Neo-Aristotelian naturalism as ethical naturalism

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Abstract:

Neo-Aristotelian naturalism purports to explain morality in terms of human nature, while maintaining that the relevant aspects of human nature cannot be known scientifically. This has led some to conclude that neo-Aristotelian naturalism is not a form of ethical naturalism in the standard, metaphysical sense. In this paper, I argue that neo-Aristotelian naturalism is in fact a standard form of ethical naturalism that accepts metaphysical naturalism about moral truths and presents a distinctive and underappreciated argument for it. I reconstruct the neo-Aristotelian argument for ethical naturalism in terms of a continuity between the ethical domain and the natural domain of life. I argue that clarifying the meta-ethical import of neo-Aristotelian naturalism not only helps to situate it among other positions in meta-ethics, it also facilitates better critical engagement with the view.

1. Introduction

Neo-Aristotelian naturalism (hereafter, neo-Aristotelianism) is a contemporary position in meta-ethics that makes use of ideas from Aristotle's teleological metaphysics to offer an account of morality in terms of human nature. Defenders of this view such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse argue that moral goodness is an instance of *natural goodness* in human beings, where natural goodness denotes a kind of evaluation that applies to living things in virtue of their nature and their specific form of life.[1] On this view, the goodness of moral virtues such as justice and benevolence in human beings is comparable to the goodness of deep roots in oak trees. In the same way that deep roots are naturally good in an oak because they enable the tree to flourish *qua* oak,

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[1] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

moral virtues are naturally good in human beings because they enable us to flourish *qua* human. Thus, neo-Aristotelians claim to offer an account of morality that grounds moral truths in facts about our nature. On this account, moral truths obtain in virtue of facts about human nature in much the same way that the goodness of deep roots in oaks obtains in virtue of facts about the nature of oaks.

Although Foot and Hursthouse have presented neo-Aristotelianism as a naturalistic theory of ethics, the interpretation of the view as a form of ethical naturalism has been contested. That is because, unlike more familiar forms of ethical naturalism, neo-Aristotelianism does not offer an account of morality that is grounded in facts that are derived from empirical, scientific investigation. In arguing that morality is an instance of natural goodness in human beings, or even that deep roots are naturally good in oaks, neo-Aristotelians rely on a teleological conception of the nature of living things that seems largely out of touch with modern evolutionary biology. Consequently, many critics argue that neo-Aristotelianism blatantly fails to provide a naturalistic account of morality[2], while some commentators adopt a different interpretation of the view as *not* making a claim to ethical naturalism to start with[3].

The aim of this paper is to assess the place of neo-Aristotelianism in meta-ethics and clarify its stance on the question of ethical naturalism. I will argue that neo-Aristotelianism should be interpreted as a form of ethical naturalism in what we may call the standard, metaphysical sense. On this interpretation, neo-Aristotelianism is committed to a metaphysical thesis about the nature of moral facts and properties, namely that they are *natural* facts and properties. As we will see below, there is no agreed upon account of what it is for something to be 'natural', and different views within meta-ethics characterize naturalness differently. Nonetheless, there is a core

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[2] See Tim Lewens, 'Foot Note', *Analysis*, 70 (2010), pp. 468-473; Jay Odenbaugh, 'Nothing in Ethics Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution?', *Synthese* 194 (2017), pp. 1031-1055.

[3] See Jonathan Dancy, 'Nonnaturalism', in D. Copp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 122-145.

metaphysical commitment that all forms of ethical naturalism share: they all claim that moral truths are, metaphysically speaking, *not* special. Despite all the real or apparent differences in, say, their epistemology or their motivational force, moral truths are claimed to be similar in all metaphysically important respects to other, more familiar truths—those we uncontroversially accept as 'natural'. I will argue that neo-Aristotelianism should be characterized as a form of ethical naturalism in this standard sense, and one that that presents a distinctive and underappreciated argument for the core metaphysical thesis.

One of the reasons this characterization matters is that showing how moral truths fit within the 'natural' world helps to defend morality against certain skeptical arguments. As Tristram McPherson has pointed out, a key strategy of the moral skeptic is to argue that if morality did exist, it would be *non*-natural, which is to say that it would be inconsistent with a global metaphysical naturalism—the idea that everything actual is natural.[4] Ethical naturalism offers a straightforward defense of morality against this skeptical argument by explaining how we can make sense of objective moral truths without having to introduce a *sui generis* category of non-natural entities into our ontology. As we shall see later, other forms of ethical naturalism tend to do this either by defending an empiricist epistemology or by offering an account of normative truth in non-normative terms. This, however, typically comes at the cost of abandoning at least some of our deeply held first-order moral judgments or undermining the robust reason-giving force of moral truths. I will argue that neo-Aristotelianism presents a defense of ethical naturalism that may fare better with respect to these costs. I will explain how the neo-Aristotelians' departure from a scientific characterization of human nature does not necessarily undermine their argument for ethical naturalism. To do this, I will reconstruct their argument in terms of a continuity between the moral domain and the natural domain of *life*, and I will provide a sympathetic, albeit exploratory, assessment of the argument.

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[4] Tristram McPherson, 'What Is at Stake in Debates among Normative Realists?', *Noûs* 49 (2015), pp. 123-146. (See n. 14.)

2. An overview of neo-Aristotelian naturalism

In a nutshell, neo-Aristotelianism is the view that moral virtue is an instance of natural goodness in human beings. To further spell out the view, we need to clarify the notion of natural goodness and its relation to the flourishing of a living thing. Philippa Foot introduces *natural goodness* as a form of evaluation that exclusively applies in the case of living things. Almost anything can be evaluated in a context that sufficiently relates it to human concerns. But evaluations of *natural* goodness are distinctive in that they apply to the parts and aspects of living things independently of the interests of humans or any other external party. They depend only on the individual living organism and how it fares with respect to its own form of life.[5] Foot further specifies that evaluations of natural goodness are based on what enables the organism to *flourish*, which in turn depends on the characteristic life of the *species* to which an organism belongs. To give sense to this notion of flourishing, Foot relies on Michael Thompson's account of the characteristic life of a species, or—to use Thompson's term—a *life-form*[6].

Thompson's account is complex and certainly not easy to summarize briefly, but it's worth a detour to get clear on the key elements of his view. Thompson defines the concept of a *life-form* in terms of a particular *form of thought* that we use in relation to the domain of life. The basic idea is that a life-form is a *kind* that can be the subject of a particular form of thought or a particular form of statement. The form of thought in question is manifested in the kind of generic descriptions that we typically encounter in a nature documentary or a field guide—statements such as "*the bobcat* has four legs" or "*oak trees* have deep and sturdy roots". The general form of these statements, which Thompson calls *natural-historical judgments*, is something like "the *S* is/has/does *F*", "*S*s are/have/do *F*", or "an *S* is/has/does *F*." Thompson believes that natural-

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[5] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 27.

