whether this is a problem, of course, depends upon whether it was appropriate to hope for a completely general, objective theory of ethics to deliver this result.

I. Practical Reason and Needs in *Natural Goodness*

Let us begin with a brief overview of Lawrence's "traditional conception" of practical reason. The view consists of four theses. In his words, they are:

> (T1) *The Formal Object, and Point, of Practical Rationality.* The central, or defining, question of practical reason is: 'what should I do?' Its formal answer I take to be: 'do what is best' or 'act well'. To put this another way. The formal and final object of practical reasoning is the practicable good: it is this that makes practical reasoning what it is, and reveals what its point is.
>
> (T2) *The Objectivity of Good.* One cannot call just anything good or bad, worth pursuing or not, and make sense. 'Thin' predicates just as much as 'thick' ones are rule-governed. And what is the good that the agent should achieve, or the bad he should avoid, is determined by the facts of human nature and the world we live in, and the situations in which the individual is placed.

[5] Here traditional naturalism is inspired by Lawrence's views on human nature and human virtue in a further respect. In "The Function of the Function Argument" Lawrence argues that the function argument is not intended to provide a substantive specification of human excellence and the human good, but is rather "relatively formal, with a minimum of contentious commitment. Yet it is not so formal as to be taking the project nowhere: it draws out and articulates certain—admittedly very general—facts about human life, yet ones that are crucial in establishing a general frame, or skeleton of an answer" (445). I understand the contribution of traditional naturalism in an analogous way. I take it to provide the general frame of an answer to the question of the objectivity, and basis in natural fact, of practical wisdom; as opposed to yielding a substantive specification of practical wisdom. See "The Function of the Function Argument," *Ancient Philosophy* 21 (2001): 445-75.

(T3) *The Extension of Good.* What the facts determine as good and bad include what ends are good and bad for the agent to pursue or avoid, as well as what means, and thus ends too can be rationally assessed. (130-1)

(T1) – (T3) are the heart of the traditional conception of practical reason. They tell us, in a nutshell, that practical reason is *for* figuring out, as a matter of fact, what it is best to do and how it is best to go about doing it. In addition, Lawrence gives us (T4), which elaborates on the objectivity of the good that is spelled out in (T2). (T4) is, I believe, best thought of as a sort of bridge between, on the one hand, the purely structural or formal elements of the traditional conception (as expressed by the first three theses), and, on the other hand, a more substantive specification of the practicable good and thus of the standards for practical wisdom.

(T4) *The criteria for the determination of good and bad action.* What ends and means are good or bad depends on what sorts of ends and means are good generally—that is, on human goods and bads—and on the particular features of the situation and the agent, diachronic as well as synchronic. (132-3)

In *Natural Goodness*, Foot does not endorse a traditional conception under that description. But her commitment to (T2) – (T4) is unambiguous: regarding (T2), the fundamental burden of her argument in *Natural Goodness* is to establish "an objective theory of moral evaluation" (NG 53) based on "the facts of human nature and the world we live in" (ROM 130). Regarding (T3), she says explicitly that "no one can act with full practical rationality in pursuit of a bad end" (14) and she says that the human ability to "go for *what [we] see as good*" (56) is what our practical rationality consists in. And regarding (T4), it is clear that Foot sees human goods and bads as the difference-maker: "the grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life … [I]t is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such

things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species?" (NG 24)

I believe that Foot is also committed to the all-important (T1); the view that the practicable good is the final and formal object of practical reason. But here, things are somewhat less clear. Foot does say, as previously mentioned, that "there is no criterion for practical rationality that is not *derived from* that of goodness of the will" (11). (Presumably what goodness of the will consists in will be independently determined by the content of (T4), which gives the substantive specification of the practicable good.) And she adamantly rejects desire- and self-interest-based theories of practical reason. And yet in discussing practical rationality (Chapter Four), Foot also says that we ought to see goodness as "setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of the thing itself" (63), and this is a claim that falls well short of treating the good as *the* final and formal object of practical reason.

It may be that, in spite of herself, Foot still clings to some residual elements of a desire- or self-interest-based theory of practical reason, with the result that she sees an act's goodness as "*on a par* with" such considerations (11), rather than treating goodness as that which fully determines an act's rationality, as it does on Lawrence's traditional conception. However, the idea that good is a "part-determinant" of practical rationality can also be reconciled with Foot's earlier, more categorical statement, and thus with (T1), by supposing that in the later passage Foot means to refer to a narrower sense of specifically *moral* goodness, whereas in the first passage she refers to the practicable good in general. If so, then moral goodness is one part of the practicable good, and it is not unreasonable to attribute a traditional conception of practical

reason to Foot, or something very like it, even though her commitment to (T1) is not as clear-cut as one might like.

