

The Human Form of Life: Rand and Foot on Biological Foundations of Normativity

Tristan de Liège

University of Texas, Austin; Salem Center for Policy

1. Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, Philippa Foot and Ayn Rand each defended novel forms of ethical naturalism that aimed to ground objective ethical norms in biological facts about the nature of life in general, and human life in particular. On this approach, ethical judgments (e.g., “judging people based on their race is morally wrong”) and concepts such as virtue-concepts (e.g., honesty or justice) qualify as objective by reference to a relationship to biological human needs, such as a need for self-esteem, social cohesion, cooperation with others, and/or a sense of fulfillment, to take some examples. This approach (if successful) vindicates ethical judgments and concepts as objective in the sense that scientific judgments and concepts are objective on a realist view: they can be discovered and proved, and are neither reducible to social conventions or agreed-upon norms (in the vein of Thomas Hobbes or David Hume), nor derived from the *a priori* structure of rationality (in the vein of Immanuel Kant).¹ Moreover, ethical judgments and concepts on this approach would be open to revision in light of empirical evidence rather than either being immutable and unchanging or changing due to convention or cultural mood. Finally, both Rand and Foot share a broad Aristotelian commitment to ethics as a subject

¹ Importantly, the objectivity of scientific judgments might be said to be one pertaining to disclosing new sets of facts (e.g., new discoveries of properties or entities like new planets), whereas ethical objectivity concerns the means by which values are to be selected and pursued (e.g., how to manage relationships or think fundamentally about one’s career). See Darryl Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008). However, ultimately the objectivity of scientific judgments depends on epistemic norms guiding the formation of concepts, definitions, etc., and is therefore equally action-guiding, but specialized rather than general as in the case of ethics.

pertaining to *living in a certain way* and to developing a certain character rather than as ranging primarily over evaluations of discrete actions and their consequences as in the utilitarian tradition. Thus, what is vindicated in their ethical approaches is that living a certain way is an objective requirement for human life and ethics is the field determining the content of this way of living.

While Rand's view was not developed in a single treatise or book, a clear position emerges from her various lectures and papers, most prominently "The Objectivist Ethics," as well as her novels, notably *Atlas Shrugged*. Foot's views famously changed over the course of her long academic career, but her monograph *Natural Goodness*, published late in her career, takes up issues she had considered throughout her career and presents her naturalism as I shall consider it here.

Despite the obvious similarities to their approaches to ethics, direct comparisons between Rand and Foot in the academic literature are uncommon. It is instructive to compare their approaches, however, since what appear to be broad similarities or alignments between the two approaches may turn out upon investigation to be somewhat superficial. In particular, while a full investigation to compare the promise of each approach goes beyond my scope here, the differences between them may have important ramifications for making good on the proper goals of a naturalistic ethics. Accordingly, I examine the role that the concept of the human "form of life" concept plays in each theory, namely, how this concept explains the normative standards pertaining to the activities and traits of organisms. While Rand herself does not use the term "form of life," something like this concept is clearly at work in Rand's discussion of life as a "standard of value" in "The Objectivist Ethics," as others have already identified.² This concept is needed for the explanatory and metaphysical grounding project at the core of their approaches to ethics.³

² For instance, see A. Gotthelf, "The Morality of Life." in *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, A. Gotthelf and G. Salmieri, ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); D. Wright, "The Place of the Non-Initiation of Force Principle in Ayn Rand's Philosophy," in *Foundations of a Free Society: Reflections on Ayn Rand's Political Philosophy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); and "The Act of Valuing and the Objectivity of Values" in *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, A. Gotthelf and G. Salmieri, ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

³ I will use "form of life" and "way of life" interchangeably here.

We may list at least two broad and fundamental desiderata that each of Foot's and Rand's projects require at the foundation. First, there must be some metaphysical basis for the human form of life being what it is and having the requirements that it does. In other words, there must be such a thing as a human form of life, and it must have causal requirements for its existence that we can specify. So, there must be some basis for saying that, for instance, the human way of life involves practical rationality and that this involves, among other things, virtues such as justice or prudence. For instance, as Gary Watson puts it, it must be capable of showing that "being a gangster is incompatible with being a good human being."⁴ Secondly, and relatedly, the form of life concept must *explain* and sufficiently constrain ethical norms such that judgments and concepts can be objectively shown to be valid or invalid and open to revision in light of empirical evidence. In the context of this discussion, a fundamental issue in answering these questions is whether the life-form concept is genuinely inductive (or not), in the sense that it integrates particular facts and observations about reality into general principles and concepts.

For instance, the field of physics is genuinely inductive in the sense that it proceeds by way of collecting many observations of, say, objects moving through space to develop principles of mechanics. Similarly, biology is genuinely inductive in that it develops principles integrating the functioning of living organisms and their parts to each other and their environment. In each case, these fields are continually able to form new integrations and revise past assumptions on the basis of their inductive nature; for instance, in physics, the geocentric model of the Universe, standardized by Claudius Ptolemy in the second century A.D., was gradually challenged and eroded by competing theories. The most powerful challenges came later on with astronomers such as Nicolaus Copernicus, who posited a circular heliocentric theory. Johannes Kepler in the late sixteenth century proposed instead an elliptical trajectory of the orbits of planets, which made better sense of night-sky observations. These were then strengthened with the arrival of the telescope in 1609, which enabled further observations discrediting the geocentric model, such as proof that Jupiter had moons (i.e., bodies that orbited around it and not around Earth, and also proving that moving

⁴ Gary Watson, "On the Primacy of Character," in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, Daniel Statman, ed., (Georgetown University Press 1997); also referenced by Foot in *Natural Goodness*, p. 53.

