Reassuring Ourselves of the Reality of Ethical Reasons: What McDowell Should Take from Foot’s Ethical Naturalism

by

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Forthcoming in Dialogue
Abstract:

In this paper I argue that John McDowell’s objections to Phillipa Foot’s ethical naturalism do not justify a rejection of her views, but only clarifies what we can defensibly take from her position. Moreover, his comments suggest a way in which Foot’s naturalism may help to secure the realism McDowell defends in his own work. In seeing how Foot’s naturalism can reassure us of the reality of ethical reasons, we can understand how McDowell needs something like Foot’s naturalism in order to redeem his own realist aspirations for ethics.

Dans cet article je démontre que les objections de John McDowell au naturalisme éthique de Phillipa Foot ne justifient pas un rejet de ses opinions, mais ne font qu'éclaircir ce que nous pouvons prendre défendablement de sa position. En plus, les commentaires de McDowell suggèrent une façon dans laquelle le naturalisme de Foot peut aider à affermir le réalisme que McDowell défend dans sa propre oeuvre. En notant comment le naturalisme de Foot peut nous rassurer de la réalité des raisons éthiques, nous pouvons comprendre comment McDowell a besoin de quelque chose comme le naturalisme de Foot pour satisfaire à ses propres aspirations réalistes en éthique.
In “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” John McDowell argues against Philippa Foot’s attempt to construe ethical goodness as a form of natural goodness, what is good for us given our species’ nature. In its place, he encourages us to rid ourselves of our perceived need to ground ethics in our “first nature,” our nature insofar as it can be understood from an ethically neutral, scientific perspective. We should accept, instead, that ethics is a function of our “second nature,” our culturally acquired capacity to be responsive to reasons generally, and ethical reasons, in particular. Ridding ourselves of an unwarranted scientism which equates reality with the world as envisioned by the natural sciences, we can recognize the reasons which come into view for us in terms of our second nature as real features of the world and secure a form of ethical realism which does not suffer from the deficits of Foot’s ethical naturalism. Upon examination, however, it becomes apparent that McDowell does not adequately address all of the concerns we have with understanding our ethical forms of life merely in terms of our second nature. Moreover, a close reading of McDowell’s remarks on Foot’s naturalism suggests a way in which an appeal to our first nature is not only warranted, but helpful in securing a viable form of ethical realism. In fleshing out how something like Foot’s naturalism can, as McDowell suggests, reassure us of the reality of the ethical reasons to which we appeal in undertaking ethical forms of conduct, we can come to see a way in which McDowell, despite the emphasis he places on second nature, needs something like Foot’s ethical naturalism in order to redeem his own realist aspirations for ethics.

McDowell’s Critique of Foot

To begin, we should briefly consider those aspects of Foot’s account of natural goodness which are most relevant to McDowell’s concerns, in particular, the role it plays in her account of
practical rationality. Foot begins her essay, “Rationality and Goodness,” by considering the concerns of ‘‘the moral doubter’: one who has problems about the rationality of acting morally . . . This person wants to be convinced and may be particularly attached to morality, but has a worry about why ‘in the tight corner’ anyone has reason to do what there seems to be reason enough not to do . . .”¹ The moral doubter may be inclined, for instance, to take the justice of an action as a good reason to undertake it. But ‘in the tight corner’ s/he finds that the sacrifices s/he must make give her “reason enough not to do” it. So, s/he wonders, as we all do from time to time, whether it is really rational for her/him to take the justice of an action as a good reason to undertake it when there are so many self-interested reasons stacked against it.

Foot believes we can respond to these concerns by appealing to the natural goodness of ethical modes of conduct. She explicates the idea with the help of Michael Thompson’s analysis of “Aristotelian categoricals.” We say things like “cats have four legs” and “wolves hunt in packs.” But, as Thompson and Foot point out, such statements have a peculiar logical form. Though they are true of the species they concern, they need not be true of all of the individual members of that species. It is true that cats have four legs even though one of my cats only has three. My cat’s loss of one of her legs does not falsify our statement about cats as a species. Rather, we infer that there is something wrong or defective with my cat: she is “not as (she) should be.”² In this way, Aristotelian categoricals give rise to normative judgements regarding the traits of individual members of a species as naturally good or bad. But if this kind of natural normative judgement is possible for cats, then why not human beings? Certainly things would be much the same for statements such as “human beings have two legs, two arms, two eyes, etc.” A human being with only one functioning eye, for instance, is suffering from a defect in much the
way my three legged cat is. But can we say the same for someone who is not disposed to act ethically, who does not consider the justice of an action a good reason to undertake it?

Foot argues that we can. For instance, it is not that hard to see how our practice of making and keeping promises serves a vital need in the lives of social animals such as ourselves. To the extent that this practice is a necessary aspect of social forms of life which are natural for us and facilitate our survival and reproduction or, considered more expansively, our capacity to live well in a way which is natural for us, we can say that an individual who is not disposed to keep her/his promises is also in some way defective. Things are not as they should be with her/him just as they are not as they should be with my three legged cat. But if ethical action, such as keeping one’s promises, can be made out as naturally good for us, then we can understand how it is rational to keep our promises, how we have good reason to take the fact that a promise has been made as a good reason to keep it. For Foot, ethical reasoning, in which we take ethical considerations as reasons for our actions, is a form of practical rationality on a par with prudential reasoning which takes one’s long term self-interest as a good reason for action. Just as we would not question the rationality of taking the likely ill effects to my health of smoking as a good reason to quit, we should not question the rationality of taking the justice of an act as a good reason to undertake it. Each of these forms of reasoning have a place in a form of life which is natural for us in that taking such considerations as reasons for actions facilitates in different ways our capacity to live well.

McDowell does not dispute all of this. He accepts that we can form Aristotelian categoricals concerning what a species needs to live well, in an ethically neutral sense of that phrase. But he argues that there is no inferential connection between an Aristotelian categorical
concerning what a species needs and a statement concerning what any individual member of that species needs. Just as it does not follow from the true Aristotelian categorical, “Human beings have thirty-two teeth,” that I have thirty-two teeth, so it does not follow that I need such and such from any true Aristotelian categorical concerning how creatures like myself need such and such. I can accept that my species needs this or that trait or behavioral disposition, without necessarily taking it as a good reason for me to have that trait or disposition. To illustrate his point, he imagines a rational wolf able to reflect on the rationality of playing her/his part with the rest of the pack in hunting for prey. Such a wolf need not question the truth of the Aristotelian categorical that wolves hunt in packs nor that this is true because cooperative hunting is something in which wolves need to engage in order to live well. But none of this gives our wolf a good reason to join in and play her/his part in the hunt. Generalizing his point, McDowell writes,

what converts what animals of one’s species need into potential rational considerations is precisely what enables a rational animal to step back and view those considerations from a critical standpoint. So when they become potential reasons, their status as reasons is, by the same token, opened to question. . . . Reason does not just open our eyes to our nature, as members of the animal species which we belong to; it also enables and even obliges us to step back from it, in a way that puts its bearing on our practical problems into question. ⁶

Rationality distances us from our first nature by compelling us to confront the question of why it should have any rational bearing on our actions. But, as McDowell continues his argument, it need not leave us without any unproblematic reasons for action, aside from, perhaps, an appeal to self-interest. Becoming rational is a matter of acquiring a second nature, a specific capacity for reasoning, for taking certain considerations as reasons. Insofar as one’s acquisition of a second nature includes a moral education, one acquires a distinctively ethical mode of reasoning in which ethical considerations emerge as good reasons for one’s actions. And so, as
McDowell stresses, “the alteration in one’s make up that opened the authority of nature to
question is precisely the alteration that has put the dictates of virtue in place as authoritative.”
But these dictates cannot be brought into view as reasons from an ethically neutral, scientific
perspective onto our first nature. They only emerge for us as reasons from within an ethically
informed point of view acquired through an appropriate moral education.

