Living With Each Other: Dorothy Emmet on Social Roles and Moral Facts

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Abstract:

In 1966, Dorothy Emmet published *Rules, Roles and Relations,* in which she argues that moral philosophy could stand to learn a lot by drawing on sociological research. In this paper. I will argue that *Rules, Roles and Relations* is deserving of much wider scholarly attention, especially in light of an explosion of scholarship focusing on contemporaries of Emmet such as Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Iris Murdoch (the 'Wartime Quartet').

Emmet, unlike the Quartet, has received a very minimal amount of scholarly attention. Yet, like the Quartet, Emmet rejects the Fact-Value Distinction, endorses what can be characterised as an 'Aristotelian' approach to ethics, and defends a form of moral cognitivism. What's more, her approach to these issues is novel (in drawing on sociological research) and thus enrichens our understanding of how certain philosophers in twentieth century Britain sought to push back against dominant analytic approaches to moral theorising.

Key words: Dorothy Emmet, meta-ethics, naturalism, sociology, cognitivism

0. Introduction

In 1966, Dorothy Emmet published *Rules, Roles and Relations,*[1] in which she argues that moral philosophy could stand to learn a lot by drawing on the insights of sociologists (Emmet herself collaborated with sociologists throughout her career). Both moral philosophers and sociologists, she argues, take as their starting point "the fact that people have to live with each other" (RRR, 5). While their methods diverge, both disciplines are engaged in the project of understanding that fact and its implications. In this paper. I will argue that *Rules, Roles and Relations* is highly significant and deserving of much wider scholarly attention, especially in

[1] Henceforth referred to as 'RRR'.

light of an explosion of scholarship focusing on contemporaries of Emmet's such as Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Iris Murdoch (the so-called 'Wartime Quartet').[2] Scholarship on these figures has demonstrated the significant role they played in the history of twentieth century (British) moral philosophy – in particular, their rejection of the Fact-Value Distinction, revival of an Aristotelian form of ethics, and defence of cognitivism about moral facts. Emmet, unlike the Quartet, has received only a very minimal amount of scholarly attention.[3] Her moral philosophy has received even less; and there is no sustained scholarly discussion of *Rules, Roles, and Relations.* Yet, Emmet was a near-contemporary of these figures and, in RRR*,* also rejects the Fact-Value Distinction, endorses what (I will argue) can be characterised as an 'Aristotelian' approach to ethics, and defends a form of moral cognitivism.[4] What's more, as I will demonstrate, her approach to these issues is novel (especially in drawing on sociological research) and thus enrichens our understanding of how certain philosophers in twentieth century Britain sought to push back against dominant analytic approaches to moral theorising. I will say a little more about these issues before proceeding.

Rules, Roles and Relations contains an innovative attempt to reject the Fact-Value distinction at a time when many analytic moral philosophers in Britain upheld it. Perhaps, most famously, the Fact-Value Distinction was presented in A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, published in 1936 (Ayer was himself drawing on the work of the logical positivists and the Vienna Circle). Emmet argues against the distinction, by drawing on the insights of sociological research and, specifically, the notion of social roles. Emmet's claim is that there are facts about our social roles – roles like being a mother, a sister, a friend, a teacher, and a member of parliament – that have norms of (appropriate and inappropriate) behaviour built into them. Consequently, in Emmet's words, they have "a foot in both camps, that of fact and of value" (RRR, 41). Emmet's argument is built upon her engagement with sociological research, meaning that her response to the Fact-Value distinction in *Rules, Roles and Relations*

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[2] See, in particular, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022, and Lipscomb 2021.

[3] Exceptions include Turner 2014, who discusses Emmet in connection with the sociologist Robert Merton, West 2023, who examines Emmet's metaphysics in her 1945 text *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking,* Wiseman 2024, who provides an account of Emmet's wider philosophical methodology, and Blum forthcoming, who connects Emmet's moral philosophy to that of Foot and Murdoch.

[4] Emmet corresponded with Murdoch (Wiseman 2024, 248) and dedicated *The Role of the Unrealisable* to her. She also knew Midgley and appears in Midgley's memoir *The Owl of Minerva* (Midgley 2005, 174).

constitutes what, in contemporary parlance, we would call 'interdisciplinary' and 'applied' moral philosophy.

On the back of her rejection of the Fact-Value Distinction, Emmet defends a unique form of *cognitivism* about moral facts. Unlike many philosophers in Britain in the early- to mid-twentieth century, Emmet argues that there *are* moral facts – propositions about how we ought to behave that have a truth value. However, she is neither an intuitionist (or non-naturalist) about moral facts in the vein of G. E. Moore and other moralists influenced by him, nor is she an (Aristotelian) naturalist about moral facts like subsequent thinkers such as Philippa Foot. In other words, Emmet does not argue that moral facts are 'supernatural' – i.e., *sui generis* truths that are not grounded in or derived from other natural facts – nor does she think they are facts about (or facts *grounded in* further facts about) human nature. Instead, Emmet argues that moral facts depend upon facts about our *social roles.* I will say more about how Emmet construes social roles in what follows, but briefly her idea is that we all inhabit certain roles within a social context. These social roles are often tacitly accepted or assumed rather than explicitly accepted or recognised but, according to Emmet, they exist nonetheless. And what is important is that these roles have norms of behaviour built into them. To be someone's parent, for example, *just is* for there to be certain norms that your behaviour does or does not conform to. Given the existence of social roles and given that facts about our social roles are also facts about *how we ought to behave,* Emmet argues that the Fact-Value Distinction cannot be coherently upheld.[5] Emmet defends a version of cognitivism, then, in which moral facts are grounded not in what we might think of as deeper, metaphysical facts (either non-natural facts or facts about human nature) but in empirical facts that can be discerned and understood via *sociological* research. For that reason (as I will argue in section two), Emmet's cognitivism can be fruitfully compared with that of Mary Midgley who argues that moral facts are grounded in *ethological* facts about human and animal behaviour.[6]

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section one, I introduce Emmet's moral philosophy in *Rules, Roles and Relations;* specifically, her views on how sociological research can (and should) inform moral theorising and her account of the connection between social

[5] Readers familiar with Searle's 'How to Derive "Ought" from "Is"' (Searle 1964) may notice similarities with his claims about 'institutional facts'. I will say more about these similarities in section two.

[6] I have in mind Midgley's views as espoused in *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (1978). See Robson 2024 and Whyman forthcoming for discussion of Midgley's connection to the (neo-Aristotelian) ethical naturalist tradition.

roles and moral facts. I also provide a brief account of the background to Emmet's moral philosophy because it helps us to understand her opposition to much of the (analytic) moral philosophy that was going on around her. In section two, I make the case for thinking that Emmet is defending a form of cognitivism about moral facts and compare the cognitivist position she defends with that of other cognitivists; specifically, Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley. Finally, in section three, I introduce an objection to Emmet's position: namely, that it leads to moral relativism: since moral facts are grounded in social facts, and social facts exist only in a social context, it seems that moral facts are socially relative. I consider Emmet's response to this objection and demonstrate that it draws her closer to some of her contemporaries and later thinkers; specifically, neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalists who maintain that there is a set of (biological) needs shared across humanity that any moral theory, or (in Aristotelian terms) 'way of living', should account for. I end the paper with a short Appendix (intended to serve as a call for future scholarship) that draws connections between Emmet and her one-time student Alasdair MacIntyre.

