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**Ethics and the Meaning of ‘life’:**

1 – Introduction:

“Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” – Ecclesiastes

David Wiggins argued almost forty years ago that a question often referred to as the question of the meaning of life, however marginalized by the analytic tradition, is nevertheless central to ethical thinking.¹ As far as I know only few tried to follow Wiggins’ insight. The Ecclesiastes’ question very rarely, if ever, reverberates in contemporary works on ethics. I think, and hope to demonstrate in this paper, that the meaning of life is relevant to ethical thought: the good rational life is a life that is meaningful, a life that makes sense. And what is more, life can bear meaning, i.e., be good, only qua life.

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Contemporary meta-ethical debates strive and fail to provide an account of ethical judgments that are objective, justified and motivating. I begin presenting what I take to be the most promising meta-ethical direction, neo-Aristotelianism, and explain its attractions. I proceed to

¹ Wiggins, “Truth, invention, and the meaning of life”.

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show that the attempts to articulate this position have not been fully satisfying and argue that the dissatisfaction is due to its reliance on a wrong model for ethical judgment, namely, the model of secondary-quality judgments, which fails to account for the justification of ethical judgments (§1). I propose an alternative model based on the logic of ‘life’, namely, the form of animate nature (§2). I proceed to show how this form of thought about animate nature, offers a model for the understanding of the justification of ethical judgments, while preserving their objectivity and motivational force. The meta-ethical approach constituted by this model I name vitalism.

2 - Neo-Aristotelianism in Meta Ethics—its promise and its limitations:

Neo-Aristotelianism of the kind promoted by McDowell and Wiggins promised to overcome the apparent stalemate in the central meta-ethical debate between Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism.² It aspired to overcome the fundamental meta-ethical dichotomy between Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism. Generally speaking, each side of the debate is successful in grounding one part of what is taken to be the essential characterization of ethical judgments³ while failing to ground another. The two relevant characteristics are:

(1) The cognitivist or ‘objective’ nature of ethical judgments

When we judge ethically we do not take ourselves to merely express an inclination or a contingent preference; rather we take our judgment to be true.

(2) The motivating or efficacious nature of ethical judgments

³ I will use, throughout the paper the term ‘ethics’ rather than moral in order to capture a wider normative realm, one that is not limited to duties and obligations toward others but rather concerned with the widest sense of the good way to conduct one’s life. Cf. Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. Chapter 10.
When we judge ethically we don’t merely express our theoretical belief but make a ‘practical judgment,’ namely, a judgment that determines an action.

Put schematically, cognitivist theories, as their title attests, secure the cognitive or objective nature of ethical judgments but struggle to establish the motivating or action guiding nature of ethical judgments. Typically theories of this kind establish cognitivism, i.e., objectivity by developing their accounts independently of human psychology (desires). In opposition, non-cognitivist theories, by grounding their accounts in human psychology (desires), secure the action grounding nature of ethical judgments but at the cost of compromising the cognitive, objective nature of these judgments.  

Neo-Aristotelianism aspires to overcome this meta-ethical dichotomy and ground both the objectivity and motivating force of ethical judgments. To achieve this McDowell and Wiggins pursue two lines of argument. The first is aimed at breaking the link between the requirement that ethical judgments bear a truth value and their having to be subject independent; the second aims at establishing that ethical judgments, are motivating for a specific kind of agent whose capacity for practical judgment is excellent, namely, the virtuous agent.

A central problem in the McDowell-Wiggins approach turns on their use of a model of secondary quality judgments (e.g., color judgments) to establish the objective nature of ethical judgments. Like secondary quality judgments, they argue, ethical judgments are objective, i.e., they make a truth-claim, or have a standard of correctness. Both kinds of judgment are objective, although the facts to which they refer, their truth makers, are not subject-independent in the

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4 It must be noted that many philosophers form both sides of the debate do not consider their position deficient for not accounting for either the cognitive or the motivating nature of ethical judgments. Rather they hold that the characteristic they cannot account for is not a true characteristic.
following sense: they are dependent upon the form of the capacity of the judging individual. Thus, if one of us judges an object to be blue she is either right or wrong, i.e., her judgment has a truth-value. This is so even though color is a secondary quality, that is, dependent upon our (human) form of sensibility. According to neo-Aristotelianism, ethical judgments are similar to secondary quality judgments and both contrast with the scientific conception of judgments according to which judgments bear truth-values in virtue of facts independent of the form of the judging subject. The secondary quality model, then, is helpful since it effectively dissolves the apparent necessity of an understanding of objectivity according to which objectivity entails absolute independence from the form of the judging subject. Instead it suggests a notion of objectivity intelligible only in light of a certain form of subjectivity (like human perception).

