

I will argue that we should not be convinced by this kind of (naturalist) argument for the objectivity of ethical judgements. Whilst I am a moral realist and a cognitivist, and I agree that ethics is objective, I am not a naturalist.

*'Sentences such as "A good oak tree has deep roots" can be true, and true irrespective of anybody's opinion. In other words, such sentences can be objectively true.'* is an objective statement positing a realist view. **Objective** implies that the biological function disclosed will remain to be seen as good, regardless of the perceiver, whilst realism suggests that it is **mind-independent**. The two terms convey that the biological function prevails as good, irrespective of our minds, suggesting that it is not a subjective matter; the goodness of the function will not alter according to the agent in question.

*'Now, the word "good" doesn't change its meaning just because it's being applied to members of one species rather than another. So, sentences such as "A good human being is kind" can be objectively true as well.'* is suggesting that moral statements are objective. This means that what is right or wrong does not depend on the subjective perceivers. Realists agree with this view, and state that morality exists mind-independently, in the physical world, therefore concluding that it is objective, as it is individual from human minds.

I argue that:

1. An empirical claim cannot be transferred into an ethical claim.
2. The fulfilment of a biological function does not always promote the flourishing of an organism.

### **Foot's naturalistic argument:**

The problem with using the statement 'A good oak tree has deep roots' in an argument to posit ethical objectivity is that there is a debate as to whether good is being used in the same way as it is in the statement: *A good human being is kind*.

Foot argues for naturalism, advocating that 'good' is objective and so is the same for all species; she states that, concepts such as function and purpose are "found where there is evaluation of all kinds of living things, including human beings", meaning that good has a certain, consistent essence or form.<sup>1</sup> According to Foot, there is a 'network of interrelated concepts such as function and purpose' found within all species. To her, it seems illogical to claim that there is no common logical structure between the evaluation of zoological or botanical agents.

*A good oak tree has deep roots* focuses on a botanical subject, highlighting that 'good' for oaks means having deep roots for water absorption, allowing it to fulfill its function. The feature is considered good as it enables the organism to flourish; flourishing is desirable for neo-Aristotelians

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<sup>1</sup> Foot, 'Transitions to Human Beings', in *Natural Goodness*. Implications of 'Forms' is prevalent within Platonism, stating that these exist in the World of Forms, which are innate and objective ideas

as it is considered an ultimate moral goal. *A good human being is kind* indicates that kindness is a function of human beings. Through kindness, flourishing can also occur due to its creation of social connectivity.

Foot recognises that the way in which the two subjects operate is different, which is rendered by our perceptions, however there is no plausible reason as to why “the word ‘function’ has a different meaning”<sup>2</sup>

### **Contemporary naturalists aiding Foot:**

Hursthouse further aids Foot’s ethical naturalism, by understanding humans to be “part of the natural, biological order of living things”, suggesting a continuity between people and other species. This thought pattern is seen in Foot’s claim about what humans can regard as ethical. Hursthouse argues that the evaluation of oak trees is equivalent to the moral evaluation of humans; both are considered good if they are flourishing. We “have not suddenly started to use the word ‘good’ in a totally new ‘moral’ or evaluative way”.<sup>3</sup> This quote implies that flourishing should be comprehended in the same manner for moral or biological assertions- there is nothing *sui generis* about the alteration in the circumstance.

Thompson aids Foot’s argument through his theory of ‘natural-historical judgements’; moral and biological judgements have a general form.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the meaning of these concepts fluctuate to accommodate the agent ascribed, Foot and Thompson consider it fallible to claim that there is no common base to which the logical structure of the evaluation derives from; natural-historical judgements enable the deduction to natural goodness. The truth within these forms of generality is true in both instances, allowing for conclusions to be drawn about the defective state of an organism. For example, if *a good oak tree has deep roots* is not true in an instance, it can be concluded that the organism in question is defective, as it would have been inferred from historical data that this is naturally good.

### **An empirical claim cannot be transferred into an ethical claim.**

Fitzpatrick argues whether *a good human being is kind* is true, cannot be inferred empirically. The neo-Aristotelian approach exploring biological function has no relation to moral virtue. Thus, Foot’s argument is not comprised on a basis of natural science; it evolves from the premise that inhuman life (i.e., oak trees) is continuously on the same grounds as the domain of morality. This is considered fallible.

Earlier, David Hume argued similarly through his creation of ‘Hume’s Law’, posing significant skepticism against the validity of using empirical data for morality. In this case, if a moral realist infers from a scientific hypothesis, they are obtaining a prescriptive proposition (something that

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<sup>2</sup> Foot (2001) pg. 40

<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse (1999) pg. 226

<sup>4</sup> Thompson (2008)

‘ought’), derived from a descriptive proposition (something that ‘is’). Hume deems it “altogether unconvincible” when that deduction is made about morality, as scientific hypothesis are purely facts, and therefore not evaluative.

