

THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF ANSCOMBE
AND FOOT'S METAETHICAL THOUGHT

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DEDICATION

To Jennifer

For loving me for who I am, but always pushing me to become who I want to be.

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ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation, I argue that Anscombe and Foot's metaethical thought was not only significant for the history of metaethics in the twentieth-century, but continues to be significant for contemporary thought. In Part One, I argue that the historical significance of Anscombe and Foot's metaethical thought consisted in their revival and unique development of an approach to metaethics called Ethical Naturalism, which was a philosophical position that had all but disappeared from the theoretical map for several decades. Additionally, I argue that their work was historically significant for showing the relevance of Wittgenstein's late theoretical philosophy for ethics and metaethics. In Part Two, I argue that the unique brand of Ethical Naturalism that was initially articulated by Anscombe and Foot has opened up exciting new pathways in contemporary metaethics. In particular, it made possible the development of a family of views called "Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism", according to which it is possible to explain objective normative truths in terms of natural facts about what human beings are like. I argue that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is a promising, yet underdeveloped, position in contemporary metaethics.

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PREFACE

This is a dissertation about two of the most significant philosophers in the twentieth-century, Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. In particular, this is a dissertation about the historical significance of Anscombe and Foot's metaethical thought for the twentieth-century, as well the significant promise that many of their ideas have for the twenty-first century and beyond. Although Anscombe and Foot are the central characters, two others deserve mention. First, there is Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's radical philosophical thought was a major force in the development of Analytic philosophy during the twentieth-century. Anscombe, who studied closely with Wittgenstein towards the end of his life, was deeply influenced by his ideas, and eventually exerted that influence on Foot. It is not possible to properly understand Anscombe and Foot's philosophical thought without understanding their relationship to Wittgenstein, and it is for this reason that Wittgenstein will be discussed at length below. Second, there is Aristotle. Both Anscombe and Foot were deeply influenced by Aristotle, specifically by his approach to ethics. One of the lasting contributions of Anscombe and Foot's philosophical corpus was that it brought renewed attention to Aristotle, one of the most prominent naturalistic philosophers in the history of Western philosophy, during a time when naturalism in ethics was viewed with serious doubt. The story I want to tell is the story of how Anscombe and Foot brought together their own original insights with those of Aristotle and Wittgenstein, in order to open up exciting new pathways within metaethics that, as I argue, remain promising to this day.

The fact that I have written such a dissertation is quite surprising to me. I can still remember a time when I was skeptical about the ability of philosophy to have anything

interesting to say about ethics. As a college freshman, I was convinced that ethics was a waste of time because some form of relativism, or nihilism, was obviously true. At the same time, I also firmly believed that certain things *really mattered*, and that there were objective truths about why the kind of music *I* enjoyed was valuable, and why certain political positions were correct. Suffice it to say, I was quite confused without being aware of it. As I progressed through the philosophy major, however, my attitudes towards philosophical ethics began to change. Despite still being possessed by youthful skepticism, I had begun to think that ethics can be interesting, at least in the hands of Nietzsche, whose approach resonated with me, as it has with so many young minds. As far as I can tell, it was because of Nietzsche that I first developed an interest in Greek philosophy and culture. I distinctly remember reading the opening pages of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and feeling incredibly interested, as well as incredibly confused. I did not make it very far into that book, but it had an effect upon me.

The following semester, I decided to take an upper level seminar on Aristotle with the late Professor Alan Gotthelf. I was deeply impressed by the systematic nature of Aristotle's philosophy, and reading his theoretical works gave me the feeling that I was getting to the bottom of things. When it came time to read Aristotle's ethical writings, having already been equipped by Nietzsche with an unhealthy level of my own importance, I became immediately attracted to Aristotle's discussion of human flourishing and excellence. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I first saw how it might be possible to make sense of objective normative truths within a secular worldview. Since then, I have studied ethics with the hope of realizing that possibility.

When I arrived at the University of Pennsylvania as a first-year PhD student, I knew that I wanted to write something about Aristotle and something about ethics, but I wasn't sure at the time whether I would specialize in ancient philosophy, and write a dissertation on Aristotle's ethics, or work on contemporary topics while finding ways to incorporate Aristotelian ideas. The answer became clear to me in the Fall of 2018 when I attended a lecture by Rachael Wiseman and Claire MacCumhaill on Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. The talk came at the perfect time. Having just finished being a teaching assistant for Intro to Ethics, my head was full of doubts about the standard contemporary approaches to normative ethics. For example, I found myself sharing with my students a certain level of frustration and skepticism with the "gamified" nature of certain contemporary discussions in normative ethics, and went in search of alternative approaches that spoke to my methodological concerns. In their talk, Wiseman and MacCumhaill explained how four women, Anscombe, Foot, Midgley, and Murdoch, largely inspired by Aristotle, articulated a counter-narrative to the dominant tradition of modern Anglophone moral philosophy, and set out a radically new approach to ethics. I was hooked, and since then the identity of my philosophical research took on a more definite form. I would write about Aristotle and ethics, but through the lens of the unique strain of Neo-Aristotelianism developed by Anscombe and Foot.

Following this talk, I became intensely interested in contemporary virtue ethics. Many of the famous texts that I would go on to read gave voice to the doubts I was having about contemporary approaches within normative ethics. The idea that modern Anglophone moral philosophy was operating with certain implicit and highly questionable assumptions, and that there was an entirely different framework within

which philosophical work on ethics could proceed, was very exciting to me. As I continued to study virtue ethics, however, I began to notice that many of the texts that were famous for bringing about its “revival” in the second half of the twentieth-century, such as the early work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre, were strikingly different than their contemporary offspring. To my surprise, I came to realize that a significant amount of contemporary virtue ethics research had, in my opinion, inherited many of the problematic assumptions that shaped the paradigm within which their “opponents” were operating! While the early texts seemed to be radical in nature, questioning the whole edifice of twentieth-century Anglophone moral philosophy, many contemporary texts appeared keen on beating their opponents at their own game — the cost of which being that one must play the *same game* as their opponents. This realization pushed me to focus more closely on the early figures in the virtue ethics movement, specifically Anscombe and Foot. I wanted to figure out where modern Anglophone moral philosophy had gone wrong, and what we should do about it. So, like most third-year graduate students, I drew up grand plans for an ambitious dissertation. What you are reading now is a much less ambitious, although, perhaps still too ambitious, instantiation of those initial plans.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 The Wartime Quartet

In 1936, a philosophical bomb went off in Oxford. The culprit was a brilliant young philosopher named A.J. Ayer who, three years earlier, traveled to Vienna to study with Europe's leading intellectuals. Despite not being fluent in German, Ayer was able to distill the philosophical thought of the Vienna Circle into its elementary components and, after crossing back over the Channel, make these ideas widely accessible to Anglophone philosophers in his first book *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Ayer's explosive book held that any statements which were not empirically verifiable, or truths of math and logic, were utterly meaningless. Decades of work carried out by an older generation of Oxford dons, who had taught Ayer several years earlier, was threatened. Furthermore, entire domains of inquiry, such as ethics and aesthetics, were reduced to nothing more than expressions of our subjective emotional attitudes towards the world. *Language, Truth, and Logic* had started a war of ideas among the older and younger generations of Oxford philosophers. Ayer's war on everything unscientific was quickly superseded by another war which had, shortly thereafter, broken out in Europe.

By most accounts, Analytic philosophy had all but stopped during the Second World War. The brilliant minds of the United Kingdom's top universities had left behind their linguistic squabbles, and decided to put their brainpower to good use in serving their country. As a result, there was a mass exodus of male philosophers from Oxford. Analytic philosophy during this period did not stop, however, despite what most histories

of the discipline say. The disappearance of male philosophers from Oxford, created an opportunity for new voices to emerge. The new voices which came to dominate the tutorials during this period were those of four young women: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgely, and Iris Murdoch. These four women, recently dubbed “The Wartime Quartet”, are thought by some to have constituted the first female school of analytic philosophy, and would eventually go on to provide decisive arguments against the philosophical coup which Ayer had thrust upon Oxford philosophy.

The four members of The Wartime Quartet would frequently meet in Philippa Foot’s living room to discuss the leading philosophical ideas of their time. The explicit aim of their meetings was to do their best, in their own distinctive way, to reject the dominant orthodoxies of Oxford philosophy. After the war, many of the prominent dons returned to their posts in Oxford, and began to pick up precisely where they had left off — discussing, among other things, the idea that moral language is meaningless. It turned out that the influence of Ayer’s work upon Oxford philosophy had not faded after several years of war, but was merely put on hold.

When the news of the concentration camps came out in 1945, Philippa Foot was shocked to find that the content of moral discussions among philosophers had seemingly been entirely unchanged by the war, with philosophers still developing theories which viewed the nature of morality as merely an expression of our attitudes. Convinced that it must be possible to prove, on a rational basis, that the actions of the Nazis were unjust, Foot became gripped by the challenge of explaining how it is possible for sentences like

“it is morally wrong to kill innocent people” to be objectively true statements, and attain a status equivalent to the objective truths of modern science.

The years spent by the quartet working through philosophical problems together quickly paid off. In the 1950’s, the members of the quartet would go on to publish a series of radical and important articles which exposed the mistakes introduced by Ayer before the war. While many of these articles are celebrated today for their historical significance in undermining the views of their contemporaries, very few philosophers have, until recently, taken the ideas contained in them to be significant in their own right. Many contemporary debates do not engage directly with the ideas of these four women and, when they do, it is often only in footnotes. In order to correct this injustice, it is necessary to treat these women as significant philosophers in their own right, and not merely historical actors.

1.2 Dissertation Overview and Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is an examination of the philosophical significance, for both the history of Analytic philosophy and contemporary research, of the work of two of these women — Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. In particular, I argue that the metaethical thought of these two women constituted a new approach within ethics – an approach that simultaneously provided resources for criticizing previously dominant frameworks of thought, *and* for developing sophisticated answers to contemporary questions in normative ethics and metaethics. In particular, my central claim is that Anscombe and Foot, through synthesizing their own original insights with the ideas of Aristotle and

Wittgenstein, developed a new form of Ethical Naturalism that not only constituted a significant innovation during the middle of the twentieth-century, but is a promising view within metaethics today. I argue for this claim in four chapters, which are divided into two equal parts. In Part One, titled “Historical Significance”, I present two chapters that explain why Anscombe and Foot’s metaethical thought was historically significant. I argue that Anscombe and Foot not only exposed the flaws in the views of their predecessors, but opened up new pathways for Ethical Naturalism that had not been considered before. Meanwhile, in Part Two, titled “Contemporary Significance”, I present two chapters aimed at showing how Neo-Aristotelianism represents a promising and undervalued approach to debates in contemporary metaethics regarding the nature of normativity and normative reasons.

In the second chapter, titled “Unifying Anscombe’s Three Theses”, I offer an original interpretation of Anscombe’s critique of “modern moral philosophy”, and explain why I think its philosophical significance for moral philosophy today has largely been misunderstood. In particular, I argue that the dominant reading of Anscombe’s famous article “Modern Moral Philosophy” has largely missed her main point, which is that before we can properly do ethics, we must first achieve a better understanding of the nature of human action and human virtue, and what she calls the “philosophy of psychology” – a lesson that has been largely ignored, with the result being the propagation of consequentialism within ethics. In addition to explaining the historical significance of Anscombe’s critique, my reading also gives Anscombe’s article a

renewed significance for contemporary work in moral philosophy, insofar as the majority of such work has adopted precisely the opposite methodology from Anscombe's.

In the third chapter, titled "The Revival of Ethical Naturalism: Anscombe, Foot, and Wittgenstein", I argue that Anscombe and Foot's metaethical thought in the late fifties and early sixties was historically significant for two reasons. First, and most importantly, it constituted a new approach to Ethical Naturalism with metaethics, a view that had been all but wiped off of the theoretical map for more than half a century. Second, it showed the significance of Wittgenstein's late theoretical philosophy for practical thought, something which Wittgenstein underappreciated.

In the fourth chapter, titled "Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and Normativity", In chapter three, titled "Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and Normativity", I discuss how Neo-Aristotelians should respond to what I call the normativity objection. In particular, I argue for the position that, instead of attempting to answer the normativity objection directly, Neo-Aristotelians should challenge the presuppositions behind the objection in order to strengthen the dialectical position of their view in the current literature. The reason for adopting this strategy is that, once the underlying presuppositions behind the normativity objection are laid bare, it quickly becomes clear that the standards for evaluating metanormative theories that have taken hold in the current literature are based upon implicit substantive assumptions that are unfair to the Neo-Aristotelian. Furthermore, I argue that once Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is evaluated by more neutral standards, its plausibility as a metanormative theory is significantly improved with respect to its main competitors in the literature.

In chapter five, titled “The Aristotelian Theory of Reasons”, I build off of the themes in chapter four, and sketch an Aristotelian theory of normative reasons. Although a small number of philosophers have worked out similar views in the context of other debates, my account is original insofar as it demonstrates the plausibility of adopting an Aristotelian approach to explaining normative reasons within the conceptual framework of the current debates about normativity and normative reasons. My strategy for doing this is to hitch the Aristotelian view to one of the most lucid and highly influential accounts in the literature today, which is Mark Schroeder’s Neo-Humean view as developed in his 2007 book *Slaves of the Passions*. The idea is to show how an Aristotelian theory of reasons can be developed within the same conceptual schema employed by Schroeder, and that it is *prima facie* more plausible than the Neo-Humean alternative. Since the Neo-Humean view is well respected in the current literature, my hope is that by showing the comparative advantages of the Aristotelian view, I can encourage metaethicists to take it more seriously and further develop its prospects. My thesis is that Aristotelian approaches to normativity and normative reasons deserve significantly more attention than they have received.

PART ONE: Historical Significance
CHAPTER 2: Unifying Anscombe's Three Theses

1 Introduction

Since its publication in 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" has been one of the most widely read and discussed Analytic philosophy articles in the twentieth-century.¹ David Solomon has remarked that "'Modern Moral Philosophy' is regarded by many contemporary philosophers as the most important paper written in ethics in the last half of the 20th century, if not the most important paper written in the entire century".² As Duncan Richter points out, however, it is quite clear that "Modern Moral Philosophy" has completely failed in achieving its primary aim of getting moral philosophers to stop doing moral philosophy, without first developing a sufficient understanding of the nature of human action and intention.³ That "Modern Moral Philosophy" completely failed to change how moral philosophy was done, despite its "influence", can be seen most clearly in the fact that after 1958, moral philosophy saw

¹ For scholarship on Anscombe's three theses and "Modern Moral Philosophy" as a whole see: MacIntyre (1981), Darwall (1987), Baier (1988), Pigden (1988), Darwall, Gibbard, Railton (1992), Richter (1995), Diamond (1997), Crisp (2004), Lawrence (2004), Lovibond (2004), O'Neill (2004), Pink (2004), Thompson (2004), Coope (2006), Haldane (2006), Irwin (2006), Lagerspetz (2006), Vogler (2006), Alvarez and Ridley (2007), Watson (2007), Flannery (2008), Garcia (2008), Hursthouse (2008), Miner (2008), Watkins (2008), Solomon (2008), Teichmann (2008), Thompson (2008), Vogler (2008), Brewer (2009), Hacker-Wright (2010), O'Brien (2011), Cremaschi (2012), Darwall (2012), Vogler (2012), Chappell (2013), Cremaschi (2014), Stern (2014), Sanford (2015), Wiseman (2016), Cremaschi (2017), Doyle (2018), Reid (2019), Frey (2020), Sandis (2020), Wiseman (2020), Chappell (unpublished).

² This is, without a doubt, a highly controversial statement. See Solomon (2008, 110).

³ Some of the other concepts that Anscombe thought must be better understood before returning to doing ethics were wanting, pleasure, virtue, and human flourishing.

the dramatic return of substantive normative theorizing.⁴ It seems that Richter was right to conclude, then, that Anscombe failed to have an influence *on* moral philosophy, and ended up only being influential *within* moral philosophy.⁵

While there are many factors explaining why “Modern Moral Philosophy” has failed to have its intended effect on moral philosophy after its publication, one of the most important reasons concerns the fact that, despite over sixty years of scholarship, many significant interpretive questions about “Modern Moral Philosophy” remain unanswered. Two features of Anscombe’s text help explain this curious state of affairs. The first is that “Modern Moral Philosophy” is infamous for treating the ideas of many of the most well known figures in Western philosophy with intellectual rudeness. The effect that this feature of Anscombe’s text has had, I suspect, is to discourage many philosophers from making the effort to study her text closely.⁶ The second feature is connected to the first. “Modern Moral Philosophy” is a difficult text. Not only does it contain no clear argumentative structure as a whole, but it leaves many of its most important ideas undeveloped, and the relationship between them unexplained. For example, while many are familiar with Anscombe’s three famous theses with which she begins her article, there is no consensus in the secondary literature about what the *main*

⁴ See Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992) on the revival of normative ethics in the middle of the twentieth-century, a phenomenon they dubbed “The Great Expansion”.

⁵ The latter claim, however, must also be qualified, since Anscombe’s primary influence within moral philosophy was, as it now well documented, only on a subset of moral philosophers who were inclined towards developing a virtue ethical approach.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of how to read “Modern Moral Philosophy” as a polemic, see Chappell (2022).

conclusion of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is supposed to be. Does “Modern Moral Philosophy” have *three* conclusions, one corresponding to each thesis? Or, does it have one? If so, which of the three is it, or is there some *fourth* thesis which is defended elsewhere in the text? Without clear answers to these questions, skeptics of “Modern Moral Philosophy” will continue to be justified in overlooking Anscombe’s text.

In this paper, I aim to remedy this situation by explaining how Anscombe’s famous three theses are related. I do this by arguing against what I take to be the most commonly held view in the secondary literature, which I call the Unity thesis. The Unity thesis consists in the claim that Anscombe’s three theses are *directly* related and in some sense unified. While no one, as far as I am aware, explicitly defends Unity as I have put it here, I take it to represent the core of the dominant position in the secondary literature. Furthermore, many interpreters appear to not only take Unity to be true, but also take its truth to be necessary for understanding the true significance of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Despite its popularity, however, the justification for Unity has remained unclear since the publication of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. As Jennifer Frey has recently remarked, “no one has successfully managed to give an account of how Anscombe’s three theses are fundamentally united or related to one another”.⁷ By arguing against what I take to be the best attempt at showing Unity to be true, I expose a deep division between Anscombe’s second and third theses which shows that it is not possible to directly unify *all three* of Anscombe’s theses. Instead of arguing that the true

⁷ See Frey’s 2018 talk “Revisiting Modern Moral Philosophy” at the *Royal Institute of Philosophy*. For her explanation of Unity, see Frey (2020).

significance of “Modern Moral Philosophy” lies in appreciating a deeper connection between Anscombe’s three theses, I argue that it lies in properly appreciating the connections between Anscombe’s first and third theses.

An important upshot of my view will be that Anscombe’s second thesis, which has received the most scholarly attention of the three, is only *indirectly* related to the other two, and stands in an indirect relationship to Anscombe’s main argument in the paper. This is a significant claim since a disproportionate amount of the scholarly attention has focused on Anscombe’s second thesis, and the surrounding discussion. The result of this, however, has been a failure to appreciate the radical significance of her methodological remarks on the relationship between first-order theorizing, the philosophy of psychology, and action theory. My hope is that, by redirecting the center of attention, a new discussion will emerge regarding these aspects of Anscombe’s thought, especially in relation to the interesting developments in the history of twentieth-century ethics after 1958.

In section two, I provide an overview of Anscombe’s famous three theses. In section three, I motivate the importance of Unity, and explain why it has proven so difficult to justify. In section four, I argue that Unity is false. In section five, I explain why this is significant.

2 Anscombe’s Three Theses

In this section, I begin by explaining some of the initially puzzling features of Anscombe’s article and why it is surprising that the Unity thesis is a popular view among

Anscombe scholars. Following this, I explain the meaning of each thesis in more detail, and provide several clarifications and elaborations of Anscombe's highly idiosyncratic claims. The purpose of this section is to set up the main argument found in the later sections of the paper.

2.1 The Initial Puzzle

Anscombe begins "Modern Moral Philosophy" by stating the following three theses:⁸

- (1) It is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy.
- (2) The concepts of obligation, and duty — moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say — and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of "ought", ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible.
- (3) The differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

Before explaining each thesis in detail, I want to briefly remark on the *prima facie* puzzling nature of the relationship between Anscombe's three claims, and why it is surprising that the Unity thesis is the dominant view in the secondary literature.

Anscombe begins her article by presenting three theses, all of which seem quite substantial, and quite different. Anscombe's first thesis concerns the "profitability" of "moral philosophy". A natural question to ask is what Anscombe means by "moral philosophy"? A natural answer is that she means "modern moral philosophy", referring to the work of the "English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day"

⁸ For purposes of clarity, I have removed the condensed justifications which Anscombe attaches to each thesis, in order to isolate her main claims. I will discuss her justifications below.

in thesis three. But, as anyone who is familiar with the article knows, Anscombe does not simply argue that “modern moral philosophy” is unprofitable, but uses the term more generally to refer to *all* approaches to ethics, including those inclined towards reviving a divine law or virtue ethical approach. Virtue ethics cannot be properly begun, Anscombe thinks, until adequate progress has been made in developing our understanding of a whole suite of concepts regarding action and ethics, such as “intention”, “wanting”, “pleasure”, “virtue”, “flourishing”, and several others. So, Anscombe must be using “moral philosophy” here in a generic sense. Additionally, Anscombe writes that what makes “moral philosophy” unprofitable is that it lacks what she calls an adequate “philosophy of psychology”.⁹ This seems to widen the gap between Anscombe’s first thesis and her third, which is a claim about the “importance” of the differences between the “well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day”. It is clear, later in the article, that the differences between these figures are unimportant, in Anscombe’s eyes, insofar as they are all committed to a consequentialist normative ethical view. But, this claim seems to have little to do, at least on the surface, with the purported lack of an adequate philosophy of psychology. That is, Anscombe’s claim about what makes moral philosophy unprofitable in thesis one seems to be a very different claim than the one she makes in thesis three, which seems to consist in a substantive normative ethical objection to a group of thinkers. Furthermore, Anscombe’s famous second thesis, which concerns the incoherence of the predominant concepts employed by the modern moral philosophers, *also* seems to be a quite different kind of

⁹ This concept will be explained below.

claim from the claims of thesis one and thesis three. The problem of lacking an adequate philosophy of psychology is distinct from the problem of a group of philosophers using a set of incoherent or meaningless concepts, and also distinct from the problem of their acceptance of an objectionable substantive normative ethical theory. It seems to be the case, then, that Anscombe's three theses are, at least *prima facie*, three distinct claims, and we should not be surprised if they cannot be directly unified, even if they are *related*.

If it is true that Anscombe's three theses are disconnected in some significant way, though, it may be the case that the article contains a more *general* conclusion, or a *general* argument, that the three theses individually support. That is, perhaps it is the case that Anscombe's three theses are themselves premises in some master argument, the conclusion of which is left implicit in the article. While this may be the case, and some sophisticated interpretations in the secondary literature point out interesting connections between Anscombe's claims that are certainly undeniable, as a matter of textual interpretation, I think this is implausible. At the end of the article, Anscombe quite explicitly states:

“It is left to modern moral philosophy — the moral philosophy of all the well-known English ethicists since Sidgwick — to construct systems according to which ... it is left open to debate whether such a procedure as the judicial punishment of the innocent may not in some circumstances be the ‘right’ one to adopt ... *and that is my complaint*” (emphasis added).¹⁰

¹⁰ I have left out several sentences here that do not, in my opinion, affect the truth of my argument.

Anscombe ends her article with the words “and that is my complaint”, referring to her complaint, in thesis three, that the differences between the modern moral philosophers are of little importance because they are all committed, whether implicitly or explicitly, to consequentialism, which is a normative ethical theory that cannot make sense of absolute prohibitions on certain obviously unjust actions. As a matter of textual interpretation, it seems quite straightforward that this constituted Anscombe’s primary concern. But, if this is true, it seems unrelated to her most *famous* complaint, found in thesis two, that modern moral philosophy has developed a set of incoherent or meaningless moral concepts, since Anscombe’s complaint about consequentialism isn’t that the concepts employed by consequentialists are *meaningless* — it is that they have a meaning, and that the content of the ethical view expressed by them is morally objectionable. It seems to be the case, then, that Anscombe’s three theses cannot be unified, and we should not expect them to be. Additionally, it is quite surprising, then, that the Unity thesis is popular among Anscombe scholars. As we will see, however, this does not mean that there are no significant connections between Anscombe’s claims, since they are certainly related in various interesting ways, it just means that, as a matter of philosophical argument, Anscombe’s article contains several different lines of thought that do not stand in any *direct* relation to one another — and the textual evidence bears this out. Anscombe’s text *seems* disunified, because her arguments, in fact, *are*.

2.2 Explaining Anscombe’s Three Theses

While there are several ironies surrounding the impact “Modern Moral Philosophy” had upon its field, the most striking is that shortly after its publication, Analytic moral

philosophy saw a “Great Revival” of substantive normative theorizing, thereby completely bypassing Anscombe’s first thesis. For the first half of the twentieth-century, ethics in England and the United States was viewed as a second-order discipline that was almost exclusively concerned with the language of moral thought and talk.¹¹ In the 1950’s, however, the landscape began to shift back towards the kind of substantive normative theorizing that predominated in the nineteenth-century, as a result of the work by figures such as: Baier, Brandt, Firth, Frankena, Rawls, Toulmin, and von Wright.¹² While the revival of substantive work shared a common starting point with Anscombe, insofar as it was generally agreed upon that the course which moral philosophy had taken was no longer tenable, the direction in which it developed was precisely the opposite from what she had envisioned. Not only did Anscombe think that moral philosophy in 1958 was not profitable, but she also held the methodological thesis that we should refrain from doing first-order ethics altogether until we first make significant progress in what she called the “philosophy of psychology”. Anscombe thought that moral philosophy “should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology”.¹³

The phrase “philosophy of psychology” is borrowed from Wittgenstein, who used it as a title for a series of notes that served as a basis for the second part of the

¹¹ The most influential books on ethics being: Ayer (1936), Hare (1952), Moore (1903), Stevenson (1944).

¹² For an account of the relationship between nineteenth and twentieth century British normative theorizing, see Hurka (2004, 2014). Also, see Darwall, Gibbard, Railton (1992) and Bevir and Blakely (2010), on the revival of first-order ethics after the second World War.

¹³ See Anscombe (2005, 169).

Philosophical Investigations.¹⁴ By “philosophy of psychology” Anscombe (as well as Wittgenstein) did *not* mean an empirical investigation into the mind, or the kind of work that would be called “moral psychology” today, but a *grammatical* investigation into the concepts which are relevant to ethics. More specifically, Anscombe envisioned a grammatical investigation into the concepts of action, intention, wanting, virtue, and any other concepts which are needed to determine the goodness or badness of a human action.¹⁵ The kind of work which Anscombe carried out in her monograph *Intention*, published a year prior to “Modern Moral Philosophy”, provides a positive example of such work. *Intention* constituted a “conceptual analysis” of intentional human action, wanting, and other related concepts.¹⁶

Anscombe thought that we should not even *begin* doing ethics until we made adequate progress investigating the nature of these important concepts.¹⁷ When

¹⁴ See Cremaschi (2014, 21). See also Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (1980).

¹⁵ A “grammatical investigation” is a conceptual investigation into the logical features of concepts that constrain their intelligible use in linguistic contexts. For example, Foot argues that one cannot feel proud of the sea, because it is part of the grammar of pride that it cannot be used to apply to such a thing.

¹⁶ See Anscombe (1957). For an excellent account of how to read “Modern Moral Philosophy” in tandem with *Intention*, see Wiseman (2012). It is important to note that Anscombe’s approach to philosophical analysis, which is largely Wittgensteinian as mentioned above, does not result in analytic definitions, or necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of concepts. It is better to think of the Anscombean/Wittgensteinian conception of analysis as determining what Ryle called the “logical geography of concepts”. Ryle compared the philosopher to a cartographer whose job was to clarify the “logically legitimate” uses of language, and to referee the uses and abuses of conceptual grammars that were embedded informally in language, thereby eliminating pseudo-concepts and correcting category mistakes.

¹⁷ Many have taken Anscombe to task over the fact that she appears to have violated her own requirement in some of her later work on issues in applied ethics. Anscombe, however, has remarked in several places on the difference of her philosophical approach for different audiences and purposes, especially with respect to writings directed towards religious audiences.

considering the possibility of replacing modern moral philosophy with secular virtue ethics, Anscombe provides the following methodological remark:

“But meanwhile — is it not clear that there are several concepts that need investigating simply as part of the philosophy of psychology and — as I should recommend — *banishing ethics totally* from our minds? Namely — to begin with: ‘action’, ‘intention’, ‘pleasure’, ‘wanting’ ... Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept of virtue; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of study of ethics”.¹⁸

What is striking about Anscombe’s first thesis, when read in conjunction with the passage above, is that Anscombe not only thought that the kind of moral philosophy practiced by her opponents in 1958 was unprofitable, but that the only viable secular alternative — virtue ethics — was also not *yet* profitable. There is a double irony, then, surrounding Anscombe’s first thesis, which is that not only did moral philosophy in general proceed in precisely the opposite direction of Anscombe’s recommendation, but *Virtue Ethics* did so as well, and largely under the influence of the dominant approach to moral philosophy.¹⁹ Anscombe’s first thesis, then, has almost universally been ignored.²⁰ Whether or not this was as disastrous as Anscombe thought it would be, however, is a matter of debate. When considering the progress made in understanding the structure of

¹⁸ See Anscombe (2005, 188).

¹⁹ For more on the differences between Anscombe and Foot’s approach to virtue ethics, and contemporary virtue ethics, see Brewer (2009), Doyle (2018), Frey (2020), Sanford (2015), Solomon (2003), Vogler (2012).

²⁰ A few notable exceptions are Foot (2001), Brewer (2009), MacIntyre (1981), Thompson (2004, 2008), Vogler (2002).

certain normative concepts following the revival of first-order work, many think, with good reason, that passing over Anscombe's warning was for the better.²¹

While Anscombe's first thesis has largely been overlooked, the same cannot be said about her second thesis. An overwhelming majority of scholarly attention has been devoted to interpreting, criticizing, and defending Anscombe's claim that the concepts of moral obligation, moral duty, moral rightness, moral wrongness, ought to be jettisoned.²² The predominance of Anscombe's second thesis in the scholarly discussion is likely owed to Alasdair MacIntyre's influential book *After Virtue*, which developed Anscombe's insights in much greater detail than she was able to do in "Modern Moral Philosophy".²³

Anscombe's second thesis holds that the moral concepts ought to be jettisoned both because they are survivals from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer exists, and because they are harmful as such. While the fact that a set of concepts survives beyond its original context does not by itself provide sufficient reason to jettison them, when it comes to the *moral* concepts, Anscombe thinks that they have lost all meaning, and retain only a psychological force.²⁴ The use of such concepts, on

²¹ For a powerful argument to this end, see Hurka (2004).

