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Is metaethical naturalism sufficient? A Confucian response to problems of meaning

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ABSTRACT

Ethical naturalism is sometimes accused of problematic metaphysics or epistemology. Some argue that naturalists rely on concepts of 'nature' indefensible in the light of modern evolutionary biology. There is also an epistemological worry that has been raised recently that strong normative evaluation, such as meaning in human life, is empirically inaccessible or even in conflict with what we know in scientific contexts. While the critics have targeted Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian views, I will appeal to an argument from the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi as one potential way that we can respond to skeptics. If we can know that human beings are capable of moral goodness, and it is comprehensible for us to take moral goodness as a final or unifying goal of our lives, then we can respond to the skeptical objections which allege that we cannot sustain rich normative judgments about meaning in life in the face of scientific evidence.

KEYWORDS

Metaethics; naturalism; Zhu Xi; Neo-Confucianism; skepticism; meaning

Metaethical naturalism is broadly the view that there are mind-independent moral facts, which are ultimately grounded in or consist in natural facts. Bernard Williams criticized naturalist ethics on a few grounds. One of these was that concepts of 'nature' (or teleology or essence) are indefensible in the light of modern science. David McPherson (among others) has taken up and expanded upon another aspect of William's critique, which alleges that natural facts, as studied in modern science, are unsuited to sustain a suitably rich normative judgment about what life was worthwhile or, at least, would not show me the way in which living in accordance with nature (scientifically understood) would answer the deepest desires of my heart for *meaning*.

While the criticisms and objections target Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian views, I will appeal to an argument from the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi as one potential way that we can respond to skeptics about the (naturally) normative implications of scientific facts. Neo-Confucianism is, in my opinion, quite close to Aristotelianism and in principle compatible with it. My appeal to this argument is not to claim that Neo-Confucians present a unique perspective on metaethical naturalism but only to reconstruct from their own arguments one way that metaethical naturalists in general might respond to this species of objection.

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The Neo-Confucian argument, derived from Mencius, points to the fact that if human beings have the *potential to* engage in morally good actions or behaviors, and this potential is seated within human beings from birth. I will propose that any wider appeal to teleology, while perhaps part of a larger explanation of the nature of the human species, is unnecessary in responding to the skeptic. Moral goodness is a prime candidate for a source of meaning. If we can know that human beings are capable of moral goodness, and it is comprehensible for us to take moral goodness as a final or unifying goal of our lives, then we can respond to the skeptical objections which allege that we cannot sustain rich normative judgments about meaning in life in the face of scientific evidence.

Worries metaphysical and epistemological for naturalism

Aristotelianism is a paradigm example of metaethical naturalism. Neo-Aristotelians such as Rosalind Hursthouse appeal to species-specific norms as the basis for determining what it is to be a good instance of species *x*. Hursthouse follows Geach, Anscombe, and Foot in holding that 'good' is a predicative or attributive adjective that requires appeal to some given kind membership when we evaluate whether an *x* is a good *x*. Consequently, she argues, we evaluate a thing as a good *x* in light of whether that *x* fulfills or perfects its species-specific norms; metaethical naturalism of the Neo-Aristotelian kind therefore focuses on 'evaluations of individual living things as or qua specimens of their natural kind' (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 197). Good human beings are evaluated in terms of their unique capacities, being social animals with capacities for rationality (Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 217–238). These claims are supposed to be scientifically and empirically accessible. 'Aristotelian categoricals', as proposed by Michael Thompson, include those claims about natural kinds made in the context of biology: e.g. that giraffes do not fly or that rabbits eat herbs. They thus resolve the famous Humean worry that descriptive facts do not entail normative facts, as Aristotelian categoricals appear to properly ground normative judgments about what is appropriate or good for members of the species. It will be bad or inappropriate, given what a 'cat' is, for a cat to eat Styrofoam. Aristotelian naturalism assumes that facts about *natural kinds* serve as the grounds for normative judgments and that we can know the relevant facts about natural kinds through 'naturalistic' empirical scientific study.

