

Ethics and the Logic of Life*

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NOTE: This is a DRAFT.

The question of the viability of some form of ethical naturalism, largely sidelined for many decades, is again attracting significant philosophical attention. This upsurge of interest is, to a large extent, accompanied by interest in revising received assumptions about what a naturalistic position in ethics is like. Whereas traditional ethical naturalists conceive moral judgments as based in facts that fall within the compass of the natural sciences and, by the same token, take for granted the possibility of reductively capturing the normative qualities that moral judgments determine in non-normative terms,¹ many recent ethical naturalists disclaim reductive ambitions. A significant number of newer ethical naturalists both resemble their more traditional counterparts in representing moral judgments as essentially modes of concern with the objective – or ‘natural’ – world and differ from them in discussing such modes of concern in reference to features of the world that can only be fully specified normatively. This departure from traditional ethical naturalisms is noteworthy for being directly tied to one of the philosophically most controversial aspects of the work of the relevant latecoming ethical naturalists: namely, the introduction of a conception of some features of the world as simultaneously objective and normative.² But, setting aside for now

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¹ For a useful overview of traditional, reductive ethical naturalisms, see Charles Pigden, “Naturalism” in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1991, pp.421-431.

² See Barry Stroud, “The Charm of Naturalism” in Mario de Caro and David Macarthur, eds., Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.21-35, esp. pp.30-35, for an outline of the sorts of non-reductive ethical naturalisms in question here. Any reasonable list of significant recent contributions to discussions of such ethical naturalisms should include Julia Annas, “Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?” in Stephen M. Gardiner, *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2005, pp.11-29, Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford,

this reflection about the contentious character of certain claims of contemporary non-reductive ethical naturalists,³ it is worth mentioning a further respect in which members of one subset of these non-reductive ethical naturalists call on us to revisit familiar assumptions about what a naturalistic position in ethics amounts to.

Consider in this connection the recent work of Philippa Foot, together with a closely connected set of writings by Michael Thompson. Foot defends what she characterizes as a neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism, and, although she has been read as an advocate of a reductive position, a study of her work reveals that she is in fact presenting herself as an ethical naturalist of the non-reductive sort just sketched. This observation does not, however, suffice to capture what is unusual about the particular naturalistic approach in ethics that she propounds. When Foot describes her preferred ethical outlook as naturalistic, her guiding concern is underlining a distinctive sense in which it treats human beings qua moral beings as belonging to the natural world. The centerpiece of what Foot regards as a properly naturalistic picture of human beings is a unified theory of “natural goodness” that treats moral judgments as analogous to species-relative assessments of non-human organisms, inviting us to see that, just as we appeal to facts about the life-form to which a plant or animal belongs in offering species-relative assessments of it, we appeal to certain ‘facts about human life’ in making moral judgments of human beings.⁴ For his part

Oxford University Press, 1999, esp. chapters 9 and 10, John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” in *Mind, Value and Reality*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1998, pp.167-197 and Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures in Practice and Practical Thought*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008, chapters 1 to 4, “Three Degrees of Natural Goodness,” published as “Tre Gradi di Bonta Naturale,” *Iride*, vol.38, April, 2003, pp.191-197 and “Apprehending Human Form,” in Anthony O’Hear, ed., *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.47-74. I discuss Foot’s and Thompson’s work at length below.

³ I turn to this topic in section 4, below.

⁴ See the references to Foot’s and Thompson’s writings in the last note but one.

Thompson not only concurs with Foot in sounding these larger themes but also makes a significant contribution to her efforts to develop them. When Foot turns to discussing the account of species-relative assessments of non-human organisms that her broader naturalistic approach in ethics presupposes, she draws on a set of Thompson's writings that contain a deeply original treatment of these matters, and Thompson signals that he sympathizes with the use to which Foot puts his work.

In this paper, I offer a commentary on the distinctive type of ethical naturalism that Foot espouses. My initial goal is simply to describe the position that Foot lays out jointly with Thompson. A second goal is to isolate certain philosophical presuppositions of the position that neither Foot nor Thompson accents. Since this may sound like a promise of censoriousness – and since the reception of Foot's work to date has been largely chilly⁵ – I should mention that what occupies me is not a critical intervention but something closer to an appreciation. When I turn to philosophical presuppositions of Foot's work, it is with an eye to illuminating noteworthy aspects of the view of moral judgment central to her naturalistic theory and considering what it would take to defend the view against certain fundamental objections that Foot doesn't consider and that – although I can't argue the point here – I believe can be met. To be sure, in discussing these matters, I bring out respects in which Foot's view of moral judgment resembles other familiar views, and in doing so I suggest that it would be possible to make a case for the view without evaluating the merits of an analogy to assessment elsewhere in the natural world. But these points don't qualify Foot's claim to have presented a unified theory of natural goodness. On the contrary, there is an important respect in which things I say about the philosophical context in which

⁵ See the text and notes of section 2, below, for what is in effect a survey of the reception of Foot's recent work.

Foot operates strengthen the argument that can be made for her analogy between moral judgments and assessments of non-human organisms as members of their kinds. At the same time, there are important respects in which things I say change our understanding of the significance of the sort of naturalistic theory Foot favors, and, after first commenting on the portions of Thompson's work that Foot inherits (sections 1 and 2) and then laying out Foot's theory (section 3), I consider the most fundamental of these changes (sections 4 and 5).

1. Thompson on species-relative assessments of non-human organisms

The system of natural-historical propositions with a given kind or form as subject supplies...a standard for members of that kind...It is in *this* sense that natural-historical judgments are 'normative'; and not by each proposition's bearing some sort of secret normative infrastructure. The first application of concepts of good, bad, defect and pathology is to the individual, and it consists in a sort of reference of the thing to its form or kind and the natural history that pertains to it.

– Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures in Practice and Practical Thought*, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp.80-81, stress in the original.

When Thompson discusses species-relative assessments of non-human organisms, he is specifically interested in illuminating our practice of treating these assessments as flowing directly from descriptions of features and operations that individual living organisms have as living beings or, in his terms, from *vital descriptions*. That is, he is specifically interested in illuminating our practice of treating the assessment that, for instance, “this frog is deformed or defective” as flowing directly from a (‘vital’) description of it as having only three legs. For this reason, he initially focuses on the character of vital descriptions, arguing that these descriptions have a distinctive, irreducible logic that we obscure if we treat them as

logically indifferent instances of ascriptions of properties to concrete particulars.⁶ The centerpiece of his argument for this thesis about the logically distinct character of vital descriptions is a case for what, picking up a familiar bit of jargon from philosophy of mind, he at one point describes as a type of “externalism.”⁷ His thought is that attempts to capture the content of vital descriptions by fixating on material aspects of individual organisms are frustrated by their individualistic focus and, further, that the vital constitutions of organisms need to be understood as essentially functions of facts external to the organisms’ individual makeups. Thompson attempts to vindicate this *vital externalism* by showing that materially similar, or even identical, aspects of organisms can amount to different vital features or operations.⁸ One of his examples concerns an imaginary plankton-eating shark that, like other sharks, chases smaller fish and incorporates them but nevertheless cannot be said to “eat” because the resultant “hideous brew” never enters its bloodstream and is instead “spewed out occasionally to frighten predators.”⁹ Another example concerns the mitosis-involving phase in the reproduction of amoebas, a phase that is in itself indistinguishable from mitosis in human cells, though what is at issue in the human case is not reproduction

⁶ After briefly summarizing things Thompson says about assessments of non-human organisms as members of their species, the author of one critique of Foot’s theory of natural goodness excuses herself from further consideration of Thompson’s work, remarking that “the idea that some evaluative judgments are species-relative is fairly familiar” and adding that “it is, for example, standard to view judgments about the adequacy of vision as species-relative” (Chrisoula Andreou, “Getting On in a Varied World,” in *Social Theory and Practice*, vol.32, 2006, pp.61-73, p.64). While the bare idea that some evaluations are species relative may indeed be familiar, it is a premise of this paper that *Thompson’s* account of species-relative assessments of non-human organisms, although not without significant historical antecedents, is in certain respects philosophically distinctive and that unless we come to terms with some of its distinctive elements we will fail to appreciate the significance of Foot’s decision to incorporate it into a larger theory of natural goodness.

