

THE SAUCER OF MUD, THE KUDZU VINE AND THE UXORIOUS CHEETAH: AGAINST NEO-ARISTOTELIAN NATURALISM IN METAETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The early part of this paper criticizes Anscombe and Quinn on the relationship between value and desire. Their influential discussions of strange and unusual desires do not, I argue, show what they are intended to show. The remainder focuses primarily on the views of Foot, discussing her objections to subjectivism and in particular expressivism. The expressivist, she claims, can not make adequate sense of the way we apply evaluative terms to nonsentient living things such as plants. I argue to the contrary and urge that the metaethical significance of such applications is greatly exaggerated by Foot and other neo-Aristotelian naturalists.

Key words: Ethics, Naturalism, Foot, P., Anscombe, G. E. M., Quinn, W., Hursthouse, R.

1.

Let me say something, to begin with, about wanting weird stuff. Stuff like saucers of mud. The example, famously, is from Anscombe's *Intention* (Anscombe 1957)¹ where she is, in effect, defending a version of the old scholastic maxim, *Omne appetitum appetitur sub specie boni*. If your Latin is rusty like mine, what that says is just that every appetite – for better congruence with modern discussions, let's say every desire – desires under the aspect of the good, or in the wording made current by Velleman, under the guise of the good (Velleman 1992). To desire something is to regard it as good in some way, as having some desirability characteristic. And not just any old thing can be regarded as good in some way, as having some desirability characteristic. Obviously if this is correct, it rules against our giving desires any sort of ground-floor role in our understand-

¹ Page references to this book correspond to its reprinted version Anscombe 2000.

ing of practical reason. That it is correct is what the saucer of mud example is meant to illustrate.

Of someone purporting to want something with no desirability characteristic clearly in the offing, Anscombe writes this:

To say I merely want this without any characterization is to deprive the word of sense; if he insists on having the thing, we want to know what the having amounts to. (Anscombe 2000, p. 71)

We want to know what the having amounts to. A central part of the issue here, it seems to me, is a grammatical point of great simplicity. Desires are most perspicuously represented, as Richard Jeffrey emphasized, as propositional attitudes, having as their objects the propositions whose truth would satisfy the desire (Jeffrey 1965, pp. 59-60). But of course in ordinary talk we sometimes – most of the time indeed – characterize desires with simple noun phrases denoting their objects and not embedded propositions. And this works well enough most of the time. But it works well enough only because in grasping desire ascriptions so formulated we are able to translate them into the more explicitly propositional forms (or, often more naturally, into infinitive constructions²). Sometimes this requires attention to the specifics of context. If I say *I want a fish* while sat in a restaurant I mean I want to eat one; if I say the same thing sat at the river bank, rod in hand, I mean I want to catch one. Often it requires just a more general grasp of the ordinary circumstances of human life and what humans typically want. Thus if I say *I want a steak* you know what I will ordinarily mean. I mean I want to eat a steak. If I say *I want a car*, I ordinarily mean I want to own a car. If I say *I want a holiday in France*. I ordinarily mean I want to go on a holiday in France. If I say *I want a bath*, I mean I want to take a bath. And if I say *I want Esmerelda*, well... you know well enough what I might mean. We grasp all this effortlessly and immediately but we can do this only because of the pervasive human commonalities of response and attitude we understand ourselves to enjoy. It is your knowledge of basic human commonalities, of what is, we might say, normal and natural for us, that makes these translations so effortless and straightforward. Given that, there is some advice we might very properly give to anyone who wants something very weird: *spell it out clearly in propositional form*. Use a clear embedded proposition and not a noun phrase to spell out what you want or you are in danger of simply baffling your auditors who will not be able to determine what that is. If you simply say you want an x for some weird value of x we will not know what the having amounts to precisely as Anscombe says.