bodies can have smaller bodies orbiting them). These were then further strengthened and integrated through later developments, such as Isaac Newton's law of universal gravitation, which was shown to lead mathematically to Kepler's laws of planetary motion.⁵

By contrast, if the basis for the life-form concept is fundamentally an expression of the constitution of our mind or of linguistic practice (for instance), it is not genuinely inductive in this sense. Clearly, these do not exhaust the different ways we might understand the origin and foundation of the life-form concept. However, the relevant point here is that the inductive nature of the life-form concept plays an important rhetorical role; the point of drawing on biological facts is to ground the objectivity of ethical concepts and norms in a way modeled on the empirical sciences. On the view that the life-form concept is a feature of our linguistic practice (even if a necessary one), for instance, its basis is not in an investigation or integration of facts about how humans must live, but rather a cataloguing of practices humans happen to have adopted, in the same way that we might catalogue the evolution of behaviors of etiquette or the way innate human linguistic abilities happen to be structured. On the other hand, if ethical concepts are part of the structure of our minds as rational agents, then arguably we need make no appeal to biological or anthropological facts at all, and may proceed in a Kantian project by defining the structure of rational agency and its implications for practical principles for rational agents as such.

If the life-form concept is genuinely inductive, by contrast, then it successfully enables the integration of causal observations about living organisms into a normative concept open to empirical development and revision, and the distinctive metaphysical and explanatory project of Foot and Rand shows promise. This is because, assuming the scientific investigations carried out in biology are inductive, they form a viable model on which to ground and understand ethical objectivity.

In some way or another both Foot and Rand are grappling with both of these requirements. In what follows I shall argue that ultimately only Rand understands the form of life concept as genuinely inductive and therefore capable of delivering on these two requirements. By contrast, Foot's conception of form of life is that of a linguistic structure

⁵ See <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/features/OrbitsHistory>.

or practice, and is not genuinely inductive; this ultimately undermines its purported role in grounding objective ethical norms.

2. Foot on Forms of Life

Foot's project is to "describe a particular type of evaluation and to argue that evaluation of human action is of this logical type."⁶ Ultimately, she argues that moral evaluations are a subclass of a wider range of evaluations that pertain to the "characteristics and operations of living things."⁷

In contrast to attributions of goodness that are merely instrumental (for instance, the usefulness of a tree for lumber or of stone for building to particular human goals), Foot contends that "natural goodness" of the kind only applicable to living organisms involves a special grammar that pertains exclusively to a relation between an individual living being and the life form of its species.⁸ For instance, we say that an oak tree is a good tree when it has strong roots, access to adequate nutrition, etc., and the concept of the life form of an oak tree is also what enables us in turn to say that things are good *for* the tree insofar as they enable the tree to carry out its distinctive life.

To explain this life form concept, Foot refers to Michael Thompson's paper "The Representation of Life." There, Thompson lays out some key features of "natural-historical judgments" that make use of the life form concept. According to Thompson, judgments using this concept take a generic form like 'the S is F' (e.g., "the cheetah is a night hunter") are not statistical and express at least a limited normativity (if S is F, a particular individual is defective insofar as it does not F).⁹ Foot adds to this the idea that these judgments, in order to pertain to the form

⁶ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ In fact, Thompson argues that we can express this logical category in different ways, but not analyze it. This is broadly in a Wittgensteinian spirit, in the sense that philosophical problems can be explained away by understanding how our language is used without committing ourselves to metaphysical claims beyond our linguistic practice itself. See Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn, eds., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

74.

of life concept, must be teleological; in other words, they can't simply involve any causal interaction between a living things and its parts or the world, but is restricted to those which "play a part" in the life of the organism.¹⁰ What it means to "play a part," for non-human animals and plants, is being constitutive of or a means to development, self-maintenance, and/or reproduction.¹¹ From here, the life-form concept begins to emerge. We can observe, first, that there exists for each organism a distinct and unique life cycle, requiring that the organism develop a certain way, be nourished a certain way, secure reproduction, and so on. From this, norms develop that can be applied to individual members of a species, on the grounds that an organism can be regarded as defective or good insofar as it fulfills the normative requirements of its life form. So, a deer needs to be swift in order to survive because of the way the deer form of life operates, and an individual deer that is relatively slow is properly evaluated as defective.

Foot's discussion of the life form concept in *Natural Goodness* is brief, and so to explicate it, we must draw out some implications of some of her auxiliary claims and remarks. In particular, this is important because Foot's initial remarks on the form of life concept, even as applied to human beings, appears to be of an empirical and inductive nature. For instance, she writes:

Whether an individual plant or animal actually succeeds in living the life that is its good to live depends on chance as well as on its own qualities. But its own goodness or defect is conceptually determined by the interaction of natural habitat and natural (species-general) 'strategies' for survival and reproduction. What conceptually determines goodness in a feature or operation is the relation, for the species, of that feature or operation to survival and reproduction, because it is in that that good lies in the botanical and zoological worlds.¹²

This suggests that the procedure of determining the goodness or defect of an individual animal or plant follows from first discovering the causal connections between the aspect of the organism being evaluated (e.g., the acuteness of owl's hearing and vision, the greenness and strength of the leaves of the oak tree) with its ability to survive (i.e., self-maintain)

¹⁰ *Natural Goodness*, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 42.

and reproduce. Clearly, this would be an inductive procedure of just the same kind Charles Darwin describes throughout the *Origin of Species*. Upon observing many instances of owls and their “strategies” for acquiring nourishment, one can find that they need particularly precise hearing and vision in order to catch mice, which they hunt at night. If their hearing or vision become damaged or are insufficiently precise, they will simply be unable to catch their prey and thus starve. Such judgments would also be revisable in light of new evidence (for instance, if it were later realized that owls actually rely on echolocation instead of hearing or vision).

