

Philippa Foot's 'Natural Goodness'

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ABSTRACT

Philippa Foot, with the help of her friend and colleague Elizabeth Anscombe, discovered that *Summa Theologiae*, II-II of Thomas Aquinas was a powerful resource in seeking objectivism in ethics. Foot's aim was to produce an ethics of natural goodness, in which moral evil, for example, came to be seen as a 'natural defect' rather than the expression of a taste or preference. This brought her to develop a concrete ethics of virtue with a broad sweep, dealing with the individual and communal needs and goods of human beings, and particularly with their central moral quality of acting for a reason, with a practical rationality. This has helped her to return to an Aristotelian meaning of virtue, as simply one kind of excellence among others.

The general topic of the seminar for which this paper was written was 'Analytic Thomism': Thomistic thinking which is carried out in an analytic way.¹ Perhaps it is closer to the point to call Philippa Foot a Thomistically influenced analytic philosopher. Fergus Kerr's recent assessment puts it well:

For many years now, a small number of philosophers in the analytic tradition have been reading Aristotle, but also Thomas Aquinas, more or less obviously, in ways which enable them to resist, criticise and reshape the agenda in ethics. Few as these philosophers are, they have exercised an influence far beyond their tiny number. Through them, Thomas has long been an important resource, with some of his key ideas incorporated, anonymously or obliquely, into mainstream philosophy.²

This is a good description of Philippa Foot's achievement.

I will begin by mentioning Foot's early development in moral philosophy, particularly her contact with Elizabeth Anscombe, with special mention of Anscombe's suggestion that she investigate the virtues in Aquinas. I then turn to her critique of subjectivism, the need to turn to the subject's emotions or commitment in order to turn 'facts' into 'values'; and finally to her positive theory of natural, species-based goodness and the practical rationality which responds adequately to this.

Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe

It is clear that Philippa owed a philosophical debt to Elizabeth Anscombe, and that debt could be summed up in the word 'influence'. Or perhaps we also need the word 'friendship' to do justice to it. As a philosopher from a rather different tradition put it in 1997:

It must not be forgotten that reason too needs to be sustained in all its searching by trusting dialogue and sincere friendship. A climate of suspicion and distrust, which can beset speculative research, ignores the teaching of the ancient

¹ 'Analytic Thomism' Seminar organised by Cairde Thomais Naofa in National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 12 April 2008.

² Fergus Kerr, 'Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?' in *Aquinas in Dialogue*, J. Fodor and F.C. Bauerschmidt eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 124.

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philosophers who proposed friendship as one of the most appropriate contexts for sound philosophical enquiry.³

These words from *Fides et Ratio* underline John Paul II's conviction that every man is seeking the answers to the important questions in life, but that he does not undertake this search alone. Philippa Foot's friendship with Elizabeth Anscombe and their conversations on ethics and other areas have marked her thinking.

Philippa Foot (originally Bosanquet) was born in 1920, grand-daughter of US President Grover Cleveland. She was one of the founders of Oxfam, and a contemporary, friend and disciple of Elizabeth Anscombe at Oxford in the 40s, from whom she received a spur to her subsequent development from Anscombe, whom she always cites as a major influence, and in a recent interview declared one of the very best philosophers of our time.⁴ Foot had come from a non-bookish environment, indeed had no formal education as a child, simply a series of governesses. One of these finally suggested to her that she would be able to get to university, and so she put in for some correspondence courses and ended up being accepted by Somerville College Oxford, where she was a contemporary of the philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch, who has written a memoir of her from those years.

Mary Midgely's recent autobiography, *The Owl of Minerva*, describes the lifestyle of the postwar Somerville College and the dedication to philosophical conversation which marked the group around Elizabeth Anscombe and Iris Murdoch there.⁵ Issues like rudeness, talkativeness, promise-making, and the like came to the fore. Foot herself speaks of her lunch-time conversations with Anscombe, in which 'she'd propound some topic, and, and though she hardly ever agreed with what I said, she was always willing to consider my objection, and to wonder why I had made it.'⁶

In her recollections of those times, particularly of her return to Oxford after World War II, she points to the revelations of the concentration camps and other unprecedented acts of evil in the war as an incentive to get involved in moral philosophy in particular, even though she had been more interested in the philosophy of mind. It began to sound rather hollow when she read Ayer, Stevenson and Hare claiming that 'good' and 'evil' were merely expressions of 'emotion' or 'attitude' rather than objective judgements on human actions.

