

# Human Nature, History, and the Limits of Critique

Kieran Setiya

MIT

February 10, 2023

(Draft; do not cite without permission)

My project is to sketch, in a fairly abstract way, the appeal of Aristotelian ethical naturalism—in particular, for the epistemology of ethical knowledge—to raise a problem about the historicity of human nature, and to explore what follows for the limits of critique and its entanglement with social theory. We will trace a path from Aristotle, via Marx, to the Frankfurt School.

Readers have been puzzled by the Frankfurt School’s commitment to “immanent critique,” on which the ethical criticism of a given society is confined to resources accessible within it. Is this commitment a function of audience—what it makes sense to say if one aims at the emancipation of those who inhabit a society? Is it a matter of hermeneutic isolation—the need to understand a society in terms of its own concepts? Does it depend on relativism or on doubts about the objectivity of ethics? I argue that the answer in each case should be no. Instead, I offer a qualified argument for immanent critique from Aristotelian naturalism and the historical contingency of human nature. I end by relating this argument to Adorno’s pessimism.

## 1. Bringing Aristotle Back to Life

According to the form of Aristotelian naturalism that interests me, ethics is not groundless but determined by our nature, where the conception of our nature at work is richer than the mere capacity to act for reasons. It is specifically *human* nature.

That Aristotle takes this view is controversial: he may appeal to nothing more than our status as rational animals. But there are passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that suggest otherwise. At one point, Aristotle seems to conjure the existence of rational fish: “Now if what is healthy or good is

different for men and for fishes, but what is white or straight is always the same, anyone would say that what is wise is the same but what is practically wise is different.”<sup>1</sup> Practical wisdom here is life-form-relative, its nature differing with the differing nature of human beings and practically-reasoning fish. We can contrast this view, on the one hand, with that of “constitutivists” who derive the standards of practical reason from the capacity to act for reasons, as such, and on the other hand, with that of realists and non-cognitivists who deny—for better or worse—that our nature determines the ethical facts.

Some read Aristotle as an anti-foundationalist, treating any “explicit mention of human nature” in Aristotle’s ethics as “a sort of rhetorical flourish, added to a conclusion already complete without it” (McDowell 1980: 19). But the epistemological argument outlined below, in section 2, involves a more ambitious turn to human nature. It rests on a way of thinking about the nature of living things reflected in our ordinary talk about them—the sorts of remarks one hears in a documentary about meerkats, redwoods, or sharks.

Following Michael Thompson, let’s say that “natural-historical judgements” are propositions about living things expressed by sentences such as “The F is/does G” and “Fs are/do G” (Thompson 2008: 64-5). As it might be: “The skylark breeds in the spring” or “Human beings have 32 teeth.”<sup>2</sup> On the intended reading, these are generalizations about individual Fs. (Contrast, for instance, “Human beings evolved 150,000 years ago” or “The dodo went extinct in the 17th century,” which predicate something of the species.) Linguists call the relevant generalizations “characterizing generics”: they say something about the nature of the kind of thing they characterize.

Natural-historical judgements are evidently not universal generalizations. Not every human being has 32 teeth. Less obviously, they are not statistical generalizations—perhaps not even a plurality of human beings have 32 teeth—nor can they be helpfully explained in terms of normal or normative

---

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a22-24 (Ross and Brown 2009: 108).

<sup>2</sup> The latter appears in Anscombe (1958: 38), a key inspiration for Thompson’s approach.

conditions. So, at least, Thompson argues, and I propose to follow him.<sup>3</sup> Thompson goes on, however, to make radical claims about the logic of natural history.<sup>4</sup> Thus:

(1) Natural-historical judgements involve a kind of generalization that can only apply to living things.

(2) A “life-form concept” is one that can figure in the subject of a judgement of this kind.

(3) To be alive is to fall under a life-form concept; in this sense *life* is a logical category.

These claims are doubtful. Against all three: what about the use of “The F is/does G” in, for example, geology? “The volcano erupts when plates collide, and one plate is pressed under the other. The plate melts, forming magma, and as the pressure builds, the magma is forced into cracks in the rock, and eventually up to the surface. Here the melted rock blasts out of the ground.” The generalizations here are characterizing generics; they are not universal or statistical generalizations and are no easier to explain without circularity in terms of normal or normative conditions. For all that, volcanoes are not alive. One difference lies in the absence of function or teleology. The plates do not collide in order to cause a volcanic eruption, where the plant may lean towards the sun in order to get more light. But the possibility of final causation does not turn on the application of a logically distinctive form of generalization.

Thompson may not be convinced by this—but the issue will not matter here.<sup>5</sup> What we need are not contentious theses like (1)-(3) but the truth of natural-historical judgements about living things like us. The truths in question need not be irreducible. For our purposes, they may be even be

---

<sup>3</sup> See Thompson 2008: 68-76; also Foot 2001: 28.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson 2008: 69, 76-7.

<sup>5</sup> See Thompson 2008: 77-80 for the suggestion that natural historical judgements are logically suited to teleological combination in a way that other generics are not.

subjective or anthropocentric—a construction of human thought—so long as their truth is not socially or culturally relative.<sup>6</sup>

Thompson suggests a simple principle of goodness and defect that applies to living things:

DEFECT: It follows from the natural-historical fact that the F is or does G, and the fact that this F isn't or doesn't, that this F is defective in not being or doing G.<sup>7</sup>

If we apply this principle to patterns of practical thought, given the natural history of human beings, we may be able to extract a theory of good, i.e. non-defective, practical thought, which provides an account of reasons and thus of how we should live.<sup>8</sup> Human nature would be the foundation of ethics.