If Foot does indeed subscribe to (something like) a traditional conception of practical reason, then she needs an argument in support of (T2), the idea that the practicable good is objective. This brings us to Foot's views on human needs. Foot is usually understood to be arguing that a connection between human needs and human virtue is what makes morality objective. In a crucial passage she says,

> "If we ask whether [Peter] Geach was right to say that human beings need virtues as bees need stings, the answer is surely that he was. Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbors. They also need codes of conduct. And how could they have all these things without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience? Why then should there be surprise at the suggestion that the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be determined by quite general facts about human beings?" (44-5)

Here Foot certainly seems to be suggesting that moral standards are objective because they arise from ordinary empirical facts about what humans *need* in order for their lives to go well. The kind of necessity that she relies on is "Aristotelian" in a sense described by Elizabeth Anscombe: it is "that which is necessary because and insofar as good hangs on it" (NG 15). Thus humans ought to be loyal (need to be loyal; have to be loyal) because basic human goods like friendship and security are not, in practice, attainable without loyalty.

There are a few things to note about this basic view. First, the goods mentioned (e.g. friendship and security) are meant to be objective, not subjective goods; these are things humans *really do need* as a matter of empirical fact in order to be happy and to flourish, whether or not we recognize or desire the good in those things. Their objectivity is supposed to be established by facts about the human form of life. Thus the Aristotelian notion of necessity serves to establish both the good of (e.g.) friendship, and the inviolable connection between it and (e.g.) the virtue of loyalty. Second, the notion of necessity at work here covers both constitutive and instrumental relationships between virtue and the human good. Thus while mutual loyalty may be an instrumental *means* to security, it arguably partially *constitutes* the good of true friendship. Third, the 'ought' here is an 'ought' of practical rationality; the idea is to show that the *wise* or *rationally sound* course of action for a human being is to be loyal and act accordingly. The wise or fully rational person thus understands two things that a less than fully rational person does not: a) the objective good for human beings of things like friendship and security, and b) the practically necessary connection between (e.g.) loyalty and these goods.

If this argument holds up, then it demonstrates the rationality of morality by establishing a necessary connection 1) between virtue and objective human goods and 2) between objective human goods, and flourishing or true happiness. And it does so *whether or not one holds a traditional conception of practical reason*. Radically reductive, desire-based models of practical "reason" – such as Bernard Williams' "sub-Humean model" and Lawrence's "no theory" – are incompatible with the notion that an objective good constraints rational choice.[6] But even someone who believes that self-interest determines what is practically rational could accept the

[6] Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 101-13; Lawrence, "The Rationality of Morality".

above argument. In accepting it, they would be accepting that they must be virtuous in order to obtain or realize their own self-interest. They would accept, that is, both a) that friendship and security are in their interests and b) that the only way to obtain these things is to be loyal. Construed this way, the passage above makes an argument for the objectivity of morality that is largely independent of one's conception of practical reason.

Above, I said that while facts about human needs still play a role in traditional naturalism, their explanatory role is less fundamental than it is on Foot's view. I can now explain this contrast more precisely. Foot's talk of needs appears intended to establish (T2) (the objectivity of the practicable good). But in my view her needs-based argument does not demonstrate the objectivity of morality because it rests on a conception of natural normativity that is flawed (in a way to be discussed below). However, there is another way to understand the importance of human needs: we can say that they contribute to a specification of (T4), not (T2). In this case the connection between needs and virtue is part of an answer to the question of what determines good and bad action, *given* something like a traditional conception of practical reason as outlined in (T1) – (T3). But facts about needs can play this role only if the objectivity of the practicable good has been independently established.

II. McDowell's Objection to Needs-Based Naturalism

Let us now consider Foot's account of natural normativity, beginning with John McDowell's "structural" objection to needs-based naturalism. McDowell's objection is compromised as such by its own structural problem. But it nonetheless illuminates the logic of natural normativity and the place of rationality in human nature. The objection is based on what

McDowell calls the "logical impotence" (155) of characterizations of species, such as the claim that 'human being need loyalty in order to have basic human goods like friendship and security'.[7] In a nutshell, McDowell points out that what is true *of the species* is not necessarily thereby also true of *each individual member* of the species. It follows from this (he argues) that even true characterizations of our species (and even those true characterizations of our species that contain some explicitly normative claim), do not automatically have reason-giving force for deliberating individuals.

McDowell explains his objection with the help of a thought experiment about a group of wolves who acquire reason:

> Suppose some wolves acquire reason. … What the wolves acquire is the power of speech, the power of giving expression to conceptual capacities that are rationally interlinked in ways reflected by what it makes sense to give as a reason for what (151).

McDowell is interested in a parallel between the claim that "human beings need the virtues if their life is to go well" and the claim that "wolves need a certain sort of cooperativeness if their life is to go well" (151). Let us suppose that rational wolves, like non-rational wolves, really do *need* cooperativeness if their lives are to go well. Still, unlike a non-rational wolf, a wolf with rational capacities is "able to let its mind roam over possibilities of behavior other than what comes naturally to wolves. … [I]t can step back from the natural impulse [to cooperate] and

[7] Michael Thompson calls statements like this one "Aristotelian categorical statements," and argues that they express a special kind of judgment by means of which we predicate characteristics of a species or life-form. Thus it is a (purported) characteristic of the human kind that we need loyalty, just as it is a characteristic of the yellow finch that "'the yellow finch breeds in spring'", and so forth (ROL 281).

direct critical scrutiny at it" (152-3). And the rational wolves' capacity to "step back" disrupts the needs-based naturalist argument given above, in two places.

