



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Centre for Theology and Religious Studies



Why Human Virtues Obtain in the Natural World

An Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian approach

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Autumn 2012

Religious studies: Ethics – Master's Thesis (One Year)

REVM51, 15 credits

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Abstract

This essay aims to connect naturalism and virtue-ethics to a form of realism about values. The thesis advanced in the essay relies heavily on the Wittgensteinian concepts language-game and weltanschauung as explanatory tools for how values can be both real and unreal, both objective and subjective, both at the same time but not from the same perspective. It is argued that a good life is a concept that is grounded in biological facts but that the normativity inherent in this concept is a relational property that no scientific investigation can reveal or enlighten. Interwoven in the exposition is the approach to norms and values that was first articulated by Aristotle and it is argued that virtue-ethics is well endowed to expound and investigate ethical questions at all depth since it operates with a deflated metaphysics of values and is adapted to the relational character of normativity. It is also suggested that moral properties others than those advocated by virtue ethics might survive being naturalized but since moral properties is so variegated no general conclusion can be drawn from the results obtained in this study.

Keywords: Aristotle, Language game, Naturalism, Virtue-ethics, Weltanschauung

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1. Prolegomenon

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein (1958, p. 12), rather casually, remarked, “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing”. This single sentence is, in my opinion, one of the more potent pronouncements in the history of philosophy. This essay is an attempt to bear this out and in the process of doing so bring peace to an ethical praxis by laying a set of troublesome philosophical questions to rest. To lay philosophical questioning to rest is also the paradoxical end to which Wittgenstein (1958, p. 51) suggested we employ philosophy, its aim being to bring an end to philosophical questioning. Now, why would a philosopher desire the demise of philosophical inquiry as such? Is it the Freudian death-drive (thanatos) that makes her seek the end of her own activity, to embark Charon’s ferry and plunge herself down into Lethe? Perhaps it is, but she might also entertain a less destructive, even a wholesome, motive. If philosophical questions are an entangled knot of thoughts that torments her, might it not be appropriate for her to do away with them as Alexander did with the Gordian knot? Instead of painstakingly trying to untangle the loose ends, do away with the whole thing and free her mind. To do away with a knot Alexander-style is however not the same as to pass it idly by or stubbornly ignore its manifest existence. Alexander had to confront the knot and draw his sword in order to cleave it. Neither being negligent of the knot’s location nor having a blunt sword or an unsteady hand would have served his purpose. A philosopher thus has to know where the focal point of her tangled web of thoughts is located and she needs a sharp sword in an agile hand. These three things, a good aim, a sharp tool and a nimble hand is thus of essence. My contention is that Wittgenstein has a sharpened sword, i.e. “a part of our natural history”, and that he has taken a good aim, i.e. “commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting”. Left for me to provide in this essay is the nimble hand that swings the blade to cleave the knot in twain.

While I have used the language of metaphor the three elements “aim”, “sword” and “hand” are straightforwardly translated into the respectable (a) subject matter, (b) method, and (c) execution. However, object, method, and execution, these three, while conceptually distinct, are one interwoven complex. The picture of a hand swinging a sword at an object, therefor seemed more fitting than a tripartisanship; there we have an event conceived of as one single act and not as three distinct and discrete steps neatly lined up before us. The interconnectedness of the investigated object, our theoretical starting-point, and the research process is well put by Kant (1992[1781], pp. 370-371), who famously argued that in order to

perceive an object, the manner in which we perceive it has to be a given for us beforehand. The categories (time and space) in which we perceive an object is, according to Kant, necessary for the selfsame perception to occur. Without an apparatus, existing *a priori* in the subject, for arranging objects in the space-time continuum, no perception of objects as situated within these dimensions would be possible. Kant's thesis, I maintain, ought primarily to be taken as an epistemological thesis, not as an ontological. Reality, truth, the "Ding an sich" might for all we know conform to these categories as servile subjects ruled by an omnipotent despot but for us to know of objects within space-time, we still need to possess an apparatus, by which we can represent them. This Kantian lesson can be neatly illustrated by turning to some of the criticism of his argument that actually extends the applicability of his conclusion.

Contrary to Kant, many contemporary philosophers (Quine W. V., 2008; Dennett, 1996, p. 202; Churchland, 2002, pp. 270-271; Piaget, 1972, pp. 14-17), and myself included, believe that his thesis both should and could be argued *a posteriori* as a synthetic conclusion based on an understanding of how our minds work. For Kant the very idea of arriving at a transcendental criticism of reason by an *a posteriori* route would have seemed unintelligible. He lacked the apparatus necessary to categorize a thinking thing as a thing among other things. For Kant reason was only possible to grasp in terms of disembodied thoughts and thus he analyzed reason in logical categories. Indubitably, if disembodied thought is all there is to perceive then we can hardly blame Kant for perceiving the preconditions for human thought in logical terms. Yet Wittgenstein (1958, p. 47) scoffed at the very idea of thoughts as being *sui generis* and called this belief a superstition and not a factual mistake. Is it not strange, how different two great minds can stare at the same thing and find no common ground in describing their observation? However, if Kant and Wittgenstein were both right, each in their own way, then their lack of common ground in their descriptions of the human mind might not be at all that strange.

Kant taught us that how we see and what we see are two aspects of one phenomenon. A precondition for perception is an apparatus of perception and that apparatus will in turn determine what can be perceived. Wittgenstein extends this Kantian principle to not just a few categories within our mind but to language as a totality. Language determines how we see things and thus what we can possibly see. An eminent illustration of this

phenomenon is empirical research inspired by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,¹ performed on the perception of color. This research has confirmed that people from different cultures not only name colors differently but also draw the boundaries between colors in varied ways. (Goldstein, 2005, p. 387) We might object that all this goes to show is that people categorize colors differently, not that they actually perceive them differently. The percept, we insist, must be the same. However, what is the supposed difference between, say, categorizing something as green and perceiving something as green? It would seem to me that categorizing is what it is to see and that sight without categories is no sight at all.

When telescopes were novelties on the scientific scene, Galileo offered some learned men to look through his device to assure them that Jupiter really had moons. A contemporary witness summed up the event and said that none of them had been convinced since no one saw the alleged moons directly, and only a few sharp-sighted observers thought they had seen something that could have been or not could have been moons. (Shapin, 1998, pp. 72-73) To see the morning star is not the same as seeing the evening star and to behold Venus is yet another thing. To make sense of an appearance is what it is to see something as something, so what did the learned men see when they peered through Galileo's telescope? Perhaps some distant stars flickering near the great planet, perhaps some obscure dots of light, perhaps their aged eyes saw nothing. Whatever they saw one thing is sure, they did not see moons. How can this be we might ask indignantly. Those specs of light are moons; it is just obvious, indubitable, and true. Sure it is, if one know how to peer through a telescope and has a certain way of interpreting what one sees. We are still talking epistemology, not ontology. Ontologically speaking, as far as modern physics tells us, all we see is photons radiating out from curvatures in the space-time continuum and there is no need for moons or any other celestial entities, all there is are energy-momentum tensors in a relativity field. So why are we so insistent that they must have seen the moons? Assumedly because we see the moons and we see them so clearly. Surely, everyone else has to see them too! Wittgenstein (1958, p. 48) wrote "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing around the frame through which we look at it".

If we consistently apply a category or method, i.e. a language-game, there is no reason to suppose that reality will reveal anything outside the confines of our predefined

¹ The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis entails that the language of a culture affects its member's ways of thinking and conceiving of reality.

category and method. The very purpose of a language game is to prevent that from happening because inconsistency would mean a breakdown in communicability. To the extent, we remain homely within our particular language game; language will bend our thoughts to conform to the rules of that particular game. We will be compartmentalized and like Kant unable to conceive of thoughts other than as disembodied reason or, for that matter, like Galileo's learned colleagues, be blind to the objects we are gazing at. We must however not take this to mean that we are doomed to live out our days within the particular language games, with which we have been born and raised. If that had been the case, no alteration would ever occur in human thinking. The rules of a language game can be bent and they might even be completely and violently overturned. What is of essence, though, is the realization that new wine cannot be poured into old wineskins. We cannot do Einsteinian physics while we speak and think Newtonian. The same held true for Galileo's learned colleagues, for as long as they kept distrusting the efficacy of the telescope, no amount of peering through it could reveal the moons. Similarly, we cannot do neuropsychology if we insist on talking, and thus thinking, in Kantian terms.

In structuring our world it seems that we use what Wittgenstein (1958, p. 49) called "conspicuous representations" or "Weltanschauung", i.e. a nexus that bridges the gaps between phenomena. In $x \rightarrow y$ the simultaneous introduction of x and y ($x \wedge y$) is the summoning trick. We say, "Hear! That must be the sound of hail!" where a particular sound is supposed to $\rightarrow y$, or "That falling hail, it is pulled down by gravity" where falling bodies $\rightarrow y$. An audible phenomenon becomes a signifier for a visible phenomenon and a visible phenomenon becomes a signifier for a vivid image, that of a force or power. The inference, the " \rightarrow ", in and by itself, is nothing. Might we not say that the sound signifies gravity instead? Thus, "Hear, that must be the sound of gravity"? We might say this (it does not break any rule of grammar) but we do not. Hearing gravity is strange, odd, and perhaps even eerie. Gravity is seen and felt but never heard. However, we *hear* it as much as we *hear* hail and yet we never think or talk thus. A sound never really belongs to anything, but we make it belong and give it a home in the realm of phenomena and by doing so we enact a weltanschauung.

If we asked, "did you hear the drum?" Did we then mean the material of the drumhead, the tension of the drumhead, or the structure of the drum shell? Perhaps we instead referred to the pressure alterations in a gaseous medium, or the movement of some bones in our inner ear. No, we simply meant, "hear the drum". But does not "hear the drum" include all of these? Well, now it does, but a few minutes ago, it was simply "the drum" we heard and

nothing else. If I am right, then to “hear the drum”, for us, a few minutes ago, simply was “the sound of the drum” but now it has turned itself into an intractable interrelation of things. If this change has occurred in our way of looking at what to “hear the drum” entails, then I have made us, if only temporarily, to change our *weltanschauung*. This example is however too easy. We have all studied physics and physiology so the easy shift from the colloquial language game to that of science is already primed in us. All it takes is a little nudge and we willingly desert the colloquial language game and take up that of physiology and physics. Wittgenstein’s suggestion that “commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting” be considered “a part of our natural history” might on the other hand be a bullet we are less able to bite, because it leads us right to his rebuttal of human language and thought as something unique. To follow Wittgenstein down this path requires that we adapt another mode of thinking, foremost about ourselves, but by implication, humanity as a whole. To do so will come at a cost, the cost of giving up a most cherished treasure; namely, the belief that I, and by implication you, am at the pinnacle of being and that we stand tall and apart from other forms of existents. Such a shift in perspective is hard because it goes against ingrained modes of thinking and talking about our own inner world. We are asked to represent ourselves, the subjects, in continuity with things, the objects, and thus deny the metaphysical dichotomy between subject and object.²

This having been said about the intermingled nature of subject and object, the purpose of this essay might seem obscure. Have I not just said that we are fettered by our preconceptions and are blind to what lies beyond our conceptual schemes? This I have most certainly said, but I have not said that we are forever doomed to walk down the same lane we currently find ourselves walking. It is thus no trivial concern to be clear about how transitions between worldviews are effectuated. In the case of the sound of the drum, I suggested that our bilingualism made the smooth transition possible. We have all been equally instructed in the colloquial and the scientific mood of talking about sounds. All I had to do was to point at some features of what a sound is and we swapped language game effortlessly.

How did we acquire these moods of talking and imagining in the first place? We had to rely on the only means available, namely practice. We try our way by introducing new

² To deny a metaphysical difference between subject and object is in itself nothing new. Parmenides seems to have thought something along the same lines when he wrote that “thinking and to be is the same” “τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι” (Hermann & Walther, 1903, p. 121). Similarly, Spinoza expressly defended a monistic worldview when he allowed for only one universal substance in all existents (Spinoza, 1992[1677], p. 130).

words and projecting novel images when we communicate. We look at others and we imitate, first by unimaginative copying but as time pass, with gradual self-reliance and fluency. Someone who in adult years has learned to master another language has personal memories about this process. By and by she becomes homely in her new language and “an ball” will just not seem right to her in the way “a ball” does. This holds true irrespective of if she knows the relevant grammatical rule or not. Grammar is in this context not a manner of knowing but a way of copying; grammar is stilts we lean on while we have yet not learned how to walk. As Wittgenstein (1958, p. 57) suggested, we acquire a new way of looking at things so that we “compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures”. When we compare in this sense we do so unconsciously. It is not a self-conscious effort to force images together and bend others apart. We acquire a capacity, to make the world reveal itself to us in a certain way, so that hail makes sounds while gravity does not and “a ball” sounds right while “an ball” sounds wrong.

To acquire a new way of seeing things, to experience a *gestalt shift*, is both within and without our control. We can self-consciously choose to make use of bits and pieces of other language games and labor not to fall back on our homely way of talking and thinking. There is however a sever limit to the amount of control we can exercise over this process beyond these initial preparations. The success and outcome of such a process, if it somewhat artificially is initiated by an act of will, is beyond the power of our control. We cannot make the world to appear in this way rather than that way, but we can take the necessary steps to make a transition possible. At a bare minimum, we must cease to insist on being homely in the world, and let unknown modes of talking and imagining take root and grow freely in our minds. It is first at the end of such a process we can start to dialectically appreciate what we have gained and appraise what we have lost in the transition.

