

# Must realists be skeptics? An Aristotelian reply to a Darwinian Dilemma

Micah Lott<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** In a series of influential essays, Sharon Street has argued, on the basis of Darwinian considerations, that normative realism leads to skepticism about moral knowledge. I argue that if we begin with the account of moral knowledge provided by Aristotelian naturalism, then we can offer a satisfactory realist response to Street's argument, and that Aristotelian naturalism can avoid challenges facing other realist responses. I first explain Street's evolutionary argument and three of the most prominent realist responses, and I identify challenges to each of those responses. I then develop an Aristotelian response to Street. My core claim is this: Given Aristotelian naturalism's account of moral truth and our knowledge of it, we can accept the influence of evolutionary processes on our moral beliefs, while also providing a principled, non-question-begging reason for thinking that those basic evaluative tendencies that evolution has left us with will push us toward, rather than away from, realist moral truths, so that our reliably getting things right does not require an unexplained and implausible coincidence.

**Keywords** Sharon Street · Aristotelian naturalism · Moral knowledge · Moral realism · Evolutionary debunking · Philippa Foot · Michael Thompson · Life form

Human beings are organized so as to take considerations having to do with familial relations, each other's suffering, food, water, broken bones, a long life, and so on, as significant. But in principle a valuing creature could be systematically organized so as to experience anything at all as what matters above all else (Street 2009, 289).

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✉ Micah Lott  
micah.lott@bc.edu

<sup>1</sup> Philosophy Department, Stokes Hall North, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02367, USA

What all this shows is not that the capacity for reason involves any distancing from first nature, but on the contrary that reasoning, if it distances itself too much from nature, ceases to be reasoning at all. (Teichmann 2011, xii–xiii).

## 1 Introduction

The past decade has seen an explosion of interest in evolutionary debunking arguments in ethics.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most powerful of these has been developed by Sharon Street. In a series of essays, Street has argued that once we appreciate the influence of natural selection on our normative beliefs, we see that normative realism leads to skepticism about moral knowledge. While this conclusion would not show that realism is false, it would nevertheless be an unhappy result for realists. In this essay, I offer an Aristotelian response to Street. I argue that if we begin with an Aristotelian account of moral knowledge, then Street’s argument does not force the realist to adopt skepticism. In addition, I attempt to show that Aristotelian realism, in contrast to other forms of realism, has distinct resources for recognizing what is true in Street’s argument while avoiding skepticism.

For my purposes, the most important claims of the Aristotelian account are: (1) The subject matter of our moral knowledge is *human good*, in the sense of acting and living well as a human being. (2) Moral knowledge is *practical* knowledge; it is efficacious—knowledge of how to live well as a human being that issues forth in human acting and living. (3) Humans act well by acting *from an understanding* of how to act well. Good human action does not come from blind instinct or thoughtless routine, but from a grasp of the good.

I understand these claims as aspects of Aristotelian naturalism, as developed by thinkers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Michael Thompson.<sup>2</sup> These are claims about “the human,” understood as the *life form* to which we each belong. In moral philosophy, Aristotelian naturalism (AN) views practical reason as a natural capacity of our species.<sup>3</sup> At a formal level, AN claims that moral goodness is a type of species-specific natural goodness, *whatever* that goodness turns out to consist in. At a substantive level, Aristotelians attempt to give an account of what is, in fact, naturally sound in “the human”—which traits are human virtues, which ends worth pursuing, which practices good for a community, what is a reason for what, etc. One might accept formal naturalism while rejecting a particular substantive view.<sup>4</sup> The Aristotelian account of moral knowledge, as I will understand it, is compatible with a wide variety of substantive views about human good.

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful recent overview, see Wielenberg (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Elaborations of Aristotelian naturalism include: Hursthouse (1999), MacIntyre (1999), Foot (2001, 2004), Müller (2004), Thompson (2004, 2008), Hacker-Wright (2009, 2013), Boyle and Lavin (2010), Teichmann (2011), Lott (2012, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For ease of exposition, I will treat Aristotelian naturalism (AN) as synonymous with Aristotelianism.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Foot (2001) interprets Nietzsche as accepting the formal framework of natural goodness, while developing a substantive conception of human good that differs from her own.

Of course, many aspects of AN are open to criticism. I will outline, rather than argue for, the basic elements of AN. My aim is to show that *if* we accept an Aristotelian account of moral knowledge, then we can offer a satisfactory realist response to Street’s evolutionary argument—and that AN can avoid the challenges facing some other realist replies. Those who are sympathetic to AN will probably be congenial to this argumentative strategy. I recognize, however, that this strategy might be less than satisfying for those who are skeptical about the basic elements of AN. Even so, my strategy is justified for the following reasons. First, while Street’s argument has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, Aristotelian views have been largely absent in the conversation.<sup>5</sup> I wish to explore how AN might shed light on this debate. To do this, it will be necessary to take for granted some core claims of AN. Moreover, if AN can offer a better reply to Street than other types of realism, then this provides an independent reason to favor AN over other kinds of realism.

In Sect. 2, I explain Street’s evolutionary argument and three of the most prominent realist responses, and I identify challenges to each of those responses. In Sect. 3, I sketch an Aristotelian account of moral knowledge. In Sects. 4 and 5, I develop an Aristotelian response to Street. I conclude, in Sect. 6, by responding to an objection. My argument has several aspects, but the key point is this: Given the AN account of moral truth and our knowledge of it, we can accept the influence of evolutionary processes on our moral beliefs, while also providing a principled, non-question-begging reason for thinking that those basic evaluative tendencies that evolution has left us with will push us toward, rather than away from, realist moral truths, so that our reliably getting things right does not require an unexplained and implausible coincidence.

## 2 Street’s argument and some realist responses

### 2.1 Street’s Darwinian Dilemma for realism

Street’s target is *normative realism*, which she defines as the view that “there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes” (Street 2006, 110).<sup>6</sup> The core issue is the ground of a person’s *reasons*. Normative realists hold that “an agent can have normative reason to *X* even though the conclusion that she has this reason in no way follows—as a logical or instrumental matter—from within her own practical point of view, understood roughly as her own set of evaluative attitudes” (Street 2016, 295). In contrast, normative antirealists hold that “if an agent has normative reason to *X*, then this conclusion must somehow follow from within her own practical point of view: if the conclusion that she has reason to *X* is *not* entailed from within the standpoint

<sup>5</sup> An exception to this is Setiya (2012), but my appeal to AN is very different from his.

<sup>6</sup> Street sometimes refers to “evaluative realism” rather than normative realism, but I take it that these are same position.

constituted by her own set of evaluative attitudes, then she does not have that reason” (Street 2016, 295).

To illustrate the divide between realists and antirealists, Street imagines an ideally coherent Caligula. This Caligula judges that he has most reason to torture others for fun, and this judgment follows with perfect consistency from his own practical standpoint. According to the realist, Caligula is mistaken about his reasons. He is missing something about the reasons that he “has”—reasons that obtain independently of his practical standpoint. The antirealist denies this, and grants that Caligula has normative reason to torture others for fun, since Caligula’s reasons follow from his own standpoint (Street 2010, 371).<sup>7</sup>

Street’s argument against realism begins with the claim that evolution has profoundly shaped our basic evaluative tendencies, and that these tendencies in turn shape the content of our normative judgments. Street’s examples of normative judgments include: “The fact that something would promote one’s survival is a reason to favor it”; “We have greater obligations to help our own children than we do to help complete strangers”; “The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to admire, praise, and reward him or her” (Street 2006, 115). It is striking, Street notes, that humans from various times and cultures tend to accept such judgments. And this acceptance can be given an evolutionary explanation: In addition to our conscious, linguistically-infused judgments, humans possess more basic evaluative tendencies. These are tendencies to experience certain things as “called for,” or to see something as “counting in favor of” something else. Such tendencies are found in non-human animals, as when a mother lion experiences a motivational pull to feed her offspring. In the course of human evolution, “the capacity for full-fledged evaluative judgment was a relatively late evolutionary add-on, superimposed on top of much more basic behavioral and motivational tendencies” (Street 2006, 118). And it is likely that the content of our basic evaluative tendencies has been shaped by evolutionary pressures, with the tendencies that best promoted reproductive fitness being passed on. Furthermore, these tendencies influence the content of our current normative beliefs. Thus we can conclude that “one enormous factor in shaping the content of human values has been the forces of natural selection, such that our system of evaluative judgments is thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence” (Street 2006, 114). Call this claim *INFLUENCE*.

