Does Non-Cognitivism Rest on a Mistake?

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Philippa Foot has recently argued that non-cognitivism rests on a mistake. According to Foot, non-cognitivism cannot properly account for the role of reasons in moral thinking. Furthermore, Foot argues that moral judgements share a conceptual structure with the kind of evaluations that we make about plants and animals, which cannot be couched in non-cognitivist terms. In this article I argue that, in the form of expressivism, non-cognitivism is capable of accommodating most of what Foot says about reasons and morality. I then argue that the kind of evaluative judgements Foot suggests that we make about plants and animals, does not constitute a plausible alternative to an expressivist understanding of moral judgements. Finally I consider an account similar to Foot's, defended by Rosalind Hursthouse, which, I argue, suffers from an inconsistency, the avoidance of which leaves Hursthouse with a view that is either compatible with expressivism or shares the same problems as Foot's.

I. INTRODUCTION

Philippa Foot has recently argued that non-cognitivism, whatever form it may take, rests on a mistake.[1] According to Foot, conceiving of moral judgements as essentially expressions of certain non-cognitive attitudes, rather than as assertions of facts, makes it impossible for non-cognitivism to account properly for the role of reasons in moral thinking. Furthermore, Foot argues that non-cognitivism implies that moral evaluation of human behaviour must belong to a different logical category of evaluative judgements than the evaluations that we make of parts and operations in other living things in nature. The latter, according to Foot, speak of facts concerning the nature of life that is characteristic of different species of plants and animals[2] without requiring the presence of some particular attitude in us, and she wonders why we should not think that the same sort of naturalism applies to moral evaluation as well.

In this article I will defend non-cognitivism against this criticism. In particular I shall argue that expressivism, which I take to be the most credible form of non-cognitivism, can accommodate the most important aspects of what Foot has to say about reasons and morality. I will then argue that Foot does not show that it is a defect of expressivism that it is not able to account for the kind of evaluative judgements that

[1] See Philippa Foot, 'Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 15 (1995), and *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, 2001).

[2] Throughout this article I will use 'animals' to mean non-human animals.

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Foot suggests we make about plants and animals. Finally I will look at Rosalind Hursthouse's account, which is similar to Foot's and may at first sight seem more promising, but which, I will argue, suffers from an inconsistency, the avoidance of which leaves her with a view that is either unable to rule out expressivism, or is subject to the same problems as Foot's. First of all, though, a few words about some basic features of non-cognitivism.

II. THE BASICS OF NON-COGNITIVISM

Non-cognitivism has taken different forms, but a common feature is the thought that moral language is primarily expressive or prescriptive rather than descriptive.[3] The making of a sincere moral judgement about what ought to be done or avoided in a given situation, or perhaps about what it would be morally good or bad to do, essentially involves expressing some non-cognitive state of mind, such as a desire, disposition, preference, or, more generally, an attitude of approval or disapproval, regarding the behaviour in question.

Because of this it is often said that whereas the function of much human discourse is to describe or represent reality, the function of moral discourse is significantly different. Claims such as 'the table is square', or 'the earth is round', typically have the function of asserting that certain facts obtain in the world. If these facts actually do obtain, the claims are true, and if they do not obtain the claims are false. The function of a moral claim, on the other hand, is not (or not primarily) to assert that some fact obtains in the world, but rather to express a certain attitude in favour of or against acting (understood broadly enough so as also to include such things as choosing, deciding, feeling, reacting, etc.) in a particular way. Since moral claims do not aim to represent anything, it has traditionally been thought to be a part of non-cognitivism that moral claims cannot be true or false.[4]

What basically drives non-cognitivism is its ability to account for what many philosophers have taken to be an important feature of moral judgements, viz. their *practicality*, that they must serve to produce and prevent action. For the non-cognitivist, understanding moral judgements as expressions of pro- and con-attitudes establishes

[3] I think something like this can reasonably be said of e.g. the *emotivism* of C. L. Stevenson, 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', *Mind* 46 (1937); the *prescriptivism* of R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (New York, 1965) and *Moral Thinking* (Oxford, 1981); as well as of the *expressivism* defended by Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford, 1998) and Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices*, *Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

[4] Though I cannot pursue the issue here, it should be noted that whether this is correct or not depends on what theory of truth is being assumed; see e.g. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, pp. 68–83, for further discussion.

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an internal connection between moral judgements and *motivation*,[5] just because attitudes of this kind seem to be capable of actually moving people to action, while beliefs, on the other hand, seem to be motivationally inert.[6] While this may not definitely settle the issue in favour of non-cognitivism, explaining the practicality of moral judgements presents a challenge that cognitivists must meet, something which has proven difficult because, even though they deny the internal connection between moral judgements and motivation affirmed by non-cognitivists, they do not want the connection to be purely contingent.[7]

III. NON-COGNITIVISM AND PRACTICAL REASONS

Foot argues that there is a mistake inherent in non-cognitivism, viz.