For instance, Darwin believed that the appendix was part of a cecum, a large digestive structure required by the ancestors of apes who ate leafy diets. Consequently, as the diets of our primate ancestors evolved away from leaves, the appendix shrank and lost any biological function. About a century ago, it was discovered that the appendix has lymphatic tissue that is involved in sustaining beneficial bacteria. And more recent research suggests that the appendix is adaptive and has continually appeared independently in dozens of mammals, though its precise function is still not fully clear.¹³ Supposing that we could demonstrate, for at least some of the animals that had appendices, that it had some clear biological function, we could thereby show that a mammal with a damaged or dysfunctional appendix is defective.

Foot extends this framework to the human case, claiming that

...it is possible to give some quite general account of human necessities, that is, of what is quite generally needed for human good, if only by starting from the negative idea of human deprivation. For then we see at once that human good depends on many characteristics and capacities that are not needed even by animals, never mind by plants. There are, for instance, physical properties such as the kind of larynx that allows of the myriad sounds that make up human language, as well as the kind of hearing that can distinguish them. Moreover, human beings need the mental capacity for learning language; they also need

¹³ Heather F. Smith, William Parker, Sanet H. Kotzé, Michel Laurin, “Multiple independent appearances of the cecal appendix in mammalian evolution and an investigation of related ecological and anatomical factors”, *Comptes Rendus Palevol*, Volume 12, Issue 6, 2013, 339-354.

powers of imagination that allow them to understand stories, to join in songs and dances—and to laugh at jokes.¹⁴

Again, the observations Foot cites here are apparently empirical and inductive in nature. To understand the role of language in human life, and the physical capacities underlying it (such as vocal chords, innate psychological capacities for learning grammar, ear drums capable of detecting sonic frequencies, etc.) is a complex inductive project requiring numerous and varied observations.¹⁵ Added to these, certain psychological observations, such as our need for friendships and family ties as well as codes of conduct, appear to be for Foot the basis of inductive generalizations that can demonstrate our need for certain moral virtues, such as loyalty and kindness.¹⁶

However, Thompson describes a logical grammar or structure to certain modes of thought, rather than gives an account of an empirical basis for ethical propositions.¹⁷ It is worth looking at Thompson's account in more detail, especially as he explicates it in later work, to understand why it rules out such an empirical basis. If so, we may be in a position to see whether Foot also must take on Thompson's anti-empiricism by making use of his life-form concept.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Natural Goodness*, 43.

¹⁵ The degree of complexity and precision required for this inductive process is relative to one's purposes and contexts, however. At a broad level sufficient for a layperson, it is not needed to see how language underwrites many important human activities, such as promising, celebrating, coordination, etc. On the other hand, a linguist or anthropologist would require detailed study to determine the precise ways that different components of language fulfill important human needs.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," 31, 59. Thompson, in agreeing with McDowell, writes that, "...we are wrong to think of the concepts of the various life-forms as reached through abstraction of features of their particular bearers" (59).

¹⁸ It must be noted of course that Foot did not have access to Thompson's later work at the time of writing *Natural Goodness*, although she did surely have many discussions with him (as he was her student at UCLA). Importantly, Foot reiterates several times throughout *Natural Goodness* that Thompson's view of the life-form concept rightly locates the sources of normativity; she does not express any concern about disagreements with his view (see *Natural Goodness* 32, 41, 46, and 125 fn. 19).

In his examination there of the concept of “life,” Thompson aims to show that the concept cannot be analyzed or broken down into component parts, such as organization, stimulus and response, or metabolism. This is because to understand any of these concepts in turn presupposes an idea of a vital operation or activity, that is, the life-form concept itself.¹⁹ Since Thompson sees attempts to analyze ‘life’ into a real or metaphysical definition as doomed to failure, he proposes that we understand judgments about living things and their operations as exhibiting a special and irreducible form of logical judgment: “...in the end we will have to do with a special form of judgment, a distinct mode of joining subject and predicate in thought or speech... I am emboldened to say that the vital categories are logical categories.”²⁰ If the life-form concept is irreducible and unanalyzable, then it cannot be empirical or inductive after all (i.e., it can’t be traced to or reduced to perceptual content or observation); instead, for Thompson, it is a necessary pre-requisite for the cognition of particular organisms and their activities.²¹ For instance, in noting that the “Black Poplar has an extensive shallow root system in order to acquire water,” we presuppose a conception of the integration of the activities and parts of the poplar in a life cycle determined toward its own survival. Without that concept, we would be unable to make sense of or understand its nourishment, development, survival, and so on.²² Obviously, at some level empirical propositions enter into the picture—for example, a tree having this or that increase in weight, size, and shape, leaves bending in this or that direction, water moving into the roots, and so on. But the non-empirical life-form concept is what enables us to think of these as vital operations and characteristics in the first place, versus cognizing them as mere physical operations. Thus, for Thompson the life-form concept is akin to a

¹⁹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ It might be thought that the concepts could be *a priori* and yet have *some* empirical content. For instance, perhaps the general life-form concept is *a priori* but specific life-form concepts relating to specific organisms will have empirical content. At any rate, the question for my purposes would remain the same: insofar as the life-form concept is not genuinely inductive (even if it has some empirical content), it can’t play the kind of role it needs to play to secure objectivity in a way that is relevant for ethical naturalism.

²² Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 208.

Kantian pure concept of the understanding, in that it structures our experience and constitutes its objects.