Street does not claim that evolution explains all the content of our normative judgments. She acknowledges the role of culture and history. And she insists that we can “step back” from our evaluative tendencies and reflect upon them. However, Street insists that our reflection must have *starting points*, and that evolution has significantly shaped these starting points (=our basic evaluative attitudes). These starting points, in turn, shape the results of reflection. Thus evolutionary forces should be seen as responsible for much of the content of our views about what is good and bad, what makes sense, and what is a reason for what: “had the general content of our basic evaluative attitudes been very different, then the general content

<sup>7</sup> There is a further twist, since a Kantian antirealist denies that an ideally coherent Caligula is possible. But Street’s own view is “Humean antirealism,” and the distinction between Humean and Kantian antirealism will not be crucial to my essay.

of our full-fledged evaluative judgments would also have been very different, and in loosely corresponding ways” (Street 2006, 120).

Having argued for INFLUENCE, Street then asks: What is the relationship between evolutionary forces and the independent normative truths posited by realism? One possibility is that our evaluative tendencies were selected *because* they track independent normative truths, and thus evolution has pushed us toward those truths. But this “tracking account” is scientifically untenable. For it is much less plausible than the “adaptive link account,” according to which evolution selected our evaluative tendencies simply because they promoted reproductive fitness (Street 2006, 125–135). The second possibility is that there was *no* connection between evolutionary forces and normative truths. While scientifically acceptable, this possibility means that it would be a *massive coincidence* if evolution shaped us to form reliably true normative beliefs:

Of course it’s *possible* that as a matter of sheer chance, some large portion of our evaluative judgments ended up true, due to a happy coincidence between the realist’s independent evaluative truths and the evaluative directions in which natural selection tended to push us, but this would require a fluke of luck that’s not only extremely unlikely, in view of the huge universe of logically possible evaluative judgments and truths, but also astoundingly convenient to the realist (Street 2006, 122).

Because such a coincidence is so improbable, we should conclude that evolution was not pushing us toward normative truths, but away from them. With respect to tracking normative truths, it is likely that “the fund of evaluative judgments with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated” (Street 2006, 124). Therefore we should conclude that our evaluative faculties do not lead reliably to true normative beliefs. Rather “all our reflection over the ages has really just been a process of assessing evaluative judgments that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark” (Street 2006, 124). Therefore *if* normative truths are independent of our practical standpoints (as the realist supposes), then we should conclude that we lack knowledge of them. Thus the influence of evolution on our evaluative faculties leaves the realist with two options: a scientifically untenable “tracking account,” or embracing normative skepticism. That is Street’s Darwinian dilemma.

Realists have developed several responses to Street’s argument. In the next three sub-sections, I consider several of those responses and Street’s replies to them (and potential replies that Street might make). My aim is not to give decisive refutations of these realist responses, but merely to identify serious challenges to each of them. I have two reasons for doing this. First, I hope to show that, at the very least, realists should not be satisfied with the dialectic between Street and her critics as it now stands. And since the Aristotelian response promises to avoid the difficulties faced by other realist approaches, that is good reason to pay attention to it. Second, my discussion of the dialectic between Street and her critics will help to frame the Aristotelian response in relation to other realist responses. That is, it will make it easier to see both what the Aristotelian approach shares with some other responses (e.g. accepting INFLUENCE), and how the Aristotelian view is distinctive.

## 2.2 Appealing to pre-established harmony

One realist response to Street is a “pre-established harmony” argument. This argument accepts INFLUENCE, but maintains that our faculties might reliably lead us to normative truths on account of some pre-established harmony between evolutionary pressures and independent normative truths. For example, David Enoch (2010) argues that it is likely evolutionarily beneficial to *believe* that one’s survival is good. And thus evolution has shaped us—for reasons of reproductive fitness—to be inclined to believe that our survival is good. However, it is also plausible to assume that our survival *is* good, in the realist sense. Thus, although evolution did not push us toward this belief because it was true, nevertheless evolution shaped us to reliably form the true belief that our survival is good. Others have made arguments with a similar structure for our beliefs about the moral standing of persons, the goodness of cooperation, and the badness of pain.<sup>8</sup> The crucial point for such replies is that even without a “tracking account,” we can explain why it is no coincidence that we reliably form true judgments about normative matters.

However, the pre-established harmony response faces a problem. In each of its versions, the argument assumes some substantive normative truth—e.g. that pain is bad, or our survival is good. But as Street points out, such an assumption seems question-begging, until we have *general* reason for restoring confidence in our faculties of normative judgment:

The reply trivially assumes that we are *correct* to think that staying alive, developing one’s capacities, family and friendship, and so on, are independently worth pursuing. In so doing, it utterly fails to address the question posed by my argument, namely: what is the relation between evolutionary influences on our normative judgments, on the one hand, and the independent normative truth considered *as such* (considered without presupposing substantive views on what that independent truth is), on the other? When we think about *that* question, we see we have reason to be pessimistic that we have any ability to track the independent normative truth. We therefore have a *prior* argument that we are likely hopeless at thinking how to live. One can’t refute that argument by trivially assuming that we’re not hopeless (Street 2011, 18).

The key point is that the evolutionary argument gives us a general picture of our evaluative faculties—an account of the kind of thing those faculties are, how they arose and what their place in nature is. And this general picture appears to undermine our confidence that our faculties reliably track independent normative truths *as such*. Thus any adequate reply must provide a convincing general account of our faculties and their place in nature, such that we could be confident that they reliably track independent normative truths *as such*. And the reply would not rely on

<sup>8</sup> See Wielenberg (2010), Brosnan (2011), Skarsaune (2011).

particular normative truths before giving us general grounds to restore confidence in our ability to know such truths (Street 2016, 319-322).

### 2.3 *Rejecting* INFLUENCE

Some realists have acknowledged this weakness in the pre-established harmony response.<sup>9</sup> But there are other options available to the realist. Whereas the pre-established harmony response accepts INFLUENCE, a second response rejects it. As William Fitzpatrick says, “Even if we grant that evolution gave our ancestors dispositions that influenced the content of their judgments, nothing follows about how deeply or widely this influence pervades our current moral beliefs” (Fitzpatrick 2015, 900).

Call this the “no pervasive influence” response. This response need not deny evolution’s influence altogether. To avoid skepticism, we need only suppose that some of our important moral beliefs are not “hopelessly off track,” and that it is possible, through reflection, to build on these starting points, refining our views to bring us closer to the truth.