As such, it is pointless to seek grounds for our ethical conduct outside that ethically
informed perspective itself. We must learn, rather, to accept that perspective as legitimate on its
own terms, as providing reasons for actions in a different, though no less rational, way than
science provides reasons for our beliefs about the world. McDowell’s ethical realism is, arguably,
founded on this idea. We secure objectivity for our judgements about how we should act in the
same way we secure it for our beliefs about the world - by finding good reasons for them. To this
extent, ethics and science, despite their all too obvious differences, are on a level playing field.
As he stresses this point elsewhere, “earning the notion of truth . . . (is) a matter of arguing that
we do after all have at our disposal a conception of reasons for ethical thinking which is
sufficiently rich and substantial to mark off rationally induced improvements in ethical stances
from alterations induced by merely manipulative persuasion.” Assuming we have such a
“sufficiently rich and substantial” conception of ethical reasoning, the only thing which shakes
our confidence in the reality of the ethical reasons we give for our conduct is an unwarranted
form of scientism that would equate reality with what can be brought into view through a practice
of scientific reasoning. Shaking off this “shallow metaphysics” leaves us confident in our
ethical modes of reasoning as ways of discerning distinctively ethical truths about how we should
act, truths which need no further foundation in anything purportedly more secure or more real,
truths which are, as McDowell insists elsewhere, there anyway regardless of whether our eyes are open to them: “In the picture I recommend, acquiring a second nature brings the demands of reason into view . . . It does not bring them into being.”  

This confidence in our ethically informed second nature to open our eyes to reasons need not, however, preclude a recognition of the role our first nature plays in relation to the second. In “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” McDowell begins making this point by stressing, as he has elsewhere, that our second nature has a foothold in our first nature: “Of course first nature matters,” he writes. “It matters, for one thing, because the innate endowment of human beings must put limits on the shapings of second nature that are possible for them.” But he soon goes on to suggest a different role for first nature that he has not discussed elsewhere:  

First nature matters not only like that, in helping to shape the space in which reflection must take place, but also in that first-natural facts can be part of what reflection takes into account. This is where we can register the relevance of what human beings need in order to do well, in a sense of ‘doing well’ that is not just Aristotle’s ‘acting in accordance with the virtues’. Consider a rational wolf whose acquisition of practical reason included being initiated into a tradition in which co-operative behaviour in the hunt is regarded as admirable, and so as worth going in for in its own right. What wolves need might figure in a bit of reflection that might help reassure him that when he acquired a second nature with that shape, his eyes were opened to real reasons for acting.  

McDowell’s acknowledgment of the way an appeal to our first nature can help to reassure us of the reality of the ethical reasons we grasp in terms of our second nature comes with two important qualifications, however. First, it presupposes the possession of the right sort of second nature. It is only from within the ethically informed perspective provided by our second nature itself, a perspective in which we already find ethical reasons for acting compelling, that the appeal to first nature can reassure us of the reality of those reasons. Hence, it cannot provide an
independent foundation for ethical reasoning, one that would be apparent from an ethically neutral point of view. For this reason, “it would not weigh with a wolf who has never acquired such a mode of valuation of conduct, or one who has come unstuck from it. And there would be no irrationality in thus failing to be convinced.” Here the stress is on reassurance. Appealing to the way in which wolves need to hunt cooperatively would still have no bearing on the deliberations of a rational wolf who did not already value cooperative hunting for its own sake. Second, the reassurance our first nature gives us of the reality of the ethical considerations we already see as good reasons for action must “operate at one remove from the subject’s rational will. What directly influences the will is the valuations of actions that have come to be second nature. This point,” as McDowell explains, “helps us to cope satisfactorily with the fact that virtue sometimes requires sacrifice.” What we need as a species cannot be our reason for undertaking virtuous actions. If the reason we are virtuous is because of the way the virtues play a role in enabling us to live well, we cease to have a reason to be virtuous whenever it requires confronting a danger to our lives. Only if we perform virtuous actions, as Aristotle stressed the virtuous do, “for their own sake,” can we understand how it can be rational to face danger for the sake of virtue.

Even with these qualifications, however, it is surprising to see McDowell acknowledge a role for our first nature in reassuring ourselves of the reality of ethical reasons when he has stressed that realism in ethics is a function of the richness of the reasons we have available. If the reasons we appeal to in ethics are sufficiently robust to enable us to “mark off rationally induced improvements in ethical stances from alterations induced by merely manipulative persuasion,” then why do we need an appeal to first nature to underwrite their reality? And just how does this
appeal do that? McDowell does not develop his comments sufficiently to see precisely what he has in mind. But a clue for how we might develop them ourselves can be found in an analogy he exploits elsewhere in helping to make a case for the reality of ethical values.

A Role for First Nature in McDowell’s Ethical Realism

In “Values and Secondary Qualities,” McDowell, for the most part, develops an analogy between, as the title suggests, values and secondary qualities. We cannot understand what it is for an object to be red apart from its being such as to look red under certain conditions. There is a need to refer to our subjective, perceptual response to the object in order to make sense of how an object could be red. But, as McDowell argues, this does not entail that objects cannot really be red. If what it means for an object to be red is for it to be such as to look red under certain conditions, then it certainly is the case that some objects really are red, really are such as to look that way. We can understand the reality of values, he suggests, in a similar way as involving an unavoidable reference to our subjective response to the world. Just as an object can really be red in the sense that it is such as to look red, so an action can really be wrong in the sense that it is such as to evoke an evaluative response from us to the effect that it should not be done. But, as he notes, the analogy with secondary qualities breaks down at this point since ethically wrong actions are not such as to causally evoke that evaluative response. They are, rather, only such as to merit it.¹⁷

To develop this thought he draws on a different analogy with fear. We can “make sense of fear by seeing it as a response to objects that merit such a response, or as the intelligibly defective product of a propensity towards responses that would be intelligible in this way.”¹⁸ It seems unproblematic to say that some things really are such as to merit our fear - a natural
predator or a loaded gun pointed in our direction, for instance. And to say that is to do more than reassure ourselves that there is nothing “odd” or “out of turn” with finding them fearful, as Simon Blackburn allows; that we are not “making a mistake” in doing so\(^9\) - a reassurance we could also get in being told that a move on the part of a hockey player merited the judgement that s/he is offside. The fact that natural predators or loaded guns merit fear is a fact about our environment to which we should be able to attend in order to be able to survive, reproduce, and more generally live well, in an ethically neutral sense of that phrase. It is a fact about what we need - in this case, what we need to avoid or treat with heightened caution - in the same sense in which Foot’s account of natural goodness references facts about what a species needs. As such, being insensitive to this fact or, perhaps, being deathly afraid of teddy bears but not of loaded guns, would surely count as “defective” for us, as McDowell suggests. Any of us who lacked the ability to discern what really does and does not merit fear would tend not to live well.