So we should instantly concede to Anscombe that there are restrictions upon what someone can be said to want. That is to say there are restrictions on possible comple-

² *X wants to Φ* or *X wants Y to Φ* straightforwardly paraphrase to *X wants that X Φ* and *X wants that Y Φ* respectively. In this case, in contrast to the noun phrase construction, correct paraphrase to propositional form requires only a grasp of the rules of English grammar and not of the facts of human life or other more particular contextual features.

tions of the sentence of form *S wants an x* that are at all readily intelligible. Saucers of mud for example are so tenuously connected with ordinary and familiar human purposes that any desire involving one must be spelled out with a clearly specified³ propositional object if we are to understand it at all. But that is not at all to say that there are restrictions on suitably clear possible completions of the sentence *S desires that p* that are readily intelligible. For what intelligibility here requires is just that we grasp clearly what proposition *p* is, that we grasp what the having amounts to. So insofar as grasping what the having amounts to is the problem, the restriction we have conceded gets us nowhere very much as regards the guise of the good. And I'm not persuaded that there is any compelling reason to impose any such restriction upon desires whose objects are adequately specified in propositional form. If I say I want a saucer of mud, you do not know what I mean. But if I say I desire that a saucer of mud be brought to me and placed in my hands, you know exactly what I mean. Indeed it is precisely because you know exactly what I mean that you may draw the conclusion that I am weird. For bare intelligibility we don't need a desirability characteristic, just a explicit specification of propositional content.

Of course there are two ways we may understand talk of intelligibility here. There are want imputations that, because they are weird, are baffling: we find it hard to understand why anyone could possibly want *that*. (You want to occupy the most uncomfortable seat on the "plane"? But *why*?) But that is not the same as saying the want imputation is unintelligible in the sense of saying we are simply unable to understand what the subject of the want is being said to want at all. With suitably specified saucer-of-mud-directed desires, while the first kind of intelligibility is indeed problematic, the second is not. Now it seems to me that in Anscombe's discussion this distinction is pretty systematically muddled but her talk of "babbling", of "fair nonsense" and of "depriv[ing] the word of sense" (Anscombe 2000, pp. 70-71) strongly suggests she takes herself to be seeking to convince us that imputations of desire for certain objects – those with no desirability characteristic in the offing – are unintelligible in the second sense: are strictly and literally nonsense. My contention here is that we need only focus on propositionally specified desires for all plausibility in her case to collapse.

I reject Anscombe's claim then but I hope my rejection gains strength by clarifying why this claim should seem attractive. Given the commonalities we enjoy, that we want things that have some desirability characteristic is indeed something that is extremely plausibly *true for the most part*. I typically want an X in virtue of features of Xs that humans (or perhaps adult humans or male humans or modern European humans or humans who work in universities or whatever) typically want in Xs. Desirability char-

³ Of course merely to express ourselves with a 'that' clause (or an 'infinite clause') is insufficient by itself if what the that-clause embeds fails, through vagueness or ambiguity, to make clear what the thought or proposition is that supplies the object of desire. So "I want to have a saucer of mud" doesn't much improve on "I want a saucer of mud".

acteristics are quite real but nothing Anscombe says here shows they are not the children rather than the parents of our stable habits of desiring and liking things.⁴

Talk of desirability characteristics is almost talk of reasons. It is the talk of people who not only want stuff but want it because it is stuff of a certain desirable kind. I think it implausible that we can understand this talk in terms of mere brute desire. But it seems far more plausible that we can understand it in terms of *richly complex structured stable patterns* of desire. This is perhaps the minimal lesson I draw from Warren Quinn's paper, "Putting Rationality in its Place" (Quinn 1993) for whom the claim that values are the children and not the parents of desires is more explicitly the target of discussion. He opens the paper by saying he will be comparing two views of "what lies at the heart of moral thought". On one, which he calls *objectivism*, this heartland is occupied by "beliefs, capable of genuine truth"; on the other, which he calls *subjectivism*, it is occupied by "noncognitive attitudes that cannot be so assessed: feelings, emotions, desires, preferences, prescriptions, decisions and the like" (Quinn 1993, p. 228). He treats us to extensive discussion of a particular example of a bizarre desire, perhaps the best known after Anscombe's, a desire to turn radios on, not, you understand, with a view to listening to them – you don't care if they are not tuned to any station – but just with a view to the bare act of turning them on. He stresses, as his paper moves to a conclusion, that his claim is not that desires and preferences cannot rationalize choice but merely that the subjectivist's conception is too impoverished: it omits the crucial dimension of evaluation (Quinn 1993, pp. 246ff).