> the mistake of so construing what is 'special' about moral judgement that the grounds of a moral judgement do not reach all the way to it. Whatever 'grounds' may have been given, someone may be unready, indeed unable, to make the moral judgement, because he has not *got* the attitude or feeling, is not *in* the 'conative' state of mind. . .: whatever it is that the theory says is required. It is this gap between ground and moral judgement that I am denying.[8]

What this comes down to is basically a denial of anti-rationalism in moral thinking. As is often noted, a crucial characteristic of our moral practice is that we expect *reasons* for judgements concerning what morally ought to be done or avoided. If I sincerely tell someone that 'you ought to donate a sum of money to Oxfam each month', or that 'Jones really ought to leave the Nationalist Party', I may sensibly be asked to present reasons for why I think this, something which seems to be a question of pointing out facts about the behaviour that are meant to count in favour of it.[9] Thus I might respond that donating money to Oxfam will help alleviate human suffering, which is something good and hence counts in favour of actually making a donation. In the case of

[5] This need not entail that non-cognitivists must think that motivation always follow immediately upon making a moral judgement; there are factors such as being in a state of depression, which may prevent the judgement from being motivationally efficacious.

[6] This is often put in terms of directions of fit. Beliefs, the argument goes, are directed to fit the state of the world, while attitudes, like desires or preferences, have the opposite direction of fit in the sense that it is the world that is meant to fit them. Because of this, such attitudes move us to try to change the world accordingly, something which beliefs are unable to do.

[7] Some cognitivists seem indeed prepared to say that the connection between moral judgements and motivation really *is* purely contingent; it just so happens that most people have a desire to be moral that explains how they so often are motivated accordingly. Foot is not, however, among these people and I will not have anything to say about such views in this article; cf. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 9.

[8] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 8.

[9] Of course, depending on the content of my judgement, what I am asked to do may be to present facts that count *against* a certain action, constituting a reason *not* to do it.

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Jones, I could point out that his political engagement in the Nationalist Party contributes to the spread of racism in his country, and this nasty fact constitutes a strong reason for him to resign. These reasons are examples of what I will refer to as *practical* reasons, reasons *to* do and *not to* do different things, and I will assume that they include reasons to act, feel and react in various ways, as well as reasons to have certain beliefs or to make certain decisions.[10]

What Foot denies is the existence of any gap between the (practical) reasons for a moral judgement and the moral judgement itself, a gap she thinks is an inevitable consequence of the non-cognitivist division between assertions of fact and expressions of the different attitudes that are said to constitute the essentials of our moral discourse. Instead of trying to fill this gap by requiring the presence of some attitude, Foot suggests, moral judgements should rather be understood as speaking precisely about what there is reason, indeed what there is *overall* or *all-things-considered* reason for us to do or not to do.[11]

In defending this position, Foot is explicitly withdrawing from anti-rationalist elements famously found within her own past view(s) of morality, according to which an agent can be said to have reason to perform a certain action only in so far as its performance helps promote the satisfaction of some of the agent's desires, or in some other sense can be shown to be in the agent's personal interest.[12] This indeed does appear to introduce a gap between the requirements of our common morality and practical reasons because of the subjectivism characterizing the latter. Her present view is quite different, because she no longer finds it plausible that practical reasons are constrained by everyone's personal desires or interests. We must rather leave room for saying that 'the rationality of . . . telling the truth, keeping promises, or helping a neighbour is *on a par* with the rationality of self-preserving action, and of the careful and cognizant pursuit of other innocent ends'.[13]

I believe that Foot is correct in withdrawing from her earlier anti-rationalism about morality. If we, for example, sincerely think that it is morally wrong to perform actions of a certain kind, this involves holding that there is strong, even overriding, reason for people not to perform such actions. There is no gap here that needs to be filled by the presence of some attitude. But we surely have to ask whether Foot is

[10] Some authors refer to this sort of reasons as *normative*, rather than practical, reasons; see e.g. Derek Parfit, 'Reason and Motivation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 71 (1997), and T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

[11] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 9, 11.

[12] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 9–10; for her earlier views, see e.g. Philippa Foot, 'Moral Beliefs', and 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford, 1978).

[13] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 11.

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correct in suggesting that this is something non-cognitivism is unable to accommodate.