But much the same can be said for some actions meriting our judgement that they are right or wrong. Assuming no important qualifying circumstances, a broken promise merits the judgement that it is wrong, really merits it, insofar as we are a distinctive sort of social animal, creatures who have need of a practice of making and keeping promises in order to facilitate social forms of life that play a role in our capacity to survive, reproduce, and generally, to live well. That broken promises merit an attitude of disapproval is as much a fact about our environment as that loaded guns merit fear. It is a fact to which we should be able to attend in order to live well. And, correspondingly, to lack the ability to attend to this fact is a defect. Someone who is unable to see a promise made as a good reason to keep it suffers from a defect in the sense that they are missing a capacity that is a vital part of a social form of life which is, as Foot would put it,
naturally good for us.

In both cases, however, it is the grounding of these facts in our first nature which enables us to see them as real. Without this it is difficult to see how it could be the case that some actions really merit being judged right or wrong any more than, to use one of Blackburn’s examples, a new fashion might really merit being judged ‘divine’ by a community of fashion designers. This is a critical point which Blackburn brings to bear against McDowell’s ethical realism whose force depends on that realism being cashed out entirely in terms of our second nature. Any normatively organized practice or form of life can easily give rise to judgements of real facts, in a sense. To the extent that a community of fashion designers can agree on what is divine, establishing shared standards of judgement, we can say that they notice something about these fashions which the rest of us are missing. From the point of view of their shared practice, it is a fact, a real fact, that some fashions really are divine and others are not. As Blackburn has stressed, given a minimalist view of truth where the meaning of ‘it is true that \( p \)’ is no different than ‘\( p \)’, there is a much too easy “climb” to be made from ‘\( p \)’ to ‘it is true that \( p \)’ to ‘it is really and truly a fact that \( p \)’ and so on. If truth follows reason, as McDowell contends, then our fashion designers can confidently claim that it is true, really true that some fashion is divine, as long as their standards of assessment give them sufficiently robust reasons to think so.

But since the practice of the fashion designers is not grounded in our first nature, is not a practice creatures like ourselves need in order to live well, it would be a stretch to speak of those of us who just don’t get it (that some design is divine while another is not) as suffering from a defect. The sense in which we are missing something is much the same as when someone who does not understand the rules of hockey cannot recognize when a player is offside. In the context
of the game, they surely are missing something. It is a fact, a real fact, whether or not someone is
offside. But if this is all we mean by the reality of an ethical value, then not keeping a promise is
really wrong only because of how we have organized the rules of the ‘game’ of making and
keeping promises. Ethical realism becomes indistinguishable from a kind of ethical
conventionalism. But a significant part of what we intuitively look for in asking after the reality
of ethical values is a reason to think that they are not merely conventional in nature. We are not
just making this stuff up. Or, if there is a sense in which we are making it up, insofar as our
ethical practices are, just like every other practice, a human construction, there is an equally good
sense in which we could not do otherwise. The ‘game’ of ethics is not optional for us. As
Michael Thompson has recently put the point, following Foot in arguing for the need to base our
understanding of ethics on the notion of a form of life which is natural to our species, “we can
accept that promising must rest on a ‘convention’ and still insist that not just anything can be
‘convened upon’.”

In order to steer clear of the threat of this sort of conventionalism, McDowell needs more
than just a way to establish that ethical reasons are robust enough for us to distinguish rationally
motivated from irrationally motivated changes in our ethical attitudes as this is possible in the
utterly conventional context of our attitudes toward a game. Inadequately informed about the
rules of hockey, I may not believe a player was offside and, upon hearing a good explanation of
the rules, come to have a very good reason to change my mind. This could be distinguished from
irrationally changing my mind on the basis of the cheers of the home crowd wanting the penalty
to be called. Nor is it sufficient to rightly stress the way in which McDowell’s understanding of
second nature makes sense of our capacity to be critical of our social traditions. To have my eyes
opened to ethical reasons is also, certainly, to acquire the capacity to question the validity of those reasons. But, as McDowell is careful to note, this capacity for critical rationality can only be “Neurathian” in character, involving the placing of one or some of our values into question in terms of others, not looking outside the realm of what we have already come to value in terms of our second nature for grounds to question or support it in part or in whole. And this sort of critical rationality is also possible within the context of a game. To switch sports for a moment, I might question the cogency of the rule in the NFL which does not prohibit, and so permits, a defensive player to run out of bounds during a play as inconsistent with the rule which prohibits players on the kicking team from doing so or the more general principle that the game needs to be confined to the field of play. And it is easy to imagine our fashion designers critically assessing a widely accepted judgement that a particular fashion is or is not divine in similar Neurathian style, appealing to other instances of divine fashions which they believe to be, in certain respects, inconsistent with that otherwise widely accepted judgement. But such exercises of critical rationality would not convince us that what we are reasoning about is anything other than conventional in character. What McDowell needs to counter suggestions of conventionalism is a way of showing that trafficking in ethical reasons in the way we do is not optional for us in the way it is for how we sometimes traffic in reasons for thinking someone is offside in hockey or thinking a rule which permits defensive players to run out of bounds is ill conceived or even, perhaps, thinking a widely shared assessment of a fashion as divine is mistaken.

We could also think about this point in relation to McDowell’s comment that “acquiring a second nature brings the demands of reason into view . . . It does not bring them into being.” In a way, we could say exactly the same about the reasons which to which are eyes are opened with
the game of hockey or football or our imaginary practice of fashion designers. It is not my acquisition of the skill for playing or following the game of hockey - the acquisition of a kind of second nature - which brings into being the reason why a particular hockey player should be construed as offside. Even if I have not acquired that second nature, and so have not had my eyes opened to that reason, there is still a good reason to think that. As such, McDowell’s criteria for the reality of reasons has been set too low, bringing in wholly conventional reasons we would intuitively want to contrast with any significant sense in which we might want to speak of ethical reasons as real.

There is no sense, however, in which we could say that there is a good reason for thinking a hockey player offside prior to the invention of the game of hockey. This is in contrast to our reasons for being ethical. These reasons were not brought into being by what we could call, in analogy to the invention of games and practices, the historical emergence of the practices and forms of life we become skilled at when we acquire a second nature. Inasmuch as our need for justice, for example, is grounded in the exigencies of our first nature, the needs of the distinctive kind of social animal which we are, a reason for being just is brought into being with that first nature. And this enables us to say more than that ‘acquiring a second nature brings the demands of reason into view, but does not bring them into being’ as it is not even the historical emergence of the practices we become skilled at in acquiring a second nature which brings ethical reasons into being. In this way we can speak of the reality of ethical reasons in a way which clearly distinguishes them from the sense in which there is really a reason for thinking a hockey player offside. Apart from this sort of reference to our first nature, it is difficult to envision how McDowell could adequately draw this distinction.26
We need, therefore, to do more than rid ourselves of an unwarranted scientism in order to see how ethical values or ethical reasons could be, in the senses of the term which matter to us here, real. Leaving our ethical forms of life floating in our second nature, as one among many practices and dispositions we may or may not acquire depending on our socialization, leaves us with the thought that they may be on a par with other merely conventional practices which, in their own way, also open our eyes to reasons. It is only by anchoring the ethical aspect of our second nature in our first, in the way Foot’s naturalism does, that we can reassure ourselves that our ethical values and reasons are real in the sense of not being merely conventional. It is, of course, far from clear that McDowell would agree that our first nature can play a role in reassuring ourselves of the reality of our ethical reasons in the way I have sketched here. On the basis of his brief remarks in “Two Sorts of Naturalism” and the possibilities for developing those remarks latent in the analogy to fear he endorses in “Values and Secondary Qualities,” I believe that he could. But my main point is not that he would agree with any of this, but that he should. Without exploiting an appeal to our first nature, along the lines of Foot’s ethical naturalism, McDowell’s ethical realism remains haunted by the thought that ethics may be merely a kind of game, a game we might play differently or even not at all.

