UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM | THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Character Education, Ethical Naturalism, and the Philosophy of Nature

Pierre-Thomas Eckert

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 14th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2026.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Jubilee paper

In this presentation, I would like to explore in what sense Aristotelian normative ethics (virtue, telos, phronesis, etc.) needs a consistent philosophy of nature in order to be formulated coherently as naturalistically normative. I argue that this was Philippa Foot's ambition *in Natural Goodness* (2001). Naturalism, understood as the integration of different currents of knowledge through attention to the methods and results of the empirical sciences, is a largely fruitful and widespread endeavour, encouraging a recalibration of the ambition and scope of various philosophical concepts (De Caro & Macarthur, 2022). In its most general form of academic ecumenism, it receives broad consensus from various sectors of the analytical philosophical world and finds favourable echoes from some scientific circles interested in philosophy (cf. e.g., Lapsley & Narvaez, 2005; Moosavi, 2020; Quintelier et al., 2010). But this laudable attempt to unify the various pieces of human knowledge often underestimates the intensity of disagreement about what counts as 'natural'. As a result, appeals to 'nature' and 'human nature' suffer from underdetermination, leading to substantial disagreements about their normative scope.

Yet, as Kristján Kristjánsson points out, Aristotelian normative ethics presupposes a strong conception of human nature and nature in general. These two concepts, although highly contested, are fundamental to the neo-Aristotelian project and determine the success or failure of its endeavour: as Kristjánsson points out, the entire architecture on which it is based depends on them (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 10). In this sense, although it can rightly be said that Aristotelian normative ethics fits into the naturalistic project, it must make clear what kind of naturalism it is committed to.

My aim is to argue that this naturalism is the one that the Foot-Thompson tradition has developed over the last 20 years. But this tradition is often misunderstood: the classical view is that the 'natural normativity' defended by Foot (2001) commits its supporters to a crude naturalism of the first kind that would be vulnerable to a considerable number of objections: the failure to provide a concept of nature that is up to date with our biological knowledge, the failure to account for the role of reason, the failure to recognise the gap between scientific-empirical knowledge and moral-normative knowledge, the regression from naturalism, especially in its Thompsonian version, towards a Kantian apriorism (Angier, forthcoming). In this presentation, I would like to show that this is not the most plausible interpretation of Foot and Thompson's undertaking, and that some currents of philosophy of nature, also inspired by neo-Aristotelianism, can provide us with material for stabilising the project. In particular, I will argue that recent developments on the concept of teleology in biology and on the metaphysics of causal powers provide satisfactory answers.

(1) In the first part, I will outline the neo-Aristotelian naturalistic project, from Anscombe and Geach to Foot and Thompson.

(2) In the second part, I will show how responding to the classic objections to Foot's project means interpreting the project in a realistic sense. I contend that the perspective of the philosopher of biology Dennis Walsh can help us dismantle some important objections.

(3) In the third part, I will show how three hitherto distinct neo-Aristotelian perspectives can interact: Footian (ethical) naturalism, Dennis Walsh's (biological) Developmental Darwinism, and the metaphysics of hylemorphic powers, in particular that of William Simpson and Robert Koons.

I will summarise all this in my conclusions.

1. Let us begin with the neo-Aristotelian project in ethics. As is well known, this current emerges from two theses expressed by the Geach-Anscombe pair. The first thesis is Peter Geach's grammar of the good', inspired by the late Wittgenstein: in response to G.E. Moore's Open Question Argument (Moore, 1903), Peter Geach (1956) contends that the meaning of 'good', although fluctuating, is not at all mysterious, accessible only through basic intuitions, as Moore thought. In particular, in the case of functional concepts, the good expresses the proper function of the object under consideration: a good knife is a knife that fulfils its function: to cut. A knife made of butter is a bad knife because it cannot perform its function well. In technical jargon, it is said that at least in the case of functional concepts, the concept of good is purely attributive, not predicative: it acquires its meaning from standards internal to the type of thing under consideration. Geach takes up here an old Aristotelian criticism of Plato: it makes no sense to speak of an absolute Idea of good: we must always specify what we are talking about before we can use the concept correctly.