In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot takes a similar line, though she appeals to a more complex principle:

DEFECT AND FUNCTION: An F is defective in not being or doing G just in case being or doing G has a function in the life of the F.<sup>9</sup>

She goes on to give an account of functions in terms of “Aristotelian necessities”: natural-historical facts on which the good of Fs depends. For Foot, these functions are independent of natural selection.

---

<sup>6</sup> For Kantian anthropocentrism, see Breitenbach 2009 and Lewens 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson 2008: 80; but see Foot 2001: 30 on the blue tit, which has a blue patch on its head, though an individual blue tit is not defective if it lacks that colouring.

<sup>8</sup> On goodness as the absence of defect, see Foot 2001: 75-6.

<sup>9</sup> Foot 2001: 30-35. It is not clear whether Foot believes in a distinctive kind of generalization, “The F is/does G” that entails that being or doing G has a function in the life of the F, or whether she thinks of the attribution of function as something beyond mere natural-historical fact. See Foot 2001: 30, 31, 33; also Thompson 2008: 77n12.

They are not to be understood by appeal to the sorts of evolutionary fact that have played a central role in theories of function in the philosophy of biology.<sup>10</sup>

There are several problems here. First, it is not plausible that the concept of function that appears in the nature documentary—the one we natively employ in doing “natural history”—is distinct from the concept invoked by philosophers of biology. It’s not as though the young naturalist, fascinated by the function of petals, is the subject of a bait-and-switch when she gets a PhD in evolutionary biology. If the account of function given by Foot diverges from accounts in the philosophy of biology, that is a real conflict, not a verbal dispute.

Second, it follows from Foot’s account, as it does from Thompson’s, that human beings by nature engage in non-defective, i.e. good, practical reasoning.<sup>11</sup> In other words, as a matter of natural history, human beings are fully rational. Insisting that this is a natural-historical truth, not a universal or statistical generalization, does not remove the air of paradox. It is one thing to say that human beings by nature have 32 teeth and fully functioning organs, another to say that they are by nature practically wise. There is a related difficulty, not specific to human virtue: the possibility that a given F will deviate from the ways in which Fs characteristically go on—being or doing something other than G when the F is/does G—in a way that is advantageous for it and perhaps for other Fs, too. This turtle has an uncharacteristically hard but lightweight shell; this bird has better eyesight than members of its species naturally do. If we can make sense of possibilities like these, we must reject both Defect and Function.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See Foot 2001: 32n10, 40n1; also Thompson 2008: 66, 79.

<sup>11</sup> Given that “The F is/does G” and “The F is/does H” together imply “The F is/does G and H”; see Thompson 2008: 69.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps we can improve upon these formulations, drawing from natural history standards for an F to function well—better than Fs characteristically do—with respect to being or doing G. But we still face a puzzle. Is human virtue a matter of how human beings behave when their capacity for intention and desire functions well? Or of behaving in ways of which human beings approve when their capacity for approval of character functions well? Against Foot and Thompson, I adopt the latter view, on which the relationship of human virtue to human functioning is less direct.

Finally, there is a threat of circularity in Foot's appeal to the human good in accounting for the function of practical thought. To speak of the human good is to speak of the life we should want to live; "should" is to be understood in terms of the weight of reasons; and reasons are explained in terms of practical rationality as "goodness of the will." For Foot, this is a form of natural goodness, or non-defectiveness, that falls under Defect and Function: good practical thought has a function in the life of human beings, which is to say that human beings reason in certain characteristic ways, where this is a fact about human life on which the good of human beings depends. But then we have come full circle, back to the human good as the basis of functions that explain good practical thought, and thus the standards of practical reason that fix how we should want to live. If the circle is vicious, as it appears to be, then Foot's account must fail.

The result is that, despite the insights of Thompson and Foot, it is not all clear how to state a viable form of Aristotelian ethical naturalism.

## **2. Why Be Aristotelian?**

Given these challenges—along with others I have not discussed—what is the appeal of the Aristotelian view? I will focus on its epistemological power. It's only if ethical facts are determined by our nature that the truth of our beliefs can be more than accidental; and it's only by appeal to specifically human nature that we can allow for the scope and persistence of ethical disagreement.<sup>13</sup>

The argument turns on a certain way of spelling out the view that knowledge involves non-accidental truth. This idea is sometimes expressed in terms of "modal safety": when S knows *p*, S could not easily have been wrong, in that there is no close possible world in which S falsely believes *p*. But this condition is vacuous for necessary truths, including those in ethics, since there is no possible world in which the relevant proposition is false. Hence the turn to an explanatory rather than modal interpretation of "accident"

---

<sup>13</sup> I argue for this claim, and for the condition of knowledge below, in Setiya 2012: Chs. 3-4.

K: When S knows  $p$ , she knows it by a reliable method, and it is no accident that her method is reliable; there is an explanatory link between the fact that  $m$  is reliable and the fact that S uses  $m$ .

Methods are specified by the psychological states to which one's beliefs are sensitive, for instance ones that register a certain kind of evidence. The specification of a method can be narrow: for our purposes, the “generality problem” can be ignored. The challenge is to formulate *any* account of the method by which we form our ethical beliefs, narrow or otherwise, on which it is no accident that our method is reliable. In the limiting case of basic beliefs, which do not rest on evidence, the method could simply be: believing  $p$ .

We can be equally liberal about explanations, efficient, final, or formal—appealing to causation, function, or constitutive connection—so long as we insist that modal safety is not enough. It's not just that your method could not easily have made you unreliable. Whenever  $p$  is a necessary truth, the method of believing  $p$  could not easily lead one astray, even if the fact that one believes  $p$  has nothing to do with the fact that  $p$ . In that case, the truth of one's belief is accidental, despite being safe. According to K, there must be an explanation that runs from the fact that  $m$  is reliable to the fact that you use it, or vice versa, or a common explanation that connects the two. If you know  $p$  by method  $m$ , it cannot be a mere coincidence that these facts—the reliability of  $m$  and the fact that you use it—both obtain.