⁷ “Apprehending Human Form,” op. cit., pp.64-65.

⁸ Thompson’s initial move towards an account of vital descriptions as logically distinct is to observe that particular vital features (e.g., eyes) and vital operations (e.g., eating) are realized in materially quite different ways in members of different species. He moves from defending this kind of *multiple realizability* – to borrow a term from philosophy of mind that Thompson does not employ – to arguing for the kind of externalism that is my topic right now.

⁹ *Life and Action*, op. cit., p.54.

but growth or self-maintenance.¹⁰ These examples of how ‘materially similar things can add up to different vital ones’ are supposed to establish that we need to refer to facts external to the individual organism in order to capture its vital qualities. It might, however, appear that we can arrive at accurate vital descriptions of the organisms at issue in the examples, in a manner that undermines calls for externalism about the vital, by introducing functional definitions of the different vital operations in question (viz., eating, reproducing and growing) that can be applied at the level of the individual organism.

To dispel this appearance Thompson presents a vignette about an expert on jellyfish or jellies who, while exploring in distant waters, comes across a jelly that strikes her as peculiar. At first, the expert is simply perplexed. (She reflects that “for a jelly so tiny it has an unusually large number of secondary mouths...its tentacles are disproportionately short; its upper part, or ‘bell’ is extremely thin, spreading out over the rest of its mass like an umbrella.”¹¹) A bit later the expert is struck by the idea that she may be contemplating a defective instance of some already familiar jelly-species. Finally, she becomes persuaded that she is in fact looking at a member of a new species – a species she dubs “umbrella jelly.”¹² When the expert has determined that she is confronting a new species, she sets about not only classifying individual jellies as members of the species but also characterizing the species itself, offering a “natural history” of it. She makes judgments about how the umbrella jelly’s life cycle “moves from an egg to a polyp state to what is called the medusa stage, as it does in

¹⁰ Ibid., p.55.

¹¹ “Apprehending Human Form,” p.48.

¹² Ibid.

every form of jelly-life,” and also about “numerous peculiarities” of this “familiar basic pattern.”¹³

Within this tale of jelly-exploration, and elsewhere, Thompson refers to particular judgments composing the natural history of a species as *natural-historical judgments*, and one of his objects in telling the tale is to get us to see that the knowledge represented by the jellyfish expert’s natural-historical judgments about the umbrella jelly make an ineliminable contribution to her ability to describe individual umbrella jellies. The expert’s natural historical research gives her an improved understanding of, among other things, “the umbrella shaped bell that the umbrella jelly grows,”¹⁴ and this new understanding directly informs her ability both to tell “when this individual jelly here and now before her in the reef *is moving itself up or down the water column* and when instead it is *being moved by currents*” and to “distinguish individual cases of bell-contraction that are a part of self-movement from those that are immediate defensive reactions to perceived predators.”¹⁵ By the same token, the expert’s improved natural-historical knowledge of the umbrella jelly’s life-cycle makes an internal contribution to her ability to identify the reproductive organs of a particular umbrella jelly, even of one not engaged in any process of reproduction.¹⁶

Thompson’s jellyfish narrative does more than simply fund an abstract claim about how vital descriptions encode a necessary reference to certain ‘external’ facts. What the jellyfish expert needs in order to accurately describe individual umbrella jellies is natural-historical knowledge of the species “umbrella jelly.” Her vital characterizations of particular

¹³ Ibid., p.49.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.51.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

specimens essentially reflect the natural-historical judgments about the species that she has learned to make, and, with this in mind, we can capture a significant moral of Thompson's reflections on jellyfish by speaking, as he does, of an inevitable "mutual interdependence of *vital description of the individual* and *natural-historical judgment about the form or kind*."¹⁷

Turning now to natural-historical judgments, Thompson argues that these judgments resist reduction to more familiar logical forms. He prefaces his treatment of this topic with reflections on the judgments' grammar, noting that we might formulate a natural-historical judgments about a given species, S, in any one of a number of different ways: for instance, "*the S is/has/does F, or S's are/do/have F, or S's characteristically are/have/do F.*"¹⁸ Although these grammatical possibilities make it natural to think that we are confronted, if not with universal judgments, then with some kind of statistical generalizations, Thompson wants to show that this thought is at bottom the product of grammatical illusion. Consider in this connection examples of natural-historical judgments such as "the yellow finch breeds in the spring, attracting its mate with such and such a song."¹⁹ While not about a particular bird, this judgment does not predicate something of every yellow finch. Nor is it simply that the truth of the judgment is indifferent to the fact that some individual yellow finches – for instance, the one with slightly unusual markings that has been frequenting our bird feeder for weeks – have no song. Nor for that matter is it simply that true judgments of the kind in question need not do justice to even a substantial proportion of members of the species in question (as, e.g., the truth of the natural-historical judgment "cross-jelly eggs characteristically progress to the medusa stage" is unaffected by the fact that the vast

¹⁷ Ibid., p.52, stress in the original.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.49.

¹⁹ *Life and Action*, op. cit., p.65.

majority of cross-jelly eggs never reach the medusa stage).²⁰ To grasp what is distinctive about the logic of natural-historical judgments we need to see that by conjoining a number of true judgments of this type we could very likely produce a true compound judgment that does not accurately describe even one actual member of the species at issue. *That* is what it comes to to claim, with Thompson, that natural-historical judgments are neither universal judgments nor a class of (even “hedged”) statistical generalizations.²¹

Building on this negative characterization of the logic of natural-historical judgments, Thompson rebuts the idea that, in denying that the judgments possess a type of generality that is a matter of statistical accuracy, he is cutting them “free of ‘the facts’.”²² Recall that after first considering and dismissing the idea that the peculiar jelly that interests her is a defective member of a species of jelly she is familiar with, Thompson’s jellyfish expert explores the idea that she is dealing with a new species. Recall further that her vital observations of individual members of what is in fact a new species lead her towards a respectable natural history of it. By the time we reach the end of the tale, it is clear that we need to regard the expert’s original vital observations of the new – “umbrella” – jellies not only as to some extent hampered by her ignorance of the species to which they belong but also as nevertheless equipping her to take her first primitive steps towards a better natural history. It is also clear that we need to regard this nascent natural history as directly contributing to her ability to offer more accurate vital descriptions of individual organisms, descriptions that she can in turn use to further enrich her natural history.

²⁰ See “Apprehending Human Form,” op. cit., pp.50-51.

²¹ *Life and Action*, op. cit., pp.71-72.

²² *Ibid.*, p.72.

The jellyfish tale can thus be seen to speak for the view – it is a view well represented in the history of the philosophy of biology – that thought about living beings is circular in the sense that knowledge of particular organisms presupposes knowledge of the whole life-form and vice-versa.²³ Let me set aside until later the question of whether this circularity should be regarded as vicious.²⁴ The point of mentioning it here is to note that, according to Thompson, progress towards the natural history of a species or life-form, while driven by observations of individual organisms, is not an atomistic matter, and that it is instead invariably guided by the idea of a whole life-form. So any adequate treatment of the character of individual natural-historical judgments needs to include a discussion of what thought about whole life-forms is like.