[6] Michael Thompson, 'The Representation of Life', in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtue and Reasons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 247-296; Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

historical judgments have a distinctive logical form, which is the key to understanding what is distinctive about living things, and can help us get a grasp on the nature of life itself. He argues that natural-historical judgments have a form of generality that is neither universal nor statistical. They articulate the characteristic elements, aspects, and phases in the life of a kind of living thing. But they are neither universal generalizations about *all* instances nor statistical generalizations about *most* instances of the kind. The truth of a natural-historical judgment about life-form *S* is consistent with some or even most instances of *S* not matching the description expressed in the judgment. For instance, "the bobcat has four legs" can be true even if most bobcats lose one of their legs in an accident. According to Thompson, what we can infer about such non-conforming instances is that there is something *defective* about them: a bobcat with only three legs is defective in that it doesn't have four legs. In this way, natural-historical judgments provide a basis for evaluations of natural goodness and defect. A part or aspect of a living thing is *naturally good* when it conforms to natural-historical descriptions of its life-form, and it's *naturally defective* when it doesn't.

Foot highlights a teleological dimension in natural-historical judgments by arguing that the relevant generic judgments are those concerning what "plays a part", or has a *function*, in the characteristic life of a kind of organism. Take, for instance, the two judgments "the male peacock has a brightly-colored tail" and "the blue tit has a blue patch on its head". These judgments are superficially similar, but only the former underwrites inference to goodness and defect. This is because a male peacock's brightly-coloured tail has a function in the characteristic life of the bird by attracting mates in a way that a blue tit's having a blue patch on its head does not.[7] As Thompson also points out, natural-historical judgments are a specific subclass of generic judgments that are "teleologically articulable".[8] They can be connected with each other in teleological relations, such

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[7] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 30.

[8] Thompson, *Life and Action,* p. 79.

that we can say, e.g., that "male peacocks have a brightly colored tail *in order to* attract mates". The set of natural-historical judgments that capture the characteristic features and activities of a life-form are teleologically interrelated. Together, these judgments form a special unity or a system, which gives a conception of what it is for bearers of that life-form to flourish. The neo-Aristotelian notion of *flourishing*, then, is the life-form-specific notion of an organism's doing well by being a good instance of its life-form, as characterized by natural-historical judgments. It's this notion of flourishing that licences inference to evaluative judgments. Thus, evaluations of natural goodness are flourishing-based evaluations: they evaluate parts and aspects of living organisms based on their function in enabling the organism to flourish according to its life-form.

The aim of the neo-Aristotelian project is to extend evaluations of natural goodness to the case of human beings and to show that our judgments of goodness and badness in humans—including our judgments of moral evaluation—instantiate the same type of evaluation. What flourishing consists in differs from one kind of living thing to another. And on the neo-Aristotelian view, *human* flourishing is characterized by the capacity to recognize, respond to, and act in light of reasons, where moral virtues constitute exercising this capacity *well*. Thus, according to neo-Aristotelianism, moral evaluation of human character and action is the same kind of flourishing-based evaluation as the natural evaluation of an oak's roots or a peacock's tail.

3. The question of ethical naturalism

Foot presents her view as "a naturalistic theory of ethics"[9] and contrasts it with Moore's non-naturalism, various forms of non-cognitivism, and Kantianism. She claims that, rather than predicating a special kind of 'non-natural' property, moral judgments share a conceptual structure and status with familiar 'natural' judgments of goodness and defect in plants and animals. Hursthouse similarly characterizes her account as a form of ethical naturalism. She explicitly points out that while as an Aristotelian she aims to ground ethics in considerations of human nature,

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[9] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 5.

it is crucial to the account that human beings are understood as "part of the natural, biological order of living things".[10]

Following this presentation, many commentators on neo-Aristotelianism have described it as a form of ethical naturalism. According to Julia Annas, for instance, although virtue ethics is not by definition naturalistic, neo-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics offer a naturalistic account of the good life and virtue.[11] Echoing this view in their *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Moral Naturalism"[12], Matthew Lutz and James Lenman describe neo-Aristotelianism as the official meta-ethical position of many contemporary virtue ethicists and one of the leading versions of contemporary naturalism next to Cornell realism[13] and Frank Jackson's moral functionalism[14].

Yet, several critics have raised questions about whether and the extent to which neo-Aristotelianism fits within the general framework of naturalism. Elijah Millgram, Chrisoula

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[10] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 205.

[11] Julia Annas, 'Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?', in S. M. Gardiner (ed.), V*irtue Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 11-29.

[12] Matthew Lutz and James Lenman, 'Moral Naturalism', in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018).

[13] Lutz and Lenman characterize Cornell realism broadly, as the view that moral properties are the kinds of properties that can be investigated empirically and discovered *a posteriori,* in a broadly scientific way. But Cornell realism is often considered to involve a further commitment to the irreducibility of moral properties to non-moral properties. Cornell realists (e.g., Richard Boyd, David Brink, and Nicholas Sturgeon) thus believe that moral properties are constituted by non-moral natural properties, but form a type that can only be identified in moral terms. They are distinguished from reductive synthetic naturalists (e.g., Richard Brandt and Peter Railton) who believe that a reduction of moral properties to some independently identifiable type of natural property is possible. See Richard Boyd, 'How to Be a Moral Realist', in J. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 187–228; David Brink, 'Externalist Moral Realism', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24.5 (1986), pp. 23-40; Nicholas Sturgeon, 'Moral Explanations', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason, and Truth* (Rowman and Allanheld, 1985), pp. 49-78; Peter Railton, 'Moral Realism', *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 163–207; Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

[14] Jackson's view is, in a certain sense, the most extreme form of moral naturalism, as it embraces *analytic naturalism* – the view that moral claims are analytically equivalent to, and synonymous with, certain (highly complex) descriptive claims. See Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Clarendon Press, 1998).

Andreou, and Scott Woodcock, among other critics, argue that neo-Aristotelianism relies on an outdated, pre-scientific understanding of human nature that is incompatible with offering a naturalistic account.[15] On the other hand, some commentators have adopted a different interpretation of the view as *not* making a claim to ethical naturalism at all. Most notably, Jonathan Dancy claims that neo-Aristotelianism does not take an official stand on the question of ethical naturalism, and "neo-Aristotelian naturalists could be ethical nonnaturalists".[16] And in fact, Micah Lott, who is currently among the leading advocates of neo-Aristotelianism, agrees with Dancy's interpretation, noting that "Aristotelian naturalism is not committed to accepting metaphysical naturalism, or to rejecting metaphysical non-naturalism, in the way those positions have come to be defined in meta-ethics."[17]

The core issue is that neo-Aristotelianism does not offer an account of moral virtue that is ultimately grounded in facts that are derived from empirical, scientific investigation. As we have seen, neo-Aristotelians argue that moral truths are grounded in facts about human nature. But they rely on a teleological conception of human nature, captured in natural-historical judgments, which and seems largely out of touch with modern evolutionary biology. In fact, Foot explicitly warns against interpreting her account of natural goodness in terms of the notion of a biological adaptation, and stresses that she is concerned, not with the "technical uses" of the term 'function' in evolutionary biology, but rather with the "everyday uses" of the term.[18] This is what critics like Millgram, Andreou, and Woodcock have found puzzling given neo-Aristotelians' self-proclaimed

[15] See Chrisoula Andreou, 'Getting on in a Varied World', *Social Theory and Practice* 32.1 (2006), pp. 61-73, doi: 10.5840/soctheorpract20063213; Elijah Millgram, 'Life and Action', *Analysis* 69 (2009), pp. 557–564, doi: 10.1093/analys/anp087; Scott Woodcock, 'Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles' Heel', *Dialogue* 45 (2006), pp. 445–468, doi: 10.1017/S0012217300001013.