²² For work which focuses on Anscombe's second thesis see: Baier (1988), Crisp (2004), Darwall (2006), Doyle (2018), Kraut (2006), Miner (2008), Pigden (1988), Richter (1995), Stern (2014).

²³ See MacIntyre (1981), Garcia (2003).

²⁴ As Roger Crisp points out, Anscombe's position is "is an artful one, given the philosophical milieu of the late nineteen-fifties. Essentially, she is accepting, in broad terms, much of what the emotivists and the prescriptivists

Anscombe's view, adds nothing to our moral judgments about unjust actions other than a solemn emphasis, which is often expressed by italicizing the word *moral*, or simply reinserting it in front of words like "ought", "should", or "must".²⁵

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to criticizing, often with good reason, Anscombe's explanation for how such a situation came about.²⁶ Anscombe argued that the moral concepts lost their meaning as a result of moral philosophers rejecting God as a law-giver, while simultaneously trying to retain a "law conception" of ethics — that is, trying to retain a concept of obligation which has the sense of being bound as if by law.

Anscombe writes:

"the notion 'obligation' survived, and the word 'ought' was invested with that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a 'moral' sense, but in which the belief in divine law had long since been abandoned".²⁷

The concepts of obligation and ought, on her view, survived beyond the framework of thought that made them intelligible. It is on these grounds that Anscombe finds herself in agreement with Hume that it is not possible to infer "morally ought" from "is", claiming

said about the force of 'ought', but suggesting that once we see that this force is all that the concept gives us then it cannot serve in serious moral philosophy". See Crisp (2004).

²⁵ For a discussion of what *is* added by divine obligations against unjust actions, see Miner (2008).

²⁶ I am in agreement with Roger Teichman in holding that the importance of Anscombe's second thesis is independent of her historical arguments. Teichmann writes, "for Anscombe the real problem has to do with current errors of thought, especially within philosophy, and the historical hypothesis is meant merely to contribute to a diagnosis, of the kind that can aid understanding". See Teichmann (2008, 108). I think that Anscombe's historical arguments have, unfortunately, often drawn attention away from more significant aspects of her thought. For an account which disagrees on this point, see Crisp (2004).

²⁷ See Anscombe (2005, 176).

that “This word ‘ought’ having become a word of mesmeric force, could not, in the character of having that force, be inferred from anything whatever”.²⁸

One puzzling feature of Anscombe’s account is that she simultaneously holds that ‘ought’ has acquired a special *moral* sense in modern moral philosophy, according to which it implies “some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the ‘ought’ sentences used in certain types of context”, while also holding that the moral ought lacks meaningful content.²⁹ For example, the reason why Anscombe thought that you cannot infer “morally ought” from “is”, or even from other “morally ought” sentences, is that she thinks that the moral ought is “just a word containing no intelligible thought: a word retaining the suggestion of force, and apt to have a strong psychological effect, but which no longer signifies a real concept at all”.³⁰ Anscombe thought that using ought in the moral sense, outside of a context in which it is intelligible, would be equivalent to someone using the notion “criminal” outside of a context in which criminal law and criminal courts exist. There may be a period of time during which the use of “criminal” remains intelligible, but at some point, without the proper contextual background, the use would lose its meaning altogether. Anscombe’s argument against the moral ought appears to make the point, then, that when modern moral philosophers say that one “morally ought not to lie”, they are *trying* to use “ought” in such a way that expresses some absolute verdict on an action — a verdict which has the kind of authority

²⁸ See Anscombe (2005, 178).

²⁹ See Anscombe (2005, 175).

³⁰ See Anscombe (2005, 179).

that could come from a divine lawgiver's command— while also presupposing that such a lawgiver does not exist. It is for this reason that Anscombe writes “where one does not think there is a judge or a law, the notion of a verdict may retain its psychological effect, but not its meaning”.³¹

Anscombe's argument is essentially Wittgensteinian. As Roger Teichmann writes, “In the manner of Wittgenstein, Anscombe's method is to remind us of the actual role that a certain language □ game plays within human life”.³² When it comes to issuing *verdicts*, certain empirical background facts (such as the existence of legal institutions) are required for such a use to be intelligible. It is part of the logical grammar of *verdicts* that there must exist a law or judge which is capable of issuing a verdict (“and where one does not think there is a judge or a law, the notion of a verdict may retain its psychological effect, but not its meaning”). Anscombe infamously offers an abrupt dismissal of Kant on these grounds, arguing that it is part of the grammar of *legislating* that one cannot legislate for oneself.

Before turning to thesis three, it is important to point out that Anscombe did not think that it was impossible to make sense of obligation, or practical necessity, *at all*.³³ In fact, Anscombe thought that the concepts of “should”, “needs”, “ought”, and “must” are indispensable for ethical discourse, and that we can make sense of obligations with these

³¹ See Anscombe (2005, 179).

³² See Teichmann (2008, 109).

³³ For a thorough explanation of the concept of practical necessity and its relation to the history of ethics, see O'Brien (2011, Chapter One).

concepts in their ordinary use.³⁴ We do this all of the time when we explain the rules of a game. What is being ruled out is the special *moral* sense with which these ordinary words are often employed.³⁵ Whether or not the ordinary concepts which Anscombe preferred are sufficient to do the work of morality is, of course, a separate question from whether Anscombe was right to reject the *moral* uses of these concepts.

After Anscombe concludes her argument for thesis two, remarking that it would be a “great improvement” if we stopped using the moral concepts, and replaced them with “thick” concepts such as “unjust” or “untruthful”, she immediately shifts to discussing thesis three in what is one of the more jarring transitions in the text.³⁶ Anscombe’s “transition” to thesis three is jarring for both stylistic and philosophical reasons. Stylistically, Anscombe provides no indication to the reader about what she plans to do, or how it relates to what came before. Philosophically, the content of Anscombe’s discussion of thesis three seems to be completely disconnected from

³⁴ Anscombe thought that Aristotle got quite far with the ordinary concepts alone, but she did not think he did a good enough job explaining “what type of characteristic a virtue is”, which requires further conceptual analysis and a better understanding of philosophy of psychology. Anscombe also separately criticizes Aristotle for his understanding of the concept of pleasure, claiming that it reduced him to “babble”. See Anscombe (2005, 174).

³⁵ The question of whether anyone was actually committed to using these concepts in a *moral* way is an interesting one which requires more historical work. Roger Teichmann finds a clear example in the work of J.L. Mackie, insofar as Mackie thought that if moral properties were to exist, then they would have to be inherently normative properties which impose objective obligations on people — obligations which are independent of any legislators or practices. Teichmann writes that “The idea that morality must have this character is what Anscombe was attacking”. See Teichmann (2008, 105).

³⁶ The idea of “thick” moral concepts, which is largely credited to Bernard Williams in contemporary discussions, originated in the work of Wittgenstein and the “Wartime Quartet”, which consisted of Anscombe, Foot, Midgley, and Murdoch. Williams acknowledges Foot and Murdoch in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, writing “The idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest is basically a Wittgensteinian idea. I first heard it expressed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s”. See Williams (1985, 240, n. 7).

anything which came before. Up until this point in the text, Anscombe has contrasted Aristotelian ethics with modern ethics, discussed the possibility of transitioning from “is” to “ought”, outlined the priority of the philosophy of psychology over first-order ethics, provided a genealogy of the moral concepts, and argued against the meaningfulness of these concepts. The nature of Anscombe’s discussion on these topics was largely historical and conceptual. When it comes to thesis three, however, Anscombe’s discussion becomes markedly normative. For the remainder of “Modern Moral Philosophy”, Anscombe is largely concerned with the significance of moral philosophers’ failure to recognize the possibility of absolute prohibitions on act-types, and the structure of consequentialist thought.³⁷

Anscombe’s third thesis, as written, is not a claim about the truth or falsity of the views held by the well known English moral philosophers since Sidgwick, but about the *importance* of the differences between them. The reason why Anscombe thought that the differences between these figures are of little importance is that, on her understanding, they share a common commitment to what she calls “consequentialism”, and this feature of their thought overrides any other:

“... [W]hat is really significant is an overall similarity. The overall similarity is made clear if you consider that every one of the best known English academic moral philosophers has put out a philosophy according to which, e.g., it is not possible to hold

³⁷ There is one major exception where Anscombe surveys four different ways in which it is possible to develop a secular law conception of ethics. This stretch of text occurs after another jarring transition. See Anscombe (2005, pp. 186-88).

that it cannot be right to kill the innocent as a means to any end whatsoever and that someone who thinks otherwise is in error”.³⁸

The reason why Anscombe thought this similarity is significant is that it means that the framework of thought which modern moral philosophy operates in is not capable of making sense of absolute prohibitions on certain action-types. More specifically, Anscombe thought that modern moral philosophy is *consequentialist* because it cannot make intelligible “the prohibition of certain things simply in virtue of their description as such-and-such identifiable kinds of action, regardless of any further consequences”.³⁹

What is interesting about Anscombe’s discussion surrounding her third thesis is that she never explicitly says that consequentialism is false. Noticing this feature is significant because it brings out the fact that Anscombe never argues for the truth of absolutism in “Modern Moral Philosophy”, but predicates her entire discussion on it being the case that some actions are absolutely prohibited simply in virtue of their descriptions as such — a plausible assumption. Many philosophers will find this feature of “Modern Moral Philosophy” problematic, since Anscombe seems to be begging the question against the consequentialist.⁴⁰ One gets the sense, though, that Anscombe *intentionally* put her discussion this way, tempting philosophers into entertaining the

³⁸ See Anscombe (2005, 181).

³⁹ See Anscombe (2005, 181-2).

⁴⁰ If Anscombe were to offer a direct argument that consequentialism is false, it would assume that some actions are such that they are prohibited no matter the consequences, which just is the denial of consequentialism as she defined it.

possibility that absolutism *may* be false, thereby demonstrating what is, in her opinion, the corruption of their minds.⁴¹

All arguments need to take something for granted. Anscombe's starting point is a thesis which, in her mind, and likely in that of nearly all non-philosophers, it is impossible to reject without displaying the viciousness of one's character.⁴² I take it that this is the thinking behind Anscombe's famous remark that "if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration — I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind".⁴³

Much more can be said about Anscombe's three theses than I have provided here. My aim in this section was to provide a general overview of each thesis in preparation for the following discussion. In the next section, I will examine Anscombe's arguments in

⁴¹ I suspect that even considering that absolutism *may* be false would be sufficient evidence of corruption for Anscombe.

⁴² It is likely that many philosophers, when outside of the academy and sitting at the dinner table with family and friends, would find anyone who entertained such ideas in conversation repugnant. Anyone who has taught introductory ethics courses is likely to have experienced such a reaction from students when they find out about the way in which Analytic ethics encourages one to seriously entertain the permissibility of all sorts of grotesque actions. To take one famous example, James Rachels' argument against the distinction between doing harm and allowing harm takes there to be no moral difference between pushing a child into a bathtub so that they drown and refusing to help a drowning child out of one. See Rachels (1975). On this theme, Anscombe writes "Finally, the point of considering hypothetical situations, perhaps very improbable ones, *seems* to be to elicit from yourself or someone else a hypothetical decision to do something of a bad kind. I don't doubt this has the effect of predisposing people — who will never get into the situations for which they have made hypothetical choices — to consent to similar bad actions, or to praise and flatter those who do them, so long as their crowd does so too, when the desperate circumstances imagined don't hold at all". See Anscombe (2005, 186).

⁴³ See Anscombe (2005, 191).

more detail by considering the question of how these three theses relate, why this matters, and why the answer to this question has proven elusive.

3 The Unity Thesis

In an article celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of “Modern Moral Philosophy”, David Solomon has remarked that “Its philosophical density is staggering, containing more ideas per page than almost any philosophical article written in the 20th century”.⁴⁴ While I think Solomon is right about this feature of Anscombe’s text, it must also be pointed out that this often constitutes both a virtue and a vice of the article.

Anscombe offers an over abundance of different ideas and arguments, and does little to explain how these different threads hang together, and which are most significant. As a result, skeptics are largely justified in ignoring Anscombe’s text as a result of its surface level deficiencies. While it is not reasonable to try to explain how *all* of the features of Anscombe’s text fit together, those who are convinced of the philosophical importance of “Modern Moral Philosophy” have the burden of separating the wheat from the chaff. Most importantly, there still seems to be no consensus in the secondary literature about what the *main point* of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is, and how Anscombe’s three theses relate to one another.

⁴⁴ See Solomon (2008).

The following basic questions about “Modern Moral Philosophy” remain unresolved: Is “Modern Moral Philosophy” *really* a paper about consequentialism, the incoherence of the moral concepts, or both? If both, then are these two threads related in any way, or are they just two independently interesting lines of argument? Furthermore, how does thesis one relate to theses two and three? Are Anscombe’s three theses meant to represent three different conclusions of the article, or is there some fundamental relationship between them which serves to make a deeper point? Until these questions are adequately answered, I think, skeptics will continue to remain justified in viewing “Modern Moral Philosophy” as a defective text and, in the eyes of those who are sympathetic to Anscombe’s ideas, will continue to ignore or misunderstand its philosophical importance. One of the main strategies for vindicating the importance of “Modern Moral Philosophy”, among those sympathetic to Anscombe, has been to defend the following thesis:

Unity: Anscombe’s three theses are directly unifiable.

While Unity is a widely held position, it has proven incredibly difficult to justify. Two recent strategies have emerged for justifying Unity. On the one hand, James Doyle has argued that it is Anscombe’s second thesis which is fundamental to understanding “Modern Moral Philosophy”, and that which, if true, makes her article “profound”.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Jennifer Frey has argued that it is Anscombe’s third thesis which is of fundamental importance, insofar as it points us towards Anscombe’s commitment to

⁴⁵ See Doyle (2018).

absolutism, which serves to unify all three.⁴⁶ It is interesting to point out that what is commonly assumed between these two opposed strategies is that Anscombe's first thesis is *dependent*.⁴⁷ Jennifer Frey writes, for example, that "thesis one is a mere *assertion* shrouded in mystery when considered independent of its relation to thesis two and three".⁴⁸ Meanwhile, James Doyle has claimed that thesis two is "presupposed by the arguments for thesis one and three".⁴⁹ While it has not proven difficult to explain how Anscombe's three theses are *indirectly* related, since there seems to be interpretive pathways from both thesis two and three to thesis one, what has yet to be made clear anywhere in the secondary literature is how Anscombe's *second* and *third* theses are related to one another. It is not sufficient for Unity to show that thesis one depends upon thesis two and three, and that it serves as a common link between them.⁵⁰ Instead, what needs to be shown is how Anscombe's second and third theses are *directly* related to one another. Before explaining why explaining this relationship has proven so difficult, despite over sixty years of scholarship, I want to explain why we should care about the difficult task of justifying Unity, and why the Unity thesis has proven to be an attractive thesis to hold for those sympathetic to the importance of Anscombe's thought.

⁴⁶ See Frey (2020).

⁴⁷ Charles Pigden has also held that Anscombe's first thesis is dependent upon her second thesis, and "lack all plausibility if the latter is not true". See Pigden (1988, 23).

⁴⁸ See Frey (2020, 65).

⁴⁹ See Doyle (2018, 4).

⁵⁰ One might think that thesis one is the *direct* link between thesis two and three. I will argue against this strategy in section four.

3.1 The Unity Thesis, Action Theory, and Ethics

In her paper, “Revisiting Modern Moral Philosophy”, Jennifer Frey argues that one major consequence of the failure to justify Unity, and the tendency to treat Anscombe’s three theses independently of one another is that, following the publication of Anscombe’s *Intention*, the field of action theory has become disconnected from ethics. As explained in section two, Anscombe’s monograph *Intention*, published a year earlier than “Modern Moral Philosophy”, was a partial attempt to carry out the kind of prerequisite “philosophy of psychology” which Anscombe thought essential to the development of secular virtue ethics. Frey points out, though, that many philosophers have completely failed to recognize the connection between Anscombe’s work on the philosophy of action and “Modern Moral Philosophy”, with the result that action theory, after 1958, developed in a direction which could not serve as a foundation for secular virtue ethics. Instead, action theory became decidedly non-ethical, concerning itself with issues of mind and language, and taking intentions to be mental states that cause actions. Given this shift, Frey finds it unsurprising that “the analytic action theoretic project doesn’t seem to yield anything of foundational importance for moral philosophy generally, let alone our thought about virtue”, adding that “one strains to find normative or metaethical theorists (including virtue ethicists) seriously engaged in this literature”.⁵¹ In addition to the failure to read

⁵¹ See Frey (2020, 64).

Intention and “Modern Moral Philosophy” in tandem, Frey argues that the separation of Anscombe’s first thesis from these two and three partially explains why action theory has developed this way. The important point is that although Anscombe thought that work on the “philosophy of psychology” was *pre-ethical*, she also thought that it was the proper ground of a sound approach to ethics, and therefore that the two could not, and *should* not, proceed independently from one another.

One reason why Anscombe may have thought that we should not separate action theory from ethics, although she is not explicit about this, is that it would lead to consequentialism. As Paul Hurley argues, action theory has proceeded under the illusion of being ethically neutral, while in reality it has developed in such a way that has substantive ethical implications.⁵² Hurley argues that normative ethicists often take for granted what has come to be called the “Standard Story” of action, according to which:

“there is no difference between a mere movement (e.g., an arm rising) and an intentional action (e.g., my raising my arm) as bodily movements, happenings in the world. Intentional actions are instead distinguished by their antecedents, desires and beliefs that non-deviantly cause and rationalize such movements”.⁵³

What makes the raising of my arm intentional, on this view, is that the movement, the rising, is caused by beliefs and desires. Hurley’s main conclusion is that the Standard Story of action “generates a powerful presumption in favor of consequentialist moral theories, theories that determine the moral status of actions through appeal to rankings of

⁵² See Hurley (2016).

⁵³ See Hurley (2016, x). For a detailed defense of the Standard Story, see Smith (2012).

states of affairs as better and worse”.⁵⁴ Hurley argues that the Standard Story of action entails a “teleological conception of reasons, upon which all reasons to act are reasons to bring about states of affairs”.⁵⁵ A teleological conception of reasons, so construed, “supports a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of action, upon which the normative status of actions is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as in some respect better or worse”. On the Standard Story, the beliefs and desires which rationalize action are thought of as propositional attitudes whose object is states of affairs.⁵⁶

While the consequentialist framework of evaluation does not directly entail moral consequentialism, Hurley argues that it does rule out most traditional alternatives to consequentialist moral theories, and generates a strong presumption in favor of such consequentialist moral theories. It does this by taking all reasons to act as reasons to bring about states of affairs, and thereby “rejects all reasons to act that are not reasons to bring about states of affairs”. Traditional non-consequentialist alternatives, however, depend upon recognizing moral reasons that are different in kind from moral reasons to bring about states of affairs.⁵⁷ Hurley concludes, then, that “the consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions militates strongly in favor of consequentialism because it militates strongly against standard alternatives to consequentialist moral theories, e.g.,

⁵⁴ See Hurley (2016, x).

⁵⁵ See Hurley (2016, x).

⁵⁶ Propositional attitudes are expressed by “that” clauses, and contain states of affairs as their content.

⁵⁷ These kinds of reasons, according to Hurley, appeal to the “value of persons, relationships, and traits of character”.

standard Kantian, virtue ethical, and many contractualist theories”. Treating Anscombe’s three theses as complementing one another, then, seems potentially very important if we are to avoid allowing consequentialism into our normative theorizing through the back door. It is for this reason, among others, that some have likely felt it important to understand Anscombe’s three theses as a package, rather than independently interesting lines of thought.⁵⁸ Now that I have explained why some have taken the Unity thesis to be significant, I want to turn to explaining why justifying Unity has proven so difficult.

3.2 The Unity Puzzle

Within the secondary literature on “Modern Moral Philosophy”, it is common to find interpretations which have little difficulty in explaining how Anscombe’s second and third thesis are related to her first thesis. These explanations are often taken to be sufficient to justify Unity. What remains unexplained in these accounts, however, is how Anscombe’s *second* and *third* theses directly relate to each other. The predominant view in the literature takes Anscombe’s second thesis to be fundamental, and uses it to explain thesis one, but often leaves the direct connection between theses two and three unclear.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Another primary motivation for Unity consists in the hope of making sense of “Modern Moral Philosophy” *as a text*, given its confusing structure.

⁵⁹ As mentioned above, Charles Pigden takes Anscombe’s first thesis to be wholly dependent on thesis two. Pigden writes, “Her [Anscombe’s] brand of ethics may be unworkable in the psychological darkness of our present times, but ethics generally need not be. That would only follow if her way were the only way. Herein lies the link between the first and the second of Anscombe’s three theses. What the polemic against Ought is designed to show is that her way *is* the only possible one ... The upshot of all this is that Anscombe’s first thesis is largely dependent on the second. It lacks all plausibility if the latter is not true”. When it comes to explaining the connection between Anscombe’s second and third thesis, Pigden attempts

This unclarity is often supplemented by remarks about how thesis three is related to thesis one, but the *direct* connection between two and three remains unexplained.⁶⁰

The reason why Unity has proven so elusive is that, while it is relatively straightforward to explain how thesis one is related to thesis two and three, it does not seem possible to explain the relationship between thesis two and three to each other except *indirectly*. In other words, it does not seem possible to unify *all three* of Anscombe's theses directly, but this is just what Unity requires. In what follows, I will explain how many have taken thesis one to relate to thesis two and three, and then diagnose why the relationship between thesis two and three has proven so difficult to explain with the hope of uncovering potential solutions.

Recall that Anscombe's first thesis is that it is not profitable to do moral philosophy without an adequate philosophy of psychology. One straightforward way in which thesis one follows from thesis two is that if the concepts which moral philosophers rely on are meaningless, then using them will not be profitable. The reason why moral philosophy as a whole is not profitable is that the only alternatives to modern moral philosophy are a return to divine law ethics, or the development of secular virtue ethics. Anscombe thought, quite realistically, that the former is unlikely, but also held that the

to offer an explanation, but fully acknowledges that he may have gotten things wrong since Anscombe is not clear on this point. See Pigden (1988, 22-4).

⁶⁰ There is no one, as far as I know, who defends the priority of Anscombe's first thesis. This is unsurprising, since thesis one clearly serves as a kind of conclusion for the entire article, and therefore is the result of taking thesis two or three as fundamental to the justification of that conclusion.

latter is not possible without making sufficient progress in the philosophy of psychology first. Anscombe writes:

“In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology. For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a ‘virtue.’ This part of the subject-matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is — a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis — and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear. For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as ‘doing such—and—such’ is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required”.⁶¹

The connection between thesis one and three can also be given a quite straightforward explanation. The reason why moral philosophy is not profitable is that it is necessarily consequentialist as a result of its bad philosophy of psychology. Anscombe argued that Sidgwick’s definition of intention, which entails that “one must be said to intend any foreseen consequences of one’s voluntary action”, is what explains the difference between “old-fashioned utilitarianism and that *consequentialism*, as I name it, which marks him and every English academic philosopher since him”.⁶² Since the definition of intention is part of the philosophy of psychology, and Sidgwick’s definition is what led modern moral philosophers to work within an ethical framework that cannot make sense

⁶¹ See Anscombe (2005, 174).

⁶² See Anscombe (2005, 183-4).

of absolute prohibitions, moral philosophy is not profitable until we develop an adequate philosophy of psychology to replace the dominant one.⁶³

At this point, it is natural to think that Unity has been sufficiently explained. I have explained how Anscombe's three theses relate, and my explanation has linked theses two and three in virtue of a common relatum, which is thesis one. Unfortunately, things are not so straightforward. The account which I have just provided exposes an equivocation in Anscombe's use of "profitable" in thesis one. The link between thesis one and two was explained by taking profitability to involve making sense, or *conceptual* profitability. Meanwhile, the link between thesis one and three was explained by taking profitability to pick out a *moral* requirement. The result, then, seems to be that I have sketched two independent lines of argument for two separate conclusions. It is not sufficient for Unity, then, to use thesis one as the direct link which explains the relationship between thesis two and three.

The problem with the strategy I have just sketched above points to a more general problem, and explains the difficulty of directly connecting thesis two and three. The two routes for connecting thesis two and three in terms of thesis one differ insofar as one seems to be clearly conceptual, while the other is clearly normative. The same difference of kind is exhibited by Anscombe's second and third theses. Anscombe's second thesis,

⁶³ Anscombe also thought that Sidgwick's definition cannot make sense of moral responsibility for our intentional actions.

and the surrounding discussion, is concerned with the *meaning* of the moral concepts.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Anscombe's third thesis, and the surrounding discussion, clearly depends upon the importance of absolutism, and is thereby normative. How to reconcile these two different threads on both textual and philosophical levels is not immediately clear, and shows why Unity has proven so difficult to explain.

3 Why Unity Is False

In this section, I will consider Jennifer Frey's recent attempt to justify the Unity thesis.⁶⁵ I consider Frey's account to be the most fruitful attempt at explaining how Anscombe's three theses are fundamentally united. By explaining why Frey's account falls short, I will bring out what I take to be an important feature of Anscombe's second thesis that shows why Unity is false.

According to Frey's account, Anscombe's three theses are fundamentally united in virtue of Anscombe's requirement that moral philosophy recognize absolute prohibitions on certain act-types.⁶⁶ Frey takes Anscombe's main complaint to be that modern moral philosophy has "made it either enormously difficult or downright impossible to articulate the thought that murder is intrinsically unjust and must never be

⁶⁴ Anscombe does say in thesis two that the moral concepts would be "only harmful" without a law conception of ethics, but she does not explain this added remark anywhere else in her text.

⁶⁵ See Frey (2020).

⁶⁶ Notice that Anscombe's absolutism is *not* one of her three theses, although it is the ground of her third thesis.

done for that reason”.⁶⁷ Anscombe’s third thesis provides the key to seeing how to unify all three, insofar as it points towards Anscombe’s views on absolutism. What is important is that the reasons for adopting thesis one and two are, on her account, the *same* — the requirement that moral philosophy recognize absolute prohibitions against certain act-types. Frey writes:

“So, it is the widespread lack of recognition of absolute prohibitions—against, say, murder or the judicial condemnation of the innocent—that explains why she thinks we need to stop doing moral philosophy until we have a sound philosophy of psychology, and also the reason why talk of ‘moral’ right, ‘moral’ wrong, and ‘moral’ obligation is harmful and best jettisoned”.⁶⁸

According to this view, the reason why the requirement to recognize absolute prohibitions justifies stopping first-order moral theorizing until we develop an adequate “philosophy of psychology” is that until we do so, it will not be possible to properly recognize the intrinsic qualities of actions. Furthermore, the reason why the *moral* concepts ought to be jettisoned is that these concepts are used to recommend, approve, or command absolutely prohibited acts, and are thereby harmful.

Frey takes the link between thesis two and three to consist in the harmfulness of the moral concepts. As part of the justification for thesis two, Anscombe wrote that the moral concepts not only ought to be jettisoned because they are survivals from an earlier conception of ethics, but also that they are “only harmful” without such a conception.

⁶⁷ See Frey (2020, 62).

⁶⁸ See Frey (2020, 63).

How are these concepts harmful outside of a law conception of ethics? A natural answer is that their use necessarily leads to consequentialism, with “only” suggesting a necessary connection.

Although this reading is a natural one, and provides a strong apparent link between thesis two and three, I do not think, upon closer inspection, that it secures Unity. To see why, let’s reconsider Anscombe’s second thesis, this time including its full formulation:

“The concepts of obligation, and duty — *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say — and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ‘ought’, ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; *because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it*” (emphasis added).

In section two, I explained why Anscombe thought the status of certain concepts as survivals provided grounds for their rejection. What I want to point to here is that Frey’s strategy for linking thesis two and three does not depend on that discussion, but takes the link only to require the claim about harmfulness. What is the connection, though, between *these* two lines of thought? What does the incoherence or meaninglessness of the moral concepts have to do with their harmfulness? Finally, how does this *necessarily* lead to them being harmful?

The following passage provides a clue to an answer. After Anscombe transitions from discussing the incoherence of the moral concepts to consequentialism, she remarks that “In Moore and subsequent academic moralists of England we find it taken to be

pretty obvious that ‘the right action’ means the one which produces the best possible consequences”.⁶⁹ Recall that *moral* rightness was one of the concepts which Anscombe sought to jettison in thesis two. Anscombe’s remark seems to establish a necessary link between thesis two and thesis three via the concept of *moral* rightness. Unfortunately, this link provides only a partial unification of Anscombe’s second and third thesis, and brings to light a distinction which shows why Unity cannot be true.

Anscombe’s second thesis aims to jettison the concepts of *moral* obligation, *moral* duty, *moral* rightness, *moral* wrongness, and *morally* ought. One important question, though, which has scarcely been asked in interpreting thesis two, is whether Anscombe thinks that these concepts should be jettisoned for the same reason, or whether they each admit of different treatment. Anscombe *suggests* that they all admit of the same treatment in writing that they ought to be jettisoned because “*they* are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives” (emphasis mine). Furthermore, the way in which Anscombe groups together the concepts of “should”, “needs”, “ought”, and “must”, in claiming that they have acquired a special *moral* sense because they were equated, in the relevant contexts, with meaning “is obliged”, or “is bound”, or “is required to”, also suggests that she intends, in general, to treat the *moral* concepts in a unified manner.⁷⁰ While Anscombe does seem to group together concepts which have acquired a special *moral* sense, it is important to

⁶⁹ See Anscombe (2005, 180).

⁷⁰ See Anscombe (2005, 175).

point out that Anscombe's famous discussions about the incoherence of these concepts focuses specifically on the concepts of *moral* obligation and the *moral* use of "ought" — *not* on the concepts of *moral* rightness and *moral* wrongness. In fact, Anscombe's discussion of *moral* rightness and *moral* wrongness does not concern their coherence or incoherence *at all*, but concerns their relation to consequentialism and absolutism.⁷¹ Importantly, in her discussion of consequentialism, her complaint, again, seems not to be that the concepts employed by the consequentialist are incoherent or meaningless, but normatively objectionable. So, Anscombe seems to give different senses to the concepts of *moral* obligation and the *moral* use of "ought" than she does to the concepts of *moral* rightness and wrongness.

