

# Applied Naturalism? Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and the Implementation Problem

# Outline of my talk

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1.1. Forms of Naturalism

1.2. The Meaning of „Applied“

1.3. Some Tensions that cannot be resolved

## 2. Aristotelian Naturalism as Applied Naturalism

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2.2. The Appeal to (Human) Nature

2.3. The Appeal to Virtues

2.4. A Footian Objection to an Applied Aristotelian Naturalism

2.5. How to understand and undermine the Footian constraint

## 3. Summary and Open Questions



## 1. Applied Naturalism – A Wooden Iron?

- How can we as humans apply concepts to nature when we ourselves are parts of nature?
- Is it sufficient to say that applied naturalism is nothing other than (empirical) science?
- Does applied naturalism only describe the way scientific naturalism affects us?
- Where is the ethical located in a naturalistic cosmos?  
Nowhere, in between or everywhere?



# 1.1 Forms of Naturalism

metaphysical naturalism

scientific naturalism

semantic naturalism

*Ethical Naturalism*

*Naturalism of Human Nature*



## 1.2 The Meaning of „Applied“

*What does it mean to apply an existing theory to a practical problem?*

- standard view: subordination of a case to an ethical rule *vs.* specification of the case in order to come to an ethical judgement
- my suggestion: before adopting the standard view, it is necessary to clarify the basic normative concepts (goodness, rule, human nature, happiness, etc.) including their use in everyday language

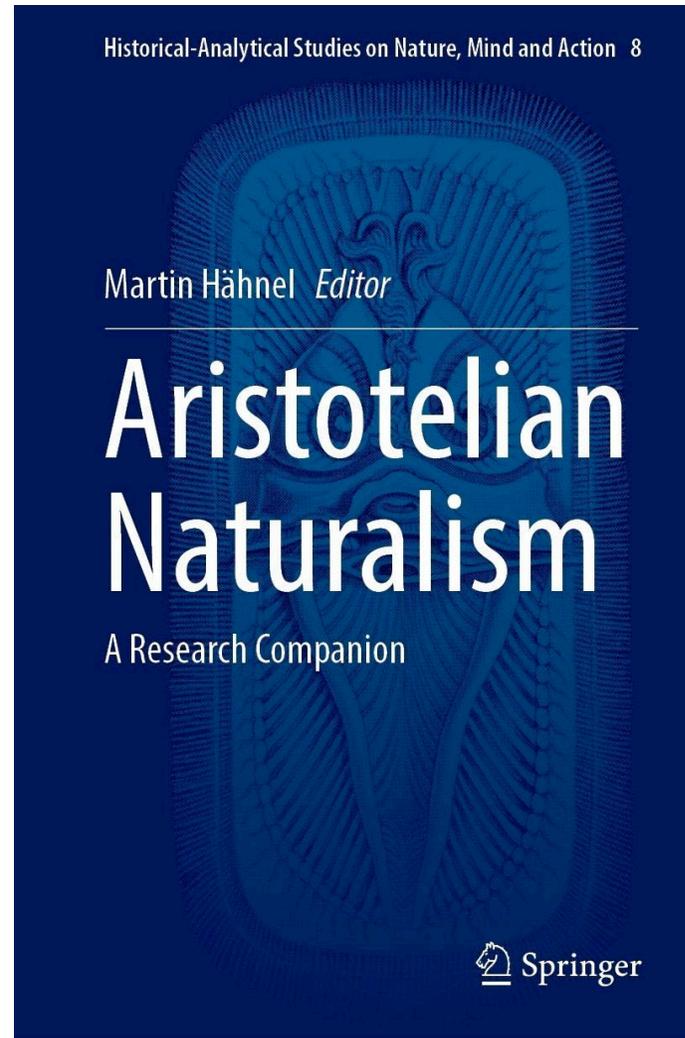


## 1.3 Some Tensions that cannot be resolved

Methodological naturalism cannot be applied to something that does not itself describe a natural property in the scientific sense (“norms” in the natural sciences  $\neq$  “norms” in philosophical ethics)

“The 'cases' which applied ethics discusses are themselves indeterminate, and the relation of principles to these 'cases' differs from the relation of principles to cases in naturalistic, truth-oriented inquiry.” (O’Neill 2009)