1. Moral Philosophy in the Real World

Emmet was the second woman in Britain to be appointed to a Professorship in Philosophy, in 1946 at the University of Manchester – a philosophy department which she was said to have "built it up from a handful of students and a single lecturer to 400 students and a strong and varied staff."[7] She was also, from 1946 until 1961, the only woman in Britain to be a Professor of Philosophy, since Susan Stebbing (the first woman to hold the position) died in 1943.[8]

From the very beginning of her career in philosophy, Emmet was dissatisfied with the approach of mainstream analytic moral philosophers and did not share their vision of where the value of moral philosophy lies. These early views seem clearly to have shaped her approach to moral philosophy in *Rules, Roles and Relations.* In her 1996 memoir, *Philosophers and Friends: Reminiscences on Seventy Years in Philosophy*, Emmet explains that as a student in Oxford in the 1920s, she was unimpressed and disillusioned by the dominant approach to moral theorising going on around her. For example, with regard to the 'intuitionist' philosophers in

[7] https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/sep/25/guardianobituaries.books

[8] Ruth Lydia Saw, a former student of Stebbing, was made a Professor of Philosophy at Bedford College in 1961.

Oxford, W. D. Ross and H. A. Pritchard, who were both influenced by Moore's non-naturalist approach to ethics, she explains that to her younger self "[they] seemed to live in a very different world from that of moral problems as they actually impinged on us" (Emmet 1996, 7).[9] In the summer of 1926, Emmet volunteered to run philosophy classes for Welsh miners in the Rhondda Valley who were taking part in the General Strike against the Conservative Government. She taught Plato's *Republic* to these miners, and it became clear to her that, despite writing 2000 years ago in ancient Greece, Plato *had* managed to address moral problems "as they actually impinged" on ordinary people with real-world problems in the 20th century. This experience, Emmet explains, "made me more convinced that I must try to do philosophy" (Emmet 1996, 32). The impact of these early experiences can be clearly felt in *Rules, Roles and Relations,* written forty years later.

In the preface to the book, Emmet sets out her stall:

> I have written because I believe that moral philosophers and sociologists can have things of mutual relevance to say to each other. Also I have an impression that, while many of our most pressing moral problems arise out of the fact that we have to live increasingly in big organizations, most moral philosophy is still written in a vein which assumes that morality is matter of face-to-face personal relations. (RRR, ix)

Emmet's point is that moral philosophy that concerns itself exclusively with "face-to-face personal relations" – i.e., interactions between neatly detached moral agents – will inevitably fail to help us understand real world problems that arise from our living in "big organizations"; societal structures made up of multiple "criss-crossing relationships" (RRR, 125). In other words, moral philosophers are too simplistic in their accounts of how our (moral) interactions with one another work. Many of our actions and interactions with one another, within a society, are *not* face-to-face. For instance, we can *wrong* one another by being part of an institution that fails to live up to certain responsibilities it has to groups or individuals (e.g., a government that doesn't keep its manifesto promises). Or we can wrong one another by failing to act in accordance with the expectations that come with the social *roles* that we stand in to one another – for instance, if we fail to live up to the expectations that come with being a parent or a sibling

[9] Emmet may have been influenced in this view by her tutor A. D. Lindsay who, she explains, felt that moral philosophy in Oxford had become too specialist (Emmet 1996, 7). A similar sentiment can also be seen in the work of Emmet's student, Alasdair MacIntyre (e.g., MacIntyre 2007, xvii).

in a given society.[10] What good is it to learn, hypothetically, how these idealised agents ought to be behave, when their circumstances and interactions are categorically different to our own?

Emmet may have decided early on, after discussing Plato with the Welsh miners, that (analytic) moral philosophy was too abstract. But her position in the preface to *Rules, Roles and Relations* is also shaped by her engagement with sociological research. As she explains in her memoir, "My main intellectual concern in the 1950s and 1960s was in the philosophy of the Social Sciences" (Emmet 1996, 88). Emmet's influences were figures who are little known in the contemporary analytic tradition, including Herbert Hart, an Oxford philosopher of law, and R. R. Maret, "a philosopher turned anthropologist" (Emmet 1996, 88-89).[11] More locally, in Manchester, as Rachael Wiseman explains, Emmet also integrated herself into the "newly established Department of Social Anthropology" (Wiseman 2024, 270). The most significant influence on Emmet in this period was Robert Merton, the Giddings Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. Merton's highly influential work in sociology (such as his 1949 collection of essays *Social Theory and Social Structure*) focused on the structural relations of societies and on understanding, through empirical means, social roles and their significance. Emmet was part of a seminar led by Merton in Columbia in 1960 and, she explains, "[*Rules, Roles and Relations*] owes a great deal to discussions with [him]" (Emmet 1996, 94).[12]

What these figures who influenced Emmet have in common is that they never *just* worked in one discipline; they all engaged in interdisciplinary study, applying (e.g.,) the methods of philosophy in law or sociology, or vice versa. This aligned closely with Emmet's own view that good philosophical enquiry must work in tandem with other fields.[13] In *Rules,*

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[10] As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, even Iris Murdoch might be accused of making the mistake that Emmet is pointing out here, in 'The Idea of Perfection'. There, Murdoch imagines a mother-in-law, 'M', re-assessing her opinion of her daughter-in-law, 'D'. Murdoch considers the ways that we might describe (or judge) M's change of opinion – e.g., as "just" or "intelligent" (Murdoch 2014, 18). But in her account of how we might (morally) evaluate M's change of mind, Murdoch does not (or at least does not seem to, directly) take into account the fact that M stands in a certain social relation to D, namely, that of being D's mother-in-law. *That,* too, Emmet might have argued, should play a role in how we evaluate D's change of mind.

[11] For an intellectual biography of Hart, see Lacey 2006.

[12] For more details on Merton and Emmet, see Turner 2014.

[13] Emmet similarly advocates for inter- and cross-disciplinary research in her 1945 text *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking.* There, she argues that metaphysicians should pay attention to the insights of physicists and theologians, since all three disciplines are (broadly speaking) concerned with understanding the nature of the world around us (see West 2024, 2, 8; Wiseman 2024, 265-66).

Roles and Relations, Emmet's aim is to present a model of moral philosophy working alongside sociology – and to advocate the benefits of this approach. As Peter Winch (a philosopher of social science at Birkbeck College) wrote in an early review of the book: "[*Rules, Roles and Relations*] surveys the border country between moral philosophy and the philosophy of sociology and tries to show how the work of the moral philosopher and of the sociologist can be reciprocally illuminating" (Winch 1967, 11).[14]

As noted at the outset, Emmet's rationale for bringing sociology into contact with moral philosophy is that both disciplines share a common starting point: "the fact that people have to live with each other" (RRR, 5). Both disciplines are aimed at addressing questions that arise about how people go about doing so. Early in the text, Emmet anticipates a prima facie objection to the move from sociological insights to moral judgements. It is worth pausing to consider how she responds to this concern, since her approach here sets the tone for much of the discussion to come. Emmet acknowledges that sociologists are engaged in an empirical or descriptive project: that of describing the "moral rules and attitudes people happen to have in a particular society" (RRR, 2). This is different to the aims of moral philosophy which are *normative.* What we want from a moral theory is not just a set of descriptive claims about how we do act, but an account – perhaps a set of principles or maxims – of how we ought to. It is understandable that Emmet pre-empts this concern, given the prevalence of the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy' (with its roots in Moore and Hume); that is, the idea that it is a mistake to think that empirical facts about how we *do* in fact behave might inform us about how we *ought to.*

In response to this kind of concern, Emmet claims that to think of descriptive and normative claims as neatly detached in this way is too simplistic an image of the relation between them. In other words, her suggestion is that it is actually the naturalistic fallacy – specifically, its denial of the move from descriptive claims to normative claims – that is a simplification. Why? Because, as it happens, we do in fact often need to know something about what *is* the case in order to arrive at a judgement about what ought to be done.