Thompson's reflections on this new topic have to do with the peculiar temporal organization of the elements of *natural histories* (i.e., the discursive forms for thought about life-forms considered as totalities). He brings out his main thoughts here by means of a contrast with the temporal structure of descriptions of the lives of individual organisms. While these descriptions are formulated in past and future as well as present tenses (thus, e.g., of a particular bobcat, Elsa, we might say that she *bore* three cubs last spring, that she *is* now pregnant and that very likely she *will* soon give birth),²⁵ natural histories are formulated exclusively in the present tense (thus, e.g., of the bobcat as a life-form, we might say that, as Thompson puts it, “when the springtime comes....the female...gives birth to two to four

²³ See in this connection, e.g., Goethe's work on the representation of plants and animals. Goethe presents a view of what Thompson calls “vital descriptions” that anticipates Thompson's in – among other things – representing the process of arriving at an account of the vital *parts* of an organism is thus inseparable from the process of arriving at an account of the natural history of its *whole* kinds. See *Goethe's Botanical Writings*, Bertha Mueller, trans., Oxbow Press, CT, 1989, pp.86, 217 and 225.

²⁴ See section 2, below.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.65.

cubs [and] nurses them for several weeks.”).²⁶ This suggests that these ‘histories’ need to be conceived, not as statistically accurate pictures of how individual members of a species actually move through time, but rather as standards for how, in some sense, individual members of a species *ought* to move through time. Thompson’s specific suggestion is that natural histories are descriptions of ideal temporal progressions for organisms of different kinds and that, in turn, individual natural-historical judgments are “outtakes” from the larger, unified progressions that natural histories represent, and he claims that the judgments deal with features or operations of life-forms that are internal to these progressions in the sense of contributing directly to their further stages. Elaborating on this part of Thompson’s work, Foot claims, plausibly, that in order to have the tie to assessment that Thompson ultimately aims to establish, natural-historical judgments about non-human kinds need to concern features or operations that, in her words, have “to do, directly or indirectly, with self-maintenance, as by defence and the obtaining of nourishment, or with the reproduction of the individual, as by the building of nests.”²⁷ Incorporating this point, we can capture the positive spin Thompson places on his claims about the special logic of natural-historical

²⁶ Ibid., p.63. To be sure, we *can* talk about the past and futures of the life-forms that are of concern to us when we are doing natural history, as we in fact do, for instance, when we discuss whether a given life-form existed in some geological age or whether it will survive changes associated with global warming. But this reflection is consistent with the recognition that a capacity for natural-historical reflection is conceptually independent of a capacity for such historical and futuristic musings and that, as Thompson puts it, “the simple classification of individual organisms in terms of life-form precedes any possible judgment” about the life-form’s historical genesis or future development (ibid., p.67).

²⁷ *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.31. While differing slightly here, both Foot and Thompson regard natural-historical judgments as concerned with features or operations of organisms that have a certain role or *function* in the life of the organism. Both also deny that they are speaking of function in reference to genetic or evolutionary success but rather in reference to the current flourishing of the life-form. (See ibid., p.32n10 and Thompson, *Life and Action*, op. cit., p.79.) Let me add that, in distancing themselves from an evolutionary perspective, Foot and Thompson are not suggesting that it is possible to grasp the idea of a species or life-form apart from a conception of its members as reproducing themselves over time. Their point is simply that it is in principle possible to grasp the idea of a species independently of any view of how species change over time. Thus, among other things, they can consistently claim both that the bare capacity to represent life requires the idea of whole species without implying that, say, creationists are cut off from thinking and talking about life in virtue of their characteristic views about the natural world.

judgments by speaking of an irreducibility that is a function of the possession of a type of generality that, instead of being a matter of statistical accuracy, needs to be understood *teleologically*.²⁸

Now we can see how Thompson's vital externalism is supposed to shed light on the practice of treating vital descriptions of individual non-human organisms as grounding species-relative assessments of those organisms. In defending the particular externalist position he favors, Thompson claims both that vital descriptions are conceptually tied to natural-historical judgments and that these judgments are in turn stages of the ideal temporal progressions constitutive of natural histories. It follows from these claims that vital descriptions invariably refer to such progressions, and this fact illuminates an inferential practice that involves moving directly from vital descriptions of individual non-human organisms to species-relative assessments of them – and counting organisms as *defective* when, according to our descriptions, they fail to conform to true natural histories of their kinds.²⁹

2. A further reflection on 'the facts of life'

There is a difference between seeing and seeing...The eye of the mind must work in constant and spirited harmony with the

²⁸ It might seem as though, in describing natural-historical judgments in terms of a non-statistical, teleologically organized form of generality, Thompson represents these judgments as indistinguishable from certain judgments about *social practices* and hence as lacking the unique logic he claims they possess. So it is noteworthy that Thompson himself acknowledges that certain judgments about social practices resemble natural-historical judgments in possessing a kind of generality that needs to be understood teleologically and not statistically. He himself points out that when, with regard to social practices, we say "first one does this, then one does this" we are tracing out a type of ideal performance and not describing how things have in fact generally been done. But at the same time Thompson notes that this parallel does not suffice to establish an exact logical analogy. Natural-historical judgments and judgments belonging "to the general description of a particular [practice]" diverge insofar as judgments of the latter sort presuppose "that someone makes or has made the corresponding judgment, or at least some others belonging to the same system of judgments" (*ibid.*, p.80, stress in the original). This marks a contrast with natural-historical judgments because these judgments "are in no sense presupposed by what they are about" and because, indeed, "unrecognized life-forms are common" (*ibid.*).

²⁹ See the epigraph to this section.

bodily eye, for otherwise the scholar might run the risk of looking and yet overlooking.
 – Goethe, *Botanical Writings*, Bertha Mueller, trans., Oxbow Press, 1989, p.180.

Later it will be clear that the use Foot makes of Thompson’s work is only justified if we interpret the vital descriptions in which Thompson takes species-relative assessments of non-human organisms to be grounded, together with the sorts of natural-historical judgments to which he takes these descriptions to be conceptually tied, as capable of revealing the – objective – facts of the living world. Anticipating this point, it is noteworthy that Thompson signals that he regards vital descriptions and natural-historical judgments as metaphysically transparent in this sense.³⁰ Thompson recognizes that this, in my terms, *objectivist attitude towards the vital* is philosophically controversial,³¹ and he takes a specific interest in the classic charge that it involves an ineliminable reference to a divine or transcendent mind. What is traditionally taken to justify the charge is the fact that natural-historical judgments combine into teleological clauses. If we claim not only that natural histories involving this type of clause are irreducible but also that the categories they employ best capture the facts that make them true, we may seem to be insisting on “an independent,

³⁰ See, e.g., Thompson’s claim that he is defending both the “idea of a reciprocal dependence between judgments about the individual organism and judgments about its form” and the idea of a “correlative connection that *facts* about the individual bear to *facts* about its form” (ibid., p.79; see also p.10). Thompson doesn’t merely advance this claim. He also takes important, if inconclusive, steps towards establishing it. Insofar as he defends a conception of vital descriptions on which they contain a necessary reference to natural-historical judgments that are possessed of a non-statistical, teleologically articulated generality, and insofar as he thus makes it difficult to imagine what it would be even to try to capture the worldly relations with which vital descriptions and natural-historical judgments are concerned in terms of physics or some other non-teleologically organized natural science, he undermines considerations that may have seemed to support the belief that the capacity of these descriptions and judgments to illuminate such relations will some day be surpassed. This is how he makes a case for treating vital descriptions and natural-historical judgments as the best guides to the facts of life.