However, this model is inadequate for ethics since unlike color judgments, ethical judgments are justifiable. Thus, while the question ‘why is x good/valuable?’ poses a demand upon the judger to provide reasons, justifications, for his judgment, the question ‘why is x blue?’, if intelligible, poses a demand not for justification but rather for a causal explanation (e.g. ‘y causes its blueness’). Moreover, it is not necessary for the judger to be able to provide this explanation: while in color judgments the judger’s ignorance with regard to the causal explanation does not render his original judgment deficient (for still, if x is blue his judgment is true), in ethical judgments it is constitutive of judging ‘x is good’ to be able to provide the reasons for which x is good, i.e., to be able to justify the judgments. The judging individual not

5 Note that the question is not “how do you know that x is blue”. The judger can provide justifications for this question but he cannot provide justifications, only causal explanations, for the judgment “why is x blue”.

6 Here is another way to put this point: the only way one can defend his color judgment is by appeal to the proper shape of his capacity to judge color and the absence of causal interruption. But in ethical judgment one is expected to be able to justify his judgment, not only to argue that there was no causal interruption.
only properly ‘perceives’ the value but comprehends its justification—only then we can say she has judged ethically.

It is, then, incumbent upon neo-Aristotelianism to account for the justifiability of ethical judgments, as they themselves acknowledge. It is here that these accounts are not satisfying. And it is not by coincidence that this is a particularly difficult point for neo-Aristotelianism, since in accounting for justifications one is in great risk of falling back into either of the two standard meta-ethical positions (cognitivism and non-cognitivism). The difficulty is to explain in what do justifications of ethical judgments consist. For, on the one hand there is the temptation, with non-cognitivism to ground these justifications in the psychology of the judging individual (e.g., ‘x is good because it facilitates what human beings typically desire’). This direction is tempting since after all neo-Aristotelians insist on the motivating nature of ethical judgments and justifying ethical judgments in desires account for their motivating force. But in order to sustain the objectivity of ethical judgment neo-Aristotelians ought to avoid this solution. Hence, there emerges the opposite cognitivist temptation, that is, to ground the justifications in pure reason. But with pure reason comes the problem of preserving the motivating nature of ethical judgments to which neo-Aristotelians are committed. It seems, then, that anything one suggests concerning the nature of justifications of ethical judgments puts one at risk of falling back to either cognitivism or non-cognitivism with their respective weaknesses.

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8 It is of course far from obvious that pure reason isn’t motivating, (cf. Korsgaard xxx). I cannot take up this issue here. Suffice it to say that if Kantians convincingly show that a person can ground her practical reasons in pure reason while sustaining judgment internalism their account adequately satisfies the desiderata I specify here, namely, that ethical judgments are objective, justifiable and motivating. Moreover, there is a sense in which my own suggestion here could be read as Kantian. I hope to say more about this in the future.
Hence, even though the secondary quality model proved effective in some respects, it is in itself an inadequate and misleading model for ethical judgments. In order to overcome the cognitive non-cognitive dichotomy, neo-Aristotelianism ought to provide an account of ethical judgments according to which they are not only motivating and objective but necessarily also justifiable. In the rest of this paper I am going to suggest that this could be achieved by replacing the unsatisfying model of secondary qualities with the model of life, a model I shall outline in the next section and that will meet our three desiderata for a neo-Aristotelian account:

1. Objectivity: ethical judgments are objective rather than subjective.
2. Motivating force: ethical judgments are motivating.
3. Justification: ethical judgments are not merely true or false, rather they are justified.

3 - Life:

In this section I will first outline the constitutive principles of life, or animate nature, and the fundamental characteristics of evaluative judgments concerning living beings. I will then show how these evaluative judgments, judgments I shall call vital-standards, satisfy our three desiderata.

Aristotle famously said that animate nature is distinguished from inanimate nature in that the principle of change of a living being is self-maintenance. Several points speak in favor of defining life by the principle of self-maintenance. To show how the Aristotelian principle can be grounded we begin with the observation that the nature of living beings is neither the form

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10 See Korsgaard in Self Constitution for an account that affirms this definition, albeit dogmatically.
of artifacts nor is it reducible to mechanism. Living beings are not artifacts: they are not produced for ends external to them, whether human or celestial. They are not merely mechanisms since this will allow no room for ends, and thereby render unintelligible the distinction between animate and inanimate nature.\textsuperscript{11} If animals aren’t reducible to mechanism and their end is internal (they aren’t artifacts) then it follows intuitively that they are their own ends: Their principle of change is in themselves. This seems to imply that they are essentially self-maintaining.

Let us note in addition that essentially the principles of change of living beings are justified in light of others, for each animate activity must be for the sake of another. To see why this is so it is necessary to observe a fundamental difference between teleological and mechanistic principles of change, a difference that arises not on the level of principles but rather on the level of the activities of the individuals that instantiate the principles. An inanimate individual, i.e., an individual that instantiates a mechanistic principle of change, in virtue of being the kind of thing it is, moves in full accordance with his principle of movement. It cannot at the same time instantiate that principle (a generic judgment) and move in a way that does not agree with that principle. By contrast an individual of an animate nature can at the same time instantiate a principle of change of the species to which it belongs and yet not move accordingly. This will be a case of a failure.\textsuperscript{12} For a mechanistic being whatever happens to it (in space and time) is according to its principles, but a vital being can either act successfully (by its own principles) or fail to so act (in this case it was moved by principles foreign to its nature that interfered).