[16] Dancy, 'Nonnaturalism', p. 122.

[17] Micah Lott, 'Aristotelian Naturalism and the Autonomy of Ethics' in M. Hähnel (ed.), *Aristotelian Naturalism: A Research Companion* (Springer Nature, 2020), p. 290.

[18] See Foot, *Natural Goodness,* n. 32.

commitment to naturalism. These critics argue that to offer a naturalist account, neo-Aristotelians must replace their teleological conception of human nature with a sound scientific account. They further contend, however, that doing so would result an implausible substantive account of moral virtues. That's because defining moral virtues in terms of an evolutionary understanding of human nature – as traits that effectively promote human survival and reproduction – would lead to objectionable first-order moral claims.[19] The critics thus argue that neo-Aristotelianism cannot offer an account of virtue that is both naturalistic and morally plausible.

The assumption underlying this objection is that ethical naturalism requires an account of morality that is grounded in facts that can be known via the empirical methods of science. The idea—as Odenbaugh puts it—is that according to ethical naturalism, "moral properties are natural properties that can be studied by the sciences". And this just is not a commitment that neo-Aristotelianism can afford to accept. In fact, neo-Aristotelians have explicitly rejected the idea that all the relevant facts about human nature can be known scientifically. Although scientific findings surely play a role in filling the details of our natural-historical judgments about a life-form, neo-Aristotelians maintain that there is also an important *a priori* element in how we make natural-historical judgments. Our conception of various life-forms is not simply reached through abstraction from neutral observations of features of their individual bearers. Rather, our observations of individual organisms are already colored by our prior conception of their life-form. Particularly when it comes to *our own* life-form, we have a non-empirical representation of this life-form through an *a priori* first-person concept, as *the life-form I bear.*[20] Neo-Aristotelians thus argue that our knowledge of the human life-form, and thereby our knowledge of morality, relies

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[19] See Andreou, 'Getting on in a Varied World'; Millgram, 'Life and Action'; Woodcock, 'Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles' Heel'; Lewens, 'Foot Note'; and Odenbaugh, 'Nothing in Ethics Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution?'.

[20] Thompson, 'Apprehending Human Form', p. 67.

on a kind of "internal observation" and "self-interpretation" that falls outside of the domain of science.[21]

In this way, neo-Aristotelians block the objection that their view leads to an implausible substantive account of moral virtues as character traits that promote human survival and reproduction. They argue that we cannot derive first-order moral conclusions from evolutionary biology or any other empirical science, because the latter does not give us a full understanding of all the relevant aspects of human flourishing.[22] Thus, neo-Aristotelianism is compatible with the epistemic autonomy of ethics from science, which is an independently plausible thesis given that we normally do not think we can derive moral conclusions from strictly empirical or scientific evidence.[23] For critics like Odenbaugh, however, this clearly undermines neo-Aristotelianism's claim to ethical naturalism. And in fact, at least one proponent of neo-Aristotelianism—namely, Lott—agrees that to embrace the epistemic autonomy of ethics would be to forego the commitment to naturalism.

The idea that ethical naturalism should be ultimately understood in epistemic terms by reference to natural sciences is a prevalent idea in meta-ethics. To see why, we need to take a closer look at the commitments of ethical naturalism. In abstract terms, ethical naturalism is often defined as a conjunction of at least two claims: (1) *moral realism*—the thesis that in making moral judgments we purport to report moral facts, and that there are such facts to report; and (2) *metaphysical naturalism*—the thesis that moral facts and properties are natural facts and

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[21] John Hacker-Wright, 'What Is Natural about Foot's Ethical Naturalism?', *Ratio* 22 (2009), p. 320, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9329.2009.00434.x, p. 320; See also Micah Lott, 'Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form', *Social Theory and Practice* 38 (2012), p. 415, doi: 10.5840/soctheorpract201238323.

[22] See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 217-238; Michael Thompson, 'Apprehending Human Form', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 54 (2004), p. 62.

[23] See Lott, 'Aristotelian Naturalism and the Autonomy of Ethics', pp. 287-289. Lott argues that both Foot's and Hursthouse's views are compatible with the epistemic autonomy of ethics from natural sciences, and are best interpreted as preserving this autonomy.

properties. However, philosophers have generally had a hard time articulating what the naturalness of a fact or property consists in. As Russ Shafer-Landau explains the issue, we may try to understand naturalness directly by identifying some distinctive feature that is intrinsically possessed by all and only natural things. But there doesn't seem to be any promising candidate for such a criterion. *Being touchable or tangible*, for instance, would exclude many natural properties such as species and quarks, while *causally efficacy* would exclude causally-inert natural properties such as the property of being such that everything is either red or not red, or the property of being self-identical. *Being a feature of the world prior to the presence of humans* would exclude the property of being human or a human artifact; and *being non-evaluative* would unduly exclude moral properties by definitional fiat.[24]

In the absence of a suitable criterion that captures naturalness directly, many philosophers approach metaphysical naturalism indirectly by way of epistemology, and understand it in terms of the subject matters of scientific disciplines. They characterize natural facts and properties as the kinds of facts and properties that we investigate using empirical methods of science, and understand metaphysical naturalism as the view that all facts and properties – including moral facts and properties – are natural in this sense.[25] Given this characterization of naturalness, however, it's hard to see how neo-Aristotelianism could be a form of ethical naturalism. If natural facts and properties are the kinds of facts and properties that are known via the empirical methods of science, then ethical naturalism would necessarily involve a commitment to a third claim: (3) *ethical empiricism*—the thesis that we know moral claims are true in the same way that we know about claims in empirical sciences. We saw, however, that this is not a commitment that neo-

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[24] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003).

[25] See Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*; David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2011); Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, 'Toward Fin de siecle Ethics: Some Trends', *The philosophical review* 101 (1992), pp. 115-189. Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, for instance, characterize ethical naturalism as a placing of ethics with respect to empirical science by offering some sort of methodological or substantive "assimilation"—as opposed to a establishing a contrast (see p. 126).

Aristotelians would accept. They claim that moral goodness is an instance of natural goodness in human beings, while rejecting that a full understanding of human natural goodness can come from science. So, if the natural domain is construed as the domain of natural science, neo-Aristotelians don't seem to be claiming that moral facts and properties are natural at all.

However, metaphysical naturalism is not at its core an epistemological thesis, and it's in principle possible for moral properties and facts to be metaphysically natural without being discoverable via the methods of empirical science. As we saw earlier, what is at issue with the question of metaphysical naturalism is whether the domain of morality is metaphysically on a par with other, more familiar domains—those we uncontroversially accept as 'natural'. Starting from the domain of natural science as a paradigmatically natural domain and asking whether the domain of morality is suitably similar to this domain is one way to approach this question. But as we will see below, it is not the only way.