[14] Winch himself had written about the connection between philosophy and social science in his 1958 text *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy.*

Emmet argues that a proper understanding of a given 'situation' is crucial to determining how we ought to behave.[15] In her own words,

> [W]hatever ought to be done ought to be done in a situation, and we like to think that any way of better understanding 'situations' and their facts should be some help or relevance in making moral decisions. (RRR, 3)

We can already see here that Emmet is attempting to re-orientate moral theorising in such a way that our discussions line up with the circumstances that moral judgements are really made in. Whenever (in the real world) we find ourselves considering the question 'What I ought I to do?' we do so with regard to a specific situation. Outside of a philosophy classroom, it makes little sense – or, at least, it is of little help – to ask 'What ought I to do *in general?'* What we want to know is what I ought to do *here* and *now.* Given that "whatever ought to be done ought to be done *in a situation*", Emmet maintains (RRR, 3, my emphasis), it makes sense to suggest that a better understanding of those situations "and their facts" should be of relevance to our moral decision-making.[16]

The facts that Emmet has in mind here are social facts; facts about the various roles that each of us plays within a society and our social relationships, and the normative expectations that are built into them. In *Rules, Roles and Relations,* Emmet characterises a role as "a capacity in which someone acts in relation to others" (RRR, 13). Elsewhere, she also characterises a role as "carrying out a function in an institutional setting" (Emmet 1996, 94). As examples of social roles, Emmet has in mind familial roles, such as being a mother, sister, or spouse, but also roles within wider societal institutions. 'Being a teacher' and 'being a student' are social roles, as are 'being a member of parliament' and 'being a member of a political constituency', or 'being a police officer' or 'being a doctor'. While these roles differ in various ways,

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[15] We might think of Emmet as anticipating certain aspects of moral 'particularism' here. In the words of Jonathan Dancy, particularism is the view that "there are no defensible moral principles, that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases, and that the morally perfect person should not be conceived as the person of principle" (Dancy 2017).

[16] In her own work on moral and social philosophy, written a little earlier than RRR, Susan Stebbing also emphasises that a proper understanding of particular moral situations is crucial to determining how we ought to act. In *Men and Moral Principles* (published posthumously in 1944), Stebbing argues that moral situations are so inherently complex that "it is rarely possible to formulate any theoretical principle from which moral rules ought to be observed by everyone, or even by most people" (Stebbing 1944, 18). For discussion, see Robson and West forthcoming.

including who they stand in relation to (I can only be a brother to certain people, while I could be a member of parliament to thousands) what they all have in common, according to Emmet, is (a) there are facts about the roles we stand in, in relation to other members of our society, and (b) these roles all have norms and expectations of behaviour built into them. As Emmet puts it, "[t]he notion of a role has built into it a notion of some conduct as appropriate" (RRR, 40).

Social roles are a central feature of Emmet's moral philosophy because they constitute what she calls a "bridge notion". A bridge notion is a notion (or concept) that bridges two further notions that may appear to be divided – in the sense that they may be conceived of separately.[17] There are two senses in which the notion of a social role is a bridge notion for Emmet. First:

> [A role] may be a bridge notion between myself as an individual with my proper name and personal responsibility, and 'my station and its duties' in the institutional world of society in which I have to live. (RRR, 15)

There may appear to be a difference between what I refer to as 'me' (a person with aspirations, desires, a distinct personality and temperament, etc.) and "my station and its duties" – i.e., the social roles I inhabit and the expectations others (in my society) will have of me by virtue of them. But in fact, according to Emmet, the social roles I inhabit make it the case that what *I* am *includes* those duties and expectations – and, in turn, that what *I* am is part of the "society in which I have to live". This means that the actions I perform, and the kinds of actions I *should* perform, will be determined by that society – and its own system of norms and institutions. On the one hand, then, social roles bridge what might seem to be a divide between myself as an individual and my social roles and duties (and, in turn, the society I live in).

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[17] It is difficult to think of a usefully illustrative example of a bridge notion outside of Emmet's own examples. But, in a completely different context, perhaps we might think of Descartes' notion of a human being (understood as a 'mind-body union') as a 'bridge notion' between immaterial minds and material spirits – in the sense that while minds (thinking things) and bodies (extended things) may appear to be irreconcilable in the Cartesian system, a human being is supposed to 'bridge' them by being a composite of both. Or, pre-empting my discussion of Anscombe and Searle in the next section, one might argue that the concept of 'promising' is a bridge notion, since – in a context where a promise is made – it bridges a fact about what was said (e.g., 'you promised to do such and such…') and a *norm* about what that means someone ought to do ('…and that means that you ought to do such and such'). Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

But there is also another sense in which the notion of a social role is a bridge notion (and this is the sense most relevant for my present concerns). According to Emmet, facts about our social roles also bridge – in the sense of showing that there is no real divide there in the first place – the apparent divide between 'Facts' and 'Values'. Emmet explains that the notion of a social role provides

> a link between factual descriptions of social situations and moral pronouncements about what ought to be done in them. It has, so to speak, a foot in both camps, that of fact and value; it refers to a relationship with a factual basis, and it has a norm of behaviour built into it which is being explicitly or tacitly accepted if the role is cited as a reason. (RRR, 41)

It is worth clarifying this point with an example.

Emmet considers a case in which someone is told: "You ought to help her because, after all, she is your mother" (RRR, 40). The significant thing about this kind of statement is that the individual in question is being presented with both a *fact* (she *is* your mother, you *are* her daughter) and a normative claim (you *ought* to help her). There are facts, that is, about the relations that those individuals stand in to one another, and also about how it is appropriate for them to behave in relation to one another. It is not as though these are two separable, contingently related propositions or that one is being derived from the other. Rather, the speaker is reminding the hearer *what it means* to stand in the relation of 'mother' (or 'daughter') to someone else. In Emmet's words, "The obligation to help is said to follow from the fact of parenthood" (RRR, 40). There is no further fact that the speaker must appeal to in order to justify or explain why the statement is true (they might do so, for example, by explaining 'well she brought you into this world' but the point is that they need not). According to Emmet, the fact that someone is your mother (i.e., stands in that social relation to you), has built into it the further fact that 'you ought to help her'.

Emmet further argues that the social roles that we stand in (and act in) in relation to one another also determine the nature of, along with evaluative judgements of, the actions that we perform. For instance, there is a difference between the act of lying to someone *as their mother,* lying to someone *as their friend,* and the act of lying to someone *as their member of parliament.* Precisely because these acts are being performed by individuals with different social roles – and therefore different social relations to one another – the acts they perform are, too, different. To borrow the words of Susan Stebbing, "it is impossible for an action to be merely a-speaking-

of-the-truth" (Stebbing 1944, 16). Emmet would agree. Her point is that, so long as I am a member of a society and therefore living alongside other people, if I perform an action I do so *from a certain social standpoint.* There are no mere speaking-of-the-truth actions. There are, instead, speaking-of-the-truths-*as-a-mother, -as-a-member-of-parliament, -as-a-friend,* and so on.

In this way, Emmet argues against the Fact-Value Distinction. Emmet suggests that her approach to doing so is one that may even have satisfied Hume himself. For his objection, she claims, was to "people who pass from statements about what 'is' to statements about what 'ought to be done' without showing the bridges by which this is effected" (RRR, 46). By explicitly shining a light on the notion of social roles and the ways we appeal to them in everyday utterances, such as the example discussed above, Emmet (and the sociologists whose insights she is drawing on) takes herself to have done just that.