Thompson, in a later paper,²³ makes use of a distinction formulated by John McDowell between first and second nature in foundational ethical theory. According to this distinction, a theory of first nature concerns human beings as biological entities with certain physical and psychological properties (e.g., having a certain number of teeth, being capable of language, etc.). A theory of second nature examines human beings in terms of their having been shaped by culture, learning, and habituation, such as the formation of a certain kind of character, cultural value-sets, and habitual responses to the environment. In his seminal paper “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” McDowell stresses that one could read a naturalistic project (of the sort Foot is laying out in *Natural Goodness*) from the perspective that norms of practical rationality could be read off of first nature. In the case of wolves, this might be of the form: “wolves hunt in packs, therefore, this individual wolf is defective in not cooperating in the hunt.” McDowell suggests that no derivation of this kind is possible for human beings, because for any given biological fact or alleged aspect of our first nature, we can step back from it reflectively and consider whether to endorse it. Therefore, all our practical norms come from our second nature - our cultural/historical/social makeup that constitutes our distinctive ethical outlook from within which we can consider and evaluate norms and ethical concepts.²⁴

However, and crucially, Thompson clarifies that this objection itself depends upon a notion (which Thompson rejects) of the life-form concept itself being empirical, rather than a first-personal reflection on second nature.²⁵ That is, it makes just the same mistake that Kant does (according to Thompson) when he assumes that ethical discourse and judgment cannot start from a conception of human life and instead must

²³ Michael Thompson, “Forms of Nature: “First,” “Second,” “Living,” “Rational,” and “Phronetic,”” in *Reason in Nature: New Essays on Themes from John McDowell*, Matthew Boyle and Evgenia Mylonaki, eds. (Harvard University Press, 2022).

²⁴ John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism.” in *Reasons and Virtues*, Hursthouse, Quinn and Lawrence, eds. (Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁴ *Natural Goodness*, 51.

²⁵ Michael Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54 (2004), 47-74.

start from a non-empirical conception of a self-legislating rational being. Thompson writes that

the intellectual operation through which the individuals reach their respective so-called Gattungen [form of life] is the same in all the self-conscious acts of any bearer of any of them — just as the first person, as an intellectual operation, is the same in all of them. The bearers of the different kinds cotton onto different life forms through the first-life-form operation, as I might put it, slightly idiotically, just as the different individual rational animals latch onto different individual rational animals through the first person concept. The intellectual operation is perfectly pure in either case.²⁶

Thus, the life-form concept, which we first exercise in self-conscious thought, is a non-empirical *a priori* concept that structures our experience of the world.²⁷ In this way, Thompson suggests that it is true that our concept of the human life form is not based on empirical facts about the biological character of human beings in the way science would have it (in this respect, he agrees with McDowell). But nor are we in a position to know anything about what a rational wolf would be like solely based on assumptions about the nature of rationality in general.²⁸

Instead, when we apply concepts of, say, *justice* or *virtue* to certain human activities and states of affairs, we are employing a non-empirical concept of the human way of life to understand and judge certain of our practices (e.g., making promises, praising and blaming, etc.) in light of these concepts. Obviously, at some level, there is an empirical input that is relevant here - we perceive the world, and certain activities, properties, and states that we perceive in the world and in relation to ourselves and other human beings come to be related to this life-form concept. However, the concept *itself* is non-empirical, and therefore given to us as an *a priori* concept that structures our experience and enables us to cognize properties/states/activities as vital operations expressive of the life form. In turn, this implies that ethical *knowledge* can be (at least partly) itself non-empirical. To further clarify this position, Thompson invites us to consider ethical knowledge as a kind

²⁶ Michael Thompson, “Forms of Nature: “First,” “Second,” “Living,” “Rational,” and “Phronetic,”” 730.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 731.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 733-35.

of practical self-knowledge that is non-observational, just as is our knowledge of our own intentions. Following Anscombe, he understands knowledge of what one is doing as non-observational knowledge that is constitutive of intentional action: for example, if I am intentionally going to the market to get groceries, I know non-observationally that I am in fact *going to the market to get groceries* — I don't know that by "checking" the world first. Similarly,

as my thinking representation of what I am doing intentionally is an aspect of what this representation itself is about, so this latter cognition will be an aspect of the life characteristic of the developed human subject and will characteristically mediate her practical operations. Such cognition goes to constitute the form of life in question as one in which the things cognized are true.²⁹

Thompson doesn't fill in this account, and so his remarks are largely programmatic. Thus, the way such non-empirical practical self-knowledge would work in the case of the ethical is left indeterminate. The thought might be something like this: we know, non-empirically, the reasons for which we are acting - whether we are acting, for example, for the sake of pleasure, or for honor or rewards, or for the sake of a conception of fine or noble action. That desires for pleasure or the avoidance of pain, or for honor or the avoidance of dishonor, are within us and can operate in us is also something we can know non-empirically about ourselves. But it is through such knowledge and through intentionally choosing to act for the sake of the fine, that we develop and have practical wisdom. In learning about ourselves through proper habituation and self-reflection, we simultaneously learn about the human form of life, in a non-empirical way, which is constituted by the correct use of practical reason and the development of practical wisdom. Thus, my knowledge of the role of "justice" in human life is derived from my self-knowledge about the reasons for acting and choosing available to me in contexts when I am thinking about how to judge the actions and character of others.

However exactly this account is supposed to look, some such account must be filled in to make good on the life-form concept as a concept that is both non-empirical and yet tied to our unique nature as a particular kind of life. Is Foot committed to such a non-empirical

²⁹ Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," 47–74.

account or can she draw on Thompson's life-form idea without such a commitment?