Many have worries that the plausible empirical accounts we can give of human beings as members of a biological species, having certain normative functions, do not seem to give the right kind of *prescriptive* force to ethical norms. Some allege that an evaluation given in terms of natural facts about human beings does not seem to get us to *ethical* norms (see Liu, in press). I focus on two different kinds of arguments to this end: conceptual-metaphysical and epistemological. An exemplar of conceptual-metaphysical objections to naturalism is David Hume's famous argument that no natural descriptive facts can entail a normative one—an 'is-ought' gap. Descriptive properties, or natural properties, cannot ground normative properties.

Bernard Williams proposes a different metaphysical objection. Williams proposes that modern natural science does not support the requisite teleological metaphysics upon which Aristotelian naturalism rests. Williams thinks the Aristotelian account is drawing implicitly on data that is foreign to modern scientific naturalism, taking for granted 'a strong view of the harmony among themselves of human capacities and needs'. Evolution

shows that we evolved various capacities and desires piecemeal over long periods of time, and the shape these capacities have taken in contemporary mankind is contingent. Without the strong teleological assumptions, it will remain 'an open question whether the evolutionary success of humanity, in its extremely brief period of existence, may not rest on a rather ill-sorted *bricolage* of powers and instincts' (Williams, 1995b, p. 199).

Thus, the metaphysical objection posed by Williams is that an outdated 'Aristotelian cosmology' of teleology is needed as an auxiliary set of assumptions to deduce normative judgments from the scientific facts shown in contemporary biology. Williams alleges that, only if it was true that we were able to investigate in scientific contexts something that grounds the morally normative sense of 'natural', could we employ those results of science to make judgments of the moral kind. But any morally normative sense of nature relies upon 'a deeply teleological outlook . . . according to which there is inherent in each natural kind of thing an appropriate way for things of that kind to behave. On that view it must be the deepest desire . . . of human beings to live in the way that is in the objective sense appropriate to them . . . ' (Williams, 1995a, pp. 109–110). Without those teleological assumptions, one cannot make judgments that humans *ought* (in some strong normative sense) to pursue moral goodness. And those teleological assumptions are non-naturalistic, at least in the sense that they are neither required for nor derived from natural scientific theories.

David McPherson, following Charles Taylor, extends elements of Williams' objection from a metaphysical to an epistemological objection. McPherson agrees with Williams that, if the naturalistic and scientific picture of the universe given in contemporary evolutionary biology and physics were true, it would undermine a metaphysical basis for drawing normative judgments about human nature from the scientific natural facts. 'If life is indeed ultimately without meaning and purpose and merely the by-product of contingent, blind forces, then it is difficult to see how we can sustain a strong evaluative conception of what is noblest and best about human life' (McPherson, 2015, p. 209). Our judging of a caring disposition as normatively valuable (for example) 'will be based merely on happening to possess certain caring dispositions—for whatever contingent personal, cultural, or evolutionary reasons—rather than on categorical judgments concerning things about which we *ought* to care' (McPherson, 2015, p. 205). McPherson concedes that scientific evidence *could* support normative judgments of some kinds, if we discovered that 'the universe is in some sense "biophilic" and "noophilic", that is, there is a tendency . . . for the universe to give rise first of all to life and then to conscious intelligence' (McPherson, 2015, p. 213). That is, McPherson holds open the possibility that scientific evidence could show us that the world is teleological. Nevertheless, he agrees with Williams that the current state of science does not support that teleological perspective.