The question is how ethical beliefs could count as knowledge, given K. If ethical facts are causally inert and constitutively independent of us, there is no room for an explanatory link between the methods by which we form our ethical beliefs and the fact that those methods are reliable. Ethical knowledge is impossible.<sup>14</sup> You might think the solution is to go reductionist: for any ethical concept, E, there are non-ethical concepts, N, with which we can say what it is to have the property picked out

---

<sup>14</sup> Unless, perhaps, we appeal to God; compare Setiya 2012: 114-5.

by E. If we can give causal explanations that appeal to N, ethical facts will not be causally inert. But despite appearances, this maneuver will not help. It remains true that the fact that being E is being N is causally inert, so we have no account of how such truths could ever be known.<sup>15</sup>

There are, however, theories that would solve the problem. Some are “anti-realist”: they meet condition K by giving an account of ethical facts in terms of our beliefs. For instance:

CONSTRUCTIVISM: For a trait to be a virtue is for us to be disposed to think it is.

If this is true, it is no accident that we form beliefs about virtue by a reliable method, since our reliability follows from the nature of ethical facts. Constructivism may appear too simplistic to take seriously, but there are more subtle views that share its spirit, such as Sharon Street’s “Humean Constructivism,” on which the facts about what there is reason to do are a function of our judgements about reasons, corrected for coherence of various kinds (Street 2008).

One need not think the facts are a function of our beliefs in order to explain how ethical knowledge is possible. The constitutive link could run the other way: our beliefs may be a function of the facts, as in externalist views of content.<sup>16</sup> According to the simplest such view:

EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to be such that one’s method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable.

Again, if this is true, it is no accident that we form beliefs about virtue by a reliable method, since our reliability follows from the nature of those beliefs.

In their simplest forms, Constructivism and Externalism predict that everyone is reliable in ethics. More sophisticated views allow for individuals whose beliefs are wildly off the mark. To focus

---

<sup>15</sup> This argument is spelled out in Setiya 2012: 112-3.

<sup>16</sup> Although it may seem unfamiliar, versions of this thought have been pervasive in realist meta-ethics; see Boyd 1988, Jackson 1998: Chs. 5-6, Brink 2001.

on externalism, we might tie concept-possession not to individual reliability but to one's linguistic or conceptual community:

SOCIAL EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to belong to a linguistic or conceptual community whose method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable.

If the community uses method *m* and I use *m* because the community does, it is again no accident that my method is reliable, assuming Social Externalism. There is an explanation of why I use it that entails as much.

The problem is that not just individuals but whole communities can go astray. Imagine, if you will, a Calliclean society, inspired by Callicles' "great speech" in Plato's *Gorgias* to believe that what we call "justice" is not a virtue at all and that the condition of "natural justice" is one in which the powerful dominate the weak, who acquiesce in the justice of their subordination. The Calliclean society may be stable enough in its brutal hierarchy, but the ethical beliefs of this community—and the methods by which they characteristically form those beliefs—are wildly off the mark. What Callicles calls "natural justice" is not a manifestation of virtue but of vice, and we may suppose that this forms part of a whole system of virtues, endorsed by the Callicleans, with which we radically disagree.

The Callicleans are not reliable about what we call "virtue." If Social Externalism holds, and their words make sense at all, they must mean something different by them. We are thus led from Social Externalism to a form of Social Relativism on which we are talking past the Callicleans when we say "Justice is a virtue," not disagreeing with their beliefs. Like many, however, I find this implication incredible: we don't talk past the Callicleans but reject their views, as Socrates and Plato did. Ethics is objective, at least to that extent. If this is right, Social Externalism cannot be an adequate account of ethical concepts. It misinterprets the Calliclean society; and so it misinterprets us. Social Externalism is not true and we cannot make sense of ethical knowledge in its terms.

This is where natural history comes in. For natural-historical facts are suited to explain the reliability of our beliefs without Social Relativism, preserving our disagreement with the Callicleans. The connection between virtue and natural history might take various forms. The most obvious adapts Foot's Defect and Function to the traits that count as virtues:

NATURAL VIRTUE: For a trait to be a human virtue is for human beings to act in accordance with that trait and for doing so to have a function in human life.

As well as the dubious implication that human beings are by nature fully virtuous, however, this view does not relate the ethical facts to our beliefs about them, but to our behaviour. As it stands, Natural Virtue cannot explain how knowledge of virtue meets condition K. It matters here that we do not merely act in accordance with traits of character but that we are beings who have a conception of ourselves as the kind of creature we are, where how we should live depends upon the answer to that question. In this respect, we differ from other animals. Compare Marx on species-being in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: "Man is a species-being not only in that practically and theoretically he makes both his own and other species into his objects, but also ... he relates to himself as to the present, living species, in that he relates to himself as to a universal and therefore free being" (Marx 1844: 89). We have beliefs about our nature and how we should live in light of it.

Although they abstract from the substance of our self-conceptions, forms of constructivism and externalism that appeal to natural history are consonant both with our species-being and with the demands of ethical knowledge. Thus we may consider two schematic views:

NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: For a trait to be an ethical virtue is for creatures of one's life-form to believe that it is a virtue.

NATURAL EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to belong to a life-form whose method for applying that concept is sufficiently reliable.

Like other forms of constructivism, the idea that facts about virtue are fixed by what human beings take to be virtues is explicitly circular. It identifies the facts about F with facts about beliefs about F. I doubt that true identifications take this form.<sup>17</sup> Natural Externalism is more plausible. It is not circular and its partial account of the concept *virtue* would explain how ethical knowledge is possible. If Natural Externalism is true, and human beings use *m* to classify traits as virtues, it follows that *m* is sufficiently reliable; and if I use *m* because humans use *m*, it is no accident that my method is reliable. Condition K is met.