Recall that, for non-human organisms, Foot identifies their natural goodness with respect to their life cycle. This, in turn, consists in identifying what is required for their development, self-maintenance, and reproduction (hereafter I shall refer to these three together as 'survival').³⁰ So, for instance, it is required for the reproduction of the peacock that the male be brightly colored and able to attract his potential female mates. A deer needs to be able to run quickly and quietly in order to evade predators. These are all cases of identifying one kind of activity or trait with a form of life that requires that activity or process as a constitutive component. In the case of humans, however, identifying what is good amounts instead to identifying *reasons* for choice and action: it is "clearly not true," writes Foot, that human goodness is determined merely by its relation to reproduction or survival.³¹ But, as we saw, some activity (or part or trait) being shown to be related to survival or reproduction for other animals and plants is precisely central to the inductive procedure of establishing that the activity in question is part of the animal's or plant's form of life.

Given that Foot's goal is to show that a conception of the human form of life can underwrite a conception of human goodness, and that this goodness is a form of practical rationality, the challenge then is whether the procedure of identifying moral reasons for choice and action is an inductive one with some basis *other* than its being connected to survival. For instance, if someone questioned why justice was morally required or not, could she provide an inductive basis for an answer?

In the end, Foot cannot and does not provide such a basis. This is because, for Foot, the ability to exercise our capacity to see things as reasons for action is based on the special role of language in human life, which in turn enables us to engage in specifically *moral* language. In the end, language defines the human way of life, and moral language in particular requires as its grammar not just that patterns of evaluation are structurally similar to natural norms, but that they do so with a conceptual connection between considerations for action to *moral*

³⁰ *Natural Goodness*, 32.

³¹ *Natural Goodness*, 42, see also 51.

reasons rather than between considerations for action to a connection to survival.³²

As Foot writes, it is language that gives us the power to see and give and explain grounds upon which we act, rather than simply acting according to desires or drives as animals do.³³ But in the case of moral action, these grounds (which serve as reasons) are not based on desire or self-interest (as they arguably are for animals), because it is a prior or more fundamental conception of the human good that is “a necessary condition of practical rationality and part-determinant of the thing itself.”³⁴ Since human goodness underwrites practical rationality, by what specific procedure, then, do we identify the human good? For instance, by what procedure do we identify that the following is true: I should not harm others for my own purposes, because it is unjust. To say simply that justice is something on which our way life depends³⁵ only pushes the question back: why is *this* our way of life, and not some other? Foot does not directly answer this question, but a clue to her view lies in her description of ways in which an action can be considered good or bad. She offers three: the kind of action, the end of an action, and one’s beliefs about whether it is good or bad to do.³⁶ These mental features of action are all accessible to an agent’s consciousness, if she could be said to be acting intentionally at all — that is to say, in Anscombe’s formulation, knowing what one is doing. They are not the product of an inductive or scientific investigation into the external world: a child will be brought up to use the term ‘justice’ and identify treating others fairly as a kind of action with a certain end, etc., but what makes that action ‘just’ is that it is partly constitutive of the human good and not that it contributes to some other thing (self-interest, survival,

³² Foot might argue that community-based norms that arise from a shared moral-linguistic community form a basis for a conception of human goodness. On that basis, arguably the project of figuring out the norms of the community is inductive. But unless the community norms themselves were formed by an inductive procedure, rather than by constructive procedures or habituations (for example), this would not make moral investigations truly inductive in the way required to constitute a genuine biological basis for normativity, any more than a system of etiquette in Japan would have an inductive basis just because I have to acquire empirical evidence to figure out what it is when traveling there.

³³ *Natural Goodness*, 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

desire-satisfaction) that is held to be good or valuable.³⁷ Instead, the seeing of certain considerations as reasons for action (e.g., that you must fulfill a promise you've made in normal circumstances) is simply what justice *is*, and it cannot be justified "from the outside" (to use McDowell's phrase³⁸) of the linguistic practice that makes up the human form of life and enables us to recognize those reasons.

As the reader may appreciate, there is now a tension in Foot's thought. As I initially introduced Foot's discussion, the life-form concept is based on causal interactions in the world that have to be empirically determined, and if the human life form has a "common conceptual structure," then the same should be true for the human life form.³⁹ And yet, as Foot is clear, human good is *sui generis*, and in transitioning from plants and animals to human life there is a "sea change," where the standards of survival and reproduction do not suffice to answer our normative inquiry about ourselves.⁴⁰ When we take Thompson's extended discussion of Aristotelian categoricals into account, as a way of understanding the grammar that is a precondition for our ability to talk about and cognize the activities of living things, the standard empirical and inductive picture is further put into question. It seems that when we consider knowledge of the human life form in particular, we do not depend upon empirical data (though this might be relevant as a kind of external constraint), but rather acquire a non-empirical knowledge about ourselves that serves as the basis for apprehending the human life form.

But if this *a priori* self-knowledge is the basis of our normative conception of the human way of life, what, then, is the practical import for Foot of demonstrating the conceptual similarity between the way we

³⁷ See in particular Foot's analysis of promise-keeping in the example of Mikluko-Maklay, *Ibid.*, 50-51. The example serves to show that the justice of Maklay's action is simply in responding appropriately to a certain consideration (promises are not to be broken), even though no harm would have ensued nor would the institution of promising have been undermined. This is a "special linguistic device" for Foot that is part of the human good, but not a means to some other good, such as preventing harm or fulfilling contracts.

³⁸ John McDowell, "Two Kinds of Naturalism."