³¹ One way of spelling out what is controversial about the position is to note that there is a respect in which it challenges *physicalism*. While there is no good reason to think that the relevant type of objectivist attitude conflicts either with the physicalist doctrine that there are no ‘gaps’ in physical causal chains or with the physicalist doctrine that all legitimate non-physical properties supervene ‘globally’ on physical ones, it does offend against physicalism in treating vital features and operations, together with connections among them, as belonging to the ‘furniture of the universe’.

conscious subject who sets things up thus ‘teleologically’.”³² In responding to this worry about psychic-theological entanglement Thompson argues that, despite the grammatical similarity of the teleological constructions of natural history, on the one hand, and psychological explanations, on the other, these modes of thought have strikingly different logics.³³ Setting aside any further details of Thompson’s response to this worry, which I believe is decisive, it is worth considering a further source of philosophical resistance to his objectivist attitude towards the vital that he does not consider. I have in mind a couple of influential philosophical lines of thought that seem to supply a priori grounds for denying that vital discourse, as Thompson understands it, possesses the kind of metaphysical transparency he attributes to it.

A classic strategy for distinguishing *reality* and *appearance* centers on the idea that all our subjective endowments (i.e., both those that are idiosyncratic and those we possess as members of larger or smaller communities or classes of beings) have an essential tendency to obscure our view of the world and that it is only by abstracting from these endowments that

³² Ibid., p.78. See Foot’s sympathetic commentary in *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.32.

³³ Thompson starts his argument by observing that a satisfactory psychological explanation of the sort I am demanding when I ask why a person did something illuminates the person’s ends. If I ask why some individual is acting in a certain singular manner, an appropriate answer will specify that she is comporting herself in order to do such-and-such. In contrast, when, in the mood of natural history, I ask why something – say, to use an example of Thompson’s, the convulsive movement of a frog’s internal organ – is the way it is, my question refers not to the individual organism but to its form. An appropriate answer might say that the thing I am looking at is the frog’s heart and that it beats in order to circulate the blood (ibid., p.78). The resulting teleological construction, like others within natural history, “links a plain fact, not with a possibly unrealized end [as do the teleological constructions of psychological explanation], but with another plain fact” (ibid., p.79, stress in the original). This means that we are justified in representing the connections of fact constitutive of the teleological constructions of natural history, connections that Thompson takes to be internal to the very phenomenon of life, as logically distinctive. Now it appears that it is wrong to represent these connections as markers of a divine purpose. Indeed, it appears that any purpose a Divine Being hoped to achieve by doing something with a life-form would of necessity have to presuppose the teleological ordering of that life-form and would be necessarily extraneous to that order. The point, in Thompson’s words, is that “even if the Divine Mind *were* to bring a certain life-form into being ‘with a view to’ securing an abundance of pink fur along the shores of the Monongahela, this ‘purpose’ would have no effect on the inner natural teleological description of that form of life” (ibid., p.79). These reflections lead Thompson to the conclusion that, when we do natural-historical teleology, we are “as far as can possibly be imagined from the category of intention or psychical teleology” (ibid., p.78).

we can assure ourselves of having gotten our minds around how things really are.³⁴ The strategy might aptly be described as encoding an *abstraction requirement*, and, within the context of this requirement, it appears that we cannot be justified in regarding as fully real any qualities that are such that only a person who possesses certain subjective endowments can arrive at an adequate conception of them. Among the qualities that clearly fail to pass this reality-test are Thompson's vital qualities. At the heart of Thompson's defense of his distinctive understanding of vital qualities is an externalism on which descriptions of these qualities – vital descriptions – have a necessary reference to natural-historical judgments. When Thompson speaks of a necessary tie between vital descriptions and natural-historical judgments, his point is that recognizing the vital quality at issue in a description of a particular organism is a matter of seeing aspects of that organism in light of one's knowledge of its kind. So, by Thompson's lights, a person's ability to bring a particular vital quality into focus necessarily presupposes her appreciation of the significance of her knowledge of the pertinent kind of organism to what is before her here and now.³⁵ Since there is thus no such thing as recognizing Thompson's vital qualities, in a fully abstract manner, apart from the possession of certain modes of appreciation or sensitivities, it follows that these qualities fail to meet the standard for reality underwritten by the idea of an abstraction requirement.

³⁴ This strategy receives what is perhaps its most influential contemporary defenses in the writings of Thomas Nagel.

³⁵ Borrowing a slogan that Goethe uses in a similar context, we might say that, when Thompson is concerned with our ability to pick out the vital qualities of individual organisms, he allows that "there is a difference between seeing and seeing" [i.e., a difference between, on the one hand, simply detecting that there is before us is an organism with certain physical characteristic and hence 'seeing' in one sense and, on the other, having the kind of understanding of the organism's life-form that allows us bring its vital qualities accurately into focus and hence 'seeing' in a further sense]. See Goethe, *Botanical Writings*, Bertha Mueller, trans., Oxbow Press, CT, 1989, p.180. For an excellent commentary on relevant themes from Goethe's writings, see Eckart von Förster, "Goethe and the 'Auge des Geistes,'" in *Deutsche Vierteljahrs Schrift für Literaturwissenschaften und Geisteswissenschaften*, vol.5, no.1, 2001, pp.87-101.

There is a substantial, well-known body of contemporary philosophical work dedicated to criticizing the idea of an abstraction requirement (or the closely related idea of a “point of view from nowhere”) and, since this might make it seem tempting to minimize challenges of defending Thompson’s objectivist attitude towards the vital, it is worth noting that there is a further set of considerations that might well be taken to provide an independent a priori case against the sort of objectivist position that interests Thompson. Thompson’s vital descriptions are cut off from meeting the standard for reality supplied by the idea of an abstraction requirement because they are embedded together with natural-historical judgments in a logical *circle*. Thompson maintains that in describing the vital features and operations of a given organism we invariably draw on our beliefs about its kind, and he thus represents vital descriptions as shaped by the very body of beliefs to which they are themselves contributions. This is noteworthy because it seems reasonable to a fair number of philosophers to believe that the presence of this type of circularity in any mode of discourse represents an insurmountable obstacle to objectivity.

Perhaps this belief founders for lack of a coherent conception of a contrasting non-circular mode of discourse. The standards we draw on in assessing judgments internal to any mode of discourse are in effect views about how to bring the world into focus, and if a given mode of discourse is to count as non-circular in the pertinent sense the relevant views need to be excluded on some grounds from counting as a substantive account of what the world is like that forms part of the body of belief to which the judgments it shapes contribute. If no suitable grounds are available, then it may be right to think that a priori objections to the objective aspirations of circular modes of discourse are at bottom nothing more than expressions of lingering attachment to the idea of an abstraction requirement. But whether there are here two independent sources of resistance to the sort of view of the vital

Thompson defends or whether, as I suspect, there is ultimately only one, there are in any case comprehensible objections here that a defender of Thompson's work needs to address.

I return to this topic below, after an initial overview of Foot's work.³⁶

3. Foot on Virtue, Objectivity and Human Life

For all the differences that there are...between the evaluation of plants and animals and their parts and characteristics on the one hand, and the moral evaluation of humans on the other...these evaluations share a basic logical structure.

– Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.27.