Can Natural Goodness Give us a Reason to Be Ethical?

If the natural goodness of ethical forms of life can reassure us of the reality of ethical values and reasons, then can it not also provide a reason for why we should be ethical, as Foot argues? Returning to our rational wolf, McDowell imagines her/him recognizing that cooperative hunting is naturally good for wolves. But he does not see how this gives the wolf a reason to cooperate since he does not accept that there is an inferential connection between an Aristotelian
categorical which states what wolves need and what this individual wolf needs. As we have seen, McDowell notes how we can recognize that “Human beings have thirty-two teeth” along with the fact that I am a human being without it following from this that I have thirty two teeth. Both Foot and Thompson, however, acknowledge this logical feature of Aristotelian categoricals. And yet they still argue that they have relevance for evaluative judgements concerning the way individuals ought to be. Foot identifies a crucial mediating element in this inferential connection: that the feature identified in the Aristotelian categorical must “play a part in the life” of the creature. To take her example, though it may be true that “the blue tit has a round blue patch on its head,” as long as that feature plays no important role in the life of the blue tit, no role in the “self-maintenance” or “reproduction” of the individual, it does not follow that a blue tit which lacked that round blue patch would be defective or not as it should be. But with a similar judgement concerning peacocks, that “the male peacock has a brightly colored tail,” where those bright colors play a role in attracting mates and, thus, in securing reproductive success, we can say that any male peacock without a brightly colored tail is not as he should be, is a defective male peacock.\textsuperscript{28}

It could be objected, of course, that it is still possible for a male peacock with a brightly colored tail to be reproductively unsuccessful. He could be killed by a natural predator before securing a mate for himself, for instance. It might even be the case that his huge plumage is itself responsible for his untimely death, preventing him from running from the predator as quickly as he otherwise could. Foot acknowledges this point, however. In claiming that a trait is naturally good for a creature, we are not claiming that it guarantees survival and reproduction, but only that it makes an animal fit to survive and reproduce. In considering the natural goodness of
swiftness in deers for escaping predators, she stresses that “in some circumstances even the
greatest speed possible for this type of animal would not be enough. Moreover, by chance it may
sometimes be that the fastest deer fleeing from one predator is the very one that gets caught in the
trap.” That a trait makes one fit to survive and reproduce does not mean that one will
necessarily survive and reproduce if one has it.

Nor does it mean that one cannot survive and reproduce without that trait. Rosalind
Hursthourse points out, in this regard, how a doctor’s advise that I should give up smoking to
live a long and healthy life can be very sound advice despite the occasional presence of smokers
who live long and healthy lives. What we need to undermine the soundness of that advice is not
just occasional cases of smokers living long and healthy lives but “a clearly identifiable pattern” of
them that would undermine our confidence in a causal connection between smoking and
diseases such as lung cancer, heart disease, and the like. If it appears to be merely a stroke of
good luck that some smokers live long and healthy lives, then it can still be true that smoking is
bad for our health and the doctor’s advice is still very well taken. It is in this way that our
advice that the rational wolf should join in with the others in the hunt is also very well taken. Not
that s/he might, through a stroke of good luck, still make out quite well not doing her/his bit with
the others or, through a stroke of bad luck, not do well despite or even because of joining in, but
that participating in the hunt gives her/him the best chance to do well. Such advice would surely
be taken by any rational wolf, assuming it is not rational to stake how one’s life goes on sheer
luck, gambling on the role of the dice, as it were.

On closer examination, however, it is apparent that McDowell does not conceive of our
rational wolf as just gambling that the dice will roll her/his way. Fleshing out his example,
McDowell asks us to imagine that the wolf is not just distanced from her/his “natural impulses,” but impressed with the thought that s/he “should transcend his wolfish nature in pursuit of his individual interest, exploiting the less intelligent wolves who continue to let their lives be structured by what wolves need.” As McDowell goes on to elaborate it, this “Calliclean or Nietzschean stance . . . involves reconceiving the project of partially transcending his nature as a project of properly realizing his nature. . . . The concept of nature figures here, without incoherence, in two quite different ways: as ‘mere’ nature, and as something whose realization involves transcending that.” Viewing our imaginary case in this way makes it clearer as to how the rational wolf is challenging the inference from what wolves generally need to what s/he, as an individual wolf, needs. Our rational wolf has become convinced that though s/he shares much of the ‘mere’ nature of wolves generally, there is more to her/his nature than that. It is in her/his nature to rise above the ‘mere’ nature of wolves generally and realize something else, something more distinctive of her/him.

Construed in this way, McDowell’s case of the rational wolf would appear to leave us with an empirical question regarding the accuracy of our wolf’s understanding of her/his nature rather than a philosophical question about the cogency of Foot’s naturalism. If the wolf is right, then we should withdraw our advice to join in the hunt not because her/his first nature is irrelevant to the question of what s/he has reason to do, but because s/he has a first nature that is different in significant ways from the ‘mere’ nature of other wolves. As one might expect, though, McDowell does not see things in this way. He dismisses the empirical question raised by the case of the rational wolf as irrelevant to his point. “Of course he may be quite wrong in thinking his project is workable, or in thinking it will be satisfactory to him, wolf that he is. But
perhaps he is not wrong; and if he is, we cannot show him he is by reaffirming the facts about what wolves need.”\textsuperscript{33} McDowell is right, of course, that we could not show our wolf that s/he is wrong merely by reiterating our Aristotelian categorical about what wolves need since our wolf does not challenge this as a true observation about the ‘mere’ nature of wolves generally. It is only its adequacy to her/his nature that s/he questions. It is hard to see, though, how this does not still leave us with the empirical question as to whether s/he is right about her/his nature - which is just what Foot’s position would lead us to expect. It is these sorts of empirical considerations that Foot considers the only plausible way to argue against what she characterizes as the “immoralist” positions of a Callicles or Nietzsche who, in a way that is similar to our rational Calliclean/Nietzschean wolf, believes that we are wrong in thinking they should value cooperative (in our case, ethical) behavior. Regarding an assessment of Nietzsche’s critique of ‘the morality of pity,’ she writes, “We are now, of course, in an area in which philosophy can claim no special voice: facts about human life are in question and so no philosopher has a special right to speak.”\textsuperscript{34}