But it is surely not hard to see how the subjectivist should reply. If we want to understand *evaluation* we won't, most certainly, do so by taking any *single* desire, be it as weird or as familiar as you like, and putting it under the philosophical microscope. But that is not to abandon my suspicion that a form of what Quinn understands as subjectivism, is a plausible view. To see that position's strengths, I would urge, we should focus not on any single desire but on what we humans actually have, which is *loads and loads of desires in highly structured stable patterns*. To get a sense of what our talk of reasons might mean we won't get far looking at just one disconnected desire. But suppose we consider a person who wants to turn the radio on, who believes the music he will then hear will give him pleasure and who is motivated by that belief to want to turn the radio on because he now wants to do things that will conduce to later pleasure. He knows that if he lives a life without pleasure he may well come to regret living this way and he doesn't want that to happen. And he knows that other people don't much tend to like joyless people who never have any fun and he would not like not to be liked. As we enrich the story in these ways it becomes much harder to finger a worry about crucial dimensions of evaluation having been omitted. But we are still making sense of what he does, making it intelligible in the sense in which it was conceded above a brute desire

⁴ So I dissent from Anscombe's rejection of just this diagnosis in remarking: "It is not a mere matter of what is usual in the way of wants and what is not." Anscombe 1957, p. 71

for a saucer of mud is not yet intelligible, with reference to his desires, only not now to a single desire disconnected from a rich pattern of others. That is why such example of bizarre disconnected desires don't really tell against what Quinn calls subjectivism, but only against crude and implausible forms of it.

There might be a creature that only ever had a single desire. (I just want to keep on eating away at this plankton.) Or there might be a creature whose desires were utterly erratic and unstable in their objects. I doubt if creatures of either kind would ever get round to forming the concept of a reason. But for creatures like us for whom desires come in structured stable patterns, it is otherwise and the smart subjectivist will see reasons as emergent from this structure and stability but no less grounded in, or reflective of, desires for that. More precisely there is an understanding of reasons as what rich, complex and stable patterns of desire present themselves as from a distinctly first-personal perspective, an understanding which these examples of odd and disconnected desires do nothing to undermine.

Philippa Foot too has attacked something she calls 'subjectivism', like Quinn using that term for a somewhat extensive range of doctrines. Her paper "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?" (Foot 1993)⁵ seems to me to have an impressive first half and a less impressive second half. The impressive first half retracts the anti-rationalism of her earlier work. Morality is a part of practical rationality. This is because, as she now rightly sees, there is no privileged concept of rationality in terms of say, self-interest, that is prior to and independent of the moral standards we share. And once we have freed ourselves from that false picture of practical rationality the way is opened up to accept the overwhelmingly natural internalist thought that when we seriously believe it is morally right to do something we thereby believe we have a reason to do it. So far so admirable. But of course this may be only a rather modest retreat from anti-rationalism. For it is not to say that our moral commitments are grounded in reason but merely perhaps that our understanding of what reasons we have in part expresses and incorporates our understanding of our substantive moral commitments. And that is a form of rationalism that would still leave room for the sort of deep contingency to our moral commitments the prospect of which so troubled Kant.⁶

The less impressive second half raises the worry that we might be subjectivists about reason itself. As indeed many moral subjectivists are. Here, I fear, assertion rather outstrips argument. McDowell's notorious sneer about quasi-hydraulic pictures of moral psychology is approvingly wheeled out but, without proper development, it really is just a sneer, albeit a nice colourful one, rather than an argument, and it gets little development here. Foot does offer an insistence that the regress of practical reasons can just as properly bottom out in the recognition of a reason as it can in a desire. The person who

⁵ Page references to this paper correspond to its reprinted version in Foot 2002, pp. 189-208.