On a number of occasions she has spoken of the spur which she received from the horrific photographs and films of concentration camps came out in the forties:

[I]t's really not possible to convey to people who are younger what it was like. One would have said such a thing on such a scale could not happen, human beings couldn't do this. That was what was behind my refusing to accept subjectivism even when I couldn't see any way out. It took a long time and it was only in the last fifteen or twenty years that I managed it. But I was certain that it could not be right that the Nazis were convinced and that there was no way that they were wrong. It just could not be...

That is what has driven all my moral philosophy.⁷

Aquinas, Aristotle and the virtues

The way to objectivism in moral theory came when Anscombe suggested that she read

³ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 33.

⁴ 'The Grammar of Goodness', interview with Alex Voorhoeve in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* XI (2003), p. 34.

⁵ *The Owl of Minerva* (London: Routledge, 2006)

⁶ 'The Grammar of Goodness', interview with Alex Voorhoeve in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* XI (2003), p. 34.

⁷ 'The Natural', Interview with Julian Baggini in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, issue 21 2003, p. 43.

Aquinas, and this brought her to the Second Part of the *Summa Theologica*, dealing with specific virtues and vices, later reflected in her *Virtues and Vices* (1978).⁸ She found that ‘the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St Thomas’s ethical writings are as useful to the atheist [Foot has always declared herself to be a ‘card-carrying atheist’] as to the Catholic or other Christian believer’.⁹ This brought her to say that there are good reasons, not just to say that behaviour is vicious or virtuous in general, but that specifically, particular virtues and vices connect with key aspects of human welfare, and human appetite as controllable by will is probably involved.

This means *all* of the main virtues, however, as traditional thinkers believed. In *Natural Goodness*, Foot complains that most philosophers in modern times see their subject as having to do exclusively with the virtue of *justice*:

[R]elations between individuals or between an individual and society, and so with such things as obligations, duties, and charitable acts. It is for this reason that, of the four ancient cardinal virtues of justice, courage, temperance and wisdom, only the first now seems to belong wholly to ‘morality’. The other three virtues are recognised as necessary for the practice of ‘morality’ but are now thought of as having part of their exercise outside ‘morality’ in ‘self-regarding’ pursuits, ‘moral’ and prudential considerations being contrasted in a way that was alien to Plato or Aristotle.¹⁰

Foot believes that when we speak of courage, temperance and wisdom we are making evaluations of the rational human will also, just as surely as when we speak of matters of justice. She claims that folly, obstinacy and rashness, not to mention churlishness, ingratitude and despair can also deserve classification as ‘wicked’ or ‘evil’ even though no-one else is hurt by them.

This is the approach of all of her work, right down to *Natural Goodness* (2001), in which she situates morality within a theory of natural norms and species-based criteria of evaluation, as well as bringing to a new level her account of practical rationality which shows that *human* choice is based on i) rational grounds (‘acting on a reason’) rather than causal antecedents à la Hume, whom she often criticises in this regard, and ii) a description of properly *human* goodness and happiness.

Objectivism in ethics

What is Philippa Foot trying to achieve? She tells us, at the beginning of her key work, the culmination of her thought, *Natural Goodness*:

I have in this book the overt aim of setting out a view of moral judgement very different from that of most moral philosophers writing today. For I believe that evaluations of human will and action share a conceptual structure with evaluations of characteristics and operations of other living things, and can only be understood in these terms. I want to show moral evil as ‘a kind of natural defect’.¹¹

This is a far cry from G.E. Moore’s anti-naturalism and from the subjectivism of Hare, Ayer and Stevenson. The latter had felt that they could now identify Moore’s strange ‘non-natural’ qualities among which ‘good’ and ‘evil’ were to be found: they were simply ‘attitudes’ (emotional, expressive, or prescriptive) of the speaker, and reflected his or her commitment and views rather than a description of the event, person or action

⁸ *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

referred to.

According to Foot, subjectivism in values means that the making of a sincere moral judgement requires the presence of individual feeling, and goes beyond description or assertion of fact, in such a way that the descriptive content of moral-sounding words never reached all the way to moral evaluation – the speaker’s emotion or command to action would always need to be added. Someone convinced of the utility of certain kinds of action would not – indeed could not – straightforwardly make the judgement about their moral goodness unless he found in himself the right feelings and attitudes, or was ready to take the step of committing himself to act in a particular way. Fact had been clearly distinguished from value, is from ought.¹²

In this connection, Foot recounts an exchange she had with Elizabeth Anscombe in one of their early philosophical lunches. She had remarked of some sentence that it must have a mix of descriptive (factual) and evaluative meaning. ‘And [Anscombe] said: ‘Of what? *what?*’ And I thought, “my God, so one doesn’t have to accept that distinction! One can say *what?*”¹³ This was crucial for Foot, and became a key question in her thought.