It is important to recognize here that it is not essential to Foot’s position that we insist that an Aristotelian categorical concerning what wolves, generally, need must be true of any individual wolf. Though this is not a point that figures prominently in her account, Foot accepts that “since species themselves are subject to change . . . Aristotelian categoricals must take account of sub-species adapted to local conditions.”\textsuperscript{35} And so, for instance, we could imagine a scenario where human civilization has encroached on the habitat of a population of wolves, leading to selection pressures which no longer favor hunting in packs but, rather, begging from tourists and the like. Given enough time, it is easy to imagine our wolves adapting to their new
environment in such a way they lose their disposition to hunt in packs and become skilled at making a living for themselves in a more solitary fashion. It seems wrong to say of this “sub-species” of wolves that it is naturally good that they hunt in packs or that they are defective in not doing so. Assessments of what is naturally good or defective for a species need to be sensitive to variance in the population. But this sensitivity to variance need not undermine the very idea of making judgements about what is or is not naturally good for a species. It only leads us to qualify such judgements. In this case, we would want to be careful to make an exception to our judgement concerning the natural goodness of hunting in packs for wolves, generally, for this particular population of wolves, coping with an unusual type of environment for wolves. This exception, however, still leaves our initial judgement intact. For most wolves, living in environments more typical of wolves, it would still be true that it is naturally good for them to hunt in packs. And this fact should count as a good reason for any such wolf to do just that or to reassure her/him that it is rational to do so.

Foot’s ethical naturalism is committed to a philosophical thesis regarding the relation between natural goodness and practical rationality and a number of empirical theses regarding various forms of conduct as naturally good or defective for different sorts of creatures. Of course, if there is no empirical support for her claim that ethical modes of conduct are naturally good for creatures like ourselves then it fails to provide us any reassurance regarding the rationality of ethical conduct for us and is, to that extent, not as philosophically interesting as it would otherwise be. So it is not as if we can be indifferent to empirical questions in considering her position. But it is important to keep the philosophical and empirical dimensions of her thought distinct enough to recognize the ways in which the latter become relevant to the former. In the
case of McDowell’s rational wolf, the questions raised are empirical in nature and not essential to her core philosophical position concerning the relevance of a creature’s first nature to what forms of conduct it has good reason to undertake.

Can the Rationality of Ethical Conduct be Assessed from an Ethically Neutral Vantage Point?

Thus far, it appears that just as our first nature can play a role in reassuring ourselves of the reality of ethical reasons, it can also play a role in helping us to understand how we have a reason to be ethical. But we have not yet considered the two qualifying points McDowell stressed in granting the first point: that 1) it can only do so for someone with a second nature in terms of which they already find ethical reasons compelling, not from an ethically neutral point of view outside that second nature, and 2) that it cannot directly influence the rational will, serving as our reason for being ethical. It is possible that taking these qualifications into account would seriously complicate, if not undermine, what I have claimed so far regarding what McDowell should take from Foot’s ethical naturalism. It is important, therefore, to consider both their cogency and their impact on our capacity to reference our first nature to reassure ourselves of the reality of ethical reasons.

Taking his first qualification first, we should return to McDowell’s case of the rational wolf and ask whether the rationality of cooperating in the hunt is only apparent insofar as our wolf already shares in a form of life in terms of which its value is apparent. Would our reflections on what wolves need not be compelling for a wolf who, as McDowell puts it, “has never acquired such a mode of valuation of conduct, or one who has become unstuck from it”? Would it be rational for such a wolf to remain unconvinced that s/he should join in the hunt, as
McDowell also stresses\textsuperscript{37} It is hard to see how this could be so as long as we are right that our wolf still has the nature of wolves generally who need to hunt cooperatively. S/he should be able to recognize, in principle at least, that s/he has a good reason to join in the hunt, despite the way s/he just does not get the ‘attraction’ it holds for the other wolves. And if s/he is not convinced, how could we conclude that s/he is being rational? S/he is a wolf and, as such, needs to hunt with other wolves to survive, reproduce and, more generally, live well in a way that is natural for wolves.

Rosalind Hursthouse, whose work takes up and develops Foot’s views, has also advanced McDowell’s case for our inability to make such judgements from an ethically neutral vantage point. She agrees with Foot that we can form judgements about the naturally beneficial character of the virtues. But, she argues, there is no reason to expect these considerations to be compelling for an immoralist who rejects our positive appraisal of the virtues. Though judgements about “human nature and how human life goes” are not obviously evaluative judgements in the same way ethical judgements are, they are still not adequately construed as empirical judgements. For want of better terms, she characterizes them as “ethical but non-evaluative beliefs” because of the way they are “part and parcel of (an) ethical (or immoralist) outlook.”\textsuperscript{38} The natural benefits of a virtuous life are only apparent to the virtuous because of their positive evaluation of the virtues themselves.

Hursthouse has several arguments for her claim. First, she argues that what the virtuous assess as a benefit, the immoralist assesses as a disadvantage. For instance, “someone points out in public that I have not done something I promised to do. The immoralist regards himself as having been put at a disadvantage; now he will have to keep the promise or come up with an
excuse. I regard myself as benefitted, because I had clean forgotten and can now make sure I keep the promise.” But unless we are going to take these assessments at face value,

Hursthouse’s point seems unconvincing. Given their own projects, the one virtuous and the other not, each is right regarding what is beneficial or not for the pursuit of those projects. But the beneficial character of the event in question cannot really be decided without an appraisal of the beneficial character of those projects themselves. And here it is surely possible that the virtuous person is right to regard herself as benefitted and the immoralist is wrong to think otherwise because the virtuous project is beneficial while the other is not.

Hursthouse goes on to argue, however, that the immoralist would have rejoinders for every point made by the virtuous in an argument between them regarding the beneficial nature of their respective projects. For instance, “The virtuous point to the occasions when people who live like him are stabbed in the back by their so-called friends; he points to the occasions when the virtuous bring disaster and loss on themselves, the virtuous say this was just bad luck, he says it’s only to be expected, and so on and so forth.” But this only shows that the question between them is a difficult one, not that it is empirically unresolvable or that there could not be evidence to show one of the positions more likely true. This is especially apparent when we note that Hursthouse correctly stresses that what matters here is not just pointing to isolated cases of virtuous people faring badly or those without virtue faring well. What the immoralist needs to show is a “clearly identifiable pattern” in which the virtuous fare badly not merely because of bad luck but because virtue does not make one fit for living well. Though we should certainly consider such a possibility, it seems plausible to assume that a reasonably strong empirical case could be marshaled against the immoralist’s position.
Finally, Hursthouse points out that “neither side believes what it does about how life works on the basis of even local, let alone worldwide, observation or statistical analysis.” This is true enough. But it does not preclude the possibility of empirical observation. In fact, the wealth of recent literature on the evolution of altruism and morality could be construed as just such a research project insofar as it tackles the question of whether and under what sorts of conditions altruistic and/or moral behavior and sentiments might be adaptive and so selected to evolve. Of course, none of this sort of research is *likely* to actually convince an immoralist that s/he should change her ways. At most, it would give us reasons that should be convincing for creatures like ourselves, not reasons that likely will be convincing for all of us. Some people, after all, are just not open to certain sorts of reasons. But that should not shake our conviction that the reasons we find compelling for the rationality of ethical modes of conduct for creatures like ourselves *ought* to be convincing for any such creature, regardless of whether they are open to them or not.