\textsuperscript{11} This way of presenting the matter is similar to Kant’s discussion of the end of nature in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} critique (the analytic of the teleological power of judgment).

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Thompson \textit{Life and Action}, the first part “The Representation of Life”.
The introduction of the notion of success and failure raises a demand with regard to life, one that is not raised with regard to inanimate nature – the demand that principles have reasons, that they be justified. If we say that a living being failed to achieve x, we mean that accomplishing x, acting successfully, was in some way good for this living being. But then it must be possible to understand in what sense the accomplishment of x is good for this creature and why failing to is bad for it. Put another way, in order to understand what it is to perform activity x successfully, we must know what end it serves, and in the case of animate nature, that end is another activity of the same individual. Principles of this kind, that is, principles of nature that allow success and failure aren’t mere principles of change (like mechanistic principles) but rather vital-standards, and as such they are justifiable.

Hence, from the very idea of internal teleology we can conclude that vital nature, the nature of a living being, is articulated by vital-standards and the latter consist in justifications. This conclusion will lead us now to see that self-maintenance is the form of life in the most general sense. To see this we first need to get out of our way a prevalent but misleading idea. The idea is that the justification for any vital standard, that which justifies it as a standard, is survival (of the species and maybe also of the individual). Thus, according to this suggestion, the reason that growing branches is a standard for apple trees is that it is required for the “survival” of the species ‘apple trees’ (and maybe of this individual tree). The notion of survival appealed to here as one we can understand independently of any concrete species. But in any concrete case, the standard of survival of a given species rests on the nature of the species at issue, and this nature is given by the very judgments whose justification is supposed to be given by ‘survival’, that is vital-standards. Hence, in order to understand what survival means when ascribed to a species we first need to
understand the standards that make up the nature of this species, and hence survival cannot figure in the explanation of these standards—it cannot be the fundamental justification of vital-standards.

What justifies a given *vital-standard*, then, is not the abstract concept ‘survival’. Rather, a *vital-standard* is justified by other activities of the species that are furthered by the activities instantiating this *vital-standard*. Thus, ‘growing branches’ is a standard for apple trees because acting according to it further other activities of the species, e.g. growing leaves. Therefore, what justifies the normativity inherent in teleological activity, the normativity expressed in *vital judgments*, is reference to other activities of the same species; it is *in light* of these other activities that acting according to one’s nature (*vital-judgment*) is a success, and acting otherwise is a *failure*.

It is easily noticeable that what I have just suggested implies justifying one *vital-standard* by appealing to other *vital-standards*. We justified the standard ‘growing branches’ by the standard ‘growing leaves’. So how are we going to go about explaining this further *vital-standard*? The answer is that we have no way to go about justifying a *vital-standard* other than by appealing to further *vital-standards* of the species at stake. Every standard, then, is justified by the standards it furthers.\(^\text{13}\) the apple tree grows a trunk because it grows branches because it grows leaves and so on. To put the matter abstractly, what we get is a chain of generic judgments: S does P1 because S does P2 … because S does Pn (where S is a kind term).

Notice that what we get through this chain is not only an articulation of the justifications for each single generic judgment being a *vital-standard* but also a determination of the content of that standard. Each added judgment in the chain further specifies what would it be like to be

\(^{13}\text{This way of putting things is of course inaccurate insofar as standards do not further other standards—rather the activities subsumed under standards further each other. The proper formulation then would be: a standard is justified by another standard the instantiating activities of which are furthered by the activities instantiated by the first standard. For the sake of brevity I will stick to the inaccurate formulation.}\)
successful in pursuing the previous judgments. Thus, what it means to grow a trunk successfully, i.e., growing a trunk according to the standard, is specified by growing branches, growing leaves etc. Namely, an apple tree is growing branches successfully if they are formed in a way that facilitates all the activities for the sake of which branches are grown. Hence the chain of generic judgments both grounds standards and determines their content.

Finally, the chain must form a circle (or a system), namely, each standard is both justified by the rest of the standards and takes part in their justification. For surely, there cannot be a generic judgment in the chain that is not itself justified, since each of them is a standard for the success of the previous judgments and as we said before, a judgment is a standard only if it is justified. Therefore, it cannot be the case that the chain of standards consists of one ‘highest’ judgment with which all justifications come to an end. This means that the chain must be either linearly infinite or circular. The first option seems less favorable: infinite chain can be either actually infinite or infinite in capacity. An actual infinity of ends is not intelligible. If it is infinite in capacity than it carries with it the infelicitous consequence that none of the judgments in the chain are determined for there are always further judgments the actualization of which will further determine each judgment. Hence none of the judgments is an actually determined standard (for, in view of the growing chain, it may be shown that that which was considered successful is in fact a failure). Through this reductio argument we conclude that the chain is circular (or systematic).