⁶ For a defence of the contingency of moral value and of the early Foot's thought that this contingency should not unduly disturb us see Lenman 1999.

quits smoking need only, she writes, be “supposed to know, like most adults, that it is silly to disregard one’s future without special reason to do so. No special explanation is needed of why men take care of their future: an explanation is needed when they do not” (Foot 1995, p. 206). But this doesn’t come to much more than just insistence. Sure, nobody will dispute, most men care about their future, want their future lives to be long and happy not nasty and short. But these are *conative* not *cognitive* states. Granted too, at least in everyday explanatory contexts, it’s the exceptions that puzzle us. If young Charlie reaches the age of 25 and shows no interest whatever in sex, we’re puzzled at his failure to develop the desires and responses young humans normally do and may look precisely for a *special* explanation. But to say that is not to undermine, or even to address, the plausible claim that having these desires and responses is a distinctively conative rather than a cognitive way for a person to be, that the explanation for ordinary human sexual motivation is one that, *inter alia*, makes some essential reference to the desires that we all – or nearly all - have. Of course, if we thought of the remarks of Anscombe and Quinn about anomalous desires that I have just discussed showed what they seem intended to show Foot could rest a rejection of such subjectivism on that foundation but, as I have urged, this is not a particularly solid foundation.

2.

However Foot has a further weapon in her armoury against subjectivism and in particular against *expressivism*, the form of subjectivism in which both she and I are most interested (though my interest is much friendlier than hers). To consider this is to turn to the central thought of the neo-Aristotelian naturalism that is at the heart of much modern virtue ethics. It’s a thought about *objectivity*.

Here’s a good game to play with your undergraduate students if you have the right props. When someone insists, and someone is bound to, that all goodness is subjective, whip out a couple of pot plants, one healthy, blooming, bright and colourful, one stunted, withered and almost dead. Look, you say, at this lovely pot plant, healthy and flourishing. This is surely a good way for a pot plant to be. A much better way, we can all agree, than this. What could possibly be plainer? And you kids want to tell me this isn’t objective...? This is the key strategy of neo-Aristotelian naturalism. Seek to establish a clear and unproblematic sort of objectivity in cases like this. Then try to show that we can understand the rest of the evaluative and normative domains in a way continuous to the way we understand this case.

Among other things this strategy is supposed to kill off is expressivism. This is made very clear by Foot in the opening paragraphs of chapter 2 of *Natural Goodness*. (Foot 2001). It’s these cases, cases involving non-human and especially nonsentient living things that expressivists, it is contended, cannot handle. She mentions but does not name a philosopher who put it to her that “the good roots of trees were roots of the

kind we ‘should chose if we were trees’” (Foot 2001, pp. 25-26), a view she makes it clear she deems absurd enough to be dismissed without argument and yet she evidently sees little prospect of expressivists improving upon it.

It’s worth looking briefly at a discussion by another philosopher who is clearly sympathetic to much in Foot’s position, namely Judith Jarvis Thomson, in the last chapter of her contribution to Harman and Thomson’s *Moral Relativism and Objectivity* (Thomson 1996). Thomson accepts what amounts to a version of Geach’s doctrine that ‘good’ is attributive. The only sort of goodness, she writes, is *goodness in a way*: morally good, beneficial, enjoyable, useful for some activity, skilful at some activity etc. (Because they are good in different ways it’s nonsense to ask of a good hammer whether it’s better than a good symphony. The goodness *simpliciter* presupposed by consequentialism is a fantasy.) But it’s plausibly not just an accident of homonymy that we call all this stuff ‘good’. Does anything tie these contexts in which the word is used together? The suggestion she favours, here at least, is that goodness is always at some level a matter of answering to human wants. Thus “being good for use in X-ing consists in being such as to facilitate X-ing in manners that conduce to satisfying wants that people typically X to satisfy” (Thomson 1996, p. 135). And “being good at X consists in being capable of X-ing in the manner that people who want to X typically want to X in” (Thomson 1996, p. 137).