The other fundamental indication of neo-Aristotelianism can be found in Elizabeth Anscombe: the concepts of duty and obligation, similar to the concept of good, initially have a very vague content. They seem to invoke a notion of necessity, with the use of the word 'ought'. But there are various types of necessity, and ethical 'necessities' are certainly not of the same type as logical, metaphysical or physical necessities. Anscombe contends that these ethical necessities are part of a particular type of necessity that characterises living beings as living beings. These necessities are generalities that are not infallible and do not even need to be instantiated in the majority of a population to be real, yet they characterise a certain form of life. It is thanks to this type of generality that we can semanticise the lexical field of defect, disease, damage, etc.: generality gives us a norm, and any deviation from this norm will be semanticised as a defect. Anscombe (1958, 1969) calls this type of generality 'Aristotelian necessity'. An example given by Anscombe is "human beings have 32 teeth". This statement gives us the standard induced by the concept of normal development specific to our species, even though a large proportion of living human beings may not achieve it. In fact, it is very common for a human being not to have 32 teeth, for a whole series of reasons (old age, genetic malformations, accidents, etc.). This example serves to clearly distinguish the 'Aristotelian necessity' in question from a mere statistical regularity or, in the case of human beings, from a sociological observation. Anscombe's insight is that our moral knowledge is of this kind: we do not need sociological investigation to understand what it means to keep a promise.

Philippa Foot elegantly summarises these two points in *Natural Goodness* (2001). She too sets out to provide a 'grammar of goodness' and to understand virtues as 'Aristotelian necessities'. She does this by proposing her scheme of natural goodness, which we can summarise as follows: judgements that express an ethical evaluation have the same *form* as the evaluative judgements of any living being, be it an oak tree or a wolf. These judgements are judgements of natural goodness or badness: descriptions of an individual in light of the 'Aristotelian necessities' that govern the life cycle of its species. These judgements are therefore entirely relative to the form of life under examination: what will be evaluated as good for a wolf will be very different from what will be good for an oak tree. However, we must immediately clarify something: in the case of human beings, even if this scheme applies in the same way, there is a *sui generis* sense of natural goodness that interests us: the goodness of the rational will, of practical rationality. This power is unique to us and has no equivalent in the animal world.

Thompson, in *Life and Action* (2008), articulates all this in a distinctive way. He adds some theses that are stronger than Foot's: for example, he argues that the consideration of a living being according to its species/form of life is transcendentally necessary: no living process can be identified as living except against the background of a particular form of life. Two phenomena that are identical at the

physical-chemical level will count as different at the biological level precisely because of this background. For example, the event 'cell duplication' will be described as 'reproduction' if we are talking about an amoeba but as self-preservation in the case of a human being. Therefore, in every operation of describing living beings, a certain idea of the form of life is implicit; this form of life is expressed in 'natural-historical judgements', which are Anscombe's Aristotelian necessities. This categorical apparatus, according to Thompson, is a priori, in the sense that it emerges *with* and is presupposed by every description of living beings but is not deduced or extracted *from* living beings. In the case of our form of life, we have access to it every time we exercise our intellect and our will: every act of volition and thought that I perform presupposes, like other vital operations, a background of intelligibility: our form of life. What interests us is that, if we follow Thompson, the normativity of our actions is no longer a mystery: it is a special case of the normativity of the living, a normativity that is necessarily implicit in every grasp of the living.

A recurring criticism is that the scheme of natural normativity presented here does not correspond to our scientific knowledge. In particular, the concept of species/life form invoked does not correspond to anything in our current biological taxonomies. And if there is no life form but only natural selection of genotypes, then there is no such characteristic life cycle, with its teleologically ordered activities, which is so important to Foot and Thompson. A second criticism, put forward by John McDowell (1995), is that reason produces a detachment from the natural necessities that govern other species; we are subject to the norms of the second nature (rational, educational, cultural) but not to those of the first (instincts, mechanisms).