The content which Anscombe ascribes to the concept of *moral* ought is that of suggesting a *verdict* on an action, while the content which she gives to the use of *moral* wrong is, as pointed out in the quotation above, a consequentialist one. Anscombe does not criticize this use of wrong on the grounds that it is incoherent, but on the grounds that its application is always *open* to any sort of action whatsoever. The significance of this observation is that while it may seem sufficient to unify Anscombe's second and third theses to point to the passages in which she discusses the concept of *moral* wrongness in relation to consequentialism, what is actually happening is that Anscombe's famous arguments attacking the concepts of *moral* obligation and *moral* ought are entirely

⁷¹ Mary Geach has pointed out that it is the concept of "morally right" which is harmful, but she may have misled some by adding the remark that it is harmful "when cut off from its roots in divine law". Geach writes: "She thought that the notion of the 'morally right' was harmful when cut off from its roots in divine law: obviously, one of the harms she had in mind was consequentialism, the view that there was no kind of action so bad but it might be rendered 'morally right' by its foreseeable consequences". See Geach (2005).

separate from her arguments concerning the concept of *moral* wrongness. In short, Anscombe's arguments about the incoherence or meaninglessness of these concepts are just about that — their meaning — and are, therefore, not *normative* arguments.

The reason it is not possible to fully unify Anscombe's three theses, then, is that Anscombe's second thesis is itself disunified. While it may be true that there is a single explanation for why the concepts of *moral* obligation, *moral* duty, and *morally* ought, are problematic in virtue of being survivals from an earlier conception of ethics, the concept of *moral* rightness, as employed by the consequentialists, not only has a separate sense from the former concepts, but seems perfectly intelligible outside of a law conception of ethics.⁷²

It does not seem possible, then, to show a necessary connection between Anscombe's famous arguments concerning the incoherence of certain concepts and her discussion of consequentialism. The former discussion is purely conceptual, and concerns the meaning of the concepts of *moral* obligation and *moral* "ought". The latter is a substantive normative discussion concerning the harmful nature of consequentialism, and its role in modern moral philosophy. These two lines of thought are completely separate, and should be treated as such.

⁷² Some have suggested an alternative connection that exists between thesis two and three, although it is much weaker. Charles Pigden, for example, has tried to draw a connection between thesis two and three by suggesting that "I suspect Anscombe would argue that it is the use of the empty Ought (and perhaps of the predicative Good) that *tempts* people into consequentialism". I think it is right to hold that the *moral* concepts tempt us towards consequentialism in virtue of their "openness". When a concept is removed from its proper context, there are no rules or conventions to restrict its meaningful use. See Pigden (1988, 24).

The upshot of this interpretation is that the two most famous lines of argument in “Modern Moral Philosophy” are independent of one another. Some may find this conclusion unappealing, since its truth shows there to be, at the very least, a significant degree of textual disunity at the heart of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Furthermore, my reading of thesis two also shows that there is also a significant degree of conceptual disunity between Anscombe’s arguments. Some may worry about giving up on unifying Anscombe’s thought for some of the reasons mentioned in section three, regarding the separation of action theory from ethics. In the final section of the paper, I will argue that giving up on Unity actually helps bring the strengths of “Modern Moral Philosophy” into sharper focus.

4 The Significance of Thesis One and Three

In this section, I will argue that giving up on Unity allows us to construct Anscombe’s main argument in a straightforward and compelling way. The main argument of “Modern Moral Philosophy” consists in the relationship between thesis one and three, with another secondary argument obtaining between thesis one and thesis two. According to this interpretation, the main conclusion of the argument, which is the main conclusion of the paper as a whole, is the conclusion of thesis one — that it is not profitable, at present, to do moral philosophy. As Frey has argued, the reason why Anscombe thought that moral philosophy was not profitable in 1958 was that it could not make sense of absolute prohibitions as a result of its bad philosophy of psychology. Anscombe’s third thesis, that the differences between the well known English writers on moral philosophy are of little importance, because they are all consequentialists, serves as a premise supporting this

conclusion. Meanwhile, Anscombe's supplemental remark attached to thesis one, that moral philosophy should be set aside until we make sufficient progress in the philosophy of psychology, also serves as a premise in establishing this conclusion. A more sophisticated philosophy of psychology, and philosophy of action is *necessary* to avoid consequentialism, and avoiding consequentialism is necessary to doing moral philosophy profitably.

According to my reading, Anscombe's main argument in "Modern Moral Philosophy" is fundamentally a normative rather than conceptual one concerning the meaning of certain concepts. The reason for this is that the conclusion of this argument, which is Anscombe's claim about the profitability of moral philosophy, depends upon her unquestioned commitment to absolutism. What makes an approach to moral philosophy profitable or unprofitable, for Anscombe, is whether it can make sense of absolute prohibitions. When placed in its historical context, this normative reading of "Modern Moral Philosophy" makes the most sense, since Anscombe wrote the article out of dissatisfaction with her colleagues' refusal to object to awarding an honorary degree to Harry Truman.

Someone might object to my claim that the main argument of "Modern Moral Philosophy" is the one described above. If there are two independent lines of argument, why do we have any more reason to think that the normative argument is fundamental rather than the conceptual argument against the moral "ought"? While it is true that the latter argument has received the lion's share of scholarly attention, and it is independently interesting and important, I think it is a mistake to think that it constitutes Anscombe's

main point, for both textual and philosophical reasons. Philosophically, the reasons that Frey has developed in her article explain why we should understand Anscombe's main point to concern absolutism. What *unifies* Anscombe's thought philosophically is her commitment to absolutism, a commitment which in no way plays a role in her argument about the incoherence of the *moral* ought. Textually, there is also strong evidence that supports my argument. As I have already mentioned, Anscombe concludes her article writing about consequentialism and that its non-absolutist nature constitutes her complaint. Additionally, Anscombe also dedicates significantly more space in her article to discussing the issues surrounding consequentialism and absolutism. Although Anscombe's complaint is *not* one of her three theses with which she began the article, it does result from reading Anscombe's first and third thesis together in the right way. For these reasons, it seems textually implausible to take Anscombe's main argument in the paper to concern thesis two. Instead, her argument about the incoherence of the *moral* ought should be treated as an important, but secondary argument in the text. Moreover, I think that it is *this* mistake — taking the argument behind Anscombe's second thesis to constitute her main point — and *not* the failure to unify Anscombe's three theses that partially explains why "Modern Moral Philosophy" has failed to have an influence *on* moral philosophy.

Another significant difference between Anscombe's complaint about consequentialism and her complaint about the *moral* "ought" is that, when it comes to the former, Anscombe is far more specific. While Anscombe points to particular philosophers as exhibiting consequentialism, and points out specific instances of its use,

it is far less clear who Anscombe is charging with using the *moral* “ought” illegitimately. Anscombe does say that it is the “present-day ethicists” who are guilty of trying to find some “very fishy” content for the *moral* “ought”, and of attempting to retain its “psychological force”, but this is puzzling. Are the “present-day ethicists”, or “modern moral philosophers”, both guilty of using “ought” in an incoherent way *and* being consequentialists? Given that the language of consequentialism is clearly not meaningless or incoherent, just harmful, it cannot be that these charges amount to the same thing. Consequentialists are not guilty of trying to invoke an absolute verdict on actions without a proper authority being in place to render that verdict meaningful. Instead, they are guilty of trying to do ethics without the notion of absolute verdicts whatsoever, such that it is always an open question whether some action-description is *morally* right or not. Anscombe seems to be raising two separate charges against modern moral philosophers which are incompatible with one another. Given that she is more specific in her complaints regarding consequentialism, and investigating the truth of these claims would be far more tangible than investigating the truth of the more general complaint about the *moral* “ought”, it is reasonable to take her main complaint against modern moral philosophy to be the one with which she explicitly concludes her article.

In section three, I explained why some have taken Unity to be an important thesis. Insofar as my account rejects Unity, is there a danger that reading “Modern Moral Philosophy” through the lens of thesis one and three will result in separating action theory from ethics? In short, my answer is no. I do not think that Unity, at least as I have defined it, is necessary to appreciate Anscombe’s point about the relationship between

action theory, the philosophy of psychology, and doing ethics in a way that can make sense of absolute prohibitions against intrinsically unjust actions. The reason for this is, as I have argued, Anscombe's second thesis is largely independent from her main argument, and appears to be making an entirely separate, conceptual, point. It is not needed. To see Anscombe's main point, one only needs to read thesis one and three together in the right sort of way. It turns out, then, that Jennifer Frey's reading, which takes absolutism as fundamental, is right in my opinion, except in that it tries to explain how thesis two contributes to Anscombe's main argument. The separation of action theory and ethics did not result from a failure to read Anscombe's three theses together, but from a failure to properly appreciate the relationship between thesis one and three, and an over emphasis on Anscombe's second thesis and the surrounding discussion.

5 Conclusion

Although Anscombe's three theses cannot be unified, this does not diminish the significance of "Modern Moral Philosophy". Instead, I have argued, it brings it into sharper focus. Part of the reason why "Modern Moral Philosophy" has failed to have its intended effect on moral philosophy after 1958 is that it has largely been read as a conceptual and historical argument against a certain set of *moral* concepts, as Anscombe defined them. What has largely been overlooked are the normative and methodological dimensions of Anscombe's text. These dimensions are appreciated by taking theses one and three as the essential components to Anscombe's main argument. What results is an interesting discussion of the relationship between action theory and ethics, and how a failure to appreciate this relationship can distort practical reasoning by forcing us towards

consequentialism. This reading of Anscombe's main concerns places her in stark opposition to the development of normative ethics after 1958, insofar as first-order normative theorizing became an autonomous field of inquiry.⁷³

⁷³ See Sandis (2020) for an argument that moral philosophy after 1958 has actually gotten worse, by Anscombe's lights, than moral philosophy before 1958.

CHAPTER 3: The Revival of Ethical Naturalism: Anscombe, Foot, and Wittgenstein

1 Introduction

For roughly the first sixty years of the twentieth-century, following Moore's influential anti-naturalist arguments in *Principia Ethica*, Ethical Naturalism had completely disappeared off of the theoretical map.⁷⁴ For example, in the introduction to her 1958 paper "Moral Beliefs", Philippa Foot wrote:

"To many people it seems that the most notable advance in moral philosophy during the past 50 years or so has been the refutation of naturalism; and they are a little shocked that at this late date such an issue should be reopened. It is easy to understand their attitude: given certain apparently unquestionable assumptions, it would be about as sensible to try to reintroduce naturalism as to try to square the circle. Those who see it like this have satisfied themselves that they know in advance that any naturalistic theory must have a catch in it somewhere, and are put out at having to waste more time exposing an old fallacy".

It is quite surprising that, given the philosophical climate in 1958, that Anscombe and Foot's revival of Ethical Naturalism has not been recognized as a major philosophical achievement. In doing so, Anscombe and Foot not only developed powerful arguments that challenged the set of "apparently unquestionable assumptions", the primary one being that statements of fact and statements of value could not stand in any logical relation to one another, but they also developed the general outlines of a positive path forward for ethical thought that did not require such assumptions.

⁷⁴ "Ethical Naturalism" can be understood here as, roughly, the metaethical view that combines 1) Ethical Realism, the view that ethical truths are *cognitive* and at least some of them are true, with 2) the thesis that ethical truths are, in some important sense, natural. Anscombe and Foot, I will argue, developed a unique version of Ethical Naturalism that is non-reductive and non-empirical.

Anscombe and Foot's revival of Ethical Naturalism was a product of their position in a unique period in the history of Analytic philosophy. As mentioned above, for roughly the first sixty years of the twentieth-century, Ethical Naturalism had all but vanished from the theoretical map within metaethics. Following the Second World War, however, things began to change. One of the primary, and often overlooked, reasons for this change was a major philosophical shift during the Interwar years in the theoretical philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Following his return to philosophy in the thirties, Wittgenstein began to develop highly original views on the nature of philosophy and language that challenged many of his earlier ideas, as well as the general trend within philosophy towards embracing the natural sciences. The result of this shift was the development of a unique kind of naturalistic approach to philosophy in Wittgenstein's later writings.

Wittgenstein's naturalism, however, was of limited use for ethics. Wittgenstein was not, by anyone's lights, an ethicist, and he did not take his theoretical insights to directly yield any substantive ethical conclusions. Despite showing how it is possible to understand ethical thought and talk in a cognitive way, it was not until Anscombe and Foot combined Wittgenstein's ideas with those of Aristotle that their significance for ethics was made evident. So, although Wittgenstein, as I will explain below, directly contributed to reviving a cognitivist conception of ethical thought and talk, that was not enough by itself to move the needle within metaethics.

In this chapter, I argue that Anscombe and Foot's revival of Ethical Naturalism was historically significant insofar as it constituted a major theoretical advancement for

Ethical Naturalism at the time, in addition to showing the philosophical significance of Wittgenstein's late theoretical philosophy for practical thought. In order to make my argument, this chapter provides a significant amount of philosophical and historical background to Anscombe and Foot's ideas. The purpose of doing this is twofold. First, in order to properly understand the unique innovations for Ethical Naturalism developed by Anscombe and Foot, it is necessary to understand not only the ideas that they were rejecting, but the extent to which their philosophical thought was influenced by Wittgenstein. Second, providing a sufficient amount of historical background helps to underscore the extent to which the approach to Ethical Naturalism developed by Anscombe and Foot constituted a major theoretical advancement.

2 Moore, Non-Cognitivism, and Anti-Naturalism

In order to bring out the significance of Anscombe and Foot's revival of Ethical Naturalism, in this section I will provide a brief overview of the anti-naturalist philosophical climate that Anscombe and Foot inherited following the Second World War — a climate that was deeply shaped by Wittgenstein's early thought. Analytic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth-century was defined by what has come to be called the "Linguistic Turn". The Linguistic Turn, which came to prominence as a result of the work of major figures such as Frege, Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, made the philosophical analysis of language the defining aim and method of Analytic philosophy.

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for example, Wittgenstein famously presented an approach to philosophy as consisting in the “logical clarification of thoughts”.⁷⁵

With respect to ethics in particular, G.E. Moore largely set the course for several decades, and his influence is still felt today.⁷⁶ The result of Moore’s influence was that ethics would come to be dominated by metaethical concerns, with substantive first-order issues largely taking backseat to the logical analysis of ethical thought and talk.⁷⁷ One of the defining features of Moore’s influential work would be his arguments against Ethical Naturalism which, even after Moore’s own ideas came to be heavily criticized and rejected, were retained and transformed in the hands of the adherents of Non-Cognitivism — the ethical branch of Logical Positivism.

For several decades, Non-Cognitivism became the dominant metaethical approach within Anglophone ethics. The early adherents of Non-Cognitivism preserved Moore’s anti-naturalism by accepting a version of his famous “open-question argument”, while also rejecting his Ethical Non-Naturalism due to its unpalatable epistemic and metaphysical commitments. The result was roughly *sixty* years of deeply anti-naturalist sentiment within Anglophone ethics. One of the great ironies of this story is that Wittgenstein’s early views regarding the nature of philosophy and language were one of the primary causes of the rise of anti-naturalism. But, as we will see in later sections,

⁷⁵ Wittgenstein (1922).

⁷⁶ See Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992) for a detailed account of the significance of Moore’s thought for twentieth-century metaethics.

⁷⁷ Loobuyck (2005, 383).

Wittgenstein's later views were also one of the primary causes of its undoing. In order to understand these complicated developments in more detail, the remainder of this section will consist in an overview of Moore's anti-naturalism, as well as the major developments within Non-Cognitivism during this time.

2.1 Moore

In his 1903 book *Principia Ethica*, Moore famously brought a new philosophical approach to ethics that focused on the clarification and analysis of ethical language and concepts. In *Principia Ethica*, Moore set out an approach to ethics that involved the linguistic analysis of what he took to be the fundamental ethical concept — “good”. According to Moore, the subject matter of ethics should be defined in terms of the question “What is good?”, with questions about the meaning of “good” being the only legitimate questions of ethics.⁷⁸

Moore thought that nearly every moral philosopher in the history of Western philosophy, except Sidgwick, had misunderstood what ethics was about. In particular, Moore thought that nearly everyone was guilty of committing what he called the “naturalistic fallacy”. The “naturalistic fallacy”, which has been criticized for not being a fallacy, as well as being poorly named insofar as it applies to more than just naturalism, consists in the attempt by moral philosophers to define “good”.⁷⁹ Moore thought that this was a fallacy because he held the surprising view that although ethics should be

⁷⁸ Loobuyck (2005, 382).

⁷⁹ For a famous critique of Moore, see Frankena (1939).

concerned with the conceptual analysis of the concept “good”, it is also the case that “good” is a simple and indefinable concept. In short, the “fallacy” consists in attempting to define the indefinable — something which Moore saw as a repeated pattern in the history of Western ethics. But, why did Moore think that “good” is indefinable?

Moore’s primary argument for his claim that “good” is a simple and unanalyzable ethical property is his now famous “open question argument”. Moore famously argued that “good” could not be defined in terms of any other concept because it is always an open question whether “good” is identical to any such concept. Moore took this to be evident especially in the case of attempts to define “good” in terms of “pleasure” — as some Utilitarians such as Bentham had done. The result of Moore’s open-question argument was that he was forced to adopt the view that we use our moral intuition to determine which things are good, rather than philosophical analysis.⁸⁰ Instead of providing a definition of “good”, Moore advocated relying on intuitions about complex concepts to determine which things possess the property of goodness.

Moore’s intuitionist views would go on to be criticized heavily, even by other intuitionists at the time, such as H.A. Prichard and W.D. Ross. Contemporary intuitionists criticized Moore for having, among other things, an overly restrictive menu of ethical concepts. Against this, figures like Prichard and Ross argued in favor of a plurality of fundamentally important ethical concepts, with “rightness” being the most notable addition to the list. In general, however, Ethical Intuitionism, both Moorean and not,

⁸⁰ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 251).

would come to lose popularity as a result of broader trends within Analytic philosophy. By the thirties, Logical Positivism was on the rise, and with it, the nature and aims of ethical inquiry would be redefined once again. As we will see, however, one common theme that was retained was anti-naturalism.

2.2 Anti-Naturalism After Moore: Non-Cognitivism

Between the mid-thirties and late-fifties, the dominant view in Anglophone moral philosophy was Non-Cognitivism. The rise of Non-Cognitivism within ethics was the direct result of the rise of Logical Positivism within Analytic philosophy more generally, which introduced new conceptions of philosophical analysis.⁸¹

The non-cognitivists combined the radical insights of Moore's naturalistic fallacy with Logical Positivist ideas about language and meaning in order to develop a theory of ethical thought and talk according to which naturalistic inferences from factual statements to value judgments are not possible.⁸² The non-cognitivists retained Moore's idea that fundamental ethical concepts such as "good" are indefinable but, rather than accepting Moore's Intuitionism, they denied the cognitive nature of ethical thought and talk. The primary reason for going in a different direction than Moore was their epistemological and metaphysical skepticism about Moore's Non-Naturalist version of

⁸¹ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 251).

⁸² See Loobuyck (2005, 383).

Intuitionism. The result was that, as Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton write, “we are led to see noncognitivism as the real historical beneficiary of the open question argument”.⁸³

In general, Non-Cognitivism is usually understood in terms of a set of negative theses regarding metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and mind.⁸⁴ For example, non-cognitivists held that there are no moral facts, moral properties, no moral knowledge, and that moral thought and talk is non-representational.⁸⁵ Non-Cognitivism can be understood as the negation of Cognitivism, which is the view that ethical thought and talk is cognitive, meaning that it purports to represent the world in such a way that can be true or false.⁸⁶ The tradition of Non-cognitivism, a tradition that originated in the early work of Wittgenstein, and developed out of the work of the Vienna Circle, has survived to the present day in the form of Expressivism.⁸⁷ The subject of this section, though, will be its two earliest forms, Emotivism and Prescriptivism, both of which have not survived. Despite their differences, these views were united in the fundamental commitment to the view that facts are logically distinct from values, and that normative

⁸³ See Darwall, Gibbard, Railton (1992, 199).

⁸⁴ Eriksson (2017, 591).

⁸⁵ Eriksson (2017, 591).

⁸⁶ Although most of those who believe in Cognitivism are Realists, the distinctions between Cognitivism/Non-Cognitivism and Realism/Anti-Realism cut across one another. The reason is that Error-Theory is the view that ethical thought and talk is cognitive, but that there are no ethical facts or properties, thereby making all ethical thought and talk false.

⁸⁷ Eriksson (2017, 591).

reasoning from facts to values is not possible, since there is an unbridgeable logical gap between the two.⁸⁸

2.2.1 Emotivism: Ayer and Stevenson

Logical positivism came to the English speaking world with the publication of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* in 1936. In that book, Ayer condensed the ideas of the Vienna Circle and brought them to England for the first time. The Vienna Circle was a group of philosophers that included, among others, Rudolf Carnap, Otto Neurath, and Moritz Schlick. The members of the Vienna Circle were firmly committed to Empiricism. The commitment to Empiricism led the members of the Vienna Circle to develop the "verification criterion" of meaning, which was partly inspired by remarks made by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. According to the verification criterion, in order for a statement to be meaningful, it must be empirically verifiable. If this is not the case, then the statement must either be analytic — true by definition — or meaningless. Since Moore's arguments were taken to show that naturalistic definitions are not possible within ethics, it followed within this framework that ethical statements are meaningless. But, it also followed that Moore's way of thinking about moral statements was *also* not meaningful, since non-naturalistic claims are not verifiable. This led to the rejection of Intuitionism, since it was incompatible with the idea of empirical verification, and left it unexplained how we come to know about moral truths. In its place, Ayer's theory of Emotivism offered a non-cognitivist account of ethical thought and talk.

⁸⁸ See Galisanka (2016, 153).

Ayer thought that the job of philosophy, following the early Wittgenstein, was to analyze the propositions of various domains of discourse and eliminate the meaningless propositions. The conception of analysis introduced by Ayer relied on a fundamental distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, which was itself inspired by the Vienna Circle's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.⁸⁹ Ayer advocated a rigid distinction according to which all meaningful propositions must be one of two types: either *analytic a priori* tautologies, or *synthetic a posteriori* empirical hypotheses. Importantly, Ayer's distinction left no room for ethical propositions, since they did not appear to fit into either category. If a proposition could neither be verified by science, or was true *a priori*, then it was treated as meaningless. The result was that all propositions regarding value, such as propositions about ethics and aesthetics, were meaningless within Ayer's scheme. By denying the meaningfulness of ethical propositions, though, a Non-Cognitivist also acquires the explanatory burden of accounting for the *apparent* meaningfulness of ethical thought and talk.

Ayer's approach to this problem was to argue that statements of value are not factual statements that can be true or false, but expressions of the emotions and attitudes of the speaker. Hence, the label Emotivism. Ayer wrote, for example, that "Sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything ... they are pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood".⁹⁰ Since

⁸⁹ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 251).

⁹⁰ See Ayer (1936, 108).

expressions of emotions and attitudes are not representational, they are non-cognitive.

Hence, the label Non-Cognitivism. Ayer wrote:

“The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money,’ I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money.’ In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it ... It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker”.⁹¹

Ayer’s conception of analysis and language left little theoretical room for the development of competing ethical views, and naturally suggested Emotivism as the only viable option. The general distinction in language between analytic and synthetic statements, as interpreted by Ayer, required a sharp distinction between facts and values in ethics, with facts being treated as meaningful propositions that are verifiable by science, and values being treated as “metaphysical” propositions that are meaningless.

Ayer’s version of emotivism would go on to receive a more sophisticated treatment by the American philosopher Charles Stevenson in a series of important articles, as well as his 1944 book *Ethics and Language*. Stevenson built upon the core of Ayer’s view, which was his distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, the distinction between facts and values, and the analysis of ethical thought and talk as non-cognitive, but provided a more nuanced account of how ethical language works.

⁹¹ Ayer (1936, 107).

Stevenson innovated upon Ayer's view by rejecting his rather extreme view that ethical statements are meaningless, and developed a theory of "emotive meaning" according to which ethical language is the result of conventional uses of speech that have a history of possessing a positive or negative valence. Stevenson argued that, unlike factual statements, normative utterances are not statements of belief, but are "used more for encouraging, altering, or redirecting people's aims and conduct than for simply describing them".⁹² Stevenson's innovation gave the meaning of ethical statements an "etymological dimension" and a history of use. Stevenson wrote, "the emotive meaning of a word is the power that the word acquires, on account of its history in emotional situations, to evoke or directly express attitudes".⁹³ Although Stevenson gave ethical statements a more sophisticated treatment than Ayer, he still concluded that, as a result of the differences between ethical and factual statements, they could never stand in a logical relationship, and "inference" or "entailment" were inappropriate relations for such statements. As a result, normative disagreement could never be logically resolved by appeal to factual statements, since normative disagreement would consist in a disagreement of attitude and, even though one's normative views could be changed by appealing to facts, this was not a result of logical inference, but casual influence. The Emotivist treatment of ethical thought and talk as essentially non-rational would lead to the next major development within Non-Cognitivism — Prescriptivism.

⁹² See Galisanka (2016, 154). Stevenson (1944, 21).

⁹³ See Stevenson (1944, 33, 82).

2.2.2 Prescriptivism: Hare

Following the Second World War, R.M. Hare returned to Oxford and set out to develop a new approach to ethics. According to Bevir and Blakely, Hare's "prescriptivism" was "easily the most prominent moral philosophy from the 1950's to the early 1970's, and would be the primary target of critique for figures such as Anscombe and Foot".⁹⁴ Hare was dissatisfied with the non-rational nature of the emotivist treatment of ethical language. Building on Stevenson's view, Hare retained the emotivist idea of the distinctness between factual and normative statements, but rejected the idea that the relation was causal, and gave a restricted kind of rationality or logical status to normative arguments.⁹⁵

In order to show how ethical thought and talk could be rational, Hare developed a theory according to which ethical statements could be understood as entailing universal imperatives, akin to Kantian categorical imperatives, rather than expressions of emotions. Hare thought that ethical statements are attitudes that we turn into universal imperatives and that, as imperatives, they follow a set of rules that allow for rational inferences. For example, Hare thought that "stealing is wrong" entails the attitude "let me not steal", which entails the universal imperative "let nobody steal" in such and such circumstances.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 252).

⁹⁵ See Galisanka (2016).

⁹⁶ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 252).

According to Hare, a normative conclusion *could* be entailed by a set of premises, as long as one of the premises was itself normative.⁹⁷ Additionally, in order for a normative argument to entail a normative conclusion, Hare thought that it had to take the form of a deductive practical syllogism: that is, it has to involve a major normative premise, a minor factual premise, and a normative conclusion. Hare took this to be the logical form of normative arguments.

Although Hare argued in favor of the logical status of normative arguments, his results were highly restricted by his formalistic assumptions. Even though it was true that normative claims could be deduced from a major normative premise, Hare thought that, ultimately, high level normative premises themselves could never be fully justified. Debates about ultimate normative premises could not be settled by factual statements, since Hare took them to stand in no logical relationship to fundamental normative principles. In Hare's words, the truth of ultimate normative premises rested on a "decision of principle" — a commitment that Anscombe would criticize Hare heavily for.⁹⁸

Although Hare's theory purported to reinstate the rationality of ethical thought and talk, Anscombe and Foot would attack Hare's system insofar as it had no resources to restrict the content of ethical views. The rationality Hare brought to ethics was largely formal and, although it introduced the constraints of universality and consistency, it

⁹⁷ See Galisanka (2016, 155).

⁹⁸ See Hare (1952, 69).

placed no restrictions on the attitudes that people could adopt. In the opinion of Anscombe and Foot, this led to morally unacceptable conclusions that could only be avoided by adopting stronger restrictions on the content of ethical statements.⁹⁹

In this section, I have provided a general survey of the intellectual background that Anscombe and Foot would go on to inherit and criticize. Beginning with Moore, and throughout the rise in popularity of Non-Cognitivism, there was a clear anti-naturalist thread within Anglophone moral philosophy for the first sixty years of the twentieth-century. The belief in a sharp distinction between facts and values, and the acceptance of the open-question argument by nearly all major figures during this period, shows why Foot's 1958 assessment of the state of Ethical Naturalism was not hyperbolic. In the following section, I examine Wittgenstein's complex relationship to the transition from anti-naturalism in the first half of the century, to the revival of naturalism at the beginning of the second half. Understanding the connections between Wittgenstein's theoretical philosophy, specifically his naturalism, and ethics will prove essential to a proper understanding of the significance of Anscombe and Foot's metaethical thought.

3 Wittgenstein, Language, and Naturalism

Standard accounts of the development of twentieth-century metaethics often proceed through the lenses of Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism, Naturalism and Non-

⁹⁹ See Bevir and Blakely (2011, 252).

Naturalism, and several other well-known distinctions. One particularly interesting, and underexplored lens, is that of Wittgenstein's impact on the development of Analytic moral philosophy in the twentieth-century.¹⁰⁰ Mark Bevir and Andrius Galisanka write, for example, that "Although Wittgenstein's influence on philosophy is well known, his impact on ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and religion — what we will call 'normative inquiry' — remains underappreciated".¹⁰¹ In some ways this is surprising, while in others it is not. It is surprising insofar as Wittgenstein's theoretical philosophy is either a major cause, or in the background of, nearly all of the major developments within Analytic philosophy during a significant portion of the twentieth-century.¹⁰² Insofar as the development of Analytic moral philosophy was widely known to have been influenced by broader developments within Analytic philosophy, it is reasonable to expect that the influence of Wittgenstein's thought on ethics would have been studied closely. But, on the other hand, it is also not surprising since Wittgenstein did not write much directly on ethics, and the relationship between his views on method, mind, and language, to ethics is not straightforward in the least. Perceptions aside, the fact of the matter is that Wittgenstein has exerted a considerable influence on the development of twentieth-century ethics, despite writing on "non-ethical" topics.¹⁰³ In conjunction with the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's early "Lecture on Ethics" helped along the development of

¹⁰⁰ See Bevir and Galisanka (2016) for a recent collection of essays on this theme.

¹⁰¹ Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

¹⁰² Not only was Wittgenstein's early philosophy a major influence on the development of Logical Positivism, but his late philosophy was a major influence on "Ordinary Language Philosophy", which came to dominate Oxford philosophical thought during the late fifties and sixties. See Ryle (1949) and Austin (1962).

¹⁰³ See Bevir and Galisanka (2016) for a compelling argument.