There are early forms of non-cognitivism according to which moral judgements are thought of as mere emotional ejaculations, meant to have an impact on the behaviour of oneself and others, but without any connection to reasons whatsoever.[14] Since moral judgements are not primarily aimed at representing facts, the idea was that there cannot be any particular reasons in favour of or against moral judgements. But in more sophisticated forms of non-cognitivism, there is explicit recognition of the fact that we often think that there are reasons to act or feel in certain ways, even without actually being capable of acting or feeling in precisely these ways ourselves. However, such thinking *itself* involves the exercise of normative or moral judgement, and as such it is open to a non-cognitivist analysis. Hence, we may be non-cognitivists about practical reasons, which is the view held nowadays by most *expressivists*.

Consider the norm-expressivism defended by Allan Gibbard in his *Wise Choices*, *Apt Feelings*. Gibbard's proposal is that to make a judgement about what it would be rational to do should be understood as expressing an acceptance of a set of norms that permit the act in question,[15] rather than as asserting facts that may obtain or not. As Gibbard convincingly shows, this analysis also allows us to say that a statement that a certain act is rational can itself be understood as a statement that there is overall reason to do the act, because they both express the same thing. The set of norms that an agent accepts can be such as to point out which facts count in favour of which acts, as well as assigning the proper weight to these facts in different situations. To judge, then, that there is overall reason to do an act A, is to express an 'acceptance of a system of norms for weighing considerations, that, as things come out, supports doing that act'.[16] And this is just another way of cashing out how to understand a judgement about what it is rational to do, viz. that the action is permitted by the set of norms accepted by the agent.

Adopting this analysis, or some version of it, enables the expressivist to accept the good point in Foot's argument, viz. that a moral judgement really can be thought of as a judgement about what there is all-things-considered reason to do, and to that extent non-cognitivism does not fall prey to the criticism raised by Foot.

[14] Cf. John Dewey, 'Theory of Valuation', *The Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, vol. 2(4) (Chicago, 1939), pp. 6–13, for a critical discussion of what Dewey considered 'the most extreme of the views which have been advanced' in the theory of valuation, viz. that evaluative judgements 'are purely ejaculatory' ('Theory of Valuation', pp. 6–7).

[15] Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, e.g. p. 7.

[16] Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 163.

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IV. REASONS AND MOTIVATION

Foot acknowledges something close to the expressivist strategy as a possible response to her argument, but she is not much impressed by it. She claims that proponents of this kind of non-cognitivism will insist

> that the fact of an agent's having reason to do something (say to keep promises) is itself dependent on his feelings, passions, or desires. And so, they will argue, if a moral judgement about what I ought to do implies that I have reason so to act, the judgement would seem to imply not just 'cognitions' but also something 'conative': something having to do with an engagement of the will. A non-cognitivist, neo-Humean theory of reasons for action is thus being called in to support a neo-Humean account of moral judgement.[17]

Foot thinks many people will find such a view seductive, their argument beginning

> from the premise that moral judgements are 'motivating reasons' for action; by which it is meant that people do things simply because they think that they ought to do so. And this is followed by a particular account of what it is for anyone to have such a motivating, action-explaining, reason as part of his 'psychological state'.[18]

The seductiveness of this view, according to Foot, lies in the fact that it is tempting to think that if we are to explain a piece of human behaviour in terms of 'she did it because. . .', then any chain of answers must end with a fact about the person herself, something that she simply wants or desires. But we should resist this temptation, she claims, and instead take the recognition of a reason to act as constituting the proper end of explanation.[19]

Here we are close to stirring up a hornet's nest of questions about the difference between the reasons *for which* people act the way they do and what reasons there may be for people *to* act in various ways, which has been subject to much discussion. Unfortunately Foot pays no attention to this discussion, but the following remarks should show that properly distinguishing between different *sorts* of reasons can help the expressivist to defuse the force of her argument.

According to what is sometimes called the Humean theory of motivation, human motivation is explained in terms of pairs of beliefs and desires, where the desires are what ultimately move us to action once we believe there is a certain way of acting that will help us achieve the object of some desire. Such belief–desire pairs are often thought of as the *causes* of our behaviour, which is a plausible view that many

[17] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 21; cf. Warren Quinn, 'Putting Rationality in its Place', in his *Morality and Action* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 230–1, for a similar statement.
[18] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 21.
[19] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 22.

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non-cognitivists and cognitivists alike have accepted. There is therefore an intelligible and familiar sense in which the reasons *for which* we behave as we do, our *motivating reasons* as they are commonly denoted, have to do with our psychological states. However, how to conceive of reasons *to* do and *not to* do various things is another question. As I have argued earlier, such *practical* reasons are facts that in some sense count in favour of or against different ways of acting. Their status as practical reasons is not necessarily settled by the presence of pro- or con-attitudes in the agents to whom the practical reasons apply.[20] In some cases the reason *for which* an agent does something coincides with what there is reason for her *to* do and then the practical reason could be said to have become her motivating reason.[21] At other times this will not be the case, and then the reason for which the agent acted as she did was not a good reason for acting in that way, since, properly speaking, there was no practical reason to act in that way at all.