(2) Let us begin with the first criticism. Since Geach, some critics have argued that the type of evaluation of good highlighted was only related to our interests: in fact, the functionality of the knife is real but only insofar as we use it in this way. The teleology of the concept would always be extrinsic: relative to our interests. Many philosophers of biology, especially those best known in the public sphere, maintain that a similar situation occurs at the biological level: organisms and species have no intrinsic teleology; we impose teleology for our own explanatory interests. Teleology, if it is useful, is useful only as a heuristic: it allows us to identify certain connections and phenomena that will then be gradually replaced by causal connections and mechanical explanations once we have understood them better. A similar story is needed at the level of fundamental ontology: some proponents of a metaphysics of powers, such as Anna Marmodoro and Alexander Bird (Greco & Groff, 2013), maintain that real powers are only those of the fundamental entities of our best physical theories. We can, if we wish, continue to talk about powers at the macroscopic level, but this use will be of secondary importance, relating to our explanatory interests.

The authors we are examining, on the other hand, think that teleology is a real phenomenon, predicable of natural entities. The Foot-Thompson scheme can technically be interpreted as a purely logical scheme, as a categorical apparatus applied to an external reality, à la Kant, and there are passages in Thompson's Life and Action that seem to go in this direction. But we also read, for example on p. 36 of *Natural Goodness*, that intelligent Martians would see natural normativity as an 'ontological fact':

> Nor did we need to draw on descriptions of specifically human life as if the language had to be transferred from there to be understood. Some intelligent Martians who themselves did not think in terms of goodness and badness might (even if landing in the rain forest and knowing nothing of humans) realize that the plants and animals on earth could be described in propositions with a special logical form, and come themselves to talk about the newly met living things as we do. They would rightly see the existence of this different order of things in the world as an extremely interesting

> ontological fact, allowing them to invent and deploy a range of concepts that they did not have before. (Foot, 2001, p. 36)

I think this talk of an 'ontological fact' should be taken seriously. However, the most famous biologists and philosophers of biology, supporters of the so-called Modern Evolutionary Synthesis, such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, tend to disparage the role of organisms, which are reduced to mere vehicles for genes. The only real teleology we could strictly concede is that of the entire process of natural selection, or, heuristically and temporarily at the methodological level – pending a true causal explanation – as seen above. But according to the philosopher of biology Denis Walsh, this is an unjustified bias of Modern Evolutionary Synthesis, which gives too much priority to the causal power of genes and their random mutation. In particular, according to Walsh, novelties are initiated by development and the environment at least as much as by changes in replicators. Natural selection is not the cause of gene selection and evolution: it is rather the effect of the behaviour of organisms. It is simply the sum of the activities of organisms, not a distinct causal process. This is actually closer to Darwin than the Modern Synthesis: for Darwin, natural selection was already the consequence of the struggle for survival of organisms, while the explanatory factor "organism" is absent in the Modern Synthesis. The adaptive plasticity defended by Walsh, according to which changes in phenotypes can occur before changes in genotypes, is an update of Darwin's struggle for survival: organisms struggle not so much against scarcity as against instability.

Walsh does not merely criticise the Modern Synthesis, but aims to restore the dignity of teleology in biology. In chapter 8 of Organisms, Agency, and Evolution (Walsh, 2015), he argues that adaptive evolution arises from organisms' active responses to affordances, i.e. emerging opportunities or obstacles in relation to their goals. These affordances are not simply characteristics of the environment, but properties of purposeful systems embedded in their context. Organisms, responding to them, modify themselves or their environment to pursue their goals, and these changes can be explained precisely by their contribution to these goals. In this way, Walsh reintroduces purpose and agency as key elements in evolutionary processes. In an even more recent publication, Walsh develops a perspective that is ultimately similar to that sought by Foot, and openly Aristotelian: "The form of an organism, considered dynamically, consists of a series of changes in the capacities of matter over time, the end of which is the implementation or realisation of those vital processes that distinguish the organism as such. We can think of the form of an organism as a set of organisational principles, or a set of goal-oriented dispositions, for organising its matter in such a way that the organism is able to perform the particular functions inscribed in the life form that distinguish its species." Although, like any material entity, the structures and activities of an organism derive from the properties and interactions of its constituent parts, unlike ordinary objects, the reverse is also true: the existence, structure and functioning of the parts are the direct result of the activities of the organism as a whole. This was precisely Thompson's position in Life and Action.