We are now in a position to see that living kinds are indeed self-maintaining: Recall that the judgments we are concerned with are the principles of change, the nature, of a certain kind of being, a kind we characterized through the notion of internal teleology; and internal teleology is,

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14 This assertion needs to be justified which I tried to provide in another paper (see, my PE).
as we have seen, vital nature.\textsuperscript{15} We now saw that \textit{vital-standards} form a circular chain, a system of judgments, and hence we can see that the nature of living beings is nothing but the logical characterization of the notion of self-maintenance: each \textit{vital-standard} concerns an activity aimed at facilitating the rest of the activities referred to by the other \textit{vital-standards} in the system. In other words, each activity is aimed at \textit{self-maintaining} the other activities referred to by the totality of \textit{vital-standards} in the system. Moreover, the content of each \textit{vital-standard} is determined by all the other \textit{vital-standards}. We shall call this form of a system of judgments: \textit{an organic system of judgments}.\textsuperscript{16}

Equipped with the notion of vital nature as an \textit{organic system of judgments}, we can see how \textit{vital-standards} satisfy two of our desiderata, justifiability and objectivity. It is easy to see in what sense \textit{vital-standards} are justifiable, for, as we have just seen, a \textit{vital-standard} is a standard because it is \textit{for the sake} of the entire organic system of judgments. Moreover, this already provides us, at least to a certain extent, with a first sense in which \textit{vital-standards} are also objective. For they are not arbitrary but rather justified by the life form, the totality of vital-standards, to which they belong. Hence we have a standard of correctness for vital-standards: if they are not justified by the \textit{organic system of judgments} of the relevant life form, they are not \textit{vital-standards}.

Let me note two additional senses in which \textit{vital-standards} are objective: First, a \textit{vital-standard} is obviously objective insofar as we conceive of objectivity as contrasting particular-mind-dependent subjectivity. For according to our discussion, vital judgments hold regardless of any particular peculiarities or desires that instantiating individuals may have. Rather, \textit{vital-standards}

\textsuperscript{15} We saw that internal teleology is that which distinguishes vital nature from artifacts and mechanism.

\textsuperscript{16} We can see now that survival means nothing but the abstract concept of a successful realization of certain organic system
make the nature in virtue of which individual activities are possible at all. Second, vital standards are also objective in that they do not depend on the way we, thinking beings, may or may not conceive of the nature of a given individual.

We are still missing an account of how the second desideratum, motivating, is satisfied through the notion of organic system of judgments. In order to show how the requirement that evaluative judgments (vital-standards in this case) are motivating is also satisfied we need to introduce the category of animals, namely of desiring living beings; for it is hard to see how this requirement could possibly be satisfied by mere life, i.e., plants. Indeed, it is unclear what a ‘motivation’ would mean for a cabbage. There are some complications in the transformation from mere life to animal life. However, since the discussion of life is not the main purpose of this paper I shall avoid addressing any difficulty and state rather dogmatically how desire figures in the notion of life as construed above.

The notion of animal life doesn’t signify a nature, a life form, like Hyacinthus orientalis does. Rather, it signifies a category of life, life endowed with the capacity of desire. Specifically it signifies the manner in which ends are pursued by animals. While plans act according to their nature without any sort of representation, animals act according to their nature by representing the object the attaining or avoiding of which will be an accomplishment of an end. It needs to be stressed that the kinds of objects pursued by animals are not determined arbitrarily. Rather the kinds of desirable objects are determined by the nature of the desiring animal. Thus, unless anything goes wrong, a horse desires objects the kind of which figure in the organic system of judgments that constitutes its nature. The case where a desire is in tension with the animal’s nature indicates that something is wrong. We would say in this case that the animal desires something that is not good for it—it desires something that is against its nature. These cases are
cases where there is a problem with the animal. For example, it is injured, malnourished, suffers from a neurological disorder, etc.

Given this account of animals, we see that as long as everything is all right, i.e., if nothing interrupts, an animal desires objects the kind of which is determined by vital-standards. In other words, animals are motivated by representations corresponding to their vital-standards. We thereby showed that life understood as constituted by an organic system of judgments satisfies our three desiderata: objectivity, justifiability and judgment internality.

4 - Rational Life:

I want to suggest in the remaining of this paper that we should consider the notion of vital nature, as developed above, as an attractive model for thinking of normativity in human life. Vital nature, or simply ‘life’ provides us with the kind of objective, justifiable and motivating structure that is required by, but missing from, meta-ethical accounts and specifically from neo-Aristotelianism. Moreover, drawing on ‘life’ for our understanding of the human good life may also be significant as a way to understand philosophically our human vital nature and hence our relation to and place in the realm of life.

The most obvious reason to reject my suggestion is that we humans, in opposition to other animals, are not bound by ‘a nature’, that is, to any specific organic system of judgments of the kind we described above. This is manifested, for instance, in our historicality as well as in our capacity to step back and consider whether what we do or what we hold valuable is indeed valuable. Hence what we are left with, and I think this is Korsgaard’s line of thought, is nothing but our category of agency. To wit, rational animal, like mere animal, signifies a way of acting;
but while mere animals, like Giraffes, have a nature, rational do not. How then is my suggestion relevant to us human beings?