Against this nice simple view Thomson raises just the worry Foot raises against expressivism. Happy enough with her generalizations about the useful and the skilful, she turns to the trickier case of the beneficial. Something can be said to be good for X, she suggests, if it conduces to X being in a good condition. But what does that mean? There is no problem with carpets and lawnmowers. Something is good for a carpet if it conduces to the carpet being in the sort of condition people typically want carpets to be in. But in the case of living things she registers real puzzlement. It seems natural to say that a plant is in good condition if it is healthy and that is nothing to do with anybody’s wants. This she makes clear from a characteristically beautiful example: that of the kudzu vine (Thomson 1996, pp. 142-143). Apparently kudzu vines are an aggressive and invasive member of the plant kingdom. Some people want them around but no one in their right mind would want a healthy one. If you want one at all, what you want is a weak, stunted specimen that won’t do too much damage. So what do we say is good for a kudzu vine? Or, more to the point where Foot is concerned, which kudzu vines are the good ones?

How hard though is the challenge of the kudzu vine? Perhaps not so hard. A number of possible lines of resistance are open to explore. I’ll consider three.

1. Suppose Thomson and the expressivist are right in supposing there to be, albeit of course in dramatically different and inconsistent ways (Thomson of course is positively hostile to expressivism), an intimate link between goodness and human desires. Well, it’s true that health answers to human desires. Certainly this is true where *our own* health is concerned. And it’s broadly true for the health of many *other* organisms. We

cultivate many of these and many of those we do not cultivate we harvest from the wild. For these instrumental purposes we generally prefer healthy to unhealthy specimens. Sometimes, if we are biologists, botanists or zoologists we may harvest specimens just as specimens and here too the interests of biologists are such that healthy specimens are preferred much of the time. And stuff we don't want to harvest at all we typically enjoy in various dimensions, just walking in the woods. In all these many cases, we can understand talk of what it is to benefit a plant or what a good plant is, in much the highly deflated fashion Thomson proposes in the case of carpets. The puzzle only seems deep and intractable in such cases as kudzu vines. But cases like this are now looking rather marginal. There's still a problem I guess if we have a firm and robust linguistic intuition that a healthy kudzu vine is a good kudzu vine. But do we? We surely wouldn't want to rest any defence of a position in metaethics on the thought that it is utterly clear what to say about such matters. Suppose someone were to say: Well a healthy kudzu is a good *plant* all right since it has a characteristic – health that people who want plants typically want. But it's a completely rubbish *kudzu* as it has a characteristic- health- no one in their right mind would want in a kudzu. Is that simply linguistic perversity? If you're not in the grip of a theory that says it is, I doubt if you'll feel confidently able to say either way.

Of course the kudzu case is maybe not *that* marginal. There are many organisms in whose flourishing we have only a strongly opposing interest: most notably certain deadly viruses that kill us in large numbers. But surely the same points apply. Try, if you care to, to vary my little classroom experiment using some deadly virus instead of plants. (Maybe this time not such a great idea to bring actual specimens into the classroom.) These ultra-flourishing, antibiotic-resistant ones are the good ones - are they not, dear students? - while these rather enfeebled ones that your immune systems would fight off more or less effortlessly, they are the bad ones. I'm guessing that, varying the example in this way, you may find your students rather less inclined to see anything very obvious in such claims. There is such a thing, for sure, as healthy flourishing smallpox but, in my book, a good smallpox virus is most typically a dead smallpox virus and I bet you find a good number of your students are with me here.

2. Put that thought aside though and grant for the sake of argument that a healthy kudzu is a good kudzu. Are we left with nothing to say? I think not. 'Good' we might say is an evaluative term in its primary use. As such we pervasively, almost universally apply it to healthy things given our pervasive positive valuation of health. Given that when we meet a healthy kudzu vine, something we value not at all, we persist in calling it good although this is no longer, strictly evaluation at all. What could be more natural if we take on board the sort of points Wittgenstein made about family resemblance concepts, about the mistake of looking for too much tidiness in our understanding of what some term in our language means? Suppose in some community a *blessing* is what people call anything that it is, in the familiar sense, a blessing to receive or possess. Suppose Jenkins, an imaginary anthropologist, conjectures that