However, McPherson also takes up Taylor's criticism of the 'disengaged moral stance' and applies this to the Neo-Aristotelian attempt to begin from facts about natural kinds revealed in 'naturalistic' empirical science. McPherson argues that it is not *epistemically* possible in principle to make normative judgments based on evolutionary facts, given their contingent history and context of development within constraints of evolutionary fitness. If all we knew were the facts as existing in contemporary natural science, we could not know that a life of virtue is noblest/best for human beings (McPherson, 2015, pp. -208–209). He argues that scientific methodology, operating in a way disengaged from

concern about meaning and normative facts, would not provide 'an internal justification for a normative account of human nature; that is, … sense making from within our evaluative standpoint' (McPherson, 2015, pp. 211–212). McPherson distinguishes 'strong' normative evaluation from 'weak' normative evaluation. Strong evaluation provides 'qualitative distinctions of value in terms of higher and lower, noble and base, admirable and contemptible, dignified and undignified, sacred and profane, and so on that are seen as placing normative demands upon us, whether or not we are responsive to them' (McPherson, 2020, p. 10). Otherwise, we would care about certain values only 'because *we happen to care about it*, rather than because we see ourselves as recognizing a desire-independent normative standard for what we ought to care about' (McPherson, 2020, p. 56). The distinction is between 'categorical' and 'hypothetical' imperatives, the latter (weak evaluation) only having the pull of instrumental rationality.

What would give us a basis for making 'strong' normative evaluations? McPherson believes that '"mystical perception" or a "religious attitude" of reverence for human life' is necessary to provide epistemological access of the appropriate kind to facts that would ground strong normative evaluation and meaning—only such attitudes would ground judgments, for instance, about 'absolute' moral prohibitions (McPherson, 2020, p. 100). He takes these sorts of attitudes to aim at 'cosmic' or ultimate sources of meaning in the universe, even if not theistic. McPherson's appeal to the scientific evidence about universal 'biophilic' teleology, for instance, suffices to show us that human have a place in the universal order without positing a theistic God. Nevertheless, even if we had scientific knowledge of requisite facts about universal teleology, we would be unable to move from our disengaged scientific knowledge that the world 'aims' at life to thereby conclude that our lives have meaning in this strong sense. He cites with approval the following from Charles Taylor:

> [The] terms of our best account [of the ethical life] will never figure in a physical theory of the universe. But that just means that our human reality cannot be understood in the terms appropriate for this physics. … Our value terms purport to give us insight into what it is to live in the universe as a human being, and this is a quite different matter from that which physical science claims to reveal and explain. This reality is, of course, dependent on us, in the sense that a condition for its existence is our existence. But once granted that we exist, it is no more a subjective projection than what physics deals with (Taylor, 1989, p. 59).

McPherson argues that the only way we can engage in strong evaluation and perceive the appropriate 'strong goods' is within an engaged, first-person perspective. 'We cannot understand strong goods if we only consider the subject side or the object side of experience' (McPherson, 2020, p. 131). We need the object-oriented facts about the metaphysics of reality, but we also need to have *personal engagement* with those sources of meaning. McPherson therefore criticizes merely objective accounts of universal teleology in favor of more theistic models; since

> theism is personalistic – it holds that the ultimate nature of reality is personal rather than impersonal – it interprets the evolutionary process in terms of the goal of interpersonal communion, or the normative focus of love (there are certainly other goals for humans as well, such as the virtuous development of our various human capacities, but these also further contribute to the richness of communion) … [and for that reason] theism provides a purposeful framework by which we can identify our natural tendencies toward love/communion as part of what is noblest and best about us – and indeed part of what it is to

> be made in the image of God – and thus as what ought to be cultivated as part of a normatively higher, more meaningful mode of life (McPherson, 2020, p. 145).

At best, in a counter-factual scenario rather unlike actual evolutionary theory at present moment, scientific facts *could* in principle show us that we 'fit' into the universal scheme of things, but no scientific facts about natural kinds can reveal to us that the universe has *intentions* for us. Metaethical naturalism therefore fails in principle to provide grounds for strong normative concepts that would support judgments about absolute moral prohibitions, meaning in life, and other important aspects of normative evaluation.