However, the no pervasive influence response also faces a difficulty. Fitzpatrick insists that some of our moral beliefs “may very well be attributable not (or not merely) to evolutionary or other factors operating insensitively to the truth of their content, but to our having grasped the relevant moral facts as such through informed moral experience and reflection on their grounds” (Fitzpatrick 2014, 244). But the difficulty for realism comes when we consider how our engagement with moral values works, how we “grasp” moral facts or recognize certain considerations as reasons. For it seems likely that our moral experience and reflection are thoroughly shaped by starting points that are the products of evolution. Consider, for example, Fitzpatrick’s claim that we can judge the treatment of girls by the Pakistani Taliban to be wrong because we recognize that treatment as “unjust, cruel, demeaning, and sexist, violating human rights and dignity by depriving these girls of central human capabilities and goods, based on arbitrary considerations” (Fitzpatrick 2015, 896). Fitzpatrick argues that the best explanation for our normative judgment here is not evolutionary influence, but our perception of moral properties: “we are *correctly* grasping the *wrong-makingness* of these factors, and this is precisely what leads to our moral judgment....the moral properties and facts come straightforwardly into the explanation of such moral beliefs” (Fitzpatrick 2015, 896). The problem is that our understanding of moral properties—what things we *take* to be wrong-making and in what ways—seems to be shaped by very basic evaluative attitudes (or “proto-beliefs”), such as: “pain, death, and loneliness are bad and to be avoided” or “survival, enjoyment, and intimacy are good and to be pursued.” It is hard to see how we could form our notions of what is “unjust”, “cruel”, “demeaning”, etc. without drawing on very basic evaluations, which serve as the starting points for reflection. And these basic evaluations are precisely what evolution is likely to have shaped. Once we appreciate just how basic the relevant evaluations are, it seems

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Shafer-Landau (2012, 33).

difficult to deny evolution's influence on the content of our moral experience and reflection.

We can make the point clearer by recalling that, for Street, the realist's normative truths are only a small set of "the huge universe of logically possible" truths. In principle, the normative truths could be *anything* conceptually possible. Call this claim NO CONTENT<sup>10</sup>:

[F]or all our bare normative concepts tell us, survival might be bad, our children's lives might be worthless, and the fact that someone has helped us might be a reason to hurt that person in return. Of course we think these claims are false—perhaps even necessarily false—but the point is that if they are false, it's not our bare normative concepts that tell us so. Noting this sense in which the normative truth might be anything, and noting the role of evolutionary forces in shaping the content of our basic evaluative tendencies, we may wonder whether there is any reason to think these forces would have led us to be capable of grasping the independent normative truth posited by the realist (Street 2008, 208).

Now, if it were true that our survival was bad or that our children's lives were worthless, it is doubtful that creatures like us would recognize these *as* truths. Why? Because these ideas are so at odds with our starting points for thinking about the good—our basic evaluative attitudes. And this reveals how thoroughly those basic attitudes influence the content of our beliefs, contrary to the no pervasive influence reply. At the same time, there are plausible evolutionary explanations for why we would not tend to view our survival as bad, our children as worthless, etc. So given that the normative truths could be pretty much anything, surely it is no accident that our normative beliefs so closely align with what we might expect given evolutionary shaping. Rather, this alignment is evidence of evolution's influence.

In her original presentation of the Darwinian Dilemma, Street anticipates that realists might resist INFLUENCE by appealing to rational reflection. She argues that this won't work, for the reasons I have just spelled out: that reasoning must have starting points; that in human beings these starting points include very basic evaluative attitudes, which are largely the products of evolution; that the results of our reasoning (the "outputs") are significantly shaped by those starting points (the "inputs"). Thus if our basic evaluative tendencies are not reliable guides to discovering independent normative truths, neither will be reasoning that uses those basic evaluations as starting points. Fitzpatrick objects that Street merely "presupposes exactly what is in question, namely that our entire fund of moral beliefs is 'thoroughly contaminated' and 'utterly saturated' with evolutionary influence" (Fitzpatrick 2014, 246). Is he right? Well, it is true that INFLUENCE alone does not show that our beliefs are "thoroughly contaminated with illegitimate influence," because INFLUENCE by itself does not show that our judgments have been pushed *away* from the normative truths. That conclusion requires the additional premises of Street's argument. But that does not mean that Street merely

<sup>10</sup> I take this label from Cuneo (2014).

presupposes what is in question. Rather she offers a picture of how human reasoning works, according to which whatever we find, upon reflection, to be “valuable” or “reasonable” will have been profoundly shaped by our basic evaluative attitudes, which are themselves the products of evolutionary processes. Whereas Fitzpatrick appeals to our grasping moral facts through experience and reflection, Street is making a point about how such grasping works for human beings. And so far as I can tell, nothing Fitzpatrick says challenges the essentials of Street’s picture.

## 2.4 *Rejecting* NO CONTENT

A third response rejects NO CONTENT. NO CONTENT provides crucial support to Street’s claim that realist moral knowledge would require a fluke of luck comparable to winning a massive lottery, because NO CONTENT establishes a baseline of possibilities for assessing the likelihood of our getting it right.<sup>11</sup> Fitzpatrick also rejects NO CONTENT. Commenting on ideas like “survival might be bad,” he argues that these are “not viable candidates for a true system of values because they are divorced from any background framework within which talk of value is intelligible” (Fitzpatrick 2014, 253).

I agree that we should resist NO CONTENT.<sup>12</sup> But in the context of Street’s argument, undermining NO CONTENT is harder than Fitzpatrick suggests. To begin, Fitzpatrick’s appeal to a “background framework” for intelligibility sits uneasily with his own rejection of INFLUENCE. For Street might well reply, “Yes, of course we don’t find these possibilities intelligible, and that is precisely because they run so contrary to our basic evaluative attitudes! Thus the fact that these possibilities don’t make sense to us is simply a further sign of evolution’s influence on our normative judgments.”

More importantly, Street insists that it is the realist who has already opened the door to NO CONTENT. For the realist claims that if there were to be ideally coherent eccentrics with bizarre values, they would be wrong about the independent normative truths: “The *realist* is the one who makes all the merely possible coherent souls relevant by insisting that if they existed, they would be mistaken. It’s this insistence that makes merely possible agents very much to the point when we assume for the sake of argument that the realist is correct about the robust attitude-independence of normative truth and ask about our epistemic situation with regard to it” (Street 2016, 317).

Katia Vavova offers a different challenge to NO CONTENT. VAVOVA argues that Street cannot require realists to set aside substantive moral truths, because if we apply these strictures consistently, then Street’s own argument cannot work. For Street must show that, on the assumption of realism, we have good reason to think

<sup>11</sup> As Street says, “Given the odds we can reasonably suppose to be in play in this ‘normative lottery’ case, we should conclude that in all probability we *didn’t* win” (Street 2016, 315).

<sup>12</sup> I offer my own analysis of what is wrong with NO CONTENT in Sect. 5.

that our moral beliefs are mistaken.<sup>13</sup> But there is no way to show this, unless we make some substantive assumptions about what morality is like:

If we cannot make any moral assumptions—not even that pain is bad—then morality could be about anything. To hold that the moral truths do not coincide with the adaptive judgments, we must assume something about what those moral truths are, or are like. If we may assume nothing about morality, then morality could be about anything. And if morality could be about anything, then we have no idea what morality is about. So we have no reason to think that the attitude-independent truths and the adaptive beliefs don't overlap (Vavova 2014, 92–93).

Let us grant Vavova's point that we must know *something* about morality to formulate the Darwinian challenge. Still, it seems doubtful that this will derail Street's argument, so long as Street distinguishes between: (1) some particular moral claims that we know to be true, and (2) the general kind of thing that morality is about—basically, our normative reasons to live and act in certain ways. Street can point out that (2) is all that her argument needs. And by assuming (2) Street is not helping herself to anything that she disallows the realist. With respect to (2), Street need not claim that “morality could be about anything.” Rather morality is about what is valuable and practically rational. But that leaves open the specific content of what we have reason to do and to be. It does not rely on (1). The point is that given the kind of thing that the realist agrees morality to be (a matter of claims about what is good and how we should live), and given the kind of thing the realist says are the truth-makers of moral claims (independent normative truths), we can see that it would be a massive coincidence if beings like us, whose moral beliefs are shaped by evolution, were reliable in getting it right.