I began this chapter by suggesting that some philosophical questions can be laid to rest by applying natural history as an interpretive framework for characteristic human activities. These activities are those Wittgenstein exemplified with “commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting” and I construe it in the likes of the Aristotelian *ἔργον*. What I mean by letting some questions rest is that a certain way of looking at human practices dissolves the enticement of questions that else forces themselves upon us. How and why philosophical questions are laid to rest can be understood in various ways. One way to explain why certain philosophical questions wane away is offered by Anthony Kenny (2006, p. 384), who ends his *History of Western Philosophy* by suggesting that philosophical questioning ceases when a set of problems have fallen within the purview of a special science, with a

standard of proof and established nomenclature. This seems to me to be nothing but dead wrong. Philosophers today vigorously engage in debate over psychology, biology, and physics without any hesitation because of their status as well established independent branches of science. All the while, most contemporary philosophers remain silent on Leibnitz's Monads, Plato's Ideas, and Schopenhauer's Will regardless of there being no sciences that claim to cover these areas. I figure that the state is more like William James (1912) suggested; that hypotheses are either living or dead to us at the very onset of an investigation. It does not strike us any more fruitful to speculate over platonic ideas than it does to speculate over the working conditions of tooth fairies. It seems, to us, superfluous, idle, childish, and perhaps outright senseless to entertain such thoughts. Yet these very thoughts were once entertained and pursued with vigor by the intelligentsia, as were the questions pertaining to astrology and the proper methods of detecting witches. Now these enquiries lay as dead and deserted hypotheses. But they are not superseded by science, because there are no sciences of astrology and witchcraft that has taken these questions away from philosophers. They are simply neglected because whatever once was taken as a sign of astral influence on human fortunes, or as dabbling with malevolent spirits, are now signs of something mundane. Senior crooked women that mumble are not conjuring daemons but simply lonely or demented. Likewise, ideas of perfection are simply ideas and not sure signs of our recollections from a previous existence. If we wonder why this is so, the most readily available answer is that we do not compare that with that but that with this. There has been a *gestalt shift* and certain phenomena no longer incite us as they once used to.

There is, however, no way to force someone to undergo a *gestalt shift*. Surely, we can point out features that, if attended to, can facilitate a transition, but there are no forced moves inherent in those features. We can of course still press the matter and try to force someone to admit that they are inconsistent, that their *weltanschauung* has irreconcilable tensions, is muddy or unacceptable, but as Quine (1961, p. 43) observed, "Any Statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustment elsewhere in the system". We do not have to turn to outlandish thought experiments to demonstrate Quine's thesis because examples are readily at hand all around us. Immediately to mind spring the creationist movement and the host of conspiracy theories that annually resurface in variegated guises. No single observation is by itself mighty to imprint an indelible worldview in our minds. Moons or no moons, epistemologically the question is not so much if they are there or not, as what price we are prepared to pay for seeing them or not seeing them. If we encounter another

weltanschauung, and are conscious of this, what price are we prepared to pay to enact it or refuse to enact it? The answer will depend on why we came to hold our present weltanschauung in the first place. Was it because it revealed reality as it truly is, or perhaps, more modestly, that it offered us a comprehensive and less tenuous hold of our existence, or enabled some practical competence?

A way to look at things, a weltanschauung, matters to us mainly because of two distinct reasons. First, it permits communication and by extension it enables us, by learning, to engage in practices that we can perform jointly or privately. In a communal bath, we are handed the shampoo because we have learned to say: “Can you please hand me the shampoo?” and someone else have learned with what action to respond. Likewise, we know how to wash ourselves because someone taught us to say, and thus think, “shampoo”, “tap”, “water”, and “scrub”.

Second, we desire an inner order, a reflective equilibrium between our own thoughts. Conflicting thoughts upsets us and cause angst, so we seek to reconcile them or compartmentalize them to avoid psychological conflict. Philosophy has traditionally been preoccupied with bringing order where there is disorder or uncovering disorder where we thought there was order. Many philosophies have promised to bring such a unity of thought about. Grand systems of thought have replaced one another as inconsistencies and tensions have been uncovered in previous designs but all attempts to find the Holy Grail has failed. Wittgenstein’s quite original suggestion is, as previously mentioned, that we blow the search for the Grail off, that we simply stop doing philosophy. This, however, cannot be done by an act of will. It requires that we acquire a particular perspective that silences our urge to seek order by removing its very cause, the impression that there was a disorder to be bothered by in the first place.

The Wittgensteinian method is sometimes called clarificatory philosophy and its main assumption is that the solution to our troubles is laid down right before our eyes. Problems and tensions in our worldview are essentially brought on by our misdirected urges to seek oversophisticated explanations. It is this urge to explain that force us to take on misguided perspectives, which entangle us in a web of conflicting thoughts and images. These thoughts and images then keep haunting us and demand a resolution, which we can never bring. (Hutto, 2009, pp. 638-643) The Wittgensteinian way forward is thus to take a step back and let phenomena come to light in their own right by seeing them in their genuine milieu. The original environment for human thought and praxis are not the philosopher’s armchair but

the mundane toils that countless millions of our species have lived through when they were not sitting in their armchairs doing philosophy. It is an environment, which spans the entire circumference of the glob (as of late even space) and stretches over hundred thousand of years back in time. That milieu is the one we ought to turn to and use as a lens through which to look at human thought and praxis. If we do that, so the theory goes, then the philosophical conundrums that cloud our minds will be blown away, so that we can see clearly, what has been there all along.

Should we endeavor to acquire such a frame of mind as Wittgenstein has suggested? I will not now argue in favor of a particular answer to this crucial question. For the moment, I shall be content with stating my own belief that we probably should, if we have reason to believe that such a *gestalt shift* can bring us the peace of mind that lets us escape doing philosophy.

2. Precursory Thoughts

2.1 Status Quaestionis

When we set out to talk about something, a good start is to know what this something is supposed to be. Such knowledge facilitates the process of joining words together into comprehensible paragraphs. While I would not insist on such knowledge being an absolute necessity for talking, I nevertheless think it is as close to an “if and only if” as we get, if we by talking mean talking sense. Humans tend to take substantial pride in their proficiency as talkers; they take it as the trademark of their species. The accusation of talking nonsense therefore has a real sting, because talking nonsense is not really talking but mere noisemaking. Consequently, when we find something genuinely important and therefor unceasingly talk about it, the mere idea that we are talking nonsense is truly terrifying. It would demote us from the rank of talkers to a position as mere noisemakers and sweep away the very thing we genuinely care for by making it impossible for us to articulate anything about it.

Ethical concerns have for some time inhabited the precarious zone of talk that is potentially nonsensical noisemaking. It has lived there at least since the sophists first rocked the boat by telling their compatriots that ethical concerns are nothing but human convention in disguise. The thrust of the sophist’s argument was directed at the claims of morality, which they saw as manmade customs (Νόμος) that hampers nature’s (Φύσις) course. According to the

sophist trio Antiphon, Callicles and Tharsymachus, morality cannot hold any sway over us because its dictates goes against human nature that demands that we primarily pursue our own interest and advantage (McKirahan, 1994, pp. 397-399). In modern time, a most eloquent champion for the sophist argument is found in Nietzsche and his attack on first order morality. However, his attack on second order morality (metaethics) is even more radical than his attack on first order morality and far beyond what the sophist dared to dream about. According to Leiter (2011), Nietzsche held not just that our morals are unnatural but that evaluation as such, even that of his own sophistic criticism, are nothing more than personal idiosyncratic whims. There is thus nothing for our language to hold on to when we make evaluations and our talk is demoted to mere noisemaking. While the sophist believed we talked nonsense about the Thing Nietzsche maintained that even to talk about a Thing is nonsense. In this latter radical critique of ethics he has been joined in the twentieth and twenty-first century by philosophers such as A. J. Ayer (1946, pp. 102-113), J. L. Mackie (1946; 1977), R. Garner (1990), R. Joyce (2001), and J. P. Burgess (2007).

The idea that moral concerns are a nothing, an unbeing, has also come to be one of the central tenants of existentialism. Camus (2005[1942], p. 66) writes “The absurd man cannot so much expect ethical rules at the end of his reasoning as rather, illustrations and the breath of human lives” and Camus concludes that “these illustrations are not, therefore, models”. Camus’ “absurd man” can only see images of human lives, i.e. acts and consequences, but he can see nothing that affirms ethical concerns because there is no Thing that could affirm them. Yet, the absurd man chooses to act, but for reasons of self-affirmation, to acquire an identity, to be something rather than nothing. Thus, we find doctor Rieux in the *The Plague* (Camus, 2002[1947], p. 237), in his chronicle of the trials and tribulations that has befallen the citizens of Oran, observe that men “while not being saints but refusing to give away to the pestilence, do their best to be doctors”. Despite all meaningless suffering and wickedness, most women and men of Oran still chose to act decent and some even heroic. There is a stubborn refusal to give in to despair and apathy but this stubbornness is entirely of their own choosing, at least that is what the existentialist maintains.

The existentialist stance is that of one who has embraced that ethical concerns are nothing but a heap of nonsense, yet she refuses to give in. She clings to her nonsensical existence in defiance of its very nonsensicality and finds justification for her actions in the very absence of such justification. She realizes that her life and way of thinking is absurd but are not freighted by it. The accusation of talking nonsense, being a mere noisemaker, has lost

its hold on her, because she inoculated herself by admitting her nonsensicality without fear. This position is harsh and calls forth images of individual bravery of Herculean proportions. The subject standing high above her own circumstances and looking with indifference at the encroaching darkness as it engulfs her deepest concerns and longings. Is it possible to live this life? If one can bear the cost of the existentialist weltanschauung, then it is possible. On my part I have doubts if it is a genuine option for humans, given our psychological makeup. Be that as it may, our concern here is what gave birth to existentialism and not with existentialism itself.

Existentialism is of course not the only answer to irrealism about values and the threat of nihilism that follows in its wake. It is, however, a most astute articulation of man's situation in a world without values where the threat of nihilism looms large. There are mainly two ways to face up to the challenge irrealism poses; either to, in the likes of existentialism, bite the bullet and say "okay, values are not real but ...", or to dodge the bullet and say "yes, values are real because...". Among those who have followed Nietzsche the first of these two alternatives is the only option available, if they do not want to end up embracing global nihilism. They thus argue that people should uphold their decent behavior on prudential grounds, i.e. some species of enlightened self-interest is to take the place moral concerns used to have. The second route is to deny what the first affirms, i.e. irrealism about values. Here we find different species of moral realism, both naturalistic and non-naturalistic. They mainly seek to demonstrate that values do exist and the reason we might think they do not depends on our initially muddy conception of what a moral value really is. The logic behind a realist defense is to find something that indubitably exists and argue that this undoubted and, hopefully, ontologically innocuous entity, is what value terms truly designate.

Whichever road we travel the irrealist position is allowed to set the agenda and it is for us to be reactive and not proactive. With that in mind, let us turn to Warnock (1971, p. 11) who noted, somewhat despairingly, in a book with the telling title *The Object of Morality*, that perhaps all a moral philosopher can do is to "offer [...] a way of looking at the subject matter, *an* account of it". In light of what has been said in the preceding chapter, Warnock's description is right on the mark. Consequently, this essay is an attempt to, without despair, offer such a way of looking at the subject matter of morality; i.e. to give an account of it. Warnock, however, saw this as a lack of rigor and a possible weakness in the field of moral philosophy. What are we left with if valid deductive proofs are no longer an option?

Sure, to offer a way of looking is something but one should hope for more, at least that seems to be a widespread sentiment.

In a positivistic spirit we thus find Frankena's (1996[1963], p. 141) *Ethics* where he argue for the existence of "a moral point of view" that is defined by three features common to a class of considerations, which provide reasons for action. Only these are to pass as genuinely moral. In this context we should also mention Hare (1981, p. 22) who identified moral questions with a logical property of imperatives. Considerations not belonging to this logical class Hare deemed to be non-moral by definition. The problem for both Hare and Frankena is not that "morality" cannot be defined in such a way, but that the same possibility to define at one's own liking is equally open to everyone. If we decide that this but not that is "moral" considerations, while valid inferences from these are governed by this and not that set of rules, then it stands to reason that we will arrive at a neat picture of what is "moral" and what is not. At least this holds true as long as we abstain from insisting on self-contradictory rules of inference and not begin with a set of unintelligible considerations.

The way to deal with moral concerns suggested by Frankena and Hare is probably too paternalistic to cater to contemporary taste. It has nevertheless been, and to no negligible extent remains, an influential approach, most obviously so in outspokenly constructivistic theories.³ The practical advantage of their method is nonetheless obvious. Whatever our philosophical interest in morality might be, a definitional approach leaves us in complete control of the future course our investigation will take and thus of its outcome. Nevertheless, the price we have to pay for taking the commanding heights offered by stipulating our way through moral philosophy is high. A parsimonious refutation of a stipulative definition amounts to no more than an alternative stipulative definitions and it is here reason become shipwrecked on a bank of contradicting images. One image says look at it this way and another says look at it that way. Rather than providing an alternative story to the one told by irrealists, each new attempt to define the essence of morality becomes a new argument in favor of irrealism. The ceaseless stream of conflicting definitions is by moral irrealists taken as a sure sign that the emperor is naked because his subjects cannot agree on what cloths he is wearing.

³ See for example Rawls (2001, p. 5) who unapologetically conjures a moral (Rawls emphatically insists to call it political (p. 14)) point of view out of the human condition as it manifests itself in a pluralistic democracy. He does so in willing opposition to comprehensive moral views, which he relegates to the private sphere (p. 183), in a manner reminiscent of the place religion occupy in contemporary Scandinavia.