In later years Foot would deal with this, in her 1995 lecture: ‘Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?’ she claimed that it is the mistake of ‘so construing what is “special” about moral judgements that the grounds of a moral judgement do not reach all the way to it’.¹⁴ Whatever factual grounds have been given, the person may not be ready to make the moral judgement because he or she has not got the attitude, feeling or conation which would be commensurate with such a judgement.

Why is this ‘non-cognitivism’ so prevalent? In an early essay on Hume on moral judgement she points to his definition of morality as essentially practical, serving to produce or prevent action. She quotes from the *Treatise*:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: wilful murder for instance. Examine it in all its lights, and see if you can find in that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You can never find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. here is a matter of fact; but ‘tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object.¹⁵

Reason is useless in this connection; it is ‘calm and indolent’ for Hume: between these calm and indolent judgements and the assertion that something should be done, there is, for Hume, the famous gap between *is* and *ought*.

Foot believes that theories based on this gap are traceable back to an *interpretation* of Hume’s ‘crucial’ (and correct) premise: morality is necessarily practical. This can lead one to too close a connection between moral judgment and the will of the person judging, rather than focusing on the goods which the person has identified in the situation or action being assessed:

[M]oral virtues are qualities necessary if men are to get on well in [the] world ... This general connexion between such things as courage, temperance, and justice and human good is quite enough to explain why people are often influenced by considerations of morality. They are not *necessarily* influenced, as

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³ ‘The Grammar of Goodness’, interview with Alex Voorhoeve in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* XI (2003), p. 34.

¹⁴ ‘Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?’ in *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 192.

¹⁵ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II I 2, cit. in ‘Hume and Moral Judgement’, in *Virtues and Vices*, p. 77.

Hume must have known; but they are concerned to teach and practise virtue in so far as they have taken this thought for their own and the common good. It is therefore unnecessary to posit a special sentiment to explain why observations about virtue have an influence on will, and the *raison d'être* of Hume's subjectivist theory of ethics disappears¹⁶

Practical Rationality

Philippa Foot says that Hume's demand for a practical morality is met by a most un-Humean thought: that 'acting morally is part of practical reasoning'.¹⁷ It does not require some kind of introspective sentiment or desire on the subject's part. It simply means that we know how to do good things and want to do them. She quotes Aquinas here: 'wisdom is a power under direction of the will'. This is what adds up to the role of prudence in perfecting the practical intellect.¹⁸

So what makes a person morally say, just? For Foot, it is the fact that for him certain considerations count as *reasons* for action, and as reasons of a given weight. People who possess certain virtues possess them insofar as they recognise certain considerations, such as the fact of a promise or of a neighbour's need, or the helplessness of his or her child or aged relative, as powerful. The root notion, the common thread linking different parts of practical rationality is the goodness of the human beings in respect of their actions, which means goodness of the will, rather than simple gifts or skills of sight, dexterity or memory. Kant was right to say that moral goodness was goodness of the will; but he was wrong to think that an *abstract* idea of practical reason applicable to 'rational beings' as such could take us all the way to anything like our own moral code. For the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of *specifically human life* – educating children, helping those in need, telling the truth, practising chastity, etc.

Gavin Laurence adds that Foot's approach to practical rationality has been developing over the years.¹⁹ In her early thinking, even when she had sloughed off Humean determinism in order to develop a theory of real and free practical rationality, prudence or practical rationality was still bound up with the agent's desires and interests, rather than with the practicable good – target of the traditional theory.

In the traditional theory, however, this is not enough: the mere fact that the end is desired by the agent is not sufficient for it to be a reason for him to act, either ever, or in these particular circumstances. Ends as well as means are assessable. Agents can make mistakes over their ends on this theory.²⁰ The 'formal object', as he puts it – the 'point' of practical rationality – is the practicable good. He believes that this is the direction in which Foot has been moving with her notion of species-based 'natural goodness'.