## 2.5 Some lessons learned

In light of the existing dialectic between Street and her critics, I draw three lessons. First, realists need to offer a general account of the kind of thing that moral knowledge is—an account of moral truth, and of how we know it—that explains why our grasping of moral truth is not a massive coincidence. Second, this explanation of our reliability must a) avoid a question-begging reliance on particular normative claims, and b) come to terms with, rather than deny, the truth in INFLUENCE. Third, we need to articulate exactly what is wrong with NO CONTENT, and why realists are not forced to assume NO CONTENT in thinking about moral knowledge. In the next three sections, I will show how the Aristotelian account of moral knowledge does all of this.

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<sup>13</sup> It is not enough, Vavova argues, for Street to establish the weaker claim that we have no good reason to think that our beliefs are true.

### 3 Aristotelian moral knowledge: a brief sketch

#### 3.1 Moral knowledge and moral truth

The paradigm of Aristotelian moral knowledge is the *phronimos*, or person with practical wisdom. The *phronimos* knows about things pertaining to human good and bad. This includes knowledge of what is good and bad *for* humans as such, and how to act and live well *qua* human being. Whatever in substance human good turns out to be, human good is the defining topic of moral knowledge.

Moral knowledge is also practical knowledge.<sup>14</sup> That is, moral knowledge not only has human good as its defining topic, but it is also the *source* of human good, in the sense that it issues forth in good choice and action. As a kind of practical knowledge, moral knowledge may be compared to skill-knowledge, such as a carpenter's knowledge of carpentry. The carpenter's distinctive skill-knowledge is not merely a set of (theoretical) beliefs about carpentry. Rather it is knowledge of how to do the things a carpenter does—e.g. how to build a table, or frame a house. The carpenter *qua* carpenter is able to do those things. Likewise, the *phronimos* knows how to live and act well as a human being.<sup>15</sup>

Closely related to the practicality of moral knowledge is a third Aristotelian claim that a human being acts well by acting *from* an understanding of the human good. Again, the comparison with skill is instructive. A carpenter does not act at random, or from mindless habit, but from knowledge of carpentry. Likewise, it belongs to “the human” to live according to knowledge of how to live well as a human being. And it follows from this that human good, in the realm of action and choice, is such as to be *essentially known*. As soon as we have an instance of a human acting well, we must also have some understanding of acting well. For unless it sprang from a grasp of the good, it could not *be* good human action.<sup>16</sup>

Corresponding to the Aristotelian account of moral knowledge is an Aristotelian account of moral truth. Generally speaking, moral truths are truths about human goodness in the realm of action and character. These include truths about particular occasions, e.g. “I should return her car today, because I promised to do so”; “It would be foolish to risk losing my job for a few fish tacos!” They also include truths about those states of character, the virtues, that lead one to reason and act well. Individual virtues are distinguished by a characteristic pattern of response to a kind of consideration.<sup>17</sup> And a person who possesses the virtues knows how to live well with respect to the considerations relevant to those virtues.<sup>18</sup> Thus claims about

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<sup>14</sup> See Annas (2011) and Hursthouse (2011).

<sup>15</sup> The similarities between skill-knowledge and moral knowledge do not mean that moral virtue is a skill. See Hacker-Wright (2015). On the skill analogy, see Annas (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Or at least it would be a derivative and non-paradigm instance of good action. The claims in this paragraph apply to adult human action, which I take to be “acting well” in the fullest sense.

<sup>17</sup> See Hursthouse (1999) and Russell (2009).

<sup>18</sup> See Foot (2001, 12–13).

which traits are virtues, and what those traits require, embody a general conception of living and acting well *qua* human being.

### 3.2 Aristotelian naturalism and moral knowledge

Since human good is at the heart of the Aristotelian account of moral knowledge, we must ask: how is the notion of human good to be understood? AN holds that human good is the good of a certain kind of organism, and our thought about human good belongs to a larger category of thinking about living things, which is captured in natural-historical judgments of the type explained by Michael Thompson.<sup>19</sup> We make natural historical judgments when we talk about how the brown falcon builds its nest, or the Bengal tiger finds a mate, referring not to particular falcons or tigers, but to the respective life forms that individual falcons or tigers instantiate. Natural historical judgments have some canonical forms: “The S is/has/does F” or “S’s are/have/do F.” Such judgments describe the characteristic features and activities of the life form, e.g. “the African elephant has four legs” or “mother grizzly bears protect their cubs.” An ordered *system* of natural-historical judgments describes the function of different parts and activities in the life of the species. For any kind of living thing, it answers the question “how do they live?” It provides “one’s *interpretation* or *understanding* of the life form shared by the members of that class” (Thompson 2008, 73).

A natural history spells out what living well, or proper-functioning, amounts to for a particular kind of creature. In so doing, it articulates the species-specific *good of an organism*. Crucially, natural-historical judgments are not statistical summaries of what is true of most, or many, members of a life form. Hence they are not falsified by the existence of (many) individuals for whom they fail to hold. For example, “the nine-banded armadillo has four legs” is not disproved by the fact that *this* nine-banded armadillo has only three legs, or even the fact that most nine-banded armadillos currently have three legs (perhaps a disease is presently ravaging the population). On the contrary, natural-historical judgments provide criteria for evaluating excellence and defect in individual members of the life form. From the truth of “the nine-banded armadillo has four legs,” together with the fact that this armadillo has three legs, it follows that this armadillo is missing a leg. In bringing together (a) the natural-historical representation of a life form, and (b) facts about individual bearers of that form, we arrive at what Foot calls evaluations of *natural goodness* and *defect*.

Such evaluations bring out the conceptual connection between what is characteristic of a life form and what constitutes goodness *as* a member of that form (or, equivalently, goodness *in* the parts and operations of individual members of that form). The basic point is easy to see. What counts as good eyesight for Manny the Mole is determined by the kind of organism that Manny is, as articulated in an account of “the mole.” And good sight in a mole would be poor sight in an eagle.

<sup>19</sup> See Thompson (2008, part I).

Likewise, an organism's characteristic life-cycle provides the essential framework for determining what that organism needs, and what counts as harming or benefiting it. Again, the basic idea is easy to see. Being in water is good for a rainbow trout, and drinking its mother's milk is good for a human infant. Why? Because these things enable the organism to carry out the life activities characteristic of the kind of organism it is. They enable the trout to breathe and swim, and the human to develop healthy brain cells and heart tissue, etc. In contrast, being on a forest floor is bad for a salmon, and drinking gasoline is bad for a human infant. Why? Because these things disrupt the life activities of the organism. In general, what is good *for* an organism is that which enables it to realize the species-specific good of creatures of its kind—i.e. what helps it to live well as the kind of thing it is.<sup>20</sup>

AN holds that humans, like other living things, have a species-specific good, and that goodness in individual humans is determined by the good of “the human.” Crucially, human form is distinguished by a faculty of practical reason, or rational will. It is this aspect of human form that we refer to when we speak of “a good person” in a moral sense, as opposed to a physically healthy person. Judgments of moral goodness and badness speak to excellence and defect in the human will—in the action and character of human beings as such.

Furthermore, our species-specific good shows up *within* an account of “the human,” as something that it belongs to humans to understand. While there is such a thing as earthworm-good, it does not belong to earthworms to understand their good, or to act from such an understanding. But humans are self-directing in a different way: we realize human good only by acquiring and acting from a grasp of our good.<sup>21</sup> And an understanding of how to live well *qua* human being is what a human acquires when she acquires moral knowledge.