According to Emmet, moral philosophy stands to learn at least two lessons from the insights of sociology. First, that an approach to moral philosophy that is atomised, disengaged, and focused on "face-to-face interactions" between agents or individuals who are distinct from their social roles and duties will inevitably fail to track the behaviour of real, human agents embedded in a social context.[18] Second, that the Fact-Value distinction, a cornerstone of a lot of mid-twentieth century philosophy in Britain, is put under considerable pressure by the reality

[18] For this reason, it seems clear that Emmet is endorsing a form of what is known as 'relational ethics.' Wendy Austin characterises relational ethics in the following way: "Relational ethics is a contemporary approach to ethics that situates ethical action explicitly in relationship. If ethics is about how we should live, then it is essentially about how we should live together. Acting ethically involves more than resolving ethical dilemmas through good moral reasoning; it demands attentiveness and responsiveness to our commitments to one another, to the earth, and to all living things" (Austin 2008, 749). Austin also explains that: "[Relational ethics] is not based in a disengaged process of moral reasoning conceived as objective and existing outside the situated reality of human existence. There is instead acknowledgment of the primacy and ethical significance of our relationships to one another and of the need to understand humans as embodied beings situated within families and communities" (Austin 2008, 749; for further outlines of relational ethics, see Metz and Clark 2016; Metz 2021). Emmet's moral philosophy shares the central features of this approach. Emmet is critical of 'atomistic' approaches to moral philosophy: approaches that focus on ethical dilemmas and agents that are disengaged from their social (and real-world) contexts. Her approach in *Rules, Roles and Relations* also "demands attentiveness and responsiveness to our commitments to one another." And, moreover, Emmet places considerable stress on the fact that moral philosophy should (like sociology) take as it is starting point "the fact that people have to live with each other" (RRR, 5). This is only a brief sketch of Emmet's connection to relational ethics, but this is significant since, as yet, there is no discussion of her work in this context.

of our social relations and social contexts. For sociological research informs us that there are, as it happens, facts about how we ought to behave, within a social context, which are grounded in facts about our social roles.

2. Social and Moral Facts

In the introduction, I claimed that in *Rules, Roles and Relations,* Emmet is defending a form of cognitivism about moral facts. That is, she is defending the view that there are facts about how we ought to behave that have truth-values. As outlined in section one, those facts are *social* facts: facts about our social roles and relations. The utterance 'You ought to help her since she is your mother' is a *fact* about the relations that obtain between the hearer and their mother, but it has built into it a normative requirement: if someone stands in the relation of 'mother' to you, then you *ought to* help them. According to Emmet, examples like this make the Fact-Value distinction difficult to uphold since it is both a *fact*, in the case stipulated by the example, that such-and-such is the hearer's mother and also *true* that, given that fact, the hearer should help her mother. Of course, we might disagree about the specifics of this example and what kinds of norms are built into the social roles of 'mother' or 'daughter' (or any other social role), but the example serves to make a wider point. According to Emmet, in any given societal context, such social roles are at work, and they *do* have normative components. This is an empirical claim derived from the insights of sociological research and the kind of close observation of the functioning of human societies that sociologists engage in. The further question of *what* kinds of norms are built into certain social roles, in certain societies, is another empirical question that sociologists can inform us about.

If cognitivism is the view that there are facts about how we ought to behave, and that these facts have truth-values, then it seems clear that Emmet is defending a form of cognitivism. But it's worth pausing to consider what kinds of *facts* Emmet is concerned with and, indeed, the wider question of what kind of statement can – or should – count as a fact. The first part of this section will clarify what kinds of 'facts' Emmet is concerned with.

Emmet explains that when it comes to facts about our social relationships, they are "not merely a description of physical facts" but also involve "reference to mutually and commonly held expectations as to how people should behave and of the social significance of their

actions" (RRR, 33). There is perhaps an acknowledgement here that social facts are not the same kinds of facts that proponents of the Fact-Value distinction typically have in mind. In *Language, Truth and Logic,* for example, the 'facts' that Ayer contrasts with (mere) values, are "empirical facts" (Ayer 1936, 67, 70, 114) or what he calls "the facts of experience" (Ayer 1936, 43). These labels are a little misleading since Ayer has in mind an even narrower type of 'fact' than just 'empirical facts' (social sciences, after all, produce empirical facts and data – but that is *not* what Ayer has in mind). What Ayer really has in mind are facts about *the physical world* that are the subject-matter of the hard sciences (specifically: physics); facts that are not about (and whose truth-value does not rely on) human thought, convention, or institution. In what follows, I will refer to Ayer's facts as *physical* facts.

If Ayer's physical facts were the *only* kinds of (truth-apt) facts, then Emmet could not plausibly maintain that social facts 'have a foot in both camps' of fact and value, since facts like 'M is D's mother-in-law' or 'R is P's teacher' are *not* true or false independently of human convention (were there no human societies, there would be no social relations like being someone's 'mother-in-law' or 'teacher'). But part of Emmet's aim in *Rules, Roles and Relations* is to show that this is an overly restrictive conception of what constitutes a fact – and, in turn, of what kind of statements can be said to have a truth-value. Sociological research informs us that there *are* facts, which can be discerned by observation (and are thus empirical facts), about the relations between individuals in a society. Observe most Western societies, a sociologist might argue, and you will *see* that when someone stands in the relation of 'daughter' to another, there are expectations within that society that the daughter should look after their mother.

Emmet was not alone in making this kind of claim at this juncture in the history of analytic philosophy. As she notes (RRR, 41), John Searle, writing two years earlier, draws a distinction between what he calls "institutional" and "noninstitutional" facts (Searle 1964, 55). Searle appeals to various examples of facts about human institutions, including promising, monetary value, and hitting a home run. He writes:

> [S]tatements containing words such as 'married', 'promise', 'home run', and 'five dollars' state facts whose existence presupposes certain institutions: a man has five dollars, given the institution of money. (Searle 1964, 54-55)

And continues:

> We might characterize such facts as institutional facts, and contrast them with noninstitutional, or brute, facts: that a man has a bit of paper with green ink on it is a

> brute fact, that he has five dollars is an institutional fact. The classical picture fails to account for the differences between statements of brute fact and statements of institutional fact. (Searle 1964, 55)

The "classical picture" here refers to the kind of view endorsed by Ayer; one on which the term 'fact' is restricted to *physical* facts. Like Emmet, Searle's point is that this is an overly restrictive account of what constitutes a fact.

Searle's talk of 'brute facts' (and his use of the example of promising) is, in turn, derived from Elizabeth Anscombe. In 'On Brute Facts', published in 1958, Anscombe – via her example of buying potatoes from a grocer – argues that the *fact* that I owe my grocer money for potatoes is a "fact in the context of our institutions" (Anscombe 1958, 69). Anscombe (like Searle, following her) distinguishes between such institutional facts and "brute facts". As she puts it:

> [A]s compared with the fact that I owe the grocer such-and-such a sum of money, that he supplied me with a quarter of potatoes is itself a brute fact. (Anscombe 1958, 71)

Anscombe herself – unlike Searle – expresses some scepticism of the idea that there are any brute facts in a truly objective sense (note in the quotation above that the brute fact in question is only a brute fact "compared with" a fact that is more obviously rooted in a particular institution). Her view is, instead, that certain facts are 'brute' relative to others. There is a great deal more that could be said about the aims of Anscombe's argument.[19] For now, what suffices is to note that Emmet was not alone in seeking to develop a more permissive account of what counts as a 'fact', in contrast with Ayer's more restrictive account of facts as (solely) *physical* facts.

It appears, then, that this kind of analysis of what constitutes a 'fact', and the project of broadening the scope of what counts as a 'fact' beyond Ayer's narrow conception of facts as *physical* facts, was being taken up by multiple thinkers in this period (i.e., between 1958 and the publication of Anscombe's 'On Brute Facts' and 1966 when RRR was published). In other words, Emmet was part of a wider trend. She does not have an *identical* approach as Anscombe or Searle. For instance, rather than employing linguistic analysis to widen the scope of what counts as a 'fact', Emmet draws on the insights of sociology. But the move that Emmet is making does seem to be analogous. Returning to Emmet's rejection of the Fact-Value

[19] For further discussion, see Wiseman 2020.

distinction, recall that, on her reading, Hume's objection was to "people who pass from statements about what 'is' to statements about what 'ought to be done' without showing the bridges by which this is effected" (RRR, 46). In distinct, but overlapping, ways, Emmet, Searle, and Anscombe, all seek to show that bridge. In Emmet's case, the notion that does the bridging is the notion of social role – and we could not properly understand the notion of a social role were it not for the work carried out in the social sciences. Sociological research informs us of the existence (and nature), of these social roles. And what's crucial for Emmet is that, so sociological research informs us, these roles have built into them "a notion of some conduct as appropriate" (RRR, 40).