First, a reflective wolf might sometimes perceive that he really does *not* need to be cooperative, here and now, to secure a good that is typically unobtainable without cooperation, for the species. He might, for example, sometimes be able to "idle through the hunt but still grab his share of the prey" (153). Second, even when an individual rational wolf *does* happen to need what his species typically needs, he only needs it in order to obtain something that is a good *for the species* (e.g., eating prey). And upon reflection some rational wolves might spurn the goal of having a good lupine life itself; they might opt instead for vegetarianism, the leisure that comes with the confines of a petting zoo, or the existential authenticity of suicide, taking themselves to be choosing wisely in so doing. If so, they will be unmoved by the fact that they cannot get what is good *for wolves* by pursuing the unnatural course of action they have chosen, since they take what is non-natural to constitute the practicable good.

The analogy to human beings is clear. From the fact that, as a species, wolves need to hunt cooperatively in order for their lives to go well, it doesn't follow that a given individual wolf has that typical lupine need, or that he values the life of lupine wellbeing. In the same way, for humans there may well be a *species-level* relationship of necessity between, say, loyalty and stable relationships with others. But it doesn't follow that a given individual is constrained by that typical human necessity, or that she has reason to value the stable relationships that are undisputedly part of a good (specimen of a) *human* life. In short, needs-based naturalism assumes that what is true of the species will also always be true of all individual members of the species. And this is notoriously (*and naturally*) not the case. From the fact that humans have 32 teeth it doesn't follow that I have 32 teeth, from the fact that humans reproduce sexually it

doesn't follow that I have or will or can reproduce sexually, from the fact that humans need loyalty in order to have the basic human good of security it doesn't follow that I need to be loyal in order to have security; from the fact that having friends matters to humans it doesn't follow that having friends matters to me.

None of this would matter, of course, if the individuals in question couldn't understand these facts and their practical significance. But as rational animals, we *can* understand such things. As McDowell says, "With the onset of reason … the nature of the species abdicates from a previously unquestionable authority over the life of the individual animal" (154). And the problem, he concludes, is structural: "as soon as we conceive nature in a way that makes it begin to seem sensible to look there for a grounding for the rationality of virtuous behavior, the supposed grounding is in trouble from the logical impotence of 'Aristotelian categoricals'. Reason enable a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements", including facts about the good of one's species (155).

It matters for Aristotelian naturalism's conception of natural normativity that what is true of the human kind is not thereby always true of individual human beings. And of course rationality allows us to appreciate, and act in the light of, such eventualities. In these respects, McDowell's objection focuses our attention in the right place: namely, on the logic of natural normativity and the role of human rationality in a naturalist ethics. Nonetheless, his objection to needs-based naturalism itself suffers from a structural problem. McDowell imagines a group of wolves who *acquire* reason, in a way that is superimposed upon their nature. But it is indisputably human nature *to be rational*. Our rational capacities – broadly construed to include various sorts of intelligent conceptual and agential capacities – are an integral, organic part of what we are and how we live. And if it is human nature to be rational, then human nature and

human reason are inseparable and cannot be pitted against one another, any more than human nature and human warm-bloodedness can be separated. It therefore makes no sense to say that reason is acquired, introduced, or superimposed upon human nature, and it makes no sense to talk of human nature "abdicating" its authority over the life of the species in the face of reason. The predicament of the reasoning wolf is thus dis-analogous to the human condition with respect to the very thing under discussion: namely, how our rationality relates to what it is in our nature to do.

Let us reconsider the thought experiment in light of this point. If the case of the rational wolves is to have any bearing by analogy on what is the case for human beings, then we must imagine rational wolves whose rationality is organic, not artificial or alienated from the wolves' nature. And once rationality is part of our conception of the rational wolves' nature, then the answer to the question of what it is natural for rational wolves to do cannot be merely that they ought to invariably cooperate in the hunt *as if they were doing so instinctually*. To do so would be most *un*natural for them, though it would be perfectly natural for non-rational wolves. Instead, the answer to the question of what it is natural for the rational wolves to do must be something like, 'do whatever makes sense for a reason-possessing wolf to do in this deliberative context'. But with this correction to our conception of his nature, when McDowell's wolf steps back, adopts a critical stance, and wonders why he should do what comes naturally to wolves, the question should strike us very differently. The question amounts to something like, 'Why should I now pursue what deliberation tells me is the best course of action?' And the answer to *that* question is something like, 'Because that's the course of action that you have, to the best of your ability and hopefully correctly, identified as best.'

McDowell suggests that reason "enables a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements" (155). But reason does not allow a deliberating agent to step back from reason itself, or from *reasons* themselves, without violating the norms of reason. Reason does not allow a deliberating agent to be indifferent to justification, while still laying claim to rationality. So the fact that the wolves in McDowell's thought experiment are rational does not show that claims about rational-lupine nature do not bear on what individual rational wolves ought (rationally) to do. Rather, the fact that the wolves are rational is a particularly relevant fact *about* their nature, which affects the content of any reasonable account of what such wolves must do in order to be acting well. And the same is true of human beings.