Surely, one cannot expect to simply carry over what is true for non-rational living beings to the case of rational animals. And indeed I’m not suggesting a simple reapplication of the logical structure of organic system of judgments to human beings. There are three significant differences to heed: First, rational living beings are conscious of their form of life while animals and plants are not. Second, for rational animals this form is acquired through habituation and its contents may be modified historically and culturally. Third, and this is a difference that will become clearer as we go along, while in the case of non-rational life the form of organic system of judgments applies to every individual, in the case of human life the form of organic system does not apply to every human individual but only to individuals with the capacity for the good human life. If my account, henceforward vitalism, is successful it will have to make sense of these differences.

Let me begin with a short and inevitably crude sketch of what is the ‘the good human form’ according to vitalism. For the sake of presentation we begin our characterization of the good human form with an internalist picture of human motivation: reasons for actions are always in relation to one’s motivations. One has a reason for an action C only if C-ing furthers a motivation of his.\footnote{Or any motivation that one would arrive at by means of sound deliberation.} We shall follow Bernard Williams’ nomenclature and call the totality of one’s motivations his subjective motivational set.\footnote{Williams. “Internal and external reasons”.} I am suggesting here that the good human form is one in which the motivational set bears the form of organic system of judgments. This means that each of one’s motivations furthers (or sustains) and is furthered (or sustained) by all the other motivations in one’s motivational set. Having this form the motivations aren’t mere
desires or pro-attitudes but rather, according to the picture I suggest, they are ethical judgments. Ethical judgments then are the rational form of vital-standards (the principle of a certain nature) as we characterized them in our discussion of non-rational life. Like vital-standards, each ethical judgment is understood as furthered by and as furthering all the other values and like vital standards the content of each ethical judgment is determined by all the other ethical judgment in the system. However, unlike mere vital-standards ethical judgments are conscious; namely, they don’t determine the agent as his principles of change, rather the agent is self-determined by being conscious of them as standards, as good, as values.

In order to show why my suggestion is plausible and attractive we must show that it satisfies our three desiderata:

1. **Objectivity**: ethical judgments are objective rather than subjective.
2. **Motivating force**: ethical judgments are motivating.
3. **Justification**: ethical judgments are not merely true or false, rather they are justified.

4.1 – **Motivating force and Justifiability**:

In this section I will consider together the second and the third desiderata above, namely, motivating force and justifiability. The first step is to explicate what is required from ethical judgments such that they are both motivating and justifiable. Once these requirements are in view I will show how the notion of the good human form as sketched above satisfies them.

The advantage of beginning my sketch of **vitalism** with the notion of *the subjective motivational set* is that we don’t lose sight of the important insight Williams tried to convey through this notion: that unless ethical judgments are tied to one’s motivational set, they cannot be motivating
for her. I take it to be a merit of an ethical account that it explicates the sense in which ethical judgments are motivating or practically potent. However, assigning the notion of subjective motivational set a central place in an ethical account also holds a threat: the threat of failing to distinguish between desires and ethical judgments. For if ethical judgments are simply motivations, namely, one’s motivational set is the set of his ethical judgments, there is no difference between desires and ethical judgments and then it’s hard to see in what sense this is an ethical account at all. In response to this threat, one may try to distinguish between ethical judgments and motivations but then the risk is that by distinguishing between them, ethical judgments lose their motivating force.

It may seem promising to argue that some of our motivations are ethical judgments and others are desires. Ethical judgment and desire, according to this proposal, are both species of the kind ‘motivation’. This is an attractive proposal since it both accounts for the motivating force of ethical judgments (for they are a species of motivation) and sustains the distinction between them and desires. In order to establish this sort of account we need to explain what distinguishes desires and ethical judgments, i.e., we need to provide the relevant differentiae. Sharon Street in her Humean constructivism attempts to provide a differentia in terms of the psychological attitude of the subject: x is an ethical judgment if the subject’s attitude is evaluative; it is a desire if the subject merely desires. The weakness of her account is that it seems that every x could be evaluated since she offers no positive account for what are the characteristics of x such that it could be evaluated. Accordingly, one may value (not merely desire) the infamous activities of

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19 Street does differentiate between desires and ethical judgments by noting a difference in their inferential relations: evaluating V entails that (1) activities that further V inherit the evaluation and (2) V ought to be consistent with other ethical judgments the agent has. Desires do not conform to (1) and (2). However, this account still does not tell us anything about the content of ethical judgment. They are ethical only in virtue of being a different psychological attitude that constitutes a certain inferential relationship with other psychological attitudes. Cf. Street’s “constitutivism about reasons”, pp.230-231.
radio-turning-on, mud drinking and the like. But while we might comprehend a case where an agent is afflicted by bizarre desires, it would be dumbfounding if it turns out that he also values these activities. While in the first case, that of desire, we may be concerned about the causal source of his strange motivation in the second we would wonder *why* he values mud drinking. This shows the close link we noted before between ethical judgments and justifications, a link that does not exist in the case of desires. If we explain *x* being a value for an agent merely by reference to the agent’s valuing *x*, as Street does, we miss this link and this leads to aforementioned absurd results. For that reason ethical judgments need to be justified. This suggests that ethical judgment and desire differ not only in terms of psychological attitude but because the first is justified and latter is not.