What do we hope *a way of looking* at morality shall accomplish? One answer is a more or less complete account of the entire Thing and that is by far the most common ambition we find among philosophers. To be content with saying a little something is too measly and does not fit well with grand systems of thought. However, as previously said, the never-ending stream of mutually contradicting grand systems has set a bad precedence for that kind of ambitious undertakings. Another possibility is that we consider the prospect that ways of looking come both in degrees of comprehensiveness and in different logical types.⁴ Each one of these will have to be evaluated on its own merits, so let us take a closer look at an example.

In *Utilitarianism and the Virtues* Philippa Foot (1988) suggested that philosophers take a step back and question some of the things that they have taken for granted as being the object of morality. What she had in mind was that the concept of “best state of affairs” is put to rest, so that other ethical theories can get a fair hearing. She tried to exorcize what she conceived of as the spell of consequentialism that keeps haunting us whenever we try to grasp a moral question, by forcing us into viewing a lesser of two evils as an essential moral good. The point here is that a certain way of looking at moral questions, i.e. utilitarian, can prevent us from appreciating the merits of perspectives that explore ethics without using the consequentialist shibboleth as a focal point. Our evaluation of non-consequentialist theories will, Foot argued, be skewed as long as we insist on taking our bearings with a consequentialist compass. What Foot suggests is, in essence, that we accustom ourselves to the thought that where we believed we had a firm grasp of the meaning of an ethical term there is, as she puts it, “simply a blank” (1988, p. 242). This is a Socratic piece of wisdom, to know that we know not. As long as we maintain that we know we are bound up with one way of viewing, namely through the lens of our preconceived knowledge. Now, with our previous knowledge gone we can look at the thing anew through another lens (we still need lenses) and appraise what we see on its own merits. I would suggest that the most important insight, or

⁴ I am here referring loosely to the notion of logical types originally developed by Russell (1905). The relevant sense in which I wish the reader to understand logical types in this context is that a class is not (necessarily) a member of itself, i.e. “this sentence is a lie” is a member of two classes a) the statement b) the truth-value or meta-level of the statement. The latter class is not a member of the former, because if it were any truth-value assigned to the statement would involve us in a self-contradiction. The relevance for the question to what *a way of looking* entails is that *a way of looking* can both be self-reflective, i.e. be part of or contained within a moral outlook or it can be external to and not be a part of moral categories. In the former case, the characteristic normative pull is retained in our way of looking, while in the latter case there is no trace of normative content neither intended nor implied. The relevance of this distinction will be made clearer in chapter 4.

gestalt shift, Foot offers to us is that we ask the crucial question of how we got from “moral” to moral in the first place, i.e. how we bridged the gap between our intellectualized description of “the moral” and morality as it manifests itself in praxis. A good perspective shift can be just that, not a new way to look at the Thing but to shift our attention at how we look at the Thing.

2.2 Moral Properties

If we felt that defining our way out of the problem moral skepticism posed was a tenuous solution, we should perhaps shift our attention to the way we look instead of staring even harder at the Thing. To do that we need an unassuming heuristics of what is and what is not a moral property. Such a heuristic is offered by Eaton (2001, p. 21) for identifying aesthetic properties but with some alterations it can be equally well applied to identify what a moral property is.

M is a moral property in a situation, S, in a culture, C, if and only if M is an intrinsic property of S, and M is deemed sufficient as ground for action in C, that is, in C it is generally believed that perceiving and/or reflecting upon M will yield practical understanding.

This heuristic, adapted from Eaton, for identifying moral properties have two main implications, first, it tells us that a moral property can exist if and only if there is a community that identify it as such. Second, it tells us that a morally relevant property must inhere in a situation just as color must inhere in a chromatic painting. No *a priori* restriction on what types of properties that can count as moral properties is built into the proposed heuristic, since humans are free to attend to everything within their cognitive range. Naturally, moral properties must be able to enter into the awareness of human cognizers but it would be absurd to see that as a restriction imposed by the heuristics. The demand that a moral property must be held to be such by a community is no *a priori* restriction on the types of properties that can come into question. Take any kind of wildly absurd property; as long as it is an intrinsic property of a situation, and a culture holds it to be of moral relevance, it will count as a moral property. The moral character of the property must however be upheld by a culture for reason of intelligibility.

Culture implies language and languages cannot be private. Languages must be public because there must be ways in which they are spoken and only by that token can words refer (Rhees, 1963). This does emphatically not entail that the predominant moral order of a society is solely eligible to determine what a moral property is. It does mean, however, that members of a society must be able to understand and comprehend the property as moral. To give an example, if someone said, “I was entitled to take his tomatoes because my nephew likes milk” we would try to find some conceptual connection between “my nephew likes milk” and “I was entitled to take his tomatoes”. If we failed to find such a conceptual bridge, we would think that the person had misspoken. If he nevertheless insists, that his nephew’s preference for milk is the sole reason for him being entitled to steal someone’s tomatoes, then we would confine him to an asylum rather than append our list of moral properties. Consequently, there must be a culture where the property is deemed moral for us to identify it as such. This is an epistemological claim, nothing else.

The second restriction that our heuristic introduces is that a moral property inheres in a situation. Without some systematic application of M_1 to S_1 in C_1 it would be impossible for an outsider to understand the nature of the concept involved and it would even be impossible for members of the community to acquire a linguistic competence. This is not an *a priori* restriction imposed on what types of properties can be counted. Rather, it is an *a priori* restriction on what, linguistically, can be a property of any sort. This latter restriction, too, is then an epistemological claim.

The value of our heuristic lies in its openness to the variegated ways in which human life expresses itself. Since people can attend to any property that is possible for the human mind to comprehend, our heuristics is open to every such property that a culture has deemed as sufficient ground for an action. (Sufficient is to be understood in the loose sense of being comprehensible as a cause for action in analogy with the above example of the nephew who liked milk.) The heuristic entails that a Delphic oracle is as much a moral property as is an order in the military or the giving of a promise. If any of these has ever been picked out as a sufficient cause for action in a culture that has reckoned them as bringing practical understanding, then they are moral properties. If we find any of them, absurd or insufficient is in no way relevant. Neither is it relevant if some such property has gone in or out of fashion within a particular culture. The relevant question remains if there has ever been an x that satisfies the heuristic, and if yes, then it is, or was, likely a moral property.

The proposed heuristic could equally well be applied by a Martian ethologist on earth as a Tellurian ethologist on Mars. As long as there is a species, that makes public to its conspecifics the motives for actions, and the conspecifics evaluate these motives in terms of sufficiency as an explanation to aforementioned action, as long will our heuristic be able to pick out what, within that species, counts as a moral property. Our Tellurian ethologist on Mars might find that there is great variety in what count as moral properties among the Martians and he might even find that the same property is applied in contradictory ways in different groups and that properties go in and out of fashion as time passes. For our purpose, however, it might be more interesting to ask what the Martian ethologist on earth would find. Would he not find culturally bound norms that vary over time? In one place at one time, he finds how a divine oracle is accepted as sufficient ground for action and at the same place but on a different time he finds an identical claim causing one to be confined in an asylum. What would he make of that? If he had been a lazy ethologist then he might have written the whole subject of morality off as random behavioral variations. But we are lucky! Our Martian ethologist is diligent, so he asks himself if there is some deeper order in what on the surface looks like random behavioral quirks. Given enough time he would detect similarities across time and place, we might call these similarities unifying themes.

What a unifying theme means is simply that there exist patterns, which repeat themselves with a higher frequency than they would if they were due to pure chance. Take as examples: kinship; previous interactions, material gain, material cost, ancestral customs, and character traits. All of these are recurring themes i.e. moral properties that keep recurring on different places and at different times. They are neither ephemeral nor idiosyncratic. That there are such recurring themes I take to be self-evident even by a brief glance on cultural data and thorough anthropological studies confirm their existence abundantly (Westermarck, 1924;

Brown, 1991).⁵ It is not the case that recurring themes are true moral properties while the less recurring are something else. A moral property is a moral property even if it has only figured as such once during the entire history of our species. Nevertheless, when it comes to explaining and understanding, there is an important difference between unifying themes and irregularities. There is reason, if no other the second law of thermodynamics, to believe that order demand a different type of explanation than do disorder. Disorder can be explained by random drift or occasional outside disturbance while unifying themes need some principle that explains the homogeneity. Thus, we seek general explanations for general cases and particular explanations for exceptional cases. This is a point to bear well in mind when we seek to explain moral properties.

Contrary to the unifying ambition of some philosophers, what we have at our hands is not one single phenomena but a plethora of phenomenon all bearing the name of moral properties. Some might say that this polymorphism is nothing but our own making since we have chosen an open-ended heuristic. True enough, a less allowing heuristic, perhaps even a stipulative definition, could have shaped a monolith of unity. However, to accomplish such unity we would need to assume the commanding heights and declare that some linguistic communities lack competence, and that we, the philosophers, are better suited to determine the true meaning of words. This is a route possible to take if we are prepared to pay the price of the underlying assumption, for as Quine (1961) noted, “Any Statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustment elsewhere in the system”. I find myself unable to pay that price since I am interested in what humans do when they communicate, not what they would or could do if they had unfailing command of some ideal unambiguous language. Indeed, as Churchland (2011, p. 10) points out, “moral” is a fussy concept, even if we can all agree on prototypical cases.

⁵ To clarify: recurring themes do not imply genetic hardwiring. Genes most certainly play a part because without them there would be no humans in the first place. But genes interact with other genes and with their environment. The supposed relevant genes express themselves in neurons that constitute their environment and the milieu of a neuron is affected by other neurons that are susceptible (it is their job to be susceptible) to the influence of the entire organism and its external environment. Thus Churchland (2011, pp. 106-110) concludes that moral knowledge is most likely situated in “skills and dispositions” rather than in specific genes. None of this makes the recurring themes less recurring but it warns us against jumping from recurring behavior to genetic reductionism and biological determinism. Behavior can recur without genetic hardwiring, there is for example, as far as we know, no gene for making boats. They are just a handy solution if you want to cross open water. Still, without some particular set of genes you would not have the limbs necessary to make them or the brainpower to come up with the idea of how to make one. Thus, genes are always a necessary but seldom a sufficient condition for a particular behavior to occur.

If we take serious the polymorphic nature of moral properties, we will be forced to consider the possibility that not all of them can be explained or even understood in the same way. Sure, they all bear the same name and fill the same function of giving communally accessible reasons as for why one acts as one does, but the similarity needs not extend beyond this point. Compare horticulture and restaurants, they can both in one way or the other be related to the human need for nutrients but to seek a common denominator beyond this point seems futile. To understand the origin, development, and function for one of these will not inform us about the other. We need two sets of explanations for two distinct phenomena that are loosely held together by their indubitably shared connection to man's metabolic needs. In the same vein, moral properties are loosely held together as being properties in situations, which are communally accepted as relevant for the cause of actions someone takes. Moral properties could be bundled together even further under what we may call "communicating about motives". It seems to me that it was something like this Aristotle tried to say when he wrote, "If then, human activity is a way of life according to articulate reason and not without it [...]"⁶ (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1098a) (*my transl.*). Here Aristotle simply points out that giving and deliberating over reasons is a distinctive human activity. We could see it as the moral counterpart to the explanatory function metabolic needs played for horticulture and restaurants. There is, however, no reason to assume a common cause for the diverse manifestations moral properties take even though they share a characteristic. Moral properties are held together as a group by a family semblance; in a chain of likenesses where the extreme ends need not share a single factual feature. Consequently, if we want to say something about moral properties we had better not be covetous.

My argument this far amounts to this: a great host of moral properties have surfaced and succumbed during human history, some of them are lonely birds (the oracle of Delphi said...), while others are recurring themes (it is my child...). Given the fact that some are ephemeral while others persist, there is reason to assume that they, while falling under one description, still need different explanations. If nothing else then at least their relative

⁶ "εἰ δ' ἐστὶν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου" (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1098a). The translation of λόγος as *articulate reason* is supported by Sparshott's (1994, pp. 45-48) observation that Aristotle elsewhere uses λόγος to signify the communicable aspect of reasoning. Λόγος is an act of communal deliberation, not a solo play by a lone thinker, if ever there were such. Articulate reason is also something different from mere rationality because, as Sibley (1953) pointed out, a mere rational agent can do the most unreasonable things, while a reasonable agent is "essentially related to the disposition to act morally" (*op. cit.* p. 560). To act with articulate reason and never without it, is essentially to commit oneself to act morally, i.e. to be prepared to justify one's acts.

frequency is crying out for an explanation, i.e. there must be a cause to why some moral properties recur more often than others do. The arguments we use as to why some moral property obtain or not obtain must therefore not be greedy. We will have to look at each particular group of moral properties and the context in which they are used before we construct a case for or against them. General and sweeping arguments about moral properties as such are worthless as long as we cannot confidently speak of moral properties as a discrete unit that stand or fall on the same premises. Unifying themes, along with idiosyncrasies make it very unlikely that moral properties can ever be treated as a discrete unit, so we had better shelve all ambition to force them under the same explanatory header. My own ambition is to look at a subset of moral properties, those the ancient Greeks referred to as virtues. Before we go on and explain what we take talk about virtues to entail in chapter 3, one crucial question remains. What exactly is our question?

2.3 Why and What Do We Ask?

We ruminate and we reason over various things because they trouble us in some way. The things that do not trouble us are familiar; if they even enter our consciousness, they do so docilely and then leave it without making a fuss. If we happen to tend to them, it is by accident rather than design. They cause no syncopation in the rhythm of our daily lives just because they have become part of its familiar tune. It is when something is amiss that Things break into our stream of consciousness and cause our attention to whirl around them like a maelstrom races around its center. Once a thing forces itself into the epicenter of our being, it is impossible to, by an act of will, let it go. It captures the attention of our thought like a cat that becomes transfixed by its plaything and chases it around the sitting room oblivious to furniture and trinkets. Oftentimes it is simple things that stir up such a commotion in us; the sound we heard in the stairs, the swift movement we caught in the corner of our eye, the hotplate we used just before we left.