III. The Logic of Natural Normativity

McDowell's decidedly un-naturalist conception of rationality prevents his analogy from establishing the intended conclusion. At the same time, it focuses attention on the fact that ethical naturalism, if it deserves the name, must construe *reason itself* as a natural phenomenon that happens to be a characteristic capacity of our species. Traditional naturalism does just this.

To appreciate the significance of human practical rationality in traditional naturalism, we need first to clarify the ways in which facts about our species do (and do not) have normative implications for individuals. Let us begin, then, by revisiting the supposed "logical impotence" of Aristotelian categorical statements (in McDowell's phrase). It is true, as Anscombe and others have observed, that you can't treat characterizations of kinds as if they were universal

generalizations.[8] But to call this a logical *impotence* is a bit like saying that the statement "Some birds lay eggs" is logically impotent because you cannot conclude from it that if X is a bird, X lays eggs. Existential and universal quantifications have their own distinctive logical properties, and the same is true of kind-characterizations. Aristotelian categoricals are not logically impotent; rather, their distinctive logical implications are *normative*. They are not, however, normative in quite the way in which Foot, following Thompson, takes them to be. A close look reveals that the inferences upon which Foot depends are systematically fallacious; the premises simply do not establish the conclusions she takes them to establish.

Aristotelian categoricals like "Wolves hunt cooperatively" or "Humans are social animals" attribute characteristics to kinds of living things – humans, wolves, etc. At the same time, in virtue of so doing, they express *norms* for individual members of the kind they name. As Foot puts it, "evaluation of a living thing in its own right … is possible where there is intersection of two types of propositions: on the one hand, Aristotelian categoricals (life-form descriptions relating to the species), and on the other, propositions about particular individuals that are the subject of evaluation" (33). Thus, for example, if we know that Kapu is a wolf and that wolves hunt cooperatively, then we know that Kapu *ought* to hunt cooperatively (but that he does not necessarily do so). And if we know that Anna is human and that humans are bipedal, then we know that Anna *ought* to have two legs (but that she does not necessarily have two). And so on, for any characteristic that can justifiably be predicated of a kind, and any individual who can justifiably be counted as a member or instance of that kind.[9]

[8] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"; Thompson, "The Representation of Life"; McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism"; and Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

[9] Not all generic sentences about kinds have the kind of normative implications I am describing here. Thus I am using the word 'characteristic' in a somewhat technical sense that deserves more explication. Roughly, if a statement about a species or kind tells us part of what it is to be that kind of thing, then it predicates a characteristic and constitutes a norm, whereas if it tells us something that happens to be true of the species it will

Now it may seem that this is all we need to know in order to draw the conclusion that Foot draws: namely, that what we have here is a straightforward natural-fact-based theory of *goodness* and *defect*. For her, deviation from what is characteristic – in the case of functionally significant species-traits – is intrinsically a kind of natural *defect*: "By the application of these norms to an individual member of the relevant species it [is] judged to be as it should be or, by contrast, to a lesser or greater degree defective" (34). Conversely, for Foot instantiation of (functionally significant) species-traits is natural excellence. On her view, then, if Kapu hunts cooperatively he is good *qua* wolf, and if he does not hunt cooperatively then "*ipso facto* … there is something wrong" with him; he is "*ipso facto* defective" (35,59). And if Anna has two legs she is good *qua* human; otherwise she is defective as such.

But these clean evaluative conclusions are too quick, and too simple. To see why, the first step is to appreciate just how modest the normative implications of species-facts really are. Of course, it is obvious that neither of the 'oughts' in the examples above are *practically* normative. The implication is not that Kapu ought to hunt cooperatively in order to be a virtuous (or rational) wolf, or that Anna ought to have two legs in order to be a virtuous (or rational) human. Rather, the normative implications of species-characterizations for individual members of that species are *very* strictly circumscribed by the content of the characterization itself. 'Humans are bipedal' gives an anatomical norm, whereas 'Wolves hunt cooperatively' gives a behavioral norm. Thus the correct conclusion to draw regarding Kapu the wolf is not 'Kapu ought to hunt cooperatively in order to be virtuous or excellent' but rather 'Kapu ought to hunt cooperatively

likely not do so. The distinction between these kinds of predication will not be very clean, since it ought not to be part of a contemporary ethical naturalism to attribute immutable essences to kinds. But for example: 'Tigers have stripes' is a species-characterization whereas 'Tigers are endangered' is not. 'Mosquitoes are disease vectors' seems like an interesting borderline case. Is it part of what it is to be a mosquito, in our ecosystem, to play a role in the spread of pathogens to warm-blooded animals? Or is this an accidental trait of the kind? I can see a case for either claim. Kapu is the name of the wolf in the children's novel *Julie of the Wolves,* by Jean Craighead George.

in order to procure food collaboratively in the way that is characteristic of his kind'. And regarding Anna the human, the correct conclusion to draw is not 'Anna ought to have two legs in order to exemplify natural goodness', but rather 'Anna ought to have two legs in order to have the number of lower limbs that is characteristic of her kind'.