Another influential approach in discussions of naturalism takes the domain of *non*-normative truths as its the starting point. Many meta-ethicists thus start from the assumption that the non-normative domain is natural, and ask whether moral truths are suitably similar to the truths in this uncontroversially natural domain. The similarity relation in question could be a metaphysical relation (e.g., identity, grounding, or reduction) to non-normative properties and facts, or a linguistic relation (e.g., analytic equivalence or representability) to non-evaluative concepts and predicates. Gideon Rosen, for instance, characterizes ethical naturalism as the view that all normative facts are wholly metaphysically grounded in non-normative facts.[26] Along the same lines, many ethical naturalists adopt the project of showing that normative properties and facts are

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[26] See Gideon Rosen, 'What Is a Moral Law?' in Oxford studies in metaethics 12 (2017), pp. 135-59. For Rosen's explication and defense of the relation of metaphysical grounding, see Rosen, 'Metaphysical dependence: Grounding and reduction', in Modality: Metaphysics, logic, and epistemology (2010), pp. 109-36.

identical or reducible to non-normative properties and facts[27], or that they can be represented using non-evaluative, descriptive predicates and concepts[28]. This way of approaching the question of naturalism can also be seen in the arguments raised by ethical *non*-naturalists who argue against ethical naturalism by relying on the assumption that establishing naturalness requires accounted for in non-normative terms. This way of approaching the question of naturalism can also be seen in many of the arguments raised by ethical *non*-naturalists against ethical naturalism. G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument and Derek Parfit's Triviality and Normativity Objections are among such arguments.[29] Parfit's Normativity Objection, various versions of which are also advanced by Dancy, Fitzpatrick, and Scanlon, makes this approach particularly explicit, as it contends that naturalizing ethical facts and properties by accounting for them in non-normative terms necessarily results in abolishing their distinctive normative character.[30]

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[27] Examples of accounts that try to identify which natural properties are normative properties in non-normative terms include Railton, 'Moral Realism'; David Copp, *Morality, normativity, and society* (Oxford University Press, 1995); and Kim Sterelny and Ben Fraser, 'Evolution and Moral Realism', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 68 (2017), pp. 981–1006.

[28] Jackson's analytic naturalism is an instance of this kind of account (see note 13).

[29] G. E. Moore, *Principia ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 12-17; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters/* Volume 2 (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[30] Consider Dancy's version of the Normativity Objection. Dancy argues that the *normativity* of normative facts has to do with their distinctive subject matter, which is the practical significance of some aspect of the world. The central normative facts, on Dancy's account, are normative "meta-facts", which are facts about other facts' making a difference to how to act. The fact that an action maximizes welfare, for example, makes it the case that one has reason to do it. Dancy argues that such normative meta-facts cannot be identified with non-normative facts, because doing so would change their subject matter. Note that the fact that an act maximizes welfare is distinct from the meta-fact that *that fact* makes it the case that one has reason to do it. So, Dancy argues that naturalizing normative meta-facts would abolish their normativity. See Dancy, 'Nonnaturalism', pp. 137-140. For different versions of this argument, see William FitzPatrick, 'Skepticism about Naturalizing Normativity: In defense of ethical nonnaturalism', *Res Philosophica* 91.4 (2014), pp. 559-588; and Thomas Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

We can see that this approach to the question of naturalism does not place neo-Aristotelianism among naturalist views either. It's not an ambition of the neo-Aristotelian project to establish a similarity relation between the normative and non-normative domains. Neo-Aristotelians argue that the normative domain of moral truths is grounded in facts about what is naturally good in human life, but they clearly understand the latter domain of facts as also normative. In fact, as Lott has pointed out, neo-Aristotelianism is compatible with the view that normative truths *cannot* be accounted for in non-normative terms. This, together with the rejection of ethical empiricism, seems to be why Lott concludes that neo-Aristotelianism does not have a claim to metaphysical naturalism.[31] However, as Nicholas Sturgeon has argued in response to Moore's Open Question Argument, the idea that naturalness must be shown by establishing a relation to the non-normative domain presupposes that irreducibly normative truths cannot be natural in their own right.[32] Sturgeon's own view is that moral properties and facts are *already* natural, and simply don't need to be placed in a *sui generis* category in our ontology. The challenge for views like Sturgeon's, of course, is to present a different argument for why normative truths should be considered natural, i.e., metaphysically on a par with truths in other, uncontroversially 'natural' domains. Sturgeon's own argument for this claim is based on the plausible assumption that any property that plays a causal role in the natural world is a natural property. He argues that normative properties like goodness and wrongness qualify as natural because they meet this condition: they figure in causal explanations of the world.[33] Now, Sturgeon's claim that normative

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[31] He points out that normative truths, which characteristically concern the normative significance of other, non-normative truths, cannot be accounted for in non-normative terms. See Lott, 'Aristotelian naturalism and the autonomy of ethics', pp. 289-290.

[32] See Nicholas Sturgeon, 'Moore on Ethical Naturalism', *Ethics* 113 (2003), p. 536. For an in-depth discussion and critique of the assumption that natural properties must be representable in non-normative terms, see Pekka Väyrynen, 'Normative Naturalism on Its Own Terms', *Organon F* (2021), pp. 1-27.

[33] For a classical exchange on this question, see Sturgeon, 'Moral explanations', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), pp. 49–78; Gilbert Harman, 'Moral Explanations of

properties are causally efficacious is contested, and in any case, is not part of the neo-Aristotelian view. So, if neo-Aristotelians are to argue that moral properties and facts are natural despite not being somehow accounted for in non-normative terms, they need to present a different argument.

In the next section, I will explain how neo-Aristotelians can in fact offer such an argument. I will reconstruct an argument that is implicit in Foot's and Hursthouse's remarks about natural goodness to show that neo-Aristotelianism makes a distinctive and interesting case for ethical naturalism.

4.   In defense of a naturalist interpretation

In response to the concerns about whether neo-Aristotelianism in fact a form of ethical naturalism, several proponents of the view have tried to articulate what is naturalist about this view[34]. What is common among these accounts is the formulation of neo-Aristotelianism as the view that the concept human is the central concept of ethics, or the view that ethics is grounded in considerations of human nature. This formulation is the reason why commentators like Dancy conclude that neo-Aristotelianism is naturalist in an entirely different sense from other naturalist views in meta-ethics. What is 'natural' about neo-Aristotelianism on this formulation seems to be the claim that morality concerns human *nature*, not that it is metaphysically speaking natural. As Dancy articulates this interpretation—and Lott agrees—although neo-Aristotelianism calls itself 'naturalism' "because it holds that moral distinctions are tightly grounded in considerations of human nature", it does not take a stance on the debate between ethical naturalism and non-

Natural Facts: Can Moral Claims Be Tested against Moral Reality?' *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24.S1 (1986): pp. 57-68.

[34] Hacker-Wright, 'What Is Natural about Foot's Ethical Naturalism?'; Michael Thompson, 'Forms of Nature', in G. Hindrichs and A. Honneth (eds.), *Freiheit: Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2013), pp. 701-735; Jennifer Frey, 'How to Be an Ethical Naturalist', in J. Hacker-Wright (ed.), *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018), pp. 47-84. Lott, 'Aristotelian naturalism and the autonomy of ethics'.

naturalism.[35] One might say that such a view would be more appropriately called a *naturist* view. If all that neo-Aristotelians mean by naturalness is having to do with human nature, then their claim would be distinct from metaphysical naturalism, as they would not be concerned with whether morality belongs within the domain of natural facts and properties. Note that it's not obvious that all facts about human nature are natural facts. If it turns out, for example, that human nature consists in having an immortal soul or being a rational agent, there is a further question whether it is, metaphysically speaking, natural.