## 2. Aristotelian Naturalism as Applied Naturalism





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

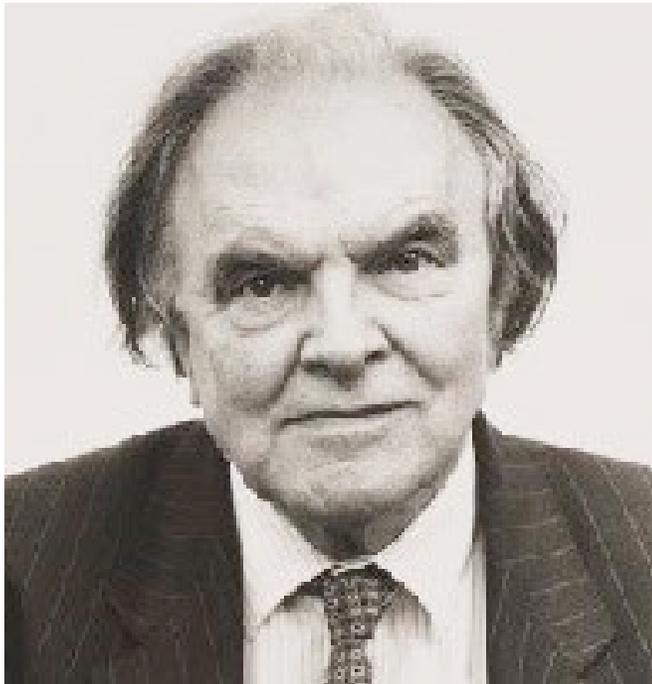
First phase of **initiation**: G.E.M. Anscombe with "Modern Moral Philosophy".





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

Second phase of **concretion**: Peter Geach and Philippa Foot





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

Third phase of **transformation**: critical revisionism of Michael Thompson in *Life and Action* (2008), Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDowell. Peter Geach and Philippa Foot





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

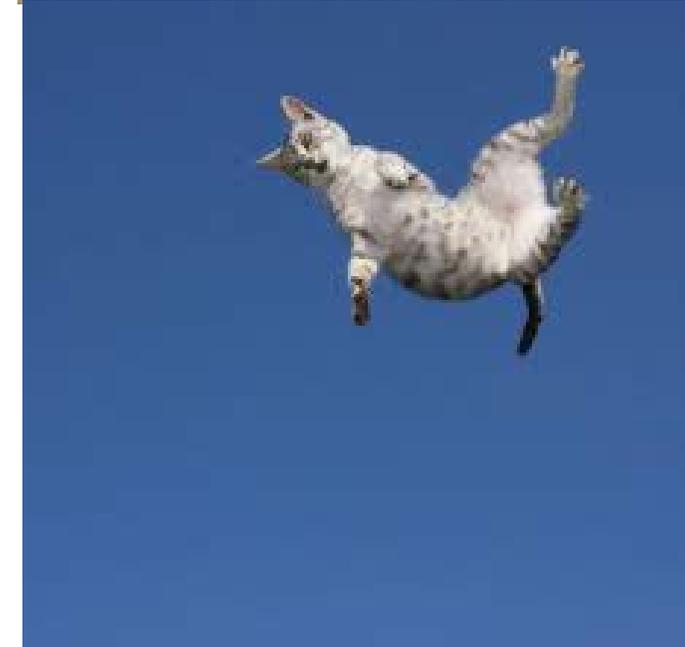
Fourth phase of **apologetic anti-revisionism**: John Hacker-Wright, Micah Lott, Martin Hähnel





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

Normative statements about the goodness or badness of an individual – and thus also the understanding of human virtues vices – can be derived from statements about the life form to which it belongs.





## 2.1 What is Aristotelian Naturalism?

"There is nothing to suggest that this structure is not present in the evaluations that are attributed to morality today. [...] If we ask [...] whether Geach's assertion was correct that human beings depend on virtues as bees depend on stings, the answer is 'yes'." (Philippa Foot)

"A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or to live well." (Rosalind Hursthouse)