But in noticing the narrowness of these natural norms' implications, we are simultaneously confronting the inherent pluralism and sheer abundance of natural norms. Absolutely every true characterization of a kind or type of thing simultaneously constitutes a very specific norm for individual instances of that kind. What type of norm it is will depend upon the content of the characterization. The combined specificity (narrowness) and sheer innumerability of species characteristic-based norms explains why a departure from what is characteristic cannot be simply equated with *defect* in an individual.

What if Kapu does not hunt cooperatively, and Anna does not have two legs? It may seem a short step from here to the conclusion that Anna is anatomically 'defective' and Kapu is behaviorally 'defective'. But in fact what is warranted at this point is not an evaluative conclusion, but rather a *question* – or more likely, questions. Why doesn't Kapu hunt cooperatively? How does Anna's lack of one or both legs relate to her overall flourishing? As Gavin Lawrence puts it, an individual's departure from what is characteristic of her species *calls for explanation.*[10] Pending an explanation, we know nothing more than that the individuals in question are uncharacteristic in one, very narrow respect. We do not know, for example, whether (and if so how) their being uncharacteristic tells for or against their flourishing. We do not even

[10] Lawrence's talk of a call for explanation in the classroom, while teaching Ethics and Metaethics, influenced my views on this subject the most, and I quote the phrase here from notes taken as a teaching assistant in those courses. But see Gavin Lawrence, "Human Good and Human Function," in Blackwell's *Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Richard Kraut (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006): 37-75. See also Thompson, *Life and Action* , 199ff, with thanks to John Hacker-Wright for the Thompson reference.

know, without a full explanation, whether their being uncharacteristic in the relevant respects counts for or against their excellent instantiation of the species; for no particular individual can simultaneously instantiate all of its species' traits, and it may be that precisely in virtue of being uncharacteristic in one respect, an individual attains excellence in some other, more central regard. In short, until a complete and satisfying explanation is in hand, we will not know how to evaluate an individual's departure from a given species-norm, and no judgment of goodness or defect can be justified.

What would it look like for deviation from a species-trait to instantiate species-excellence? Suppose, for instance, that Kapu the wolf is absorbed in the hunt when he suddenly senses that all is not well and ceases to perform his role, with the result that the prey escapes. As it turns out he was on the edge of a pit trap, and his hesitation saves his life and alerts the pack to the present of human predators. In this case, his deviation from one species-characteristic (involvement in cooperative hunting) is simultaneously his excellent instantiation of other equally important species-characteristics (let us say, high intelligence, generally pro-social behavior and a deep, intuitive awareness of his surroundings). Of course, departure from what is characteristic of the species can also justify judgments of natural defect. For example, like Kapu, McDowell's free-riding wolf is able to hunt cooperatively but chooses not to. But his departure from the characteristic pack-hunting behavior of his kind manifests none of the other lupine excellences that Kapu exhibits in so going. Thus in the case of the free-riding wolf one might be able to build a case for a judgment of natural defect by giving a full explanation: appealing to the context and drawing out the implications for that individual's instantiation of other species-traits which bear on the question of his flourishing, or of how well he instantiates his kind.

The same point can be made in the context of the kinds of human examples that Scott Woodcock has discussed in objecting to Foot's naturalism.[11] Consider human two-leggedness. Humans have two legs, and Anna is a human, so by the above-proposed normative logic Anna *ought* to have two legs. But now suppose Anna does not have two legs. At this point we must look for a complete, contextualizing explanation of her departure from what is anatomically characteristic, before we make any further evaluative judgments based on this discovery. Now suppose that on investigation we find that Anna lost one leg in a car accident last year and has been struggling to come to terms with it and to get around. Here her one-leggedness arguably does impact her flourishing and her ability to live a characteristically human life. On these grounds (in these respects), we might say that Anna's uncharacteristic number of legs is a bad thing.

But suppose on investigation we find instead that Anna has had prosthetic legs from birth, that she is currently test driving the latest integrated prosthetics from a new medical device startup, and that the superior shock absorption of these prosthetics means that she can expect to have far fewer back and neck problems than other people in her line of work over the course of her life. If this is what we discover in our search for a full explanation, then I think we will want to say that Anna's departure from the anatomical norm of two-leggedness actually contributes positively to her overall human flourishing and thus is not a "defect" or a bad thing, even though it *is* a departure from an anatomical norm. Her anatomical abnormality may even constitute a kind of human excellence, given its overall impact on her health and job performance. The case

[11] "Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles Heel" *Dialogue* (2006): 445-68.Woodcock's objections are not based on a very charitable reading of Foot's view. Still, in my view her account of the grounds for judgments of natural goodness and natural defect is too quick, and as a result I believe her view as stated is vulnerable to criticisms like the ones Woodcock makes.

for excellence will be even stronger if Anna is a bionic woman who chose to have her flesh and blood limbs replaced with incredibly advanced, indestructible, synthetic limbs, perhaps so that she could play some otherwise-impossible role in some important human endeavor, such as a space landing on a planet with very different gravitational and atmospheric conditions. Here we will likely evaluate her departure from the original characteristic of two-leggedness very positively in the context of other kinds of norms having to do with health, flourishing, adaptability, survival, happiness, and so forth.