Having already noted both that the cornerstone of the naturalistic approach in ethics that Foot champions in recent work is the thesis that moral assessments and species-relative assessments of non-human creatures have the same basic logic and that, in developing the thesis, Foot borrows Thompson's analysis of the latter assessments (slightly altered), I now want to observe that the objectivist character of the analysis is important for Foot's purposes. Foot takes the logical parallel at the heart of her naturalistic strategy to be notable because she believes it isolates the objective grounds of moral judgment – thereby, among other things, allowing her to break decisively with the ethical subjectivism that she defended,

³⁶ The fact that Thompson neglects these kinds of objections to his attitude towards vital discourse is a reflection of what he calls the “Fregean” method that he employs throughout *Life and Action*, op. cit. It is an assumption of his method that we are justified in representing the basic forms of inference we use in thinking and talking about the world – forms of inference that are free from obscurities of ordinary language that have their place in what we might think of as an up-to-date *Begriffsschrift* – as “founded deep in the nature of things.” (For one of Thompson's more revealing remarks about his method, see *ibid.*, p.131.) This assumption only seems reasonable if we exclude the possibility of modes of access to the world that are non-conceptual and thus capable of supplying an image of how things are with a claim to legitimacy independent of our most authoritative inferential practices, and my point here is that at least one of the two basic objections to Thompson's work on the vital that I just touched on – and arguably both of the two – starts from the thought that this possibility is a real one and that we are entitled to the idea of an ideally abstract, non-conceptual form of contact between mind and world. It is for this reason unsurprising that Thompson never addresses the objections.

with great emphasis and a certain flair, and in good company, earlier in her career.³⁷ A number of Foot's readers move from registering the objectivist ambition of her new naturalistic enterprise to representing her as basing moral judgments, reductively, in facts of human animal existence.³⁸ But Foot clearly distances herself from any reductive position along these lines. She opens her book by telling us that she has no interest in treating deviations from norms of human life conceived simply animalistically as grounds for moral censure,³⁹ and she proceeds, a bit further on, to turn the envisioned criticism around and direct it at her critics, claiming that the very thought that her naturalistic hypothesis is inseparable from a reductive posture is "ill-conceived" in that it presupposes that "the natural-history account of human beings could explained in terms of merely animal life."⁴⁰

Below I start my discussion of Foot's work by describing how she thinks we *should* proceed towards a natural history for human beings and referring to her understanding of what such a natural history is like in briefly sketching her overarching theory of natural

³⁷ For a helpful account of the development of Foot's thought over time, see "The Grammar of Goodness: An Interview with Philippa Foot," in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, vol.xi, 2003, pp.32-44. Foot's early subjectivist tendency is well represented in several essays, written between the late nineteen fifties and seventies, that are collected in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002, especially the essay "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," pp.157-173. Interestingly, certain lines of thought that oppose this subjectivist tendency and that will turn out to be central to her later naturalistic project are also already developed in this collection. In this connection, see note 61, below.

³⁸ See, e.g., Michael Slote, "Review of Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* and of Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice and Value*," in *Mind*, vol.112, 2003, pp.130-139 and Scott Woodcock, "Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has An Achilles' Heel," in *Dialogue*, vol.xlv, 2006, pp.445-468.

³⁹ See, e.g., *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.41. In "Apprehending Human Life," Thompson makes a similar point about how those who charge Foot with advocating a limited, reductive position demonstrate a revealing failure to make room for the possibility of a non-reductive image of human life (pp.62-63). In making this point here, Thompson uses a terminology that Foot, if I read her correctly, is careful to eschew. Thompson describes the kind of reductive position that Foot avoids as a "biologistic" one, thereby implying that when Foot presents her natural history of human beings she is not concerned with what is properly called human biology. For her own part, Foot never presents herself as departing from biological topics, and she thus leaves room to claim that her natural history account of human beings – while not part of human biology understood as concerned with the merely animal existence of human beings – nevertheless genuinely belongs to human biology, understood as concerned with the logic of human life.

goodness (section 2.i). I then consider a few – actual and potential – objections to her theory and draw from my reflections on the objections a new consideration in the theory’s favor (section 2.ii).

i. A sketch of Foot’s theory

Moral judgment of human actions and dispositions is one example of a genre of evaluation itself actually characterized by the fact that its objects are living things.

– Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.4.

If not to biology, where should we turn for our ‘facts of human life’? The beginning of wisdom, for Foot, is the banal observation that human beings are as such “rational creatures,” specifically “in being able to act on reasons.”⁴¹ This observation is supposed to be the product of turning a naturalistic gaze on human life. The clear-sighted naturalist will recognize that, unlike members of a class of beings who differed from us merely in having divergent banking practices or styles of clothes, beings who resembled us to some extent yet were not able to act on reasons would not count as human.⁴² The implications of this initial point for how we continue our natural history for human beings will vary with how we conceive practical reason, and Foot advocates a somewhat distinctive conception that is objectivist in a sense that places it in opposition not only to skeptical, Humean views but also to formal, Kantian ones.

Foot’s strategy for defending her preferred conception can be sketched as follows. She attacks the practice – which she herself once advocated and which is distinctive of

⁴¹ Ibid., p.53.

⁴² The examples here are from the section of Thompson’s “Three Grades of Human Goodness” (op. cit.) entitled “Logical Footianism.”

different non-cognitivist theories of ethics – of bringing Humean views of practical reason to bear on analyses of moral judgment.⁴³ What distinguishes these views is the idea that a complete account of a reason for acting needs to include, alongside the mention of a belief, the mention of an independent desire or passion. The inclusion of such a desire is supposed to be required to furnish a motivational source, and, given the familiar observation that moral judgment is internally connected to action, these views appear to oblige us to concede, in Foot’s words, that the descriptive or factual “grounds of a moral judgment do not reach all the way to it.”⁴⁴ Unsatisfied with this conclusion, Foot now proposes a switch from demanding that “morality [in this way] pass the test of rationality” to demanding that “rationality pass the test of morality.”⁴⁵ She starts from an attractive but not undisputed understanding of virtue on which what distinguishes those who possess particular virtues is that “*for them certain considerations count as reasons for action, and as reasons of a given weight,*” and she asks us to understand the possession of a virtue as an achievement of practical reason.⁴⁶ Her thought is that the capacity possessed by the virtuous person resembles other rational capacities, including, e.g., prudential ones, in consisting in a form of responsiveness to

⁴³ For Foot’s earlier defense of a Humean view of practical reason, see esp. “Reasons for Acting and Desires,” in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 148-156. Foot applies her defense to an account of moral judgment in “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” op. cit.

⁴⁴ *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.8.

⁴⁵ “The Grammar of Goodness: An Interview with Philippa Foot,” op. cit., p.41.

⁴⁶ The inset phrase is from *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.12, stress in the original. The kind of understanding of virtue that Foot defends, on which virtues are achievements of practical reason, comes under attack from theorists who claim to find it ‘intellectualist’, alleging that it prevents us from representing virtues as dispositions of character and that if we want to retain the link between virtues and the development of affect we need to represent them as essentially distinct from the exercise of practical intelligence. For a defense of this basic contrasting understanding of virtue, see Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001. For a comment on why it is wrong to read Foot as advocating the type of intellectualist position that is in question here, see note 62, below.

genuine reasons aptly glossed as “goodness of the will.”⁴⁷ She traces doubts about whether this conception of practical reason accounts for motivation to misguided Humean views of reason-explanation on which desires are mechanical “forces that move the will in a certain direction,”⁴⁸ and, since this last gesture will presumably be welcome to Kantian moral philosophers, it is worth noting that she gives it a distinctively unKantian turn, representing reasons for acting, whether moral or non-moral, as having worldly, descriptive grounds that ‘reach all the way to them’.⁴⁹ Foot’s divergence from Kant at this point is decisive for her enterprise. Her claim to be considered a naturalist stands or falls with the idea that the exercises of reason internal to individual virtues are essentially matters of sensitivity, not to the formal adequacy of principles of conduct, but to humble and messy facts of human life.

Having presented her preferred conception of practical reason, Foot suggests that it obliges us to regard a natural history for human beings as fundamentally different from other natural histories. The conception represents the exercise of rationality as opening our eyes to features of the world that present us with objectively authoritative reasons for acting, and, if, following Foot, we assume that we are qua human rational beings, it appears to follow from the conception that we are qua human called upon to act in accordance with certain reasons. This conclusion is striking in its implications for how we proceed to a natural history for human beings. Now it appears that such a ‘history’ must for the most part be undertaken

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.21. Although, taken by themselves, Foot’s brief critical remarks on Humean views of reason-explanation are unsatisfactory, it would, I believe, be relatively easy to follow up satisfactorily on her remarks by supplementing them with the work of philosophers like Christine Korsgaard, John McDowell and Tim Scanlon who in effect ask us to understand Humean views as psychologistic and perhaps also with a related portion of the work of Thompson – Foot’s collaborator – who attacks belief-desire views of reasons for acting that abandon any reference to Humean passions thereby ducking the charge of psychologism. (See Part II of *Life and Action*, op. cit.) I cannot in this paper further discuss these topics.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp.14 and passim.

from the perspective of sensitivity to reasons for acting and that here using a properly naturalistic method is by and large equivalent to reflecting practically.