This conclusion is most compelling, though, when we consider one more point. Thus far, I have stressed that it does not take a rational wolf committed to the value of cooperative hunting to recognize, in principle at least, that s/he has a reason to cooperate in the hunt. But, in fact, it does not even take a wolf. Anyone who knows something about what wolves need can recognize that our wolf needs to hunt with the rest of the pack and that her/his inability to recognize its value is a defect, something that in the ordinary lives of wolves will tend to undermine their ability to live well. Coming to such a judgement only requires an intelligent capacity to appraise the natural needs of a species and the forms of life appropriate to creatures with such needs. It does not require being a participant in a form of life for which such behaviors are regarded as
good for oneself. It is a judgement available from an informed third person perspective onto that form of life.

Reassuring Ourselves of the Rationality of Ethical Reasoning

McDowell’s second qualification appears to have more merit, however. As he notes, the reassurance our first nature can give us of the reality of ethical reasons cannot directly influence the will, serving as the reason why we undertake ethical modes of conduct. If that were to happen, he warns, we would lose the ability to make sense of how virtuous behavior may require self-sacrifice. This aspect of McDowell’s thesis appears to concern not so much our purported inability to recognize ethical conduct as rational by appeal to a notion of its natural goodness, but rather the inability of such reasoning to give us a distinctively ethical reason for undertaking ethical conduct. As he notes in relation to Aristotle, a virtuous person performs virtuous actions for their own sake. A person who only performed virtuous actions because of the way they contributed to their capacity to live well would not be performing them for their own sake, but for the sake of something else. Such reasoning would appear, therefore, to have the effect of undermining the distinctively ethical character of otherwise ethical conduct, the distinctively ethical character of the reasons to which a virtuous person appeals in undertaking ethical actions.

McDowell is absolutely right about this. But his point does not so much tell against Foot’s account of natural goodness as it helps to clarify how we should take it. Foot frames her position on the natural goodness of ethical conduct in terms of an account of the practical rationality of ethical modes of reasoning, modes of reasoning in which we take the justice of an action, for instance, as a good reason in itself to undertake such an action. Indeed, she suggests defining the virtuous precisely in terms of their capacity for ethical modes of reasoning in which
“for them certain considerations count as reasons for action, and as reasons of a given weight.” Construed in this way, the appeal to natural goodness is not an appeal to something which directly influences the rational will, but to something which can reassure us that, in taking ethical considerations as good reasons in themselves to undertake certain actions, we are being rational. This is how the appeal to natural goodness functions for Foot’s “moral doubter.” She notes that the moral doubter need not be “in any doubt about what is right and wrong, and is therefore different from an immoralist such as Thrasymachus in Plato’s Republic, who insists that justice is not a virtue but rather ‘silly good nature.’” But s/he worries that, ‘in the tight corner’ where it seems very costly to her/him personally to act virtuously, it may be irrational for her/him to do so merely because it is virtuous. Understanding the natural goodness of virtuous action for creatures like her/himself is a way of reassuring her/himself of the rationality of her/his own distinctively ethical forms of reasoning.

In order to avoid the problem McDowell highlights, Foot’s account needs to be construed, as Michael Thompson does in Life and Action, as a “two-level account” in which we justify the rationality or goodness of individual actions by a justification of the rationality or goodness of a practice to which they belong. Drawing on Rawls’ account of a practice in his essay, “Two Concepts of Rules,” Thompson argues that a practice “must include a certain type of general ‘deontic’ judgement.” Using the example of making and keeping promises, Thompson notes that a “faithful agent” keeps her/his promises merely because of her/his “practical judgement that promises are to be kept, pacta sunt servanda.” This sort of deontic judgement is constitutive of the practice of making and keeping promises. Rawls utilizes this thought to show, in particular, how utilitarianism can make better sense than is usually supposed of our ethical intuitions about
making and keeping promises by restricting itself to a justification of the practice of making and keeping promises. In seeing the practice as rational on utilitarian grounds, we can also see the acts taken in accord with the practice as rational, but not in a way which would involve us undertaking them for reasons of utility.\footnote{47} Since it is constitutive of the practice itself that the acts in accord with it be undertaken for their own sake, we can see the rationality of a form of deontic judgement which does not coincide with the form of judgement exercised in our assessment of the practice itself. We come to see the rationality, in utilitarian terms, of a quite different form of practical reasoning.

As Thompson notes, Rawls’ defence of a utilitarian justification of practices is not primarily concerned with defending utilitarianism but with defending the logic of a justification of the rationality or goodness of individual actions which accord with a practice by a justification of the rationality or goodness of that practice. What Thompson refers to as the “standard of appraisal” we bring to bear in evaluating the rationality or goodness of the practice is irrelevant to the logic of that form of justification.\footnote{48} And what we have with Foot’s form of ethical naturalism would appear to fit that logical form. Rather than provide a direct justification of individual acts of keeping promises and the like, she provides a direct justification of the practice of making and keeping promises as an indispensable element of a form of life which is naturally good for us. Insofar as a distinctive form of practical reasoning is constitutive of that practice - keeping our promises merely because “promises are to be kept, \textit{pacta sunt servanda}” - we can see how we are rational in engaging in that form of reasoning: how it is rational for us to take the ethical character of an action as a good reason, in itself, to undertake it.

That Foot’s account of natural goodness should be understood in this way is, perhaps,
most apparent in her attempt to distinguish her understanding of the rationality of making and keeping promises from a utilitarian account. Recognizing that her account might be misunderstood as having a “utilitarian tenor,” leaving it open to “the objection that in rare cases where (a promise) could be broken without the slightest risk of harm or annoyance to anyone, a promise would be without moral force,” she responds by appealing to the “special kind of linguistic device that humans have developed for themselves” in connection with making and keeping promises which creates “an obligation that (although not absolute) contains in its nature an obligation that harmlessness does not annul.”

Though she advances this thought without much elaboration, it appears to gesture in the direction of what Thompson takes from Rawls: that the practice of making and keeping promises involves a distinctive form of deontic judgement that cannot be undermined without undermining the practice itself. In recognizing the rationality of the practice of making and keeping promises we also recognize the rationality of that distinctive form of deontic judgement, that “special linguistic device” that plays a constitutive role in it.

This is a point Hursthouse recognizes as well in the way she frames her own version of ethical naturalism as evaluating “character traits, not directly actions or lives.” Elaborating with the example of a gangster, she writes “A gangster is bad qua human being, if he is, because a gangster is, as such, callous, unjust, dishonest, reckless, and thereby lacks charity, justice, honesty, and courage (at the very least).” Ethical naturalism is not relevant in evaluating the life of the gangster as bad, but in determining whether it is rational to consider the sorts of virtues the gangster lacks as genuine virtues, character traits which facilitate a life well lived for creatures like ourselves. Once we see the rationality of being virtuous, which means seeing the virtue of an
act as a good reason, in itself, to undertake it, then we can see the rationality of a point of view from which the life of the gangster can be evaluated as bad. Seeing this point also enables us to see a way in which McDowell and Hursthouse may be right in insisting on the way in which ethical naturalism presupposes a point of view which is not ethically neutral. As a “two-level” account, it cannot be understood to displace what we would intuitively regard as a moral point of view onto the question of whether a particular act or life is good in favor of a naturalistic perspective that would evaluate that act or life from an ethically neutral point of view. Rather, it is an account which is meant to reassure us of the rationality of bringing a moral point of view onto our consideration of actions and lives.