‘blessing’ means in their language more or less the same as it does in ours. But now suppose that, coins being things it is a blessing to receive, the word ‘blessings’ is applied with great frequency to coins. Suppose moreover there is a particular special sort of coin that is never a blessing (our sense) to receive, one only ever given in very grave circumstances, perhaps to signal a murderous intent. (To supply a vivid context just think back to children’s stories about pirates and curses and stuff.) Only these special coins, we learn are called ‘blessings’ too. Aha, we say, so much for Jenkin’s conjecture, the case of the death-blessings proves it wrong. But of course it proves no such thing. It simply proves that the concept while its central meaning is clear enough, also has a certain natural stretch. The dictionary entry for ‘blessing’ may simply say: “1: Good things such as coins; 2: Any coin.” What could be more natural? If talk of family resemblance seems too muddy, we can more boldly say here that, in such a case, the term ‘blessing’ would be simply ambiguous but that there is nothing accidental about the homonymy and we can see how sense 2 arose naturally out of sense 1. A like story about ‘good’ would surely be far from far-fetched.

3. I think there’s plausibly some truth in this second diagnosis but here I am more interested in a third which is a form of heavily circumscribed error theory. Error theory is not a popular option in metaethics because what we think of as error theory is typically a global error theory about the whole of our evaluative discourse and that seems a crazy option, one that simply cannot be taken seriously in practice. But things are different when the supposed error infects only a tiny corner of evaluative discourse and one we could simply give up with zero loss. And we might very plausibly have here a case in point.

The key thought as it is expressed by contemporary neo-Aristotelian naturalists such as Foot, McDowell and Hursthouse is that objective normativity is unproblematic because we find it pervasively in the natural world, for example in pot plants I imagined using as props in a lecture. And that we can thereby aim to demystify the normativity of, say ethics, by viewing it as continuous with this. This is the starting point of the Aristotelian naturalist’s story as recounted in, for example, chapter 2 of Foot’s *Natural Goodness* and chapter 9 of Hursthouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* (Hursthouse 1999). On Hursthouse’s account to say of an organism of species X that it is a good X, is to evaluate its parts and its operations in terms of how well they conduce in the ways characteristic of the species to as many as four ends: put very simply, survival and reproduction for all organisms, pleasure and sociability in the case of organisms whose character of life makes these appropriate. This thought has of course some striking consequences as Hursthouse herself stresses. A good brood parasite (a cuckoo, say) is good at exploiting the nurturing efforts of other species. A polar bear that protects its young is defective. And we can’t fault male cheetahs who offer no assistance in hunting to the heavily pregnant females they have mated with (Hursthouse 1999, Chapter 10, esp. pp. 220-221).

Of course this is fair enough. But do we really want to call this *evaluation* or simply *classification*? Are we really finding anything normatively significant in nature when we go in for it? One way to make the thought dramatic is to consider what we would say of a cuckoo that developed a tendency for reflection ordinarily unknown in cuckoos and decided that, *No, dammit, it's not fair, I'm going to look after my own young*. Or a male polar bear that takes it into its head to adopt a new and caring attitude to its young. Or a male cheetah that says to the female he has impregnated, *Come along now dear, I'll do the hunting today: you sit down and have a nice cup of tea*. Certainly these imaginary beasts are behaving in ways uncharacteristic of their species. Do we say they are thereby *defective*? Well if we are going to understand 'defective' as a biological term of art that means simply not conducing to the four ends in relevantly characteristic ways, then maybe. But surely not if we are to understand it as suggesting there is really something *amiss* with them.

But this is a thought experiment that will prompt many to cry foul. For in making it, of course, I've anthropomorphised: I've made my polar bear, my cuckoo and my cheetah uncharacteristically reflective, given way to the fairy tale fiction of the rational brute. But this, it may be objected, is not a factor we can vary in harmless isolation, leaving everything else in place. Introduce rationality, it may be urged, and everything changes. The point is stressed by Hursthouse and in stressing it she follows McDowell in his essay "Two Sorts of Naturalism" (McDowell 1995).⁷ As McDowell puts the point: "Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species that we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearings on our practical problems into question." "With the onset of reason", he elaborates, "the nature of the species abdicates from a previously unquestioned authority over the behaviour of the individual animal" (McDowell 1995, p. 172). And again, later in the paper, writing about humans: "The dictates of virtue have acquired an authority that replaces the authority abdicated by first nature with the onset of reason" (McDowell 1995, p. 188).