A full account would have to say much more, both about the concept and about the facts. As to the concept: the remainder of the story might advert to David Hume. For Hume, we apply the concept *virtue* to traits that win approval by the operation of human sympathy from the “common point of view”: we abstract from personal connections and focus on the typical effects of the trait on the agent’s “narrow circle” (Hume 1738-9: Book Three). Updating Hume, we might say instead that the concept *virtue* is applied to traits of which human beings approve in conditions of non-ethical knowledge, and that this concept regulates social life, guiding our interaction with other people. These facts about its use determine its reference, vindicating Natural Externalism.

This is all, at best, approximate. As Aristotle said, we should not expect more precision than the subject-matter admits. This goes not only for the theory of ethical concepts but for the facts themselves. What human beings approve in conditions of non-ethical knowledge may be vague or indeterminate: the facts about virtue may leave much to be settled by social convention. Fairness could be objectively a virtue, say, but subject to social specification in multiple ways. The details are opaque. But even at this abstract level, we can see how this approach—combining Hume’s sentimentalism with Aristotle’s naturalism—would explain the possibility of ethical knowledge while saving our disagreement with the Callicleans. It does so without encountering any of the problems that confronted Foot’s view. Thus the appeal of Aristotelian naturalism for the epistemology of ethics.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Dorr 2016: §8.

### 3. The Problem of Human History

There are many problems with the sort of view I've sketched, but one is especially deep. Can human nature really do the work it's called upon to do in Natural Externalism? Not if we think of it as the essence of the human species, fixed by the very existence of human beings.

There are disputes about the nature of species in the philosophy of biology. But whatever we say about them, it is consistent with the existence of *Homo Sapiens* that our evolution might have been quite different. Adapting a thought experiment due to Philip Kitcher, we can imagine that, soon after the speciation of *Homo Sapiens*, an environmental toxin kills off all but congenital psychopaths (Kitcher 1999: 72). The psychopathic humans may live on, perhaps for many generations, but their natural history will be radically different from ours, in ways that matter to ethical judgement. If we think of natural history as "what a Martian anthropologist should say about how we live," the anthropologist who came across our psychopathic descendants would be forced to tell a very different tale. If they have beliefs about virtue at all, the psychopaths do not reliably track the virtues we recognize as such. Still, the human species and everything essential to it have been preserved. The essence of *Homo Sapiens* is too minimal a basis for the human nature that Aristotelians need.

More mundanely, what a Martian anthropologist should say has shifted over time, from our hunter-gatherer past through agricultural settlement and feudal societies to the advanced capitalist present. (According to some anthropologists, there was an even more radical shift, from the early *Homo Sapiens* of ~150,000 years ago to humans having language and symbolic thought, for which we have evidence dating back ~70,000 years. But the evidence and its interpretation are controversial.) We find here an echo of Marx, in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach: "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Geras 1983: 29.

How to read Marx on this point is much disputed. On the “anti-humanist” reading, favoured by Althusser, Marx “broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man ... This rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism [is] Marx’s scientific discovery” (Althusser 1965: 227). In other words: there is for Marx no human nature (or essence) that could play a foundational role in ethics; Marx is not in this way Aristotelian. The contemporary philosopher Rahel Jaeggi represents this view as a default: “Ever since Althusser criticized Marx’s ‘humanism’ and its ideal of the subject’s self-transparency and self-directed powers ... the critique of essentialism has become part of philosophical ‘common sense’” (Jaeggi 2014: 28).

But it is not inevitable. In his classic, *Marx and Human Nature*, Norman Geras argued that, for Marx, there is a constant “human nature” that includes our basic needs—food, water, clothing, shelter, rest, physical health, and the “free development of individuals” or “the means of cultivating [one’s] gifts in all directions”—and there is “the nature of man” as socially-historically determined.<sup>19</sup> In *Capital*, man “acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.”<sup>20</sup> That is to say: there is an historically-invariant human nature, including essential human needs, and there is the subject-matter of Martian anthropology, or natural history, whose truths are historically contingent and variable. We change them over time.<sup>21</sup>

It’s not clear how “human nature” in this reading relates to the essence of the human species, which might not support the list of basic needs above. But however we interpret Marx, we should distinguish senses of “human nature” on which it must be invariant from the shifting natural history of how we live. The former is ill-suited for a leading role in Aristotelian naturalism, since we share it

---

<sup>19</sup> See Geras 1983: 24, 72-3, quoting Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Geras 1983: 90.

<sup>21</sup> Does the natural history of human life also vary geographically, i.e. from place to place at a given time? Not exactly. When human beings live in different social formations, the Martian anthropologist’s natural history must acknowledge this. But since it finds expression in natural historical judgements—generalizations about human beings, as such—it will do so by qualifying what it predicates of them. For instance: “Human beings live in small roving communities *or* in larger static ones, depending on the circumstance”; “Human beings adapt to their environment as follows...”; and so on. In this way, the prospect of change may be inscribed within the natural history of human beings at a given time. This differs from the change of natural history itself considered in what follows.

with congenital psychopaths. The natural history that figures in the likes of Natural Virtue and Natural Externalism is the one that varies, contingently, over time. It is “no abstraction inherent in each single individual [but] the ensemble of social relations.”

And now we face the problem I promised before. Once we concede the social and historical construction of natural history, as this figures in our revived Aristotelianism, aren't we forced back into the Social Relativism we turned to human nature to avoid?