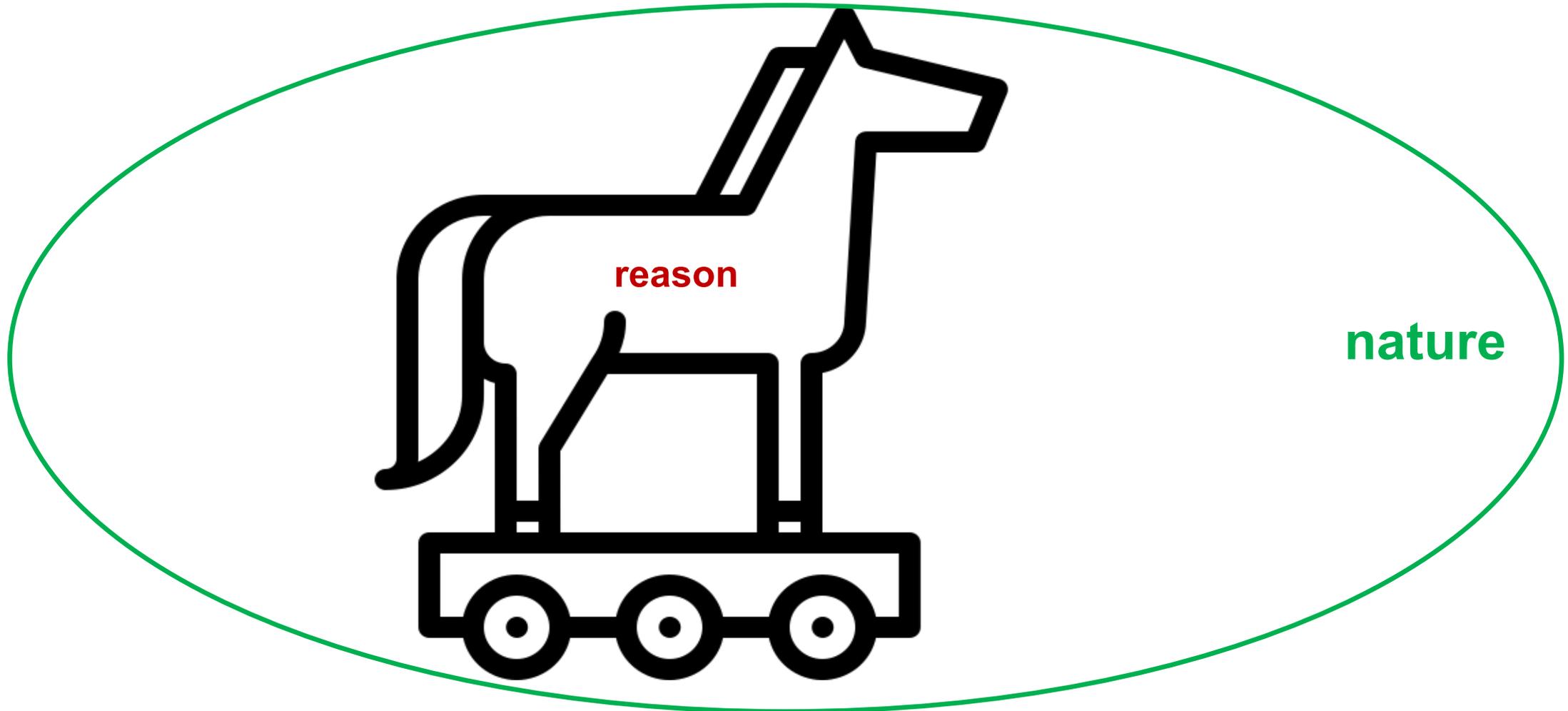
## 2.2 The Appeal to (Human) Nature

„Some say they [sc. Aristotelian naturalists] are not trying to offer naturalism at all, because they avowedly employed a moralized conception of human nature“ (Hursthouse 2013, 3571)

“But to understand ethical facts as grounded in facts about human nature where the facts about human nature are understood in a way that is already pervasively and substantively moralized no longer looks much like a form of naturalism” (Lenman 2014, § 4.1)