But now the problem is that it is hard to see what kind of justifications is proper to ethical judgments. Surely, theoretical justifications are irrelevant—We need justifications for why we hold something good, not true. It is also clear that we cannot justify an ethical judgment by showing that it is instrumental for a desire. However, it does not seem implausible that we justify an ethical judgment by appealing to its place in a system of ethical judgments. This suggestion already points to the direction of *vitalism* since according to it ethical judgments are justified by the fact they further other ethical judgments in a system.\(^\text{20}\)

However, even the requirement that one ethical judgment is justified by other ethical judgments in a system of judgments is insufficient. It is further required, as I will show now, that the justifications for an ethical judgment are internal to the judgment, that is, part of its content. The internality of the justifications is required because ethical judgments are acted upon consciously.

\(^{20}\) As in the case of my discussion of *vital-standards*, it is clear that ethical judgments do not actually further other judgments; rather activities instantiating these judgments further or sustain one another. I’m using the inaccurate expression for the sake of brevity.
as ethical, as good. That is, if one acts on the ethical judgment \((v)\), then he represents \((v)\) as good. But if the content of \((v)\), although justifiable, could be represented independently of its justifications then it follows that one could be motivated by \((v)\), i.e., judge \((v)\), without being conscious of it \emph{qua} ethical; for as we saw before \((v)\) is an ethical judgment \emph{only} if it is a \emph{justified} motivation. Hence, if justifications are merely external to \((v)\), being an ethical judgment is accidental to \((v)\) since it could be represented either as ethical or not.\(^{21}\)

It is required, then, that the content of the justification of an ethical judgment is internal to the content of an ethical judgment. Now we need to understand what could be meant by this internalist account and whether and how this account is achieved by the \emph{vitalist} conception. But before we turn to do this let’s take stock of the dialectics that led us to this final internalist requirement. 1) We first noted that if ethical judgments are to be motivating they must be tied to \emph{subjective motivational sets}; 2) At the same time, they must be distinguished from desires and the distinction needs to be related to the link between ethical judgments and justifications; 3) The kind of justifications suited for values are such that arise from the relations between ethical judgments. Finally (4), these justifications must be internal to the value, that is, part of its content.

How then \emph{vitalism} and its constitutive form, that of an \emph{organic system of judgments}, satisfies our requirements? Up to step 4, it is easy to see that it does. First, (1) according to \emph{vitalism}, ethical judgments are motivating simply since they are nothing but motivations of a certain form—the good human form. Now, having the good human form means that one’s subjective motivational

\(^{21}\) By analogy: think about being afraid of \(x\). It is a privative form of being afraid if we are being afraid without knowing why. One’s being afraid of \(x\) is at once being conscious of what makes \(x\) frightening, of the justification for the emotion. In the same way, what makes \((v)\) an ethical judgment is that it consists of its justifications. If internality of justifications is overlooked we soon find ourselves with a difficulty to differentiate between acting merely according to what is good and from what is good.
set bears the form of an organic system of judgments; this means that each ethical judgment furthers all the other ethical judgments and is furthered by them. This is the source of the justifications of ethical judgments—they are justified by appeal to the rest of the judgments in an organic system of ethical judgments. This satisfies requirements (2) and (3). It is harder to show how the fourth requirement, i.e., that justifications are internal to the value, is satisfied; indeed it is hard to understand what its satisfaction could look like.

One of the most striking characteristics of the organic system of judgments model provides an answer to this difficulty. Recall that in an organic system of judgments each judgment doesn’t only refer to an activity that furthers other activities in a system. The judgments of the system also determine each other. The content of each judgment then reflects the contents of the rest of the judgments in the system. This is, if you will, the monadic nature of judgments within a system of vital-judgments. Each of them is both distinct from the whole and reflects, from its own position, the whole.\(^{22}\) Therefore, the justifications for each vital-standard are not external to it but rather they are reflected in its content. Thus, the vital-judgment ‘horses chew’ already consists of what it would mean for a horse to chew in the right way and what this means is: to chew in the way that furthers all the other equine activities. Notice that this monadic quality of the content of vital-standards is not something added on top of a more fundamental conception of their content. ‘Horses chew’ means the right way for horses to chew—this is what chewing means for horses. A less determined conception of chewing is already a case of abstraction.\(^{23}\)

Like vital-standards, ethical judgments also don’t only further and sustain each other; they also determine each other. The content of each ethical judgment reflects in its own way the system of

\(^{22}\) The limits of the monadic metaphor should be clear for as opposed to monads judgments are forms of activities and these activities have causal effect on each other, while monads don’t.