³⁹ *Natural Goodness*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51, 42-43. Mathias Haase, in his chapter "Practically Self-Conscious Life," in *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, has argued similarly that Foot faces such a tension.

cognize living organisms more generally and how we think about and make moral judgments? The answer, I would argue, is more methodological than substantive in focus, and more negative than positive. In particular, the elucidation of the grammar of natural goodness clarifies certain *mistakes* that can be made by philosophers in understanding the conceptual structure of ethical thought. For example, her grammar of natural goodness dissolves Hume's separation between human practical reason and ethical goodness.⁴¹

This is because, according to Foot, when one asks a question such as, "Why is it rational to act morally?" we can answer by pointing to why specific things count as acting badly for human beings (e.g., breaking promises or murdering). If the question pertains to a general relationship between morality and rationality, the answer lies in a conceptual connection between doing well (acting on the right kinds of reasons) and being rational.⁴² It also clarifies the problematic foundations of a position such as G.E. Moore's, on which we must posit the existence of non-natural moral properties and entities in order to explain and justify the reality of moral facts. On Foot's view, to speak of "goodness" in general as a state of affairs or non-natural property existing out in the world fails to cohere with the way in which we cognize and talk about goodness, the moral virtues, praise and blame, etc. It also renders incoherent attempts to derive an ethical framework from the nature of rational beings as such (in the way Kant does) or on the basis of considering the intrinsic goodness or badness of certain states of affairs (in the way utilitarianism does).

As Foot writes in her postscript to *Natural Goodness*, this leaves "substantial moral questions" exactly as they were before, but she has clarified the "framework in which the dispute takes place."⁴³

3. An Inductive Understanding of Human Nature: Ayn Rand

The core elements of Ayn Rand's distinctive approach to ethical foundations can be found in her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics."⁴⁴ There,

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² *Natural Goodness*, 64-65.

⁴³ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁴ Rand's ethical framework is clarified across a combination of her non-fiction essays (in which she is usually addressing a specific delimited topic, such as a current event) as well as her novels, which are philosophically rich in character. I've focused here on "The Objectivist Ethics" because its structure is most

Rand forcefully makes use of the idea of a human way of life, alternately using terms such as “man’s life,” “man qua man,” or what is required for “the survival of a rational being.”⁴⁵

Rand’s distinctive inductive approach to ethics is observable in her method in this essay. First, she holds that an explanation is needed for why ethics is needed at all (and hence how it arises). According to Rand, philosophical discussions on ethics tend to proceed on the assumption that codes of ethics and ethical reasoning exist and that we merely need an account of how they operate (e.g., whether as moral expressivists would hold it, ethical judgments are expressive of non-cognitive attitudes). Foot’s approach to ethics would be no exception here insofar as she is offering another account of ethical judgment.

Rand begins, then, by tracing the origins of and need for a concept of ‘value.’ For Rand, this concept can only arise (and apply) in the context of living organisms pursuing goals in the face of an alternative.⁴⁶ Rand writes:

It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil.⁴⁷

And later:

Only a living entity can have goals or can originate them. And it is only a living organism that has the capacity for self-generated, goal-directed action. On the *physical* level, the functions of all living organisms, from the simplest to the most complex—from the nutritive function in the single cell of an amoeba to the blood circulation in the body of a man—are

useful to the present discussion.

⁴⁵ Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” 28, 30, 31.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

actions generated by the organism itself and directed to a single goal: the maintenance of an organism's life.⁴⁸

In the context of living things pursuing their own survival (and the processes and activities needed for it) and avoiding death, things can be demonstrably shown to have value — they are pursued for the sake of a goal (life) and without those values the organism dies. To illustrate this, we may take the example of a deer. In relation to the deer, the world has a value-laden character — it must avoid certain things (animal predators, cold, humans) and pursue others (grass and other vegetation as food, a potential mate, safe cover for resting and hiding) if it is to live. These facts are made possible in turn by the fact that the deer is a particular kind of organism and has particular requirements for its distinctive form of life — indeed, the biological study of deer would have to proceed on such a premise.

It is important here that Rand emphasizes both an epistemic and a metaphysical perspective on value. It is not merely that the concept of 'value' (and hence, normative evaluation in general) is dependent on the concept of 'life,' but that metaphysically things are only good or harmful to living organisms in the context of their pursuing their own survival. 'Value' is therefore a concept that enables us to recognize and grasp this metaphysical fact.

Thus, living organisms and the distinctive requirements they have for their particular lives (the life of a whale, or an oak tree, or plankton, or a mushroom, and so on) give rise to the need for both the concept 'value' and in turn a normative standard for a given organism in terms of what is needed for its life to go well or poorly. A deer does well when it evades predators, finds mates, etc., and suffers or fails insofar as it is caught by predators, can't find food or shelter, and so on. An oak tree, by contrast, seeks sunlight, water, and nutrition in the soil. These respective standards Rand describes as being dependent on "[the organism's] *nature*, by the kind of entity it is."⁴⁹

Notice that here Rand is describing a general concept of value that covers the pursuit of objects (food, mates) or states (safety, warmth, pleasure) by organisms. For Rand, value in the more specific senses of *conscious* values (i.e., those pursued by conscious animals as *goals*) and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

chosen values (i.e., those pursued only by human beings as *purposes*) are sub-categories of this wider sense of ‘value.’