However, this formulation of neo-Aristotelianism is incomplete, and does not take notice of the fact that the paradigmatic neo-Aristotelian view presented by Foot and Hursthouse also involves a second claim. As Hursthouse puts these two claims explicitly, neo-Aristotelianism grounds ethics in considerations of human nature, where human beings are understood as "part of the natural, biological order of living things"[36]. The second claim thus adds to the first by clarifying how the relevant notion of human nature is to be understood. As Hursthouse points out, for instance, it is not the notion of human beings as possessors of an immortal souls that is supposed to be the basis of ethics. Neither is it the understanding of human beings as 'persons' or 'rational agents'—i.e., beings that are simply defined in terms of their capacity for practical reason. The notion of human nature that is relevant to neo-Aristotelianism is rather the notion of human beings as a species of living things and part of the natural order. Thus, at least on Hursthouse's formulation, neo-Aristotelianism does not merely claim that moral truths are grounded in human nature, but also that they are grounded in something *natural*. The question, however, is whether neo-Aristotelians can justifiably claim to understand human beings as part of the natural order

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[35] Dancy, 'Nonnaturalism', p. 122. Lott, 'Aristotelian naturalism and the autonomy of ethics', pp. 290.

[36] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics,* p. 205. It's worth noting that the second claim is not shared by all views that are described as 'neo-Aristotelian'. John McDowell's 'second-nature' naturalism, for instance, only claims that morality is natural in the sense that it *arises naturally* in humans. See John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in his *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 167-97.

despite the fact that they neither offer a value-neutral conception of the human life-form nor accept an empiricist epistemology.

I propose that the neo-Aristotelians' argument for this claim can be found in their attempt to show that there is a *continuity* between their conception of human beings and that of other living things. The concept of a human being, which neo-Aristotelians claim to be central to ethics, denotes a *life-form*.[37] Unlike the abstract concept of a person or a rational agent, the concept of a human being is tied to actual material living things with a particular evolutionary history, and is characterized at least in part by certain physical features such as having two arms and two legs. This *living* nature puts the human life-form on the same plane as plants and non-human animals. On my interpretation, it is this continuity between human nature and the nature of non-human living things that underlies the neo-Aristotelian's claim to metaphysical naturalism. The idea is that *non*-human, sub-rational living things uncontroversially belong to the natural domain, and if the human life-form is continuous with these other life-forms, it must also belong in the natural order. Note that we normally take it to be uncontroversial that non-human living things are natural, especially when it comes to simpler forms of non-human life. We don't, for instance, debate whether facts about an oak tree are natural or non-natural. To the extent that there are facts about the nature of an oak tree, we take them to be natural facts. Note, further, that this supposition of naturalness is not based on any assumptions about how we come to *know* facts about oak trees. Even if it turns out that – as neo-Aristotelians like Thompson have claimed – there is an *a priori* element in our apprehension of oak trees in natural-historical judgments, we won't thereby think of oak trees as non-natural entities. Neither does the presupposition of naturalness rely on the assumption that facts about oak trees are purely *non-evaluative*. The idea that the nature of oak trees grounds facts about goodness and defect does not undermine their status as natural things. Neo-Aristotelians take this presupposition about the naturalness of non-human living things as

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[37] As Thompson points out, the word 'human' is used in a way that is "on a level with words like 'Norway rat' and 'coastal redwood'. See Thompson, 'Forms of Nature', p. 701.

their starting point. They then argue that the nature of human beings as living things is continuous with the nature of non-human living things, and is therefore, similarly natural.[38]

We can trace this continuity most clearly in Foot's claim that moral evaluations "share a basic logical structure and status" with evaluations of plants and animals[39]. As we saw earlier, Foot's project is to identify a form of evaluation that applies to plants and animals and then argue that moral evaluation is an instance of this same kind of evaluation. It is crucial to Foot's account that this form of evaluation—i.e., evaluation of natural goodness—simultaneously applies to the domain of non-human life as well as human life. This emphasis on sharedness of the form of evaluation can only be understood in the context of an attempt to give a naturalist account. Note that if neo-Aristotelianism was in fact neutral between metaphysical naturalism and non-naturalism, it wouldn't matter whether evaluations of *non*-human living things could be shown to

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[38] It might be objected that the concept of human nature, or more generally, the idea that species have essences is rejected by modern evolutionary biology. see, e.g., David Hull, 'On the Plurality of Species: Questioning the Party Line', in R. Wilson (ed.), *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 23–48; Philip Kitcher, 'Essence and Perfection', *Ethics* 110 (1999), pp. 59–83, doi: 10.1086/233204; and Marc Ereshefsky, "What's wrong with the new biological essentialism." *Philosophy of Science* 77.5 (2010), pp. 674-685. However, several authors have responded to this objection. For a few instances of such responses, see Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics and Human Nature', *Hume Studies* 25 (1999), pp, 67-82; and Odenbaugh, 'Nothing in Ethics Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution?'. It should also be noted that recently there has been a resurgence of Aristotelian essentialism in philosophy of biology. Many philosophers of biology now argue that a revised version of Aristotelian essentialism is theoretically and empirically compatible with evolutionary biology. See, for instance Denis Walsh, 'Evolutionary Essentialism', *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science* 57 (2006), pp. 425–448, doi: 10.1093/bjps/axl001; Stephen Boulter, 'Can Evolutionary Biology Do without Aristotelian Essentialism?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 70 (2012), pp. 83-103; and Christopher Austin, 'Aristotelian Essentialism: Essence in the Age of Evolution', *Synthese* 194.7 (2017), pp. 2539-2556, doi: 10.1007/s11229-016-1066-4.

[39] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 27. To see what Foot means by this, note that Foot's account of natural goodness is based on Thompson's natural-historical judgments. Thompson distinguishes natural-historical judgments from other types of judgment by highlighting their distinctive logical form and grammar, e.g., their peculiar form of generality and how they underwrite inferences of natural goodness and defect. But his overarching claim is not merely a claim about language or grammar, but rather that these judgments capture the *nature* of a life-form in describing its characteristic life. Thus, what Foot means by sharing a "logical structure" with evaluations of natural goodness in plants and animals is that moral evaluations are similarly grounded in the nature of a kind of living thing.

have the same structure as flourishing-based evaluations of humans, or whether we could make evaluations of non-human living things in virtue of their flourishing or their nature at all. The sharedness of the form of evaluation goes toward showing that moral evaluation of human action and character is *not* a special case. The continuity between evaluations of humans and non-humans is meant to support the claim to naturalism.

This interpretation is in line with what Annas highlights as the distinctive mark of the Aristotelian brand of virtue ethics: that it "puts us in our biological place" by bringing out continuities between us humans and other living things. It shows that our ways of evaluating ourselves morally and otherwise are continuous with "evaluative patterns to be found in the lives of animals and plants".[40] If this interpretation is correct, then the basis for the neo-Aristotelians' claim to naturalism is neither a scientific nor a value-neutral conception of the human life-form, but rather an understanding of the human life-form as continuous with other life-forms, which we can plausibly take to be natural.

5.   The neo-Aristotelian argument for ethical naturalism

We may reconstruct the distinctive neo-Aristotelian argument for ethical naturalism as follows:

(P1) Non-human life-forms are natural.

(P2) Evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms are grounded in the nature of these life-forms.

(P3) Therefore, evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms are natural.