The claim that humans are practically rational animals belongs to the formal, rather than substantive, level of AN. It is consistent with different views about what we have reason to do, and what well-functioning practical reason looks like. However, this formal claim has an important implication for any attempt to articulate a substantive view of “the human”—namely, that we cannot articulate any substantive account of human form without relying on our own normative judgments.<sup>22</sup> This might seem odd, but it follows from the basic idea that, in the

<sup>20</sup> Certain cases might seem to stand in the way of connecting the good *of* and good *for* in this way. Isn't it good for a tiger to be given nutritious food in a zoo, rather than to face the difficult task of hunting as the naturally good tiger does? Wouldn't it be good for a tiger if it could run 150mph, although that is certainly not required for being good as a tiger? What if a tiger was given the capacity to philosophize or to enjoy literature? Wouldn't that be good for the tiger, even though such things are clearly not part of the naturally good life-cycle of “the tiger”? For a response to such examples on behalf of AN, see Groll and Lott (2015).

<sup>21</sup> In saying this, we need not suppose that humans first acquire a “blueprint” for living well and then implement that blueprint as the “Grand End” of all their deliberations.

<sup>22</sup> As Michael Thompson says, “Of course we have no way of judging what practical thoughts and what range of upbringings might be characteristic of the human, and sound in a human, except through application of our fundamental practical judgments—judgments about what makes sense and what might count as a reason and so forth.” Thompson (2004, 73). See also Lott (2012).

case of human beings, practical reason is central to the natural-historical explanation of “how they live.” For if humans live by reason, then the characteristic, non-defective human life will be according to *properly functioning* practical reason, just as living well as a dolphin will include properly functioning perceptual and locomotive capacities. But we cannot say what counts as properly functioning practical reason apart from judgments about how persons *act well*, which is a matter of choosing to do certain things for certain reasons in a situation. And to make assessments of acting well, we must draw on our sense of what sort of response is merited, what is a good reason, what is worth caring about, etc. Thus in order to say what is actually sound in “the human,” we must rely upon our own normative judgments.

Of course, a full elaboration and defense of AN’s account of moral knowledge would require much more work. But this sketch is enough for my purpose, which is to show that *if* we adopt AN’s account of moral knowledge, then we can offer a satisfactory reply to Street’s Dilemma. In the next section, I develop that reply.

At this point, it is important to stress that AN is a version of realism in Street’s sense. AN holds that ideally coherent Caligula is indeed missing something, that his practical reasoning is defective (assuming that he acts viciously), that he fails to recognize and respond to the relevant practical considerations. The criteria for failure here are provided by the virtues (or, equivalently, the standard of “the virtuous person”). Reasoning well is determined by human good, and Caligula is rationally defective precisely because he reasons in a way that is starkly opposed to human good. Aristotelians, then, reject the idea that the reasons an individual “has” are exhausted by what follows from within one’s own evaluative outlook.<sup>23</sup>

## 4 Aristotelian solutions to Darwinian challenges

### 4.1 Street’s challenge to the Aristotelian view

What does Street’s argument look like if we apply it to the Aristotelian account of moral knowledge? AN holds that human good is the defining subject matter of moral knowledge—that is what is what moral truth is *about*. But this leaves plenty of room for error over what human good actually consists in, what is good and bad for humans, what we have reason to do and be, etc. Applied to AN, the Darwinian argument is this: “Our beliefs about human good, and our normative judgments about how to live, are pervasively influenced by our basic evaluative tendencies. Were these evaluative tendencies significantly different, so would be our full-fledged normative views. But these tendencies were shaped by evolutionary forces in accordance with reproductive fitness, not according to what is actually *true* about the human good. We thus have no reason to think that our basic evaluative attitudes lead us to grasp what living and acting well *qua* human beings actually consists in. Given (1) the range of possibilities for what human good might be, (2) the role of

<sup>23</sup> This is clear in Foot (2001, 2004).

evolutionary forces in shaping the content of our beliefs about human good, and (3) the indifference of those forces to the truth about human good, it would be a massive coincidence if evolution had pushed us toward the truth about human good. Thus AN, like other forms of realism, leads to skepticism about moral knowledge.”

#### 4.2 Why INFLUENCE is not a Problem for Aristotelian Naturalism

AN grants INFLUENCE. Given that certain evaluative tendencies are characteristic of human beings, and given that these tendencies shape the content of our full-fledged normative views, the key question raised by Street’s argument is: Do we have a principled, general reason for thinking that such tendencies are reliable guides to what is true about human good, such that it wouldn’t be a massive coincidence if we got things right?

We do. To see why, begin with one of Street’s own points about non-human animals. Animals have tendencies to perceive their environments in evaluatively-laden ways, even if they are not capable of reflective thought. Non-human animals construe some things as “to be avoided” and other things as “to be pursued,” as “to be approached quietly” or “to be approached loudly,” as “for swimming” or “for drinking,” etc. The point is not that animals think these thoughts explicitly, but that their evaluative perceptions can be accurately described in these terms. Moreover, we could not understand what these creatures are like, or how they live, without attributing to them such perceptions. Indeed, such perceptions are familiar parts of natural-historical descriptions of living things. And a seal who failed to recognize fish as to-be-eaten, or killer whales as to-be-avoided, would be a defective seal.

Furthermore, an animal’s evaluative perceptions explain other aspects of its life-cycle. Animals maintain themselves—they do those things characteristic of their species—*on the basis* of their perceptions. Wolves chase rabbits because they register them as to-be-eaten. Squirrels run up trees because they register dogs as threats to-be-avoided. The evaluative perceptions that are characteristic of a given life form are systematically linked to their species-specific desires and to their species-specific capacities for doing things. Street implicitly recognizes this, I believe, in speaking about both “proto” judgments and “behavioral and motivational tendencies” (Street 2006, 114 and 118).

And this reveals a crucial point, which is that there cannot be a merely coincidental connection between: (1) an animal’s characteristic evaluative tendencies, and (2) the animal’s characteristic ways of acting and living. For if the connection between these was merely coincidental, then we could not grasp the relevant evaluations as belonging to an ordered system of natural-historical judgments. Evaluative perceptions that could not explain other things the organism did would have no claim to being part of the natural history. They would make no contribution to answering the question “how do they live?” Thus we must see an animal’s (non-defective) evaluative tendencies as belonging to its life-cycle, and enabling other aspects of its life life-cycle. At the same time, an account of the life-cycle yields an account of the species-specific *good* of an organism. Thus there cannot be a merely coincidental connection between an animal’s characteristic evaluative perceptions, and the characteristic good of that animal. If we conceive of

an animal as living on the basis of its perceptions, then we must also see its perceptions as aspects of its species-specific good, and as intelligibly related to other aspects of that good.

Of course, the perceptions of a particular animal might be defective. Or a correct perception might, on a particular occasion, lead to what harms the individual, as when the deer with the most accurate perceptions is the first to flee, and therefore the one to fall into the hunter's trap (to adapt an example from Foot). But if it was a mere *coincidence* that an animal's perceptions directed it toward its characteristic good (its non-defective life-cycle), then those perceptions could not be *characteristic* of the animal—i.e. they could not have a place in our system of natural-historical judgments describing the life form. Thus there cannot be a mere coincidence between (a) the characteristic evaluative perceptions that direct an animal in what to do, and (b) the good of such an animal.

Applied to human beings, this means that there cannot be a mere coincidence between the basic evaluative tendencies of “the human” and *the good of human beings*. To the extent that certain evaluative tendencies are characteristic of our life form, we must see them as playing a part in the life-cycle of “the human.” And thus we have a non-question-begging reason for supposing that those tendencies will push us toward our characteristic life—toward living well as human beings—even if this push is not infallible. At the same time, moral knowledge *just is* knowledge of how to live well as a human being. Thus we have a principled, general reason for thinking that our basic evaluative tendencies will push us toward moral knowledge, rather than away from it.