There have been influential answers to this question, attributed to Marx and Hegel, that purport to find direction in the course of human history. This direction, or teleology, points towards a fully realized form of human life whose natural history is our goal. This narrative gives non-arbitrary grounds for regarding a particular possible phase of human history as that which matters to the foundations of ethics. But it is implausible that the Martian anthropologist should think of human history in this way, its course projected in advance. As Jaeggi writes with only slight exaggeration, “no one today would endorse the kind of justification offered by a Hegelian philosophy of history, with its normatively teleological view of historical development” (Jaeggi 2014: 28). We know that human history lacks inherent direction.

A more modest and more realistic point is that, since natural-historical judgements are not statistical generalizations, the idea that human beings approve of justice does not imply that the Calliclean society cannot exist or long survive. It's not a claim about how things usually go but about how they go by nature. Even if the Callicleans endure, we need not conclude that human beings live like them or that they are not radically mistaken. The same point applies to more mundane realities: the persistence and pervasiveness of sexism and racism do not imply, all by themselves, that human beings are by nature sexist or racist.<sup>22</sup> In conditions of deprivation, or where the environment is inhospitable, natural history and statistics can dramatically diverge. When we study the Callicleans, or ourselves, we may resemble botanists studying specimens in parched soil.<sup>23</sup> Deprived of water, lilies

---

<sup>22</sup> I defend this claim in Setiya 2012: 142-58.

<sup>23</sup> A controversial real-world illustration of this thought is Colin Turnbull's anthropology of the Ik, discussed in Setiya 2012: 150.

do not look or grow the way that lilies look and grow—and there is no paradox in this. “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing,” wrote John Stuart Mill, “the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others” (Mill 1869: 22). The same thing goes for the nature of men.

Still, there are limits to this strategy, however hard to trace. The facts of natural history cannot float entirely free of how things tend to go. Suppose that the Callicleans are able to survive and reproduce; they are not hungry or thirsty, unhoused or unclothed. Suppose that, for whatever reason, the rest of us die out: only the Callicleans survive. What should the Martian anthropologist say when she arrives on Earth? Unless she can find evidence that their environment is inhospitable or their needs unmet—evidence available from her detached perspective, not our ethically inflected one—she must admit that human beings approve of “natural justice,” the tendency of the powerful to dominate the weak and of the weak to accept their domination. This is what they call “virtue,” part of a whole system of virtues radically unlike ours. Assuming that they have not misapplied their method for identifying traits as virtues, the Callicleans are reliable. They are not, however, reliable about what *we* call “virtue.” If their words make sense at all, the Callicleans mean something different by them. And this is true not only on Social but Natural Externalism. Once human beings are Calliclean, we cannot anchor their ethical concepts in ours, as we could when they were no more than a renegade society. If their method for identifying traits as virtues, properly applied, yields verdicts that are radically different from ours, we cannot save our disagreement with them. Instead, we talk past them—as we might talk past the Martian anthropologist who guides her life by ethical concepts alien to us, ones adapted to how Martians live, not being social animals, perhaps, reproducing without sex, surviving for centuries, regrowing limbs. The Callicleans have become an alien form of life.

Of course, we can still say that justice—as we understand it—is a virtue. The prospect of our Calliclean future, even in its most dystopian version, doesn’t mean that isn’t true. But it’s apt to be disturbing all the same. For the Aristotelian ethical naturalist, the historicity of human nature tempers ethical objectivity, leading to a form of Natural, not Social Relativism, where the nature in question is not the essence of the human species but the natural history of how human beings live. If our natural

history changes to the point that our method for identifying traits as virtues renders wildly different verdicts, even properly applied, then our ethical concepts will have changed. We will be talking about something else. This Calliclean prospect may be fanciful, but as I'll argue, it sheds light on the nature and limits of social critique.

#### **4. The Limits of Critique**

In "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno contrasts three forms of critique directed at collective social structures. "Internal critique" of a society appeals to "the norms which it itself has crystallized" (Adorno 1951b: 31). It appeals, that is, to the society's own ethical beliefs, showing how it fails to live up to them, or how those beliefs contradict themselves. "Immanent critique" is more expansive. It appeals to norms at least implicit in society or accessible to its members, but these norms need not be objects of overt belief. They may be expressed or contained in social practices; and the critical tensions exposed may involve a wider understanding of irrationality or dysfunction than contradiction or hypocrisy.<sup>24</sup> Finally, "external critique" appeals to norms not even implicit in a society—as it might be, facts about objective human nature. For Adorno, "the transcendent criticism of culture, much like bourgeois cultural criticism, sees itself obliged to fall back upon the idea of 'naturalness', which itself forms a central element of bourgeois ideology" (Adorno 1951b: 31).

Like other members of the Frankfurt School, Adorno insists on immanent critique, finding internal critique inadequate and external critique illicit. It's not hard to see why one might hope to go beyond internal critique. The question is why one should confine oneself to immanent critique. What exactly is illicit in the criticism of society by norms external to it? Can't we criticize the Callicleans—at least in their local formation—as profoundly unjust, regardless of whether our standards of virtue are in any way implicit in their society?

---

<sup>24</sup> For an illuminating treatment of immanent critique, see Jaeggi 2018.

Why immanent critique? I'll reject three answers before offering my own. The first answer appeals to self-determination.<sup>25</sup> If we hope to emancipate a society through social critique—not just evaluate its practices or change it by coercion—we need to convince the members of that society that our critique is valid. We can do this only if our arguments appeal to norms at least implicit in the society, ones expressed or contained in its practices if not in overt belief. Since we should aim at emancipation not mere commentary or forced change, there is a moral case for immanent critique.

As Sanford Diehl observes, however, this line of reasoning falls short of motivating immanence as a constraint on the theorizing of the social critic (Diehl 2022: 681-2). It gives us reason to refrain from external critique when we address the members of a given society, perhaps. But it doesn't invalidate external critique on its own terms.