These examples show that to equate *being uncharacteristic* with *being defective* is to make an evaluative leap that short-circuits the most important part of the process of evaluating individuals against species-characteristics: namely, the open-minded search for an explanation of the individual's departure from the norm in question. Living things are complex, and the relationship between our species trait-instantiation and our goodness is complicated. Given the extremely circumscribed, specific normative implications of any one species-trait, and given the indefinitely many traits that can reasonably be predicated of a given species, it is not to be expected that trait-instantiation will always correspond simply and straightforwardly to natural goodness, and vice versa. Thus the key point to take away from the discussion so far is this: species-characterizations do constitute norms for individual members of the kind in question, but not in exactly the way that Foot proposes. Specifically, when an individual is not as-is-characteristic, we are not automatically entitled to call this a natural *defect*. Instead we are entitled to pose a question and to begin searching for an explanation.

Thus far, we have been focusing on the question of how to evaluate an individual when they are *not* as-is-characteristic of their kind in some respect or another; a kind of evaluation we might call a *trait-external* evaluation. I have been trying to show that one must be extremely

careful not to leap to overly-strong, unfounded evaluative conclusions based on an individual's deviation from what is characteristic, in advance of a full explanation of that deviation. But even when done carefully and in a way that is well-justified, trait-external evaluations are anyway not the most significant and useful from the point of view of traditional naturalism. Instead, what matters most are the evaluations that are, so to speak, *internal* to a given characteristic: the rich, qualitative judgments we can make about *how*, and *how well*, an individual instantiates a given trait, when they are in fact as-is-characteristic of their kind in the relevant respect.

Sticking with the above examples: suppose that Kapu the wolf *does* hunt cooperatively. Then we can ask how well he does so, and our assessment of his cooperative hunting may be indefinitely qualitatively detailed and particular. Our grasp of what constitutes excellence and success in lupine cooperative hunting will derive from our sense of what cooperative lupine hunting is, and it will of course be fallible. But it will be answerable to the facts about the phenomenon in question. In the same way, if Anna the human has two legs, we can ask how well they function and how well she makes use of them. We can ask, that is, whether and in what ways they are *good human legs*. And in the same way, if a person uses practical reason to get around in the world, we can ask how wisely and effectively and accurately – how well – she does so. In short, whenever an individual *is* as she ought to be in some respect (whenever she instantiates some species-trait), it is possible and appropriate to ask *how well* she succeeds at being as she ought to be. And, like external characteristic-based evaluations, these evaluations will not be simply binary judgments of goodness and defect. They will be indefinitely qualitatively detailed, and tailored to the particulars of the case.

IV. Traditional Naturalism

Now let us put Lawrence's traditional conception of practical reason together with the theory of characteristic-based normative inferences outlined in the last section. Consider the following basic inference:

1) Humans are practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason.
2) I am human.
3) Therefore, I ought to be practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason.

In order to interpret this inference about practical rationality correctly, we must be very careful to apply the lessons learned from the above discussion of other sorts of natural norms. First, what should we make of the 'ought' at work in this conclusion? It is very tempting to think that this inference tells us that *qua* human I ought *practically* to be practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason:

4) If I am not practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason, then I am *ipso facto* practically irrational.

But in fact 4) is not supported by 1) – 3), because the relevant sense of ought in 3) is not yet practical. but rather natural or characteristic-based. What this inference says so far is only that I ought to be practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason, *in order to have the kind of agency that is characteristic of my kind*. IN other words, it tells us that because I am human it ought to be possible to give an "internal" evaluation of how and how well I instantiate the species-trait of practical rationality. But perhaps I do not possess practical rationality or engage in its constitutive activities. In that case, an internal evaluation of my practical rationality is not possible, and a different sort of evaluation is called for: an "external"

evaluation based on a full explanation of my being uncharacteristic of my kind in this particular respect. Thus we should conclude, not 4) but 4'):

4') If I am not practically rational according to a traditional conception of practical reason, then I do not possess (or am not exercising) the kind of agency that is characteristic of my kind.

Now, as with the above examples, in order to know whether and how this departure from what is characteristic relates to goodness or defect, we need to explain its occurrence in this case. What kinds of things might explain a human being's *not* having or exercising practical rationality? Familiar explanations include: being in a coma, being severely brain damaged, being completely senile, being profoundly insane, and being a very young infant. Being plugged into a pleasure machine or being trapped in the Matrix would also suffice.[12] So would being so aberrantly highly evolved that one's form of agency is actually radically different from, but better against the general standards of practical excellence than, normal human practical rationality. In each of these circumstances, the individual in question will not possess the practical capacity that is characteristic of her kind. And in most of these cases, the departure from what is characteristic certainly constitutes or corresponds to a serious impediment to flourishing, and to living a characteristically human life. This is to be expected, given the centrality of agency to our lives. But that is a substantive conclusion even here, and not something that can be automatically assumed, as the everyday case of infancy and the science-fiction case of the super-rational biological sport reveal.