But this is a bit too quick. For in simply applying the point about animal perceptions to human beings, we risk overlooking the place of practical reason in human life. Even if human beings have evaluative tendencies similar to those in other animals, the characteristic human life is not lived on the basis of those perceptions in the same way as other animals. Rather humans live through practical reasoning, and our grasp of reasons must explain “how they live” in the case of human beings. The argument in the previous paragraph threatens to avoid skepticism at the cost of assimilating moral knowledge to the kind of “knowing how to live” that we find in cats and dogs. That would be a mistake. Moreover, it runs counter to the third feature of the Aristotelian view, that human beings act well by acting from an understanding of acting well. Surely our grasp of the good goes beyond what is contained in the sort of evaluative perceptions that play a part in the lives of squirrels and seals.

We should be clear about the argumentative situation at this point. The worry is not that Street might reject the idea that human practical thought is pushed in certain directions by tendencies similar to those found in other animals. On the contrary, that idea is central to Street's own argument. Granting INFLUENCE, I have argued that we have good reason to suppose that our characteristic evaluative tendencies will push us toward moral truths, based on the defining topic of moral knowledge (human good) and on the part that evaluative perceptions play in the lives of animals in general. The worry is that this strategy requires basic evaluative tendencies to play a part in human life that is inconsistent with the notion that we are rational

animals whose characteristic way of living is according to reason—a notion that is itself a central commitment of AN.

Can Aristotelians maintain that basic evaluative tendencies play a part in the life of human beings, while also holding that humans live according to reason? Yes. To see why, consider the *developmental story* of “the human.” It belongs to infants and young children to make certain sorts of evaluations. Think of an infant’s proto-judgment that intimacy is good, manifested in her crying until being held, reaching out for her mother, holding onto other humans, etc. Because it belongs to human infants to make certain evaluations, we can speak here about defect and lack. If a baby does not register mother’s milk as “good-for-drinking,” or human touch as desirable, this is a sign that something is missing in the child.

At later stages, humans do more than make such proto-judgments. Humans acquire language and concepts, and the ability to make full-fledged normative judgments about what there is most reason to do. Crucially, however, our basic evaluative attitudes *play a part* in the proper development of our faculty of practical reason. A human being does not acquire moral knowledge *in spite of* possessing basic evaluative attitudes, but rather through the refinement and reshaping of those attitudes.

Consider a simplified example. At some stage of development, a human being is able to make the full-fledged normative judgment “friendship is good” and to act from that judgment as a piece of practical knowledge, e.g. persisting in friendship in the face of disappointment and the temptation to retreat into self-seclusion. On the Aristotelian view, this judgment about friendship is not unrelated to an infant’s proto-judgment that intimacy is “to be pursued.” Rather, the full-fledged judgment is arrived at through teaching and training which takes as its starting point the presence of certain evaluative tendencies in the child. With respect to the process of acquiring moral knowledge related to friendship, a child’s natural inclinations toward intimacy are not obstacles to be overcome. Nor are they neutral facts, like the child’s hair color. Rather those tendencies are the material with which teaching and training works. That teaching and training is a deepening, elaboration, and reshaping of the perception that is already present, in a germinal way, in the infant—namely, that friendship is good. And from the point of view of our life form, it is no accident when an infant registers intimacy as “to be pursued,” and it is no accident when a human adult is able to judge that “friendship is good.” Both of these belong to human beings, and the full natural-historical interpretation of “the human” will include both of them, as well as the developmental relation between them.<sup>24</sup>

Thus AN acknowledges: (1) that basic evaluative tendencies play a part in the life of “the human,” while insisting (2) that they do not play the *same* part as in other animals. What unites these points is the notion of practical reason as a capacity that develops in the course of the our life-cycle, and that operates with, not in spite of,

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. MacIntyre: “[F]or us human beings it is because we do have reasons for action prior to any reflection, the kinds of reasons that we share with dolphins and chimpanzees, that we have an initial matter for reflection, a starting point for the transition to rationality which a mastery of some of the complexities of language can provide” (1999, 56).

our natural inclinations. The first point recognizes that certain evaluative tendencies belong to humans. They are not an unfortunate condition that befalls us and impedes flourishing, like arthritis or schizophrenia. Nor are they idly-spinning wheels with no role to play in our life-cycle. The second point recognizes that it also belongs to human being to live according to practical reason, and our capacity for reason transforms the place of evaluative tendencies in human life.

The resulting picture is one that captures the truth in INFLUENCE, while also explaining why INFLUENCE does not lead to skepticism about realist moral knowledge. Given that we are dealing with evaluative tendencies belonging to our life form, we have good reason to suppose that these tendencies push us toward the *good* of creatures of our kind. For there must be a non-accidental connection between (a) our characteristic evaluative tendencies, and (b) the sort of living and acting that constitutes the human good. If those tendencies did not play a part in our life-cycle, then we would have no reason to see them as belonging to our life form. And in seeing those tendencies as playing a part in how “the human lives,” we must also see them as ordered toward aspects of our species-specific way of living well. And moral knowledge is precisely knowledge of how to live well *qua* human being. Thus we have a general, principled reason for thinking that our basic evaluative tendencies will not push us hopelessly off track from moral truths.

It is important to note that my argument does not rely on a particular substantive conception of human good, or particular normative truths. To do that would risk assuming what needs to be proved, as we saw in Street’s response to pre-established harmony views. What matters for my argument here is a general picture of moral knowledge, understood as something that belongs to the life-cycle of a particular life form. This picture explains why it will not be a coincidence if our basic evaluative tendencies, *whatever* those turn out to be, are somewhat reliable guides to what is true about human good, *whatever* that turns out to be. Thus we should not be misled by my earlier example about friendship and proto-judgments regarding intimacy. If someone supposes that, as a substantive matter, friendship does not belong to living well as a human being, then she will not see the proto-judgments about intimacy as playing the part that I ascribed to them in the life of human beings. But then neither will those proto-judgments about the goodness of intimacy belong to human beings in the relevant sense. They may be statistically common, but if they do not enable or sustain other aspects of proper functioning, then they are not characteristic of “the human” in the sense relevant to natural-historical interpretation.

### 4.3 Objections and replies to the argument so far

Given AN’s distinction between what is characteristic of our life form versus what is merely statistically common, is it a “minor miracle” that evolution has left us with basic evaluative tendencies that push us toward judgments that track our characteristic life instead of tracking what is merely statistically common?<sup>25</sup> I think

<sup>25</sup> In his response to Street, Enoch (2010) concedes that his view requires a “small miracle.” I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Studies* for pressing me to consider whether Aristotelian naturalism requires a miracle of its own.

not. Perhaps it would be a miracle if an evaluative tendency that was merely statistically common in human beings—but did not belong to humans in the sense of “belong” defined by natural-historical description—gave us a push in the direction of our characteristic life. But AN need not make any such claim about tendencies that we classify as merely statistical. Rather AN’s claim is about those basic evaluative tendencies that we take to be as characteristic of our form, that play a part in our life-cycle. And it isn’t miraculous if *those* tendencies push us toward our characteristic life, because if they did not do so then we would lose our basis for seeing them *as* playing a part in our life-cycle.

However, someone might object that my argument has merely pushed the problem back a step, because we now face the question of which evaluative tendencies actually belong to human form, and which do not, though they might be statistically common. This claim is true, so far as it goes. But as an objection to my argument it misses the point. The goal at this stage is not to say what is substantively true of “the human.” Rather the goal is to provide grounds for thinking that our basic evaluative tendencies will not have a wildly distorting influence on our moral beliefs. We are giving a general picture of such tendencies within our kind of (rational) animal life, and how they relate to moral knowledge. And this picture shows what is mistaken in the skeptical claim that it would be a huge coincidence if our basic tendencies pushed our normative judgments toward the truth. Answering the relevant skeptical challenge does not require first discharging the different task of saying what, substantively, characterizes “the human.”