Diehl goes on to make his own case for immanent critique, an alternative to the argument from self-determination that finds some common ground with it (Diehl 2022: 686). Diehl's argument turns on distinguishing the question "How should I relate to my social world?" asked by the members of a given society from the question "What is wrong with this society?" asked by someone outside of it. For Diehl, only considerations that can be brought to bear on a question by those who ask it can be relevant to the answer. Thus, while external critique is fine for the second question, the first must be answered by considerations available within the society involved. It is apt only for immanent critique. This is not a matter of how we should address the members of the given society if we aim at their emancipation, but of the question we intend our theory to answer. Immanence is a constraint on the social critic's theorizing insofar as she intends to answer the question posed by those who ask, within the society, "How should I relate to my social world?"

While I am convinced by Diehl's critique of the argument from self-determination, I don't think his alternative succeeds. The question "How should I relate to my social world?" may be distinct from the external question "What is wrong with this society?" But the external critic need not ask the latter question. Instead she may ask, about a member of the given society, N, "How should N relate to

---

<sup>25</sup> This answer can be found in Horkheimer 1937.

her social world?”—a question that differs from N’s only in being asked in the third person, not the first. It’s about the same individual, N, and deploys the same “should.” Even if the critic restricts herself to considerations that can be brought to bear on this question by the person asking it—that is, by the critic—it does not follow that she is constrained by the resources available to N. Since the answer to the question “How should I relate to my social world?” asked by N herself must be congruent with the answer to the critic’s question “How should N relate to her social world?” considerations unavailable to N may be relevant to her question, after all.

Put differently: Diehl’s premise—that considerations can be relevant to a question only if they can be brought to bear by those who ask it—implies the possibility of different answers to the question, “How should N relate to her social world?” depending on who asks it, N or the social critic; or it amounts to a form of “reasons internalism,” on which what N should do depends on what she can be reasoned into. The first path is implausible; the second path begs the question.<sup>26</sup> External critique assumes that norms that N does not accept, even implicitly, can be relevant to the question “How should N relate to her social world?” by determining what she has reason to do.

A second argument for immanent critique appeals to hermeneutic isolation. The idea is that it is impossible to understand a given society except in terms of its own ethical categories, and to use those categories is to share the ethical standpoint they encode. It follows that social critique that is based in genuine understanding must adopt the ethical outlook of the society being criticized. As Robin Celikates puts it in a recent essay: “On the hermeneutic view, social practices, institutions, and discourses do not constitute a reality that can be apprehended from the perspective of a detached observer” (Celikates 2006: 27). We are thus threatened with an “impasse,” in which we are forced to choose between “uncomprehending critique” and “uncritical understanding” (Celikates 2006: 22). Immanent critique is the way out: using a society’s implicit understanding of itself to criticize its practices and institutions.

---

<sup>26</sup> It’s also conflicts with the text: Diehl hopes to “remain agnostic about the relation between an agent’s reasons and the considerations on which she could act” (Diehl 2022: 687).

But the premise of the hermeneutic argument is dubious. One can internalize an ethical standpoint well enough to understand the categories that constitute it without coming to share that standpoint. As the anthropologist James Laidlaw contends in *The Subject of Virtue*, this is the precondition of much ethnographic work:

One can gain an imaginative understanding of a form of life, and expand one's moral horizon by learning to think with its concepts and appreciate the force of its values, without having to make those concepts or values one's own, let alone adopt its practices. Just this detachment is intrinsic to the ethnographic stance. (Laidlaw 2014: 224)<sup>27</sup>

A final flawed argument for immanence turns on Social Relativism. If we are talking past the Callicleans when we claim that justice is a virtue and their society unjust, as the Social Relativist contends, then our critique falls flat. The concept that regulates their social life—the one expressed by their word “virtue”—is not the concept that regulates ours. In that respect, the truth of what we say when we talk about “virtue” is irrelevant to them. External critique fails to address the questions they are prone to ask about their own society not because it is asked by someone outside it, but because it changes the subject from what they mean by “virtue” to what we do. If we want to address their questions, we must use the ethical concepts that the Callicleans use, and if Social Relativism is underwritten by Social Constructivism or Social Externalism, the concepts will be ones with which they are reliable. Our only hope is to find norms at least implicit in their practice that conflict with their approval of “natural justice.” Despite appearances, the true description of their method for identifying traits as virtues, properly applied, must be one on which it agrees with ours. Hence the need for immanent critique.

The objection to this argument goes back to section 2: even if the Callicleans apply their own method correctly, they don't mean something different by “virtue” than we do; and we do not talk past

---

<sup>27</sup> See also Laidlaw 2014: 45.

them. It was in order to avoid that implication that we turned from social to natural history, insisting that particular societies, like the one inspired by Callicles, could be ethically unreliable. Such societies invite external critique.

None of the arguments for immanence so far—the argument from self-determination, the argument from hermeneutic isolation, or the argument from social relativity—is sound. But these arguments point towards a circumscribed case for immanent critique, which rests on the historicity of human nature. Recall the Callicleans at the end of section 3, no longer one society among others but the whole of humanity, with a system of “virtues” radically unlike our own. Imagine a heretic who aims to criticize the Calliclean form of life, having learned of ours from some forgotten history book. She can point to frustrated needs or an inhospitable environment, arguing that Calliclean life does not reflect the natural history of human beings: the Callicleans are like plants growing in parched soil. Or she can argue that they’ve misapplied their method for identifying traits as virtues, perhaps because they lack non-ethical knowledge, using their own ideas against them. But if both arguments fail, she must concede that they are reliable about “virtue” and that they mean something different by it than their ancestors—a different concept regulates their social life. What the Social Externalist says about the Calliclean society, the Natural Externalist must conclude about our Calliclean future. The heretic’s critique falls flat.