Foot and Rand share the view that human agency creates a radical gulf in how we consider the life form of humans versus other organisms. Clearly, since human values are chosen and deliberated upon, a mere statement of what humans pursue does not suffice as a standard of what is required for human life, in the way that it would for the life of a deer or an oak tree, whose agency is limited to response to sensations and drives or physical stimuli, respectively. Humans can clearly choose actions that are contrary to their well-being and survival, whether intentionally (i.e., self-harm) or through willful or innocent ignorance, as when people unknowingly injure themselves, choose unhealthy and mentally destructive relationships, or become addicted to unhealthy drugs. Rand in particular stresses that the specific nature of human consciousness is such that it gives rise to specific psychological and social needs, which together constitute a much more complex system of self-maintenance than one would find in the life of, say, a deer or wolf.⁵⁰

However, Rand’s view of the nature of reason’s role in human life differs from Foot’s. Whereas Foot highlights the fact that we justify our actions and choices with reasons, and hold others accountable, and so on, Rand stresses the distinctive survival value of reason. In particular Rand stresses the fact that humans have conceptual needs — we need to formulate, apply, and extend our conceptual knowledge of the world in order to surpass our dependency on perceptual knowledge. Whereas deer and wolves have patterns of behavior and goals set by nature for them, humans need to discover, plan, and learn about themselves and their environment using conceptual knowledge in order to survive. For instance, humans learned how to master fire for cooking and warmth, how to master materials for building an extraordinary array of structures suited to innumerable purposes, and how to create complex institutions such as governments and financial institutions that enable coordination and collaboration on a large and sophisticated scale. Since conceptual knowledge is not automatic and people need a way to orient their actions and choices to integrated purposes, Rand sees ethics as a fundamental conceptual solution to the fact that we need guidance in the achievement of values in order to survive.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

This is a view that, on the face of it, most philosophers would balk at as implausible: clearly one can survive without ethics — not only because many immoral people seem to survive just fine, but because survival simply seems to be a separate issue. Survival is about meeting basic physical and psychological needs to avoid death in the short-term, whereas ethics is either unrelated to well-being or related only to well-being in a higher sense—the achievement of happiness or distinctively ethical or aesthetic values (individually or collectively).⁵¹

Moreover, this view seems to be susceptible to the kinds of worries or objections Thompson and McDowell raise (on Foot’s behalf), in thinking that such a view merely makes ethics into a subcategory of biology. This view is objectionable, from their perspective, for two reasons. First, it might suggest that issues of justice, or questions about the nature or importance of honesty or integrity, say, are to be decided by scientific investigations and classifications. Such a view does not do justice to our volitional conception of practical reasoning, which in part involves an ability to step back from any putative activity and evaluate it as worth doing or choosing, regardless of its putative role in a natural process. Secondly, it seems not to do justice to our self-reflection on normative standards, and the fact that we begin ethical reflection not from a Cartesian place of bare foundations, but from an already acquired rich view of what is good, right, and virtuous. As Rosalind Hursthouse puts it, our ethical reflection occurs from within an acquired ethical outlook.⁵²

⁵¹ Many of these points can be found in the secondary literature on Rand. See, Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (Dutton, 1991), (especially Chapters 6-8), Tara Smith, *Viable Values* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), Gregory Salmieri, “Selfish Regard for the Rights of Others” in *Foundations of a Free Society: Reflections on Ayn Rand’s Political Philosophy*, Salmieri and Mayhew, eds., (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), Gregory Salmieri, “Objectivism” in *The Routledge Companion to Libertarianism*, Zwolinski and Ferguson, eds. (Routledge, 2022), and Darryl F. Wright, “Evaluative Concepts and Objective Values: Rand on Moral Objectivity,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008), 168.

⁵² Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 163. The issue of the ability to “step back from” our ends, including our ultimate end of life, has been one generating much discussion in secondary literature on Rand. On Rand’s view, ethics only has normative authority to us based upon our choice to live; that is, to adopt life as a human being as our ultimate end. But whether and in what sense this choice itself is justified, is not obviously clear. See Darryl Wright, “Reasoning about

However, to dismiss Rand's view on such grounds would be to fail to see the subtlety and sophistication of the view she develops.

For Rand, the fact of human volition does not alter the fact that for her human life (and *a fortiori* human consciousness) has specific requirements for its proper maintenance. She writes:

That which [man's] survival requires is set by his nature and is not open to his choice. What is open to his choice is only whether he will discover it or not, whether he will choose the right values or not. He is free to make the wrong choice, but not free to succeed with it. He is free to evade reality, he is free to unfocus his mind and stumble blindly down any road he pleases, but not free to avoid the abyss he refuses to see. Knowledge, for any conscious organism, is the means of survival; to a living consciousness, every "is" implies an "ought."

...

Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes, or destroys it is the evil.

Since everything man needs has to be discovered by his own mind and produced by his own effort, the two essentials of the method of survival proper to a rational being are: thinking and productive work."⁵³

The conceptual nature of human consciousness and the capacity for it, which Rand refers to as 'reason', determine specific uses of our volitional capacity *if* we are to gain knowledge and successfully engage in productive work (which for Rand, is the most central or core survival element of a human way of life). Thus, her view maintains a deep respect for practical reason's capacity to "step back" from any given standard and ask why one should adopt it, including the ultimate end of living as a human being at all. For Rand, ethics offers guidance and standards

Ends: Life as a Value in Ayn Rand's Ethics," in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory*, Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox, eds. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 26, and Allan Gotthelf, "The Choice to Value," in *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue*, Gotthelf and Lennox, eds, 33-46, in particular.

⁵³ Ibid., 28.

only to those who have embraced the goal of living, and that therefore any specific standard or guidance can be critically examined in light of that fundamental goal.⁵⁴

What about the way in which ethical reflection seems to begin from an acquired outlook? After all, it is clearly false that we can only begin to think about the nature of the human good and virtues after having, say, taken a course on biology or psychology. Rather, when we can truly appreciate these questions, we already have many moral judgments and views about the nature of the good.

Rand's view neither implies nor requires that ethical reflection begin from axioms or Cartesian reflection, outside of an acquired outlook. To illustrate her view of how ethical reflection works, I will raise two cases as exemplifying her distinctive form of foundationalism and how it relates to the inductive process in the case of ethical knowledge.