\(^{23}\) More on this see Ford’s “Action and Generality”.
ethical judgments in its entirety, i.e., the well-formed subjective motivational set. Moreover, and here the point becomes relevant to the challenge at hand, being self-conscious beings, rational beings are not only determined by their ethical judgments rather they are determined by being conscious of their judgments, of their content. Hence, one acts on an ethical judgment by being conscious of it as furthering or sustaining one’s totality of ethical judgments. The ethical judgment upon which one acts, then, is not justified externally to its content or additively, but rather its content consists of its justifications. This characteristic of ethical judgments is manifested in that we pursue an ethical judgment, qua ethical judgment, in the right way and this phrase (that harkens back to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean) refers to the form the judgments bear by virtue of their reference to the totality of ethical judgments.

Thereby we have shown that the two desiderata discussed in this section, justifiability and motivating force, are satisfied by vitalism. To put the matter concisely, to understand the way in which the good human form satisfies these desiderata we need only to look at one’s practical life from the perspective of a distinction I cannot fully articulate here, the distinction between matter and form: ethical judgments viewed as matter are motivating, since they are motivations in one’s motivational set; they are justified by their bearing or reflecting the form of an organic system of judgments. It is important not to lose sight of these two perspectives being only perspectives, that is, an ethical judgment is one in being but can be considered from the material or formal perspective.

Articulating the justifiability (or better, the rationality) of ethical judgments and their motivational force in terms of hylomorphism allows an insight into the relation between the concept desire and that of ethical judgment. Matter has potentialities actualized by its form: bronze has the potentiality to be a statue, potentiality actualized by the form of the statue; lacking
this form it is mere bronze. Likewise, motivations have the potentiality to be ethical judgments, a potentiality actualized by the form of *organic system of judgments*. Bearing this form motivations are actually ethical judgments. Lacking this form they are mere motivations, i.e., desires.\(^{24}\)

4.2 - Objectivity:

We saw that in non-rational living beings the life form, the species, renders vital-standards (judgments in an *organic system of judgments*) objective. These standards, we saw, are considered objective by contrast to at least two senses of ‘subjective judgments’: They don’t depend on the peculiarities or desires of the acting individual and they do not depend on their being conceived by any thinking individual. Now clearly, without significant modifications a system of ethical judgments cannot be contrasted to subjectivity in any of these senses. For it seems to depend on the peculiarities of an individual since it is the form of a subjective motivational set, and it does depend on an individual who conceives this form, for judgments are conscious. The third sense of objectivity noted in relation to non-rational vital-standards transpires form the fact that they are justified. In this sense ethical judgments are also objective because as we showed in the previous section, they are internally justified. The task in this section is to bring out a further, albeit related, sense in which values are objective.

Ethical judgments, according to the suggested *vitalism* are objective also because they provide us with a standard of correctness in the following sense. Ethical judgments are constitutively judgments within an organic system of ethical judgments and I want to suggest that reflecting the form of a system is the standard of correctness of ethical judgments. This allows judging putative

\(^{24}\) This of course can come in degrees: from perfect from to a lack of from.
ethical statements as right or wrong, for if a motivational judgment does not reflect the form of an organic system of judgments it is not an ethical judgment, but rather a desire. What makes an ethical judgment is not only that the subject takes it to be one (as Street holds) but rather the organic form of one’s motivational set. The important difference is that while Street’s conception of ethical judgments is subjective through and through—it depends merely on psychological attitudes of individuals—the vitalistic conception does allow us to consider objectively ethical judgments. Allowing ourselves again to the form-matter framework we can say that abstracting from the matter of one’s motivational set, that is, from one’s being motivated by whatever the set consists of, brings out the logical form that makes these motivations a system of ethical judgments. To the extent that one’s motivational set fails to bear this form, it is objectively true that he does not have the capacity to judge ethically in the fullest sense. By contrast, when someone judges ethically she does so objectively—not just because she takes her desires to be ethical judgments.25

Some might find the kind of objectivity I have argued for less than satisfying since it is not entirely independent of the existence of persons and their (in some sense) contingent motivations. In this connection let us recall that we began our reflection with noting the importance of the neo-Aristotelian non-absolute conception of objectivity. According to this conception objectivity understood independently of the form of the judging individual is both unattainable and inappropriate to the subject matter at hand, namely, ethics. Neo-Aristotelianism, mainly in Wiggins’ writing, aimed at carving out a notion of objectivity proper to ethics, one he

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25 Note that vitalism also satisfies one of the most well known ways to put the objectivity requirement: Many take one of Kant’s main insights to be that by willing the good we are not determined by our inclinations. Vitalism argues the same because, by definition, where one acts from ethical judgments one is not determined by his desires, which in this context may similarly be called inclinations.
named ‘underdetermined cognitivism’. I noted earlier that Wiggins’ and McDowell’s favored secondary quality model did not serve well their purpose and I hope to have convinced the reader that the model of vitalism provides what was lacking in the secondary quality one. This is since ‘life’ doesn’t only represent a form of non-absolute objectivity but also demystifies the sense in which ethical judgments are justifiable, a sense that remained largely unexplained by neo-Aristotelian accounts.