Non-Cognitivism, while his late philosophical work had a significant influence on figures such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Stephen Toulmin, and John Rawls, ultimately leading to a revival of Cognitivism and Naturalism.¹⁰⁴ The purpose of this section is to make Wittgenstein's relationship to ethics more clear by explaining the connections between his theoretical developments and ethics *via* his naturalism.

For my purposes, I will follow many philosophers in dividing Wittgenstein's thought into two periods — early and late. This is an oversimplification, but it does not affect my argument. The two periods can be divided in accordance with Wittgenstein's radically different views about the nature of language.¹⁰⁵ During the first period, which is identified here with the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein developed an *atomistic* approach to language, according to which “atomistic propositions have meanings in isolation from other propositions”.¹⁰⁶ Wittgenstein's ideas began to shift, however, during the 1930's while lecturing at Cambridge. During this period, Wittgenstein would go on to renounce many of his views in the *Tractatus*, adopting a *contextualist* approach to language according to which propositions have meaning only in relation to a context of use, rather than in isolation. Ultimately, Wittgenstein's contextualist approach would lead him to develop a general naturalistic conception of philosophy which, I will argue, served as a model for Anscombe and Foot's Ethical Naturalism.

¹⁰⁴ See Galisanka (2016, 152).

¹⁰⁵ See Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

¹⁰⁶ See Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

3.1 Wittgenstein's Early and Late Conceptions of Language and Philosophy

3.1.1 The Tractarian Conception of Language

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously argued that ethical truths could only be *shown*, rather than *said*. Propositions, for Wittgenstein, were meaningful insofar as they assert facts, with facts being about what is the case in the world. But, since Wittgenstein thought that ethical truths are “transcendental”, expressing values rather than facts, they therefore could not be expressed in propositions.¹⁰⁷ Wittgenstein wrote, for example, that “it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics”, and that “ethics cannot be put into words” (*TLP*, 6.42-6.421). In essence, Wittgenstein held a non-cognitive view about ethical thought and talk, which resulted from his sharp distinction between statements of fact and statements of value.

As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein's views on language in the *Tractatus* had a significant influence on the development of Logical Positivism. Wittgenstein is explicitly acknowledged, for example, in the Manifesto of the Vienna Circle and in the preface to Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*.¹⁰⁸ His views on ethics, however, were largely discarded. Patrick Loobuyck writes, “Carnap, Neurath, and Ayer did not realize that the final pages of the *Tractatus* were the culmination of the book, not an appendage to be ignored or explained away”.¹⁰⁹ Loobuyck continues, for example, that “They use Wittgenstein in a way Wittgenstein himself did not intend, to argue that nothing can be

¹⁰⁷ See Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

¹⁰⁸ See Erikson (2017).

¹⁰⁹ Loobuyck (2005).

said about ethics and thus that ethics and moral philosophy must be meaningless”.¹¹⁰ Although it is true that Wittgenstein thought, in the *Tractatus*, that nothing could be said about ethics, it is important to point out that he *did* think that there are ethical truths — it is just that they are transcendental. Importantly, Wittgenstein also thought that even though nothing could be said about matters of value, that does not mean that such matters were unimportant or meaningless. For example, Wittgenstein wrote “If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case” (*TLP*, 6.42).

Given Wittgenstein’s views in the *Tractatus*, it is not hard to see how a sharp distinction between facts and values came to dominate ethical thought during the first half of the twentieth-century, since the Logical Positivist view about meaning held that only statements of empirical fact are meaningful. While Wittgenstein’s early work was adopted, even if inaccurately, by the Vienna Circle, thereby giving to Non-Cognitivism, his later work played an essential role in reversing the course of Analytic moral philosophy.

3.1.2 The Post-Tractarian Conception of Language

Wittgenstein’s late work on language and meaning was vital to the revival of naturalistic approaches to normative inquiry, substantive normative theorizing, and the development of Neo-Aristotelian metaethical views. In particular, Wittgenstein’s new conception of philosophy as consisting in “grammatical investigations” opened up new pathways for

¹¹⁰ Loobuyck (2005).

naturalistic philosophy which, in the hands of Anscombe and Foot, led to a revival of Ethical Naturalism.

The major development in Wittgenstein's late philosophical thought was not a new *theory* of meaning, since Wittgenstein was a staunch anti-theorist and would never understand his philosophical writings as presenting a "theory", but a new *approach* that sought to analyze language as it is embedded in human life and practices. In short, Wittgenstein transitioned from what can be described as an "idealist" approach, to a "contextualist" approach. For example, in the *Philosophical Investigations* he argued that the meaning of a concept or a proposition depends on the meaning of the concepts or propositions to which it is connected, and the background assumptions of the contexts in which language is used. Wittgenstein's contextualism was the result of his new view of meaning as consisting in the *use* of language in a linguistic community – uses which constituted moves in what he called "language-games". Wittgenstein famously writes, "For a large class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its *use* in the language" (PI, 43).

Wittgenstein's shift towards understanding language as embedded in actual contexts of use, linguistic communities, and cultures, is what ultimately led to the development of his naturalism and, as I argue, the development of new forms of Ethical Naturalism in the hands of Anscombe and Foot. Before explaining Wittgenstein's naturalistic approach, however, I want to spend some time explaining how Wittgenstein's

concept of philosophy as “grammatical investigations” ultimately leads to or constitutes a kind of naturalism.

3.1.3 Grammar and Grammatical Investigations

Along with a new approach to meaning, Wittgenstein also developed a new philosophical methodology, which consisted in what he called “grammatical investigations”.

Wittgenstein writes:

“Our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the *‘possibilities’* of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena. Thus Augustine recalls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration, past, present, or future, of events ... *Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one*. Such investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language” (PI, 90, emphasis added).

There is some controversy about what exactly Wittgenstein meant by “grammar”, but it is popular to think that Wittgenstein’s meaning of “grammar” is, for the most part, the one which we are all already familiar with. That is to say, grammar concerns the rules or standards for the correctness of use of language. As Martin O’Neill writes, “to specify the grammar of an expression is to give a specification of its meaning; it is to locate it in logical space, with regard to its relationship to other expressions of a language”.¹¹¹ The main difference between Wittgenstein’s concept of grammar and the ordinary one,

¹¹¹ O’Neill (2001).

though, is that Wittgenstein uses it to apply to a broader range of cases than the ordinary grammarian would.

Unlike in his early work, Wittgenstein's later thought held that there is no underlying structure of our language waiting to be uncovered, and that we should stop attempting to construct formal meta-languages that can capture the "true" logical form of our thoughts, as Bertrand Russell had famously attempted to do.¹¹² While this approach was popular among early Analytic philosophers, Wittgenstein shifted towards thinking of the task of philosophy to respect and clarify the grammatical rules of ordinary language that are already embedded in our everyday lives. This new approach led Wittgenstein to develop a conception of language and grammar and philosophical inquiry into grammar as being *autonomous*. Instead of trying to explain meaning in terms of how language relates to an external metaphysical reality, Wittgenstein advocated an approach to meaning that was *internal* to the natural uses of language as they already are. Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations, then, constituted a *descriptive* project in which we come to elucidate the nature of language *as it exists* and is employed *within human life*. The main task of philosophy, conceived in terms of grammatical investigations, is to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" in order make the embedded rules of language use more perspicuous.

Because grammatical investigations concerned grammar as it is already embedded into human life, Wittgenstein also thought of the grammatical rules that guide our lives as

¹¹² See Russell (1905).

“arbitrary” in an important way. Wittgenstein did not think that the rules of grammar being uncovered were true or false. They just are. Instead, truth and falsity exist *within* some already existing grammatical system. In calling our grammar “arbitrary”, though, Wittgenstein did not mean that any individual human being could somehow change the rules of grammar at any moment. Grammar is not *subjectively* arbitrary for Wittgenstein, since he thought that it is not possible to have a wholly *private* language, and that meaning and grammar are *public* in an important sense. Instead, what Wittgenstein meant was that the fundamental rules of grammar do not admit of a justification of any kind.¹¹³ Investigations into the grammar of our language and concepts ultimately bottom out, or come to an end, when we reach an understanding that the rules of certain uses of language cannot be justified or explained any further, because they are baseless presuppositions of our language.¹¹⁴

The way that our grammar functions in human life is naturalistic insofar as it is a product of the way *the world is*, and how *we are*. Things could have been different, though, which means that, at some point, any justification for grammatical rules must bottom out. As I will argue later, this feature of the grammar of our concepts play an important role in understanding how Anscombe and Foot approached ethics, since the kind of grounding which they attempt to provide for morality in human nature is also arbitrary in a way that resembles the arbitrariness of grammatical rules— yet, incredibly important and *normative*. Following Wittgenstein, although Anscombe and Foot did not

¹¹³ O’Neill (2001).

¹¹⁴ See O’Neill (2001).

think it was possible to always provide some sort of foundational justification for our basic ethical concepts and precepts, they did not take this to mean that ethical thought and talk was therefore *subjective* as Hare had thought.

In a similar vein, although Wittgenstein thought that grammar is arbitrary, he did not view it as unimportant. Wittgenstein wrote, “To a man who invented chess, everything in it may have been very important, no more arbitrary than a poem is arbitrary”.¹¹⁵ The point is that the rules of our grammar are, *for us*, not only important but inescapable. As human beings, we cannot help but use language in accordance with the unique kind of grammar that structures our lives, *given the kinds of beings we are*. Although our grammar is not *justified* by the metaphysical truth about the world, it is certainly made *useful* by facts about the world.

Understanding grammar in terms of arbitrariness and usefulness highlights the *naturalistic* dimension of Wittgenstein’s late philosophical thought. The usefulness of our grammar is constrained by natural facts about the world and our place in it. For example, O’Neill writes, “As Wittgenstein puts it ‘the rules of grammar are arbitrary in the same sense as the choice of a unit of measurement’, and whilst the choice of a unit of measurement is arbitrary in an important sense, we nevertheless would not measure a room in microns ...” (PG, 133).¹¹⁶ The natural facts constrain and determine the usefulness of our grammar and make possible our practices of measuring, counting,

¹¹⁵ LFM, pg. 143.

¹¹⁶ See O’Neill (2001).

selling, and so on. The natural facts determine the environment in which human life acquires its shape, and in which our practices emerge.¹¹⁷

There are two ways in which the plausible range of grammars is constrained by natural facts in the world — two kinds of limits on the “arbitrariness of grammar”. First, there is a conceptual limit on the range of possible grammars. It is not the case that any kind of behavior whatsoever can be intelligible. The intelligibility of behavior requires the establishment of some system of rules that allow us to interpret an action, for example, *as eating*, rather than some random movement of limbs. Rule-governed behavior imposes a limit on possible grammars. Second, there is a practical limit, generated by our biological constitution and socio-historical background. We must all share in various practices and capacities which allow us to agree in our judgments in order for a grammar to emerge.¹¹⁸ For example, a legal system requires certain assumptions about the nature of human behavior to even make sense — and it could not function properly when dealing with an entity whose behavior is unintelligible and did not resemble human behavior in any way whatsoever. There must be a certain level of uniformity to human nature and what people are like in order for grammar to get off the ground, and only those grammars that take into account our capacities and powers are possible options for us. Thus, grammar *depends* upon natural facts about what the world is like, and is therefore in an important sense natural. Similarly, Anscombe and Foot

¹¹⁷ See O’Neill (2001).

¹¹⁸ See O’Neill (2001).

argued that only certain kinds of content can figure into a moral principle, without rendering the concept of morality utterly meaningless. Foot argued, for example, that it cannot be a moral judgment that “it is good to always clasp one’s hands three times in an hour”.¹¹⁹ In the absence of some special explanation about the significance of such an act, such as someone recovering from a serious disability which makes their action an *achievement*, it goes against the logical grammar of moral judgments to take such an arbitrary judgment to count as a *moral* judgment. It is part of the grammar of “good”, thought Foot, that there are limits to its use.

Now that I have explained Wittgenstein’s concept of grammar and his conception of philosophy as consisting in grammatical investigations, it is easier to see how his new approach led to the development of a unique form of naturalism. In the following section, I will explain how grammatical investigations must proceed within the context of what Wittgenstein called the human “form of life”. The purpose of doing this is to draw a connection between Wittgenstein’s naturalism and the kind of Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism developed by Anscombe and Foot that seeks to ground objective normative truths in facts about human nature. Wittgenstein’s unique brand of naturalism, and methods for investigating the human “form of life” provides a kind of model for understanding the unique view developed by Anscombe and Foot.

¹¹⁹ See Foot (1959), Hacker-Wright (2021).

3.2 Wittgenstein and Naturalism

Many interpreters of Wittgenstein's late philosophical thought take his naturalism to be a central part of his philosophy.¹²⁰ Despite this, it is also the case that Wittgenstein has often been overlooked as not having anything to contribute to contemporary debates on the subject.¹²¹ This is not all too surprising. Given the idiosyncratic nature of Wittgenstein's philosophical writings, it is hard to always see how his ideas fit into mainstream debates.¹²² Kevin Cahill and Thomas Raleigh write:

“Whatever the explanation may be, there are very strong reasons for thinking not only that Wittgenstein's later thought in particular evinces some kind of naturalism, but that it is also a potentially rich and fecund source of insight and challenge for many important contemporary discussions.”¹²³

Up until this point, I have not said much at all about what “naturalism” means. The reason for this is that defining naturalism has proven notoriously difficult, not just in ethics, but in nearly every philosophical subfield. As a result, saying anything useful about naturalism requires at least an entire section devoted to that task. Additionally, saying anything useful about *Wittgenstein's* naturalism adds another layer of difficulty, and requires its own section. I have chosen to talk about naturalism in general first, before explaining in a separate section how Wittgenstein's naturalism offers a unique

¹²⁰ For a recent collection of essays on the topic, see Cahill and Raleigh (2020).

¹²¹ See Cahill and Raleigh (2020, 2).

¹²² See Cahill and Raleigh (2020, 2).

¹²³ See Cahill and Raleigh (2020, 2).

alternative. Of course, I do not expect what I say here to be anything close to the last word on how to understand naturalism, but merely to provide at least some helpful remarks in order to understand what makes the naturalism of Wittgenstein, and ultimately Anscombe and Foot, unique.

3.2.1 Naturalism: What?

Traditionally, philosophy was conceived as providing the epistemological and metaphysical foundations for the natural sciences. Philosophers such as Kant attempted to “establish *a priori* the presuppositions, extent, and limits of knowledge and reality”.¹²⁴ But, since the Scientific Revolution, there has been a gradual negotiation of the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences. In the nineteenth-century, for instance, positivists such as Comte, Mill, Spencer, and Mach, were committed to the idea that scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge there is and that the proper philosophical method is nothing other than the scientific method.¹²⁵ Although at the beginning of the twentieth-century the early Analytic philosophers such as Frege, Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein thought that philosophy could be autonomous from the natural sciences, as a result of believing in the power of logical analysis, later in the twentieth-century, Quine significantly changed the predominant attitudes about the relationship of analytic philosophy to the natural sciences, writing that scientific naturalism is the

¹²⁴ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 5).

¹²⁵ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 8).

“abandonment of the goal of a First Philosophy prior to natural science”.¹²⁶ Quine’s famous attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction, and its negative effect on the prominence of traditional *a priori* conceptual analysis, made it much more popular to think that philosophy is continuous with the natural sciences, and not an autonomous discipline.¹²⁷

Many philosophers today self-identify as naturalists about a variety of philosophical topics. Despite this, there are serious difficulties that come along with any attempt to define what a commitment to naturalism means. When faced with such a problem, philosophers often rely on saying what their view denies. Many naturalists, therefore, understand themselves as denying the existence or the possibility of knowledge of anything *supernatural*.¹²⁸ But such definitions are unhelpful for understanding what a commitment to naturalism amounts to in positive terms.¹²⁹ Mario DeCaro and David MacArthur argue that what a philosopher often seems to have in mind when they identify as a naturalist is what they call “Scientific Naturalism”. Scientific Naturalism can be understood as consisting in the following two theses:

1 Ontological Scientific Naturalism: The entities posited by acceptable scientific explanations are the *only* genuine entities that there are.

¹²⁶ See Quine (1981, 67). Although Wittgenstein’s views famously changed throughout his lifetime, his underlying commitment to Philosophy as being *autonomous* from the natural sciences in an important sense never changed. Wittgenstein always understood philosophy as the logical clarification of language and thought, but what that *meant* changed between his early and late philosophy.

¹²⁷ See Quine (1951).

¹²⁸ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 2).

¹²⁹ It is also hard to say what the “supernatural” is, without having a conception of the natural.

2 Methodological (or Epistemological) Scientific Naturalism: It is *only* by following the methods of the natural sciences — or, at a minimum, the empirical methods of *a posteriori* inquiry — that one arrives at genuine knowledge.¹³⁰

DeCaro and MacArthur understand Scientific Naturalism to be “a scientism that says not only that modern (or post-seventeenth-century) natural science provides a *true* picture of nature but, more contentiously, that it is the *only* true picture”.¹³¹ This strong position is becoming increasingly popular given the success of the modern natural sciences in predicting, controlling and explaining natural phenomena.¹³² Such a scientific conception of nature, though, leaves little room for what appear to be “non-natural” concepts and entities. The result is that philosophers are constantly attempting to “naturalize” various concepts and entities that do not fit into the strictures of this conception of nature, often by reducing them to the concepts of the natural sciences, or explaining them away entirely. The drive towards naturalization, in this sense, is fueled primarily by the tendency of scientific naturalists to adopt a “narrow or restrictive conception of what constitutes legitimate natural science: at a minimum, physics, or more plausibly, physics and also chemistry and biology”.¹³³

Although many philosophers self-identify as “naturalists” are likely committed to some version of Scientific Naturalism that resembles the views presented above, it is

¹³⁰ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 7).

¹³¹ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 4).

¹³² See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 4).

¹³³ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 4).

important to point out that there are many other ways of being a naturalist that deserve serious philosophical attention. It is within this category of Non-Scientific Naturalism that Wittgenstein, as well as Anscombe and Foot, should be placed.

It is important to point out that Non-Scientific Naturalism does not require rejecting the results of modern science. As John Dewey writes, “the naturalist is one who has respect for the conclusions of natural science”.¹³⁴ Respect for the conclusions of natural science is compatible with the rejection of Ontological Scientific Naturalism as well as Methodological Scientific Naturalism. Additionally, it is important to point out that the rejection of either of these theses does not entail the acceptance of the traditional purely *a priori* approach to philosophical inquiry. The menu of positions in between these extremes is large. For example, it is possible to adopt a naturalism that is primarily concerned with the study of human nature, rather than non-human nature, where human nature is understood as a “historically conditioned product of contingent forces”.¹³⁵ The primary method of such a naturalistic approach would be a description of the various aspects of human life as they exist in our everyday experience and language. Importantly, this study of human nature is *not* merely the *biological* study of human beings, although it can be informed by such scientific knowledge, but a study of the human that takes place from *within* the perspective of lived human experience.

¹³⁴ See Dewey (1944, 2).

¹³⁵ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 14).

Undertaking such a study requires both a different conception of what the proper *subjects* of naturalistic inquiry are, as well as the proper *methods* of inquiry. A philosophical study of human nature does not need to rely on the standard methods employed by the natural sciences, such as specialized data collection, experiments, and so on.¹³⁶ Instead, it can rely, for example, on Wittgenstein's method of grammatical investigation into language-games and the human form of life.

The version of Non-Scientific Naturalism which I will understand Wittgenstein's naturalism in terms of is what has come to be called "Liberal Naturalism".¹³⁷ David MacArthur provides a concise account of Liberal Naturalism in terms of the following three claims:

- 1 A denial that reality contains anything supernatural.
- 2 A denial that reality is exhausted by the natural scientific image (or the composite natural scientific image) of the world .
- 3 The affirmation that there are a plurality of non-scientific and scientific forms of knowing and/or understanding. The sciences do not provide a single unified complete account of reality.¹³⁸

One of the significant advantages of adopting a version of Non-Scientific Naturalism is that it does not necessarily require adopting an adversarial attitude towards normativity. Normativity is embedded into the fabric of everyday human life, and does not need to be

¹³⁶ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 15).

¹³⁷ See MacArthur (2018, 46).

¹³⁸ See MacArthur (2018, 46).

reduced or explained away on such views. According to a scientific worldview, however, normativity is a problem, since it is not clear how it fits into a physicalist, or strict conception of nature.¹³⁹ The result is various attempts by adherents of Scientific Naturalism to naturalize normativity. Within a Non-Scientific Naturalist worldview, however, normativity can exist as a *sui generis* phenomenon that does not stand in need of reduction or elimination.¹⁴⁰ With these distinctions and clarifications in place, it is now possible to turn to explaining Wittgenstein’s unique brand of naturalistic approach to philosophy, how it differs from Scientific Naturalism, and opens new pathways for Ethical Naturalism.

3.2.2 Wittgenstein’s Naturalism

Wittgenstein naturalism, as mentioned above, can be understood as a *descriptive* project concerning the lived experience of human beings — a *kind* of “anthropology”.¹⁴¹ As

David Pears writes:

“There are several kinds of philosophical naturalism and one of their leading ideas is that the right method in philosophy is not to theorize about things but to describe them as we

¹³⁹ Frank Jackson calls this the “placement problem”. In general, Jackson takes placement problems to involve questions concerning how or whether various important phenomena — consciousness, ethical and rational norms, moral and aesthetic values, logical and mathematical truths, free will, familiar everyday objects, social institutions and practices, etc. — can be explained, somehow or other, as being part of, or supervening on, the one same natural/physical domain that is studied by the natural sciences”. See Cahill and Raleigh (2020, 2).

¹⁴⁰ See DeCaro and MacArthur (2008, 14-5).

¹⁴¹ The relationship between Wittgensteinian “anthropology” and anthropology proper is complex, and cannot be investigated here. See Hacker (2013).

find them in daily life. Wittgenstein's later philosophy is evidently a naturalism inspired by this idea".¹⁴²

The aim of Wittgenstein's naturalism is to remind us of the ordinary use of words as they function in the everyday lives of human beings, considered as natural beings in the natural world.¹⁴³ Wittgenstein famously writes, "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI*, 116). By adopting the grammatical method, philosophers are able to assemble "reminders" that "are designed to put us back into contact with relevant facts about our everyday practices and customary ways of going on".¹⁴⁴ For example, they remind us of:

"the fact that we act in such-and-such ways, e.g. punish certain actions, establish the state of affairs thus and so, give orders, render accounts, describe colours, take an interest in others' feelings" (*RPP*, 630; *PI*, 226e).

As P.M.S. Hacker puts it:

"the facts in which Wittgenstein is interested are already quite familiar to us ... Wittgenstein directs us to attend to what 'lies before our eyes' and to recognize that 'What has to be accepted, the given – it might be said – are facts of living [forms of life]".¹⁴⁵

Wittgenstein's contextualist investigation into the grammar of human language leads him to consider what he calls the human "form of life". Wittgenstein's concept of a "form of

¹⁴² See Pears (1995, 411).

¹⁴³ See MacArthur (2018, x).

¹⁴⁴ See Hacker (2013).

¹⁴⁵ See Hacker (2013).

life”, plays an important role in his late philosophical thought about language and the methods and aims of philosophical theorizing, although he leaves many of the implications of the concept unexplored.¹⁴⁶ Wittgenstein held that all human beings share what he called a common “form of life”, which can be thought of, roughly, as general patterns of behavior, as well as the conceptual frameworks and natural human capacities that make such behavior intelligible.¹⁴⁷ Lynn Rudder Baker provides a constitutive explanation of Wittgenstein’s concept, writing that “forms of life” are:

“Patterns of activity and response — following rules in the ways that we do, coping with the past, hoping for the future, caring for and educating the young, taking into account the interests and feelings of others— patterns so obvious to escape notice, are constitutive of human life. Pervasive as they are, however, the practices that shape human life form no system”.¹⁴⁸

There are two key features that Baker points to which deserve comment here. First, the human form of life is made up of certain characteristic *activities* that humans do, such as educating the young. While it is true that, at some level, there is a wide variety of differences in how human beings go about doing such an activity across different cultures, the point here is that there is an underlying form to such cultural differences which makes such activities identifiable *as* educating the young. While it is often tempting and unavoidable to fixate on the differences between cultural practices, it is important to also recognize the underlying similarities which make such recognition

¹⁴⁶ See Baker (1984, 277).

¹⁴⁷ Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

¹⁴⁸ See Baker (1984, 277).

intelligible at all. The second key feature of Baker's account is that, despite there being identifiable patterns, such patterns cannot be systematized. The systematization of these patterns would, in Wittgenstein's view, distort the phenomena.¹⁴⁹ Forms of life, then, are, like the grammar which they generate, best understood as arbitrary or contingent in an important sense.¹⁵⁰

The conventional nature of forms of life distinguishes them from empirical regularities. Facts about the human form of life, for example, are not discoverable through the traditional methods of the natural sciences, such as induction, hypothesis, and experiment.¹⁵¹ Baker writes:

“To call forms of life conventional is to distinguish them from empirical regularities. In the first place, empirical regularities are discoverable by induction, hypothesis, and experiment; forms of life are not so discoverable. Since these scientific procedures presuppose the forms of life that render them intelligible, they are not available for the investigation of forms of life”. 278

The *kinds* of facts that constitute the human form of life are not the kinds of facts that can be tested by the traditional methods of the natural sciences. They are too general. In fact, the natural sciences themselves, Wittgensteinians think, depend upon, and issue from, a form of life. If this were not the case, then the results of the natural sciences would not be intelligible to us at all. Therefore, we should distinguish them from empirical facts.

¹⁴⁹ See Baker (1984, 277). Also, see Anscombe (1981, 122).

¹⁵⁰ See Baker (1984, 278).

¹⁵¹ See Baker (1984, 278).

Another reason to distinguish the facts that constitute forms of life from empirical regularities is that the very general kinds of facts that constitute a form of life are accessed from *within* the lived experience of that form of life. Insofar as the natural sciences attempt to access nature *sub species aeternitatis*, then the kinds of facts that constitute a form of life will be passed over and simplified. Finally, forms of life differ from empirical regularities insofar as it is not possible to “get outside” of our own form of life and imagine other ways that it might have been, while it is possible to imagine empirical regularities to be different from what they are.

There is, then, a certain kind of necessity to a form of life, despite its being conventional — it could not be imagined to be otherwise for the life-form that lives it within it, even though it is, from the perspective of the natural sciences contingent. Although it is true that, had human biology and human history been different, it might have been the case that the human form of life would have looked very different — that is, the ways in which human beings find it natural to get on with living could have looked very different — given the kind of beings we *in fact are*, such alternative forms of life are not conceptually available to us. Any attempt to imagine what otherwise could have been must take place from *within* our form of life. For example, we all know that it is a contingent fact that we were born into a certain culture and that, had we been born somewhere else, it is very likely that our way of living would have been dramatically different. But, it is not possible to think about what *I*, as I currently am, a person already determined to some extent by the culture I was born into, would have been like had *I* been born in another culture. What we would be imagining is essentially what the life of

someone else would have been. The concept of form of life, then, possesses a unique set of properties that render it naturalistic, but non-empirical, contingent, but necessary or inescapable.

The unique combination of features exemplified in Wittgenstein's concept of "form of life" make it possible to see what it would mean to ground objective normative truths in facts about human nature. If we understand human nature in a similar way to the way that Wittgenstein understands a "form of life" as the "hinges on which our ordinary thoughts swing back and forth", referencing Wittgenstein's remark that "If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put" (OC 343), then it is possible to see how a conception of human nature can provide a *kind* of necessity for how we must live, despite the fact that it is in an important sense arbitrary and contingent.¹⁵² Additionally, even though our form of life cannot be *justified*, since it is just *given* and among the very general set of facts that make up our world, it is still possible *within* that form of life to develop normative practices and systems that allow for objective normative judgments given the grammatical rules of those systems.¹⁵³

Wittgenstein's late philosophy was naturalistic in the sense that it was predicated upon the view that our concepts are grounded in facts about the natural world and natural human capacities.¹⁵⁴ It is not difficult to see how those inspired by an Aristotelian

¹⁵² See Wittgenstein (1969).

¹⁵³ Garver suggests that these very general facts can be thought of as Wittgenstein's analogue of *synthetic a priori* judgments, insofar as they are about the natural world, but presupposed by ordinary discourse and not subject to doubt. See Garver (1990, 192, fn. 36).

¹⁵⁴ Bevir and Galisanka (2016).

approach would find such a theoretical framework appealing since, as I have defined Aristotelianism, it is the view that ethical facts are grounded in natural facts about human nature. Although many contemporary philosophers are skeptical of the concept of human nature, insofar as it does not have a biological basis, understanding Wittgenstein's naturalistic approach helps, I hope, to make more clear the sense in which those inspired by Wittgenstein were *not* trying to offer an empirical theory of human nature.

By the time of his death, Wittgenstein left his concept of "form of life" largely underdeveloped. Additionally, Wittgenstein would not have taken his work to have provided the grounding for an objective moral theory in terms of human flourishing. His aims and results were far more *quietist*. Anscombe and Foot, meanwhile, saw how some of the unique concepts developed by Wittgenstein could help move debates forward within metaethics, and open up new pathways to revive Ethical Naturalism *via* Neo-Aristotelianism.

4 Anscombe and Foot's Revival of Naturalism

Wittgenstein's new philosophical method as consisting in grammatical investigations into our concepts and "language-games" provided resources for Anscombe and Foot to show how it is possible to make inferences from facts to values. That is, Wittgenstein's methods showed how "objective" rules could be embedded in conventional normative practices (language games) and provide grounds for rational inferences from facts to values. Such philosophical tools made it possible to undercut the fundamental anti-

naturalist assumptions that had dominated metaethical thought since Moore. It was now possible for philosophers to “draw normative conclusions from claims about human beings and their goals in the world”.¹⁵⁵ But, Wittgenstein’s ideas on their own provided *too slim* of a basis for ethics. Despite showing how normative thought and talk could be conceived as *cognitive*, Wittgenstein’s view of norms and normativity appeared to only treat *moral* thought and talk as one language-game among many.

In order to put Wittgenstein’s innovations to good use, Anscombe and Foot would turn to Aristotle, and facts about human nature, human goodness and human badness, in order to give certain norms and practices a privileged status in human life. They argued that the natural facts not only restricted what ethical views are possible, just as they restrict what uses of language are possible, but underwrite positive ethical positions. In order to show this, Anscombe and Foot applied Wittgenstein’s naturalistic grammatical method to ethical concepts such as “virtue”, “action”, “intention”, “flourishing” and “good”.¹⁵⁶ The result of their ethical investigations was the development of an exciting new form of Ethical Naturalism, which is referred to today as “Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism”.