A Neo-Confucian response to the metaphysics and epistemology

There are fundamentally two challenges being posed by Williams and McPherson to metaethical naturalism. The epistemological challenge is that a scientific or 'disengaged' approach to the world cannot in principle supply for that meaning which arises from knowledge that our place in the universe is *intentional*. Scientific knowledge in its current state cannot supply even that necessary, insufficient basis for strong evaluation that our tendencies or inclinations are toward what is universally good. The metaphysical challenge is that strong normative judgments require a teleological worldview. Without that worldview, we could not infer from the fact that some contingent inclinations or dispositions are present in human beings that these inclinations or dispositions are ordered toward *what is necessarily best for us*. Without knowing what is best for us in this modally strong sense of *best*, whether simply as best for creatures like us or best absolutely speaking (as in an 'absolute' moral evaluation that virtue is to be pursued above all other goals), we could not make judgments to evaluate some ways of life or ultimate goals as absolutely better than others.

The question seems to be whether we can know from natural facts about our kind that moral activity, e.g. a life of virtue lived for its own sake, could serve as an ultimate and meaning-giving goal of our lives. The medieval Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹has, I propose, given an argument (ultimately derived from Mencius) that strikes me as relevant to this question. Zhu Xi's dialectic is different: he is arguing that human nature can be known to be good. While Zhu Xi accepts background assumptions of a teleological worldview that the objectors reject, let me first lay out a few of those assumptions. Zhu Xi's predecessors, the Cheng brothers, proposed a paradigm in which everything was one by reason of their underlying structure: there was 'one *li*, many manifestations' (*liyi fenshu* '理一分殊'), so that just as the '[selfsame] moon reflecting upon ten thousand rivers' (Zhu, 2002, vol. 17, p. 3167 – translation mine)., nothing exists that is not reflecting the one *li*. To *be* a given thing is to exemplify the *one li*, a kind of metaphysical structuring principle that pervades the universe. Exemplifying *more fully* the one *li*, being more what one is essential, is what it is to be more fully good.

Zhu Xi took the Cheng brothers' metaphysical principle of oneness further and offered a full metaphysics on which the differences between kinds and instances of material objects are accounted for in terms of their *qi* (roughly, material stuff; see further Rooney, 2022, esp. pp. 97-124). This perspective leads to a wide-ranging metaphysical consequence that 'the natures of human beings and other things fundamentally are the same; they only differ because of their respective

endowments of *qi*' (Zhu, 2019, p. 17). To become men and women of virtue is to more closely resemble the one *li*, or nature, that is reflected in all reality. The progress of moral cultivation, on Zhu Xi's picture, is to purify one's material stuff, or *qi*, so as to allow human nature to be more 'brightly' exemplified by it; Zhu Xi holds that it is a general metaphysical principle, applicable to everything, that exemplifying the oneness of *li* is to be fulfilled; 'with respect to the nature of humans, we speak of brightness and dimness; with respect to the nature of things, there is just unevenness and blockage' (Zhu, 2019, p. 38).

For our purposes, Zhu Xi's overarching metaphysics would be question-begging with the skeptic. Yet Zhu Xi is arguably a metaethical naturalist, insofar as it is the nature' 性 that grounds the 'function' 用 and other facts about ethical norms of each thing, human beings included. Zhu Xi held that we need to investigate our nature through sense perception and reasoning to apprehend our natural functions. He proposed that we come to know *li* for humans by introspective knowledge of our own reactions, study of classics, and empirical observation of human life, generally speaking—in sum, 'investigation of things' (格物致知) (e.g. Zhu, 2019, p. 46, nos. 21 & 22). Once one comes to investigate the *li* of that natural order, as human beings are capable of doing, one can come to understand what true moral cultivation requires and to disregard other ends for human life as ignoble or unfitting (see Zhu, 2019, p. 27).