Having now clarified what kinds of facts Emmet is concerned with, it is worth considering what kind of cognitivism that leaves her with. In the remainder of this section, I will contrast Emmet's cognitivism with the non-naturalist cognitivism of G. E. Moore before comparing it with the naturalist cognitivist positions of Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley.

In *Principia Ethica,* Moore explains that his subject matter is the question(s): "What is good? and What is bad?" and explains that "to the discussion of this question (or these questions) I give the name of Ethics, since that science must, at all events, include it" (Moore 1903, 55). According to Moore, the 'science' of Ethics does not deal with particulars but instead deals "with what is general, in the sense in which physics and chemistry deal with what is general" (Moore 1903, 56). Moore goes on to explain that providing a definition of what it is for something to be 'good' is "the most essential point in the definition of Ethics" (Moore 1903, 57). Thus, for Moore, Ethics is the project of understanding the nature of 'Goodness' – a non-natural property that some things have and others lack. Moore's answer to the question 'What is Goodness?' is (in)famously simple: "If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter" (Moore 1903, 58). In Moore's view, goodness is not only non-natural but *irreducible.* The property of goodness cannot be subjected to naturalistic analysis and *facts* about what is (and isn't) good cannot be reduced to or grounded upon separate, natural facts. Moore rejects any attempt to provide what he calls a 'naturalistic ethics'; any account on which "Ethics is an empirical or positive science" and on which "its conclusions could be all established by means of empirical observation and induction" (Moore 1903, 91).

Emmet clearly does not share Moore's views on what moral philosophy, or 'Ethics', properly construed, requires. Moore's approach is abstract, idealised, and disengaged from the

particularities of everyday life and real-world concerns – and deliberately so. Moore argues that:

> There are far too many persons, things and events in the world, past, present, or to come, for discussion of their individual merits to embraced in any science. Ethics, therefore, does not deal at all with facts of this nature, facts that are unique, individual, absolutely particular […] And, for this reason, it is not the business of the ethical philosopher to give personal advice or exhortation. (Moore 1903, 55)

There is an assumption lying behind Moore's view that Ethics is a science, and that sciences deal in universals, not particulars. It is precisely this 'scientistic' approach to moral inquiry that Emmet found objectionable in her youth and which she argues against in *Rules, Roles and Relations.*

Consider, for instance, Emmet's claims about meta-ethics, which she characterises as "a second order study" of "the language of morals" (RRR, 82). According to Emmet, the study of meta-ethics is supposed to be "neutral" with regard to any given first-order view. But she argues that it is impossible to engage in such neutral, second-order moral inquiry into (e.g.,) the meanings of terms like 'right', 'wrong', 'good', and 'bad', because "there is no self-evident or agreed ethical terminology" (RRR, 82). In other words, *pace* Moore, it is impossible to *just* examine the question 'What is Goodness?' without bringing one's own first-order views to the table. The independent study of meta-ethics is impossible, according to Emmet, and Moore's project cannot even get off the ground.

In a further point of departure from Moore, Emmet *does* think of moral philosophy as "empirical" and involving "empirical observation". The empirical facts Emmet is concerned with, as we saw above, are not Ayer's *physical* facts but they *are* derived from observation nonetheless – the sociological observation of how interrelated individuals in societies operate. According to Emmet, what sociological research tells us is that an individual in a society is "set in multiple criss-crossing relationships, so that the results of his actions affect and are affected by those of other people, producing snowballing effects" (RRR, 125). Attempts at moral inquiry that seek to abstract away from these societal relationships and contexts will inevitably fail to capture the reality of our interactions with one another and their "snowballing effects". What is clear, then, is that Emmet is not a cognitivist about moral facts in the non-naturalist sense that Moore is.

But Emmet's cognitivism is not *naturalist* either – at least not if 'naturalism' involves grounding moral facts in facts about *nature,* understood as something independent of human institutions and conventions. An example of the kind of naturalist cognitivism I have in mind is Philippa Foot's position in *Natural Goodness.* Foot's aim in this text is to establish a cognitivist position that undermines subjectivist, non-cognitivist views on which:

> Propositions about matters of fact [are] assertable if their truth conditions [are] fulfilled, but moral judgements, through conditions of utterance, [are] essentially linked to an individual speaker's subjective state. (Foot 2001, 8)

This is a version of the Fact-Value distinction put forward by Ayer (although Foot's targets also include later thinkers like R. M. Hare (Foot 2001, 6)). On the view that Foot wants to reject, when I articulate a moral judgement (like 'murder is wrong') I am not putting forward a proposition with a truth value. I am instead expressing something about my own subjective state (e.g., my disapproval). Against this non-cognitivist view, in *Natural Goodness,* Foot draws a comparison between evaluations of the lives and actions of other living things – both plant and animal – and human lives and actions. She notes that there are actions and ends that are, as a matter of fact, *good for* plants and animals, e.g., those which aid survival, growth, or reproduction. Similarly, Foot argues, there are actions and ends that, *as a matter of fact,* are *good for* human beings. On this basis, she argues that "the grounding of moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life" and "moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of a matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a particular subject matter" (Foot 2001, 24). The 'subject matter' in question is the lives of human beings and what is, in fact, good for them.

Foot is a cognitivist: she argues that there are moral facts. For Foot, these moral facts are facts about *what is good for* human beings; facts about what does and does not lead to human flourishing. And moral arguments, for Foot, are (or can be) rational because we can premise those arguments upon facts about human nature (Foot 2001, 22-23). But this cannot be Emmet's view. On the one hand, there are similarities: both Foot and Emmet maintain that we need to know something about human life to identify facts about what is good and bad (for humans). And both maintain that normative claims about human action and interaction have a truth value. But, while the social facts that Emmet is interested in are facts that are true *within* the context of a society (i.e., a certain way of living a human life), the facts that Foot is concerned with are facts *about* human life *per se.* As Anscombe points out, there is an important

difference between facts *within* a context and facts *about* a context (Anscombe 1958, 69). Anscombe's point is relevant here: Emmet's social facts are institutional whereas Foot's facts about human life are noninstitutional (or perhaps 'brute'). In light of these differences, it doesn't seem right to characterise Emmet as a 'naturalist' cognitivist, since she does not ground normative facts in *natural* facts or facts about human nature.

A closer – but, again, imperfect comparison – is between Emmet's cognitivism and that of Mary Midgley. Recent literature (notably Robson 2024) has emphasised that Midgley is defending a form of naturalism about moral facts – and that, like Foot's, Midgley's naturalism is 'Aristotelian' in the sense that it equates moral facts with facts about what does and does not lead to human flourishing.[20] Like Emmet, Midgley is critical of the detached and disengaged way that Moore addresses the question 'What is Goodness?' (Midgley 1978, 182 & 220). According to Midgley, Moore's non-naturalist approach, in which the non-natural property of 'goodness' is compared to the property of something's being yellow (Moore 1903, 59), threatens to present goodness as something:

> floating free, a kind of mysterious exotic pink balloon, a detached predicate, high above all possible attempts to entrap it and connect it with life by any conceptual scheme. (Midgley 1978, 195)

Like Foot (and against Moore), Midgley argues that rather than "floating free", we should think of goodness as something that is closely tied to human life. There are, she argues, in fact, certain things that are *good for* and *bad for* human beings. In her words: "[i]f we say something is good or bad for human beings, we must take our species' actual needs and wants as facts, as something given" (Midgley 1978, 182). For Midgley, facts about the needs of human beings (a species of natural animal) are facts about what is good and bad for them; there are moral facts which are grounded in facts about human nature.