Expressivists can agree to all of this. Suppose that a person P, in a situation S, cannot make out that, all-things-considered, she has reason to do an act A. Her system of norms, if we stick to the Gibbardian proposal, does not yield that outcome. Then another person, Q, may very well judge that P is mistaken, that there really is all-things-considered reason for P to do A in S. Of course, the latter judgement is itself an expression of an acceptance of a certain set of norms, but that does not entail that there really is no reason for P to do A, unless P herself endorses the same norms as Q. To say that it would be rational for P to do A only if P has a certain attitude of approval towards A-ing (such as accepting a set of norms prescribing A), is to make a normative, or even moral, judgement in its own right, and it is one that may be disputed. If P does not accept the same norms for how to act as Q does, then P may not find it rational to do A in S, but what that means is that P and Q face a substantive disagreement about what there is all-things-considered reason for P to do. Of course, this does nothing to rule out that, irrespective of what action P ends up doing, there will be a reason *for which* P acts. But as we have seen, whether that will be a good reason, a reason *to* act in that way, is a different, normative, question.

[20] In Jonas Olson and Frans Svensson, 'Sorting out Reasons: On Stoutland's Criticism of the Belief-Desire Model', *A Philosophical Smorgasbord: Essays on Action*, *Truth*, *and Other Things in Honour of Frederic Stoutland* (Uppsala, 2003), and 'Regimenting Reasons', forthcoming in *Theoria*, I co-defend the view that strictly speaking we need to distinguish between three rather than two different sorts of reasons here. The suggestion is that besides *motivating* and *practical* (or what we refer to as *normative*) reasons, we should also acknowledge the existence of *deliberative* reasons, understood as the reasons agents take themselves to be acting for from a first-person perspective. Though I believe this is correct, I do not think it makes much difference in the present discussion.

[21] Cf. Parfit, 'Reason and Motivation', p. 99.

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Hence, in reply to Foot's claim that the expressivist 'will insist that the fact of an agent's having reason to do something (say to keep promises) is itself dependent on his feelings, passions, or desires',[22] the expressivist could say that understood as a claim about practical reasons it is simply false. If, on the other hand, the claim is taken to be about motivation and the reasons for which human beings act the way they do, it is plausible, even according to many philosophers belonging to the cognitivist camp.

Foot would quite possibly resist this argument because of its reliance on what she, following John McDowell, calls a hydraulic or mechanical picture of human behaviour.[23] Unfortunately there is no development of what this criticism amounts to (except for the claim that the picture is 'suspect'), and, importantly, Foot does not offer much in defence of any alternative conception of motivation.[24] Until this has been provided, expressivists need not feel threatened by what Foot says in this respect.

Lack of support is also true of another related claim made by Foot, viz. that expressivism cannot account for the *importance* of practical reason, understood as our ability to deliberate and act for reasons.[25] Foot's idea seems to be that there is nothing left for practical reason(ing) to be, on an expressivist picture, except for an ability to deliberate about the most efficient means to live in accordance with one's own personal set of desires or concerns. But if this is the case, what is so important about practical reason, given that some people desire or are concerned with things most of us would conceive of as rather worthless or even deplorable?

It seems fairly clear, however, what an expressivist response to Foot's claim will involve. Practical reasoning, in the sense crudely described above, is important for creating unity within our lives. It matters for our ability to navigate between our often complex and competing concerns in order to achieve some harmony among them, and thereby reach conclusions about what to do or how to plan our lives. This kind of practical reasoning, furthermore, is essential for us as members of

[22] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 21.

[23] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 21; cf. John McDowell, 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 52 (1978), and 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following', *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. S. Holzman and S. Leich (London, 1981).

[24] As far as I can see, we are only told that it is part of her account that an understanding of practical reasons actually can explain action, which is why Foot holds that her account fulfils the practicality requirement on moral judgements (see sect. II above); see Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 18. But of course this is not really an argument at all.

[25] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 10, 62; cf. Warren Quinn, 'Rationality and the Human Good', and 'Putting Rationality in its Place', in his *Morality and Actions* (Cambridge, 1993), for work to which Foot is much indebted on this point.

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society, in order to find efficient ways of cooperating and implementing various decisions about matters that we all find important. This is surely important enough, even if there are cases of substantive disagreement among people concerning what really is worthwhile, or what there actually is reason to pursue or avoid in life.