G. E. Moore, like Hume, argued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that there is an ‘is-ought gap’ in naturalistic ethical theories. This convinced philosophers that non-moral statements, or descriptive terms like *a good oak tree has deep roots*, make a huge leap to, and are not equivalent to moral statements like *a good human being is kind*. He argued that moral properties cannot be identified with any natural properties using the ‘Open Question Argument’.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that:

When we state “Good means X” (X being a natural property such as pleasure or function) it is highlighting that good cannot be defined because the question “Is X good?” is not a closed, tautological question. If we could define good, this question would be asking “Is good, good?”, as X would be equivalent to good. But this never is the case: ‘Is pleasure good?’ or ‘Is fulfilling your function good?’ are open questions.

Furthermore, an empirical claim cannot be transferred into an ethical claim because, if this was the case naturalism would erode autonomy, morality would be a science; due to this, ‘*matters of fact*’ would become ‘*matters of value*’. But scientific hypothesis cannot cast ethical judgement. Ultimately, autonomy is seen as a centripetal idea in ethics, in particular in Kantian deontology and virtue Aristotelian ethics, where self-imposition is required to be moral. Without it, humans are unable to act as moral agents completely: for example, exercising practical wisdom would be challenged, making it difficult for flourishing to prevail, stunting the accomplishment of eudaimonia. Given that Foot is a neo-Aristotelian naturalist, this may challenge her view to an extent.

### **The fulfilment of a biological function does not always promote the flourishing of an organism.**

Through the works of Dawkins and Kitcher, Fitzpatrick developed an account supporting the evolution of biological function, whilst refuting that morality can be derived from it.<sup>6</sup> The theory grapples with the use of exerting phenotypic effects on organisms, in order to increase their rate of reproduction. Natural selection determines the functions of organisms which is gene replication. It is implied that this gene selectionist account does not coincide with the neo-Aristotelian function ascription, because organism welfare is not promoted. Examples are provided by Fitzpatrick, accentuating traits which have biological functions but lack the promotion of the organism’s welfare:

#### ***Fitzpatrick's Elephant Seals Fighting Case***

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<sup>5</sup> Moore (1903)

<sup>6</sup> Fitzpatrick (2000) uses ‘welfare’ to refer to flourishing, where flourishing is desirable to neo-Aristotelians.

Violent fights are prevalent amongst elephant seals, where the males of the species fight in order to acquire dominion over the harem. This is driven by gene replication: female elephant seals only mate with the dominant male.<sup>7</sup>

Biological function is derived from the brutality, as the genes which render the violent nature dominate the gene pool, given the apparent out-production of peers by fighting male seals. However, injuries and deaths are prevalent amongst the practice, which is not on the level of promoting welfare. Due to this, Fitzpatrick believes that ascription of functions on the premise of contributions to flourishing is fallible. This is a strong argument, as it criticises the main premise of neo-Aristotelian naturalists, demonstrating that flourishing, and therefore morality, cannot always be derived from biological function.

### **Neo-Aristotelian Response:**

On the other hand, I acknowledge that neo-Aristotelians may counteract this argument by denying that function ascription is separate from biological science. Natural goodness is argued to concern an *alternative* concept of function.<sup>8</sup> Lott underlines that the pain rendered by the fighting in Fitzpatrick's example, does not necessarily follow that flourishing may not occur. Reproduction is deemed as a significant aspect of the seal's welfare, assisted by the fights.

Fitzpatrick's argument is stronger as he makes a general allegation that an organism's welfare is determined independently of its biological function, in the case; therefore, unless welfare is defined in genetic terms, biological function can be conducive to a lack of/no flourishing. Due to this, the counter against naturalism succeeds.

Foot considers good to be 'the fulfilment of function resulting in flourishing' which is mind-independent and objective. However, I maintain an empirical claim cannot be transferred into an ethical claim and the fulfilment of a biological function does not always promote the flourishing of an organism. Hume's Law particularly supports the former point as it refutes Foot's and Hursthouse's link between biological and moral subjects. This is a significant issue for the neo-Aristotelian naturalists, as it attacks the central component of the theory. This conclusion depends on acknowledging that there is no common essence or *form* that oak trees and humans described as good share. The lack of shared good between oak trees and humans can be shown using G.E. Moore's idea that: good cannot be defined.

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<sup>7</sup>Moosavi (2019) pg. 4

<sup>8</sup> Lott (2012)

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