There is one clear sense in which Midgley's cognitivism is similar to (though still distinct from) Emmet's. Like Emmet, Midgley argues that we must draw on empirical research carried out by experts in *other* disciplines, outside philosophy, to discern the relevant facts when it comes to understanding what is good for human beings. Where Emmet turns to sociology, Midgley turns to ethology: the study of animal behaviour. In *Beast and Man: The*

[20] For earlier characterisations of Midgley as a (meta-ethical) naturalist, see Cottingham 1983, 456; Graham 1986, 339; Pigden 1990, 153.

Roots of Human Nature, Midgley argues what ethology shows is that there are many myths about the lives of nonhuman animals. What ethology reveals is that "other animals clearly lead a much more structured, less chaotic life than people have been accustomed to think, and are therefore, in certain definite ways, much less different from men than we have supposed" (Midgley 1978, 18). This is significant, in turn, for our understanding of *human* behaviour since, according to Midgley, a great deal of Western philosophy's conception of humanity is premised upon the idea that there are certain traits – rationality and language-usage, for example – that separate us from the animals. But what ethology shows us is that the so-called 'anthropological difference' is a very thin one.[21] In Midgley's words, "Man has been mapped by reference to a landmark that is largely mythical" (Midgley 1978, 19).

Midgley and Emmet have in common a commitment to thinking that moral philosophy should not be carried out in isolation from other disciplines that can inform us about the nature of human action and human relationships. And, like Emmet, Midgley's view is that facts about what is good for humans are grounded in further facts that can be discerned through empirical observation. According to Midgley, we can work out the shape of a good human life in much the same way that we can work out what is a good animal life: by observing what kinds of behaviours and actions are typical and what kinds of 'ends' human actions tend to be aimed at. Just as, say, wolf nature – i.e., how it is natural for a wolf to live – is simply the set of behaviours (directed at certain ends) typically observed in wolves, human nature can be understood in terms of a cluster of actions and ends that make up human lives (Midgley 1978, 58; see also Robson 2024, 6). And, like the lives of other animals, human lives cannot properly be understood in isolation from one another; to understand the nature of a wolf or a human is to understand how members of the species live with each other. No doubt, Emmet would agree on this point.

But the similarities between Emmet and Midgley only go so far. Like Foot, Midgley defends a form of naturalist cognitivism. For Midgley, there are facts about the needs and wants of human beings – facts about human nature – and these facts are connected to questions about what is *good* for human beings (Robson 2024, 5-7). Emmet is not a naturalist cognitivist, at least not insofar as I have characterised the position. Emmet's social facts are *not* facts about human nature and they are true *only* within the context of a specific society. In fact, while certain social roles (e.g., the role of being a mother) may be ubiquitous across societies, others

[21] See, e.g., Glock 2012 for discussion of the 'anthropological difference'.

may not (e.g., being a head of specific state religion or being an elected member of parliament). It seems, then, that Foot, Midgley, and Emmet disagree on the kinds of facts that *moral* facts are grounded in. For Foot and Midgley, moral facts are grounded in facts about human nature – and thus true for all human beings. For Emmet, it seems, this is not the case. And this may lead to a worry about just how robust or objective Emmet's account of moral facts is. I will address this worry, presented as a charge of moral relativism, in the next section.

For the time being, though, what is significant about the preceding discussion is that, at least in comparison to the non-naturalism of Moore and the naturalist cognitivism of Foot and Midgley, Emmet defends a unique form of cognitivism. For Emmet, moral facts are grounded in social facts: that is, facts about the relations we stand in to one another in a specific social context and the norms and expectations that are built into them.

3. The Problem of Moral Relativism

With the preceding considerations in mind, one might plausibly worry that the position Emmet puts forward in *Rules, Roles and Relations* – one on which moral facts are grounded in facts about our social relations within a society – leads to moral relativism: in Emmet's words, the view that "the actual rightness or wrongness of actions is relative" (RRR, 93). Relative, that is, to a specific society. In this section, I will outline Emmet's response to the charge of moral relativism and, in doing so, defend two further interpretative claims. First, I will show that Emmet's response reveals she is committed to a form of moral pluralism. Second, I will show that underlying her pluralism is a commitment to thinking that the different 'ways of living' – i.e., societal differences – that sociological research reveals to us are all, in fact, attempts to meet a set of shared *human* needs. In other words, even though different societies exhibit different social (and, seemingly, moral) values, there is a shared set of human needs that those societal norms are attempting to address. This is significant since it reveals Emmet's position to be closer to the meta-ethical naturalism of thinkers like Foot and Midgley than the previous section indicated.

Emmet acknowledges that sociological research does seem to entail what she calls "descriptive relativism" (RRR, 92). Descriptive relativism, she explains, is a label for "the empirical fact that people's moral principles and convictions are found to vary in different

period and cultures" (RRR, 92-93). But Emmet also explains that descriptive relativism does *not* itself entail "normative relativism", the view that "the actual rightness or wrongness of actions is relative" (RRR, 93). As Emmet notes, "[t]hat there are some actions which ought to be done need not be defeated by the discovery that people have different views as to what these are" (RRR, 93). It could be that there is an objective (noninstitutional/ society-independent) set of facts about what is right and wrong but that only *one* society, or even *no* society, has worked out what they are. As it happens, this is not the position Emmet endorses. But it is important nonetheless to note that she explicitly rejects the idea that cultural or societal relativism (the empirical fact that different societies and cultures have different norms) entails moral relativism. Even if we are committed to thinking that moral relativism cannot be true, that is still not a good reason to disregard the insights of sociological research.

So how does Emmet avoid moral relativism, while also holding onto the idea that sociological research is important for moral philosophy? Answering this question reveals Emmet to be a moral pluralist *but not a moral relativist*. In a passage that helpfully illustrates Emmet's view, she writes:

> Particular moral rules may indeed make sense in the context of some kinds of social situation and not others. But this does not imply an infinite diversity of morals, leaving us with only emotional preference or tradition to decide between them. Morality can be a matter of judgement. There may be better and worse judgements within the same social contexts; every society can have its men of practical wisdom. There may be ways of living that allow for the development of moral judgement better than others do. (RRR, 108)

Emmet here describes the middle ground that she seeks to take up, between *normative* relativism (the idea that 'anything goes', normatively speaking) and the opposite position that there is some, one particular way of living which is the *right* way of living, which she rejects (see, e.g., RRR 99, where she criticises the 'intuitionist' view, associated with H. A. Pritchard, that certain moral principles are "evident to any right-minded and mature person"). Emmet's view is that the answer to the question 'What is the right thing to do?' is always going to depend on the particularities of a social situation or context. As we saw in section one, she maintains that "whatever ought to be done *ought to be done in a situation*" (RRR, 3, my emphasis).

As Elinor Mason explains, "moral value pluralism does not entail relativism. The idea is not that all values or value systems are equally true" (Mason 2023). This is clearly consistent

with Emmet's claim that her position "does not imply an infinite diversity of morals". For Emmet, members of different societies may arrive at different judgements about what is right or wrong – and these judgements will depend on, since they are inevitably deeply embedded in, the multiple 'criss-crossing' relationships that any given member of a society finds themselves in. As Emmet puts it (clearly evoking the Aristotelian notion of '*phronesis'*) "every society can have its men of practical wisdom". But even the wisest members of a society are still *part of* that society; and so their judgements will be judgements about what the right thing to do is *in that society, i.e., in a particular context.*[22] The norms of behaviour that are attached to our social roles (norms such as that expressed in the statement 'you ought to help her since, after all, she is your mother') embody such judgements about what is right in certain societal contexts.