V. FOOTIAN NATURALISM AND EXPRESSIVISM

So far I have argued that non-cognitivism, in the shape of expressivism, survives Foot's criticism. But Foot has yet another card to play, which may be the most interesting and controversial one. Her thesis is that moral judgements share a conceptual structure with a kind of evaluative judgements that we make about plants and animals. This should make it possible for us to understand moral judgements as objective statements of fact, grounded in the nature of human beings and human life.[26]

It is, according to Foot, a noteworthy feature of expressivism that it has the 'consequence of separating off the evaluation of human action. . . from all evaluation of the characteristics and operations in plants and animals'.[27] If we consider judgements about, for example, the goodness of roots in oaks, or the hunting skills of wolves, Foot suggests that we find that, typically, these cannot plausibly be thought of as essentially expressions of attitudes that *we* happen to have towards these things. Though it is possible for a person to evaluate the roots of a particular oak as good or bad for one or another purpose of his or her own, that does not seem to reach to the issue of whether *the roots* in fact are good or bad. Foot illustrates this by quoting an unnamed opponent, who once told her 'that the *good* roots of trees were roots of the kind we "should choose if we were trees" ',[28] something which does sound a bit odd.

To understand properly the seemingly evaluative judgements that we sometimes make of parts and operations in plants and animals, Foot argues that we must inquire into the nature of what constitutes a characteristic way of life for members of the species or life-forms to which the parts and operations that we are judging belong. Foot devotes an important chapter of her recent book to develop this view in more detail.[29] Drawing on work by Michael Thompson, and, of course, Aristotle, she suggests that *teleological* explanations play a crucial role for our understanding of the nature of plants and animals. We understand different parts and operations of a given species by

[26] Hence, Foot tells us that she is 'quite seriously, likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behavior in animals' (Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 16).
[27] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 25.
[28] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 25–6 (italics in original).
[29] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, ch. 2.

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recognizing their specific functions within a characteristic life cycle of the species in question.[30] This teleology enables us to evaluate a particular part or operation as good or bad of its kind, depending on the extent to which it fulfils its function. Furthermore, Foot suggests that we may think of the characteristic way of life of a given species as itself setting a standard for what individuals, *qua* members of a certain species, overall should be like in order to do well or flourish. If an individual deviates from this standard in some respect, it is a defective exemplar of its kind. The good of oaks, wolves, rabbits, etc., then, resides in their fulfilling the standards set by an account of the characteristic way of life for members of the species to which they belong.

The above is made out in terms of what are seen as plain facts about the nature of life of different species, without reference to human attitudes. Now, why, Foot wonders, should we think moral judgements to be so different?

This is an interesting challenge.[31] Foot has put her finger on what appears to be a kind of evaluative judgements that most of us recognize and that cannot plausibly be couched in non-cognitivist or expressivist terms. I shall argue, however, that moral evaluation is so significantly different from the evaluation of parts and operations in plants and animals, that even if Foot is right about the latter, she is wrong about moral evaluation, for it belongs to a different category of evaluative judgements, a category that expressivism is well fitted to deal with.[32]

Foot admits that there is at least one crucial change involved in the transition from evaluation of plants and animals to moral judgements.

[30] See Michael Thompson, 'The Representation of Life', *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. Quinn (Oxford, 1995); in addition, Foot also acknowledges influence from G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in her *Collected Papers III* (Minneapolis, 1981), and Peter Geach, 'Good and Evil', *Analysis* 17 (1956), and *The Virtues* (Cambridge, 1977).

[31] It has been suggested in writings of other prominent neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists as well. See, especially, Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, (Oxford, 1999), chs. 9–10, which I will discuss in sect. VI below. Cf. also Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics', *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison (Cambridge, 1995). For a critique of Nussbaum, see Louise M. Antony, 'Natures and Norms', *Ethics* 111 (2000). (I am indebted to Mark Timmons for drawing my attention to Antony's article.)

[32] A more radical approach may be to argue that, post-Darwin, we know that there is no teleology in nature, no matter how appealing it is to think so. Evaluative judgements relying on a teleological conception of the world should therefore be thought of as embodying some sort of error in trying to pick out facts that simply are not there. This is an alternative considered in James Lenman, 'Against Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism' (unpublished). Of course, even if this were to be true, we still have to consider the possibility that Foot is right in thinking that the conceptual structure of moral judgements really is similar to what she has argued is the case regarding evaluation of plants and animals. If she is, and the latter kind of judgements embodies an error, then it seems we would have to conceive of morality in the same way, and that would be bad news for expressivism.

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Moral judgements are essentially practical in having an *action-guiding*, or perhaps *prescriptive*, element.[33] They are thereby closely connected to choice in a way that is exclusively applicable to human beings. This is manifested in the fact that while we could say, for example, that a person born with a lack of characteristically human abilities to learn a language suffers from a severe handicap, we would never dream of saying that this constitutes a moral flaw in that person, that she morally ought to do something about it. Factors outside our sphere of choice are relevant for morality only in limiting the range of things we may be morally required to do, but they are not themselves factors determining what makes us, or our behaviour, morally good or bad.