4.1 Anscombe

In her influential paper “Modern Moral Philosophy”, Anscombe argued that Anglophone moral philosophy since Sidgwick had taken a wrong turn. Anscombe’s main complaint,

¹⁵⁵ See Galisanka (2016, 153).

¹⁵⁶ See Galisanka (2016, 153).

as I have argued elsewhere, was that modern moral philosophers overlooked the importance of certain background theoretical assumptions for practical philosophy, with the result being that a whole menu of positions that appeared distinct were really fundamentally unified insofar as they did not have the conceptual resources to make sense of intrinsically unjust actions. It was for this reason that Anscombe claimed we should stop doing ethics until we develop an adequate “philosophy of psychology”.

In claiming that a prerequisite to ethics was sufficient progress in the “philosophy of psychology”, Anscombe was not advocating that moral philosophers turn towards anything empirical. Instead, she was arguing in precisely the opposite direction. What Anscombe was advocating was a Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis of certain concepts that she took to be important to doing ethics in a way that could make sense of absolute prohibitions on intrinsically unjust actions — a grammatical investigation into concepts such as “wanting”, “pleasure”, “action”, “intention”, and various others. Importantly, Anscombe thought that such a project was necessary in order to do ethics properly, regardless of whether moral philosophers were interested in reinstating a Divine Law conception of ethics, or pursuing secular views. Just as Wittgenstein had thought that we must adopt a new approach to philosophy in order to understand language and meaning in context, Anscombe had thought that we must do the same within ethics in order to speak meaningfully about such matters, and avoid what she took to be the absurdities of modern moral philosophy.

In her diagnosis of the state of modern moral philosophy, Anscombe famously claimed that moral philosophy would greatly benefit from a return to an Aristotelian

approach to ethical inquiry. In particular, Anscombe thought that it would be a great benefit to modern moral philosophers if they replaced their suite of “thin” moral concepts with the “thick” vocabulary of the virtues. Her reason for thinking this seemed to be that the language of the virtues, given its “thickness”, would make it much easier to see, from the mere description of an action within a concrete circumstance, whether such a certain action was “unjust”, “untruthful”, “chaste”, and so on. Similar to Wittgenstein, then, Anscombe wanted to make things more perspicuous. This was not merely to dissolve or clear away philosophical problems – but expose the extent to which consequentialist reasoning had permeated modern moral thought. Without a proper understanding of the logical grammar of our ethical concepts, there would be no restrictions on their use.

Anscombe appealed to facts about what human beings are like in order to restrict the use of certain concepts, and provide objective grammatical criteria for how certain concepts can be used in human contexts. We can see Anscombe’s adoption of Wittgensteinian naturalism in her approach to the concept of “wanting”. In *Intention*, Anscombe argued that it is not intelligible for a human being to *want* anything whatsoever. There are limits to the intelligibility of the use of the concept “wanting”, and those limits find their source in natural facts about how human beings are constituted.¹⁵⁷ The concept “wanting”, then, does not admit of a *subjectivist* interpretation, according to which any individual can simply decide to want anything whatsoever. Although there is,

¹⁵⁷ See Galisanka (2016, 165).

of course, subjectivity in deciding what we want, there are limits on what options are intelligible for a human being. Anscombe wrote:

“So when out of the blue someone says ‘I want a pin’ and denies wanting it for anything, let us suppose we give it [to] him and see what he does with it. He takes it, let us say, he smiles and says ‘Thank you. My want is gratified’ — but what does he do with the pin? If he puts it down and forgets about it, in what sense was it true to say that he wanted a pin?”¹⁵⁸

Anscombe thought that not all wishes are intelligible. If we can’t imagine what a person would do with certain objects, or if they do nothing with something they claim to have wanted, we have reason to think that they did not understand what it *meant* to say that they wanted something in the first place.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, if moral philosophers think that it can be justified, in the right circumstances, to murder the innocent, Anscombe would argue that moral philosophers have simply failed to understand what it means for an action to be *unjust*.

In “Modern Moral Philosophy”, Anscombe applies this grammatical approach to the concept of “need”, in a discussion that would serve as a main source of inspiration for the revival of Aristotelianism in contemporary metaethics. Anscombe’s discussion showed how the concept of “need” can be given an analysis according to which it may be

¹⁵⁸ See Anscombe (1957, 71).

¹⁵⁹ See Galisanka (2016, 165).

possible to say sentences like the following “human beings need the virtues as bees need stings”.¹⁶⁰

Although Anscombe agreed with Hume that it is not possible to infer an “ought” from an “is”, if “ought” is understood in the special *moral* sense which she attacks (she thought that Hume should be praised, despite being a “mere brilliant sophist”, for bringing our attention to such an important result), she also thought that this did *not* mean that inferences from “is” statements to *other* normative concepts are impermissible. Anscombe *did* think it was possible to make an inference, for example, from the “characteristic of an organism” to a claim about the “environment that it *needs*” (emphasis added).¹⁶¹ To say that an organism *needs* a particular environment is not to say that someone *wants* it to flourish — it is not a subjective claim. Instead, Anscombe thought that it is an objective statement about that organism and what is necessary for its flourishing — that it “won’t flourish unless it has it”.¹⁶² Anscombe wrote:

“In the case of a plant, let us say, the inference from ‘is’ to ‘needs’ is certainly not in the least dubious. It is interesting and worth examining; but not at all fishy”.¹⁶³

Later in her article, Anscombe developed a similar line of thinking with respect to what human beings need. Crucially, Anscombe thought an understanding of the logical grammar of the concept “need” showed that it was at least *possible* to make inferences

¹⁶⁰ See Geach (1977).

¹⁶¹ See Anscombe (1958, 7).

¹⁶² See Anscombe (1958, 7).

¹⁶³ See Anscombe (1958, 7).

from the way a human being is described to claims about the specific *virtues* that are *necessary* for a human being to flourish.¹⁶⁴ Anscombe wrote:

“Just as *man* has so many teeth, which is certainly not the average number of teeth men have, but is the number of teeth for the species, so perhaps the species *man*, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life — powers and faculties and use of things needed — ‘has’ such-and-such virtues: and this ‘man’ with the complete set of virtues is the ‘norm,’ as ‘man’ with, e.g., a complete set of teeth is a norm”.¹⁶⁵

Several things are worth mentioning about this interesting passage. First, in this passage Anscombe presents, for the first time, the idea that a characteristic, such as the characteristic number of teeth, can belong to a “species”, and that such statements are not *statistical claims* about the “average number of teeth men have”, but are claims about “the number of teeth for the species”. That is, the statement that “dogs have four legs” is being understood here as a claim about the “norm” for dogs that is not a statistical or empirical generalization, but a different kind of statement which some thinkers today have called “essence expressing generics”.¹⁶⁶ This special class of statements about *living things* would go on to be unpacked further in the work of thinkers inspired by Anscombe such as Michael Thompson, Foot, and others, and ultimately lead to the development of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism.

¹⁶⁴ See Galisanka (2016, 169).

¹⁶⁵ See Anscombe (1958, 14).

¹⁶⁶ See Moravcsik (1994).

Second, Anscombe states that if we consider man “from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life”, then “perhaps the species *man*” will have “such-and-such virtues: and this man with the complete set of virtues is the ‘norm’”. What Anscombe seems to be suggesting is that possessing certain virtues might simply be part of something like our Wittgensteinian “form of life”, or human nature, such that it is simply *built in* to the human form of life that we act in accordance with a certain set of virtues. If this were the case, then, it may be possible to “look for ‘norms’ in human virtues”, and provide a basis for objective ethical judgments that is *species-relative*, such that we can judge someone who acts uncharacteristically as somehow defective *qua* human being.¹⁶⁷ Such a project is, ultimately, precisely what Foot set out to do in *Natural Goodness*. Although Anscombe sketched out the *possibility* of such an approach to ethics, in *lieu* of the *moral* concepts, she herself largely left the task to others. But, it was Wittgenstein’s naturalistic approach to the analysis of concepts which, in the hands of Anscombe, first showed how such a project may even be possible.

4.2 Foot

In a similar vein to Anscombe, Foot argued that there are logical restrictions on the use of certain ethical concepts, and that these restrictions are grounded in natural facts about human beings. For example, Foot argued that human emotions are intelligible only when

¹⁶⁷ Critics argue that it is also characteristic of human beings to act viciously just as much as it is to act virtuously. While this is certainly true, this does not mean that we cannot, as a result, judge vicious actions as rendering someone *bad*. One way to do this is to connect virtuous action to the human good, as so many have tried to do.

they are plausibly connected to activities, persons or things.¹⁶⁸ But, not all such connections are intelligible or plausible, and the range of such connections is limited.¹⁶⁹ For example, Foot argued that it is not possible to feel pride about anything whatsoever. Foot wrote, “The characteristic object of pride is something seen (a) as in some way a man’s own, and (b) as some sort of achievement or advantage; without this object pride cannot be described”.¹⁷⁰ It is not possible, thought Foot, to be proud of the sea, unless some *special* explanation or background was provided. One may be proud, for example, of having cleaned up a particular part of the sea, but one cannot be proud of the sea *simpliciter*.

Like Anscombe, Foot appealed to Aristotelian arguments in order to arrive at substantive conclusions. Galisanka writes:

“Having started with Wittgensteinian explorations of naturalism, by 1961 she was already appealing to Aristotle’s term ‘function’ and exploring the possibility of likening terms such as ‘father’ and ‘daughter’ to functional terms such as ‘knife’.”¹⁷¹

Although Foot would not develop her complete theory of natural normativity until several decades later, in her early work she was able to draw substantive metaethical conclusions regarding the nature of “moral judgments”. In several early articles, Foot utilizes the grammatical method in order to criticize the standard views of moral judgments during

¹⁶⁸ See Galisanka (2016, 166).

¹⁶⁹ See Galisanka (2016, 166).

¹⁷⁰ See Foot (1958, 87).

¹⁷¹ See Foot (1961).

the late fifties and early sixties, and set out her alternative view that connects them to human goodness.¹⁷² According to the Non-Cognitivist conception of moral judgments, moral judgments featured a non-cognitive component that was attached to the descriptive component. Foot argued that such views were implausible since there was no restriction on the content of moral judgments, insofar as we can have attitudes about anything whatsoever. In order to undermine such views, she employed Wittgensteinian ideas, such as his arguments against the possibility of a private language, in order to show that there must be a “content restriction” on moral judgments and moral principles. On this point, Hacker-Wright notes that:

“In arguing against her emotivist and prescriptivist opponents, Foot develops the outlines of a positive position that should be labeled a version of ethical naturalism in view of the role that it accords facts about human life in defining the content of morality”.¹⁷³

Foot’s early ethical naturalism can be seen in her arguments that cultivating the virtues is always in our self-interest, refuting the position of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. In “Moral Beliefs”, Foot first argues that we all have *pro tanto* reason to act in view of what is demonstrated to be in our interests.¹⁷⁴ In order to show that cultivating the virtues is in our interest, she compares injustice to physical injury. Foot argues that an injury to our limbs, for example, is something we have reason to avoid (barring special conditions). It would be irrational to seek out injuring oneself. What makes it the case that it is irrational is that we all have reasons to want our bodies to function well and without pain or

¹⁷² See Foot (1954, 1958, 1959). Also, see Hacker-Wright (2022).

¹⁷³ See Hacker-Wright (2022).

¹⁷⁴ See Hacker-Wright (2022).

suffering. Analogously, Foot argues that there are reasons for why it is rational to want to the virtues. Foot argues that the virtues are necessary for our flourishing in a similar way that functioning limbs are. Possessing the virtues, even if it doesn't *necessarily* benefit us in what Foot calls the 'tight corner' (unique one-off circumstances), benefits human beings *in general*, and it is rational to want to cultivate virtuous dispositions in order to live a good human life. Thus, Foot's early ethical writings demonstrate how adopting a Wittgensteinian approach to ethical questions led Foot to develop an early form of Ethical Naturalism inspired by Aristotle that attempted to justify the virtues in relation to what is necessary for human flourishing.¹⁷⁵ Despite taking several decades to work out her mature views, Foot would ultimately go farther than Anscombe in developing the Aristotelian metaethical line. While Anscombe thought that "modern moral philosophy" faced a choice of reviving a divine law ethics, or pursuing a secular virtue ethics, Anscombe wasn't entirely interested in pursuing the latter herself, and even remarked that she was not capable of it. Much to Anscombe's dismay, Foot was an atheist, and therefore was naturally drawn to the latter option.

4.3 Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism

The revival of Ethical Naturalism by Anscombe and Foot in the late fifties and early sixties would go on to inspire the contemporary metaethical view today referred to as "Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism". Although Philippa Foot had been working on this kind of

¹⁷⁵ See Hacker-Wright (2022).

approach to ethics since those early years, it would take her until 2001 to arrive at a definitive statement of her view in her only monograph *Natural Goodness*. The development of “Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism” would not have been possible, however, without the early developments of Anscombe and Foot in extending Wittgenstein’s ideas to ethics. That enabled them to develop a method for speaking about ethics in a naturalistic way that is autonomous from the natural sciences. In this section, I will set out the basic tenets of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism in order to transition to Part Two of this dissertation, which concerns the contemporary significance of this approach for metaethics. It should now be possible to understand what makes this view unique without falling into common misunderstandings of its central claims.

Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is a family of metaethical views that attempt to explain objective normative truths in terms of human nature. Importantly, proponents of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism attempt to do this without saying anything that conflicts with the results of modern science.¹⁷⁶ Proponents of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism believe that there is a body of ethical knowledge about human nature and human life that cannot be investigated through the standard methods of the empirical sciences, and therefore that ethics is, in an important way, epistemically autonomous. Despite being autonomous from the natural sciences, Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is commonly understood by its proponents as a form of Ethical Naturalism, since it attempts to explain objective normative truths in terms of human nature. One of the main questions facing this view,

¹⁷⁶ See Moosavi (2022, 335).

though, is whether it makes sense to consider such a view a form of naturalism at all, given its non-scientific nature.

4.3.1 Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism: Overview

Although Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is often closely identified with the work of Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot, since they were the first two philosophers to set out relatively complete statements of the view, I will consider the view here in more general terms. That is, I will consider Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism as a *family* of metaethical views that is unified by several *general* commitments shared by all, or nearly all, proponents of the view. With that being said, it is still helpful to explain the view *via* Hursthouse and Foot's instantiations of it, since they express the central ideas behind Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism in a compelling way.

Both Hursthouse and Foot have argued that moral goodness is an instance of *natural* goodness in human beings, where natural goodness is to be understood as a kind of *species-relative* evaluation that applies to living things in virtue of their nature and specific *form of life*.¹⁷⁷ Hursthouse and Foot are famous for taking the analogies between moral and natural goodness quite literally, such that the goodness of the moral virtues in a human being are thought to be naturally good for us in a way that is *conceptually equivalent* to the way in which deep roots are good for an oak tree. Both are what

¹⁷⁷ See Moosavi (2022, 335-6).

constitute the flourishing of some thing, in virtue of the kind of thing that it is. The basic thought is that moral virtues are naturally good for human beings insofar as they enable or constitute what it means for us to flourish *qua* human being.¹⁷⁸ It is in this way that some Neo-Aristotelians take themselves to be committed to Ethical Naturalism — moral truths are grounded in facts about our nature as human beings.

Foot understands natural goodness in terms of a *special* form of normative evaluation that applies uniquely to living things. That is, there is a special class of judgments about living things that have unique conceptual properties, and these judgments, despite resembling evaluative judgments about artifacts, are taken to differ from them.

What Foot had in mind was not evaluating things in relation to particular human projects or interests. For example, a shovel can be evaluated *qua* shovel, or *qua* weapon, if one has an evil aim in mind. Evaluations of natural goodness are *objective*, rather than *subjective*, and apply to the “parts and aspects of living things independently of the interests of humans or any other external party”.¹⁷⁹ They are *internal*, in the sense that “they depend only on the individual living organism and how it fares with respect to its own form of life”.¹⁸⁰ Evaluations of natural goodness work, according to Foot, by judging individual members of a species in relation to the characteristic ways of living for that

¹⁷⁸ See Moosavi (2022, 336).

¹⁷⁹ See Moosavi (2022, 338).

¹⁸⁰ See Foot (2001, 27).

species in general. If it is characteristic for human beings to form social bonds, for example, then if a particular human being is incapable or unwilling to do so, then there is something naturally defective about such a way of living. The neo-Aristotelian notion of flourishing consists in the notion of an organism's doing well by

being a good instance of its kind, or life-form. It is this notion of flourishing that licenses inferences to evaluative judgments about an individual member of some species. Thus, evaluations of natural goodness are flourishing-based evaluations. According to Foot, human flourishing is uniquely characterized by the capacity to recognize, respond to, and act in light of reasons, with the moral virtues constituting exercising this capacity well.¹⁸¹

4.3.2 Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism as Ethical Naturalism

In their article on “Moral Naturalism”, Matthew Lenman and James Lutz describe Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism as one of the three leading versions of Moral (Ethical) Naturalism, alongside Cornell Realism and Frank Jackson's Moral Functionalism.¹⁸² Although naturalism is supposed to be a defining feature of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism, many have raised serious challenges to the naturalistic credential of the view. One of the sources of this skepticism is that, unlike other extant forms of Ethical Naturalism, Neo-

¹⁸¹ Moosavi (2022).

¹⁸² See Moosavi (2022, 340), and Lenman and Lutz (2018).

Aristotelian Naturalism does not offer an account of morality that is grounded in facts that are derived from empirical scientific investigation.¹⁸³ The thought is that, if Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is conceived as Non-Scientific Naturalism, then it cannot be properly called a version of Ethical Naturalism.¹⁸⁴ Before explaining the way in which it is a version of Ethical Naturalism, it will be helpful to contrast it with some of the leading alternatives.

I said above that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is viewed as a competing version of Ethical Naturalism alongside Cornell Realism and Moral Functionalism. Cornell realism was developed in the 1980s by Richard Boyd, David Brink, Nicholas Sturgeon, and Peter Railton.¹⁸⁵ Cornell Realism gets its name from the fact that Boyd, Brink, and Sturgeon were working or studying at Cornell University at the time.¹⁸⁶ Cornell Realism is a version of Ethical Naturalism according to which ethical properties and facts are the kinds of properties and facts that can be investigated empirically via the methods of the natural sciences. Meanwhile, Moral Functionalism is the view that ethical claims are analytically equivalent to, and synonymous with, certain highly complex descriptive claims.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ See Moosavi (2022, 336).

¹⁸⁴ Jonathan Dancy argues that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism can be understood as a form of Non-Naturalism. See Dancy (2006).

¹⁸⁵ See Boyd (1988), Brink (1986), Sturgeon (1985), and Railton (1986).

¹⁸⁶ See Lenman and Lutz (2018).

¹⁸⁷ See Jackson (1998). Reference from Moosavi (2022, 340).

Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism differs from Cornell Realism in its methodological and epistemological commitments. Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism denies that ethical facts and properties can be investigated via the traditional methods of the natural sciences. Meanwhile, Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism differs from Moral Functionalism insofar as Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is a *non-reductive* version of Ethical Naturalism. To say that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is non-reductive is to say that it is committed to the claim that ethical facts and properties are natural facts and properties that are irreducible to any other kind of non-ethical facts or properties. Additionally, according to such a view ethical knowledge is, in an important sense, *autonomous* from other types of knowledge, such as scientific knowledge, insofar as ethical inquiry, despite being informed by the sciences, is independent of the sciences. The kind of facts being investigated in ethical inquiry are not the kind of facts that the natural sciences can investigate.¹⁸⁸

If Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is a form of naturalism that does *not* ground ethical truths in facts that can be investigated by the natural sciences, then what kind of facts does Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism concern itself with, and how do we come to know them? Parisa Moosavi writes:

“Neo-Aristotelians have explicitly rejected the idea that all the relevant facts about human nature can be known scientifically. Although scientific findings surely play a role in filling the details of our natural-historical judgments about a life-form, Neo-

¹⁸⁸ Recall from Chapter Two Wittgenstein’s “very general facts of nature”, and conception of “natural history” as not consisting in the articulation of empirical claims.

Aristotelians maintain that there is also an important *a priori* element in how we make natural-historical judgments”.¹⁸⁹

Michael Thompson, for example, argues that, with respect to our *own* life-form, we have a non-empirical representation of it through an *a priori* self-knowledge. Some Neo-Aristotelians, following this strategy, argue that our knowledge of the human life-form relies on a kind of *self-knowledge* that does not belong to natural science, and that this self-knowledge can ground our knowledge of ethical truths.¹⁹⁰ Although not all Neo-Aristotelians are committed to such an account, this is one popular strategy adopted by several prominent Neo-Aristotelians in order to provide a moral epistemology for their view.¹⁹¹

Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism, then, is a form of Ethical Naturalism that denies that it is possible to derive first-order ethical truths from evolutionary biology, or any other empirical science. The idea is that there is a body of knowledge concerning the human life-form and human flourishing that falls outside of any such discipline, and is significant to understanding what it means to be a good or bad human being.¹⁹²

Therefore, Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is a form of Ethical Naturalism that takes ethics

¹⁸⁹ See Moosavi (2022, 342).

¹⁹⁰ See Moosavi (2022, 342).

¹⁹¹ See Thompson (2004), Hacker-Wright (2009), Lott (2012).

¹⁹² See Moosavi (2022, 342).

to be *epistemically* autonomous in an important way from the natural sciences.¹⁹³ Does this mean that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is not *truly* a form of Ethical Naturalism?

As Moosavi writes, “The idea that ethical naturalism should ultimately be understood in epistemic terms by reference to natural sciences is a prevalent idea in metaethics”.¹⁹⁴ Ethical Naturalism is often defined as the conjunction of Ethical Realism and Metaphysical Naturalism. Metaphysical Naturalism is the thesis that ethical facts and properties are natural facts and properties in some important sense.¹⁹⁵ Since it has proven difficult, however, to define what a natural fact or property is in *metaphysical* terms, many philosophers have, following Moore, understood naturalism in *epistemic* terms. Specifically, they have understood naturalness to be understood in terms of the kinds of facts and properties investigated by the empirical methods of the natural sciences. That is, Metaphysical Naturalism is often defined in terms of Epistemic Naturalism.¹⁹⁶ According to this understanding, it does seem to be the case that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is *not* a form of naturalism.

Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism, as developed by Hursthouse and Foot, involves the significant claim that, in addition to the claim that ethical truths are grounded in human nature, that human beings must be understood as “part of the natural, biological order of

¹⁹³ See Moosavi (2022, 342). Several authors, such as Odenabugh and Lott, think that this just means that Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism is *not* a form of naturalism, but something else.

¹⁹⁴ See Moosavi (2022, 343).

¹⁹⁵ See Moosavi (2022, 343).

¹⁹⁶ See Moosavi (2022, 343).

living things”.¹⁹⁷ The concept of human being and human nature are to be understood, on this view, in terms of being about a *species* that is part of nature. Thus, ethical truths are grounded in something natural.

Moosavi argues that the “continuity between human nature and non-human living things” underlies the Neo-Aristotelian claim to Metaphysical Naturalism. Moosavi understands Neo-Aristotelians are holding that there is a *continuity* between human beings and other living things. Human beings are understood, according to this view, in terms of a *life-form*, rather than in terms of something more abstract and non-natural, such as rational agent. Moosavi writes:

“Unlike the abstract concept of a person or a rational agent, the concept of a human being is tied to the actual material living things with a particular evolutionary history, and is characterized at least in part by certain physical features such as having two arms and two legs. This living nature puts the human life-form on the same plane as plants and non-human animals”.¹⁹⁸

5 Conclusion

Wittgenstein’s approach to language made it possible to reject the widely accepted position within the first half the twentieth-century that facts are logically distinct from values, and that there cannot be any rational inferences between them. Wittgenstein showed how norms and values are embedded in the practices — language-games — that

¹⁹⁷ See Hursthouse (1999, 205).

¹⁹⁸ See Moosavi (2022, 348).

constitute human life, and how these practices are rule-governed in ways that allow for inferences from facts to values. Although Wittgenstein's approach itself did not provide substantive ethical conclusions, it provided the conceptual framework within which such views could be developed in a naturalistic way. Anscombe and Foot thought that it was possible, by looking into nature, to find substantive ways in which the language-games and conventions that form a part of human life can entail ethical conclusions about what is good and bad for human beings, and how we should live. Wittgenstein's concept of "form of life" brought attention to natural facts about human nature and human capacities as providing a rich source from which to derive such conclusions. Thus, not only does the human form of life, and the "very general facts" of nature, limit what views are intelligible and possible, but, as Anscombe and Foot have shown, they can also help us fill in the content of this framework in positive ways. While Wittgenstein was an anti-theorist who held a largely negative conception of philosophy, Anscombe and Foot were committed to justifying ethical objectivity and providing positive theories. Galisanka writes, "philosophers such as Anscombe and Foot, even if they wanted to take naturalistic inquiries further, found no concepts in Wittgenstein's body of work to do so".¹⁹⁹ They were forced to combine Wittgenstein's insights with those of other thinkers, such as Aristotle, who worked within a naturalistic framework. The result of this unique combination was a new form of non-reductive, non-empirical Ethical Naturalism that ultimately led to the development of what is today referred to as "Neo-Aristotelian

¹⁹⁹ See Galisanka (2016, 171).

Naturalism". In Part Two, I consider the prospects of such an approach within contemporary metaethics.

PART TWO: Contemporary Significance

CHAPTER 4: Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and Normativity

1 Introduction

During the second half of the twentieth century, largely owing to the work of Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot, Neo-Aristotelian approaches to normative and applied ethics experienced a significant revival of interest in the form of Virtue Ethics. In contemporary metaethics, however, there was no analogous revival of interest.²⁰⁰ This was the case despite the fact that a significant portion of Anscombe's and Foot's philosophical writings were clearly metaethical in nature and laid the groundwork for contemporary Neo-Aristotelian metaethics. Although Neo-Aristotelianism has failed to secure its status, the same cannot be said about Neo-Humeanism and Neo-Kantianism.²⁰¹ Both of these views have occupied a privileged position at the center of many contemporary metaethical debates.²⁰² What explains this state of affairs? While there are several factors that one can appeal to, some philosophical, others sociological, the most significant factor seems to be that Neo-Aristotelian views have yet to reach philosophical maturity and, as a result, remain largely undertheorized and misunderstood.²⁰³ In the last decade, however, there has been a growing amount of work on Neo-Aristotelian

²⁰⁰ To take one representative example, in the index of Derek Parfit's *On What Matters: vol. 1 and vol. 2*, Aristotle is mentioned twice, while Foot is not mentioned at all.

²⁰¹ Chrisoula Andreou writes, for example, that "Much of contemporary ethical theory is a debate between Kantians, who argue that the dictates of morality are dictates of reason, and Humeans who argue that reason is neutral between morality and immorality". See Andreou (2006, 61).

²⁰² For some examples of Neo-Humeanism, see Schroeder (2007), Williams (1979). For a prominent example of Neo-Kantianism, see Korsgaard (2008, 2009).

²⁰³ For an explanation of the historical and sociological factors that have affected the growth of Neo-Aristotelian metaethical thought in the twentieth-century, see my "The Distorted Legacy of Anscombe and Foot's Moral Thought" (unpublished ms).

metaethics, especially among those interested in the particular brand of Neo-Aristotelianism that has been directly developed from Anscombe and Foot's early thought.²⁰⁴

The increased attention given to Neo-Aristotelianism in recent years has been both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, recent work has resulted in sophisticated articulations of the view and its main commitments.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, commentators have developed increasingly sophisticated challenges and objections that Neo-Aristotelianism must overcome. One such objection, which I call the *normativity objection*, has served as a major obstacle to the advancement of Neo-Aristotelian metaethics. The primary aim of this paper is to respond to the normativity objection and, thereby, improve the prospects of Neo-Aristotelian metaethics.

The normativity objection holds that Neo-Aristotelian views cannot, *in principle*, explain what has come to be known as “authoritative normativity”.²⁰⁶ In general, Neo-Aristotelian views locate the source of normativity in natural facts about human nature and human goodness.²⁰⁷ Critics complain, however, that even if it is true that human nature can be the source of certain norms, or standards of evaluation, it cannot be the source of *authoritative* norms. Although the property of authority is rarely defined, the idea seems to be that authority requires that the normative force of some norm cannot be

²⁰⁴ For two recently published edited collections containing several essays that have significantly advanced Neo-Aristotelian scholarship, see Hacker-Wright (2018) and Hähnel (2020).

²⁰⁵ For some recent examples, see Hacker-Wright (2012), Frey (2020), LeBar (2008), Lott (2014).

²⁰⁶ Some philosophers have also referred to this kind of normativity as “genuine”, “real”, “robust”, “substantive”, and “true” normativity.

²⁰⁷ The two most influential attempts to do this are Hursthouse (1999) and Foot (2001).

challenged or questioned. For example, within professional sports, although it is common for athletes and fans to complain about the decision of a referee, the referee's decisions are authoritative within that normative system. The only way in which a particular athlete could escape the normative force of the referee's decision would be to stop playing the sport altogether. Authoritative normativity, though, is supposed to be something even beyond this. That is, full-blooded authoritative normativity is not supposed to be indexed to a normative system, such as morality, but authoritative *simpliciter*. The normativity objection, as I understand it, consists in the complaint that Neo-Aristotelianism cannot explain *that*.

Many critics of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism are willing to grant that human nature can underwrite certain norms. For example, some critics are willing to grant that it is possible to make evaluative judgments about whether a particular human being is doing well *qua* human being, and that there are species-relative norms with respect to which we can evaluate individual human beings. The normativity objection, though, does not recognize this kind of species-relative normativity as authoritative, and does not think that any such strategy can account for the special kind of authoritative normativity that metanormative theories should try to explain. The reason for being skeptical about the Neo-Aristotelian strategy is that, while it is true that we cannot stop being human, and our humanity is in some sense inescapable, it also seems to be the case that the facts about our nature as human beings are always open to rational questioning. Since human beings are also rational beings, the thought goes, it is always possible for us to “step

back” from our human nature and ask why we *should* act in accordance with it.²⁰⁸ While it may be true that, with respect to certain animals, we can make evaluative judgments about a particular animal insofar as it fails to act in accordance with its nature and attain its species good, it seems that such judgments are not possible with human beings, insofar as our practical identities are not reducible to our natural identities. In short, the critic argues that it always seems possible to ask “Why should we care about being good *qua* human being?”.

In recent years, many Neo-Aristotelians have gone to great lengths to try and show how Neo-Aristotelian accounts of the relationship between human nature and practical reason can generate authoritative norms and thereby overcome the normativity objection. Although this work is very interesting, and has led to significant advancements in the depth of understanding of what Neo-Aristotelian views are committed to, I think that a better strategy is available.