A different objection holds that while AN indeed needs a developmental story about the place of reason in human life, any such story allows the skeptical worry to re-emerge: The developmental story describes the transition from proto-evaluations to full-fledged normative judgments, from “first nature” to “second nature.” In this transition, our proto-evaluations must be directed toward the good. Our natural tendencies need to be shaped in accordance with what a person *should* desire, what we have most reason to go for. And some tendencies (including ones that appear widespread) are ones that we should resist rather than foster, e.g. tendencies toward aggression, or in-group bias. Thus any adequate account of practical reason must allow for our capacity to “step back” from our basic evaluative attitudes, and to evaluate them before the bar of reason. Even if our tendencies have a part to play in the development of human rationality, the very notion of practical reason requires critical distance and normative assessment.

Furthermore (the objection continues), realists must posit “independent normative truths” that determine what *counts as* a good shaping of natural tendencies. Our actual proto-evaluations might track these independent normative truths more or less well. But now Street’s worry returns: When we attempt a normative assessment of our proto-evaluations, that assessment will be subject to INFLUENCE. Our sense of what is valuable, good, rational, etc. will be significantly shaped by those basic evaluative tendencies that characterize human beings. And since those tendencies are best explained as the products of evolutionary forces that were not tracking the good, it would require a massive coincidence if our normative assessment of our proto-evaluations was not hopelessly off-track.

This objection fails. Despite initial appearances, the objection doesn't add anything that hasn't already been taken into consideration by the AN account. In essence, the objection is just a re-statement of INFLUENCE, applied to our full-fledged normative judgments concerning our reasons for developing (or resisting) a natural tendency one way or another. At this stage, however, we have already provided a non-question begging account of why, given the AN account of moral knowledge, we can accept INFLUENCE without worrying that our normative assessments have been pushed hopelessly off-track by our basic evaluative tendencies. So AN has nothing to fear from the re-emergence of INFLUENCE.

#### 4.4 Practical reason, first nature, and normative realism

If the last objection seems to have force, this is perhaps because one is assuming a picture of normative assessment in which genuine rational reflection requires “stepping back” from *all* our natural tendencies, viewing them as mere “natural facts” about us. If that is one's picture of rational reflection, then one might be suspicious of any role that proto-rational tendencies play in shaping our full-fledged normative outlooks. But that is view of rational reflection that AN need not accept. AN grants that practical reason enables us to step back from particular natural inclinations, but also insists that normative assessment becomes impossible if we attempt to step back from *all* our natural inclinations. The proto-evaluations that are characteristic of human (first) nature are, on this view, the starting points for practical reason, not only in the sense that they are essential to the development of reason in a child, but also in the sense that they continue to define the basic framework in our which our grasp of reasons and values is possible.

On this view, “our human, pre-rational nature underlies our rationality, i.e. our notions of good and bad reasons, and our notions as to what thoughts, feelings, and actions count as rational or reasonable or justifiable” (Teichmann 2011, x). If we bracket all our most basic attractions and aversions, all our instinctive modes of perception and response—in short, everything that belongs to first nature—then we would lose our ability to see anything as good or bad, valuable or worthless. Critical reflection, then, can question particular evaluative tendencies, but only because that reflection is itself *built upon* a broader set of basic evaluations. Absent these basic evaluations, we would be unable to make rational sense of ourselves or others. To see this, consider how unintelligible would be a person who offered, as her *ultimate* reason for doing something, that it was boring, lonely, or painful.<sup>26</sup>

This basic idea has been well-summarized by Roger Teichmann: “We are a certain sort of animal (*Homo Sapiens*), and our modes of perception, action, reaction, thought, and feeling are all determined in large part by our animal constitution—by human nature, that is” (Teichmann 2011, 2). My aim here is not to defend this view of practical reason. Rather, the point is that this view fits AN's developmental story, and *if* we accept this view then we can diffuse any lingering worry that our basic evaluative tendencies must “contaminate” our full-fledged

<sup>26</sup> See the second epigram to this paper.

normative outlook. For such a worry is driven by a picture of rational reflection as free from, rather than built upon, our basic evaluative tendencies—and that picture is an illusion. Moreover, in this context, it is legitimate for the Aristotelian realist to assert that practical reason must have starting points, and that these starting points include the basic evaluative attitudes belonging to human nature, since these ideas are crucial to Street's own argument.

Indeed, there is a kinship between the Aristotelian idea that first nature underlies practical reasoning, and Street's remarks about ideally coherent eccentrics (ICEs), of which ideally coherent Caligula is an example. Imagining several possible ICEs, Street concludes that, "In many cases, an accurately imagined ICE will look more like an interesting visitor from another planet than a human being" (Street 2009, 281). This matters because it undermines an intuition that appears to support realism—namely, that an ICE is getting something wrong when it comes to the normative facts. Thus Street says, "If a group of intelligent, ideally coherent aliens descended upon us and began trying to kill us for food or torture us for sport, would we feel intuitively convinced that they were making a mistake about the normative facts?" (Street 2009, 281).

Because AN takes moral knowledge to be knowledge of human good, AN is not committed to saying *in advance* that these aliens act badly. Perhaps so, or perhaps not. Moreover, if the facts about human nature were very different, then we would expect differences in what living well consists in. In that sense, AN does not hold that moral truths are "independent of us." How could they be, if human good is the subject matter of moral knowledge, and human good is understood in terms of natural-historical judgments about "the human"?

However, AN remains a type of realism in precisely the sense that matters to Street's argument. According to Street, the realist affirms, and the anti-realist denies, that there are some reasons that "we have quite independently of our evaluative attitudes and what does or doesn't follow from within the standpoint constituted by them" (Street 2016, 296). AN is a type of realism in this sense. AN holds that ideally coherent Caligula is wrong about the normative truths. For no matter how alien-seeming and unintelligible Caligula might be, he is in fact a human being, not a visitor from another planet. And that is the basis for saying that his reasoning is *defective*, that he is *missing* something, that there are considerations he *fails* to recognize. These judgments are underwritten by the standard provided by "the human," and that standard applies to Caligula, since he is not an alien but a (very bad) human being.<sup>27</sup>

Thus from the perspective of AN, Street is not wrong to insist that features of how human beings are organized constrain what could possibly be valuable to us, or

<sup>27</sup> AN holds that the normative authority of moral considerations does not derive from an individual's particular commitments, and indifference or hostility toward morality implies a rational defect. In this respect, AN is different from the "society-centered" moral naturalism of David Copp. See Copp (2007) and Copp (2008). In the context of Street's argument, this difference is important. It means that AN is not vulnerable to the same rejoinder that Street makes to Copp. Rather, AN is an "uncompromising normative realism" in Street's sense. See Street (2008).

that other creatures might be organized to value very different things.<sup>28</sup> Rather Street errs by adopting an overly individualistic account of practical reasons and normative truths. To make sense of normative truths, or the reasons a person “has,” or what is wrong with ideally coherent Caligula, we must look beyond what follows from within individual standpoints. We must look to the life form of which both Caligula and ourselves are bearers.

## 5 What is wrong with NO CONTENT

So far, I yet to address NO CONTENT. Recall that, for Street, the main importance of NO CONTENT is this: when realists are assessing the likelihood that our normative beliefs match the normative truths, they must take seriously all kinds of wild possibilities about what those truths might be—e.g. perhaps we have most reason to stand on our heads all day, or to value counting blades of grass above all else. Taking seriously such possibilities supports the thought that it would be a huge coincidence if evolution pushed our beliefs toward the truth, amidst this vast ocean of possible errors. That would require winning the normative lottery, and (the argument continues) we have no reason to think that we have won.

In Sect. 4, I developed an Aristotelian response to Street’s argument, and my response did not require me to reject NO CONTENT directly. Even so, a fully satisfying reply to Street must address NO CONTENT. I will now say why NO CONTENT seems strange, and why it is misleading to assume NO CONTENT when thinking about moral knowledge.