Because of this Foot has to say that while the goodness of plants and animals is based on an overall assessment of the functioning of their parts and operations, moral goodness is confined to what is voluntary, and more specifically, Foot suggests, it is determined by one aspect alone, viz. action in accordance with all-things-considered reason (or, as Foot sometimes refers to it, practical reason). Still, Foot argues, the basic conceptual structure remains the same in judgements of good roots of oaks and judgements of good or right human actions. Just as we must look for the standards of what it takes for the roots of oaks to count as good within an account of a characteristic life cycle of oaks, the standards of good action (action in accordance with all-things-considered reason) must be sought within a characterization of the nature of specifically human life.[34]

A striking problem with this proposal is the difficulty involved in understanding the idea of a characteristic way of life for human beings that is analogous to what Foot finds in relation to other species of living things, and is also capable of carrying moral importance. Human life exhibits such tremendous diversity between different cultures, societies and historical contexts, that any attempt to find a general characterization of it that would cover all of these differences seems a more or less hopeless enterprise, especially so if it is meant to provide us with determinate standards of what there is moral reason for us to do and avoid.

But maybe we can follow Foot in thinking that we need not worry too much about the details of what an account of a characteristically human life may look like, as long as we can find enough examples indicating that *some* such account figures in the conceptual structure of our moral discourse.[35] Foot draws our attention to what she, following Elizabeth Anscombe, calls Aristotelian necessities, which are meant

[33] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 9.
[34] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 16.
[35] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 39.

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to refer to things that are 'necessary because and in so far as good hangs on [them]'.[36] We need, for example, the institution of promising, because there often is no other way of getting others to do what we want, and certainly much good in our lives may hang on that. Similarly Foot claims that we need to develop some power of imagination in order to understand a story and to join in songs and dances; we need virtues such as loyalty, fairness and kindness, as well as codes of conduct, in order to pursue and sustain friendships and family ties, or to be able to cooperate in different ceremonials, all of which are characteristically human goods.[37]

However, proceeding in this manner cannot yield much of a standard for human action. It does not tell us what kind of friendships to engage in, what codes of conduct should look like, or how to weigh different requirements against each other if in conflict. To disregard such problems as matters of detail that we need not worry about is a hard bullet to bite. People have different views about these things and it is not easy to see how to fill in these details without actually engaging in substantive moral argument, thereby leaving the level of description of what counts as a characteristically human life. One way to solve this problem would be to refer to the conceptions of friendship, family life, codes of conduct, etc., inherent in local traditions, but that would lead us straight into a moral relativism, which for a self-proclaimed objectivist as Foot is not an option.[38]

But even if it were possible to overcome this difficulty, there is a further serious question to be raised about the proposal. How are statements of facts about the nature of our human life-form or species

[36] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 15; cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, 'On Promising and its Justice', in her *Collected Papers III* (Minneapolis, 1981).

[37] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 43.

[38] There is indeed much interesting work within recent virtue ethics devoted to showing that it is a much too strong requirement on ethical theory to demand that it must be able to come up with standards of rightness that any normal adult is capable of applying in each case. It may take much experience and wisdom to be able to see what is required of us in a certain situation. Therefore, it may be said, it is not necessarily a fault in Foot's view that it does not attempt to specify all details. We know enough to say that loyalty and fairness, for example, are virtues, even if we cannot be expected to come up with complete criteria for their application. See Julia Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78 (2004); Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*; John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *Virtue Ethics*, ed. R. Crisp and M. Slote (Oxford, 1997); and David Solomon, 'Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics', *Virtue Ethics*, ed. D. Statman (Edinburgh, 1997), for arguments along this line. However, even if there is something to this, it does not quite settle the issue of whether there is any objectively true content to what the virtues demand, which is there to be known by virtuous people irrespective of cultural or historical setting. The content of the virtues, and at least in some cases even the virtues themselves, may well differ between different cultural, historical or social contexts, even if these contents cannot be fully spelled out within a given context.

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meant to carry any reason-giving force? There is supposed to be an analogy here between how to understand evaluative judgements about plants and animals, and evaluation of human action. But if we consider a species judgement saying that the roots of oaks provide their owners with nourishment, we may have some sort of standard for calling the roots of a particular oak defective or bad of their kind in so far as these roots do not actually achieve what it is said in the species judgement that they are supposed to do. But it certainly does not provide oaks with *reasons* to acquire roots capable of providing them with nourishment (nor, of course, does it provide roots with reasons to provide their owners with nourishment).[39]

How, then, could things be so different when it comes to our own species? Consider the suggestion that human beings characteristically join in songs and dances, as well as pursue family life. To the extent that this is true it might indicate that if a person is lacking some (or indeed all) of the abilities required for actually joining in songs and dances or pursuing family life, then she is thereby lacking something people characteristically are endowed with by nature, and as such she suffers from physical or mental dysfunctions that are not due to any fault of her own. But none of this tells us much about practical reasons or moral goodness.