While the methodologies Zhu Xi recommends are not particularly scientific, Zhu Xi also argued that we can come to know the inclinations of the four virtues (礼义智仁) are 'natural' to *li* itself; that 'these [virtues] are the very substance of the nature' (Zhu, 2019, pp. 155–156). In particular, Zhu Xi argued that we can infer to the goodness of *li* and the existence of the virtues within that unifying principle of the universe due to the fact that goodness *spontaneously* arises within the natural order. The Neo-Confucian tradition put great weight on the Mencian claim that morally good feelings of commiseration arise spontaneously and without deliberation when we see, for instance, a child about to fall into a well—Mencius referred to these feelings or reactions as the sprouts of the virtues, *duan* 端. Zhu Xi's predecessor Cheng Yi 程颐 goes beyond Mencius to argue that we could know human beings have the virtues incipiently: 'due to the feeling of commiseration, we know that there is benevolence' (Cheng & Cheng, 2004, p. 168 – trans. Huang, in press). Zhu Xi expands upon Cheng Yi's reasoning: 'as soon as one sees the infant about to fall into well, the feeling of commiserations arises in the person. How can one refrain from having it!. . . Things that are arranged by human efforts are what humans can refrain from doing. Things that are natural are what humans cannot refrain from doing' (Zhu, 1986, p. 1281 – trans. Huang, in press). The fact that one has these reactions spontaneously indicates that such feelings are natural, at least in the sense of in-born rather than deliberate. He argues further to this end:

> . . . everything has its root. Although the principle of human nature is formless, what issues from it is perceivable. So from the feeling of commiseration we know that there must be benevolence, from the feeling of shame and dislike we know that there must be rightness, from the feeling of reverence, we know that there must be propriety, and from the feeling of approving and disapproving we know that there must be wisdom. If there is originally no principle inside, how can there be sprouts outside? From the sprouts issued outside, we can indisputably know that there must be principle inside. (Zhu, 2002, vol. 23, p. 2779 - trans. Huang, in press)

From the fact that we spontaneously have such reactions, we know that we are capable *by nature* of having feelings of compassion. As he puts it more succinctly elsewhere, 'we can know that there must be root from the bud' (Zhu, 1986 – trans. Huang, in press).

Chen Lai and Huang Yong, two contemporary scholars of Confucianism, criticize Zhu Xi's argument. Chen interprets Zhu Xi as arguing that, because feelings are sometimes morally appropriate, we can infer that human nature, universally, is good—and notes that this is fallacious (Chen, 2000, p. 211). Huang (in press) notes that the reasoning is not strictly speaking fallacious but does not prove as much as Zhu Xi wants it to: 'Although from the bad bud we may not infer that its root must also be bad, still we cannot exclude the possibility that the bud is bad indeed because the root is bad. Similarly, although we cannot infer that human nature must be bad simply because human feeling issued out from it is bad, we cannot exclude the possibility that the feeling is bad indeed because the human nature is bad'. However, I want to propose a slightly different interpretation which is not so fallacious, and which responds to the metaphysical and epistemological objections to metaethical naturalism reviewed above. In a revised interpretation, Zhu Xi's argument could simply be interpreted as an inference from the occurrence of certain feelings or morally good reactions to the *capacity* for having such feelings and reactions. As these good reactions spontaneously proceed from human nature, we can know that human nature is immediately capable of producing the right kinds of feelings which can issue in morally good reactions.

Specifically, Zhu Xi's empirical argument could aim to show a *minimal* form of teleology (which Zhu Xi might refer to as 体-用): the teleological facts which associate of powers with their manifestations. His aim is to show, first, that the manifestation proceeds from factors *intrinsic* to human beings rather than anything extrinsic to us. Then, second, that the relation between power and manifestation is not finked or masked, but that the moral feelings are *properly* manifestations of a power seated in human beings, just as we come to know an object is fragile by inference from manifestations of fragility (breaking, shattering) under appropriate conditions. Many analyses of dispositions in metaphysics today would not be adverse to these sorts of claims (see Choi & Fara, 2021). Human beings have a potential or a capacity for morally good emotional reactions towards others, and, if we can know that this capacity is natural to members of the human species, then we have a clear sense in which human beings have intrinsic dispositions toward moral behavior, since we have capacities for becoming morally good or evil. Zhu Xi's argument might seem to beg the question against the skeptics if Zhu Xi assumes that we can know that developing these capacities is *good for* human beings. However, I take it that this is not in dispute. The skeptical objections of McPherson and Williams do not deny that compassion is good for us. Rather, they argue that we need a stronger set of teleological claims, whereby we come to know not only that moral goodness is good for us but rather that it is the best way of life for human beings or that it is appropriate for our place in the universe that we pursue virtue above other apparent goods.