(P4) Evaluations of natural goodness in human beings are of the same kind as evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms.

(P5) Therefore, evaluations of natural goodness in the human life-form are also natural.

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[40] Annas, 'Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?', p. 17.

(P6)   Evaluations of moral goodness are instances of evaluations of natural goodness in the human life-form.

(C)   Therefore, evaluations of moral goodness are natural.

The argument starts from the plausible assumption that non-human life-forms are natural. The idea is that whatever naturalness consists in, there is no question that plants and non-human animals *qua* living things belong in the natural order. Neo-Aristotelians then argue that evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms are natural, because they are grounded in the nature of these life-forms. As we saw earlier, evaluations of natural goodness are made based on natural-historical judgments about the life-form of an organism, which are judgments of a distinctive generic form that capture the characteristic parts and aspects of a form of life. The next step for neo-Aristotelians is to argue that evaluations of natural goodness in human beings are also natural, because they are an instance of the same kind of evaluation, i.e., evaluation based on the nature of a life-form. And lastly, the argument goes, moral evaluations are instances of natural goodness in human beings, and so, they too are natural.

There are, of course, various ways in which this argument can be challenged. Although a full assessment of the argument is outside the scope for this paper, it would be helpful to consider some of these challenges and ask how neo-Aristotelians might respond to them. Broadly speaking, there are two potential objections that need to be addressed if the argument is to succeed. Here I will briefly discuss these objections and outline what I take to be the best strategies for neo-Aristotelians to address them.

The first objection is what we may call the *charge of biological inaccuracy*. I have argued that the way critics typically appeal to science to undermine neo-Aristotelianism relies on the mistaken assumption that ethical naturalism must involve a commitment to ethical empiricism. There is, however, a more nuanced way critics may appeal to science to challenge the argument. Neo-Aristotelians argue that evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms are natural, because they are grounded in the nature of non-human life-forms. But one may question this latter

claim by noting that evaluations of natural goodness are not based on a scientific understanding of living things. The neo-Aristotelian account of natural goodness is based on an intuitive, pre-scientific description of the domain of life that is expressed in natural-historical judgments. And there is a question whether this conception of the domain of life can be trusted.[41] Note that here, the appeal to science does not assume that neo-Aristotelianism must offer a scientific account of *morality*. It's rather the domain of *life* – in fact, the domain of *non-human* life – that is presumed to be subject to a scientific epistemology. The idea is simply that biology, which is a scientific discipline focused on the systematic and rigorous study of plants and animals, is our best source for understanding the domain of life. Neo-Aristotelians claim that the nature of living things can be accurately described in natural-historical judgments – judgments of a particular teleological form that are not reducible to claims about evolutionary history and natural selection. And this claim seems suspect in light of the fact that natural-historical judgments are not part of our scientific understanding of living things.

The charge of biological inaccuracy thus targets (P2). The concern is not that plants and animals are somehow *non*-natural, but whether the neo-Aristotelian account of these life-forms is in fact accurate. However, what critics have often overlooked is that neo-Aristotelians do present an argument for (P2). Thompson's account of representations of life in natural-historical judgments is not merely an analysis of our everyday descriptions of living things. It also contains a transcendental argument for the kind of teleology that it is implicit in these judgments. Thompson argues that we cannot really capture *what it is to be a living thing* without relying on the form of thought that is manifested in natural-historical judgments. He argues that the criteria that are often listed as the defining characteristics of life – homeostasis, reproduction, being highly organized,

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[41] William Fitzpatrick raises a version of this objection in his *Teleology and the Norms of Nature* (Taylor & Francis, 2000). For a detailed discussion of science-based objections to neo-Aristotelianism, see Parisa Moosavi, 'Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and the Evolutionary Objection', in J. Hacker-Wright (ed.), *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 277-307.

responding to stimuli, etc. – cannot be understood in the abstract or defined in reductive terms. Identifying these characteristics as such requires presupposing a conception of the particular life-form to which a given organism belongs.[42] This requires making *some* natural-historical judgments about the life-form in question, providing background knowledge about how members of the life-form maintain themselves, reproduce, and go about the activities that constitute their way of life.[43] This natural-historical conception of the life-form brings with it not just the context required for recognizing the parts and processes of the organism, but also a teleological conception of the flourishing of the life-form along with its implications of goodness and defect. Thus, Thompson argues that apprehending something as a type of living organism already commits us to a teleological framework for making judgments of natural goodness and defect.

The upshot of Thompson's argument is that the natural-historical form of thought, together with its implications of goodness and defect, is indispensable for understanding the nature of living things. Other neo-Aristotelians have extended this argument further by claiming that even an empirical science like biology must presuppose a natural-historical conception of living things. Micah Lott and John Hacker-Wright have argued that since the life-form concept is involved in recognizing living things as living, biologists must presuppose the concept of a life-form *before* they can even identify the subject of their study. They contend that some of the explanatory concepts of evolutionary biology must rely on the life-form concept.[44] I have recently offered empirical support for this claim by tracing a commitment to neo-Aristotelian teleology in the

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[42] See Thompson, *Life and Action,* pp. 33-62.

[43] No doubt, our conception of a life-form might be incomplete or flawed. But according to Thompson, no matter how we may have to revise our conception, it remains the case that presupposing *some* conception of the life-form and making *some* natural-historical judgments is necessary for identifying a living thing *as living*.

[44] See John Hacker-Wright, 'What Is Natural about Foot's Ethical Naturalism?', p. 316; and Micah Lott, 'Have Elephant Seals Refuted Aristotle?', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 9 (2012), pp. 353-375, doi: 10.1163/174552412X625727, p. 375.

explanatory concepts of organism and function in biology.[45] Thus, neo-Aristotelians have responded to the charge of biological inaccuracy by defending their teleological conception of living things. They have argued that judgments of natural goodness are not merely subjective or arbitrary, but rather based on standards that are constitutive of living things and grounded in their nature. To be sure, the jury is still out on whether these arguments succeed.[46] But it's far from obvious that the best philosophical interpretation of what science tells us about living things would undermine, rather than support, the neo-Aristotelian argument.

The second serious objection facing neo-Aristotelianism is what we may call the *charge of normative inadequacy*. This objection concerns the next crucial move of the above argument, i.e., the transition from non-human life-forms to human beings. In (P4)-(P5), neo-Aristotelians argue that evaluations of natural goodness in *human beings* are natural, because they are of the same kind as evaluations of natural goodness in non-human life-forms. The idea is that in both cases what is naturally good is determined by the nature of the kind of organism in question. Then, in (P6)-(C), they argue that *moral* evaluations of human action and character are also natural, because they are instances of evaluations of natural goodness in human beings. However, the idea that the nature of human beings *as a species of living things* is the source of moral evaluation and normative reasons for action raises a number of concerns. The most obvious concern has to do with the

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[45] See Parisa Moosavi, 'From Biological Functions to Natural Goodness', *Philosophers' Imprint* 19 (2019); and 'Is the Neo-Aristotelian Concept of Organism Presupposed in Biology?', in M. Hähnel (ed.), *Aristotelian Naturalism: A Research Companion* (Springer Nature, 2020), pp. 329-342. I ultimately defend a conception of natural goodness that has differences with Thompsons' natural-historical account, but I believe my alternative conception keeps the metaethical aspirations of neo-Aristotelianism within reach. See Moosavi, 'Natural goodness without Natural History', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2020).