Foot has been particularly influenced in this direction, away that is from the neo-Humean approach, which still felt that the subject's desires were somehow the key, even if not in a determinist way, by Warren Quinn's question: *what would be so important about practical rationality if that was all that it did?* and, if it were simply the relation of means to ends, *whatever* the ends might be. Why should practical rationality, with such a narrow focus, be able to dictate the terms of goodness? Reflecting on this, she realised that people take it for granted that practical rationality is not mere cunning, which is its caricature, but 'has the status of a kind of master-virtue', always to be found when things

¹⁶ 'Hume on Moral Judgement', p. 80.

¹⁷ *Natural Goodness*, p. 9.

¹⁸ 'Virtues and Vices' in *Virtues and Vices*, p. 6, referring to *Summa Theologica* I-II q.56, 3.

¹⁹ Gavin Lawrence, 'The Rationality of Morality' in *Virtues and Reasons*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 89-148.

²⁰ Gavin Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

like goodness and evil are involved.

This brought her to ‘the change of direction that Quinn suggested: seeing goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality.’²¹ Most people, she claims, reject a ‘present-desire’ theory of reasons for action and judge that someone who knowingly puts (say) his future health at risk for a trivial pleasure is behaving foolishly, and therefore not well.²²

This means that prudence, for Foot, is not simply a technical virtue for achieving our ends more ably, it is itself bound up with the end, with the good. As Herbert McCabe put it, it is much more importantly thinking what sort of action follows from the kind of person I am. To quote Aristotle, you have to have a character in order to make a decision, because how we interpret the world depends on the kind of person one is, the kind of virtues or vices you have developed.²³ The induction which brings us to know the first principles of action would be mistaken without the experience which proceeds from the presence of virtue.

Foot remarks that this insight permitted Quinn to develop his neo-Aristotelian account of human goods, and it certainly helped her to write *Natural Goodness*, in which we find that the life of our species and ‘Aristotelian necessities’, like habitat, education of young, care for the old and vulnerable, play a part in moral decision-making. Virtues such as chastity, temperance, courage find their fulfilment in the protection of goods such as these.

Life [is] at the centre of my discussion, and the fact that a human action or disposition is good of its kind [is] taken to be simply a fact about a given feature of a certain kind of living thing.²⁴

Alasdair MacIntyre and practical rationality

Alasdair MacIntyre, in a recent review article about Philippa Foot and Peter Geach, has suggested that Philippa Foot’s argument would gain by being pushed a little further. He is impressed (how could the author of *Dependent Rational Animals* not be?) by Foot’s interest in species-based natural goodness, but he is not convinced that Foot has found the formula for identifying what a *natural* good is, claiming that many of the virtues which she singles out are indeed good and productive of good but that it is ‘not proven’ (as a Scot might say) that they are *naturally* so (and he instances the issue of making promises), leading to a situation that to judge an action personally immoral does not necessarily mean that it is naturally evil.

MacIntyre suggests a way out: change the definition of ‘goods-specific-to-human-beings’ by playing up the role of practical rationality, the specifically human quality of ‘acting for a reason’. To say of something that it is ‘good’ should mean simply *that it gives some class of agents a reason for action*. Nothing other than a good can do this: give us reasons for action. Since we are by our specific nature reason-givers, and reason evaluators, to act against reason or without considering adequately what reasons there are for acting, when one is capable of acting rationally, will certainly involve acting immorally, but it will, crucially, also be to suffer from a natural defect, for ‘by failing to accord with reason it exhibits defective humanity’.²⁵

Conclusion

For Philippa Foot, beyond all questions of perspective to be applied to human beings in

²¹ *Natural Goodness*, p. 63.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Herbert McCabe, ‘Teaching Morals’, in *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 197.

²⁴ *Natural Goodness*, p. 5.

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Virtues in Foot and Geach’ in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (2002), 621-631.

differing circumstances and cultures, there are some basic human needs and goods, and the practical rationality involved in recognising and achieving the practical good is the place where virtue is found for human beings.

Returning to Fergus Kerr's assessment of analytic Thomism and its ability to reshape the agenda in ethics, alluding to Elizabeth Anscombe's starting point:

[T]he project of getting the word 'moral' out of ethical discourse and returning to something like Aristotle's account of what we call 'virtue' as one kind of excellence among others was not advanced very far by Anscombe. It has been brilliantly achieved by Philippa Foot.²⁶

²⁶ Fergus Kerr, 'Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?' in *Aquinas in Dialogue*, J. Fodor and F.C. Bauerschmidt eds. (Oxford: Blackwell 2004), p. 128.