I suggest that we can and should reject these demanding requirements. Showing that the life of virtue is the *best of all possible ways of life* for human beings, if by that we were to mean that our nature is modally necessary and could not have been otherwise, is an overly high demand. Many theists hold that God could not have created human beings, and thus that our existence is metaphysically contingent, or that God could have created different kinds of rational animals, and thus that our nature and normative facts about

what is good for us could have been different too. Neither of these kinds of contingencies undermine normative evaluations. (Indeed, again, some theists hold that God could have given us greater kinds flourishing.) The overly strong modal claims can be rejected. We do not need to know *the best possible* conditions that God could have created for us to recognize that some conditions are *for our flourishing*. The skeptical objections do not deny that we can recognize as good for us those other-directed attitudes highlighted in Mencius' case of feelings of compassion for a child in danger, nor do they argue that the pursuit of the life of virtue, becoming a fully *benevolent* kind of person who extends those attitudes toward all, would be an incomprehensible goal for someone's life.

Without cosmic teleology, it might seem that evolution undermines the view that benevolence is the best way of life, not because our dispositions could have easily been different than they are, but because they might conflict among themselves or because we cannot know which one is a reasonable goal for our lives. Without cosmic teleology, we are seemingly left with a bricolage of different dispositions and capacities, some of which might be ordered toward benevolence and others to aggression, or at least some other goods that might potentially come into conflict with benevolence. Why could we not order our lives around another good? In conclusion, I want to suggest that working out how goods should be pursued appropriately is precisely a matter for empirical investigation. It could be an open question how we ought to weigh appropriately different goods. Nevertheless, the fact that the question is open does not entail that it is impossible for moral goodness to be an appropriate *ultimate* goal. Moral goodness seems to many people just the sort of good which allows us to appropriately weigh and appreciate other goods. But it seems to me, again, that one would set too high a bar by demanding that moral goodness be the *only comprehensible* or *possible* ultimate goal for human life. Indeed, even a theist might argue that the minimal facts about teleology that we are *capable* of moral goodness are an appropriate starting point for reflection on where goodness arises, as Aquinas does in noting that 'it could be argued to the contrary: "If evil exists, God exists". For, there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God' (Aquinas, 1956, IIIa.71).

Similarly, while critics overestimate the way in which contemporary science stands in conflict with Aristotelian categoricals, teleology, or natures, it seems to me they more importantly misunderstand the *relation* of facts about natural kinds to normative judgments, arguing that contingency of a natural kind undermines drawing normative judgments from facts about those kinds. But, if the intuition is that relationships with other people (including with God) are not contingently good for us as rational creatures, then there is nothing about our evolutionary contingency that makes *this* fact about our nature obtains contingent, since metaethical naturalists deny precisely that there is a contingent relationship *between facts about our natural kind and facts about what is good for us*. Natural evolutionary history does not show us that this is the case either. Rather, if moral goodness is good for us in the ultimate sense, it is precisely these natural facts which can reveal it empirically. Persons who live morally good lives and pursue it will enjoy meaning, peace, and other goods. But this looks like an empirically investigable question—which we do now investigate in positive psychology.

Finally, while I take it that responding to these metaphysical worries goes some way toward responding to the epistemological worries, McPherson's epistemological concern

is that we can never come to acquire a meaningful relationship from bare scientific facts. This seems especially true (he thinks) if the current state of science reveals nothing more than the existence of a pointless, meaningless, and absurd physical history of the universe, devoid of normative facts. Briefly, I concede that it seems hard to see the way in which there is strong normativity in a world that is *positively* pointless or meaningless or absurd. Some atheistic paradigms have such a view. For instance, it seems plausible to me that there are no strong normative facts in a world where everything is reductively materialistic and there are no people. However, these positively nihilistic visions of the universe are metaphysical cosmic worldviews that are not implied by or entailed by scientific practice.