Understood in this way, it is possible to frame a response to one otherwise compelling objection to Foot’s and Hursthouse’s views. Chrisoula Andreou notes how a naturally sound approach to life for a creature may be premised on a combination of different behavioral strategies adapted for different circumstances. For example, it is conceivable that some mammals might be disposed to care for their healthy seeming offspring but not for those which seem particularly weak.\(^{51}\) Similarly, it is not only possible, but plausible that a naturally sound approach to life for a human being could consist of being both just, in some circumstances, and unjust in others.\(^{52}\) David Copp and David Sobel raise this same point when they question the idea that “a fully virtuous life is predictably better than a life that is less than fully virtuous.”\(^{53}\) If Foot’s and Hursthouse’s position is construed as a defence of the rationality of a certain kind of life, one that is fully virtuous, this point about the “less than fully virtuous” life is a compelling objection to it. It is highly unlikely that a defence of the fully virtuous, as opposed to the somewhat virtuous, life could be successfully staged on purely naturalistic grounds regarding
what sorts of lives are naturally good for us. But their position need not be construed in this way.
Understood as a defence of the rationality of ethical practices with their own distinctively ethical
forms of reasoning, Foot and Hursthouse are on much more defensible grounds, as a
responsiveness to distinctively ethical considerations for action is surely a capacity that makes us
fit for living well in terms of the distinctively social forms of life which are natural for us. It is a
capacity which plays a vital role in enabling both those who are more virtuous as well as those
who are less, but still somewhat virtuous, to do well.

Understanding Foot’s and Hursthouse’s views as committed to a naturalistic defence of
the fully virtuous life is to understand them as displacing our ethical modes of consideration of
actions and lives with a different form of assessment which does not gauge their value in terms of
how virtuous they are, but in terms of how well they enable us to live. And it is easy to see how
this sort of understanding could be taken from a view which identifies, as Foot’s does, ethical
goodness with a form of natural goodness. If ethical goodness is merely a form of natural
goodness, it would seem that we could simply substitute distinctively ethical considerations of
actions and lives with considerations involving the way actions and lives facilitate our capacity to
live well. But understanding her thesis in this way does not adequately capture her defence of the
practical rationality of distinctively ethical modes of reasoning in a way that Thompson’s “two-
level account” does. To say that ethical goodness is a form of natural goodness need only or
should only be to say that ethical practices are naturally good, that they have a role to play in the
consolidation of a form of life which is naturally good for us. It should not be to say that these
latter sorts of considerations can be substituted for the distinctively ethical forms of assessment
that are constitutive of those ethical practices.
This is a point, however, that is consistent with the idea that Foot’s naturalistic considerations provide reasons for adopting a distinctively moral point of view onto life from a vantage point that is itself ethically neutral. For anyone who can see that a distinctive form of deontic judgement is constitutive of a practice which is rational for its participants to adopt can also recognize that it is rational for them to reason in the way they do. Robert Frank’s evolutionary account of moral sentiments is a case in point here. In a nutshell, Frank argues that merely appearing honest or trustworthy without actually being honest or trustworthy, without having a genuine concern with being honest or trustworthy for its own sake, is not an adaptive strategy in a population where most can make generally reliable judgements about each other’s character. In that kind of population, it is more likely than not that those who are really dishonest and untrustworthy will be found out, with materially disadvantageous consequences to themselves in terms of their ability to flourish in an environment which requires social cooperation. And, for the same reason, it is also more likely than not that those who genuinely care about being honest or trustworthy will be recognized as such, with materially advantageous consequences to themselves. As long as most individuals are not capable of having the wool pulled completely over their eyes all the time, there will be, therefore, a tendency for a capacity for genuinely ethical behavior to evolve in which individuals take such things as being honest or trustworthy as good reasons, in themselves, to undertake an action.⁵⁴

If convincing, Frank’s account shows that, in a specific sort of population, it is rational for individuals to take ethical considerations as good reasons, in themselves, to undertake an action. His evolutionary account of moral sentiments can, in this way, be seen as a contribution to our understanding of the natural goodness of genuinely ethical practices for which a distinctive
form of deontic judgement is constitutive. But there is nothing about Frank’s analysis which presupposes that he is himself a virtuous person who cares about being honest or trustworthy for its own sake. The analysis could just as well have been carried out, at least in principle, by an immoralist who has never cared about virtue and is, perhaps, merely curious about how it could be adaptive for so many others to do so. Being able to see a creature’s first nature as giving that creature a reason to seek virtue not as a means to something else, but for its own sake, does not presuppose participation in a form of life which actually values virtue for its own sake.

Having Distinctively Ethical Reasons In View

Still, it could be objected that an immoralist might come to understand how it is rational for a generally ethical population to take ethical considerations as reasons for undertaking ethical actions. S/he might even come to understand, in principle at least, how it would be rational for her/him to do so as well. But this would not be sufficient for the immoralist to be able to take ethical considerations, in themselves, as reasons for undertaking ethical actions. An immoralist who does not already value virtuous action for its own sake could be characterized as someone who is blind to distinctively ethical reasons for action. Understanding the natural goodness and, hence, the rationality of distinctively ethical modes of reasoning would not suddenly give her/him sight. This becomes clear when we think about how such an immoralist might begin to integrate these insights regarding the natural goodness of ethical modes of reasoning into her/his own life. S/he might begin to train herself, for instance, to take the injustice of an action as a cue or prompt to oppose it. But it would remain only a cue or prompt and not a reason for her/his action insofar as s/he does not genuinely care about justice for its own sake. S/he does not really find the injustice of an action a good reason, in itself, to oppose it. Rather, s/he recognizes that it
is rational for a creature like her/himself to take the injustice of an action as a reason to oppose it and does her/his best to mimic this distinctive style of deontic judgement. S/he will never be in a position to see the injustice of an action, in itself, as a good reason to oppose it insofar as s/he only opposes it because of the way justice contributes to a form of life which is naturally good for her/him.

Something along these lines seems right. And what it shows, I think, is the way our ethical sentiments form indispensable conditions for the possibility of genuinely ethical reasons coming into view for us. The only way to see the injustice of an action as a good reason, in itself, to oppose that action is by way of caring about justice for its own sake. For a genuinely ethical creature, the sort of considerations Foot could advance about the natural goodness of taking the injustice of an act as a good reason to oppose it is an afterthought to why s/he acts to oppose injustice, a reassurance that s/he is not being irrational in doing so. It is not the reason s/he acts as s/he does as s/he already cares about justice in a way that is sufficient for her/him to regard the injustice of an action as a good enough reason to oppose it. For the immoralist, on the other hand, it would not be an afterthought but the only thought that enables her/him to see why s/he should oppose injustice. Ethical reasons can only come into view for an already virtuous agent, someone who participates in a form of life in which s/he has learned to care about virtue for its own sake.

This is not, however, a point that undercuts Foot’s ethical naturalism as her account of natural goodness is not best understood as an account of how ethical reasons for agents to act in particular ways come into view for those agents, but how there can be ethical reasons for agents to act in particular ways, where there can be a reason for undertaking some action without it coming into view for one. Given the natural goodness of distinctively ethical modes of reasoning
for creatures like ourselves, we can understand how the injustice of an action can be, in itself, a reason for us to oppose it even if an agent does not recognize it because it is not second nature to her to care about such things as justice. The ethical sentiments we acquire, in part at least, from coming to participate in a social form of life are an indispensable condition for ethical reasons to come into view for us. They are, as McDowell urges, best not viewed as blind emotional reactions or projections of affect onto the world, but as ways in which we become sensitive to reasons which are really there for us, independent of those particular sentiments.