Thankfully, we, like the cat, are blessed with forgetfulness, so things are disremembered and remain so as long nothing pull the strings of our memory and make them resurface to send us of into a new wild pursuit. We are however unlike the cat in some respects, particularly when it comes to abstract thinking. While cats surely have associative thinking and can be stirred when the thing fails to follow the sign, they lack an inner world

populated by signs.⁷ Consequently, cats cannot be disturbed by the interrelations among signs. This is however a malady that severely can distress humans and set their thoughts of in endless loops.

In the novel *Nausea*, Sartre's protagonist, Roquentin, is afflicted with the specifically human malady of being troubled by signifiers. Roquentin is haunted by the tenuous relation thoughts and words have to the things, the signified. What is the force with which we bind the world to us and us to the world? Ultimately, at a climaxed epiphany under a chestnut tree, he envisages "the collapse of the human world of measures, of quantities, of bearings" (Sartre, 2000[1938], p. 184). It is Roquentin's struggle, against a collapse of the familiar world of human measures that is chronicled in Sartre's novel. This struggle is a haunting presence, a nausea caused by thoughts he cannot rid himself. That people can be haunted *ad nauseam* by thoughts is made clear already by Agustin's (2004) *Confessions* where he recounts his own struggle with thoughts of a philosophical and theological nature. Beliefs that thus haunt us come in orders of severity; the gravest form is a pathological condition and named Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This type is found in *DSM-IV* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 456) with the diagnostic code 300.3 and is defined as "Recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or images that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and unwanted and that in most individuals cause marked anxiety or distress".

However, long before this condition was bestowed a diagnostic code, ancient Hellenistic schools of philosophy had observed the detrimental effect thoughts could have on existential health. The old Greeks therefore sought a way to free the soul from these disturbances (ταραξία). Nussbaum (1994, pp. 13-48) suggest that we follow the Hellenistic thinkers who took such a medical, or therapeutic, approach to philosophy. Her argument for this method is essentially based on a compassionate reflection on what has hitherto been said; humans suffer and they do so because of their thoughts. It is the same observation made by Wittgenstein (see chapter 1) in his *Philosophical Investigations* and it is the rationale

⁷ What I have in mind is essentially the Pavlovian conditioning with a cognitive twist. If you have a feline friend, you are probably well aware that opening the cupboard where you store the cat food, without procuring it for the cat, is met with prolonged meows and scurrying around your feet. If the cat had been human then we would say it was upset. If you on the other hand have forgot to buy cat food and thus don't open the cupboard to put new cans there, then the cat will remain unperturbed. If you have children, the same calm will not remain for long if they discover you have forgotten to buy them soda. It is this difference between immediate associative awareness and awareness through a series of cognitive representations I intend to capture.

underlying cognitive therapy. If there are thoughts that disturb humans then there is a reason for people with good will to help the sufferer extirpate them by thoughts with ataractic qualities. For reason of clarity, it is thoughts we are talking about and not facts. The method does emphatically not entail that we rely on falsehood and deception. To use an analogy, if someone is mourning the death of a loved one the therapeutic approach is not to dupe the mourner to believe that the deceased is alive. What the therapeutic approach does entail is that we try to bestow the mourner with a way to think about life and death that causes less grief and suffering. The same holds true for a Roquentin or an Agustin. The harmful ways in which we think about our situation and not the alleged facts of the matter is the object of therapeutic philosophy.

We devoted chapter 2.1 to discuss how precariously situated among our thoughts moral properties have become. If the hegemony the Christian religion provided, gave some respite from the assailing moral properties suffered under the ancient sophists, the attacks from Nietzsche and onwards have been relentless. In a very broad sense, we can say that the charge is this: we cannot make room, in our thoughts, for moral properties and ethical judgments in a scientific and enlightened age. Moral talk is reduced to mere noisemaking because it cannot sensibly be maintained that there is an object of morality. Wittgenstein (2001, p. 86 [6.41]) wrote to this point “In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists – and if it did exist, it would have no value”. The same sentiment is present in Ayer (1946), Burgass (2007), Camus (2005[1942]), Garner (1990), Joyce (2001), Mackie (1946; 1977) and Sartre (2000[1938]). This enumeration is in no way exhaustive, it only serves to show that the precarious station of moral properties is widely recognized. Yet, none of the enumerated authors embraces nihilism. All of them, in their different ways, have tried to find a workaround, which let them keep their bearings in a cosmos they perceive as essentially devoid of values. Their own thoughts cannot be reconciled with an outlook that denies them the possibility to pronounce things to be of moral import. The show must go on even if the lead character is both dead and buried. This ambivalence is perhaps not that strange, because as one author rather wryly put it, “Human beings cannot live wholly and healthily except in responsiveness to objective values of truth and beauty and goodness” (Cottingham, 2003, p. 103). We are thus torn between, on the one hand, our intuition to attribute values and, on the other hand, our inability to find anything in this world to which these values will stick. Thus begins the wild goose chase, for some measures that can save troubled minds.

It seems to me that we have now found our question and the motive for asking. The motive for us asking is a conflict between an enlightened and scientifically informed worldview and our propensity, as a species, to single out moral properties. There is a felt tension here, and it will not go away and refuses (at least for the last two hundred years) to be forgotten. The question itself is cast in the therapeutic mold. Is there some way to free ourselves from this felt tension and restore our peace of mind (*αταραξία*)? To put it another way; are there at least one point of view from which science and enlightenment does not clash with moral properties, and enables us to retain both without felt tensions? However, as we discussed in 2.2, there is probably not one answer to what a moral property is beyond the heuristic. If we construe the question in its broadest sense, we will have to say something about every property that has ever been singled out as carrying moral significance. Such an explanation would have to be greedy because it would have to maintain not only that all moral properties could be scuffed under one roof but also that they pose identical problems for a mind that is enlightened and scientifically literate. This seems highly unlikely given the varying forms moral properties take. The mere fact that they are all counted as moral properties does not entitle that we must view them as one indivisible whole. Consider; violet, green, and red may well all be colors but they cause different symptoms among the colorblind.⁸

We shall take a precocious route and try to stay clear of avarice, thus we will settle for one class of moral properties, namely virtues. We shall define what we take a “virtue” to be in chapter 3, and in chapter 4, we will ask what an enlightened and scientifically literate mind entails. In chapter 5, we shall then let them meet and see if there is an angle from which we can view and appreciate them both without feeling a cause to worry about the place either of them occupy in our minds. If my hand is agile enough I hope that at the end of this essay have shown that, there really is no need to philosophize about human virtues once we have taken our species natural history to heart.

⁸ Violet, green, and red represents the low, middle, and high end of the color spectrum and thus cause different types of symptoms depending on the kind of colorblindness. Achromatopsia is naturally also a possibility (though very rare), in which case no colors are seen.

3. Aristotelian Virtues

We have earlier (2.2) stressed the importance of moral properties being recognized as such by a culture and not something that we make up at our own convenience. This is important because we want to say something about real and not imagined practices, so our first task will be to capture some property of a situation that in some culture has been deemed to offer practical understanding. The suggestive heading of this chapter has of course not held anyone in suspense over what property I had in mind, i.e. virtues. But the mere word “virtues” does not immediately make it clear to us of what we are talking. The “virtue” I am referring to is that elaborated by Aristotle, so it is bound to one particular cultural context, though the scoop might well be broader if the same notion figures in other cultural contexts.⁹

It is important to stress the cultural specificity of virtue-ethics as it was conceived by Aristotle to avoid cuckoos in the nest. When we talk about virtues in a western context, our thoughts are easily drawn to the Seven Virtues, four cardinal, and three theological, with their antitheses in the seven deadly sins. The Catholic Catechism even has a special section devoted to the role of virtues in the Christian faith. If we thus read section 1812 in the catechism, we are told that, “The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt man’s faculties for participation in the divine nature” (Citta del Vaticano, 1993). It stands to reason that whatever else might be said about the relation between the virtue-ethics expounded by Aristotle and the virtue-ethics of the Christian tradition, here lies a hiatus in their continuity. This hiatus is of central importance if we are to understand what a virtue in the Aristotelian sense is, so we had better give it some attention.

When virtue-ethics returned to the scene of western philosophy by the middle of the nineteenth-century, the renewed interest was to a large extent spurred by an article written by G. E. M. Anscombe (1958a). In this seminal article, she investigates the main difference between contemporary moral philosophy and Aristotelian thinking. Her main concern is that western moral philosophy, since the arrival of Christianity, has had a transcendent approach to morality, by conceiving of it in the form of law. This is a radically

⁹ It has been suggested that Buddhist-ethics is a virtue-ethics similar to that articulated by Aristotle (Whitehill, 1994) and the same has been said about the Confucian tradition (Hursthouse, 2012). Since I lack a deeper knowledge of these traditions, I cannot confidently elaborate any further on their relation to the Aristotelian theory. Though, it would of course broaden the public interest, in a rehabilitation of virtue-ethics along the lines suggested in this essay, if its relevance could prove to be of cross-cultural value. Parenthetically I might add that some form of virtue ethics also seems, in my opinion, to have been present in the wisdom tradition of old Israel, chiefly in the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs.

different way of talking and thinking compared to the way Aristotle talked and thought.¹⁰ Aristotle's thinking was thoroughly immanent since his line of reasoning had its origin in concerns for "the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life" (Anscombe G. E., 1958a, p. 14). The key words here are "activity" and "departments of life". A human good in an Aristotelian sense is "an active way of life in accordance with excellence"¹¹ (*my trans.*), and it is this excellence (ἀρετή) that it takes to make a virtue.¹²

The object that virtues refer to in the Aristotelian scheme is a way of life (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια). As Heidegger (2009, p. 31) remarked, Aristotle's "way of life" is nothing else than "*being-in the-world*", i.e. man *qua* man. What Heidegger means to say is that things have a way of being in the world as parts of that world, parts that are something in their own right, beyond their material constituents and attributed role. The Christian scheme is, as we saw, radically different because it takes as its starting point not man *qua* man but man *qua* god. The Christian and Aristotelian accounts of what a virtue is are thus fundamentally different, so what goes for the one has no fundamental bearing on what goes for the other. Different forms of virtue-ethics, if they have been legal tender in some culture, are naturally also entitled to pick out moral properties in the sense discussed in 2.2. However, if these alternate virtues obtain or fail to obtain, from the point of view we shall discuss, would require an investigation different from the one we are now undertaking.

Hitherto we have spoken in negative terms, to determine what an Aristotelian virtue (ἀρετή) is not, mainly as to avoid confusion with other forms of ethics that share some of the Aristotelian vocabulary while being quite alien to it in other respects. In the process, we have nevertheless given a formal account of what kind of property a virtue is. We can make explicit the necessary conditions for a virtue to obtain in the following way. In the set of all

¹⁰ We should add that Anscombe's view, as a historical description, is supported by authoritative commentators on Aristotle's philosophy (Sparshott, 1994, p. 363). Two decades later Anscombe was to be joined by Philippa Foot (1972), another great name in twentieth-century virtue-ethics, in the critique of morality conceived of as a law. For an assessment of Anscombe's argument and its place in contemporary virtue-ethical debate see Hacker-Wright (2010). On a less historical note we might also add that the contemporary Aristotelian ethicist Martha Nussbaum (1990, pp. 220-229) has launched an attack on the notion that ethics is based on or requires a "divine code". Her thesis is that the longing for an external immutable is caused by a buying into the sophist version of the distinction between convention (νόμος) and nature (φύσις). We shall return to Nussbaum's thesis in chapter 4.2.

¹¹ "τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια γίνεται κατ' ἀρετήν" (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1098a:15)

¹² The correct translation of ἀρετή is probably closer to "excellence" or "superiority" than it is to our "virtue". "Virtue" has a meek and mild undertone, shaped by the Christian emphasis on humility and subservience. Ἀρετή, on the other hand, is fused with power and self-sufficiency. For a brief comment on this point, see the entry on "Ἀρετή" in W. Bauer's (2000) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

existing properties, there exist virtues if and only if x is an activity and the activity is a way of life of a non-binary nature, that is, the way of life has to be gradable in stages of completion.

Aristotle used to talk about the entelechy (ἐντελέχεια) to denote what we would call “actuality” or the Wittgensteinian “is the case”. Ἐντελέχεια is, if translated literally, an in-the-goal-holdingness, i.e. an activity that maintains the completed state in its state of completeness. The process that leads up to ἐντελέχεια is a power (δύναμις) to become. A way of life (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια) fits into this scheme by being an entelechy and the capacity to be virtuous fits into the same scheme by being a power (δύναμις) that leads to (and/or maintains) the completed state (ἐντελέχεια). It is because of this that virtue is conceived of as excellence; because it moves man towards her full potential, i.e. the entelechy of her humanity.

What still needs to be made clear is what a man *qua* man kind of thing amounts to. More prosaically; what is the thing that makes the man to the man that she is and not another thing, a non-man? We have already (p. 20) encountered an important part of the Aristotelian answer to this question when we quoted him saying that human activity is determined by articulate reason and not without it (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1098a.5). It is this human capacity to imagine, elaborate, and discern, together with an emotional makeup that underpins this ability, that makes man unique and determines her function. It is man thus understood, when she reflects on her own station, which can excel in this her principal activity. As we recall, Heidegger commented that the human way of life is one that takes place as a *being-in the-world*. This memento is Aristotle’s chief contribution to virtue theory. Man is an embodied and situated creature whose life takes place in the world and of the world. It is her existence as this kind of creature, in this kind of world, that determines what makes her flourish (εὐδαιμονία).