Instead of responding to the normativity objection on its own terms, I think Neo-Aristotelians should challenge the idea that they must explain or account for authoritative normativity in the first place, because there are good reasons to be skeptical about the very idea of authoritative normativity as it is commonly understood. Furthermore, I argue that, if Neo-Aristotelian accounts of normativity are judged by a less controversial explanatory standard, then they are actually quite plausible, and should be viewed as at least *on a par* with their Neo-Humean and Neo-Kantian competitors. By undermining the

²⁰⁸ For a detailed discussion of this objection, see Lott (2014).

presuppositions behind the normativity objection, I hope to improve the dialectical position of Neo-Aristotelian accounts of normativity in contemporary debates, and encourage further research into this family of views.

Here is the plan. In section two, I say more about what it means to be a Neo-Aristotelian and, in particular, to explain normativity in terms of natural facts about human nature and human goodness. In section three, I set out the normativity objection in detail, and present my own interpretation of what I take its presuppositions to be. In section four, I explain why there are good reasons to be skeptical about the presuppositions behind the normativity objection. In section five, I present a new set of less controversial explanatory standards against which Neo-Aristotelian views can be measured, and argue for the plausibility of Neo-Aristotelian approaches to normativity.

2 Neo-Aristotelianism

There are many ways to be a Neo-Aristotelian. In this section, I articulate what I take to be the basic metaethical commitments of Neo-Aristotelianism, and provide a general sketch of what I think it means to adopt a Neo-Aristotelian approach to explaining normativity. The purpose of this section is not to provide a definitive account of the view, but a general overview of Neo-Aristotelianism in relation to the standard menu of metaethical alternatives.

As a family of views, Neo-Aristotelianism generally involves two fundamental commitments. First and foremost, Neo-Aristotelians are committed to some form of

Ethical Realism. Although proponents of Neo-Aristotelianism spell out what this commitment means in a variety of ways, nearly all Neo-Aristotelians endorse the thesis that there are objective ethical truths of some kind. As a form of ethical realism, Neo-Aristotelianism can be distinguished from anti-realist views, such as certain forms of Non-Cognitivism and Error-Theory.²⁰⁹

The second fundamental commitment of Neo-Aristotelianism is some form of Ethical Naturalism. In general, Neo-Aristotelians are ethical naturalists insofar as they understand objective ethical truths to depend upon natural facts about human nature in some significant way.²¹⁰ Furthermore, Neo-Aristotelianism is a naturalistic view insofar as Neo-Aristotelians take their position to be *fully* compatible with the results of modern science, and do not posit the existence of anything supernatural or non-natural. The commitment to Ethical Naturalism, then, distinguishes Neo-Aristotelianism from other species of Ethical Realism, such as the versions of Non-Naturalist Ethical Realism found in the work of G.E. Moore and, more recently, Derek Parfit.²¹¹

Within ethical naturalism, distinctions can be made that bring out the unique character of Neo-Aristotelianism even further. Although naturalism was, for a long time, viewed as a reductive position (most notably by Moore), it is more common today to distinguish between *reductive* and *non-reductive* versions of ethical naturalism. Exactly how to draw the distinction between the two is notoriously difficult, and I do not pretend

²⁰⁹ For some notable examples of non-cognitivism, see Ayer (1936), Stevenson (1944), Hare (1952); for error-theory, see Mackie (1977), Joyce (2001).

²¹⁰ Philippa Foot's account of normativity is more general than this, and extends to all living things. See Foot (2001).

²¹¹ See Moore (1903), Parfit (2011).

to be able to offer a precise account here. With that being said, it will be helpful to provide some general remarks about the way in which Neo-Aristotelians understand themselves as adhering to a unique kind of *non-reductive* naturalism. All (or nearly all) Neo-Aristotelians are committed to the view that normative inquiry is, in a significant way, epistemically *autonomous* from the natural sciences and can proceed non-empirically. The concept of human nature being investigated by Neo-Aristotelians is not an empirical biological concept of human nature, and therefore Neo-Aristotelians do *not* think that grounding ethical truths in natural facts about human beings and human nature means that ethical truths are simply reducible to biological truths. Although Neo-Aristotelians accept the metaphysical commitments of modern science, they diverge on matters of methodology, and attempt to preserve the autonomy of normative philosophical inquiry from naturalistic inquiry.

The unique methodological commitments of Neo-Aristotelians makes it possible to distinguish their brand of non-reductive naturalism from a popular version of non-reductive naturalism called “Cornell Realism”.²¹² Although Cornell Realists think that ethical truths cannot be reduced to natural truths, they are committed to the view that ethical truths *just are* empirical truths and, therefore, can be epistemically accessed through the methods of the empirical sciences. By contrast, Neo-Aristotelians take the methods of ethical inquiry to be conceptual rather than empirical.²¹³

²¹² See Boyd (1988), Brink (1986), Sturgeon (1985), Railton (1986).

²¹³ One of the most active questions in the literature of Neo-Aristotelianism today concerns whether such a view can retain its claim to naturalism.

So far I have situated Neo-Aristotelianism with respect to several common categories used within contemporary metaethics. At this point, though, more needs to be said about the positive content of Neo-Aristotelian explanations of normativity. What does it mean to adopt a Neo-Aristotelian explanation of normativity? In general, what distinguishes a Neo-Aristotelian from a Neo-Humean or Neo-Kantian approach to normativity is the attempt to explain or ground objective normative truths in *kind-relative natural facts* about human nature and human goodness. For example, it is a fundamental feature of human life that we are dependent social animals. This is a kind-relative natural fact about what it means to be a human being and live a human life that significantly shapes what does and does not count as a normative reason for us. Many Neo-Aristotelians take facts such as these to objectively determine the nature of the human good which, in turn, provides the fundamental ground of normativity. Although Neo-Aristotelians do not think that individual agents, in particular circumstances, can directly infer what they should do from a general objective conception of human good built out of facts about the nature of human life, they do think that such an objective conception provides the explanatory and justificatory grounds for what we should do in general. Let's see how this kind of approach works in more detail by considering Philippa Foot's account of how certain normative practices are justified.

According to her influential version of Neo-Aristotelianism, Philippa Foot argued that normative practices such as promise-keeping are justified in virtue of their necessity to the promotion of human goodness. Foot borrowed this idea from Elizabeth Anscombe,

who called this special kind of normative necessity “Aristotelian Necessity”.²¹⁴

Aristotelian Necessity is a special kind of normative necessity regarding that which is necessary in order for some good to be achieved, or some evil avoided.²¹⁵ For example,

Anscombe wrote that “Getting one another to do things without the application of physical force is a *necessity* for human life”.²¹⁶ Adding to this, Foot wrote:

“For the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of specifically human life. Elizabeth Anscombe brings out this dependence of morality on the life of our species ... she points out facts about human life that make it *necessary* for human beings to be able to bind each other to action through institutions like promising, such as that there are so few other ways in which one person can reliably get another to do what he wants”.²¹⁷

Not all Neo-Aristotelians are committed to explanations in terms of “Aristotelian Necessity”, but Foot’s account provides a paradigmatic example of how a Neo-Aristotelian might go about explaining the *species-relative* nature of normativity, and how it is possible for objective normative truths to depend upon “essential features of specifically human life”. In general, the kind of explanation of normativity sketched here is representative of the unique strategy adopted by proponents of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism. The uniqueness of this strategy can be illustrated further by contrasting this approach with the more familiar Neo-Humean and Neo-Kantian approaches.

²¹⁴ Anscombe herself got the idea from Book V of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which Anscombe called Aristotle’s “dictionary”. See Anscombe (1969, 1978a, 1978b). For some excellent recent discussions of “Aristotelian Necessity”, see Hacker-Wright (2021), Nieswandt (2017), and Vogler (2020).

²¹⁵ See Vogler (2020, 101).

²¹⁶ See Anscombe (1969).

²¹⁷ See Foot (2001, 15).

Neo-Aristotelianism can helpfully be understood as occupying a kind of middle-position between Neo-Humean and Neo-Kantian accounts of normativity. Neo-Humeans seek to explain or ground normativity in natural facts about *individuals* and their subjective attitudes, such as facts about an individual's particular desires. What makes something a normative reason for *me* to ϕ according to the Neo-Humean? The fact that I want to ϕ .²¹⁸ So, Neo-Humeans differ from Neo-Aristotelians insofar as they develop a *subjective* account of normativity that is grounded in *particular* facts about individuals rather than *general* facts about kinds or natures. Meanwhile, Neo-Kantians seek to explain or ground normativity in terms of abstract non-natural facts about the nature of practical reason and rational agency *as such*. What makes something a normative reason for *all rational agents* to ϕ ? The fact that pure practical reason, or the nature of rational agency itself requires that I ϕ . So, while the Neo-Humean appeals to *natural* facts about individuals to ground *subjective* normative truths, and the Neo-Kantian appeals to *non-natural* facts about the nature of rational agency to ground objective normative truths, the Neo-Aristotelian appeals to *natural* facts about species or kinds in order to ground *objective* normative truths. The natural facts appealed to by Neo-Aristotelians, then, are more general and more objective than those appealed to by the Neo-Humean, but also more particular and contingent than those appealed to by the Neo-Kantian. Insofar as the kind of facts appealed to by the Neo-Aristotelian are external to the thoughts and desires

²¹⁸ Some Neo-Humeans, in order to avoid easy objections, appeal to facts about what idealized versions of myself would want.

of any particular *individual* human being, they are objective, and insofar as they are embedded in the contingent facts of our world, they are natural.

By occupying a middle position, though, Neo-Aristotelianism exposes both of its flanks to attack. Although Neo-Aristotelianism offers a degree of objectivity that Neo-Humeanism cannot provide by locating the grounds of normativity outside of individuals, it also faces the problem of explaining why any particular individual should be motivated by general facts about their species or kind.²¹⁹ Additionally, by grounding normativity in natural facts about the nature of human beings, rather than the nature of rational agency, Neo-Aristotelianism faces the problem of explaining how our humanity is *rationally authoritative*, and can provide us with authoritative reasons for acting. The former is a problem of normative motivation, while the latter is a problem of normative justification. For now, I will simply flag these problems, both of which will be addressed below. With the general sketch of Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism on the table, I now turn to articulating one of the primary objections to this view in more detail, before offering an original response on behalf of the Neo-Aristotelian.

3 The Normativity Objection²²⁰

I want to start by pointing out that the difficulty of explaining the nature and source of normativity is not unique to Neo-Aristotelianism. All metaethical views, whether naturalist or non-naturalist, struggle to explain normativity in one way or another. That being said, Neo-Aristotelian approaches to normativity are largely viewed as *non-starters*

²¹⁹ This can be thought of as a problem of “alienation” from one’s species.

²²⁰ My account of the normativity objection draws significant inspiration from Parish (2017).

in contemporary debates. The standard view seems to be that Neo-Aristotelian views cannot, *in principle*, hope to provide an adequate explanation of authoritative normativity, because there is something especially defective about such approaches.

Within the literature on Neo-Aristotelianism, several variants of the normativity objection have been developed by both friends and foes of the view.²²¹ Naturally, many of these objections specifically target the varieties of Neo-Aristotelianism developed by Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot, since these have been two of the most influential accounts of the view. In what follows, however, I hope to abstract away from some of the idiosyncrasies of the existing discussion and isolate what I take to be the more general metaethical problem that is continually raised against naturalist versions of Ethical Realism, and Neo-Aristotelianism in particular. The primary motivation for doing this is to bring out what I take to be problematic presuppositions underlying *all* varieties of the normativity objection.

In what follows, then, I will present my own interpretation of what I take the general challenge behind the normativity objection to be, as well as an account of its fundamental presuppositions. The basic strategy will be to show how Neo-Aristotelianism has been viewed as a non-starter largely as a result of its failure to meet a theoretical demand that it should not necessarily have to meet, since this demand depends upon controversial assumptions. After showing this, in section five, I will argue that,

²²¹ The *locus classicus* for the normativity objection, as applied to Philippa Foot's brand of Neo-Aristotelianism, is to be found in McDowell (1998). Similar complaints have been made by Korsgaard in some of her more recent work on animals. See Korsgaard (2011).

when measured with respect to less controversial explanatory demands, Neo-Aristotelian accounts of normativity are, *at the very least*, plausible.

3.1 Normativity: Formal and Authoritative

As stated in the introduction, the normativity objection is the objection that Neo-Aristotelian views cannot, *in principle*, explain authoritative normativity. Since “authoritative normativity” is a philosopher’s term of art, much more needs to be said about what the thing is that Neo-Aristotelianism needs to explain, and what an adequate explanation must look like. Unfortunately, it has proven incredibly difficult for metaethicists to provide an adequate definition of what “normativity” is, let alone the special brand of normativity referred to as “authoritative”.²²² Instead of there being a single agreed upon object of inquiry which metaethicists theorize about, the object of inquiry is continuously redefined by the various competing accounts of its nature. Thankfully, it is beyond the scope of this paper to adopt the difficult task of providing a definitive account of what authoritative normativity is. Instead, I will present a popular conception of what authoritative normativity is and use it to explain why critics think that Neo-Aristotelianism is not capable of explaining it.

When speaking about normativity, philosophers have something very general in mind. The normative domain is not only vast, but diverse. While the majority of normative talk in the history of Western philosophy concerned *morality* in particular, it is popular today to understand normativity as a much more general phenomenon that has to

²²² For a detailed account of these difficulties, see Finlay (2020), “Defining Normativity”.

do with all varieties of standards, prescriptions, recommendations, requirements, evaluations, and related concepts. It is helpful to think of the normative domain as being constituted by a multitude of subdomains, such as the moral domain, the aesthetic domain, the legal domain, and so on.²²³ The various subdomains that comprise the normative domain tell us what we should do, feel, and think, according to their respective normative standards.

It is popular to think that some normative domains are significant, while others are insignificant. For example, it is plausible to think that the moral domain is incredibly significant, while the domain of etiquette is not.²²⁴ Furthermore, it is intuitively plausible to think that the significance of certain normative domains is not just a matter of whether anyone happens to take them to be significant. Instead, certain normative domains seem to be *intrinsically* more significant than others.

It is important to point out, though, that insignificant normative domains still count as normative. So long as some domain involves recommendations, prescriptions, and so on, it is normative. But, philosophers often treat these domains as normative only in a *weak* sense. Such domains seem to have the right form, but lack the special normative force or authority that their significant counterparts possess. For this reason, contemporary metaethicists refer to these domains as possessing merely *formal* or

²²³ Some may find talk of distinct domains problematic, since it is not clear that we can provide an account of where one domain begins and another ends. I think that the boundaries between many normative subdomains are, in fact, *vague*, but that doesn't mean that we can't easily pick out *central* cases of the moral domain, for example, as opposed to the aesthetic.

²²⁴ For an argument that etiquette, and other merely "formal" normative domains are more significant than we normally think, see Woods (2017).

generic normativity. Meanwhile, normative domains that are obviously significant are often referred to as possessing a special kind of *authoritative* normativity.²²⁵ While formal normativity is the kind of normativity provided by *any* standard or requirement that one can meet or fall short of, authoritative normativity is the kind of normativity provided *only* by authoritative standards. Formal norms and requirements tell us what we ought to do, feel, or think in a *qualified* way, whereas authoritative norms and requirements tell us what we *really* ought to do, feel, or think, *unqualifiedly*. Explaining exactly what this difference amounts to, however, has proven incredibly difficult.

One of the main difficulties in explaining what it means for a normative domain to be authoritative is that many *prima facie* authoritative normative domains have quite a lot in common with other *prima facie* non-authoritative domains. For example, although morality is often treated as paradigmatically authoritative, morality has no exclusive claim to providing evaluations, prescriptions, recommendations, and requirements. David Copp writes, “this ... is a characteristic that morality shares with etiquette, prudence, epistemology, aesthetics, and judgements of individual self-grounded rationality”.²²⁶ The task, then, is to explain what further feature or property certain normative domains have that make their norms authoritative.

There are many different ideas about what it means for a normative domain, and its corresponding norms and standards, to be authoritative. For my purposes, it is sufficient to focus my attention on one popular idea of what normative authority consists

²²⁵ See Baker (2017).

²²⁶ See Copp (2007).

in. For many metaethicists, what they mean when they say that some domain is authoritatively normative is that it *necessarily* provides rational agents with *authoritative reasons*.²²⁷ Although this proposal provides some insight into what authoritative normative is by connecting it to a special category of reasons, it also simply moves the bump in the rug by reintroducing the idea of authority in the concept of reasons. What does it mean for reasons to be *authoritative*?

One way to understand authoritative reasons comes from Stephen Darwall. Authoritative reasons are reasons that have what Darwall calls “genuine deliberative weight”.²²⁸ What does it mean for reasons to have “genuine deliberative weight”? It means that such reasons have an objective normative weight that is unqualified. The normative weight of authoritative reasons is supposed to be fixed, and not depend upon anyone’s subjective interests or desires in the relevant domain from which the reasons originate. Furthermore, authoritative reasons are thought to be connected to rationality in a special way. Authoritative reasons are thought to be reasons that any rational person, who is aware of them, would take into account when practicality deliberating, simply in virtue of being rational.²²⁹ If a rational agent fails to take authoritative reasons into account when practically deliberating, then they are often thought to be guilty of irrationality.²³⁰ With this popular conception of authoritative normativity in place, I will now turn to fleshing out the normativity objection to Neo-Aristotelianism.

²²⁷ See Copp (2005).

²²⁸ See Darwall (1997).

²²⁹ See Copp (2005).

²³⁰ Philippa Foot famously argued, in her 1972 paper “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”, that “The fact is that the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be

3.2 The Normativity Objection

Recall that Neo-Aristotelian views seek to ground objective normative truths in kind-relative natural facts about human nature. The normativity objection can be understood as the objection that Neo-Aristotelian views cannot, *in principle*, explain authoritative normativity because kind-relative natural facts about human nature cannot be the source of authoritative reasons. In short, Neo-Aristotelian views are non-starters because they try to ground normativity in the wrong kind of *source* — a source that cannot necessarily provide authoritative reasons.

What is it that makes human nature, as understood by Neo-Aristotelians, the wrong kind of normative source? One common line of objection, that has been made by both friends and foes of Neo-Aristotelianism, is that human nature is the wrong kind of source insofar as its normative authority is *always* open to rational questioning.²³¹ The objection gets off the ground by considering the fact that human beings are rational beings.²³² As rational beings, human beings have the ability to “step back” from any source of reasons and requirements and question its rational authority for us. That is, we have the ability to seek normative justifications for any particular reason or

convicted of villainy but not of inconsistency. Nor will his action necessarily be irrational. Irrational actions are those in which a man in some way defeats his own purposes, doing what is calculated to be disadvantageous or to frustrate his ends. Immorality does not necessarily involve any such thing”. Foot later changed her views by rejecting what she called a “Humean” theory of practical rationality. See Foot (1994, 2001, 2004).

²³¹ See Lott (2014) for a thorough presentation of this challenge, and a possible Neo-Aristotelian response.

²³² Meaning that we possess the faculty of reason, not that we always act or think rationally.

recommendation. By extension, human beings have the ability to question the rational authority of kind-relative natural facts about human nature, which Neo-Aristotelians take to be the source of objective normative truths. The objection to Neo-Aristotelianism goes further, though, in charging that not only *can* we question the rational authority of human nature, but it is *not possible* for any Neo-Aristotelian account to *close* such questions, and satisfy the demands of reflective reason. The idea is that, even if human nature can serve as an evaluative standard against which we can make evaluative judgments of human beings as good or bad members of their kind, it cannot serve as a genuinely normative standard because the reasons it provides us with will always be qualified in some important way. Authoritative reasons, meanwhile, must be unqualified. If authoritative reasons are reasons that any rational agent, insofar as they are rational, will recognize as having an objective normative weight, then human nature cannot provide us with authoritative reasons because human nature is something which it is not *necessarily* irrational to go against.

So far in this section, I have fleshed out what is meant by normativity, authoritative normativity, and the normativity objection. In the following section, I explain what I take to be a questionable presupposition underlying the normativity objection. Ultimately, I will offer a response on behalf of the Neo-Aristotelian that challenges this preposition. I aim to show that there are good reasons to be skeptical about the conception of authoritative normativity behind the normativity objection, and that the fate of Neo-Aristotelianism should stand or fall with whether it can explain or justify authoritative normativity.

3.3 Presuppositions Behind Authority

What it means for authoritative reasons to be authoritative is that they are unqualified. That is, the normative weight of authoritative reasons is fixed independently of any subjective attitudes. Many philosophers think that moral reasons are like this, since they seem to have objective normative weight regardless of what anyone thinks. Furthermore, the moral domain is thought to be authoritative because it is thought to necessarily provide rational agents with such reasons. What must be true, though, in order to make sense of the idea of authoritative reasons? And, what must be presupposed in order to make sense of the existence of a normative domain that necessarily provides rational agents with reasons that have objective normative weight?

I want to start by considering the idea of objectivity. In order to make sense of the idea that there can be authoritative reasons with objective normative weight, it seems that there must be some foundational normative standard that is independent of the standards of any ordinary normative domain. Why must it be independent? If the normative standard that gives authoritative reasons their objective normative weight were to come from any ordinary normative domain, such as the moral, the prudential, or the aesthetic, then it wouldn't be an unqualified normative standard that can be used to determine the objective normative weight of reasons of any kind. For example, if the normative standard that determines the objective normative weight of authoritative reasons comes from the domain of morality, then it will only tell us the moral weight of our reasons. What we are after, though, is the weight of our reasons *simpliciter* such that, when our moral reasons conflict with our prudential reasons, we have some external standard

against which it is possible to determine how to weigh those reasons against one another and determine what we *really* have reason to do.²³³

It also seems to be the case that if we want to make sense of the idea that there is a normative domain that *necessarily* generates authoritative reasons for rational agents, it must also be independent of ordinary normative domains for the same reasons. Why think this? In order for a normative domain to *necessarily* provide rational agents with authoritative reasons, its rational authority must be unquestionable. But, if the normative standard that determines the objective normative weight of authoritative reasons comes from an ordinary normative domain, then a rational agent can always question the rational authority of that standard with respect to the normative standards of some other ordinary domain. It seems to be the case, then, that in order to make sense of the idea of authoritative reasons, we must presuppose the existence of some *special* normative domain that is independent of all others, and is constituted by a *special* normative standard that can determine the objective normative weights of authoritative reasons.

Many philosophers are convinced that there is such a privileged normative domain or perspective from which it is possible to provide a foundational normative standard that can fix the objective normative weight of authoritative reasons. It is the domain of *Reason*.²³⁴ To get a grip on what this special domain is supposed to be, it is helpful to put things in terms of practical deliberation. When we practically deliberate about what to do, we take into consideration all of our reasons, and try to determine how

²³³ For interesting discussions of this idea, see Baker (2018), Copp (1997, 2007), and Tiffany (2007).

²³⁴ See Copp (1997).

they compare in order to arrive at a conclusive judgment about what we have most reason to do. Understanding what moral reasons we have, what prudential reasons we have, and so on, still leaves something to be desired. What we want to know is what we have reason to do *simpliciter*. The idea is that, when we ask what we ought to do *simpliciter*, or have most reason to do *simpliciter*, what we are asking for is what we ought to do, not from the perspective of any particular normative domain, but from the perspective of Reason itself.²³⁵

While it is possible to understand the concept of authoritative normativity and the normativity objection differently than I have understood them here, I take this account to capture the central line of thinking within the literature. Many metaethicists are interested in explaining the special authoritative nature of certain kinds of normativity and authoritative normative reasons. There are good reasons to care about this. The main one being that, without such an explanation, some degree of skepticism or relativism might be true about norms. While I do not think that this is the case, it is not an unreasonable concern. The idea is that in order to avoid this, we must develop theories that can explain what we *really* ought to do *simpliciter* or *unqualifiedly*. But, I think it is important to question what must be true in order to even make sense of such strong concepts. In what follows, I will explain why there are strong reasons to question the presuppositions behind such an approach.

²³⁵ See Copp (1997).

4 Problems With Authoritative Normativity

In this section, I want to show how some recent developments in debates about normativity can benefit Neo-Aristotelians by raising difficulties for the conception of authoritative normativity presented above. In particular, rather than attempting to meet the normativity objection on its own terms, I believe that Neo-Aristotelians should make use of recent arguments put forth by normative pluralists in order to avoid the objection entirely, and shift the burden of proof.²³⁶

Normative pluralism is the view that normative reasons and oughts are always *relativized* to some normative domain.²³⁷ Proponents of Normative Pluralism present arguments against the very intelligibility of the presuppositions that I used to make sense of the conception of authoritative normativity presented above. If it is true that the normativity objection to Neo-Aristotelianism does in fact depend upon such presuppositions, then normative pluralists would be valuable allies to the cause of Neo-Aristotelianism.

4.1 Skepticism About Authoritative Reasons

There are good reasons to be skeptical about the existence of authoritative reasons as defined in section three. If it is true that in order to make sense of authoritative reasons, we must presuppose the existence of a special normative domain and standard that can determine the objective normative weight of such reasons, then we should be skeptical of

²³⁶ For examples of Normative Pluralism, see Baker (2017, 2018), Copp (2020), Tiffany (2007).

²³⁷ See Copp (2020).

such reasons. The main reason to be skeptical is that it is not clear that the idea of a special normative domain and its corresponding normative standard that is required to make sense of authoritative reasons is intelligible.

For example, David Copp has argued against the intelligibility of such a domain and standard by providing the following *reductio*.²³⁸ Consider any candidate normative standard that serves as the standard for the domain of Reason. Call it S. In order to determine the objective normative weight of authoritative reasons, S must have what Copp calls the property of “supremacy”. The property of supremacy is the property of being the normatively most important. But, there must be some authoritative standard in virtue of which it is possible to compare the relative normative importance of standards. Call this standard R. Therefore, the claim that S has the property of supremacy must result from R yielding the verdict that S is the normatively most important standard. Either R is identical to S, or it is not. R cannot be identical to S, because a standard cannot be normatively the most important in virtue of meeting its own criteria.²³⁹ Alternatively, if it is deemed the most important by meeting its own criteria, then we should question whether such a standard can be authoritative, since that would allow for any standards to bootstrap their authority via meeting their own criteria. What is needed is that the standard of Reason is the normatively most important standard not by its own criteria, but *simpliciter*.

²³⁸ See Copp (1997).

²³⁹ Furthermore, it seems that if we allow this, then every standard would be the most important standard with respect to its own criteria, and therefore there would be no truly authoritative standard.

So, if S has the property of supremacy, it must have it in virtue of meeting a separate standard R. But, in order for R to determine what standards have the property of supremacy, it must have the property of supremacy *itself*, otherwise it would not be able to issue verdicts about the relative importance of normative standards. But, if R has the property of supremacy, then it follows that S cannot. Therefore, S cannot be the standard of Reason.

Copp's argument is meant to call into question a kind of Normative Monism, according to which normative domains and standards can be reduced to a single foundation. Copp takes his argument against the intelligibility of such a view to provide support for Normative Pluralism. I have argued that the normativity objection requires that we accept a form of Normative Monism that is undermined here. In presenting Copp's argument, then, I hope to have shown that there are independent philosophical reasons to question the normativity objection to Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism and, further, that Neo-Aristotelians can find a home within Normative Pluralism. Although it may be true that the domain of, say, human flourishing is just one domain among many within a pluralist view, this does not mean that there is nothing to be said about why it is normatively significant. It just means that we cannot and, should not, show that it has some *further* feature that makes it supreme over all other considerations. Insofar as the normativity objection demands a justification of that sort in order for something to count as genuinely normative, I think we should question such a view. Before moving on to consider different ways in which we can evaluate Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism against its competitors, I would like to briefly look at another set of reasons for being skeptical

about the presuppositions behind the normativity objection, reasons which question the intelligibility of the idea that there is such a thing which we *ought-simpliciter* to do.

4.2 Skepticism About Ought-Simpliciter

Authoritative reasons are supposed to help us determine what we *ought-simpliciter* to do. We ought-simpliciter to do what we have the most authoritative reasons to do. The reason why authoritative reasons can help determine what we ought-simpliciter to do is that authoritative reasons promise to help us escape normative conflicts in virtue of their unqualified nature. While non-authoritative reasons tell us what we ought to do from the perspective of a particular normative domain, authoritative reasons tell us the *true value* of those domain-specific reasons. Many philosophers have argued from the belief in the concept of an ought-simpliciter to the existence of authoritative reasons and authoritative normativity. Normative pluralists, however, have challenged the very intelligibility of the concept of ought-simpliciter. According to what Copp calls “strong pluralism”, there is no fact of the matter about what we ought-simpliciter to do when our normative reasons conflict, since ought-simpliciter is not an intelligible concept.²⁴⁰

Why think that *ought-simpliciter* is not an intelligible concept? Derek Baker has recently argued that one good reason to doubt the existence of *ought-simpliciter* is that no

²⁴⁰ See Copp (2020).

one has been able to explain what it is without appealing to metaphors.²⁴¹ The concept of an ought-*simpliciter* is supposed to have a *special property* in virtue of which it helps resolve normative conflicts. Baker argues, though, that accounts of what this special property is all rely on normative metaphors. For example, philosophers claim that ought-*simpliciter* is able to resolve normative conflicts because it “trumps” other oughts, or because it is “overriding”, or has greater “normative authority” or “normative force”.²⁴²

Baker writes:

“The claim that the ought-*simpliciter* is the ought that *really* tells you what you ought to do relies on the table-thumping sense of ‘really’”, and “‘overriding’ and ‘normative authority’ rely on metaphors of political power, or they are simply vague ways of gesturing at some normative property which needs clearer characterization”.²⁴³

Philosophers have, of course, attempted to say more about what such metaphors are getting at. Baker argues, however, that it is not possible to offer an interpretation of these metaphors that does not 1) invoke other normative terms or concepts that themselves stand in need of interpretation, or 2) change the subject by cashing out *ought-simpliciter* in psychological terms. Baker concludes, then, that ought-*simpliciter* is a philosophical term of art and, therefore, there exists a burden on those who assume the existence of such a concept to explain what it means.

²⁴¹ See Baker (2018).

²⁴² For some examples, see Broome (2013), McLeod (2001), McPherson (2011), Parfit (2011).

²⁴³ See Baker (2018, 234).