If she wants to take our side against the Callicleans, the heretic must argue that they share our ethical concepts. She must hold that, while the system of virtues they profess is radically different from ours, human beings do not by nature agree with them in conditions of non-ethical knowledge—even where “nature” means the natural history of the Callicleans themselves. She must appeal to frustrated needs or to an inhospitable environment, discernible as such by a Martian anthropologist. Or she must point to ways in which the Callicleans misapply their method for identifying traits as virtues. She must show that norms implicit in their way of life conflict with their approval of “natural justice.” Despite appearances, the true description of their method for identifying traits as virtues, properly applied, is one on which it agrees with ours. In other words, she must engage in immanent critique. In the historical cul-de-sac of total Callicleanism, external critique is beside the point: a change of subject or

the mere expression of dissent. This doesn't mean it's bound to be ineffectual, but its effects are those of rhetorical conversion, not cognitive engagement with Calliclean beliefs.

The upshot is a qualified argument for immanent critique: qualified, since it allows for external critique of the Calliclean society in its local formation; but disturbing nonetheless.<sup>28</sup> It's one thing to refrain from ethical critique of our distant ancestors, refusing to say, for instance, that the honour codes of feudal society were simply mistaken, since they belonged to a different ethical world. It's another to admit that, barring the success of immanent critique, the future Callicleans might be right. If they are mistaken, that must be because they do not live as human beings live—natural history and statistics come apart—or because they've misapplied the method by which they form ethical beliefs.

So far, the threat is hypothetical, illustrated with a caricature of Callicles. The less hypothetical fear is that global capitalism is, or may become, akin to total Callicleanism: that it will shape us into people whose way of life confirms its ideology. Human beings will believe that avarice is a virtue, that social arrangements that pit us against one another are ethically acceptable, that exploitation is not unjust.<sup>29</sup> And barring the success of immanent critique, these beliefs will have come true. If we are mistaken, in the circumstance of total capitalism, that is because we do not live as human beings live—natural history and statistics come apart—or because we've misapplied the method by which we form ethical beliefs. Unless there are norms implicit in our way of life that conflict with the ideology of capitalism, ethical critique falls flat.

---

<sup>28</sup> Here I disagree with Jaeggi, for whom critique must be immanent even when directed at local forms of life that purport to solve particular social problems; see Jaeggi 2018: 40-41, on forms of life versus culture as a “comprehensive and self-contained totality.” Likewise, the immanent critique of Jaeggi's *Alienation* draws on a “*formal* conception of psychological health” (Jaeggi 2014: 33) not on a substantive account of human life. Still, some of her remarks are more congenial; see, for instance Jaeggi 2018: 135-6 on “the human form of life”

<sup>29</sup> For critical discussion of these ideological tropes, see Wootton 2018, Hussain 2020, and Cohen 1979.

## 5. Adorno's Pessimism

In closing, I explore, in slightly greater depth, the relationship between the argument above and the work of a specific Frankfurt School philosopher: Adorno. The idea that Critical Theory has Aristotelian roots, conjoined with a conditionally pessimistic outlook on the powers of critique, brings us close to Fabian Freyenhagen's fruitful reading of Adorno as a "negative Aristotelian" (Freyenhagen 2013). My hope is that an admittedly partial engagement with this reading will illuminate both Adorno and the position I've been trying to stake out.

Freyenhagen sees Adorno as an Aristotelian naturalist, like Foot, who draws on a conception of human nature as the basis for critique. "According to Adorno," he writes, "the gap between human beings as they are now—damaged, reduced to appendages of the machine, lacking real autonomy—and their potential—their humanity yet to be realized—provides the normative resources for a radical critique of our social world" (Freyenhagen 2013: 11). But the critique is circumscribed by ignorance of the human good. What makes it possible is knowledge of what is bad for us, as in the frustration of human needs whose standing as such is not ethically contentious. Hence the "negative" in "negative Aristotelianism."

Adorno thinks that we can know the bad (or, at least, the inhuman), even without knowing the good. Ascribing an Aristotelian conception of normativity to Adorno means we can elucidate how such asymmetrical knowledge is possible. To gain knowledge of the bad in this conception, we need to find out what is bad for us *qua* animal beings and what obstacles there are to the realisation of our potential as human beings. To find this out, it is not always necessary to know what the realisation of humanity (and thereby the good) substantially consists in. (Freyenhagen 2013: 240.)

This interpretation gains support from Adorno's 1963 lectures, published later as *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. For instance:

We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed. I would say that the place of moral philosophy today lies more in the concrete denunciation of the inhuman, than in vague and abstract attempts to situate man in his existence. (Adorno 2000: 175)

This passage picks up on central themes in *Minima Moralia*. Adorno is skeptical of our power to articulate, under capitalism, what the “goal of an emancipated society” or “the fulfilment of human possibilities” would be (Adorno 1951a: §100). Hence his aphorism: “There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more” (Adorno 1951a: §100). For Adorno, critique can point to nothing more than the frustration of needs discernible as such by a Martian anthropologist—of which hunger is the paradigm if not the only case. We can tell that lilies in parched soil need water, but not what they will look like when they flower.

If Adorno believes that we do or may exist in the capitalist analogue of our Calliclean future, his claims are consonant with my approach. And the Dedication of *Minima Moralia* suggests as much:

What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own. ... Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer. (Adorno 1951a: Dedication)

On a natural interpretation, the point is that how human beings live, under capitalism, is not how human beings live: in this environment, natural history and statistics come apart.

But it is difficult to say how human nature in Adorno fits with natural history, in the sense that I've invoked.<sup>30</sup> As well as passages like the ones above, there are moments that invite appeal to a humanity that transcends how human beings live. "[If] humanity has any meaning at all," Adorno remarks in the course of the lectures, "it must consist in the discovery that human beings are not identical with their immediate existence as the creatures of nature" (Adorno 2000: 15). Is he distinguishing natural history from mere statistical facts? Or humanity from natural history? It's difficult to be certain.