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers few direct arguments on man’s place in this world. He seems to take for granted that we, at least to some degree, know what man’s way of life (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια) is and what that entails for human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία). An early section of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that nevertheless discuss this matter indirectly is the part where Aristotle asks if happiness (εὐδαιμονία) is a transitory state, there he writes: “The one who pursues flourishing (εὐδαιμονία) shall remain [flourishing] for his entire live, since he mainly will act and observe in an excellent (ἀρετή) manner”¹³ (*my transl.*). Here he singles

¹³ “ὑπάρξει δὴ τὸ ζητούμενον τῷ εὐδαίμονι, καὶ ἔσται διὰ βίου τοιοῦτος: αἰεὶ γὰρ ἢ μάλιστα πάντων πράξει καὶ θεωρήσει τὰ κατ’ ἀρετὴν” (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1100b)

out two activities that he takes to constitute the human good, namely “acts” and “observations”. Both of these are naturally activities to be conducted according to articulate reason (λόγος) since that is the trademark of humankind. It is however first towards the end of book ten that he really gets down to business about human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία), the human way of life (ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια) and virtue (ἀρετή).¹⁴ On the other hand, this might not be that strange since the *Nicomachean Ethics* is supposed to be followed by *The Politics*, a work dedicated to anthropology, sociology, and political history. In this transitory and summary part of the last book in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle discusses two distinct forms of activity, namely physical and mental action. Aristotle is pointing to the obvious fact that humans are embodied creatures. The human way of life is consequently a life as an embodied consciousness. Her range of action is confined to these two elements, mind and body, and since actions are the only things that can display excellence, human virtues has to be the acts of an embodied consciousness.

Aristotle is laying a strong emphasis on the thinking aspect of human nature and writes “Since what is naturally homely for each [species] is also [the feature] most prominent and pleasurable for each one. And for humans this is the thinking life, if indeed this is the most [salient] human feature, and also [the feature which makes him] flourish the most”¹⁵ (*my. transl.*) In the same paragraph, he even likens human thinking (νόος) to the divine (θεῖος) and admonishes his listeners to affirm what is immortal, i.e. divine, within them and not to be struck down by piety or modesty in their pursuit of excellence in their primary faculty. There is a recognized tension in Aristotle’s account at this point (Norman, 1998, pp. 39-40; Sparshott, 1994, pp. 336-338). In book II-V he have expounded on the various virtues that was commonly agreed upon and they are all markedly social. He will soon return to these yet again by saying “Secondly, we have those other virtues, those that accord with human activity. Justice and courage and those other virtues we practice onto one another [...]”¹⁶ (*my*

¹⁴ Sparshott (1994, pp. 326-327) suggests that up until 1176b Aristotle’s argument have mainly been phenomenological. Sparshott argues that when Aristotle discussed the various virtues in book II-V he assumed that the reader would agree with him that the various virtues (friendliness, courage, magnanimity etc.) are parts of what makes up a happy life. It is first in this last section of his book, in the transition to *The Politics* that he questions convention and seeks a theoretic justification for the virtues. I am not entirely sure Sparshott is right because Aristotle have discussed the Sophist’s argument against convention earlier on in 1134b. It is however clear, that if we reads Aristotle with a modern metaethical discourse in mind, his most penetrating treatment of our questions will be found in 1176b-1179a30.

¹⁵ “τὸ γὰρ οἰκεῖον ἐκάστῳ τῇ φύσει κράτιστον καὶ ἡδιστόν ἐστιν ἐκάστῳ: καὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ δὴ ὁ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν βίος, εἴπερ τοῦτο μάλιστα ἀνθρώπος. οὗτος ἄρα καὶ εὐδαιμονέστατος” (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1178a)

¹⁶ “δευτέρως δ’ ὁ κατὰ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν: αἱ γὰρ κατὰ ταύτην ἐνέργειαι ἀνθρωπικαί. δίκαια γὰρ

transl.). This and a few more pages and we are of to *The Politics* where there is no place for the divine (θεῖος).

It is well worth remembering that just a generation before Aristotle, Socrates had been charged with impiety and sentenced to death because of his philosophizing. That scrutinizing the high heavens and the established order was not looked upon kindly by all of Aristotle's contemporaries seems to be an understatement. Thus, Aristotle's admonition not to become crestfallen because of piety and modesty has a rebellious undertone, let us remember, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is compiled lecture notes from him addressing the students at the academy. Aristotle (Nic. Eth. 1179a) even mounts a little theological defense for the wise man (ὁ σοφός), by saying that if the gods take any notice about humans then they are most likely to take pleasure in him that takes delight in what they themselves take delight, which, to Aristotle's mind, is thinking (νόος). Even so, he makes various concessions, interspersed in this narrative, to the effect that a life devoted entirely to thinking is not humanly possible, because "if thinking is something divine to man, then such a life [i.e. a life devoted entirely to thinking] is divine compared to human life"¹⁷ (*my transl.*). Thus, the philosopher too has to live the life of a human being and to do so she needs to excel as man *qua* man and not man *qua* god.¹⁸

To end our exegetical work and provide some flesh to the practical side of Aristotle's ethical theory we may use Nussbaum's (1990, pp. 36-44) classification of four important features in Aristotelian ethics. These are (a) noncommensurability of values, (b) priority of the particular, (c) value of the emotions, and (d) relevance of uncontrolled happenings. Aristotle conceived of man as an animal that does not inhabit the best of all possible worlds. Hers is a world that takes no particular interest in the change of her fortune. In short, man's existence is at the mercy of caprice, and the world is not structured in such a way that she can obtain all her goods. Thus, choices present themselves in a way that forces her to give up if she is to gain, and once given up some goods are forever lost to her. Life is also in a flux, as is the human condition and the interrelations among humans. To establish

καὶ ἀνδρεῖα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα τὰ κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς πρὸς ἀλλήλους πράττομεν" (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1178a)

¹⁷ "εἰ δὲ θεῖον ὁ νοῦς πρὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ ὁ κατὰ τοῦτον βίος θεῖος πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον" (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1177b)

¹⁸ There is much more that could be said about Aristotle's treatment of man's thinking faculty as something divine. Part of it would have to deal with how his own philosophy relates to Plato's and another part would have to tend to his other writings and how he conceived of mind as something without motion, a kind of unmoved mover. See Sparshott (1994, pp. 633-638) for a discussion on how Aristotle's worldview might have influenced his ethical thinking at this point.

univocal ethical laws that safeguard human flourishing by mechanical application is thus impossible. Every situation is a matrix in which external and internal conditions combine in patterns that might well be onetime occurrences in the history of the entire universe. Each of these occurrences calls for some course of action whose outcome is uncertain. Under such circumstances, it is not wise to gamble and yet it is not possible to know. Man must therefore devote all her discerning capabilities to steer a clear course in life. A course, which enables her to excel as a human being, despite the unfavorable conditions under which she lives. To achieve this end she needs practical wisdom (φρόνησις), a knowledge that enables her to combine the universal and the particular (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1142 a). It is paramount that we understand that virtues are not the same as one good act, it is rather the sum total of interconnected acts that constitute an entire life. Virtues are only really possible to identify in retrospect when we look back at the course of a complete life and judge it, as when we judge a painting, to tell if it has lasting qualities or not. When we act virtuously, what we try to do is to emulate those lasting qualities that elsewhere have made human lives display excellence in the various activities that are typical of humans.

Since there is no universal law of right action to be straightforwardly applied, and fortunes are easily overturned, the object of practical wisdom, i.e. to safeguard human flourishing, becomes a moving target. Different circumstances usually allow different possibilities to excel, as external forces reshape the landscape of possible flourishing forms of life. War, peace, famine, plenty, sickness and health, all these are factors that radically alters what options lies open to man and where her potential as a human being is situated. A warmonger in peacetime is as dangerous as a peacemonger in the trench. An ungenerous man in times of plenty is as unwelcome as a wastrel in times of need. A hard-working sickling is as injurious as a healthy person that is indolent. None has chosen the circumstances that determine where their potential of fulfillment lies, but in each particular circumstance there is some course of action that allows them to be the best they can under those circumstances. Yet, as Aristotle insists, certainty in these matters does not approach that of a law of science and the knowledge we can hope to attain must conform to the nature of the subject of our investigation (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1094b).

Since the unattainability of a mechanized ethics was clear to Aristotle, he turned to life itself and to dramatizations of possible lives for guidance. In *The Poetics* Aristotle (Aristot. Ars Poet. 1451b) equates plays and literature with philosophy in that they explore the space of possible human lives, i.e. lives that are possible for us. Story and drama let us follow

the lives of characters emotionally, and intellectually we become aware how their choices shaped their lives. The knowledge thus attained is not theoretical but practical or perhaps existential. It is knowledge of what life can be and what it can become, of how caprice or good fortune can make what once seemed remote creep under our skin. It let us emotionally sympathize or distance ourselves from various possibilities and thus this kind of knowledge helps us shape what we shall become. This, the literary turn, has been developed by contemporary philosophers within the Aristotelian tradition as for example Eaton (2001) and Nussbaum (1990). A related approach is found in applied virtue-ethics, where the autobiographic narratives of senior practitioners are used as material for reflections on what constitute virtues within their own professions (Becker, 2004, pp. 273-274).

Despite all particularities that surround us, Aristotle maintained that there are factors that are close to universal and needs to be attended to in each unique situation. Chief among these is man's social nature, about which Aristotle famously remarked "the human is by nature a sociable creature. He that by nature and not caprice is unsociable is either less or more than a human"¹⁹ (*my transl.*). Aristotle realized that virtues, i.e. excellences, could be roughly divided into two groups. Foremost we have those virtues we can practice on our own (i.e. intellectual virtues) but we also have those "we practice onto one another". From the circumstance that we are a sociable species, derives the fact that many of the capabilities in which we can excel, are of a social nature. Our need for the company and companionship of other humans is thus a universal. It is, however, not an ethical universal because we need other people in order to survive in a harsh world, which we do, but because we need them to partake in meritorious activities. A man without this need would be, as Aristotle remarked, either less or more than human. Such a creature would have other virtues but they would be of no consequence for how we appraise human flourishing.

Aristotle's overall approach to the particular virtues is pragmatic and open to revision. As he himself points out "A true judgment in these matters is passed by its fitness to human activity and life in general, because in these matters [practical validity] is paramount"²⁰ (*my transl.*). This must be so, since human flourishing and human needs is the object of our investigation, the standard of proof is internal in relation to our human

¹⁹ "ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον, καὶ ὁ ἄπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἤτοι φαῦλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος" (Aristot. Pol. 1.1253a)

²⁰ "τὸ δ' ἀληθές ἐν τοῖς πρακτικοῖς ἐκ τῶν ἔργων καὶ τοῦ βίου κρίνεται: ἐν τούτοις γὰρ τὸ κύριον." (Aristot. Nic. Eth. 1179a)

constitution. If we can learn more about ourselves, then we might also learn more about what it takes to reach our full potential as human beings. While such knowledge might well be scientific and thus derived from general laws of science there is still the intractable question of application in the particular cases that cannot be expressed in the form of a general law of ethical science, but must be the object of practical wisdom. Thus, if we take Aristotle's theory at face value, nothing he singles out as a moral property in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an absolute moral property. The different forms of excellence are excellences only to the extent they are conducive to human flourishing. In contemporary debate, the concept of virtue has been developed in radically different directions; some are within an Aristotelian framework while others are varieties of deontological or utilitarian ethics. This has led some commentators (Nussbaum, 1999) to question its usefulness since what unites the different forms of virtue-ethics is of less significance than what keeps them apart. I would agree if we were to talk about virtue-ethics *simpliciter*, but if it is affixed with some other term, like Aristotelian-, Christian- or Kantian-, then I still think it serves its purpose of drawing attention to some important feature of the theory in question, provided the reader has some background knowledge of ethics.

Enough has now been said about virtues. Before we move on to talk about the problems values are supposed to face in an enlightened and scientifically literate age we should briefly summarize what has been said about the Aristotelian conception of virtue-ethics. Virtues can most easily be understood as excellences displayed over the entire range of repeated activities an animal is performing as parts of a complete life. What activities an animal performs as parts of a complete life is dependent upon the kind of animal it is and under what circumstances it is placed. The human animal is above all an intelligent animal and her intelligence permeates all of her activities, thus to excel in her reasoning capacity is her chief virtue since it effects the execution of all her other activities. Humans are also a social creature, which means that most of her capabilities are relational and can thus only be expressed in communion with others of her kind. In order to excel as a human she must therefore be able to socialize successfully with her conspecifics during the entire course of her life. The overarching structure of a virtuous life is such that when it is ended other humans shall be able to recognize that it was a life well lived. Humans acquire virtues by using their intellectual and emotional capacity to identify and emulate lives that can be thus described. The question that now remains to be answered is if this is a coherent way of talking and thinking.

4. Nature and Naturalism

4.1 Our Natural History²¹

4.6-5.0Mya (million years ago) the family tree of man and his closest living relative the chimpanzee bifurcated. Our common ancestor was what we today would call an ape and she²² most likely lived in a group with other apes, as do all of her now living decedents. The history of our branch in this family tree, the Hominids,²³ of which we are the only now living member, dwarfs our recorded history with three orders of magnitude. Our family's first material culture, the Olduwan culture, is still three orders of magnitude older than our recorded history, and it belonged to *Homo habilis* 2.4-1.6Mya. After them came *Homo erectus*, 1.6Mya-300Kya (thousand years ago), with the more advanced Acheulian culture, and they were the first species to tame fire. 200Kya the first member of *Homo sapiens*, i.e. us, saw the day break, probably somewhere in Africa and for along time we were to live together with other decedents of *Erectus*. Our last sibling to leave was *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* that were good artisans and likely buried their dead. If that is the case, then the last Neanderthal funeral took place somewhere in Europe 38000 BCE. Approximately at the same time began the Upper Paleolithic era from where the first evidence of modern culture comes, and at the end of this period, 11000 years ago, agriculture started to spread and inaugurated the Neolithic age. What was to come thereafter can be read in history books.