[46] For a critique of Thompson's account, see Tim Lewens, 'Species Natures: A Critique of Neo-Aristotelian Ethics', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 70.280 (2020), pp. 480-501. Lewens argues that Thompson's defence of life-forms is compatible with a Kantian, projectivist interpretation of life-forms as mere heuristic devices that we use to organize the otherwise unmanageable diversity of our empirical observations.

even if Thompson's argument establishes that we *think* of organisms as instances of life-forms, it doesn't establish that there *are* such life-forms in a robust, realist sense. He

content of moral evaluations. As we saw earlier, many critics appeal to an empirical understanding of human nature to argue that neo-Aristotelianism leads to a normatively implausible substantive account of moral virtue.[47] Although some of these critics rely on a misinterpretation of natural goodness as determined by evolutionary fitness, the more general concern can be raised without appealing to an evolutionary or scientific account of human nature. Even if we consult intuitive everyday judgments about the kind of life that is characteristic of human beings, it's not obvious that the characteristic human life will coincide with anything like the traditional virtues. It's quite possible that instead of intuitively praiseworthy traits like justice and benevolence, problematic traits like selfishness, cruelty, and xenophobia will turn out to belong in the life of our species. Moreover, even if human nature did support the right substantive virtues, there would be a further question *why* we should treat this nature as the source of normative reasons. Just because a particular trait or way of life is characteristic of our species, it doesn't follow that we morally or rationally *ought to* pursue it.[48] We might evaluate actions based on the standards of the human life-form, but one may still ask whether such evaluations have the kind of reason-giving force enjoyed by moral and rational evaluation. Thus, the concern is that evaluations of natural goodness in human beings do not rise to the level of genuine practical normativity.[49]

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[47] Different versions of this objection are raised by Andreou, 'Getting on in a Varied World', Millgram, 'Life and Action', Woodcock, 'Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles' Heel', and Odenbaugh, 'Nothing in Ethics Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution?'.

[48] As John McDowell articulates this point, "reason does not just open our eyes to our nature … it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question." See McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', p. 172.

[49] Micah Lott calls this latter concern the *authority of nature* challenge. For particularly insightful discussions of this concern, see Lott, 'Why Be a Good Human Being?', *Philosophia* 42 (2014), pp. 761–777, doi: 10.1007/s11406-014-9540-z; and Francis Petruccelli, 'Aristotelian Naturalism and the Challenge from Reason' in M. Hähnel (ed.), *Aristotelian Naturalism: A Research Companion* (Springer Nature, 2020), pp. 295-310. For arguments on both sides of the debate on this issue, see Irene Liu, 'Evaluating Human Being: Toward a New Sort of Naturalism', *Philosophy* 92 (2017), pp. 597–622; Liu, 'The Limits of Aristotelian Naturalism', *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52.3 (2018);

The neo-Aristotelians' main strategy in addressing the charge of normative inadequacy has been to highlight the place of practical reason in human life. As we have seen, the natural good of a kind of organism is determined by its characteristic way of life, which differs from one life-form to another. Neo-Aristotelians argue that human beings have a faculty of practical reason, and the use of this faculty overwhelmingly characterizes their way of life. This is to say, the way humans achieve their natural ends and flourish is by recognizing, responding to, and acting in light of reasons.[50] Importantly, as Hacker-Wright and Lott have argued, the kind of practical reason that characterizes human life is not merely instrumental. It is not just that humans use reasoning as a tool to achieve certain biological or psychological ends such as survival or enjoyment. *The way* they achieve these ends makes a difference to their flourishing. And practical reason enables them to recognize certain ways of achieving their ends as reasonable and other ways as unreasonable *in themselves*. Neo-Aristotelians thus argue that what it is for humans to flourish cannot be conceived independently of the exercise of practical reason. Human flourishing is partially *constituted by* sound practical rationality, which requires being responsive to considerations about various substantive reasons and values.[51]

This distinctive aspect of the human life-form helps to address both concerns with normative adequacy. With respect to the content of moral evaluations, we can see that not just any character trait that is statistically common among humans or contributes to achieving some of their ends qualifies as *characteristic* in the relevant sense. Human flourishing consists, at least in part, in a well-functioning capacity of practical reason. So, for a character trait to be naturally good, it must be compatible with the proper exercise of practical rationality. Neo-Aristotelians can thus block

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Gabriele De Anna, 'Potentiality, Natural Normativity and Practical Reason', *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 52.3 (2018), pp. 307-326.

[50] In Hursthouse's words, "our way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way." See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics,* p. 222.

[51] See John Hacker-Wright, 'Human Nature, Personhood, and Ethical Naturalism', *Philosophy* 84.3 (2009), pp. 413-427; and Lott, 'Moral Virtue as Knowledge of Human Form'.

the conclusion that objectionable traits like selfishness and cruelty will count as moral virtues on their account by arguing that such traits are not compatible with sound practical rationality. Of course, to make this claim, neo-Aristotelians would have to appeal to a substantive conception of reasons and values that does not simply follow from their metaethical account. The mere suggestion that human flourishing requires a well-functioning capacity of practical reason leaves it open which character traits will follow from the exercise of this capacity. So, neo-Aristotelianism on its own does not provide a defence of traditional virtues or any other first-order moral theory.[52] What it does suggest, however, is that questions about the content of moral truth can be settled through the *exercise* of our practical reason, in first-order ethical reasoning and argument. And given that our practical reason is not merely instrumental or aimed at achieving independently identifiable ends, there is no reason to think that it will lead us to objectionable conclusions.

Recognizing the role of practical reason in human flourishing also enables neo-Aristotelians to address the second concern with normative adequacy. The question about the reason-giving force of human nature arises only if we start from a notion of human nature that is normatively inert. If a proper understanding of human flourishing already contains a sound grasp of reasons and values, there would be no further question *why* we should treat this understanding as the source of normative reasons. Note that we can still rationally step back and question any candidate *proposals* about what human flourishing consists in. But, on the neo-Aristotelian view, doing so is just part of forming a proper understanding of our nature. There is no stepping back from the entirety of what we are *qua* human rational agents, as we can only rationally reflect using our capacity of practical reason.

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[52] Scott Woodcock raises this point in his 'Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and the Indeterminacy Objection', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 23.1 (2015), pp. 20-41. He argues that making human natural goodness dependent on practical rationality robs neo-Aristotelianism of the ability to generate informative normative content. I agree with Woodcock that neo-Aristotelianism does not directly contribute to the content of our first-order moral judgments. On my interpretation, however, the contribution of the view is metaethical.