We misunderstand Foot's thesis about a structural analogy between human and non-human natural histories if we overlook the fact that it incorporates this distinctive understanding of what a commitment to naturalism calls for in reference to human beings.⁵⁰ Foot believes that, when we are doing natural history in the non-human case, we are concerned with questions about what features and operations of organisms are necessary in the sense of being decisive for self-maintenance or reproduction, and she believes that, when we are doing natural history in the human case we are concerned with *analogous yet nonetheless fundamentally different* questions about what modes of conduct are necessary in the sense of representing so much good in human life that they are practically demanded of us.⁵¹ Judgments about which modes of conduct are practically demanded are thus the human counterparts to natural-historical judgments about non-human organisms in Foot's naturalistic vision, and Foot follows Elizabeth Anscombe in referring to the former judgments about humans as "Aristotelian necessities."⁵²

⁵⁰ Thompson emphasizes this point in the last two paragraphs of "Three Grades of Natural Goodness," op. cit.

⁵¹ This means that self-maintenance and reproduction cannot play the same role within a natural history for human beings that it plays within natural histories for non-human organisms. There can be no question in the human case of establishing the importance of any biological (or, for that matter, other) goals except as conclusions of practical reflection, though there is also nothing to prevent practical reflection from revealing that things like sex, health and the care of children and the aged are of genuine importance. This is a point that Rosalind Hursthouse, in other respects a faithful and sympathetic reader of Foot's, appears to miss. Hursthouse inherits Foot's claim that the characteristic human life is one lived in accordance with reason, but she also wrongly attempts to combine this claim with an understanding of moral judgments, foreign to Foot's work, as assessments of human beings with respect to ends such as individual survival and the continuance of the species. For a criticism of this moment in Hursthouse's work, see David Copp and David Sobel, "Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics," in *Ethics*, vol.114, 2004, pp.524-554, pp.540ff.

⁵² *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., p.46. Foot insists that her interest in the conceptual parallel between natural-historical judgments about non-human organisms and these Aristotelian necessities is consistent with the recognition of the legitimacy of an indefinitely rich range of different human life-projects and purposes. As she understands them, Aristotelian necessities are forms of responsiveness to reasons that characterize human life in all its diversity (ibid., p.39).

In thus presenting her formal account of how to proceed towards a natural history for human beings, Foot also defends substantive views about what the ‘necessities’ internal to such a history are like. She argues that when we actually try to specify these necessities we come up with forms of responsiveness to reason distinctive not only of various ‘other-regarding’ virtues, such as promise-keeping, that contemporary philosophers typically classify as moral but also some ‘non-other-regarding’ virtues, such as temperance, that are today often treated as non-moral. These substantive views shape the way in which Foot presents her theory of natural goodness. Her central claim is that certain facts of human life that qualify as Aristotelian necessities – specifically, facts about the practical necessity of modes of conduct distinctive of traditional moral virtues – ground moral evaluations in the same way that facts about the kind to which a given non-human organism belongs ground species-relative evaluations of that organism. *This* is the claim that is supposed to entitle us to regard morality as a form of natural goodness and immorality as a form of natural defect. To be sure, Foot’s willingness thus to represent morality as a form of natural goodness depends for its plausibility on her substantive suggestion that modes of conduct distinctive of certain moral virtues qualify as Aristotelian necessities, and, as we saw, she also suggests that certain modes of conduct distinctive of non-moral virtues qualify as Aristotelian necessities. The upshot is that, in developing her larger naturalistic vision, she is inviting us to understand moral evaluations as members of a larger class of assessments of rational will, all of the members of which are analogous to species-relative assessments of non-human organisms.⁵³

⁵³ For a helpful discussion of Foot’s claim that moral assessments are assessments of human actions with respect to rational will, see Julia Annas, “Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?” *op.cit.*, esp. pp.14-16. See also David Copp and David Sobel, *op. cit.*, esp. pp.538-539. It is worth emphasizing that Foot is not associating *all* defects in the practical reason of human beings (say, those stemming from mental retardation) with moral limitations. Rather she is drawing attention to the particular defects we suffer from when, while possessing the capacity to reason practically, we fail to recognize considerations in favor of acting in a certain way or when, while in fact recognizing that we should act in a certain way, we either do not act in that way or, if

Equipped with this outline of Foot's naturalistic theory, I turn now to responding to criticisms and offering a constructive comment.

ii. Response to criticisms and a comment

Commanding, questioning, storytelling, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.

– Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §25.

Several critics have alleged that Foot's methods aren't truly those of a naturalist and that, if she had really employed naturalistic methods, she wouldn't have concluded that morality is a species of natural goodness. Drawing on work in contemporary evolutionary biology, these critics point out that naturalists sometimes find not only that environmental factors lead members of a given non-human species to develop into different forms (e.g., far-sightedness and near-sightedness) but, moreover, that this variety contributes to the survival and reproduction of the species and that both types therefore need to be regarded as naturally sound. Doesn't it follow, the critics then ask, that a consistent naturalist needs to take seriously the possibility of finding the same kind of variety in human beings and, more specifically, of finding both that environmental cues may trigger humans to become either just or unjust and that this developmental flexibility is essential to human survival and reproduction? If we answer this question in the affirmative – as members of the relevant group of critics think we should – it will seem as though we are obliged to reject the central thesis of Foot's theory and leave open the possibility that some types of immorality are

we do, nevertheless take as our operative reason something apart from the recognition that it is correct (see *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., chapter 4).

forms of natural goodness.⁵⁴

This criticism rebukes Foot for not using properly naturalistic methods in pursuit of a natural history for human beings. So it is noteworthy that – like other critics who depict Foot as a reductive naturalist⁵⁵ – the criticism’s advocates simply overlook Foot’s reflections about the distinctive character of natural history in the human case. Foot starts from the assumption that a naturalistic survey reveals human beings to be as such capable of acting on reasons as well as from the further assumption that her distinctive objectivist conception does justice to what practical reasoning is like. The second of these assumptions is controversial, and I will return to it in a moment. But right now I want to observe that, once the two assumptions are in place, it appears that – strange as this may sound – a consistent commitment to naturalistic methods obliges us to approach the process of arriving at natural-historical judgments about human life not by asking whether different ways of acting serve antecedently specified goals (say, survival and reproduction) but by examining the merits of the relevant ways of acting as modes of responsiveness to reasons.⁵⁶

To be sure, even if we accept Foot’s account of what a properly naturalistic method is like, there is room to ask whether she is right to assert that morality is a form of natural goodness. Her assertion depends for its appeal on her substantive claims about what a

⁵⁴ The most fully worked out versions of the charge described in this paragraph are in Chrisoula Andreou, “Getting On in a Varied World,” op.cit. and in Elijah Millgram’s review of Thompson’s *Life and Action*, forthcoming. Although he does not mention methods of evolutionary biology, Alasdair MacIntyre levels a fundamentally similar charge in “Virtues in Foot and Geach,” in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.52, 2002, pp. 621-631, esp. p.627.

⁵⁵ See notes 38 and 40, above.