But perhaps the suggestion could be understood as saying that human beings characteristically find it desirable for its own sake, or characteristically take there to be reason, to join in songs and dances, and to pursue family life. And if that is true, then why not say that a person who does not conceive of things in this way is defective or bad *qua* human being, just as the lack of some bodily organ human beings characteristically are endowed with by nature constitutes a defect in a human being, or even the malfunctioning of the roots of an oak constitutes a defect in that tree? Supposing that it works the other way around as well, in that a person is doing or acting well, *qua* human, in so far as she joins in activities human beings characteristically take there to be reason to join in, then have we not arrived at something beginning to look like moral judgement?[40]

This strikes me as the most plausible way of understanding Foot's naturalism. I do not believe, however, that it is a tenable view. For one thing, the problem discussed earlier concerning the indeterminacy of what counts as morally right and wrong action remains to be solved.

[39] Cf. Lenman, 'Against Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism', and John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. Quinn (Oxford, 1995), pp. 151–5.

[40] This is a picture of the structure of morality vigorously outlined, though without explicitly endorsing it, by Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', *Virtue Ethics*, ed. D. Statman (Edinburgh, 1997).

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But, furthermore, it does not seem really to answer the question of what reason-giving force judgements of what constitutes a characteristically human life could have. Indeed, even if there is a use of good that fits the Footian proposal, determined by facts about the nature of the lives of different species, including our own, it is far from clear why we should care about being good *in that sense*.

At one point, Foot suggests that this is to ask for a reason to be moral, or even for acting in accordance with reason, which it simply may not be possible to provide.[41] But the question need not be understood in this way. It could just as well be taken as a question about why we should think that moral obligations, what there is all-things-considered reason for us to do and not to do, must be grounded in facts about what counts as a characteristic way of life for our species. It seems plausible that people in some respects *characteristically* engage, or *characteristically have* engaged, in morally bad behaviour, acting in ways they ought not to do. I have heard it suggested, for example, that in war it is 'natural' or characteristic for human beings to perform all sorts of atrocities, even in situations where they are not directly threatened. To the extent that this is not meant as something people cannot do anything about, it seems clear that it ought not to be done. And one does not need to be a utilitarian to hold that people in the Western part of the world characteristically do not contribute as much as they should in order to alleviate hunger and suffering in other parts of the world. Doing what is morally right in these cases could perhaps be said to be bad examples of the kind of actions human beings characteristically would perform in them, but that consideration does not necessarily carry much weight.

Expressivism, I believe, has a ready explanation for what is missing in the Footian proposal, which is that it fails to appreciate fully the function of moral judgements themselves. Moral judgements are essentially practical, or guiding, as Foot agrees, but this feature seems hard to capture by thinking of such judgements as attempts to describe plain matters of fact. Rather, the practicality is better brought out by thinking of moral judgements as a kind of conclusions about how to act or how to live, and as such they involve expressions of pro- or con-attitudes or dispositions for acting or living in a particular way, having at least some effect on our behavior. This leaves proper room for the possibility that while a person may be quite clear about facts concerning what human beings characteristically engage in or find desirable for its own sake, that need not matter much for that person's decisions about whether to engage in these things herself, just because understanding such facts is not itself a practical conclusion. She may simply think

[41] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, pp. 62–4.

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that people are characteristically wrong in conceiving of these things as intrinsically desirable, for there really is no reason to pursue them.

VI. HURSTHOUSE'S ACCOUNT

I want to consider briefly the view of another explicit proponent of the kind of naturalism outlined by Foot, which appears to tackle some of the problems discussed above in a somewhat different way than Foot herself does. In *On Virtue Ethics*, Rosalind Hursthouse takes over from Foot the idea that properly evaluating living things requires an understanding of what *kind* of living things we are talking about, which is allegedly a point that non-cognitivists cannot accommodate.[42] Hursthouse argues that, generally, we evaluate plants with regard to two aspects, their parts and their operations, and these aspects are considered good or bad in so far as they contribute, in the ways characteristic of different species, to two natural ends of plants, viz. individual survival and continuance of the species.[43] Ascending the ladder of nature to animals, we must add two further aspects of evaluation, action and emotion or desire, as well as two further ends, which Hursthouse conceives of as characteristic pleasure or enjoyment/characteristic freedom from pain and, in the case of social animals, the well functioning of the social group.[44] An individual plant or animal, furthermore, is evaluated as a good or bad specimen overall in so far as it is well fitted in relation to all of the aspects relevant for evaluation of its species.