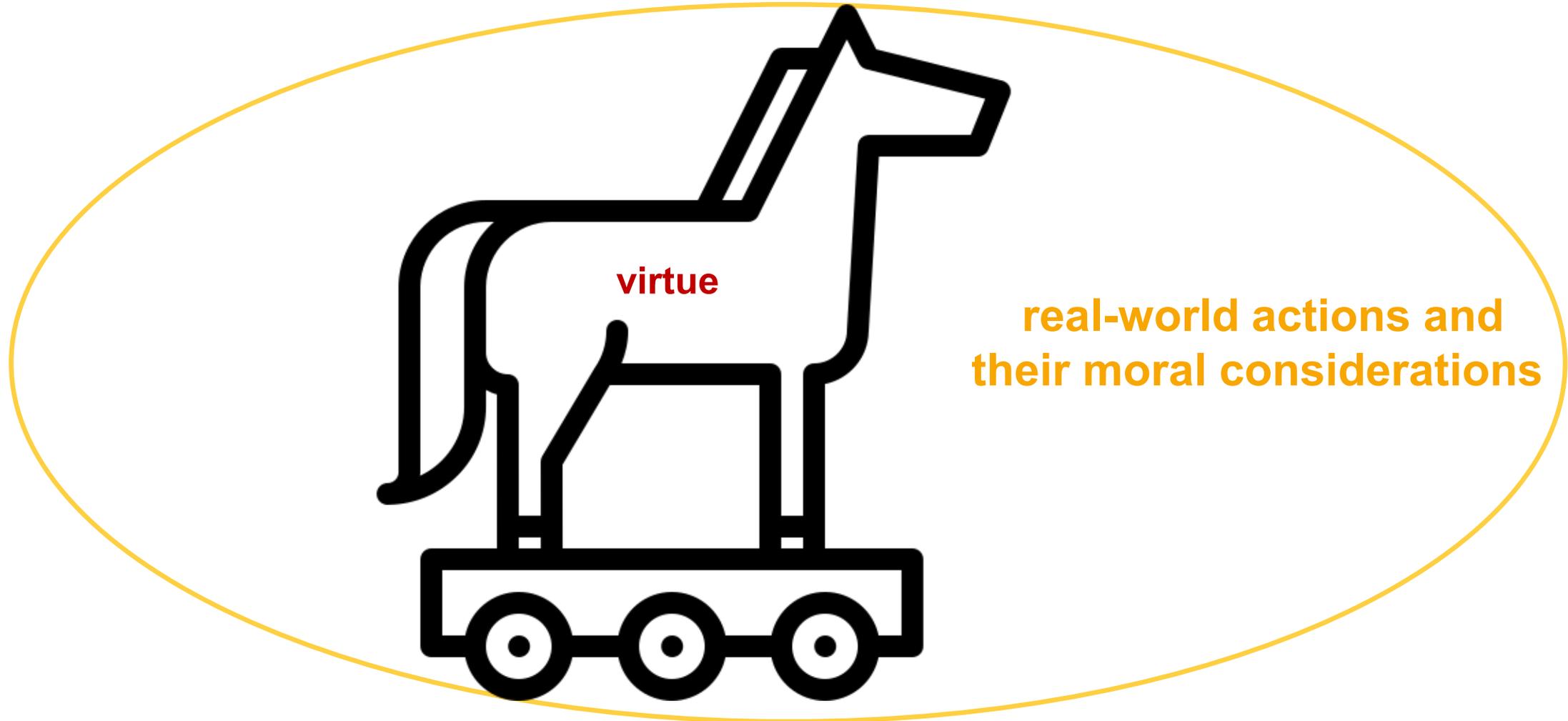


## 2.2 The Appeal to (Human) Nature





## 2.3 The Appeal to Virtues



## 2.4 A Footian Constraint

“I have been asked the very pertinent question as to where all this leaves disputes about substantial moral questions. Do I really believe that I have described a method for settling the matter? The proper reply is that in a way nothing is settled, but everything is left as it was. The account of vice as a natural defect merely gives a framework within which disputes are said to take place, and tries to get rid of some intruding philosophical theories and abstractions that tend to trip us up. There is nothing in the idea of natural normativity that should disturb the good work that many philosophers have recently done, for instance, on problems in medical ethics having to do.”

(Philippa Foot, Postscript of *Natural Goodness*)



## 2.5 How to understand and undermine the the Footian constraint

a) "Do not disturb" does not mean that Aristotelian Naturalism is not applicable to questions of applied ethics, especially of bioethics. My suggestion: Aristotelian Naturalism may be **methodological non-naturalistic** in its focus on human nature, but is nevertheless **epistemically and normatively (quasi-)naturalistic**.



## 2.5 How to understand and undermine the the Footian constraint

b) AN is a new attempt to make the **unity of nature and reason** plausible against the backdrop of the modern scientific worldview and thereby find a way of not deriving norms solely from self-legislating reason (Kant) or the goal of achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Utilitarianism).



## 2.5 How to understand and undermine the the Footian constraint

c) If the project described in b) were to be successful, this would have a major impact on the general understanding of applied ethics. Then “human nature” would only be an object of the natural sciences insofar as empirical inquiry renounces being able to explain what “human nature” *is*.



## 2.5 How to understand and undermine the the Footian constraint

d) Aristotelian Naturalism recurs, without naming it, to **a metaphysical concept of "human nature"** (many representatives of AN, including Foot, would reject this on grounds of intellectual honesty). In contrast to other naturalisms, AN is not based on a concept of nature free of normative content and does not see in the empirical sciences (e.g. biology) the first theoretical access that is appropriate for understanding the phenomenon of morality. The Aristotelian concept of function and Aristotelian essentialism are not rejected, but modified in the form of **the concept of life form.**



### 3. Summary and Open Questions

AN is open to

- ... be a new variant of classical natural law (Frey 2018)
- ... ground a folk-biological theory of organismic life (Moosavi 2020)
- ... instantiate a form of Kantian constitutivism (Hacker-Wright 2020)
- ... be transformed into a naturalism of second nature (“expansive naturalism” – McDowell 1998) or supernaturalism (Spaemann 2004, McPherson 2015)
- ... describe only a grammatical-linguistic project (Martin 2018)
- ... **provide the conceptual basis for transforming the idea of applied ethics**

## 3. Summary and Open Questions

To what extent AN could be the conceptual basis for transforming the idea of applied ethics?

1. Facts of human life are again placed at the centre of ethics.
2. Virtues play an increasingly prominent role. (for professional ethics, environmental ethics, deliberative democracy).
3. Ethics cannot do without a value-laden concept of human nature (enhancement, public health, sexual ethics).
4. Ethics should include aspects of the art of living (longitudinal view of moral agency vs. dramatic cases in applied ethics).
5. Ethics should be rather a matter of character education than of correct decision-making or ethical compliance.



Thank you for your attention!