For the first case, consider Rand's view of the importance of honesty, which she sees as a moral virtue.⁵⁵ Prior to deep moral reflection on this topic, one is likely to have the view or attitude (perhaps implicitly) that telling or representing the truth is sometimes useful, but sometimes it is beneficial to ignore the truth in favor of a pretense or to deceive others in order to secure advantages. The beginning of such a process would have to involve thinking about cases in which one deceived oneself or others, what one is doing or thinking about in such cases, and how the dishonesty impacted one's ability to achieve and keep important values. From there, one could begin to generalize using external observation beyond one's own personal experience about how dishonesty tends to lead to needless complications, undermines personal relationships, and seems to undercut self-esteem. From there, one could reflect even more deeply on a view of human nature according to which, by the nature of human consciousness and reality, pretense does not change the nature of the facts of reality with which we deal; in order to

⁵⁴ It would be impossible to elaborate fully on this point in the space available here (which would take me into the realm of normative ethics), but what is relevant for my purposes is to illustrate the way in which this model is fundamentally inductive, but preserves the distinctive role of practical reason that is (rightly) seen as central to ethical thinking.

⁵⁵ See Gregory Salmieri, "Atlas Shrugged on the Role of the Mind in Man's Existence," *Essays on Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged*, 397-452.

achieve genuine values, we need to consistently appreciate and respect the way things actually are. In fact, dishonesty is profoundly destructive, because it undercuts one's ability to create and appreciate genuine values: as in the case of secret unfaithfulness to a partner, which undercuts the genuine value of the relationship, or lying about qualifications on a job application, which undercuts the achievement of securing that job and being recognized for one's qualifications. Conversely, the reward of honesty is an experience of being in control of one's life and knowledge of reality, and therefore that one's achievements are real.⁵⁶

In addition to self-reflection on one's experience, Rand's inductive understanding of human nature depends on historical facts and developments in existing ethical viewpoints and cultural values, and how such developments can require important and radical revisions to our views.

As an example, for Rand, the identification of the two core activities of a rational life—thinking and productive work—have to be identified inductively, and continual investigation and reformulation of what that means is required. A central aspect of Aristotle's ethical system, for instance, with which Rand agrees, is the centrality of rational activity to human life. But Aristotle saw this as being expressed most completely and consistently in an activity of theoretical contemplation, understood as thinking and theorizing pursued for its own sake and not for any further material end.

Rand's identification of productive work as central to a proper human life is a significant departure from this Aristotelian ethical framework that is based on Rand's interpretation and understanding of human history after the Industrial Revolution. For Rand, rational thought — scientific innovation, the rational planning and investment in business enterprise, and the coordination of both of those — led to continual technological and economic breakthroughs that dramatically improved human life. Taken together, observations and understandings of the history of this period were essential for Rand to her identification of productive work, understood broadly as the application of reason to the problem of survival, as central to human life.

⁵⁶ See Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, 129.

In turn, this made possible further inductive theorizing on the ethical requirements of human social systems, insofar as the Industrial Revolution was made possible by the partial realization of a capitalist social system, in which productive work of the kind described above is liberated. Rand defines capitalism as “a social system based on the recognition of individual rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned.”⁵⁷ While she points out that no society in history has fully realized such a system, the northern states in America in the nineteenth century nearly did.⁵⁸

In an extended discussion of the nature and meaning of capitalism (drawing on this period in America), Rand writes:

Capitalism demands the best of every man — his rationality — and rewards him, accordingly. It leaves every man free to choose the work he likes, to specialize in it, to trade his product for the products of others, and to go as far on the road of achievement as his ability and ambition will carry him. His success depends on the objective value of his work and on the rationality of those who recognize that value...It is the basic, metaphysical fact of man’s nature—the connection between his survival and his use of reason—that capitalism recognizes and protects.⁵⁹

The emergence of capitalism thus reveals historically in a new way a system of socio-economic organization that in turn provides an inductive basis for a new perspective on the human way of life. Whereas previously human societies had been primarily agrarian, the specialization of labor and innovation made possible in capitalist societies reveals to us, from Rand’s perspective, a new way to understand human nature. The theorizing of the sort that Rand engaged in was responsive to the actual experience and emergence of capitalism itself. In this way, reflection on actually existing cultural outlooks and approaches, integrated with a view of human nature that can transcend

⁵⁷ Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism?”, 19.

⁵⁸ For further discussion and elaboration on Rand’s views of these issues, see Ayn Rand, “What Is Capitalism,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Signet 1964), Gregory Salmieri, “*Atlas Shrugged* on the Role of the Mind in Man’s Existence,” in *Essays on Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged*, Robert Mayhew, ed., (Lexington Books, 2009), Leonard Peikoff, “Objectivism Through Induction.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

particular cultural norms, is a crucial part of the inductive and empirical project of understanding the human way of life. Thus, Rand's project enables just the sort of objectivity — and the critical reflection and revision enabled by it — in ethics that the biological sciences can achieve through observation and reflection on the lives and activities of other organisms, and astronomy can achieve in observation and reflection on celestial bodies.

As we saw with Foot, her insistence that the human good is not based upon survival means that we need some other basis on which to understand the content of the human form of life, as against the way we determine the life forms of other organisms. Following Thompson, we can make sense of Foot's claims that human goodness is *sui generis* and is based on a capacity for a certain kind of logical grammar and linguistic practice—justifying our choices and actions in light of reasons for action. As Thompson's discussion of the life-form concept clarifies, the content of ethics is instead based upon an *a priori* self-knowledge of one's own reasons for action, for example, knowing why we are acting (for the sake of virtue, for some advantage, or for pleasure). This, in turn, makes Foot's theory neutral on the content of ethics itself and “leaves everything as it was,”⁶⁰ rather than providing a framework for an inductive system.

⁶⁰ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 116.