Baker's argument does not constitute a knock-down argument against the intelligibility of *ought-simpliciter*. For one, just because it is not possible to offer an interpretation or a definition of a normative term without appealing to another normative term, does not mean that a term or concept is unintelligible. Some normative concepts, as well as non-normative concepts, can only be understood within a network of other concepts that allow us to understand their meaning. That is, it is not always the case that all intelligible concepts can be understood in isolation, and many definitions often proceed through synonyms and antonyms. Baker's argument, then, only shows so much. But, insofar as Baker's argument is understood to shift the burden of proof onto those who presuppose that the concept of *ought-simpliciter* is intelligible, I take it to succeed. Admitting the intelligibility of *ought-simpliciter* already presupposes that Normative Pluralism is false, which is a substantive philosophical assumption in such debates. By undermining *ought-simpliciter*, normative pluralists call into question the idea that there is some "absolute perspective from which kinds of considerations can be weighed".²⁴⁴ Instead, they hold that there is just a plurality of normative domains that make various claims on us — claims which, very often, pull us in opposite directions, and that it is not necessary to assume that *ought-simpliciter* is intelligible in order to make sense of such normative conflicts.

²⁴⁴ See Baker (2018, 251).

4.3 Moving Past Authoritative Normativity

In sections 4.1 and 4.2, I have presented reasons to be skeptical about authoritative normativity understood in terms of authoritative reasons and *ought-simpliciter*. My aim in doing this has not been to demonstrate that the project of explaining authoritative normativity is necessarily bankrupt. Although I personally find normative pluralism an appealing position, it also faces serious problems, such as avoiding a collapse into an objectionable form of relativism. The move that I am trying to make is weaker. What I am trying to show is that Neo-Aristotelians have grounds on which to challenge the idea that their approach to normativity should be judged with respect to whether it can or cannot explain authoritative normativity so understood. In short, there are legitimate grounds for Neo-Aristotelians to question whether this is a fair test of their theories.

One of the main reasons for thinking that the test of authoritative normativity is not fair is that it seems to presuppose substantive answers to open questions about the nature of normativity. As I have shown, the idea of authoritative normativity, as it has been spelled out in this paper, clashes with normative pluralism, since it is really only intelligible if we understand the structure of normative justification to be a kind of monist foundationalism.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, it is unsurprising that Neo-Aristotelian views struggle with explaining authoritative normativity as I have presented it here, since Neo-Aristotelianism appears to be more at home within Normative Pluralism. Rather than play left-handed, Neo-Aristotelians should demand that their approach to normativity is

²⁴⁵ This is how I understand the main thrust of Tiffany's argument in Tiffany (2007).

judged by theoretical standards that are *neutral* between competing answers (if this is not possible, then standards that are *as neutral as possible*). In the following section, I present some potential alternative theoretical standards by which Neo-Aristotelianism can be judged, and argue that Neo-Aristotelian accounts of normativity are, *at the very least*, plausible with respect to such standards.

5 Re-Evaluating Neo-Aristotelianism

Along with normative pluralists, Neo-Aristotelians can be skeptical about certain overly strong conceptions of what is required to make norms authoritative without being skeptics about authority entirely. That is to say, normative pluralists do not think that rejecting authoritative normativity, or the intelligibility of ought-*simpliciter*, immediately leads to extreme relativism or nihilism.²⁴⁶ There are weaker (but still *strong*) conceptions of authority that can serve our normative lives rather well, even if they can't provide an ultimate and unquestionable normative justification. Instead of building into a conception of authoritative normativity substantive assumptions about what normative reasons must be like, and what the structure of the normative justification must be like, it is possible to understand authority in terms of reasons (not *authoritative reasons* as defined above), but remain neutral about what reasons *must* be like. Instead, it is possible to understand what is authoritative as whatever is said by our best theory of reasons, as measured against substantively neutral theoretical standards of evaluation. Such an approach allows for competing theories of reasons to jockey for supremacy without presupposing anything

²⁴⁶ This is not to make light of the difficulty of adhering to a pluralist view without sliding into relativism. That is a real problem for pluralists, but I think Neo-Aristotelianism has the resources to avoid it.

substantive about the structure of normative justification that would rule out certain theories in advance. In what follows, I propose what I take to be some theoretically neutral standards by which Neo-Aristotelian (or any other) accounts of normative reasons can be evaluated.

5.1 Three Standards of Evaluation

Rather than being evaluated with respect to whether it can explain authoritative normativity as defined in section three, Neo-Aristotelianism can be evaluated as a theory of normative reasons with respect to the following three general standards: extensionality standard, explanatory standard, epistemic standard. I will explain each standard briefly before explaining how Neo-Aristotelian views fare with respect to each.

It is common to think that a good theory of reasons should be *extensionally adequate*. What this means is that a good theory of reasons should present a plausible view about what reasons we have. For example, if a theory of reasons is too inclusive, such that we have reasons to perform grossly immoral acts, then this will be a major strike against this theory. While it could be true, of course, that such a theory is, in the end, the best theory of reasons, it is unlikely that this is the case when such a theory is judged against its competitors. Call this the *extensionality standard*.

It is also common to think that a good theory of reasons should be explanatorily adequate. What this means is that a good theory of reasons should be able to explain what *makes* certain facts reasons, and also what leads people to *act* on reasons. Reasons are almost always connected to action, and if a theory cannot make any sense of the

connection between reasons and action, then it is unlikely to be a good theory. Call this the *explanatory standard*.

Finally, a good theory of reasons should be epistemically adequate. What this means is that a good theory of reasons must be able to make sense of how we come to know what our reasons are. If a theory holds that we can never come to know what our reasons are, or requires an overly complicated story about how we come to know what our reasons are, this will count against it. Call this the *epistemic standard*.

With these three standards on the table, I will now try to show that Neo-Aristotelianism represents at least a *plausible* approach to normativity.

5.2 Re-Evaluating Neo-Aristotelianism

By grounding objective normative truths in facts about human good and human need, Neo-Aristotelianism is able to perform well with respect to the *extensional standard*. To see this, it is helpful to contrast the Neo-Aristotelian view with a view that notoriously struggles with the extensional standard. Neo-Humean views hold that the source of our reasons is facts about individual psychologies, subjective attitudes, and the like. The main problem with the Neo-Humean view is that because it is a version of subjectivism, and individuals can believe almost anything, it generates *too many* reasons that, intuitively, no one should have.²⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the Neo-Aristotelian view can place a constraint on

²⁴⁷ One potential way around this problem is to assign different weights to our reasons such that, even if we technically *have* a reason to do something grossly immoral, for example, it will be outweighed by other reasons to act otherwise.

our reasons by appealing to objective facts about human good and human need, which are not subject to the whims of an individual's desires. The Neo-Aristotelian approach is not without its challenges, though.

Some critics of Neo-Aristotelianism argue that grounding normativity in facts about human nature and human need can *also* generate too many, or even too few, reasons. For example, some critics argue that empirical science reveals human nature to contain not only characteristically virtuous dispositions, but also dispositions towards vice.²⁴⁸ For example, Elijah Millgram argues that “it is pollyannaish to suppose that justice is part of the human species form ... when natural historians do take a close look at humanity, what they find is not necessarily justice”.²⁴⁹ If this is true, then human nature would seem to generate reasons which go against morality in addition to generating reasons that support morality. In response, some Neo-Aristotelians argue that it is a misunderstanding of their view to identify their concept of human nature with the empirical/biological concept of the human being. But, if the Neo-Aristotelian concept of human nature is not an empirical concept, an account is needed of what kind of concept it is, and how we come to learn about it. Furthermore, an account is needed of what kind of naturalism Neo-Aristotelians are committed to, if their concept of human nature is not reducible to an empirical concept. Such issues are the subject of lively discussion in

²⁴⁸ See Andreou (2006), Millgram (2009).

²⁴⁹ See Millgram (2009, 562).

contemporary Neo-Aristotelian scholarship, and represent the beginning, rather than the end, of the development of the view.

What about the *explanatory* standard? When it comes to the explanatory standard, Neo-Humean views excel. The reason is that the Neo-Humean views have the easiest time making sense of the tight connection between reasons and action because they explain reasons in terms of our subjective attitudes. What explains why someone ϕ 'd? Because there were some facts about their psychology which gave them a reason and motivated them to ϕ . Furthermore, Neo-Humean views have an easy time explaining what *makes* facts into reasons for us. Facts generate reasons for us insofar as we are interested in them.

Neo-Aristotelian views, meanwhile, are not able to offer *as* tight of a connection between reasons and action as the Neo-Humean. The reason is that they locate the source of normativity outside of individuals, and thereby accept a form of externalism. In order to explain the connection between the source of normativity and the interests and desires of individual humans, Neo-Aristotelians try to show how general facts about human nature are, necessarily, relevant to every individual, insofar as they are a human being. It is not difficult for Neo-Aristotelians to explain why individual human beings have, *in general*, good reasons to be motivated by their humanity, and often *are* motivated by their humanity, even if implicitly, throughout the *vast* majority of their lives. What *is* difficult to explain is why, in *one-off* cases, an immoral human being should take their humanity as action-guiding if it conflicts with their particular individual desires. For example, it is not clear that the Neo-Aristotelian view offers a good explanation of why I

should be moved to ϕ here and now, because it is necessary or good for human beings to ϕ *in general*, given kind-relative natural facts about what it means to be a human being. So, although Neo-Aristotelians have a plausible story to tell about how their account of normativity can explain human action, since there *is* a plausible connection between human action and the human good, it does face some challenges with respect to cases where individuals deviate from the good in special circumstances.

When it comes to the epistemic standard, Neo-Aristotelian views fare worse than Neo-Humean views, but fare better than Neo-Kantian views. The Neo-Humean view performs better because our reasons come *from us*. While it is true that we cannot always fully introspect our desires, and can live in bad faith, for the most part the Neo-Humean has an easy story to tell about how we come to know what our reasons are. Although Neo-Aristotelian views have to tell a more complex story than Neo-Humean views, they also have a less difficult task than Neo-Kantian views. According to the Neo-Aristotelian story, we come to know about what reasons we have by coming to know general facts about what we need, and what is good or bad for us, as human beings. Since *we are* human beings, we get quite a lot of this knowledge *for free*. Meanwhile, the Neo-Kantian story takes our reasons to come from knowing facts about our nature as *finite rational beings*. The Neo-Kantian story is, at least on the surface, an over-intellectualization, and potentially faces the problem of making our knowledge of what reasons we have too difficult. If Neo-Aristotelianism faces a problem in explaining how we come to know about our nature as human beings, the Neo-Kantian seems to face an even worse problem

of explaining how we come to know about our nature as finite rational beings, which is even more abstract and alien to the lives of ordinary moral agents.

One particular problem facing strands of Neo-Aristotelianism inspired by Philippa Foot is to explain how we acquire knowledge of human nature that is *non-empirical*. As mentioned above, many Neo-Aristotelians do not want to reduce the concept of human nature to an empirical concept. If that is the case, then, a story is needed about what kind of concept the Neo-Aristotelian concept of human nature is, and how we come to acquire knowledge of it. Michael Thompson, from whom Foot draws on heavily in her late work, argues that we acquire a significant amount of knowledge about our nature “non-observationally”, through a special kind of immediate practical self-knowledge.²⁵⁰ Although this is an interesting direction for Neo-Aristotelians to go in, much more work needs to be done explaining what such knowledge is like, and whether it requires giving up the commitment to naturalism, which many Neo-Aristotelians take to be fundamental to their view.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Neo-Aristotelian views should not be treated as non-starters if they cannot explain authoritative normativity, because there are good reasons to question the plausible and intelligibility of one of its leading conceptions. Furthermore, I have argued that, when measured by a more neutral theoretical standard, Neo-Aristotelian

²⁵⁰ See Thompson (2009).

views are rather plausible. That being said, like any philosophical view, Neo-Aristotelian views also face a host of problems. Any theory that has something worth saying will face problems. What is more important is what kind of problems a theory must overcome. I hope to have shown that Neo-Aristotelianism, in general, is an approach to explaining normativity that faces the good kind of problems, and is not based on some fundamental mistake from the outset.

CHAPTER 5: The Aristotelian Theory of Reasons

1 Introduction

Aristotelianism, as I will understand it here, is a family of ethical views that ground normative truths in objective natural facts about what is good and bad for human beings.²⁵¹ To be an Aristotelian about normative *reasons*, is to explain normative reasons in terms of human goodness and human badness. Goodness and, in particular *human* goodness, then, is the fundamental normative notion for Aristotelians and that in terms of which they offer normative explanations. As such, it is most natural to understand Aristotelian theories of reasons as being a kind of value-first view.²⁵² Clarifying what it means to be an Aristotelian about normative reasons, and to explain reasons in terms of human goodness, will be one of the primary aims of this paper. Additionally, I will argue that Aristotelian approaches to normative reasons are at least as plausible as their leading competitors, and should therefore be taken more seriously in contemporary metaethics.

In the second half of the twentieth-century, Aristotelianism experienced a resurgence of popularity within normative ethics in the form of contemporary virtue ethics. Despite this, within contemporary metaethics, Aristotelianism has been, and

²⁵¹ I use “Aristotelianism” here as a general term to pick out approaches to metaethics loosely inspired by Aristotle’s actual text, as well as the metaethical views attributable to Aristotle himself. Many of the views that I call “Aristotelian” would commonly be referred to as “Neo-Aristotelian” in the current literature, given that they only have a loose connection to what Aristotle actually thought. The reason for adopting this usage is that I want to be as ecumenical as possible and articulate what it means to adopt an Aristotelian *approach* within contemporary metaethics.

²⁵² Although it is possible to think of Aristotelian (or very similar) theories as placing reasons-first, I think that something distinctively Aristotelian would be missing – the priority of goodness.

continues to be, conspicuously absent.²⁵³ This is surprising for several reasons. First, Aristotle has been one of the most influential philosophers in the history of the discipline, especially with respect to ethics, so it would be incredibly surprising if Aristotle's thought had nothing to contribute to contemporary metaethics. Many of the most influential passages in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, are clearly metaethical in nature, insofar as they are concerned with abstract issues of methodology and the nature of ethical inquiry itself. Furthermore, Aristotle's famous "function argument" provides a powerful answer to Christine Korsgaard's question about the "source" of normativity, which itself has shaped many contemporary metaethical debates.²⁵⁴ Second, it is not the case that there is a well-known knockdown argument against Aristotelian views that makes them clearly a non-starter. For several decades many philosophers have, no doubt, taken Moore's "open-question argument" to perform this very function against *any* form of ethical naturalism, but the influence of Moore's argument has faded considerably since the eighties.²⁵⁵ There is nothing *obviously* implausible about the core Aristotelian thought that natural facts about what we are like and, by extension, what is good and bad for us, are fundamental to ethics. Moreover, it does not seem possible for *any* theory to explain normativity without taking into account

²⁵³ Occasionally one finds some engagement with the ideas of Neo-Aristotelians such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Rosalind Hursthouse, Philippa Foot, or Alasdair MacIntyre, but a survey of the contemporary literature makes it clear that Aristotelianism has failed to secure its place as a serious contender in various contemporary metaethical debates. To take one striking example, in his highly influential three-volume book *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit barely includes Aristotle on the index, while giving a central place to Hume and Kant.

²⁵⁴ See Korsgaard (1986, 1996).

²⁵⁵ See Moore (1903).

at least *some* natural facts about what human beings are like, and what is good and bad for us.

The absence of Aristotelianism from contemporary metaethics could just be attributable to a kind of *ahistorical* approach within that subfield. Such an explanation does not work, however, since several other famous historical figures, such as Hume and Kant, have received significant attention from metaethicists throughout the twentieth century and to the present day. In short, there does not seem to be an apparent principled philosophical reason for the absence of Aristotelianism from contemporary metaethics. Although it is an interesting and important question as to how the development of twentieth century metaethics brought this asymmetry about, a full historical account is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, what I aim to do in this paper is to help correct this asymmetry by developing an Aristotelian position within contemporary metaethics and arguing for its plausibility. In particular, I hope to accomplish this aim by showing what it would mean to adopt an Aristotelian theory of reasons, and by arguing that such an approach is not only intuitively plausible, but *prima facie* more plausible than one of the leading alternatives — the Humean theory of reasons. My general thesis is that Aristotelian approaches to normativity and normative reasons deserve significantly more attention than they have received.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁶ One notable counterexample is found in Eric Wiland's paper "Theories of Practical Reason" (2002). Wiland argues that Aristotelianism is not only a plausible approach to reasons, but is actually the most theoretically fruitful view among various leading alternatives. This paper is heavily indebted to Wiland's article, although I take some of his insights into different directions, and present an original argumentative strategy for Aristotelians to adopt.

I plan to support this thesis by making an Aristotelian contribution to the contemporary discussion in metaethics regarding the nature of normativity and normative reasons. In particular, I will articulate what it means to be an Aristotelian with respect to normativity and normative reasons by sketching an Aristotelian theory of reasons, and also argue that the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons is *prima facie* more plausible than one of its leading competitors, the Humean Theory of Reasons.

My strategy for accomplishing this plan is to take one of the leading accounts of the Humean theory, develop an analogous version of the Aristotelian theory, and then show that the Aristotelian theory is *prima facie* more plausible. I use Mark Schroeder's influential 2007 account of the Humean Theory of Reasons as my vehicle.²⁵⁷

There are two general reasons for choosing Schroeder's account. First, Schroeder's account has been highly influential in contemporary debates, and is widely regarded as one of the best, if not the best, articulations and defenses of Humeanism. If it can be shown that an Aristotelian Theory of Reasons is *prima facie* more plausible than Schroeder's account of the Humean theory, then I will have provided a strong justification for my main thesis. Second, Aristotelians stand to benefit greatly from paying close attention to Schroeder's strategy for articulating and defending the Humean theory. In particular, Schroeder argues that many of the objections to Humeanism in recent decades have been aimed at particular substantive versions of Humeanism, such as

²⁵⁷ See Schroeder (2007).

Bernard Williams influential account.²⁵⁸ But, Schroeder thinks that we can theorize about the plausibility of the Humean Theory of Reasons separately from any particular substantive version of it. Although it is true that, if it is not possible to develop *any* plausible substantive conception of some kind of view, then we can conclude that such an approach is itself implausible, we cannot infer from implausibility of a few instances of the Humean theory to the implausibility of the entire approach itself. I argue that Aristotelians should adopt a strategy that is analogous to the one Schroeder uses to argue for Humeanism, in order to bolster the position of their view in the current literature. I will do this by showing how Aristotelianism and Humeanism share a common dialectical situation within contemporary metaethics. To preview, one way in which progress on Aristotelianism has been stifled is by Aristotelians identifying themselves too closely with *particular* substantive Aristotelian accounts, such as those developed by Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot, instead of putting forth a more general Aristotelian framework that encompasses a variety of substantive views. In short, I argue that the Aristotelian can offer a plausible explanation of normative reasons in terms of natural facts about human nature and their connection to human goodness and badness, and that the plausibility of this approach to explaining normativity stands on its own.

Here is the plan. In section two, I briefly explain Schroeder's account of the Humean Theory of Reasons. In section three, I set out the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons. In section four, I explain why both theories share a common dialectical

²⁵⁸ See Williams (1979).

situation, and why this matters. In section five, I explain the appeal of the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons, and also why it is, at least initially, more plausible than the Humean Theory of Reasons. In section six, I conclude.

2 The Humean Theory of Reasons

Before explaining the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons, it will be helpful to begin by looking at the Humean Theory of Reasons. The reason for doing this is twofold. First, taking this approach will be useful for explanatory purposes. The Humean Theory of Reasons, as developed by Mark Schroeder in *Slaves of the Passions*, provides a clear point of contrast with the Aristotelian theory, and will therefore make it easier to explain what it means to adopt an Aristotelian approach. The second reason is dialectical. The Humean Theory of Reasons is, in many ways, the direct dialectical opponent of the Aristotelian theory and well-entrenched in the contemporary metaethics literature. So, if it can be shown that the Aristotelian theory is *at least as plausible*, or even *more plausible* than the Humean theory, then it will be hard to deny that Aristotelianism demands more serious attention in contemporary debates.

Before laying out the Humean theory, I want to briefly say a bit about how to understand reasons, since there are many different senses of “reasons” in contemporary philosophy. This will help to clarify what the theories I consider in this paper are theories *of*.

The sense of “reason” that I am interested in in this paper is what is often referred to as a “normative reason”. A normative reason is a reason for someone to act that “counts in favor” of their acting a certain way.²⁵⁹ Although it is difficult to say much more in the positive dimension about what a normative reason is without taking a stand on substantive issues in the literature, it is possible to get some more traction on the concept by talking about what normative reasons *are not*. Normative reasons can be distinguished from “explanatory reasons”, which are reasons that explain why something is the case.²⁶⁰ Explanatory reasons answer the question “Why is P the case?” and, as such, are clearly not normative. Additionally, normative reasons can be distinguished from “motivating reasons”, which are the reasons *for which* someone does something.²⁶¹ Maria Alvarez writes, “when an agent acts motivated by a reason, she acts ‘in light of that reason’ and the reason will be a premise in practical reasoning, if any, that leads to the action”.²⁶² Unlike explanatory or motivating reasons, normative reasons can be thought of as reasons that *justify* in an ethical sense. There is, of course, much more that can be said about these distinctions, but for my purposes, Aristotelianism and Humeanism can be understood here as theories of normative reasons. That is to say, theories that try to explain what makes it the case that certain facts count in favor of acting in certain ways rather than others.

²⁵⁹ See Scanlon (1998), (2004).

²⁶⁰ Schroeder (2007, 11).

²⁶¹ Alvarez (2016).

²⁶² Alvarez (2016).

Now that I have explained what the Humean theory is a theory *of*, I will explain what the Humean Theory of Reasons says.²⁶³ Consider the following simple case.

Dancing: There is going to be a party tonight with food, drinks, music, and dancing. Ronnie and Bradley are invited. While Ronnie loves to dance, Bradley can't stand it. The fact that there will be dancing is a reason for Ronnie to go, but not a reason for Bradley to go.²⁶⁴

It is plausible to think that, in this case, Ronnie and Bradley's reasons differ.

Furthermore, it seems to be the case that the explanation as to why their reasons differ has something to do with Bradley and Ronnie's individual psychological profiles. Put simply, it is because of what Bradley and Ronnie like and dislike that their reasons differ. The Humean theory predicts that Bradley and Ronnie have different normative reasons since the basic thought behind the theory is that our reasons depend upon facts about our individual desires, and Bradley and Ronnie have different desires. Schroeder presents the central claim of the Humean theory in the following way:

HTR: Every reason is explained by the kind of psychological state that explains Ronnie's reason in the same way as Ronnie's is.

²⁶³ Schroeder makes no pretensions to be interpreting Hume's texts. It is best to think of this as a "Neo-Humean" theory that is, in Schroeder's words, "vaguely inspired by Hume".

²⁶⁴ See Schroeder (2007, 1).

HTR is a generalization of what Schroeder calls the “simple Humean thought”. The “simple Humean thought” is the thought that, if it is largely uncontroversial that at least *some* of our reasons are explained in terms of facts about individual psychologies, then perhaps *all* of our reasons can be explained in that way. One of the main motivations for the Humean theory, according to Schroeder, is that it has the potential to offer a unified story about what reasons are, where they come from, and how they fit into the world of our experience. The idea is that since the Humean starting point seems to be a necessary part of the full story of reasons, it *might* just be the whole story. At the very least, Schroeder thinks that this is a good initial candidate for a unified account of reasons.

It is important to point out that this is not meant to be an argument for the truth of HTR, but a starting point. Later, I will make a similar move on behalf of the Aristotelian, and argue that a “simple Aristotelian thought” also seems indispensable to our unified story of reasons, before ultimately arguing that ATR is *prima facie* more plausible than HTR. With HTR on the table, I will now turn to setting out the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons.

3 The Aristotelian Theory of Reasons

Just as Schroeder presents HTR as a generalization of the “simple Humean thought”, it is possible to present ATR as a generalization of what I will call the “simple Aristotelian thought”. The “simple Aristotelian thought” is the thought that it is plausible that at least

some of our reasons must be explained by the connection between natural facts about what human beings are like and what is good or bad for us, given the kind of creatures we are. In particular, natural facts about what we are like determine what human goodness and badness consists in, which is then used to understand normative reasons. According to the Aristotelian, what explains our normative reasons is goodness and, in particular, *human* goodness. Following Schroeder, if such an explanation is necessary for making sense of *some* of our reasons, then there is a strong motivation to see whether such explanations can provide a unified account of *all* of our reasons. If that were true, then it would be the case that all of our reasons fundamentally depend upon their connection to human goodness and badness, rather than individual desires or preferences. As a generalization of the “simple Aristotelian thought”, the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons can be defined at a very high level in the following way:

ATR: Every reason is fundamentally explained by its connection to human goodness and badness, which is determined by human nature.

ATR has several parts.²⁶⁵ First, there is the concept of *human nature*, about which there will certainly be many questions and concerns. While it is not possible to provide a full account of what it means to have an Aristotelian conception of human nature in this paper, and nothing about my argument turns on adopting any particular conception of

²⁶⁵ The concept of a reason is also an important moving part here, but I am purposefully avoiding debates about what reasons *are*, and assuming that the Humean and Aristotelian are theorizing about the same concept.

human nature, providing some general remarks about how Aristotelians have thought about the concept of human nature will help give a sense of the flavor of the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons, and also avoid some common misconceptions. Additionally, although nothing in my argument turns on any particular conception of human nature, it is important to say that all Aristotelians must ultimately develop some conception of human nature or other, since it is part of what defines an Aristotelian view that the good of a thing is determined by the kind of thing that it is. What such a conception of human nature must look like is a matter for internal debate amongst Aristotelians.

To start, it is important to point out that it is *not* the case that the Aristotelian view of human nature is not meant to be reducible to a modern biological view. Unfortunately, many critics of Aristotelianism have often ruled out such theories because of the concern that they must depend upon objectionable biological commitments. In particular, many critics have argued that Aristotelian theories require a commitment to unacceptable forms of natural teleology that clash with modern biological science.²⁶⁶ Bernard Williams, for example, understood the Aristotelian concept of human nature to concern matters of natural scientific fact that can be grasped from a completely external point of view outside of any human practices. Additionally, Williams took questions concerning human nature to be uncontroversial in a way that ethical questions are not, meaning that they could be settled definitively by scientific fact. Although several philosophers have

²⁶⁶ See Williams (1985).

understood Aristotelianism in this way, there are good reasons to think, first of all, that this was *not* Aristotle's view and, second of all, that this is a good thing.²⁶⁷

At this point it is natural to wonder what kind of concept the Aristotelian concept of human nature is, if not a purely empirical biological concept. While there are several different ways in which Aristotelians have tried to flesh out this concept in recent literature, in what follows I will provide a brief overview of Martha Nussbaum's approach, which I take to be intuitively plausible.²⁶⁸ Unlike Williams, who understands the Aristotelian concept of human nature to aim at providing an external foundation for ethics that can be apprehended from a value-free scientific perspective, Nussbaum understands the concept of human nature as inherently normative and hermeneutical. Nussbaum writes:

“There is nothing anywhere in Aristotle's work precisely corresponding to a modern distinction between fact and value; and, furthermore, science, as well as ethics, is ‘internal’ for Aristotle in the sense that *it is the attempt to give an intelligent account of human experience of the world*” (emphasis added).²⁶⁹

The concept of human nature, according to Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle, is accessed not through adopting a value-free external perspective from which human life can be

²⁶⁷ Nussbaum (1995) provides a compelling argument for this claim, as well as the stronger thesis that Aristotle's metaphysics and biology should also not be understood as being “value-free” or “external”. Similarly, several Neo-Aristotelians have argued that this is not how to understand the central ideas of Neo-Aristotelianism. See Foot (2001), Hacker-Wright (2009), Moosavi (2018).

²⁶⁸ Another leading approach is to be found in the work of Michael Thompson, whose work had a significant influence on Philippa Foot's late philosophical writings. See Foot (2001), Thompson (2009).

²⁶⁹ Nussbaum (1995, 102).

analyzed, but from *within* human life. Nussbaum writes that human nature is “the most fundamental and broadly shared experiences of human beings living and reasoning together”.²⁷⁰ The way that the concept of human nature is fleshed out, according to this view, is through reflection upon the fundamental features of human life that are shared across cultures. Hard facts about human life, such as our mortality, embodiedness, as well as our natural drives and appetites, shape every culture at some level and, even though such facts often lead to the development of vastly different norms, such differences can be understood as expressions of a single underlying concept of human life. From this foundation, which is inherently normative, it is possible to determine what it means to reason excellently and poorly as a human being within various practical domains of human life. Nussbaum writes that, for Aristotle, “the characteristic operations and excellences of practical reasoning, and of our sociability, are inseparable from the particular ways in which we find ourselves in the world, as both capable and limited”, and these are not “external” facts about us, but “rather a more or less permanent part of the internal perspective of human beings in many times and places”.²⁷¹ From this foundation, which is inherently normative, it is possible to determine what it means to reason excellently and poorly as a human being within various practical domains of human life. That is, the foundation determines what human goodness and badness consists in, which can then in turn be used to make normative evaluations. Human nature, then, can be understood as the fundamental shared experiences of what it means to live as

²⁷⁰ Nussbaum (1995, 122).

²⁷¹ Nussbaum (1995, 120).

a human being: Being forced to confront our mortality, understanding the nature of dependency on others, having a body and being exposed to physical pain and pleasure, and so on and so forth.

The concept of human nature for the Aristotelian can also be thought of as foundational and normative/practical, in addition to being hermeneutical. Human nature provides a foundation upon which human beings not only make sense of their experience of the world, but also find standards of evaluation and action guidance. Instead of locating the foundation in an “objective” and “value-free” concept of our biological nature, an Aristotelian can put forth a foundationalist view that is inherently normative. There are several ways to cash this out. For example, Philippa Foot utilizes Michael Thompson’s theoretical framework regarding the logic of naturalistic judgments of living things to develop a normative concept of the human being that grounds evaluations of natural goodness and defect.²⁷² Alternatively, Martha Nussbaum’s strategy is to seek a foundation for our humanity in what she calls “grounding experiences” that determine what it means to act virtuously in the different spheres of human life.²⁷³

In her paper, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach”, Nussbaum argues for an interpretation of Aristotle according to which he develops a “thin” account of the virtues, rather than a “thick” account which most have understood him as offering. According to a thin account of the virtues, each virtue represents “whatever it is to be

²⁷² See Foot (2001), Thompson (1994, 2008).