While we are rightly impressed with human achievements in recorded history, it seems to me, that we ought to be at least a little amused by our prehistory. We are not strangers to the idea that we bear an indelible mark from our own childhood, a decade or so of personal history, and the history of our own people, a few pivotal events in recorded history. Why then should it be alien to us to that we bear a mark from our close prehistory that has lasted millions of years and even so, our more distant prehistory that spans in the billions? If events of the past are at all relevant for our understanding of the present, then I submit that since our recent past itself had a recent past that for us is a distant past the chain remains unbroken. The tract of time we cut out map our own being will not change who we are but it

²¹ The various scientific data presented in this chapter are of a general nature. Their source, if not specifically attributed otherwise, is to be found in Futuyma, D. (1998, pp. 165-201, 539-561, 605-625, 728-734).

²² In this case, it really is a She since the dating of common ancestors is based on the mitochondrial DNA that in all mammals is inherited solely on the side of the mother.

²³ The term *Hominid* refers to the clade in which humans now are the only living member, the similar sounding term *Hominoid* refers to the group that includes both humans and apes.

will definitely change our outlook. Take this as an example: Sara will cry (future); Mandy hits Sara (present); Sara hit Mandy (past); Mandy had slept with Sara's wife (perfect). Depending on what time frame we use, different stories evolve, stories that take diverse shapes. We stopped our narrative at the past perfect tense, we often do. The English language lacks a tense for time segments more than two steps away from the present. It is not that we cannot tell stories that are located further back in time, but when we do, we begin with a past present, a present that took place in the past, and we make our way onwards from that present moment in the past. Humans and their languages are oriented towards the future, they stand on the lookout at the bow while the stern is left unguarded.

Something is formed out of formless matter and that something is you, it was not a *creatio ex nihilo*, it took coitus and functioning reproductive organs to accomplish that feat. It was functioning reproductive organs that were made by other functioning reproductive organs, and so on way back before time immemorial had begun. Somewhere there in the mist of prehistory, some 3 billion years ago, the first self-replicating piece of molecule, the mother of our DNA, began to self-replicate. We have certainly grown since then, grown into many different things, flowers, reptiles, bacteria, cats, and, yes, humans. So much variation "from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful", as Darwin (1859, p. 490) wrote. During these vast tracts of time, evolution untiringly ran its slow course and molded the brains and bodies of every creature we now see. It seems that the question of what an organism is, is just as much a question of what it has become. It is a question about a present in the past, a present past in the present.

Our present past begins with a lone strain of proto-RNA,²⁴ a self-replicating molecule that undergoes small random mutations in the replicating process. The relative frequency of subsequent variants of proto-RNA will be determined by the individual replicating success of each variant. If a variation does not affect the replicating success of the molecule then the frequency of this particular variation will drift randomly in the population. Some things do depend on chance but others do not. Eventually a life form resembling a modern organism evolved, most probably something like today's prokaryotic bacteria. It was a humble form of life as is our prokaryotes, a single cell with no inner cell membrane and a few metabolic pathways, but overall better protected and more effective than free-floating

²⁴ DNA is descended from a simpler form of self-replicating molecule, probably similar to the RNA that we see in present day bacteria, and before that, the general assumption is that a free floating chemical compound filled the job of chief replicator, I have baptized this compound proto-RNA.

replicating molecules. It was a single cell, silently going about its business with feeding and self-replicating its personal brand of RNA. There span the world, inhabited solely by single celled bacteria whose default form of interaction was to occasionally bump into each other by chance. They were neither friendly nor unfriendly but blissfully unaware. Some varieties became extinct, while still other excelled in making copies of themselves to posterity. The forms of life that could thrive at this time were limited since meaningful interaction was not yet invented. Each organism, a metabolic self-replicator, was tied down by what had made its predecessor to a successful self-replicator, so, to each his own germ line.

Two things were to happen that forever changed life on this planet. First, when the presence of self-replicating organism became a tangible factor in the environment, they became parts of joint ecosystems. Thus inter-organism ecology emerged, and became a driving force in the continued evolution of life. Second, different organisms began to share the same germ line (like the somatic cells in our bodies do today), and so the multicellular organism was born. If those strains of self-replicators that first banded together in one single germ line had been of a literary mind, they might have exclaimed in chorus:

*“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition”*

- **W. Shakespeare** *Henry V*

Single cells that share the same germ line and organisms that share the same environment have one thing in common, both their evolutionary and their individual fates become intertwined in intricate ways, which opens up possibilities for radically new ways of life and simultaneously other ways of life cease to be viable. Perhaps the scene of life after the multicellular revolution can be captured by the words from Shelly's *Love's Philosophy* "Nothing in the world is single; all things by a law divine, in one spirit meet and mingle. Why not I with thine?" Once the dam that had held genetic cooperation back was broken, life forms of staggering complexity and evermore-elaborate lifecycles could evolve, and as is evolved, it did so in tandem. It was not a kingdom of peace that descended on earth, competition between organisms continued to be a viable option, but it was a kingdom where an existence could be built on mutual benefit (*mutualism*) and end up in mutual dependence (*symbiosis*). An example of the latter is the fig tree and the fig wasp, two different organisms that would not exist without each other. The fig tree has made unique adaptations to accommodate for the fig

wasp's reproductive cycle; its fruits are designed as an incubator for fig wasp eggs, and the fig wasp is the sole pollinator of the fig tree. If one of them dies out then the other will go with it.²⁵ Another example is the eusocial insects, which likens the cells in our own bodies in that they share one single germ line. There is only one reproductive member in these societies; all others are decedents of their matriarchal mother, the queen, who solely will yield offspring that carries the species into posterity. Each individual has a special role to play in the colony, and it has evolved unique adaptations to fulfill that role. A republican in an insect colony would spell the end of its own species. Humans are of course neither fig trees nor eusocial insect; if they were, then they would be ecological competitors to the species that have evolved into these modes of life. What we can learn from figs and ants is not what it is to be a human but what it is to be an evolved form of life.

Human took another evolutionary rout then the insects about 550Mya, when the vertebrate and invertebrate lines began to bifurcate. The ant and the fig wasp took the direction to hyper-specialization, finding small ecological niches to which they adapted with remarkable precision. Their behavior is almost exclusively innate specific responses with small room for flexibility, so the individual inhabits an ecological cul-de-sac. Over evolutionary time, the species surely can change, but individual members of the order Hymenoptera (wasps, bees, ants, and sawflies) are hard-wired to perform a specific set of acts and by their own accord, they cannot change their very specific way of life. Mammals, to which humans belong, opted for flexibility, but flexibility came at a price, the price of less direct genetic control of their behavior. Insects do not have brains but ganglia, small bundles of neurons, while all mammals have them, and among the mammals, humans are those that have the most of it. The trend most markedly consistent in hominid evolution is the enlarged cranial cavity that steadily increased in size over millions of years. Brains facilitate many things; most importantly, they facilitate learning and accumulation of knowledge that can be transferred across the generations. But learning takes time from both the pupil and the master. Brainy creatures therefore have to rear their young for an extended period to complete the transferal of knowledge; else, the investment in an enlarged cortex would be a huge waste of energy that would backlash against the survivability of the species as such. Rearing children

²⁵ The story behind the Fig wasp and the fig tree is informed by Dawkins (1997, pp. 299-326) account of their coevolution. The complete ecology of figs and their wasps is more intricate than what I have indicated in the text and there are parasites that exploit their coevolution by mimicking the wasp and exploiting the fig. Nothing of this diminishes the main point I am making, namely that it is possible to make a good living by being a nice guy.

comes with the necessity not just of teaching, which could be done by simply observing, but also of nurturing and caring for the child. The next big question that evolution needs to answer is what to do with the nurtured and imparted child, which has now grown into a young adult. There are two extreme options, either to kick the child out and never see it again, or to take it up in an extended family, in between there are intermediary stages of cohabitation. The polar bear is at the solitary end of this continuum while the apes, past and present, humans included, are extreme cohabiters.

Cohabitation has adaptive needs of its own because if you are to live with your children and grandchildren and grow up with your parents and grandparents, then you had better know how to behave and so do they. Aggression, sexual desire, feeding order, common utilities, and all the things that need to be handled in lifelong cohabitation also need an infrastructure that allows for resolutions of these problems. Both apes and humans have adapted similar answers to some of these problems; one of them is the ability to form in-group relationships and to assign each member a place. We might liken the place an individual holds to a social map where each individual in the group occupy a unique locus, which regulates the role she or he is expected to play in various forms of interactions with individuals that occupy other loci. In-group relationships are a way to establish and maintain bonds with other members of the group, preferably friendly bonds because they will be around you for the entire course of your life. To self be able to hold a position on a social map and track the position of other individuals is thus essential, as is the ability to establish and maintain bonds with other group member. Both of these skills require communication, an ability to read and understand the others as well as an ability to express oneself and to be understood.

The human animal is as far as known the most intelligent and flexible social creature on this planet. She is equipped with prosocial emotions, symbolic thinking, and elaborate modes of communication, together with a large memory capacity to store emotional, symbolic, and practical memories for retrieval during her entire lifetime. She is also highly capable to learn from others, and integrate and transmit acquired knowledge to her conspecifics as well as to some other species. As Darwin (1871, s. 158) noted, this has made man able “through his mental faculties to *keep with an unchanged body in harmony with the changing universe*”. But when we speak of mental faculties in this context it is not pure contemplation we are discussing but an overall capacity to employ brainpower to solve both social and environmental problems in innovative ways. Aristotle seems to have it wrong since he thought it was the other way around, so that the exercise of pure intelligence (i.e.

philosophizing) came first and practical applications was as an extension of this. In reality, the practicality of intelligence was primary to the pure pleasure of abstract thought, at least as determinant in the continued evolution of the hominids.

Contrary to the Hobbesian vision of man's primordial state, it was not solitary, at least not for the last two million years when our ancestors lived in socially tight knit groups of hunters and gatherers. This form of life provided much time for leisure, and if anthropological data of hunter and gatherer societies are any guide, then plenty of inter-group interaction was the norm. (Campbell, 1995, pp. 139-140) If Hobbes had been right, there would not have been favorable conditions under which social contracts could be established in the first place. As experiments in game theory have shown, a too sanguine population will never be able to evolve prosocial behavior. (Dennett, 1996, pp. 453-460) The environment our ancestors lived in, and from which we have come, were a social environment populated by moderately intelligent hunters and gatherers. Under such circumstances conspecifics becomes as important a part of the species ecology as the food they eat and the climate in which they live (Campbell, 1995, pp. 7-8).

Enough have now been said about the details of our prehistory. To tell a detailed story is the job of biologists and anthropologists not philosophers. The point we wanted to illustrate has already been made sufficiently clear. Humans, no more than caterpillars, did descend *senkrecht von oben* without a predefined way of being in this world. It has taken billions of years for evolution to mold dead matter into the various forms of life we see today. Humans are no exception. They like all other organisms are something because they became something. History might not control what is to come but it does most certainly delineate what came to be. Our natural history has created us with "a certain range of power and tendencies, a repertoire, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern, though conditions after birth might vary the details quite a lot" (Midgley, 1980, p. 58). It is nothing normative in this description; it could be abstractly stated as a statistical correlation between a certain genotype and certain phenotypical expressions that become manifest under a set of standard conditions representing the genotype's environment. An abstract description as this would however be overly technical and our minds would be lost in an endless maze of molecular reactions too vast for a human mind to comprehend. When we describe a life form, we settle for something that is possible for our minds to grasp, so we do not miss the forest because of the trees. Ecology offers a way to see middle size object and processes, things that happens between the cosmic scale and the atomic. It seeks to describe behavioral patterns and

energy flow in the interaction between the organism and its environment and a synoptic look at them both reveals a complete ecosystem, the wheel of life that spins through time.

The ecological outlook is not identical to the Gene's eye view of differential proliferation of self-replicating molecules, which Dawkins (Dawkins R. , 2006) has popularized. It is not the case that Dawkins' account is incorrect as a causal explanation of genotypic variation in a population. Dawkins' account is however tied to evolutionary history and there is no logical connection between why a trait evolved and what function, if any, it performs at the present. The selfish gene tells us how it came to be that such and such capacities came to inhere in an organism. It might also help us predict what capacities will inhere in the organisms of tomorrow (the tomorrow of evolutionary time), but it does not tell us an iota of what use an organism might make of its capacities in the environment it presently inhabits. It is therefore a huge mistake to suppose, as Millum (2006) does, that the evolutionary cause of a function is a superior guide to determine its "proper function" in the present. Such a view cuts the connection between an organism and its environment, the very thing natural selection operates on, namely adaptation. It further seems to rest on the superstition that evolution acts with a purpose and adaptations can be viewed as tools about which we can say; this is a bad screwdriver but that is a good one. On the contrary, evolution is indeed blind and without a purpose, so adaptations do not exist for the sake of fulfilling a function, even though they happen to exist because they were able to perform a function in the past. As Christensen (2012, p. 105) have suggested, we could (and probably should) replace "proper function" with 'AS-Function' (for 'ancestrally-selected function') and replace 'malfunction' with 'C-function' (for 'changed function')". If we follow Christensen's advice, the evolutionary account of "function" will lose its normative air and turn into an innocuously factual description of why things came to be as they are and what role, if any, they play in the present.