⁵⁶ I have here left unaddressed the assumption of the relevant critics of Foot that a properly naturalistic approach to natural histories of non-human organisms will involve the methods of evolutionary biology, and I have addressed only their assumption that that a properly naturalistic approach to natural history in the human case will likewise involve these methods. But the former assumption also merits critical attention. For a corrective, see note 27, above.

natural history for human beings is like and, more specifically, on her claims about how modes of responsiveness to reasons distinctive of different traditional ‘moral’ virtues belong within such a natural history. Stripped of these substantive claims, Foot’s approach to generating a natural history for human beings leaves room for the discovery that traditional ‘moral’ virtues need to be radically reconceived and that traditional morality is not a form of natural goodness. But, supposing we in fact made it, this discovery would not seriously threaten Foot’s broader naturalistic posture. The discovery would leave unaffected her thought that we best approach a natural history in the human case by asking which modes of responsiveness to reason are practically necessary, and, as long as we preserve the familiar terminological practice of referring to as *virtues* those modes of responsiveness that we in fact identify as practically necessary, we will still be concerned with a unified theory of natural goodness, of the sort Foot favors, on which all virtues are forms of natural goodness.

Let me return now to the conception of practical reason that is central to Foot’s theory and that, as I mentioned, underwrites her account of what a properly naturalistic approach to formulating a natural history for human beings is like. At issue is a conception of practical reason as a mode of sensitivity to facts that is capable of uncovering objectively authoritative considerations for acting. Although, as far as I know, no critic of Foot’s has directly attacked this conception of practical reason, similar conceptions championed by others do encounter significant philosophical opposition. Further, although Foot herself doesn’t discuss these matters, a good way to capture what at the most basic level engenders controversy is to note that, by the lights of these conceptions, practical reflection has a certain *circular* character. The conceptions represent the capacities we exercise in making practical judgments as equipping us to detect facts or features of situations that merit certain responses, and, since the question of whether something merits a particular response is itself

a question for practical reflection, this means that the conceptions in effect depict practical judgments as governed by standards that reflect the very body of practical beliefs to which they are themselves are contributions. This is noteworthy because claims to the effect that practical reflection encodes this type of circularity are often taken to speak decisively against an objective interpretation of the sort that Foot requires for her theory of natural goodness.

Earlier, in considering Thompson's account of vital discourse, I discussed sources of philosophical resistance to objective interpretations of modes of discourse that are circular in this sense, leaving it open whether this resistance is driven primarily by the idea of what I called an "abstraction requirement" or whether the presence of circularity provides an independent source of resistance. It is not hard to see that the defender of Foot's work would need to be prepared to address these issues, if only because Foot's naturalistic theory incorporates Thompson's account of vital discourse. But the point I want to make now has to do with the fact that Foot represents practical reasoning as characterized by a type of circularity similar to the circularity internal to vital discourse as Thompson understands it. The point is that it follows that, even if a commentator undertook to defend Foot's basic conception of practical reason (and the view of moral judgment that it grounds) without reference to Thompson's view of the representation of non-human life, she would still need to be prepared to deal with the same basic issues.

There is a reason for mentioning the circularity characteristic of practical reflection as Foot conceives it that has nothing to do with noting demands that a satisfactory defense of her work needs to meet. Mentioning this circularity makes it possible to further develop the idea, pivotal for Foot's larger project, of an analogy between species-relative assessments of non-human organisms, on the one hand, and moral assessments, on the other. For it brings out direct parallels between the patterns of inference into which, on Foot's

understanding, the two types of assessment are integrated. Whereas Thompson asks us to understand the ‘vital’ descriptions of non-human organisms that he thinks license species-relative assessments as embedded with natural-historical judgments in a logical circle, Foot in effect asks us to see the descriptions of human life that she thinks license moral assessments as embedded with Aristotelian necessities in a corresponding logical circle. *This* is a perspicuous way of formulating Foot’s claim that representations of life – human and non-human – have a unitary logic, and it is only surprising that, having employed Thompson’s work in a way that lays the groundwork for this formulation, Foot never arrives at it herself.⁵⁷

4. A few remarks on factual expertise and ethical development

It is not obvious what someone would mean if he said that temperance or courage were not good qualities, and this not because of the ‘praising’ sense of these *words*, but because of the things that courage and temperance are.

– Philippa Foot, “Moral Beliefs,” Clarendon Press, 1978, pp.110-131, pp.123-124.

These reflections bring me back to things I said at this paper’s opening about two respects in which Foot departs from ethical naturalism as it is traditionally conceived. She departs both in grounding moral assessments, non-reductively, in certain normative ‘facts of human life’ and in focussing on the defense of a unified theory of natural goodness that treats these assessments as grounded in facts in human life in a manner analogous to that in which species-relative assessments of non-human organisms are grounded in facts about their kinds. Her focus on this broadly naturalistic theory comes at the expense of preoccupation with the question of what entitles us to the idea – more typically central to

⁵⁷ As far as I can tell, Thompson never arrives at it either. For what is in effect a hypothesis about why not, see note 36, above.

treatments of non-reductive naturalisms – of intrinsically normative (or practical) facts, and, in describing the kinds of objections that a defense of Foot’s preferred conception of practical reason needs to meet, I have in effect been introducing philosophical considerations we require if we are to regard ourselves as warranted in laying claim to this basic idea. My efforts thus to follow up on Foot’s non-reductive naturalistic project, while friendly, don’t leave unchanged our understanding of the project’s significance, and in this section I want to discuss what I see as one especially salutary cluster of changes.

A good way to enter into my topic is to mention a very general form of discomfort that the idea of naturalism in ethics sometimes produces. The discomfort is connected with the thought that when trying to answer factual questions it is generally helpful to consult someone with *expertise* in dealing with the relevant region of fact. Thus, for instance, when we have questions about the species of birds we saw during our car trip through New York State’s Columbia County, it is very likely to be helpful to consult a local ornithologist.⁵⁸ Confronted with this observation about the general usefulness of appealing to experts in a certain area to describe facts falling within it, it may seem reasonable to conclude that naturalistically inclined moral philosophers who represent ethical assessments as grounded in facts cannot help but be committed to the view that in cases of ethical perplexity it is generally helpful to seek an ‘expert in ethics’. Yet surely there is something confused about the very idea of ‘ethical expertise’. Who should we credit with possessing it? Perhaps professional ethicists or ombudsmen? Or, alternately, therapists or lifestyle coaches or even professors of moral philosophy? The discomfort with ethical naturalism that I am describing is a function of the quite reasonable belief that we have no good reason to think that a person would be well placed to help us with ethical problems simply in virtue of having

⁵⁸ There may, of course, be any number of practical considerations against actually doing so.

whatever specialized knowledge entitles her to wear one of these hats.⁵⁹

My point here is not that Foot's naturalist position in ethics should be understood as inseparable from a confused idea of 'ethical expertise'. I don't think that the position should be understood in this way, and what I want to suggest is simply that, in order to see why not, it is necessary to follow up on lines of thought not developed in Foot's writing. In presenting Foot's work, I emphasized the fact – not discussed by her – that her preferred conception of practical reason is characterized by a certain circularity and that the presence of this circularity makes it impossible to satisfy what I called an abstraction requirement. Now I want to mention a further, more basic respect in which Foot's preferred conception of practical reason is in tension with the idea of an abstraction requirement. Foot claims, very plausibly, that in order to qualify as practical judgments must have the sort of tie to action that enables them to explain our acting in accordance with them.⁶⁰ Although she doesn't discuss these matters, it follows that we need to read her as committed to regarding the acquisition of the world-guided concepts that, as she sees it, we use in practical judgment-making as inseparable from the acquisition of certain (defeasible) practical propensities. By the same token, it follows that we need to read her as committed to regarding the contents these practical concepts determine as unavailable apart from perspectives afforded by the relevant practical propensities. That is, we need to read Foot as at least tacitly recommending a construal of practical concepts on which they are in this respect irredeemably *non-abstract* or *perspectival*.⁶¹ This is noteworthy because a construal of practical concepts as thus

⁵⁹ Closely tied to this first belief is the further belief that, if a person wearing one of these hats presents herself as well placed to guide us ethically in virtue of doing so, we have especially good reason to be suspicious of her ability to help us.