It might seem as though this response to the charge of normative inadequacy saves (P6) only at the cost of abandoning (P4). If the characteristic human life is a rational life, then it's no longer clear that human natural goodness is determined by the nature of human beings *as a species of living things*. It rather seems that 'human beings' is taken to simply mean *rational agents*, i.e., an abstract class of beings defined by reason-responsiveness rather than any connection to a particular natural species. However, it should be noted that for neo-Aristotelians, the capacity of practical reason that characterizes human life is not a capacity that opens our eyes to an independent realm of reasons and values. Neither is it the capacity to conform to a set of universal rational principles defined based on an abstract notion of rational agency. Rather, human practical reason is viewed as a *species-relative* vital power on a par with other natural capacities like sight and memory. Just as what constitutes good eyesight for an organism depends on its form of life and differs from species to species, what constitutes sound practical reasoning in humans is determined by their form of life. A pattern of practical reasoning is valid just in case it can be made by a human agent with a non-defective, well-functioning capacity of practical reason. Thus, the standards that constitute the well-functioning of our practical reason and thereby the character traits that constitute moral virtues are, in this sense, contingent.[53] In fact, on the neo-Aristotelian view, there could be other, non-human kinds of rational agency whose practical rationality is different from ours.[54] Ours just happens to be one in which sound practical reasoning coincides with character traits like justice, benevolence, and other (human) virtues.

We can now see how neo-Aristotelianism offers a distinctive account of moral knowledge that preserves the epistemic autonomy of ethics without compromising its claim to ethical

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[53] For a critical discussion of the kind of contingency that neo-Aristotelianism involves, see Scott Woodcock, 'Aristotelian Naturalism vs. Mutants, Aliens, and the Great Red Dragon', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 55.4 (2018), pp. 319-320, doi:10.2307/45128627.

[54] See Philippa Foot, 'Rationality and Goodness' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 54 (2004), p. 13; and Michael Thompson, 'Three Degrees of Natural Goodness' (2003), retrieved from http://philpapers.org/rec/THOTDO-4 on 20/01/11, originally published in Italian in *Iride*.

naturalism. On the neo-Aristotelian account, although moral truths are grounded in human nature, we cannot derive moral conclusions from purely scientific or empirical observations of human beings. That's because the nature of human beings as a kind of living thing is characterized by a capacity of practical reason, and an understanding of a well-functioning capacity of practical reason requires a grasp of substantive reasons and values. On the other hand, we cannot arrive at such an understanding simply by analyzing the form of self-evident rational principles in the way Kantian constructivists might suggest. For neo-Aristotelians, human practical reason is a natural capacity comparable to sight and memory, and the standards of its well-functioning depend on our life-form. So, there is no pretence of abstracting away from all the contingent aspects of our nature when we assess competing claims about reasons and values. We can step back from *particular* desires or inclinations when we reason, but there is no stepping out of the point of view of human agency altogether. We develop the judgment to discern substantive reasons and values by way of living human lives and experiencing human desires, drives, and emotions. Note, further, that there is no reason to posit a mysterious faculty of intuition to explain how we can perceive substantive reasons and values. Facts about reasons and values are ultimately facts about *ourselves*. As human beings we can *exercise* our capacity of practical reason, which under suitable conditions enables us to reason and act well.

Admittedly, the neo-Aristotelian account of human practical reason is still underdeveloped. There are questions about how other aspects of our specifically human life have a bearing on our practical reason, and why we should think they make a difference to the *standards* of practical rationality rather than merely providing the context to which these standards apply.[55] Moreover, one might worry that even this species-relative kind of rationality marks enough of a departure from other living things to make evaluations of human action *sui generis*. After all, the analogy

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[55] For an example of this kind of account, see Hacker-Wright, 'Human Nature, Personhood, and Ethical Naturalism'. Hacker-Wright argues that the fact that we arrive at agency only by learning from others in a relation of dependency has a bearing on the non-instrumental form of our rationality.

between human practical reason and a natural capacity like eyesight only goes so far. Ocular evaluations just don't have the same kind of reason-giving force as rational evaluations. Of course, the capacity of practical reason is what enables us to *act*, and as such it defines what it is for us to reason and act *well*. Rational evaluations are thus internal to our practical deliberation in a way that ocular evaluations are not. That said, there is no question that there are differences between the merely vegetative life of plants, the conscious life of sub-rational animals, and the practically self-conscious life of human beings. And to see whether rational evaluations are really on a par— or suitably continuous with—sub-rational ones, we need an account of human *action* and how it fits within the broader category of self-directed activity and movement across living things. This is certainly a project that neo-Aristotelians have taken on in recent years, albeit one that extends beyond the scope of this paper.[56]

6.   Ethical naturalism without empiricism

It is one thing to show that neo-Aristotelianism presents a distinctive argument for ethical naturalism, and quite another to show that this argument is thoroughly successful. My aim in this paper has not been to offer a defence of neo-Aristotelianism, but rather to show how its departure from a scientific epistemology does not necessarily preclude the view from having a claim to ethical naturalism. The reconstruction of the argument above helps to see how neo-Aristotelians argue for ethical naturalism without accepting ethical empiricism. As we saw earlier, many meta-ethicists characterize naturalness in terms of the subject matter of scientific disciplines, which commits them to the idea that moral truths are known in the same way that we know about claims in the natural sciences. In contrast, neo-Aristotelians get around the problem of articulating what

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[56] For recent works that explore these questions, see Matthias Haase, 'Practically Self-Conscious Life', in J. Hacker-Wright (ed.), *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018), pp. 85–126; Matthew Boyle, 'Essentially Rational Animals', in A. Günther & J. Conant (ed.), *Rethinking Epistemology* (De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 395–427; Matthew Boyle and Douglas Lavin, "Goodness and Desire," in Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum (Oxford University Press, 2010), 161–201.

naturalness consists in by starting from a different, yet similarly plausible assumption: the assumption that living things – or at least non-human living things – are natural. They then argue that there is a kind of evaluation of parts and aspects of living things that can be made – even in the case of these non-human forms of life – in virtue of their nature as living things. And further, that moral evaluations of human action and character can be understood as an instance of this same kind of evaluation.

The starting point of the argument, then, is that non-human living things belong in the natural order. As I mentioned earlier, this is a premise that neo-Aristotelians take for granted. In fact, if one were to cast doubt on whether non-human living things are natural—say, on physicalist grounds—it would be fair to say that neo-Aristotelians are not concerned with defending naturalism in this more stringent sense. However, it would be missing the point of the neo-Aristotelian meta-ethical view to focus on debates about whether the domain of life is natural or non-natural. As we saw earlier, what is at issue with the question of ethical naturalism is whether we can show that the supposedly special domain of morality, with all its differences and peculiarities, fits within our picture of the natural world. This is exactly what neo-Aristotelian naturalists try to show. They give an account of the moral domain in terms of the familiar domain of life—a domain that we have no problem understanding or accepting as real. What is distinctive about neo-Aristotelianism is therefore *not* that it offers an entirely different *sense* of ethical naturalism (such as what we might call a mere naturism), but that it presents a different *argument* for ethical naturalism.

Clarifying the neo-Aristotelian argument for naturalism not only helps to appreciate its distinctive place among other forms of ethical naturalism, it also allows us to better engage with the view and assess it on its own terms. I have discussed two broad challenges that neo-Aristotelians must address in order to fully defend their argument: the charge of biological inaccuracy and the charge of normative inadequacy. We have seen that although the rejection of a scientific epistemology does not preclude neo-Aristotelians from having a claim to ethical

naturalism, it does raise a concern with the accuracy of their account of the nature of living things. Moreover, much like any other form of ethical naturalism, neo-Aristotelianism faces questions about whether its naturalist account of morality can capture our intuitions about moral judgments, their content, and their normative force. I have outlined what I take to be promising neo-Aristotelian strategies for addressing these challenges. I leave it for future work to assess how well these strategies succeed.