NO CONTENT seems strange because it invites us, when thinking philosophically about moral knowledge, to take seriously normative possibilities that we cannot bring ourselves to take seriously in deliberative contexts, when we are thinking about what to do and how to live. Indeed, as Fitzpatrick points out, these wild possibilities will strike us not merely as wrong answers concerning our overall balance of reasons, but as bizarre and unintelligible suggestions for what we have any reason to do. If a person were to value grass-counting above all else and entirely for its own sake, then this would not be someone with whom we merely disagreed, but someone whose actions we could scarcely make sense of.

This brings out an important point about practical reasons. Practical reasons have two related features. First, they are normative. They speak to what one should do, and we can cite them to justify action. Second, they serve to make action intelligible, and we can cite them to explain action. In particular, practical reasons explain action by pointing toward some good or value that the person hopes to achieve, or in light of which she is acting.<sup>29</sup> Suppose you ask why I’m taking off work, and I reply that I’m spending the day with a dear friend who is visiting from out of town. My answer is meant to show why I am justified (I have a *good* reason; my action is not frivolous, lazy, etc.), and also to make sense of what I am doing,

<sup>28</sup> See the first epigram to this paper.

<sup>29</sup> For elaboration and defense, see Brewer (2009), and Boyle and Lavin (2010).

since we both recognize spending time with a dear friend as worthwhile. Or suppose I give a different reason for taking the day off work: I'm going to an afternoon baseball game at Fenway. In this case, you might think this doesn't justify skipping work. But you will have little problem making sense of what I'm doing, since watching baseball is a recognizable sort of human enjoyment (though you might find baseball boring, and you might wonder exactly what some people find great about it). However, suppose I say that I'm taking the day off to burp and stare at the wall, and that I find this a boring, lonely activity that serves no further purpose. You will not merely think that I have given a reason that doesn't justify. You will hardly be able to understand my answer as providing a reason at all, since the consideration I've cited does not provide anything you can recognize as good or valuable or worthwhile. Not just any consideration can make an action intelligible. Importantly, there are material limits on what humans can recognize as good or valuable or worthwhile. At a very basic level, these limits are shaped by our animal (first) nature, and by our human form of life.

NO CONTENT seems strange because it invites us to imagine things that satisfy the first, but not the second, of these two features of practical reasons. The wild possibilities would be truths about what we *should* do, but these truths could not make sense of action, since we could not recognize them as identifying anything good or valuable in light of which a person might act. That is why we couldn't take these possibilities seriously in an actual deliberative context. And this prying apart of the justificatory and explanatory aspects of practical reasons is why NO CONTENT seems to violate "the rules of the game of giving and asking for reasons."<sup>30</sup> For in that game, these two features comes together.

At this point, Street might respond that NO CONTENT is indeed strange, but insist that it is the realist who puts NO CONTENT on the table (see Sect. 2.4 above). But given an AN account, we have good grounds for taking NO CONTENT off the table when thinking about moral knowledge. The subject matter of Aristotelian moral knowledge is human good. To know how to live well as a human, one must understand what is good for human beings. And the good *of* an organism determines what counts as good *for* creatures of that kind. Given that moral knowledge is about human good, it follows that moral truths are closely and systematically connected to what is good for human beings.<sup>31</sup> Given that moral truths capture how we live well as human beings, then whatever morality turns out to require, it cannot be merely coincidentally related to what is beneficial and harmful for creatures like us. Human morality must direct humans to the kind of life that is good for humans to live.

Moreover, not just anything can count as good for an organism. A novice in ichthyology might wonder if swimming in gasoline benefits an Alaskan salmon. But given what is true of "the Alaskan salmon," we cannot simply decide that gasoline, rather than water, is good for them. Likewise, not just anything we can imagine could be beneficial to human beings. Truths about good-for do not float free from

<sup>30</sup> I owe this phrase to Joshua McBee.

<sup>31</sup> This does not mean that every moral truth is about what will directly benefit the agent. On the contrary, it might well belong to humans to act directly for the benefit of others.

what is true about a life form. So if we accept that human good is the defining topic of moral knowledge, we see the mistake in supposing that moral truths could be “just about anything.”

Thus depending on how we understand “bare normative concepts,” Street’s NO CONTENT is either irrelevant to the question of moral knowledge, or it is false. On the one hand, bare normative concepts might refer to “right” or “good” abstracted from all context of human good and considered with respect to some sheer normative force or “to be doneness.” In that case, Aristotelians can agree with Street’s claim that our bare normative concepts leave open a huge universe of logically possible normative truths. But that is irrelevant to moral knowledge. For by restricting ourselves to bare normative concepts in this sense, we fail even to bring into view the defining subject matter of moral knowledge, since we leave out the idea that moral knowledge is practical knowledge of how to live well as a human being. On the other hand, bare normative concepts might be taken to include ideas like “benefit” and “harm” and “human flourishing.” Here we begin to bring the subject matter of moral knowledge into view, but it is also true that not just anything can satisfy these ideas. For they are constrained by the actual needs and capacities of human beings. As Foot (1978, 120) says, “It is surely clear that moral virtues must be connected with human good and harm, and that it is quite impossible to call anything you like good or harm.”<sup>32</sup>

## 6 Conclusion: Has a particular normative truth been smuggled in after all?

In conclusion, consider another objection to my argument. This objection claims that my AN response, if it really defends normative realism, must smuggle in some substantive normative truth *before* we have regained confidence in our normative belief-forming faculties, and hence my AN response commits the same error as the pre-established harmony response. The substantive normative truth that AN must assume is something like, “We have reason to care about being good human beings” or “Human good is valuable.” We can formulate the objection as a dilemma: In responding to Street, either AN does or does not assume that human good is valuable. If it does, then the AN response assumes a substantive normative truth, just like “our survival is good” or “pain is bad.” But it is illegitimate to appeal to any such substantive truth at this point, because doing so would trivially assume what Street’s argument has given us reason to doubt—that we are not hopeless at tracking normative truths (see Sect 2.2). However, if AN does not

<sup>32</sup> In some of her early essays, Philippa Foot begins by reflecting on moral belief and moral argument, and she observes that the content of moral concepts is systematically related to the good of human beings. Then, noting that not just anything can count as harm and benefit for human beings, she points out that not just anything can count as a moral concept or moral consideration. Rather than begin, as I have done, with an account that stipulates the realm of moral truth as that of human good, Foot works her way *toward* that idea, by considering moral belief and argument. But with respect to ruling out NO CONTENT, the upshot is the same.

For another argument against NO CONTENT, see Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014).

assume that human good is valuable, then human good cannot explain the existence of normative reasons for individual humans. For how can human good be the basis of our reasons if we don't also have further, overall reason to care about being good human beings, or if human good itself isn't valuable?

My reply is that the AN response to Street simply does not stipulate "human good is valuable," or some similar normative truth, in the way that the pre-established harmony response does. Such a substantive normative claim plays no part in the central AN argument about moral knowledge and the role of basic evaluative tendencies in the life of human beings (see Sect. 4). Of course, AN is not committed to denying that human good is valuable or that we have reason to care about being good human beings. But such claims are not part of the AN response to the distinctive sort of skeptical worries raised by Street's argument.

That said, someone might offer a different argument to show that Aristotelian naturalism is inconsistent with normative realism in Street's sense—i.e. that if AN is correct, then we cannot consistently maintain a realism that is "worth worrying about."<sup>33</sup> I believe that there are important challenges to AN along these lines.<sup>34</sup> But those challenges are distinct from the specific issues raised by Street's Darwinian Dilemma. And while I believe those challenges can be met, addressing them is beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>33</sup> I take this phrase from Street (2008).

<sup>34</sup> For one version of this challenge to AN, see Fitzpatrick (2008). For another statement of the challenge, and a partial response, see Lott (2014).

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