⁶⁰ See *Natural Goodness*, op. cit., pp.9ff.

⁶¹ Having noted a moment ago that, in her recent work, Foot doesn't discuss the account of practical concepts – as simultaneously objective and irredeemably perspectival – to which her overarching naturalistic posture

irredeemably perspectival has significant implications for how we understand the difficulty of practical reflection.

With this construal in place, it appears that striving to make responsible practical judgments necessarily involves an effort to imaginatively place ourselves in new practical perspectives, to look and see whether they reveal things that we have previously overlooked and to actually occupy the perspectives if we determine that they do. Hence it appears, we might say, that the demands imposed on us by practical reflection go beyond the kinds of cognitive demands we are obliged to meet to arrive at expertise with regard to particular regions of fact. Notice, moreover, that in saying this we are not denying that practical reflection is itself an essentially cognitive endeavor. In representing practical reflection as here confronting us with more than straightforwardly cognitive challenges, we are saying that such reflection imposes special demands that, while genuinely cognitive, can only be met by those of us willing and able to work on ourselves – to develop our characters – in ways that aspiration to even expert mastery of ordinary factual domains does not require.⁶²

Having just argued that it is possible to take an interest in Foot's naturalistic posture in ethics without embracing a suspect idea of 'ethical expertise', I should admit that it may seem as though, in thus helping Foot to avoid a hot spot, I have thrown her into the

commits her, I should acknowledge that she does defend an account of this sort early in her career. (See esp. the paper of Foot's from which the epigraph to this section is drawn.) Strikingly, at the same time at which she was developing the account, she was also defending a form of ethical subjectivism with which it is directly in tension. For relevant references to Foot's work, see note 37, above.

⁶² This is the place to return to the work of thinkers who criticize accounts of virtue, like Foot's, as 'intellectualist' because they represent the possession of a virtue as essentially a matter of the possession of a certain capacity of practical reason. (See note 46, above.) Thinkers who develop this basic criticism generally assume that a person's capacity to reason practically is in principle independent of her possession of any motivational propensities or sensitivities and that philosophers who represent practical reason as internal to virtue must therefore be overlooking the fact that virtues are dispositions of character. It is accordingly noteworthy that, if the reading of her work I am presenting here is correct, Foot does not conceive the capacities we exercise in reasoning practically as essentially separate from developments of character, and, by the same token, there is no good reason to think that a familiar worry about 'intellectualism' gets a grip on her account of the virtues.

proverbial fire. For, in order to make my case that Foot is not committed to sanctioning the idea of experts in ethics, I was obliged to point out that she is committed to regarding concepts we use in practical reflection as determining regularities that are only discernible from specific practical or ethical perspectives. I thereby suggested that, by her lights, practical reflection invariably presupposes images of the world that, while in principle cognitively respectable, are *non-neutral* in that they are unavailable apart from these perspectives, and it may appear that in thus effectively saddling Foot with the task of accounting for the existence of such images I gave her an impossible philosophical assignment.

But this appearance is not compulsory. I developed this paper's main line of argument partly with an eye to uncovering a strategy for demonstrating our entitlement to a conception of practical reason – of the sort Foot effectively embraces – that presupposes our having images of the world that, while non-neutral, don't on that account lose their claims to cognitive respectability. I observed that in inheriting Thompson's account of the representation of non-human life, Foot commits herself to the view that at least some (and perhaps all) factual discourses are circular in a sense that obliges us to regard our efforts to bring into focus the facts they deal in as necessarily 'non-abstract' affairs that presuppose the possession of certain sensitivities. Now I want to add that, insofar as Foot thus in effect depicts our ability to think and talk about some set of facts as necessarily tied to a certain sensibility – a certain sense of what is important – she at the same time effectively represents our ways of thinking and talking about those facts as inseparable from particular *values*. Further, insofar as she thus in effect conceives our ways of thinking and talking about some set of facts as encoding values, she at the same time effectively represents these ways of thinking and talking as the site of the articulation of non-neutral visions of things that have

the same claim to cognitive respectability as the relevant factual modes of thought and talk. What emerges is that, if we follow up on submerged philosophical assumptions of Foot's, we arrive at the description of a philosophical context in which there need be no question of rejecting as intrinsically confused either the suggestion of images of the world that, while non-neutral, have claims to cognitive legitimacy or the suggestion of a conception of practical reason, of the sort Foot favors, on which its exercises presuppose such images.

Although the conclusion I now wish to draw is that, within the philosophical context in which Foot defends a non-reductive ethical naturalism, it is possible to find resources for an understanding of ethical development free from any hint of a suspect idea of 'ethical expertise', I believe it would be hasty to draw this conclusion before registering implications of the line of reasoning leading up to it for how we understand expertise in reference to ordinary factual domains. The understanding of ethical development to which I am arguing Foot's views commit her presupposes that the possession of certain sensitivities is internal to an individual's ability to think and talk about even ordinary factual domains. This means that there is a sense in which, within the pertinent philosophical setting, an individual's attainment of expertise in reference to a given factual domain itself requires a kind of development of the self. It does not, however, follow that there are no grounds for distinguishing between capacities we exercise in dealing with ordinary domains of facts and capacities we exercise as ethical reasoners. Insofar as, according to the transfigured Footian outlook I am describing, ethical reflection is distinguished by the use of concepts that operate within particular practical or evaluative perspectives, such reflection requires a kind of work on the self that appears special even against the backdrop of an understanding of ordinary fact-directed thought as requiring some self-cultivation. The upshot is that, while the issues at play here are far from simple, we have good reason to regard the type of non-

reductive naturalistic outlook Foot favors as leaving room for an understanding of ethical development that opposes a dubious idea of ‘ethical expertise’.

5. Conclusion

Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, direct our interest.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, §570.

My remarks in the last section, while focused exclusively on the non-reductive naturalistic position internal to Foot’s theory of natural goodness, have implications for how we understand the theory’s most fundamental tenets, and by way of concluding I want to mention some of the most striking of these implications. To begin with, let me note that once the view of ethical development implicit in Foot’s non-reductively naturalistic posture is in place, it appears that, when we take an interest in questions about the difficulty of ethical thought, we need to take account of a variety of distinctive respects in which someone might fail to recognize reasons she has to act. We need to allow that a person might fail because, in one way or another, she has not done the kind of work on herself that would enable her to appreciate the practical importance of particular features of her life. Perhaps she has not adopted or even explored in imagination the evaluative perspective internal to a practical concept that is needed to do justice to the importance of the pertinent features of her life. Or, perhaps she has not eliminated distortions from the vision of the world that serves as the ground of her projection of such a concept, where eliminating the distortions in question would necessarily involve revising some of her ordinary factual modes of thought in a manner that itself involves the reshaping of sensibility. These are the basic types of self-cultivation that are here supposed to be partly constitutive of ethical thought, and, without further describing them, let me observe that, if we are to present the

sort of theory of natural goodness Foot advocates in a rigorously consistent manner, we need to represent the theory as embodying a conception of the challenges of ethical thought that reflects demands for self-cultivation of these types.

Notice that this means that accepting the theory is tantamount to treating individuals' successes and failures at cultivating themselves as potential objects of ethical assessment that are rightly conceived as forms of 'natural goodness' and 'natural defect'. By the same token, it means that we have good grounds to revise Foot's own presentation of her theory of natural goodness along the following lines. Instead of simply claiming, with Foot, that human beings are essentially rational creatures, we need to add that our rational capacities are inseparable from our sensibilities in a variety of ways and that a properly naturalistic picture of us must accordingly depict rationality not only as an essentially human trait but, moreover, as a trait that in these ways bears the imprint of our humanity.