Though I think there is a question here about whether Hursthouse is correct that what is said above captures how we, or perhaps plant and animal experts, really evaluate plants and animals,[45] it should be acknowledged that Hursthouse does a commendable job in bringing structure to this basically Footian picture. Still, when it comes to human beings, Hursthouse argues that things change drastically. Because of our rational capacities, or our ability to act for reasons, nature is not, according to Hursthouse, normative with respect to us. While there is a sense in which nature determines how animals (as well as plants) should behave, there is no telling what we *should* do from what we *do*.[46] Instead Hursthouse suggests that we should conceive of a characteristically human way of life in terms of a rational life; it is a way

[42] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 195–7.
[43] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 197–8.
[44] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 198–202.
[45] See David Copp and David Sobel, 'Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics', *Ethics* 114 (2004), pp. 534–6, for some doubts about this.
[46] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 220–1.

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of life that we can *rightly* see as good, or as there is reason to pursue.[47] As such, it is a way of life that not very many people actually lead.

This suggestion has the advantage of not requiring us to say that a human way of life is good or right just because it is, in a purely descriptive sense, characteristic of human beings, or characteristically thought of as being in accordance with reason. But as it stands it is more or less a denial of there being an analogy between the evaluation of plants and animals and moral evaluation, because there is not much similarity left. Indeed, an expressivist would not have much to quarrel with if this was all that Footian (or perhaps neo-Aristotelian) naturalism entailed, though the expressivist would go on to explain substantial judgements of what actually constitutes a good or right way of life as expressions of attitudes favouring the ways of life in question, rather than as something that really is there to be 'seen'.

Hursthouse is well aware of this problem, but her way of trying to solve it is a bit puzzling. She argues that her view still has a naturalistic structure, because

> it is still the case that human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal in the way characteristic of the species. And the structure – the appeal to these four ends – really does constrain, substantially, what I can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings.[48]

Hence, it turns out that, for example, a certain character trait, T, cannot be a virtue if T would be in conflict with fostering ends belonging to human beings in virtue of their nature as a species of social animals.

But how is this compatible with Hursthouse's remarks about nature not being normative with respect to us?[49] To my mind it seems clear that it actually is *not* compatible, but rather points to an inconsistency within Hursthouse's overall view. She may choose to give up on the idea that nature cannot be normative with respect to human beings, in which case her view falls prey to the same problems that we discussed earlier in relation to Foot. It seems possible for someone to hold coherently, for example, that a certain character trait really is a virtue even though it does not foster any of our four naturally given

[47] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 222.

[48] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 224.

[49] There is a complication here in that Hursthouse thinks that her naturalism only holds for questions about what character traits can reasonably be thought of as virtues and not for how we should act. The latter, she argues, is determined by facts about what a virtuous agent would do in our circumstances. I find this a bit hard to understand (*why* should we be prepared to accept an appeal to nature with respect to the virtues but not in the case of actions?), but since it does not, as far as I can see, affect my argument above, I will not pursue this issue here.

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ends, and what force could an appeal to nature have in such a case?[50] Or Hursthouse could give up on the idea that the four natural ends of social animals substantially constrain what we can reasonably hold to be a virtue in human beings. But in that case the supposed analogy between evaluation of plants and animals and moral judgements breaks down, and we are not offered any concrete alternative to an expressivist understanding of the latter.

Because of this I think that neither Foot nor Hursthouse succeed in their attempts to show that it is a flaw of expressivism not to be able to account for the kind of natural goodness that we find when determining whether a particular part or operation of a member of a species of plants or animals counts as a good or bad one of its kind. Such judgements, if they indeed have the conceptual structure suggested by Foot and Hursthouse, are crucially different from moral judgements, and it is only the latter that expressivism needs to explain.[51]

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[50] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pp. 224–6, actually considers a possible example of this kind of case, concerning whether completely impersonal benevolence, free from species boundaries and special bonds to family and friends, could be regarded as a virtue on her account. Hursthouse's (explicitly very tentative) conclusion is sceptical, just because such benevolence may clash with the fostering of our natural ends of continuance of the species and the well-functioning of the social group. But this raises precisely the question of what such appeals to nature are supposed to achieve. It seems conceivable that someone may grant these facts but all the same argue that we should rise above them.

[51] Earlier versions of this essay have been presented at the University of Arizona (Tucson), Uppsala University, and to an audience of graduate students at UC Berkeley. I wish to thank the participants at these occasions for helpful comments and discussions. Among these people, however, I am particularly indebted to Julia Annas, John Eriksson, Jonas Olson and Fred Stoutland. In addition, discussions with Rosalind Hursthouse and Howard Sobel, as well as the comments from anonymous referees of *Utilitas* and of another journal, were exceedingly valuable. I am also grateful to James Lenman for permission to refer to unpublished material. Work on this article was partly made possible by a generous grant from STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education).

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