[12] *The Matrix*, directed by The Wachowski Brothers, 1999. The pleasure machine is an invention of J.J.C. Smart's. "An outline of a system of utilitarian ethics," in *Utilitarianism For and Against*, J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

Because they are not-as-characteristic with respect to possessing (or exercising) practical rationality, the individuals described above are not subject to the kind of evaluation that I am calling 'internal'. There is no question of these individuals possessing or lacking practical excellence because they are just not engaging in the relevant activities at all. To put it another way: these individuals are *not subject to the norms of ethics*. It would be as inappropriate to evaluate the screams of an infant or the blank stare of a person with late-stage Alzheimer's against the standards of practical excellence (ethics), as it would be to evaluate the non-existent legs of a double amputee against the standards of strength and muscle tone which arise from the characteristics of human limbs. *That* sort of evaluation is an 'internal' evaluation; it is appropriate when an individual *does* instantiate some species-trait, and not otherwise.

Suppose, then, we are considering a person who is indeed as she ought to be with respect to the characteristically human form of agency. That is, suppose we are considering a person who engages in the activities that characterize and constitute practical rationality. Such an individual *can* appropriately be evaluated against the standards of goodness constituted by this species-characteristic. We can ask how practically rational she is, and in what respects, and where she excels and where she struggles, *given* that she is in fact a practically rational agent. When we do so, we are asking how well she succeeds at being a human agent. And, as with anything that is both *for* some purpose or end, and which consists in a certain characteristic activity or activities, practical excellence consists in excellently fulfilling the end(s) of agency by engaging excellently in the activities of being an agent. So in making an internal evaluation of a person's practical rationality we will be inquiring about how well she does these things.

Let us return momentarily to McDowell's wolves. The upshot of that thought experiment was supposed to be that "reason enables a deliberating agent to step back from *anything* that

might be a candidate to ground its putative requirements" (155). I retorted that reason does not allow a deliberating agent to step back from reasons themselves while still laying claim to rationality. We can now see how traditional naturalism makes good on this thought while still explaining the objectivity of ethical requirements in terms of natural facts. For just as the rational wolves could choose life in a petting zoo or the authenticity of suicide, so a human being most certainly *could* choose not to live the practical life that is characteristic of humans. That is, it is perfectly possible for a human being to abdicate agency. The human villain in *The Matrix* does this; as does anyone who commits suicide or plugs themselves into a pleasure machine. But what a human *cannot* do is *use* human agency (practical rationality) to live a non-characteristically-human life. That is just not possible, because to live a characteristically human life just is to live a life that is constituted by (among other things) practically rational activity. It is, however, possible to cease to live a human life with one's final exercise of practical reason. Whether it is possible to act well in so doing is a separate question.

So ethical evaluation according to traditional naturalism turns out to be simply the internal characteristic-based evaluation of human practical reasoners. It is for this reason that I said above that internal evaluations are the really significant and useful evaluations for traditional naturalism. When it comes to the human characteristic of practically rational agency, the rich, qualitative judgments we can make about *how*, and *how well*, an individual instantiates this particular trait *are just* ethical evaluations; they are evaluations of an individual's world-answerable practical excellence or lack thereof. Thus, because it is rooted in a sound (and suitably circumspect) theory of natural normativity, traditional naturalism gives a clear and concrete explanation of the objectivity, origins, and scope of ethical norms: ethical norms are the

norms internally constituted by the characteristically human way of striving to interact as well as possible with the world we inhabit.

V. What about Needs?

I used McDowell's lupine thought experiment to pose two questions for Aristotelian ethical naturalism, concerning the normative implications of species-facts, and the role of practical reason in Aristotelian naturalism. I have focused here on the answer that traditional naturalism would give to these questions. And in the process, I raised some difficulties for Foot's and Thompson's conception of natural goodness and defect. But though these points would need to be taken into account by a needs-based form of naturalism, I do not take my arguments to rule out a needs-based approach altogether. If anything, the discussion so far has lent it some support.

To take just one brief example, John Hacker-Wright has argued that the sheer realization of *personhood* in a human life stands and falls together with "something like the virtues" (PN 427), broadly construed in terms of pro-social and other-regarding traits. The virtues are invariably necessary for personhood in his view, both because personhood is partially constituted by the capacity to recognize the reason-giving force of others' interests, and because the only path to personhood is via an intensively nurturing, intensively social developmental process that inevitably inculcates this recognition. Hacker-Wright uses the case of personhood to argue that, McDowell's thought experiment notwithstanding, *some* human goods are invariably linked with *some* human virtues, at both the species *and the individual* level. Noticing the structural problem with McDowell's objection may add a further layer of plausibility to the idea that some species-characteristic needs for the virtues (broadly construed) do carry over to the lives of each

individual member of a species in a way that bears systematically on individual human goodness and flourishing.

Traditional naturalism is, moreover, compatible with the basic idea that human needs (and what *this human* needs) are *among* the facts that must be considered in sound deliberation. Traditional naturalism can even go as far as to acknowledge that human needs are often especially relevant to the wisdom of human deliberation and choice because of the fact that *we who deliberate* are human, humans are social, and each agent's most intimate and highly local interactions with the world are thus intra-species. On this way of thinking about the importance of human needs, they often matter more in human deliberation than, say, arachnid needs, not because humans are intrinsically more important or more valuable than spiders but rather because it's our job – our distinctive practical domain, our home turf, so to speak – to do a good job at being the domestic, social creatures that we are. Thus according to traditional naturalism, human needs can figure as part of a specification of (T4) (the criterion of good and bad action). Where traditional naturalism differs from needs-based naturalism is chiefly in its justification of the objectivity of good (T2), which makes no systematic appeal to a necessary connection between the virtues, substantively construed, and the human good.