²⁷³ Ironically, Williams famously thinks of things in a similar way, except more *individualized*, by taking “ground projects” to provide the foundations for an individual’s reasons.

stably disposed to act” in some “sphere of human experience”.²⁷⁴ The thought is that there are several fundamental spheres of human experience that we all must engage with in choice and action, regardless of our culture. Aristotle’s concern is what it means to choose and act well within each respective sphere and, alternatively, what it would mean to choose and act badly. Aristotle, of course, has his own “thick” conception of various virtues, but the important point here is that the thin theory allows for various different substantive answers, while still providing a common theoretical foundation or framework for ethical theorizing. The concept of human nature can be thought of as being constituted by the overlapping similarities in the spheres of human experiences that we all must face. Nussbaum writes:

“The point is that everyone makes some choices and acts somehow or other in these spheres: if not properly, then improperly. Everyone has some attitude and behavior toward her own death; toward her bodily appetites and their management; toward her property and its use; toward the distribution of social goods; toward telling the truth, toward being kindly or not kindly to others; toward cultivating or not cultivating a sense of play and delight; and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life”.²⁷⁵

Even though these basic grounding experiences are differently constructed by different cultures, there is still a “great deal of overlap and convergence among cultures at the level of these experiences”.²⁷⁶ The view sketched here is one plausible way to adopt a conception of human nature that is foundational and inherently normative in character.

²⁷⁴ Nussbaum (1987, 35).

²⁷⁵ Nussbaum (1987, 36).

²⁷⁶ Nussbaum (1988).

Although a complete theory eventually requires more substantive commitments, the point is that it is possible to offer a thin normative account of human nature that is irreducible to a biological conception, that can serve as the basis for ethical theorizing.

I have just presented one way of making sense of the concept of human nature as I understand it in ATR. That was the first part. ATR holds that our reasons are explained by the connection between natural facts about human nature and human goodness and badness. That is, what it means to act well or badly as a human being is explained by human goodness which is itself explained by human nature. The second part concerns the concepts of human goodness and badness being employed here. In general, that is the idea of a non-empirical concept of human nature that serves as the foundation for normativity and ethical inquiry. This foundation is what determines what is good and bad for human beings, which is the other moving part in ATR to which I now turn.

It is popular among Aristotelians to understand goodness attributively rather than predicatively.²⁷⁷ To say that an action is a “good action”, means that we have reason to perform it — it is to say that such an action is “good as an action”.²⁷⁸ According to the Aristotelian view, the criteria for goodness as an action is determined, fundamentally, by human nature, and the characteristic activities of human beings. That is to say, according to ATR, facts about the kind of thing doing the acting determine what it means to act well. Our humanity is the most important thing about us and therefore provides the basis

²⁷⁷ Geach (1956), Foot (2001), Lott (2018).

²⁷⁸ Wiland (2002).

for evaluating actions. Although it is true, of course, that we occupy multiple identities, the Aristotelian view is that our humanity is our most fundamental identity, and serves as the foundation for all other normative categories. It is easy to see how natural this position is when considering how common it is for us to condemn certain immoral actions on the grounds that they are “dehumanizing” and “inhumane”.

The fact that all Aristotelians understood goodness attributively sets them apart from several other views. It is more common within moral philosophy for goodness to be understood predicatively. The most famous example of a theory which understands goodness predicatively is consequentialism, which assigns the predicates good or bad to actions or states of affairs to the extent that they maximize some value. Although Aristotelian view also give priority to goodness, and therefore can be understood as *value-first* in their structure, the attributive conception of goodness makes such views incompatible with consequentialism. It is important to add that, despite being most naturally understood as *value-first* theories, Aristotelian views are not interested in maximizing some external value, but in analyze the goodness or badness of human actions relative to a conception of what it means to be a good human being. Aristotelianism is more about *performing* the good, rather than *producing* it.

This is all quite general and abstract. To recap, I have explained two distinctive features of ATR — its concept of human nature that grounds what is good and bad for humans, which grounds our reasons, and its concept of goodness. To make things more concrete and see the view in action, let’s consider what ATR would say about Schroder’s case *Dancing*. According to HTR, the fact that there will be dancing constitutes a reason

for Ronnie to go to the party, but not for Bradley. The explanation of this difference is, on this view, grounded in facts about Ronnie and Bradley's respective individual psychologies. A good theory of reasons should be able to explain simple cases like *Dancing*. How does ATR explain a simple case like *Dancing*? That is, how can ATR explain a case of differences in reasons regarding the same fact?

ATR can explain *Dancing* in the following way. How does the fact that there will be dancing at the party constitute a reason according to ATR? A proponent of ATR can explain reasons in terms of facts and their connection to other facts about what is naturally good and bad for human beings. What makes a fact a reason, according to ATR, is its connection to some other fact about natural goodness. For example, it may be the case that the fact that there will be dancing at the party constitutes a reason for Ronnie to go to the party because dancing is a social activity that it is good for human beings to occasionally partake in, but not for Bradley because Bradley is likely to be injured by dancing. For any fact that is a reason, there is some general fact about what is naturally good and bad for human beings that explains what makes it a reason. Additionally, individual facts, such as Bradley's fragility, connect with these general facts in order to generate normative reasons. Reasons, then, are explained according to the Aristotelian by their connection to human goodness, and its relationship to a particular human being in a particular circumstance.

This does not mean that we can deduce which facts are reasons from some general facts about human beings. It doesn't work in that direction, contrary to some common misconceptions. ATR is not trying to *deduce* individual reasons from an account of

human nature. Instead, it is a theory about what *grounds* our normative reasons. The way in which the species general facts apply to individuals in concrete circumstances depends upon particular facts about an individual and their circumstance. So, it isn't the case that whenever some individual has a normative reason to ϕ , because it is naturally good for them to ϕ , then *every* human being also has a normative reason to ϕ . Whether an individual has a normative reason to ϕ will depend upon more than just human nature. It will depend upon further particular facts about what kind of human being they are. Although an account of human nature is necessary to give content to the concepts of human goodness and badness, it is not by itself sufficient to allow for the deduction of particular normative ethical prescriptions.

So, although it is true that whenever there is a normative reason for some human being to ϕ , what explains why it is a normative reason is some general facts about what kind of creature they are, it is not *necessarily* the case that any similar creature also has the same normative reason. Our normative reasons differ greatly between individuals. Now, it is true that, for certain kinds of actions there are more general truths about our shared normative reasons. For example, all human beings, in virtue of being human beings, have a normative reason to drink water. The Aristotelian also hopes to show, though, that there are more interesting general reasons, such as reasons of morality. I don't think the significance of ATR, however, stands or falls on whether it can show that all human beings, in virtue of their humanity, have a reason to be moral. HTR doesn't show that and it is a significant view. But, many Aristotelians, in virtue of their deep

commitment to realism, hope to be able to provide an account that can explain *all* of our reasons, especially the moral ones.

4 The Common Dialectical Situation

Both HTR and ATR, so far, have been presented in very general terms. This was intentional. In developing ATR, I decided to follow a strategy analogous to Schroeder's. Schroeder presents HTR as what he calls a "parity thesis". By calling HTR a "parity thesis", Schroeder means that HTR does not tell us, *by itself*, how the reason explanation works. Instead, it merely tells us that, *whatever* the content of the reasons explanation is (whatever the relevant psychological state is), all reasons are explained by facts about psychological states. HTR provides the general *form* of how a reason explanation works for a Humean, but the content needs to be filled in by different substantive varieties of Humeanism. For example, a Humean might seek to explain reasons in terms of desires, pleasure, intentions, or various other psychological states. Different versions of HTR will build upon particular psychological states to fill in the formal sketch with more substantive commitments.

Why present HTR and ATR as parity theses? Schroeder argues that one of the things which has held Humeanism back has been philosophers focusing too narrowly on particular substantive versions of the view, rather than the form of the view in general. In particular, philosophers have mistakenly taken certain substantive versions as representative of the Humean family of views in general. For example, the substantive Humean account developed by Bernard Williams in his famous paper "Internal and

External Reasons” has dominated the literature for several decades at this point.²⁷⁹

Despite its popularity and influence, Williams’ version of Humeanism is not the *only* way to be a Humean. Although Schroeder ultimately goes on to argue that his own version, which he calls *Hypotheticalism*, is able to avoid many of the common objections that have been raised against the various substantive conceptions of Humeanism in the literature, one of the main points he sets out to make is that we can, and should, theorize about the plausibility of entire families of views, and be careful not infer the implausibility of an entire approach from the implausibility of a particular instance. So, although philosophers have consistently argued for the general conclusion that the Humean approach is implausible, they have failed to properly consider the view in its most general terms.

I think Aristotelians stand to benefit greatly by adopting a similar approach to their own views in the current metaethics literature. In my opinion, Aristotelian views have suffered a similar and, perhaps, worse fate than their Humean counterparts. Contemporary discussions of Aristotelian metaethics are often entirely preoccupied with the substantive views of Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot.²⁸⁰ This is not surprising. Hursthouse and Foot were the first twentieth-century philosophers to present relatively complete Aristotelian theories, and they both developed powerful and interesting varieties of Aristotelianism. Although Hursthouse and Foot’s views are, in my opinion, important contributions to contemporary philosophy, contemporary discussions of

²⁷⁹ Williams (1979).

²⁸⁰ Hursthouse (1999), Foot (2001).

Aristotelianism are too focused on interpreting and defending Hursthouse and Foot's particular versions of Aristotelianism, which are both quite idiosyncratic.²⁸¹ But, what goes for Hursthouse and Foot need not go for Aristotelianism in general, and Aristotelians stand to benefit by abstracting away from particular views, and developing and arguing for the theoretical appeal of their general approach to explaining normativity and reasons, among other things. For this reason, I also decided to present ATR as a parity thesis, hoping to capture the general form of what *any* Aristotelian explanation of reasons is like, thereby making the theoretical benefits of Aristotelianism more salient.

As a parity thesis, ATR does not *itself* tell us anything substantive about the content of human nature or the human good, but it does tell us that, whatever that content ends up being, all reasons explanations require appealing to natural facts about our humanity and their connection to human goodness and badness. This seems to be a *prima facie* plausible explanation of where our reasons come from, since human beings seem to have reasons to pursue what is good for them, and avoid what is bad, and that what is good or bad for us must depend, in some way, upon natural facts about the kind of beings we are. In addition to this, as mentioned above, in order to a view to minimally count as Aristotelian, it must understand goodness attributively rather than predicatively. That is, there has to be some concept of what it means to be good *qua* human being built into the structure of the view. Although it is possible to analyze human goodness biologically, all of the leading Aristotelians today try to understand human goodness in a way that is not

²⁸¹ See my paper "Neo-Aristotelian and Normativity" for an explanation of how one particular objection often aimed at Foot, which I call the "normativity objection" has, somewhat unfairly, hindered the development of Aristotelian metaethics.

reducible to a biological account.²⁸² All Aristotelians want the good to be objective in the sense that it is determined by natural facts about human life and human nature that are not able to be changed by any individual, but there are different ways of going about explaining human nature.²⁸³

At this point, one might object to the general methodological strategy that I have been advocating in this paper. That is, one might object to the idea that we can, and should, theorize about normativity and reasons at such a high level of abstraction from substantive views. One might wonder how it is possible, for example, to even compare the theoretical merits of theories like ATR and HTR, insofar as they are incredibly *thin* parity theses. It might seem like there is simply not enough content by which to judge their plausibility, and that the only way to determine whether an Aristotelian or a Humean approach to reasons is more plausible *is* by looking at the most fully developed versions of these views and seeing how they perform with respect to significant ethical cases. In other words, one might wonder what the rules of the game would even be for judging such thin theories against one another, and where such rules could possibly come from. Isn't it the case that the plausibility of a family of theories ultimately turns on how such theories perform on the ground level of particular cases and ethical decisions? Yes and no.

²⁸² Some examples mentioned earlier were: Foot, Hursthouse, Thompson, and Nussbaum.

²⁸³ Whether or not human nature is fixed is a difficult question for the Aristotelian. What can be said here is that even if human nature is not fixed, it is also true that it cannot be changed by any particular individual and is therefore incompatible with strong forms of subjectivism, and is therefore understood as a kind of objectivism.

While it is true that one way to evaluate the plausibility of the general form of explanation being offered by theories like HTR and ATR is to test substantive versions of these theories in particular cases, it is also possible to directly evaluate the theoretical benefits of these views at a more abstract level. For example, Schroeder thinks it is possible to think and argue about what view has the best prospects for unifying our normative explanations without making any substantive commitments about particular versions of a general family of views. Schroeder writes, “the main general philosophical reasons to want to know whether the Humean Theory of Reasons works are reasons which don’t discriminate between versions which say that reasons must be explained by desires, and those which say that reasons must be explained by some other psychological feature”.²⁸⁴ Although it is a bit trickier to determine what the rules of the game would be for evaluating theories at a high level of abstraction, and it is much more intuitive to test these theories by choosing a substantive version of them and considering standard ethical cases, I do not think that should be the *only* approach used to judge the prospects of a general approach. It is far too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that since the leading version of a particular kind of view has faced various problems in the literature, that there must be something fundamentally wrong with *any* view that accepts the same theoretical starting points. The belief, for example, that Humeanism in general can never work, since several famous versions of it have been tested out on cases and rejected in the literature, prevents philosophers from developing and exploring new Humeanisms, as Schroeder

²⁸⁴ Schroeder (2007).

has done. Of course, the abstract approach does come with difficulties, but so does the approach of testing theories by cases.

One of the main difficulties with the abstract approach is determining what the rules of the game will be to judge theories against one another in a way that does not beg significant questions. To take the example of theorizing about reasons, the goal would be to develop a set of theoretically neutral criteria by which to weigh the various competing theories of reasons against one another.²⁸⁵ While it is probably not possible to develop any interesting criteria that are *perfectly* neutral, it is possible to utilize a set of standards that are good enough to make progress. In what follows, I adopt Eric Wiland's approach to this problem, since I take it to provide a useful general framework within which it is possible to evaluate theories of reasons. Wiland thinks that we should articulate our "pre-theoretical intuitions" about what reasons for action are, and see which theories do a better job capturing these intuitions.²⁸⁶ In what follows, I adopt two of Wiland's three "intuitions" in order to weigh ATR against HTR.²⁸⁷

First, it seems to be the case that any good theory of reasons should be able to plausibly explain the fact that we act on/for reasons, and that these reasons *explain* our actions. Call this the *explanatory requirement*.

²⁸⁵ Wiland (2002, 450).

²⁸⁶ Wiland (2002, 450).

²⁸⁷ Wiland presents a third intuition called the "explanatory/normative constraint", but I think it makes this unnecessarily complicated for my purposes.

Explanatory Requirement: The theory should display how reasons *explain* the actions that they are reasons for.²⁸⁸

Second, it seems to be the case that any good theory of reasons should be able to plausibly explain the fact that reason also *justify* our actions that they are reasons for. If we fail to do what we have reason to do, and therefore do not respond appropriately to our reasons, then we are liable to some kind of normative criticism. Call this the *normative requirement*.²⁸⁹

Normative Requirement: The theory should display how reasons *justify* the actions that they are reasons for.²⁹⁰

These two general requirements provide a simple framework in which to *directly* evaluate theories of reasons that are presented as thin parity theses.

In sum, I have claimed in this section that HTR and ATR share a common dialectical situation that is brought out by presenting these views parity theses. Additionally, I have claimed that it is not only possible, but beneficial to Aristotelians to recognize this, and seek to develop and defend their view against its competitors at a higher-level of abstraction than they have done in the literature. Aristotelianism stands to benefit greatly from philosophers developing this approach to metaethics in ways that are not tied too closely to the particular commitments of the various influential figures that helped revive such views. In the following section, I will directly evaluate ATR and HTR

²⁸⁸ Wiland (2002, 451).

²⁸⁹ Wiland (2002, 451).

²⁹⁰ Wiland (2002, 451).

against one another, and argue that we have reason to think that ATR is *prima facie* more plausible and, therefore, should be taken more seriously in the literature.

5 The Appeal of The Aristotelian Theory of Reasons

In this final section of my paper, I will make use of the preparatory work done above and demonstrate the theoretical appeal of ATR by directly comparing it with HTR. I argue that ATR is *at least as plausible* as HTR and, very likely more plausible in the long run. All theories face problems, but ATR holds great theoretical promise, despite its problems, or so I will argue. If my argument is convincing, then it follows that ATR should receive much more attention in contemporary debates, since HTR is already a well entrenched view in the literature. I start by explaining what Schroeder takes the theoretical significance of HTR to be, and then compare that with what I take the theoretical significance of ATR to be.

On behalf of HTR, Schroeder claims that “the most general philosophical reason to be interested in the prospects for the Humean Theory of Reasons—and the reason for which it has attracted so much attention—is that it seems to license a certain kind of doubt about the objective prescriptivity of morality”.²⁹¹ Schroeder argues that it is plausible that what makes morality objectively prescriptive is that it entails the existence of reasons which are reasons for absolutely *anyone*, no matter what they are like. If HTR

²⁹¹ Schroeder (2007).

is true, however, then Schroeder thinks it is puzzling how it could be the case that anything is a reason for absolutely anyone, no matter what they are like. Schroeder concludes, then, that if HTR is true, it is puzzling how morality could be objectively prescriptive (understood in this way). The vast implications of HTR explain the level of interest that the view has generated in the last twenty-five years.

It is important to point out again that nothing about the significance of HTR depends upon making any substantive assumptions about what kind of psychological state is needed to explain reasons. Schroeder thinks that if we are really interested in the Humean Theory of Reasons because we are concerned about these kinds of possible implications, then we should “cast our nets wide” and be interested in *any* version of the Humean Theory of Reasons, not simply ones which hold that the psychological state needed to distinguish Ronnie and Bradley is a desire. And so anyone interested in defending the objective prescriptivity of morality should be just as concerned to defend it against any version of the Humean Theory of Reasons, broadly construed as a parity thesis. Analogously, as I will argue below, anyone interested in the possible implications of ATR should also “cast their nets wide”.

The appeal of ATR is essentially the opposite of HTR. Just as anyone interested in defending the objective prescriptivity of morality should be *concerned* about HTR, they should also be *excited* about ATR. If ATR is true, then it provides us with a plausible account of the *objectivity* of norms, moral and otherwise. Although the kind of objectivity that is made possible by ATR is certainly weaker than the kind that Schroeder has in mind — that is, ATR does *not* establish norms that would apply to anyone

regardless of what they are like — it is still a plausible kind of objectivity that many would recognize as robust enough to ground objective moral judgments. Additionally, the kind of objectivity made possible by ATR is also one that HTR is famously unable to account for. For example, if HTR is true, it is not clear how it is possible to criticize anyone’s reasons for doing clearly immoral or bizarre actions. Meanwhile, ATR seeks to provide a ground upon which to make objective normative judgments by locating a foundation for evaluating actions that is, although contingent, insofar as the development of human nature was contingent, solid enough to secure widespread agreement — a hallmark of objectivity. Unlike HTR, ATR locates the foundation outside of the individual and in the species — that is, in general facts about the kind of creatures we are. This “externalism” provides ATR with a less contingent basis upon which to ground normative judgments.²⁹²

Another appealing feature of ATR is that it is less extreme than other leading forms of objectivism, and therefore provides a kind of middle-position between Humean subjectivism, and Non-Naturalist objectivism. For example, ATR is often thought of as a *naturalistic* theory, and therefore does not require positing non-natural normative facts in order to explain objective normative truths. There is not supposed to be anything *epistemically* or *metaphysically* objectionable about the Aristotelian view, contrary to common perceptions. The hope is that Aristotelianism is able to provide a plausible theoretical mixture of objective and subjective elements in order to best fit our intuitions

²⁹² One interesting topic that hasn’t received as much attention as it should is how to make sense of the idea of species-change. What does it take for human nature to change over time? Relatedly, is the human good fixed?

for a theory of reasons. So much for the general appeal of HTR and ATR, I now want to see how these views directly compare with respect to Wiland's two intuitions concerning theories of reasons.

It is clear that HTR and ATR are at theoretical odds. HTR holds that all reasons depend, fundamentally, upon facts about an individual's psychology, while ATR holds that all reasons depend upon facts about an individual *qua* human being. In order to adjudicate this conflict, it is possible to appeal to Wiland's two "pre-theoretical intuitions" about what a good theory of reasons should be able to explain. I argue that ATR is not only at least as plausible as HTR, but *prima facie* more plausible. From this it follows, if it is true that HTR is one of the leading competitors for explaining reasons, then ATR should be as well.

The first intuition that an adequate theory of reasons should account for is the Explanatory Requirement. With respect to the Explanatory Requirement, HTR performs very well. It is very plausible to think that the explanation for why someone did some action must include at least *some* appeal to facts about their individual psychological states prior to acting. Without any connection to an individual's psychology, it would be hard to make sense of the idea that an individual acted on for a reason. Now, our reasons are not always perspicuous to us in the moment of acting, but it is plausible to think that there has to be a connection actually there, even if we cannot understand until after the fact. The necessity of individual psychological facts for reasons explanations is the "simple Humean thought", and Schroeder is right to take it as a plausible starting point

for HTR. The question, of course, is whether this simple thought fully generalizes as Schroeder thinks it does.

The main reason for thinking that the generalization of this thought generates an implausible theory of reasons comes from the Normative Requirement. Just as it is plausible that facts about our individual psychologies have some role to play in explaining our actions, it also seems plausible that facts outside of any particular individual's mind have some role to play in determining whether our actions are good or bad, justified or unjustified. That is, it is very plausible to think that we have reasons to act in certain ways *regardless* of what our individual psychological makeup is like.²⁹³ Even though many human beings often find themselves not wanting to do what is required of them, especially if the requirement comes from an external authority, we don't think a lack of motivation or desire lets them off the hook. This example concerns a lack of desire to do what is required, but the mismatch between requirements and desires also causes problems for the Humean in the other direction. If HTR is true, then it seems possible that individuals can have reasons for acting that conflict with what is intuitively required of everyone. For example, if HTR is true, then it seems that an individual can have reasons for acting immorally, insofar as they have certain immoral desires. That is, HTR seems to give us too many reasons, and does not seem to have the theoretical resources to place restrictions on our reasons in a way that can make sense of our intuitive moral judgments. Although there is much more that can be said, HTR is *prima*

²⁹³ Wiland (2002, 452).

facie plausible insofar as it can naturally explain our actions, but *prima facie* implausible when it comes to capturing our intuitions about what justifies them. ATR, on the other hand, provides *both* a plausible explanation of our actions, as well as a plausible story regarding their justification.

ATR explains human actions by appealing to natural facts about what we are like. While HTR appeals to natural facts about what individuals are like, and therefore shares the theoretical benefit of being a naturalistic theory, ATR operates at the species level, which allows it to abstract away, to a certain extent, from the idiosyncrasies of individuals, giving it an objective edge that HTR lacks. Although the generality of ATR does give it an immediate advantage over HTR, in my opinion, it is also important to point out that it also generates problems of its own. The main problem facing ATR will consist in explaining how general species facts are relevant to what any particular individual should do, even if they are a human being. Moreover, this gap between an individual and their species causes problems for both explaining action and justifying it. Let me first say a bit about the problem of explanation, and how ATR compares to HTR.

HTR appeals to *particulars* about what individual human beings are like. Since actions are performed by agents, it makes sense that particular facts about the agent explain their action. This is plausible because it appears as if there is *no gap* between the agent and the action. But, this is also a nearsighted approach to explaining human action, since mountains of research in economics, psychological, and various social sciences have shown, several times over, that there certainly *are* internal gaps between conscious and unconscious psychological states. Furthermore, there are *external* influences on our

psychological states that certainly are relevant to the explanation of human action. So, the idea that the whole story can be told in terms of the individual and their states is unrealistic and implausible.

The Aristotelian approach, meanwhile, pairs nicely with an interdisciplinary approach to explaining human action and human behavior. By allowing for external factors to form part of the explanation, the Aristotelian approach is able to say something about how individual human beings fit into broader patterns that characterize human life. We are not autonomous agents who form beliefs and desires spontaneously. Although there is certainly a gap between the individual human being and their species, the gap can be bridged through a complex interdisciplinary approach. The explanatory gap is the lesser of the two problems for the Aristotelian. The main theoretical problem will consist in having a good story to tell about how facts about what is good and bad for our species can be normative for a particular individual member of that species. Some worry that while the *explanatory* gap can be bridged, there is, in principle, a *normative* gap that cannot be bridged on the Aristotelian approach. Some ask, in short, “Why should I care about what my species does? Why should that guide my actions in any way whatsoever?”. If it is uncharacteristic for human beings to ϕ , but I have a desire to ϕ , then how am I unjustified or open to criticism if I ϕ ?

How does ATR meet the Normative Requirement? How does ATR explain how reasons *justify* the actions that they are reasons for? According to ATR, reasons justify in virtue of what is good or bad for us to do given the kind of creatures we are. The fact that doing some action would be good to do *qua* human being justifies doing that action. The

natural fact that human beings use lungs to breathe rather than gills means that we have a reason not to breathe underwater, even if someone *really* desired to be a fish. The natural fact that human beings are social animals means that we have a reason to seek community, in some form or other, even if we have an individual desire to isolate ourselves. More controversially, some Aristotelians argue that it is a natural fact that human beings are moral beings, despite the vast amount of immoral behavior throughout human history, and that we therefore have reason to act morally in virtue of the kind of creatures we are. This is the general form of normative justification provided by ATR. At this point, it is necessary to discuss several objections that will immediately come to mind, as well as make some points of clarification about what the view does and does not try to do.

It is likely that critics of ATR would argue that, in the end, ATR faces the same problem as HTR with respect to capturing our common sense moral intuitions. Such an objection can come in several forms. One objection would be that although it is possible to ground *certain* reasons justifications in natural facts, such as the justification for not breathing underwater, it will not be possible to ground the *significant* reasons justifications in such facts. That is, some may argue that we cannot ground morality in natural facts about what is good and bad for human beings. One way to think about this objection is as a kind of dilemma. On the one hand, if the account of human nature and the human good is very objective but very *thin*, then it cannot really guide our actions and tell us what to do, since it is too thin to settle moral questions. That is, it may be objectively true that *all* human beings have a reason to not try to breathe underwater, but

those kinds of reasons are not that interesting for moral philosophy. On the other hand, if the account of human nature and the human good is too *thick*, then its objectivity can be challenged. That is, if the Aristotelian account of human nature and the human good *does* have some more substantive moral content built into it, then it is likely that it is simply promoting certain ways of living over others that there is no objective basis for.

The problem raised here will, ultimately, come down to the details of competing Aristotelian accounts of human nature and the substantive content of such views. In developing a theory of human nature, Aristotelians need to find the “Goldilocks Zone”, where such a theory is thin enough to have the right kind of universality to speak to what is common to all human beings and cultures, but thick enough to ground substantive normative conclusions that match our pre-theoretical intuitions. While some may think it will never be possible for the Aristotelian to land in such a zone, I think that a significant amount of our common sense moral intuitions can be captured from a few very simple universal facts about human life – the kind appealed to by Anscombe and Foot. For example, Anscombe argues for the necessity of promising norms on the basis of the fact that so much of human life depends on being able to bind the will of others without relying on physical force. The simple fact that human beings need to get one another to do things in order to survive and avoid harm can get a significant amount of morality off of the ground in a very general way.

So far, I have argued that ATR is at least as plausible as HTR when it comes to meeting both the Explanatory and Normative Requirement. Now, I want to make a final

argument for the theoretical appeal of ATR over HTR by explaining how it is more ecumenical.

The Aristotelian theory is able to account for the relevance of individual psychological facts, but the Humean theory does *not* seem able to account for the relevance of human nature facts.²⁹⁴ The Humean theory gets a lot of its appeal and motivation from the “simple Humean thought” that *at least some* of our reasons seem to be explained in the Humean way. I think this is true. Can the Aristotelian account for the role of psychological states in their theory, if all reasons are *fundamentally* explained by reference to facts about human nature and human goodness and badness? I think they can. Moreover, I think that while the Aristotelian can make space in their view for the “simple Humean thought”, the Humean cannot make space in their view for the “simple Aristotelian thought”, and ATR is, therefore, a more ecumenical theory.

Eric Wiland provides a sketch of this kind of Aristotelian response, although the Humean won't be *fully satisfied* (The Aristotelian, though, does not need to convince the Humean — that is probably not possible. They need to convince a neutral judge). The Aristotelian can take on board the Humean thought that, in many spheres of life, facts about our psychology are *relevant* to what we have reason to do. But, the relevance is determined by facts about the kind of creatures we are.²⁹⁵ The key Aristotelian move is to explain what makes psychological facts relevant in terms of their connection to human

²⁹⁴ See Wiland (2002, 462).

²⁹⁵ Wiland (2002, 461-2).

nature and human goodness and badness. For example, Wiland writes “For it is not my likes and dislikes themselves that directly make certain actions reasonable. Rather, it is that, because of the kind of creature I am, in *this* sphere of life the fact that I have these psychological states constitutes appropriate grounds” to ϕ .²⁹⁶ The reason why the Aristotelian view is more plausible than the Humean is that, although it is true that in *some* spheres of life individual psychological facts are relevant to reasons explanations, in *other* spheres of life, they are not, or they are trumped by other kinds of facts. The Aristotelian view allows us the flexibility to capture this difference. The plausibility of the Aristotelian view lies in the fact, pointed out by Foot, that “Determining whether psychological states bear upon reasons depends upon what sphere of life is under consideration, and how those spheres of life relate to the characteristic activities of human beings”.²⁹⁷

Schroeder argued from the “simple Humean thought” that at least *some* reasons must be explained in terms of facts about individual psychologies to the inflated Humean view that *all* reasons must be explained this way. The Aristotelian can argue from the “simple Aristotelian thought” that at least *some* reasons must be explained by appeal to facts about human nature and human goodness and badness, to the thought that *all* reasons must be explained this way. The Aristotelian view, however, is able to offer a plausible account of how individual psychological facts can be relevant in certain instances where the Humean view does not seem capable of making room for the

²⁹⁶ Wiland (2002, 462).

²⁹⁷ See Foot (1994, 213).

relevance of objective facts about human nature and human goodness and badness.

Rather than viewing agents as human beings embedded in a shared community and form of life, the Humean view treats agents as autonomous psychologies, floating free from our nature as human animals.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I sketched the Aristotelian Theory of Reasons in its most general form, and argued that it is at least *prima facie* plausible. My goal in this paper was to ignite interest in Aristotelian approaches to normativity and normative reasons. I tried to do this by explaining what it would mean to adopt an Aristotelian Theory of Reasons, and by comparing it to one of the leading alternatives, The Humean Theory. Although much more needs to be said in developing the Aristotelian Theory, and in responding to potential objections, I take the arguments presented here to provide a starting point for further work.

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