McDowell has a point in arguing that our first nature can only reassure us of the reality, and now we can add the rationality, of ethical reasons from a point of view which presupposes our maturation into a second nature which disposes us to already find them good reasons, in themselves, for action. Only someone who already finds the justice of an action a good reason, in itself, to undertake it will find her/himself reassured of the reality and rationality of taking it as a good reason by coming to understand how such practical modes of reasoning are naturally good for her/him. Foot’s ethical naturalism is a reflection on the way our ethical second nature has roots in our first nature and, therefore, cannot be dismissed as a mere game which might very well be played differently or even not at all. It is a reflection undertaken from within a point of view circumscribed by that second nature. But this does not mean that it is a “self-consciously Neurathian” form of reflection that would have no validity outside that point of view. In fact, these sorts of reflections should convince us that it is rational for anyone with our first nature to take ethical considerations as reasons for action regardless of whether or not they have come to mature into a second nature which disposes them to, in fact, take such considerations as reasons. Without that second nature, however, these sorts of reflections would have no practical point.
Having never acquired a capacity to care about such things as justice for its own sake, such reflections will not bring the justice of an action into view as providing a distinctively ethical reason for undertake it. They would not move the immoralist to care about virtue for its own sake, which is undoubtedly why we should be skeptical about the possibility of actually convincing an immoralist to change her/his ways on the basis of such reflections. We should take McDowell’s objections to Foot’s ethical naturalism, then, in much the same spirit as Aristotle’s caution to his students that no course in philosophy would enable someone without good habits, without the sort of second nature which makes them already sensitive to ethical considerations as reasons for acting, to become good.57

In the end, then, McDowell’s concerns with ethical realism should lead him to endorse much of what we can find in Foot’s ethical naturalism. It would enable him to reassure us of the reality of ethical reasons in a way that avoids the threat of a kind of conventionalism that, despite his best efforts, continues to haunt his position to the extent that he gives pride of place to second nature alone in his work. His reasons for rejecting Foot’s views are, moreover, without warrant. Though they do enable us to see how Foot’s position should not be construed, in particular, as giving us reasons in our first nature to directly undertake ethical actions themselves, they do not give us a good reason for rejecting her position appropriately conceptualized as a “two-level account” of the rationality of ethical practices for which irreducibly ethical modes of reasoning are constitutive. And though Foot’s views would require rejecting one of McDowell’s key commitments - that we cannot find reasons for a moral point of view outside that point of view itself - it does not involve a rejection of what is arguably the defensible core of this commitment:
that ethical reasons only come into view for us as distinctively ethical reasons from the perspective of participation in a form of life in which we come to value ethical considerations for their own sake. In fact, Foot’s account of natural goodness enables us to see how those reasons which only come into view for someone with the right sort of second nature are there anyway, independently of having come into view - another of McDowell’s key commitments. Her distinctive form of ethical naturalism provides the resources needed for making sense of the reality and rationality of the ethical reasons to which we appeal in undertaking ethical conduct.
Notes


3. See Foot’s reference to Elizabeth’s Anscombe’s account of making and keeping promises in *Natural Goodness*, 45-46.

4. Though Foot recognizes that what it means for a human being to live well cannot be reduced to survival and reproduction, she is somewhat vague about precisely what other factors should be considered, stressing primarily the diversity of human goods. (See *Natural Goodness*, 42-44)

Rosalind Hursthouse gives this idea greater specification in identifying four ends by which we can evaluate whether or not “more sophisticated animals” live well: 1) individual survival, 2) the continuance of the species, 3) characteristic pleasure or enjoyment/characteristic freedom from pain and, for social animals, 4) the good functioning of the social group. (*On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 200-201) Though this list could surely stand to be fleshed out, it seems precise enough to enable us to intuitively consider how certain forms of behavior might facilitate our capacity to live well in a way which is natural for us.


6. John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism” in *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 154. Also see 151-155. It should be noted here that McDowell’s essay was written before the publication of Foot’s *Natural Goodness*. Since the position he targets in “Two Sorts of Naturalism” just is the basic position Foot elaborates in her later book, the essay can still be said
to provide a critical perspective onto the view advanced by Foot there. But there are obviously aspects of her more fully elaborated position that he would not have had access to at the time.


16. McDowell stresses this aspect of Aristotle’s conception of virtue in “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 150.


22. “Conventionalism” may not be the best word to use here since it can have a range of different connotations. I use it more as a term of convenience to merely reference an understanding of our ethical practices which does not clearly distinguish them from obviously conventional practices, such as a game which might be played differently or even not at all.


24. See McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 173. This point was raised by one of the anonymous referees on the paper.

25. This curious rule or, better, lack of a rule became evident in the last play of Super Bowl XIII when Larry Fitzgerald, a wide receiver for the Arizona Cardinals, tackled James Harrison, a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers, after he intercepted the ball (making Fitzgerald a defensive player at that point in the play), having run most of the length of the field out of bounds to catch Harrison. Needless to say, the rule which permits this came in for much Neurathian style criticism from Steelers fans after the game.

26. I owe the basic idea behind these last two paragraphs to one of the anonymous referees on the paper.


29. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 34.


31. It might, of course, not merely be a stroke of good luck but, for instance, a specific genetic
constitution that enables such smokers to live long and healthy lives. In this case, we would want to make an exception to our judgement that people generally should not smoke in order to live long and healthy lives in order to take account of the genetic variance in the population. But, assuming the genetic trait is relatively rare, our advice would still be generally well taken. More on natural goodness and variance within a population shortly.

36. I owe the basic outline of this example to one of the anonymous referees on the paper who posed it in an objection.
37. See McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 173
the sense in which a trait can be adaptive in the sense of enabling a species to evolve. “To say that some feature of a living thing is an adaptation is to place it in the history of a species. To say that it has a function is to say that it has a place in the life of individuals that belong to that species at a certain time.” (Natural Goodness, 32) But this should not preclude us from appealing to studies of how altruism can be adaptive for a species in considering whether or not it can be said to have a function in the life of a species at a particular point in time. The adaptive role altruistic sentiments can play in the evolution of a species with those sentiments may be appealed to both as evidence in favor of those sentiments having a function in the life of a species and as an explanation of how they came to have that function.

43. McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 150.

44. Foot, Natural Goodness, 12.

45. Thompson also discusses, in a parallel way, the justification of the rationality or goodness of dispositions as well, but the point I want to bring out here is most apparent in his discussion of the justification of a practice.

46. Thompson, Life and Action, 177.


48. See Thompson, Life and Action, 167 & 175.

49. Foot, Natural Goodness, 47.

50. Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 227-228.


52. See Andreou, “Getting On in a Varied World,” 71 where she writes, “the reasonable default
view is that being a mixed moral type is naturally sound.”


54. See Robert Frank, *Passions within Reason*, especially Ch. 3.

55. One must say “in part” here as our biology surely has a great deal to do with our ethical sentiments as well.