VI. In Defense of the Traditional Conception of Practical Reason

In "The Rationality of Morality," Lawrence does not argue for the traditional conception of practical reason. He simply articulates it and explains its significance for Foot's lifelong quest to establish the rationality of morality. In *Natural Goodness*, by the conclusion of Chapter Five Foot takes herself to have provided, if not an argument for a traditional conception of practical

reason under that description, then certainly an argument in favor of the substance of such a conception. But I have argued that Foot's needs-based defense of (T2) depends on a conception of natural normativity that mistakenly equates being *uncharacteristic* with being *defective*. So I would like to conclude the present discussion by offering an *ecological argument* in favor of attributing a traditional conception of practical rationality to human beings.

Let us begin with the following line of thought:

> Each distinguishable kind of living thing has its own characteristic way of being in the world. For many kinds of living things, part of their distinctive way of being in the world is a characteristic way or ways of *striving*; that is, of intentionally or deliberately interacting with the world, with awareness, in whatever way seems most called for, most fitting, or best. This capacity for consciously striving to interact well with the world we can call agency.[13] And, as with anything that is both *for* some purpose or end, and which consists in a certain characteristic activity or activities, excellence of agency (which we can call "practical excellence") consists in excellently fulfilling the end(s) of agency by engaging excellently in the activities of being an agent.

Now, we humans are one of the kinds of living things that possesses agency. And so we can ask: what is the human form of agency? What way or ways do human beings have available to us for striving to interact well with the world? Well:

> On this subject, most people agree that the human form of agency is called "practical rationality", but people disagree radically about what practical reason is, and some

[13] I argue for an interactive conception of action and agency in "Action as Interaction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51:1 (2014): 75-84.

> (Humeans and phenomenologists, for example) may reject the term altogether on the grounds that it is hopelessly tainted with intellectual and cognitive connotations that have no place in a conception of agency.

The term practical reason is, of course, prejudicial at this stage, but I will nonetheless adopt it here to refer to the distinctively human form of practical agency. Simply in choosing this term, I have not, however, committed to any particular substantive account of the activities that constitute the exercise of practical "reason". And for all that has been said so far, practical rationality might include any number of different ways of 'intentionally or deliberately interacting with the world in whatever way seems most called for, most fitting, or best', including perceptual, emotional, habitual, and intuitive, as well as intellectual or conventionally deliberative and calculative activities.

Meanwhile, with this terminological choice made, our line of reasoning may proceed as follows:

> If we can arrive at a good, substantive characterization of practical rationality, then we will thereby have discovered what human practical excellence is an excellence *of*. And just as with practical excellence in general, human practical excellence will consist in excellently fulfilling the ends of human agency by engaging excellently in the activities of human agency. In this way we will have arrived at an account of what it takes to be an ethically excellent person, since 'ethics' is just the set of norms that apply to all things human and practical.

To those familiar with Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, it will be obvious that the above is a pastiche of Aristotle's rhetoric from these passages, transposed or translated to

concern agency, human agency, and practical excellence rather than function, human function, and human flourishing. It is also a way of making good on Foot's project of setting "the evaluation of human action in the wider contexts not only of the evaluation of other features of human life but also of evaluative judgements of the characteristics and operations of other living things" (NG 25). But what have I done in painting this intuitive picture of agency, other than to take the traditional conception of practical *reason* up to a more ecological register? Thus Lawrence's traditional conception of practical reason is motivated and lent plausibility by placing human practical rationality in the broader context of the genus of animal agency in general.

In this broader context, practical rationality's purpose in the lives of creatures who possess it is the same as that of any kind of agency: namely, to permit its possessors to interact as well and successfully as possible with the world they inhabit. This is an ecological generalization of (T1), the claim that the formal and final object of practical reason is *acting well*, or *doing what's best*. And regarding (T3), the assessment of ends as well as means: one can hardly claim to be fully sensitive and responsive to the facts of one's situation while simultaneously refusing to entertain the question of whether *what* one is setting out to do is appropriate given one's circumstances. It *might* turn out that prioritizing the sanctity of one's pinkie finger above all else is a perfectly good way to be responsive to the facts of one's situation. Traditional naturalism does not rule this possibility out. But the point is that one cannot simply fail to consider the worth of one's ends or refuse to consider it, or assume that ends are a matter of fiat or raw preference, while simultaneously plausibly claiming to be fully engaged in the *interactive* striving that is agency. Similarly, regarding the objectivity of the practicable good (T2), precisely because agency is *for* interacting with the rest of the world, it is therefore world-answerable.

Practical excellence is not achieved by successfully shaping the world to match whatever is in the agent's mind, as it would be on a desire-based model of practical reason. Instead, in keeping with the general purpose of agency and the specific purpose of human agency, human practical excellence is attained when one successfully shapes the world to match whatever is in one's mind, *provided* what is in one's mind (that is, one's intention) is appropriately informed by the way the world is and what it calls for.

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