But these passages just re-emphasize my puzzle. A nurturing polar bear father, even an unreflectively nurturing such father, is certainly behaving in a way that may surprise ethologists and we may classify it accordingly as defective in a *very* deflated sense of that word. But surely that's just *classification*. How does something that deserves to be called *authority* get into this picture? That's the mystery. A greenhouse full of plants is a space full of healthy and less healthy specimens, specimens that promise to reproduce and live a long time, and specimens that do not. Sure it does. But, except when you are inside it, there are no *reasons* in your greenhouse. No *normativity*, certainly no *authority*, merely a space in which certain natural dispositional properties are distributed in certain ways.

⁷ Page references to this paper correspond to its reprinted version in McDowell 1998, McDowell 1998, pp. 167-197.

To say this is to reiterate what Williams, in a passage discussed by Hursthouse (Hursthouse 1999, p. 256), calls the “first and hardest lesson of Darwinism”, that there is simply no teleology in nature (Williams 1995, pp. 109-110). The lesson is hard because it is so natural to think of the natural world as if there were. Digging into a dead rat in the biology classroom we pick out some part and ask the teacher, *What’s this bit for?* And the default expectation, only occasionally defeated, is that there is some answer. But, of course, we know, after Darwin, how shallow and reducible this teleology is. The teleological explanation, Species X has property P because it serves function F is legitimate only as shorthand for a longer explanation in terms of processes of natural selection that are altogether blind and purposeless. Given this fact and its enormous significance to our understanding of the natural world, it seems extraordinary, for example, that Foot in the course of the whole argument of *Natural Goodness* does not mention Darwin once. (The whole modern Darwinian synthesis of evolutionary theory and genetics is similarly off the page in a paper by Michael Thompson from which Foot, McDowell and Hursthouse all draw inspiration. Thompson does briefly consider that it might be relevant to advancing our understanding of what life is to make some reference to DNA but dismisses this as doing no more to advance our understanding than “pointing to a few gorillas and turnips” (Thompson 1995, pp. 256-257). Surely this remark is *wildly* ill-judged. It is as if a proposal that we might grow in understanding of what proteins are by saying something about amino-acids were dismissed as of no more value than pointing to a few sausages.) Foot does however offer a brief and intriguing footnote (Foot 2001, p. 32) of *Natural Goodness* where she insists that when she talks about function in biological contexts she should be taken to be concerned with the everyday ways we so use this word and not with the way it is used in evolutionary biology. But folk biology is only a credible foundation for ethics or anything else insofar as it is consistent with and can be subsumed within the findings of the sort of biological understandings we have a sound scientific warrant to believe are true. Insofar as folk biological thought is pervasively and irreducibly teleological in the ways Foot, Thompson and others emphasize, then our best science very plausibly tells us that folk biology simply gets it wrong. And that’s what I have in mind when I speak of a highly circumscribed form of error theory. If a view such as expressivism can capture and make sense of large areas of our normative discourse but is defeated, as Foot alleges, by our applications of normative concepts to the plant kingdom, then the right thing for the expressivist to say is that such applications simply embody an error in the shape of the teleological picture of the natural order Darwinism has effectively buried.

As error theories go, this looks, as advertised above, to be extremely low cost. It may be bad news for Aristotelian naturalism but, as the existence of views such as expressivism makes clear, that is hardly the only game in town when it comes to making sense of the normative world. There are other objections to expressivism of course but by going error theoretic at this point we have pulled the rug out from beneath what appears to be Foot’s own favourite one. With such an error theory on the table

we could say that a healthy flourishing kudzu plant was a good kudzu plant but only in the stretched and deflated senses noted above, an understanding that would seriously undermine Hursthouse's insistence, in accepting McDowell's point that reason changes everything, that deep continuities nonetheless remain in place between our talk of good plants and our talk of good human actions. Nor indeed, after all, would it carry any significant cost to simply *give up* using evaluative language in our talk of healthy kudzu plants. We can say everything we want to say by simply saying that they are healthy, glossing that in turn in some such prosaically descriptive terms as abundantly endowed with those properties that, in their typical environment, will conduce to longevity and fertility. A similar self-denying ordinance with respect to explicitly normative language in the human domain would threaten, as Allan Gibbard neatly expresses it in his most recent book, to "drive what to do out of ethics" (Gibbard 2003, pp. 13-17). But it's profoundly unclear how refraining from normative language where kudzu vines are concerned would drive anything worth keeping out of botany.