5 - The Rogue and the Villain: Is Vitalism Sufficient?

In the previous section I showed that vitalism satisfies our desiderata since it explains how ethical judgments are objective, justified and motivating. However, since the discussion was very abstract it may raise the worry that ethical judgments as portrayed by vitalism have little to do with what and how we in fact evaluate (beyond the established points of motivating force, justifiability and objectivity). Specifically, I think that one might, and should, have the two following worries: (1) Isn’t the vitalist conception of the human good after all external rather than internal in the sense that he who has no ethical judgments, the rogue, has no reason to care about it or even to acknowledge it? (2) Is vitalism sufficient for the explanation of ethical judgments? Isn’t it possible that a truly vicious person, the villain, will manifest the form of organic system of judgments? The first worry I call the ‘rogue problem’ and the second the problem of ‘the well formed villain.’ I cannot here provide a satisfying treatment of either of these two weighty problems. What I intend to do is to briefly sketch a response to the ‘rogue problem’. I will leave the well-formed villain for another occasion.

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26 Wiggins, “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life”.

**Vitalism**, as we saw, is internal in the sense that ethical judgments are motivating, and hence the virtuous man is motivated by what is ethical. However, we have not shown that the *rogue*, she whose motivational set isn’t organically formed, should care about what is ethical at all. But it is a merit of an ethical account, rather than its disadvantage, that it does not deny that the *rogue* is not motivated by ethical judgments. Nevertheless, if the *rogue* has no relation whatsoever to the notion of the ‘good life’ suggested by *vitalism* this seems like a problem, because it undermines the evaluative sense of ‘good life’; for the *rogue* might claim that the good life is not good for him, and perhaps—not good at all, just different from his (he may even claim that his life is better). Hence it is important to show that even for the rogue there is a sense in which the virtuous’ life is better.

In order to show this we need to introduce the following distinction: the *rogue*, like everybody else, is motivated to act only according to his motivational set and in that sense he has no reasons to act like the virtuous person. However, I will proceed now to argue that he does have reason to *be* like the virtuous, to have his form, the good form. First, the *rogue*, like everybody else, would prefer his desires/motivations to be satisfied and his actions to succeed rather than fail. I take this to be part of what it is to desire and to act. The good human form is such that one’s motivations further and sustain each other and hence by acting on each motivation one furthers and sustains the others as well. In that sense even the *rogue* must agree that it is better to have this form than a motivational set where satisfaction of each motivation does not further others, let alone one in which motivations are in conflict. Second, the good human form is such that more motivations are satisfied not merely instrumentally but by means of pursuing other motivations. This cannot be attained where one’s motivations lack this form, and presumably even from the point of view
of the rogue it would be better could he spend less of his efforts and time on activities that have no internal value for him.\(^{27}\)

From these points of view, the rogue, although not motivated by the values of the virtuous person can still appreciate that the form of the virtuous person’s motivational set is better than his own. In this limited sense he has a reason to be virtuous. However, it is important to note that even if the rogue notices the advantage in having the good human form, it is not entirely up to him to have one. To become virtuous is not a reason for action, one does not have motivations by choice; i.e., revising one’s motivations is not an action (though it is perhaps achieved through actions—namely those that constitute habituation). The only sense we might give to the rogue’s understanding of the advantage of virtuous life is that if he were given the choice to be converted by miracle to virtuous life (and this means losing his motivations), he would opt for it.\(^{28}\) Or, if that seems too strong, I think it should be uncontroversial that the rogue would prefer that his own motivations would bear the organic form.

In lieu of summary let me conclude by saying a few words on what transpires from our discussion of vitalism in relation to my opening remarks on Koheleth and the meaning of life. As we have seen life is a kind of nature. This nature, vital nature, has the form of an organic system of judgments according to which each activity is justified and determined by the whole system of judgments that constitutes the agent’s nature. In rational vital nature action is self-conscious and hence when an action is well formed, namely when it is determined by an ethical judgment, it is

\(^{27}\) In addition to these two points, it may be argued that the rogue, as a rational agent, is concerned about matters such as his freedom and justifications for his actions, or alternatively, about not being a slave of his passions. Even though I did not address the issue of freedom, I think it is rather easy to see how the good human form according to vitalism characterizes fully justified and free life.

\(^{28}\) This is the sense McDowell’s suggestion of converting to the virtuous person is interpreted according to vitalism. See, McDowell. “Might There Be External Reasons?” In World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams, edited by J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
consciously justified by the totality of an organic system of ethical judgments. The ethical action, then, is justified and saying this is just saying that it makes sense. The one whose life is well-formed acts for ends that make sense for him—they are meaningful for him. This is the meaning, and the only meaning, rational ‘life’ can have. Meaningful life then is the well-formed rational life; it is a form of life, not a specific substantive content attainable through pure reason or intuition. This is the sense in which the question of the meaning of life is relevant to the question of ethics—namely, the questions one and the same: the question of the good life. The meaningful life, according to vitalism, is the good life, the fully justified life.