Natural history does not supply us with information that was inaccessible before the advent of modern biology. Nature has always revealed to us that there are organisms with a certain range of needs and capacities. That is why Aristotle could make use of arguments based on natural function 2000 years before Darwin. To recognize natural history is to recognize that an organism is not endlessly moldable but has a way of being in the world; that there is a certain range of possible lives it could live and live well. The gene's eye view explains how such a being could come about, what capacities it has and has not. However, the gene's eye view tells nothing about the present environment that determines how and if these

capacities can come to fruition. To talk about the present is to talk in terms of ecology, i.e. how the various capacities of an organism come to use in today's environment and how organism and environment affect one another. To make such observations we need to turn to ecology, to study the range of capacities and needs that inhere in an organism and connect these with the environment in which it lives at present.

Nothing of a normative nature has yet been said. We still need to bridge the is-ought gap, if indeed it is a gap. How the Aristotelian virtues moves from the "is" of natural history and ecology to the "ought" of ethical prescriptions is the topic of chapter five. Before we move over to talk about that something needs to be said pertaining to naturalistic worldviews and that will form the topic of our next section.

4.2 Naturalistic worldviews

The meaning of naturalism is not easy to pin down because (a) it spans over different fields of inquiry, i.e. methodological, ontological, metaphysical, and (b) in neither of these fields, where naturalism is debated, is there a general agreement upon what exactly the term is supposed to designate. The present-day naturalistic program was inaugurated by American philosophers such as Dewey, Nagel, and Sellars whom called for philosophy to align itself closer to science. While a rejection of supernaturalism is a ubiquitous trait of naturalism so is also the idea that science rather than armchair philosophy is a guide to truth, if such there is. (Papineau, 2009)

Since philosophers are no different from ordinary people, I suppose that we can diagnose the condition by saying that naturalism aims to make sense of a world that was taken by surprise by science. Philosophical discourses that had lasted for millennia all of a sudden found that scientists looked into such matters as cosmology, time, mind, emotions, religion, and morality. Impressed by the results obtained by the empirical sciences, philosophers began to ask themselves if there were something wrong with their own line of enquiry in these matters since no progress seemed to be made. In this light, I think we can view the naturalist discourse that began in America as the twin sister of the logical-positivist movement that began in continental Europe. Both movements tried to square philosophical questions with scientific advances. Are the old questions still meaningful and if so in what form, and in what way should science effect how we go about in seeking an answer to them? Naturalism seeks to understand this complex while retaining a fundamental respect for the basic validity of the

scientific method and the results thus obtained. Where one goes from here is up to the naturalist philosopher to decide.

In the field of ethics, one influential route has been to claim that moral categories (“good”, “bad” and, “ought” etc.) can play an explanatory role in scientific theories (Railton, 1986), while others claim we should seek a more loose fit with science, so that moral properties track “the responses of instrumentally rational people” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 438). I have previously argued that such approaches rests on the doubtful premise that moral discourse has the ambition to track an empirical domain in the same way as science and this is most likely not the case (Karlsson, 2012). There is no point in me restating that argument once more, so I will instead turn to the topic of if incommensurability between language games necessarily entails opposition and if complete translation between different language games is possible.

Russell noted, many years ago, that there exist a class of paradoxes which surface in ordinary language, mathematics and formal logic alike because of the “self-references or reflexiveness” (1905, p. 224) in certain propositions. The simplest case is the famous utterance by the Cretan Epimenides that all Cretans are liars and yet another is the question if the class of classes with no members is a member of itself. It does not matter if we affirm or negate these utterances because we are forced to contradict ourselves either way. This led Russell to the, probably correct, partial conclusion that omni-quantifiers “are *prima facie* meaningless, though in certain cases they are capable of an unobjectionable interpretation” (1905, p. 240). There is yet no agreed upon solution for how to handle quantification across all domains. Either such quantification is ruled out as illicit moves (i.e. the set of all sets is empty) or we give the universal quantification an innocuous interpretation by limiting its applicability to limited sets. As it happens, the uneasy relation between science and moral discourse in many ways mimics Russell’s paradoxes.

Both scientific and value propositions purport to quantify over the same domain, i.e. the natural world of phenomena. Yet they seem utterly incapable of expressing the same objects. It is well known that value propositions of the form “x is y” is not straightforwardly translated into a scientific proposition of the same logical form. This is, however, not the real problem, because a value proposition “x is y” is perhaps possible to

express with a complex scientific statement of another logical form.²⁶ The real problem arises if we should succeed with doing a complete translation, because if a value statement is rendered in purely factual terms it loses its normativity. Thus, either value statements are not scientifically respectable or they are but then they are not evaluative statements. Consequently, we deny values by affirming them in scientific terms and we deny them by not affirming them in scientific terms. Part of this paradox is what underlines the so-called naturalistic fallacy, the proposition that no value can be derived from factual states. It hinges on the tacit assumption that in a translation each element in language A needs to not only correspond to an element in language B but also play a functionally equivalent role in both languages. If we answer, the Cretan Epimenides that all Cretans are indeed liars, it is obvious that our answer cannot be understood within the limited logic we get by substituting denial for affirmation and affirmation for denial in a perpetual cycle of self-reference. This only leads to a mad goose chase, after an object that is elusive because the rules of the language game are such that the goose cannot be caught. If we nevertheless give an answer to Epimenides, we need to change to a language game that allows us to break free from the self-reference that involved us in contradictions. If we do break free there is still something bothersome in the fact that we did not really answer *his* question but a question of our own making, stated in a higher order logic. Similarly, the class of classes with no members can be made an unquantifiable unit (i.e. no numerical operations apply to it) and thus we are free from the paradox that arises if we count its members. As it happens the number 0 has this property, whatever mathematical operator you throw at it, it remains unperturbed. But if we say this of the null-class then we are bereft of the notion that the null-class is of the same logical type as classes with extension and extensionality seems to be at the heart of classes. You only gain some by losing some, as the saying goes.

As for values, the crux of the matter is the same self-reference that troubles us with the lying Cretans. We want values to be evaluative and not descriptive, thus we insist, that, in whatever is of value, there must be some essential valuableness. Science operates with quantifiable entities and investigates them as quanta, not *qualia*, thus we insist that in whatever is scientific, there must be nothing but quanta. Either way we turn when we attempt

²⁶ The value proposition “killing is wrong” can be translated to the statistical proposition “Homo sapiens tends to respond with aggression towards members of their own species, which use lethal force towards their conspecifics whilst unprovoked”. I do not claim that this translation is the correct one only that such translations are quite possible to perform.

to square the relation between science and values, we are forced into affirming what we want to deny; we get either paltry values or unempirical science and we desire neither. The one cannot contain the other and yet some ethical naturalists want them both, but for that to happen they would need a normative quanta, and that lead to paradoxes in the languages of either science or values. From this desire to equate the one with the other through the same language game springs a greedy form of reductionism, advocated by E. O. Wilson (1978, pp. 196-199) that equates the human good with gene self-interest, the closest we seem to get to a natural value. However, since genes are molecules they are incapable of caring and lacks self-interest.

I concur with Dennett (1996, p. 468) who writes, “The fallacy is not naturalism but, rather, any simple minded attempt to rush from facts to values. In other words, the fallacy is *greedy* reductionism of values to facts, rather than reductionism considered more circumspectly, as the attempt to unify our world-view so that our ethical principles don’t clash irrationally with the way the world *is*”. Accidentally, it seems to me, that it is something similar Hume (2007 [1739/40], p. 16) meant when he wrote that “a reason should be given” for the transition from facts to values. Hume did not write that such reasons do not exist but that they must be explained! We need a story of how values can arise out of nature just as we need a story of how coffee mugs can exist. Coffee mugs play no role in scientific theories nor are they reducible to a set of coffee-mug-making genes. Yet they pose no problem to our worldview because they seem so inconspicuous an entity and this probably prevents us from realizing that their ontology is at least as troubling as that of values. Still no one has written a tract trying to debunk the existence of coffee mugs as many have done debunking morality. The very idea seems ludicrous for some reason or other and yet all there is are energy momentum tensors in a relativity field and no coffee mugs or instant coffee.

We would be less troubled by the standing of values if we took a moment to reflect on that the language of science is only supposed to convey quanta, i.e. the mathematical aspect of energy and matter. Unless we are Platonists who believe the only reality is abstract equations, there is no reason to despair over values and coffee mugs. There naturally needs to be a story of how entities such as values and coffee mugs can arise from matter and energy, which obey the regularities revealed by science. Mugs and values need to be explicable in terms that a natural world allows; i.e. as configurations of matter and energy created by natural forces and not as “floating free, a kind of mysterious exotic pink balloon, a detached predicate, high above all possible attempts to entrap it and connect it with life by any

conceptual scheme whatever” (Midgley, 1980, p. 194). Entities such as values and human artifacts have a story that makes them at home in this world. Their story is that they are of this world and for values; this story is essentially the one we told in section 4.1. Values are not explicable as physical or chemical entities since they do not refer to entities that are primarily of a physical or chemical kind. They are higher order objects, or, if we prefer, secondary objects, that result from the interaction of lower order subsystems, in an ontological ascension that ranges from subatomic particles to ecosystems, habitats, intentional organisms, tools and values. While it is quite possible to describe the cosmos in terms of the most basic laws of physics the result is an impoverished worldview, bereft of the conceptual schemes a living system needs to get by.

It is at this juncture the sophist enters the stage with a triumphant smile. Have we not now conceded that the human world of measures has no grip on existence? That values and coffee mugs are just tools of power to manipulate others and bend them to our will. To begin with, we should point out to the sophist that if we insist on the ontology of reductive physicalism then we also rid ourselves of such things as “will”, “other”, “power”, “tool” and “I”. There simply is no “I” with a will to manipulate something in the first place, such entities does not exist in reductive physicalism, thus this form of sophist argument is not possible to make if we buy the ontology of reductive physicalism. Since sophistry does not give way so easy, there is a second stage of sophist arguments waiting to be deployed. Having had to give up on reductive physicalism the sophist might still cling on to the distinction between fundamental and accidental. The story of values that were told in section 4.1 does not place them firmly in the architecture of the universe and thus they can (or paradoxically should) be construed as something optional. This is the time-honored distinction between nature and convention where the former is seen as beyond human power while the latter can be molded as we please. But, “the discovery that truth is to some extent or in some manner human and historical, certainly does not warrant the conclusion that every human truth is as good as every other [...]” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 222).

Nussbaum (1990, pp. 224-225) points out that there is a fundamental difference between the “language of optionality” and the “language of depth”. The language of optionality speaks about things we can change through acts of will and to this category does indeed most, if not all, the idiosyncratic arrangements in human cultures belong. The language of depth, on the other hand, is not optional in the least. In this category, we find things that are fundamental to “our procedure of life and thought” (p. 225). It is true that

shaking each other's hands as a sign of greeting is optional, but an arrangement that acknowledges the presence and mutually non-hostile intentions among conspecifics is not. Likewise, it is optional to donate money to the Red Cross but the need for arrangements that express responsiveness to other people's needs is not optional in the least. The fundamental physical and psychological needs of healthy human adults are not of their making. Though the institutionalized forms human needs make manifest in culture belongs to the language of optionality the physical and psychological infrastructure underlying these belong to the language of depth. The sophist argument against values trades on the failure to see a difference between contingent forms and the necessity of form. Even if human life, like clay, could take on any form, the need for some form would persist throughout its variegated transmutations. That a being can exist along continuums in several dimensions does not make those very dimensions null and void. Rather, to exist across a particular set of dimensions specifies a creature as being of such or such a type without fixating it to a monotonous clone existence of a particular instantiation of one such being, endlessly repeated without distinction.

5. Natural Normativity

It has been argued (Copp & Sobel, 2004, p. 536) that what is lacking in contemporary naturalism with an Aristotelian bent is an explanation of, "why the evaluation of an individual as a member of a species is uniquely well suited to model the ethical evaluation of a person". This argument hinges on the premise that "deviation from the characteristic way that a species achieves survival and reproduction need not amount to a defect" (*op. cit.* p. 539). Then comes the conclusion that there is no reason as to why "we should accord any normative significance whatsoever to our membership in the species or to the fact that we have a particular form of life" (*op. cit.* p. 543). The premise that deviation from an evolved pattern is not a defect is in fact what our argument led up to in section 4.1 (pp. 38-39). The conclusion, on the other hand, stands in brisk opposition to the thrust of our argument. This contrary conclusion is due, I think, to confusion about indexicals. It is quite true that an impartial observer, like that advocated by R. Firth (1952), in no way is bound to any details about human natural history. The Ideal Observer is perfectly dispassionate and therefore lacks personal emotions (*op. cit.* p. 340). Such an admittedly fictional observer could well right ask the kind of question Copp & Sobel (2004) ask. What "normative

significance” could “membership in the species” and “a particular form of life” carry for an ideal observer that is the member of no species and lacks a form of life? As Firth observes, the judgments such an entity could pass would not presuppose “the existence of experiencing subjects” (*op. cit.* 323).

In certain branches of moral philosophy, the perspective of an Ideal Observer has been held forth as the formal ideal for moral reasoning in humans (Brandt R. B., 1955; Firth, 1952; Hare, 1981). Indeed, if the judgment of this imaginary entity is the referent for moral judgments done by humans, then Copp’s and Sobel’s question is right on the mark.²⁷ Again, we might retort that this is nothing than a naturalistic fallacy, because how, indeed, is the perspective of an ideal observer to carry normative significance? The same goes for the judgments of unicorns, gods, angels, daemons, devils and squirrels. It would seem like Hume’s admonition that we owe an explanation for passing from is to ought is equally applicable in all these cases.