The epistemological objection seems to put the cart before the horse, in terms of moral epistemology, by putting our knowledge of *intention* before our knowledge of *good*. There are two directions we can take this response. One is that which is specific to theism. As a theist, I agree that God ultimately grounds all value and existence, but it seems we would *lack any reason* to engage with God in any intentional relationship if we could not recognize or understand the way in which relationship with God *is good for creatures like us*. That is, I would be unable to recognize *God's will for my flourishing* if I could not recognize what was *for my flourishing* to begin with. Further, if facts about God's will for my flourishing were metaphysically unrelated to facts about my natural kind, then one might worry that there are more serious voluntarist assumptions lurking here which would generate the same worries about contingency which McPherson and Williams find problematic about biological evolution.

But we can also make a response to the epistemological skeptical worries which is simply naturalistic. What I have argued here is that metaethical naturalism does not *need* to show that its claims about natural kinds would be compatible with such worldviews or scientific evidence which would potentially show that such worldviews are true. What metaethical naturalists need epistemologically and metaphysically to be the case is only that facts about our natural kind are what ground facts about what is good for us and that we can know these facts about our natural kind empirically. Scientific practice might be methodologically naturalistic, and in that limited sense 'disengaged' from questions of human normativity and meaning, but neither its method nor its results deny that those normative facts exist in principle. If Aristotelian naturalists are right, for instance, biologists make normative judgements routinely about what is good for various species that are not dependent on what the biologists want to be the case. And, if we reject that the modal demands of the skeptic are overly high, we do not even need to have scientific evidence that our capacity for moral goodness is our 'highest' capacity. Rather, the question is whether we can know whether moral goodness or virtue is an *objectively* worthwhile goal for human life, rather than being contingent upon our desires, and whether we can know that empirically by access to the natural facts. To know this, we need empirical evidence which is consistent with and supports the view that moral goodness actualizes our other capacities, leading to a life of flourishing, and that other ways of life might not do so in the same way. While laying out the evidence for this conclusion goes beyond the scope of this paper, which has focused on lowering the evidential bar that we need to respond to the skeptic, evidence for these conclusions seems to exist.

In conclusion, we can lower the epistemological bar just as we did with the metaphysical objection. First, Zhu Xi endorses a vision of study as ' ... exhaustively

investigating pattern-principle (qiong li 窮理) … not [as] a matter of apprehending what was external to one's person, but about achieving a resonance between oneself and the object of one's investigations' (Virag, 2019, p. 37). Zhu Xi holds that investigation of the world can be a constituent element of that pursuit of moral goodness. It is true that scientific investigation is not intrinsically or essentially an act of prayer to God, but it is also true that scientific investigation is not an anti-moral practice. Indeed, study can function as an act of worship, since by perfecting ourselves and our capacities as God wills for us, we are already incipiently in a relationship with Him. Second, Zhu Xi's argument pertains to other-directed attitudes which we can know are natural to human beings and good for us. If we can pursue such attitudes and relationships with others as a life-goal, as in Confucian pursuit of *ren*, it seems to be simply an open question *which* and *whether* relationships of a certain kind will lead to the best version of our flourishing. If there is a God or other source of cosmic meaning for why our natures are the way they are, there is no better way to discover that source than by investigating the sort of animals we are and the goods that lead us to flourish. To cite Mencius, 'to cultivate one's nature is what it is to serve Heaven' (*Mencius* 7A.1 – trans. mine).[1]

Note

1. This essay incorporates material from a forthcoming essay of mine: Rooney, J.D. (in press). A Dilemma for Yong Huang's Neo-Confucian Moral Realism. *Australasian Philosophical Review*, 8(3).

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