For Adorno, our concepts of social life are "reified": so distorted by capitalism that they fail to disclose the nature of social reality. "The more total society becomes," he writes, "the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own" (Adorno 1951b: 34). But so long as reification is incomplete, reality can ineffably show through. Some authors see in the ineffable a form of ethical thought that departs from the mere facts of human life—a rejection of Natural as well as Social Relativism.<sup>31</sup>

I don't know how to resolve the interpretive dispute: I am not sure what Adorno thinks. But the view I've proposed confines itself to natural history. For Natural Externalists, the threat of our Calliclean future—or of the hegemony of global capitalism, with its pernicious ideology—is metaphysical, not just epistemic. It is a threat to the cogency of anything but immanent critique and if that fails, a threat to the very meaning of ethical claims.

Even if we are not yet in such dire circumstances, we confront an epistemic challenge. When needs are frustrated, or the environment inhospitable, it is difficult to learn, empirically, how human beings live: to describe "the fulfilment of human possibilities" or what human beings by nature approve (Adorno 1951a: §100). And so it is uncertain what we know about ethical life. If Natural Externalism, or something like it, holds, our knowledge-claims are hostage to social theory. When we know an ethical fact by a given method, it must be no accident that this method corresponds to those that that

---

<sup>30</sup> A further complication: Adorno's divergent use of "natural history" in criticizing the representation of what is merely historical as natural or essential; see Whyman 2016 for helpful discussion.

<sup>31</sup> On the threat of complete reification, see Rose 1978: 60-62; and on the ineffable, Finlayson 2002.

human beings use, as a matter of natural history. To profess to know, one must be willing to defend the “no-accident” claim—a conjecture in social anthropology. One must be ready to propose an explanation of one’s beliefs and the beliefs of those with whom one disagrees that is empirically contentious. In this way, the epistemology of ethics is entangled with the etiology of social change.

Analytic philosophers have not much concerned themselves with social history. But there are exceptions. Though she does not take a position in moral epistemology, by my lights—she does not articulate anything like condition K or how it could be met—Elizabeth Anderson’s account of the British abolition movement, of how we came to know that slavery is unjust, would meet the criteria I have sketched (Anderson 2014). Yet the case is far from typical: we rarely possess a social-epistemological narrative of this kind. Adorno may therefore be right in urging modesty in what we claim to know—when we go beyond the coarsest demands.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Special thanks to Sandy Diehl for prompting me to write about this topic through his eye-opening work, and for generous written comments on an earlier draft; thanks also to audiences at Indiana University in Bloomington, the British Society for Ethical Theory, Cornell University, and the University of Chicago. Finally, thanks to the Editorial Committee and to a reader for this journal, whose constructive criticism led to many improvements.

## References

- Adorno, T. (1951a). *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso Books, 1974.
- Adorno, T. (1951b). Cultural Criticism and Society. Reprinted in *Prisms*. Trans. S. Weber and S. Weber. London: Spearman, 1967, 19-34.
- Adorno, T. (2000). *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Trans. R. Livingstone. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Althusser, L. (1965). *For Marx*. Trans. B. Brewster. London: Verso Books, 1969.
- Anderson, E. (2014). *Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain's Abolition of Slavery*. Kansas City: Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958). Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy* 33, 1-19.
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross and Lesley Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1953.
- Boyd, R. (1988). How to be a Moral Realist. In G. Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988, 181–228.
- Breitenbach, A. (2009). Teleology in Biology: A Kantian Approach. *Kant Yearbook* 1, 31-56.
- Brink, D. (2001). Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18, 154-76.
- Celikates, R. (2006). From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn. *Constellations* 13, 21-40.
- Cohen, G. A. (1979). The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8, 338-360.
- Diehl, S. (2022). Why Immanent Critique? *European Journal of Philosophy* 30, 676-692.
- Dorr, C. (2016). To Be F is to Be G. *Philosophical Perspectives* 30, 39-134.
- Finlayson, G. (2002). Adorno on the Ethical and the Ineffable. *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, 1-25.
- Foot, P. (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freyenhagen, F. (2013). *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geras, N. (1983). *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*. London: Verso Books.
- Horkheimer, M. (1937). Traditional and Critical Theory. Trans. M. J. O'Connell. In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum, 1986, 188-243.

- Hume, D. (1739-40). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Hussain, W. (2020). Pitting People Against Each Other. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 48, 79-113.
- Jackson, F. (1998). *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jaeggi, R. (2014). *Alienation*. Trans. F. Neuhouser and A. E. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Critique of Forms of Life*. Trans. C. Cronin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kitcher, P. (1999). Essence and Perfection. *Ethics* 110, 59-83.
- Laidlaw, J. (2014). *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewens, T. (2020). Species Natures: A Critique of Neo-Aristotelian Ethics. *Philosophical Quarterly* 70, 480-501
- Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Trans. D. McLellan. In D. McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 83-121.
- McDowell, J. (1980). The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics. Reprinted in *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, 3-22.
- Mill, J. S. (1869). *The Subjection of Women*. Edited by S. M. Okin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988.
- Rose, G. (1978). *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*. London: Macmillan.
- Setiya, K. (2012). *Knowing Right From Wrong*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Street, S. (2008). Constructivism about Reasons. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3, 207-245.
- Thompson, M. (2008). *Life and Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whyman, T. (2016). Understanding Adorno on 'Natural-History.' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24: 452-472.
- Wootton, D. (2018). *Power, Pleasure, and Profit: Insatiable Appetites from Machiavelli to Madison*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.