Aristotle began his inquiry about human virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by explaining the transition from is to ought with the submission that the person who seeks answers to what is good does so in the capacity of being a particular someone. She is not asking out of theoretical interest, as Kraut (2012) notes, “we are asking what the good for human beings is not simply because we want to have knowledge, but because we will be better able to achieve our good if we develop a fuller understanding of what it is to flourish”. We are asking because we seek to know, in order to enact, a flourishing life, i.e. to live well (τὸ εὖ ζῆν).

In the anime movie *Conqueror of Shamballa* (Mizushima, 2005) the protagonist Edward Elric is born in another world, but cast into ours, the Munich of the 1920’s, by a series of misfortunes relating to his attempts to reclaim his little brother Alphonse’s lost body (Alphonse’s consciousness was previously trapped in a suit of armor). After many failed attempts and one successful return to his home world, the two brothers, now united, both end

²⁷ Why a dispassionate Ideal Observer should be the referent of human moral judgments is somewhat unclear for, as Brandt (1979, p. 227) points out, “it is not clear that a purely disinterested being would support a moral system at all” and further “he might be indifferent to human welfare”. Indeed, it seems like some form of vested interest is a prerequisite for a moral judgment of any kind to occur. By the way, this same Brandt is also he who in 1955 wrote a mainly positive article about Firth’s Ideal Observer theory, back then, the criticism we referred to above and made explicit in his 1979 book, was tucked away in a footnote “if a person were really incapable of particular emotions and particular interests, would he be ethically sensitive?” (1955, p. 411: n3). Brandt, however, remained positive to some sort of modified Ideal Observer theory throughout his career. In my opinion, the form of Ideal Observer theory advocated by Brandt in his later works has moved too far away from the Ideal Observer of Firth to treat it as a variety of Firth’s theory.

up back on earth. However, during his two years of exile on earth, something has happened to Edward. During his time here he has gotten involved in the fate of earth as it gets ready to plunge itself into a second world war, those people he befriended, loved and feared here are those that soon will engage in mutual carnage of which likeness had never before been seen. Instead of yet again try to make their way back to the world they were born in, he in the closing scene, explains to his younger brother “This is our home, now. This is where we belong”. Like Edward Elric of Shamballa, humans are tied to places and people through a biological²⁸ and personal history. Past events place us somewhere in the matrix of existents and once placed we cannot through an act of will change where we belong. To belong somewhere is to have a home, a place in space and time that is ours. Whether we are descended from a world in a parallel dimension or crawled up from some primordial pond in Tellurian prehistory, this is our time on earth. When a creature such as this seeks a good life, it is all about indexicals. It is a particular life form, at a particular place and at a particular time that seeks to flourish. It is not an Ideal Observer, a squirrel, a devil or a god but a human being situated in nature, culture, and history.

To talk about virtues is always to address some one individual under a specific set of circumstances and never to address alternate and/or hypothetical existents in otherworldly realms. What nevertheless saves virtue-ethics from falling into ethical particularism is its naturalistic grounding in human nature, but not “nature” naïvely construed in some reductive terms like gene self-interest. Instead, human nature is broadly construed as a set of needs and capacities that are constitutive for members of the human species and are present in the very organization of her psychology and physiology. Humans do not live by bread alone but have a need of community and are endowed with a range of capacities that pertain to forming meaningful bonds, achieve recognition and enter into romantic relations. Humans excel and take joy in creative work, finding solutions to practical and theoretical problems, creating things she and others of her kind finds aesthetically pleasing and so forth. Yet it is not within her grasp simultaneously to secure all of these goods. She thus needs to choose which among her goods she shall pursue and live with the knowledge of what she had to give up doing so. The necessity of choice between some given sets of goods thus forms the flesh of virtue-ethics. It tries to make clear what different kinds of human lives the different

²⁸ The people of Shamballa looks like Tellurians and have the same physiology as them and as Edward Elric remarks “we are humans just as you”. Had Edwards biology and psychology been radically different from Tellurians my example would not hold.

choices humans make allow for. Again, it is “kinds of human lives” that is the question. We ask what kind of life beings with human capacities and dispositions would live if they chose to realize this over that set of human goods under a particular set of circumstances. We are no more investigating the possible life of homicidal sociopaths than we are the life of acorn allergic squirrels. Organisms with radically different sets of needs and capacities compared to those of humans cannot be expected to care an iota for human virtues; a freedom-loving ant would be a miserable creature, as would a sociable spider. Neither of them has the inherent capacities needed to bring their hypothetical longings to fruition, nor do they live under circumstances that allow for activities associated with these longings. A human virtue, applied to another organism, can indeed be the epitome of wickedness and evil. The same goes for members of our own kind that is bereft of the needs that is constitutive of human nature.

As we said, the images of human lives, which virtue ethics tries to compare are tied to the inherently normative framework of practical questions asked by actual people with concrete needs and capacities. Those that behold and judge the merits of the lives these images show are the selfsame people that seek guidance and they compare these images with the prospect of fulfillment of their own needs and capacities in the cultural and social circumstances they find themselves. Given the changing circumstances under which humans find themselves and their varying individual capacity, virtue ethics seeks images that have a general appeal to the human imagination and from this generality can speak to the particular case. As Aristotle pointed out in his analysis of drama, the philosophical value of stories and legends are their delicate balance between the universal and the particular. An account too general will fail to engage us and a too specific account will be hard to square with our own life experience. But by combining universal themes that keep recurring in human experience and a narrative, which shows a way of life as a possibility for us, drama turns out to be an eminent form of applied moral thinking. Drama is however not the only legitimate form of applied moral thinking. Personal experiences with a general appeal as well as actual historical events of a general nature are also quite apt to inspire the kind of concerned self-reflection Aristotle attributed to drama.

Aristotelian virtue-ethics is a species of moral discourse that does not shy away from the circularity of self-reference. It maintains that this circularity is what gives talk about virtues a naturalistic grounding and an objective meaning. A virtue is a ternary operation with two naturalistic arguments and one normative. Thus, a virtue means that there exist (a) an evolved need with a corresponding capacity, and there exist (b) an ecological context that

affords some expression of (a) and, (c) the ultimate expression of (a) in (b) is an excellence. To be an excellence is on the one hand to stand in a relation to some aspect of oneself i.e. it is a relational property or what Geach (1956) called an “attributive adjective”. This means that it is not possible analytically to break up a virtuous activity in, x is an activity and x is excellence; no more so, than we can break up a good car in, x is a car and x is good. On the other hand talk about excellences, or goodness more generally, cannot hang in midair, it does require a subject (i.e. a mind) that does the appraisal in light of some practical end. The subjects in our Aristotelian scheme are humans endowed with characteristically human needs and capacities and the practical end in light of which they do their appraisal is the good human life. As Aristotle made clear, the capacity to reason about practical ends is also a virtue and by that token, it is an evolved need with a corresponding capacity, i.e. humans have an emotional constitution that makes reasoning about her own good a rewarding activity and she has the brainpower necessary to perform the required thinking. Seen in this light it seems quite natural indeed, that humans engage in ethical reasoning, and that this reasoning comes to employ virtues as an ethically significant category.

From what has been said follows that virtues emerge as ontological entities from an interrelation between human biology and ecology on the one hand and, here is the real important point, human biology and ecology on the other hand as well. With less rhetorical flurry; virtues emerge as a self-conscious organism of a certain kind explores relations internal to it as a member of that kind. Without such a being, there would be no set of facts pertaining to that being and without it having a vested interest in learning about these facts and act upon them, the set of facts would lack significance as an aggregate. That these facts are contingent from an external point of view stems from that they arise out of natural history and thus, in a deep sense, are historical. But historical is also the fact that our moon was captured by earth’s gravitational field and became its satellite. There is nothing essentially moonish about that piece of rock, beyond a historically contingent fact, which made it a moon. On the other hand, it would seem that a historical event is all it takes to make a moon. Likewise, all it takes to make virtues obtain is that there is a species such as ours. But to talk about virtues in this fashion, “misses something that can be experienced only from the inside, namely the normative force of the reasoning” (Rachels, 2000, p. 90). To retain the full meaning of virtues and a virtuous life we therefore need to remember that our natural history “is our home, now” and “where we belong”. Only when we view ourselves as fully continuous with nature does the normative force reveal itself as both natural and normative.

The normative pull, however, can never be experienced by others than those that live this life from the inside and is part of human institutions. In this sense, the normative pull of virtues is a brute fact given the natural history of humankind. This does not entail that each time someone talks about virtues they are making an explicit reference to natural history, as Anscombe remarked, “Every description presupposes a context of normal procedure, but that context is not even implicitly described by the description” (1958b, p. 71)

Human virtues are not a cosmic concern but neither is man nor any other existent because the cosmos has no corners for anything, not even for itself. On the other hand, it would seem that human virtues are an eminently human concern, and humans possess concerns for many things, not least herself. On the contrary, virtues could not extend beyond humankind and retain the self-reflective quality that makes them a human concern rather than a concern for someone else or no one.

6. Conclusion

The fulcrum of our worldviews determine at what side the balance of our thoughts will tip. In the western world, the fulcrum has traditionally been *sub specie aeternitatis*, a *view from nowhere* or at least a view external to man. In some way or other, it has been thought that truths must be universal and independent of indexicals or they are no truths at all. One creation, one god, one salvation, one church, one king, one nation and so on up to one theory of everything. Everything framed by some megalomaniac ontology. It might well be that some things in the cosmos are simple, one, undivided and universal but alas, man is not one of them. Man is temporal, local, and divisible so her *one* salvation has been ascension. Ascension to what? Ascension to *sub specie aeternitatis*, mediated by an external agent, force, or principle. If this were a god, law of nature or disembodied reason was of minor importance, as long as there remained one immutable Archimedean point man could use to support his lever. Contemporary moral philosophy has been obsessed with finding such support for ethical thinking but as far as I know, none of its attempts has yet found this Holy Grail.

Aristotelian virtue-ethics has no ambition to find a support for human virtues that is external to humankind. Its basic assumptions make the very idea of an external support seem wicked. The good of man can never be determined by non-human factors alone. On the contrary, it is created by the interplay between humans and their environment. Yet, the human good is not a free artistic creation made at a whim but remains a fixed mark of a provincial

kind. Fixed by whom and in what way? Fixed by natural history that has formed humans into the kind of beings they have become and in that process tied their existence to a form of life that is good and wholesome for them. This makes the fixed mark internal to man and not external. Consequently, we could turn on every atom in the universe in our search for goodness without ever finding a trace of it, and that for the simple reason that it is not out there. Perhaps we could paraphrase Luke 17:21 and write that, we cannot say that here is a good or it is there because goodness is in our midst. Being in our midst in the sense that it consists of relational properties, properties in which humankind and thus indexicality forms an essential part. If we eliminate humanity from the picture, one of the three necessary elements (see p. 48-49) needed for virtues to obtain goes missing and thus virtues disappear from the observer's event horizon. But not seeing is in a manner a choice to look in the wrong direction, away from what is already known by a child.

A child knows that it wants to become a doctor, get married to mother or father (no Freudian pun intended), bake cakes with grandmother (no sexist pun intended), have a rabbit, get new friends and new shoes. In short, a child knows that it has certain wants and capacities. Wants and capacities change over a lifetime and their expressions shift between cultures but mostly they remain constant human traits. In the best of all worlds, neither logic nor environment would restrain their satisfaction and fruition but things are different in our world. Just how different and the consequences of these differences are, however, not well understood by a child. I guess life has to thwart our wishes many times before we come to realize that there is no way of both having the cake and eating it. Becoming a doctor takes discipline, new shoes means working overtime, having a rabbit entails taking care of its pen, making cakes with grandmother requires that we first go shopping with her. Yet, if we work overtime and we go shopping with grandmother, it will be too little time left for studying medicine and taking care of the rabbit's pen. Life is complicated but we are left with but one other choice than to live it. Hence springs the question "how do I live well?" forth and in enters virtue-ethics that seeks to answer this precise question.

Seen from this vantage point science is an ally of, and not a threat to, ethics. Through science we learn how we came to be as a species, where the bounds of our mental and physical abilities lies and also what our basic needs consists of. The latter two were largely known prior to the scientific revolution and science has not so much changed the

overall picture of them as it has modified the details.²⁹ The substantial contribution of science is natural history that makes our needs and capacities at home in this world, it is, if you like, an ontological anchor that prevents the good life to drift away in the sky like a pink balloon and fixes it firmly in the history of this planet and the history of our species of which you happen to be a member. These might be contingent facts from the vantage point of some non-human observer and it would rightly think that there is an is-ought gap here that cries out for an explanation. That is because there will never be a way to bridge the gap between is and ought from an external vantage point. For an ought to arise from an is, we need an internal is, an is that is this way rather than that way, an is that strives to become and in the midst of that struggle asks how to fully become what it in one sense already is. These kind of questions have no eternal answer lying in wait independent of the particular and perhaps cosmically insignificant creature that happens to be this particular form of is. But as long as it remains the “is” that it is, the answers it finds will neither be ephemeral nor insignificant from the vantage points of its own being and becoming.

If human virtues are construed in this manner, there is nothing about them that should provoke philosophical speculations since the object is utterly mundane. Not mundane in a belittling sense but mundane in the sense flowerpots in the window, coffee cups at the table, and books in the bookshelf is mundane. They belong to the familiar fabric of reality, not by being necessary existents or independent of humankind but by being contingent and dependent on our existence. Yet they were here long before any single one of us were born and they will be here when we have all gone because they have an existence that transcends that of any single human life while remaining utterly dependent on human life as such.

²⁹ It was once believed that if a woman devoted herself to mathematical thinking that could cause her uterus to come in motion with the result that she became a hysteric. Thus, a career as a mathematician could not be good for womankind. Similar ideas have been advanced about ethnic and erotic minorities. As up to this date, all of them have been proved wrong. It is in matters such as these that science has corrected ideas about human needs and capacities.

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