At this point, however, one might still ask how Emmet can avoid the charge of moral relativism. How can Emmet maintain that, even though the empirical (sociological) evidence indicates that members of different societies have different views on what is right (or wrong), moral facts are themselves not societally relative? Emmet's answer reveals her position to be more Aristotelian than her focus on social facts and social roles would initially suggest. It is 'Aristotelian' in the sense that it commits her to a set of biological needs, that are human species-specific, and that determine what it is good or bad (or right or wrong) for human beings to do. As I will show, this means that Emmet's view is less divergent from the views of thinkers like Foot and Midgley than the discussion in section two initially seemed to show.

In response to the charge that social or cultural relativism entails *moral* relativism, Emmet argues that, even though there is more than one way of living that can be judged to be good, it is also true that any way of living that is successfully taken up by a society will be one that is able to address a more basic set of needs that are shared by *all* humans. In other words, for Emmet, differences between norms across societies can all be understood as attempts to find a 'way of life' that meets what she calls "biological and social necessities" (RRR, 98) that are *themselves* constant across the human species.

Emmet quotes an extended passage from May and Abraham Edel's text *Anthropology and Ethics* (published in 1959), where the authors (like Emmet) argue that moral philosophy should be informed by sociological and anthropological research. The quoted passage reads:

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[22] Note that Emmet's view would appear to entail that someone who was practically wise in the context of one society would not necessarily be practically wise if they were transplanted to a different society.

> There is room for wide variety in the kinds of lives men build for themselves, but certain minimal standards must be met if these 'experiments' are to be successful at all. Each culture must provide patterns of motor habits, social relations, knowledge and beliefs, such that it will be possible for men to survive. Everywhere there must be techniques for making a living, patterns of mating, of mutual help, ways of defining who is a friend and who is a foe, and of dealing with each, ways of coping with sickness and old age and death – and means for learning all of these ways […] This common human nature sets limits to the forms that any experiments in living can take, to the possible techniques of motivation, the scope of sympathy, the effectiveness of sanctions. (Edel and Edel 1959, 30-31; quoted in RRR, 96)

And continues:

> Common needs, common social tasks, common psychological processes, are bound to provide some common framework for the wide variety of human behaviours that different cultures have developed. (Edel and Edel 1959, 30-31; quoted in RRR, 96)

The point here, made by the Edels, is that while different societies and cultures will 'experiment' in different ways of living, they do so for a common set of reasons, including survival, mutual help, identifying friend from foe, coping with sickness and old age, and so on. In other words, while there may be a variety of ways that people in different societies live, and different value systems relative to those different societies, the only 'ways of living' that will get off the ground – the only ones that will be "successful at all" – are those whose value systems address those needs which are common to *all humans,* socially and biologically.[23]

[23] Stepping aside from the history of these views for a moment, one might question this empirical claim (that only societies that address a shared set of biological needs will get off the ground) and raise concerns about its implications for, e.g., non-heteronormative lifestyles. For instance, it seems problematic to suggest that a successful way of living must address a biological need for reproduction. I won't provide a detailed response on Emmet's behalf to this kind of concern here. For the time being, I will simply note that this is only a legitimate concern for naturalists who have a *reductive* account of human nature, i.e., those who want to say that the end of a human life *just is* (e.g.,) reproduction. But thinkers like Foot, for instance, do not have such a reductive account; indeed, Foot is keen to distance herself from such reductive views (Foot 2001, 3 & 42). Given Emmet's emphasis on biological *and social* needs, and her appeals to the many ways of living instantiated across human societies, it seems unlikely that she has such a reductive view of human nature either. Thanks to [name omitted] for raising this concern.

Emmet approvingly cites these anthropological claims as supporting her own view that "[w]hatever else morals may be concerned with, they are concerned with the ways that people live together in some form of ordered society" and her view that, in order for people to live together certain requirements must be met, requirements which "depend on constant facts about human society" (RRR, 95). Emmet further suggests that such anthropological research confirms what she takes to be Aristotle's view that "people come together for the sake of a life, and then go on to develop 'the good life'" (RRR, 97). Again, the position that Emmet is defending can be thought of as an attempt to strike a balance between moral pluralism and a rejection of moral relativism; a position on which it is *not* the case that anything goes, since all (successful) ways of living are attempts to address a shared set of human needs, but also one on which there is no *one* right way to address these needs. Further, Emmet does not think that just *any* fact about how a society expects its member of behave counts as a *moral* fact. But there *are* facts about human needs – biologically and socially – that explain why societies have certain social relations and social roles, with norms of behaviour attached, built into them (perhaps Emmet would argue that, regarding these facts, anthropologists, biologists, and even ethologists, can help to inform sociologists and moral philosophers).

On this basis, Emmet denies that 'descriptive' relativism (the *fact that* different societies have different societal norms) entails moral relativism, i.e., the view that what is, in fact, good *just is* what is considered 'good' in a particular society. Rather, for Emmet, what is good, in a particular society, is what is judged to be good in that society *because* that action or norm of behaviour will address "biological and social necessities" (RRR, 98) that are shared by all human beings.

Returning to the question, addressed in section two, of how Emmet's view compares with those of ethical naturalists such as Foot and Midgley, the picture now looks more complicated. There, I suggested that Emmet diverged from naturalists – specifically the *cognitivism* of these naturalists – since the facts that she is concerned with (facts about social roles and social relations) are relative to a societal context, whereas the facts that Foot and Midgley are concerned with (facts about human nature) are not. But Emmet's response to the problem of cultural relativism pushes her closer to these ethical naturalists. In particular, her endorsement of the view, put forward by the Edels in their anthropological writing, that "human nature" sets limits on the forms of living that societies can adopt, is highly suggestive of Foot and Midgley's own views that it is facts about human nature that ground moral facts. And there are more fine-grained similarities too. For instance, Midgley similarly argues that, as human

beings (and therefore as a kind of animal), "our basic repertoire of wants is given" and that we are "innately 'programmed' to want and like" certain things (Midgley 1978, 121). Like Emmet, Midgley would have approved of anthropological research that suggests human beings have a shared set of biological and social needs – even if those needs can be multiply-realised and met in a plurality of ways.

Does that mean that Emmet should be characterised as an ethical 'naturalist'? The answer is (predictably) a little complicated. Unlike paradigmatic ethical naturalists, Emmet does not explicitly commit herself to the view that morality can be explained in terms of human nature (Moosavi 2022, 1). But her endorsement of the kinds of anthropological claims discussed above clearly suggests that she thinks that societal norms are intended to attain ends that are more fundamentally connected to our nature as human beings, understood as a biological kind. It is for that reason, for Emmet, that we can think of moral facts as grounded in social facts. And, like later 'neo-Aristotelian' naturalists, Emmet also clearly sees some kind of return to Aristotle's vision of ethics as concerned with the kinds of *lives* human beings lead as a marked improvement on the 'modern' conception of moral philosophy as focused around atomistic conceptions of agents and actions. It is also worth noting that Emmet's response to the problem of cultural relativism is similar to that of later Aristotelian virtue theorists such as Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum, for example, defends Aristotle from the charge of cultural relativism by maintaining that cultural disagreements are the product of local understandings of a set of virtues that are shared across societies (Nussbaum 1993, 245-47). Emmet may not go so far as to talk of *virtues,* but her view does seem to be that different societal norms are what we might think of as 'local understandings' of how certain biological and societal needs – certain *human needs* – can be met.