3. As implied in the passage quoted above, this position is based on a metaphysics of dispositions or powers. Rom Harré and Edwin Madden have reintroduced into metaphysics the idea that certain properties are active powers intrinsic to entities. The latter behave in a certain way precisely because of their nature. To say that 'X has the power of A' means that X can do A under appropriate conditions, thanks to its intrinsic character. Some properties are essentially dispositional: those who possess them have stable tendencies to behave in certain ways. The sciences observe and codify the manifestations of these dispositions, which are activated under precise conditions, ceteris paribus, and the laws of nature are nothing more than the re-description in mathematical language of the manifestations of these powers. For example, bodies fall because they have an intrinsic gravitational

power. Water dissolves salt because of a natural disposition rooted in its essence. Qualities such as irascibility or poisonousness also fall within this dispositional framework.

In its neo-Aristotelian version, such as Pruss and Koons' hylomorphism in the article Must Functionalists Be Aristotelians? (Koons & Pruss, 2017), this metaphysics of powers insists that we have no reason to privilege microphysical powers over macrophysical powers. In fact, to understand what a causal power is, we must start with a macroscopic power: the power to make correct inferences. This power must include the possibility of malfunction (otherwise our theories would have no cognitive value) and therefore cannot be reduced to a simple input-output scheme, such as neuronal activation in response to a stimulus. Malfunctioning, in the case of the intellect, cannot be rendered in probabilistic or evolutionary terms: this would destroy the value of our theories, and therefore also the basis on which these options are formulated. The only solution is to postulate that each power expresses an intrinsic tendency towards a range of effects, with intrinsic conditions of normality. In the case of the intellect, we are forced to postulate that it has an intrinsic power towards truth, and that it is the deviation from truth that needs to be explained.

What is interesting is that, without realising it, Pruss and Koons have taken up a form of Thompson's transcendental argument: we must necessarily ascribe powers to ourselves, these powers have intrinsic conditions of normality, every ascription of powers is also an ascription of a form of life, it is the deviations from the norm that need to be explained, not the norm (which is already explained by power). Among these powers, therefore, there is theoretical reasoning, but there are also distinctly human affective capacities and our distinctive power of practical reason, which is specific to our species because it is mediated by our animal nature. With this observation, we have also responded to McDowell: there is no need for his gap between a mechanised first nature and a rational second nature: the concept of nature, when it includes intrinsic macroscopic powers, does not need to be doubled. Thank you very much.

Angier, T. (forthcoming). *Human Nature, Human Goods: A Theory of Natural Perfectionism*. Cambridge University Press.

Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958). Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy*, *33*(124), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100037943

Anscombe, G. E. M. (1969). On Promising and Its Justice, and Whether It Needs be Respected In Foro Interno. *Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, *3*(7/8), 61–83. https://doi.org/10.22201/iifs.18704905e.1969.60

De Caro, M., & Macarthur, D. (Eds). (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351209472

Foot, P. (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Clarendon Press.

Geach, P. T. (1956). Good and Evil. *Analysis*, *17*(2), 33–42. https://doi.org/10.2307/3326442

Greco, J., & Groff, R. (Eds). (2013). *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: The New Aristotelianism*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203075609

Koons, R. C., & Pruss, A. (2017). Must Functionalists Be Aristotelians? In J. D. Jacobs (Ed.), *Causal Powers* (pp. 194–204). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198796572.003.0013

Kristjánsson, K. (2020). *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View*. Routledge.

Lapsley, D. K., & Narvaez, D. (2005). The Psychological Foundations of Everyday Morality and Moral Expertise. In D. K. Lapsley & F. C. Power (Eds), *Character psychology and character education* (pp. 140–165). University of Notre Dame Press.

McDowell, J. (1995). Two Sorts of Naturalism. In R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, & W. Quinn (Eds), *Virtues And Reasons: Philippa Foot And Moral Theory* (pp. 149–179). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198240464.003.0006

Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press.

Moosavi, P. (2020). Natural Goodness Without Natural History. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 78–100. https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12751

Quintelier, K., Speybroeck, L. V., & Braeckman, J. (2010). Normative Ethics Does Not Need a Foundation: It Needs More Science. *Acta Biotheoretica*, *59*(1), 29–51. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10441-010-9096-7

Thompson, M. (2008). *Life and Action. Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. Harvard University Press.

Walsh, D. (2015). *Organisms, Agency, and Evolution*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316402719