Hursthouse's discussion of this "first and hardest lesson" is a little puzzling. In the passage from Williams she cites he clearly intends by this is the lesson that there is no teleology in nature. But later in her discussion she seems to identify it with the entirely distinct claim that we are in a terrible mess because we are so constituted that the four ends her account of goodness emphasizes fail to harmonize: that the reasons we take ourselves to have to further the first and third (living a long time and having lots of fun) conflict in deep and pervasive ways with those we have to further the second and fourth (having kids and cooperating with other people) (Hursthouse 1999, p. 261). I'm not sure what to make of this as the lack of harmony claim seems quite distinct from the no teleology claim and not to be a consequence of it. Nothing in a Darwinian denial of teleology in nature *as such* gives us a reason for pessimism about such harmonies.

The lack of clarity here seems regrettable partly because the concern she raises about harmony and what she goes on to say about it seem important and interesting. In particular it seems promising to identify such a concern about harmony as a credible reconstruction of what the moral sceptic is being a sceptic about consistently with accepting the point Foot and others make about our not being in a position to take for granted a conception of reason neatly independent of our moral commitments. Consistently with this we may nonetheless recognize that the empire of reason has many provinces and that they may not always get along. Cracks, instabilities, failures of harmony and commonality can appear anywhere. Between the various ends we hope to share. When we do share them. And between our various individual concerns when whether we share them is precisely what is at issue. That is precisely why Foot is surely mistaken in chapter 4 of *Natural Goodness* to suppose that her newly moralized understanding of practical reason leaves the moral sceptic with nothing intelligible left to say by way of challenge (Foot 2001, pp. 64-65).

Disharmony and fragmentation can take many forms. Perhaps I find that my more self-regarding concerns form a rather coherent package and my sense of what I am owing vis à vis my responsibilities to others forms another but there is a deep failure of harmony between the two. Perhaps you find that your personal happiness is so inseparable from the satisfaction you derive from discharging your responsibilities to others that you have no such sense of conflict. Then there is a sense in which I am in a mess and you are not. As someone who takes both packages seriously I can see this well enough but this isn't anything like an insight into ethology or anything at all clearly continuous with such insights. It's just the familiar problem of someone who cares deeply about things that are pulling him in opposite directions and able to recognize the great desirability of reconciling them. This problem – Sidgwick's Problem as it might be called – is very different from the problem of the person from the geography of whose reason certain provinces are simply missing. For Gangster Al, say, the package of concerns for his social responsibilities is just not there to enter into conflict with anything. He doesn't give a damn. Al's problem is different from Sidgwick's in that, from where Al is standing, it is no problem at all. Recognizing, as Foot rightly does, that our conception of practical rationality embodies our shared moral commitments helps us see that there is nothing in the contingency of our evaluative outlook that should, *from where we are standing*, threaten our confidence in it. But if we aspire, in the words of Louise Antony, to implement “a strategy that bids us always find a basis, for any values that we recommend to another, in that person's current commitments and values” (Antony 2000, pp. 35-36), Al is a grave problem. Internal to the rational space of his “second nature” the moralized reason we recognize can obtain, it seems, no purchase. We may, as Foot does in her more recent writings, insist that nonetheless *our* reasons still apply to him. But I don't find in Foot or in the other exponents of neo-Aristotelian naturalism enough in the way of materials to answer Williams' deep challenge of explaining, in robustly realist terms, what exactly that might begin to mean.⁸ Which may leave those of us who are not like Al with little to do, in the final analysis, except to think of ourselves, as Foot herself once so magnificently suggested, as volunteers banded together for liberty and justice.⁹

⁸ Williams 1981, 101-113. Anti-realist terms may be a rather different matter. See e.g. Gibbard 1990, pp. 160-164 and Blackburn 1998, p. 266.

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