For these reasons, I think it is useful to consider Emmet's position in *Rules, Roles and Relations* in connection with the (Aristotelian) naturalist ethical tradition, instantiated in the work of thinkers like Foot, Midgley, and Nussbaum. But it is also worth emphasising the ways that Emmet diverges from – and therefore brings something novel to our understanding of – that tradition. Emmet is arguably more forthcoming in terms of her empirical and epistemic claims about *how* we come to learn how it is we ought to act than a typical Aristotelian naturalist. For Emmet, how I ought to act – that is, what it is right, wrong, good, or bad for me to do – is going to depend on my social role. My status, as a mother, daughter, sister, teacher, MP (and so on) will determine the kinds of behaviours, in relation to others, that are appropriate or not. And the norms that are built into the roles I inhabit will be set by the society of which I

am a part. Emmet argues that we can be assured that these roles, with their in-built norms, are aimed at addressing the biological and social needs of myself and others, because – so anthropological and sociological research tell us – if they did not (if the society I am part of did not address these human needs) then it would not have got off the ground in the first place. *That* I am part of a functioning society (or way of living) is evidence of the fact that the practices of that society are at least, in some minimal way, meeting the conditions required for a good human life (similarly, if I am part of a malfunctioning society, that may be because the norms and social roles that make it up *fail* to address these human needs). This sets Emmet's view apart from other forms of ethical naturalism that, as Moosavi explains, do "not offer an account of morality that is grounded in facts that are derived from empirical, scientific investigation" (Moosavi 2022, 336) (although, note that Midgley's naturalism is exempt from this general tendency, since it is rooted in the work of ethologists).

I have argued in this section that Emmet's response to the problem of cultural relativism shows, first, that she is a moral pluralist and, second, that her position is closer to that of (Aristotelian) ethical naturalists such as Foot, Midgley, and Nussbaum than the discussion of moral facts in section two suggested. I think it is an open question whether Emmet *is* an ethical naturalist, which will depend inevitably upon what we mean by the term 'naturalism' (and the corresponding concept). I have shown, in any case, that there are good reasons to consider Emmet in connection to that tradition. And if it *is* appropriate to characterise her work as a part of that tradition, her position constitutes a novel take on ethical naturalism: one which is, comparatively, transparent on the question of how exactly we work out what we ought to do. Emmet's answer, put simply, is that we ought to act in accordance with our social roles and the expectations that come with them. For instance, in certain societies it is *true* to say that, if someone is my mother, and I am their daughter, I *ought* to help them, *because* they are my mother, and I am their daughter.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that there are several reasons to think of Emmet's *Rules, Roles and Relations* as a significant text in the history of twentieth century moral philosophy. Emmet pushes back against the Fact-Value distinction and defends a form of cognitivism about moral

facts, at a time when that distinction was still widely upheld in (analytic) moral philosophy in Britain. Like members of the 'Wartime Quartet', including Midgley and Foot, as well as later Aristotelian ethicists like Nussbaum, Emmet argues that there *are* facts about how we ought to behave: she is thus a cognitivist about moral facts. But, at the same time, Emmet's cognitivism is unique, because, for her, it is *social* facts – facts about the way we are socially located in relation to one another, and the norms that are built in to our 'criss-crossing' social roles – that can inform us about what is it good and bad for us to do.

Emmet's response to the problem of moral relativism places her even closer to members of the Quartet and later Aristotelian ethicists. When faced with that problem, I have argued, Emmet takes up a position on which *any* successful, functioning society (conceived of as a 'way of living') is an attempted to address a set of biological and social needs that are shared *across* societies. Drawing on sociological and anthropological research, Emmet argues that human beings need to live with each other. And they need to live with each other in ways that ensure that certain biological and social needs are met. For all these reasons, as interest in the Quartet's opposition to dominant trends in twentieth century moral philosophy (and women in the history of analytic philosophy more generally) continues to grow, so too should interest in Emmet, an important figure in the history of moral cognitivism, Aristotelian ethics, and (I have suggested) ethical naturalism.

5. Appendix: Emmet and Alasdair MacIntyre

I am attaching this section on Emmet and Alasdair MacInyre's work in moral philosophy as an Appendix because it is an incomplete account and should be seen primarily as a call for future research.

In May 2025, as I was writing this paper, Alasdair MacIntyre passed away, in South Bend, Indiana. Coincidentally, I was visiting the University of Notre Dame at the time, where MacIntyre had been based since 2000. I heard of his passing the day after sending him an email asking if he might like to share his reflections on Dorothy Emmet, who taught him at Manchester University in the 1940s. In *Philosophers and Friends*, Emmet claims that MacIntyre was "[t]he ablest student I had […] probably at any time" (P&F, 86). In 1970, Emmet

and MacIntyre collaborated on collection of essays entitled *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis.* Afterwards, according to Emmet, they maintained "intermittent but warm contact" (Emmet 1996, xiii). But there is more than just a biographical connection between Emmet and MacIntyre: there are notable parallels between Emmet's *Rules, Roles and Relations* and the development of MacIntyre's own views on philosophy's relation to the social sciences, and the virtues, in works such as *After Virtue* (1981) and *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999). Perhaps, though I cannot substantiate this claim here, this is due to MacIntyre's having been influenced by the work of his one-time teacher, Emmet.

One obvious point of agreement between Emmet and MacIntyre is their shared dissatisfaction with early- to mid-twentieth century analytic moral philosophy, especially non-cognitivism. For example, MacIntyre explains that *After Virtue* emerged "from a growing dissatisfaction with the conception of 'moral philosophy' as an independent and isolable area of enquiry" (MacIntyre 2007, xvii). This clearly echoes Emmet's early dissatisfaction with the Oxford intuitionists during her time as an undergraduate and, later in RRR, her opposition to the idea that meta-ethics could be sustained as an independent domain of inquiry (RRR, 82) – independent, that is, from first level normative ethics.[24] There are also more substantive places of overlap, not least the fact that in *After Virtue,* MacIntyre (like Emmet in RRR) attempts to, as he would later describe it (in the third edition of the text), "provide an account of the good in purely social terms" (MacIntyre 2007, xi). Similarly, reflecting on *After Virtue* in his later text *Dependent Rational Animals* (in the Preface), MacIntyre explains how he, "attempted to give an account of the place of the virtues, understood as Aristotle had understood them, within social practices, the lives of individuals and the lives of communities" (MacIntyre 2009, x). More specifically, like Emmet, MacIntyre also argues that our "*characters*" (our individual selves) ought not to be thought of as distinct from our "social roles" (MacIntyre 2007, 27). Both characters and social roles, he maintains, "embody moral beliefs".

It is also worth noting, in light of my discussion of the problem of moral relativism in section three, that MacIntyre later came to see his view in *After Virtue* as suffering from the same problem – and diagnosed this as a result of not giving his account of the virtues a "biological grounding" (MacIntyre 2007, xi;). In other words, MacIntyre ultimately saw his

[24] As noted previously, Emmet's own views echoes those of *her* teacher, A. D. Lindsay. As such, MacIntyre might also have inherited, albeit indirectly, his own attitude from Lindsay. Lindsay, Emmet, and MacIntyre might thus be thought of as instantiating a lineage of heterodox twentieth-century moral philosophers.

own view in *After Virtue* as inevitably leading to moral relativism precisely *because* it situated moral facts in a (specific) social or societal context. Like Emmet (as I argued in section three), in *Dependent Rational Animals,* MacIntyre thus seeks to avoid moral relativism by situating ethics in our biology and identifying the "goods, rules and virtues" that come out of our being a certain kind of rational animal (MacIntyre 2009, x).

To summarise, then, we can identify parallels between Emmet and MacIntyre concerning (1) their dissatisfaction with a certain kind of non-empirical approach to moral philosophy, (2) their initial preference for a sociological approach to moral theorising, and (3) the development of their view towards one on which our social practices are rooted in set of shared biological needs. But this is just an initial sketch – and I hope that the Emmet-MacIntyre connection may be taken further in future scholarship examining both thinkers' philosophical legacies.

[Acknowledgements omitted]

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