



PHILIPPA FOOT

Philippa Ruth Foot

1920–2010

I

PHILIPPA RUTH FOOT was born on 3 October 1920, the second daughter of William Bosanquet, who had done mathematics at Cambridge and became the manager of a steelworks in Yorkshire, and Esther Cleveland, daughter of President Grover Cleveland. She was educated mainly at home in the country by governesses, and not well. She said, many years later, that, ‘unsurprisingly’, she had been left ‘extremely ignorant’, and when the last one, ‘who actually had a degree’, suggested to her that she should go to Oxford, she had to work for it. She spent a year with an established Oxford entrance coach and took a correspondence course to acquire the necessary entrance Latin; the result was a place at Somerville College, where she went to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) in 1939.

She graduated with First Class Honours in 1942, and, like many of her female contemporaries, immediately looked for ‘war work’. After a year working in Oxford for the Nuffield Social Reconstruction Survey, she moved to work in London where she remained until the end of the war. There she married the historian M. R. D. Foot in June 1945 and, with him, returned to Oxford later that year where she took up a teaching position at Somerville (the marriage was dissolved in 1960). She became their first Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy in 1949, Vice-Principal in 1967, and, although she resigned her fellowship in 1969, she retained, as a Senior Research Fellow and then Honorary Fellow, very close links with the College and Somervillians, past and present, until the end of her life.

She resigned her fellowship because, with characteristic independence, she had decided that it was time for a new sort of life and that she would freelance in the US. She had already held Visiting Professorships at Cornell and MIT; in her first years of wandering she went as a visiting Professor to the Universities of California (both Los Angeles—UCLA—and Berkeley), Washington, Princeton, and Stanford, to the Graduate Center at the City University of New York and the Society for the Humanities at Cornell, and as Professor in Residence at UCLA, where she finally settled in 1976.

So, for over twenty years, from 1969 until she retired in 1991, she divided her life, flying off to the US in the autumn, and returning to Oxford, a cautious swallow, in May. In the US she was President of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1982–3, became a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Science in 1983 and the first holder of the Griffin Chair in Philosophy at UCLA in 1988, and gave well over a hundred invited lectures. To provide a secure basis for all this activity, she acquired some sort of US residency, but on one occasion forgot that this was her official status. Asked by US immigration where she lived, tired after the trans-Atlantic flight, she said ‘England, of course’ and was extricated from the ensuing fracas only by her lawyer’s definitive statement that ‘Professor Foot is not only one of the world’s greatest moral philosophers but *the granddaughter of President Cleveland.*’ They let her in.

Notwithstanding this official status in the US, England did remain home. As well as maintaining her association with Somerville, she became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976, and also maintained her long association with Oxfam. She was not, as is often stated, one of the founders of Oxfam. It began in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded by some of Oxford’s leading Quakers and academics, at which point Philippa was just completing her undergraduate degree. It must have been some time after that that she became a member, and indeed, by November 1948, Oxfam’s first minute book shows that the 28-year-old Philippa was the newest and, by a generation, the youngest of those running it. When she retired from UCLA in 1991, her return to Oxford happily coincided with the approach of Oxfam’s fiftieth anniversary, and so she was able to give the Oxfam Gilbert Murray Memorial Lecture in October 1992, in which she managed to combine surveying Oxfam’s history with philosophical reflections on the virtues of charity and justice. About ten years after this, when she was well into her eighties, Oxfam took her on a month-long visit to see their work in India. It was

the sort of visit in which one stayed in peasant huts more often than in hotels and she found it exhausting but quite wonderful. Towards the end of her life she wrote: ‘Oxfam has been one of the continuous threads in my life . . . It’s been one of the happiest things through my grown up life. I was lucky to have worked for Oxfam . . . I love it.’

Her first ten years permanently back in Oxford were busy and productive, as she gave and attended classes, saw friends, became an enthusiastic gardener and worked on what was to become her book *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, 2001). For a few years after its publication she continued to work, and gave several fascinating interviews on her philosophical development, but by 2004 her health began to deteriorate badly, and by 2006 she had become bed-ridden and, sadly, unable to do philosophy any more. She hung on until 2010 when—retaining to the last her acute eye for the right moment—she died peacefully on 3 October, her ninetieth birthday.

II

By her own account, Philippa chose to do PPE, not because she was already drawn to philosophy, but only because she wanted to do ‘something theoretical’ and ‘couldn’t do mathematics’. But she came to Oxford at a propitious time for her future development as a philosopher. Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch were in their second year at Somerville, reading Greats, and Elizabeth Anscombe, also reading Greats, was a further year ahead, at St Hugh’s. Conscription had drastically reduced the number of men in Oxford, and these three girls, attending many of the same classes and (as Midgley notes in her autobiography) making themselves heard there, were friends by the time Philippa joined their group. In the 1980s, Iris Murdoch could remember that she and Philippa ‘at once became close friends’ in Philippa’s first year, and ‘the joy with which I found her, so brilliant, so beautiful. We talked about philosophy and everything.’

At this time Somerville had no tutorial fellow in philosophy, and the three Somerville girls were sent to Donald MacKinnon. He must have been a remarkable tutor, for all three recalled him with affection and gratitude decades later. Indeed, in the acknowledgements in the Preface to the first collection of her essays, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford, 1978), Philippa singles out MacKinnon as the one to whom (perhaps) she owed most. Given the way she developed, we must suppose that this was not so much because he taught her Kant but rather that he emphasised the history of philosophy and, as a Kantian theist concerned with the reality of

evil and its manifestation in tragedy, taught them a style of thinking which was very different from the Oxford moral philosophy that prevailed at the time.

This was dominated by the moral subjectivism of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (London, 1953) and Stevenson's emotivism, and was still dominant when the three young women found themselves together again in Oxford in the autumn of 1945 and Anscombe joined them a year later from Cambridge. Midgley remembers that, from then until autumn 1949, when she left, all four of them talked a lot to each other 'about Oxford moral philosophy and what should be done about it', and thinks that 'that was when we all hammered out our various thoughts on that topic'.¹

But a diary entry of Murdoch's, from just before Midgley left, shows that it was not only moral philosophy that they were discussing. It reads, 'Argument with Pip (Philippa) and Mary (Midgley) about naming feelings. M. said, case of indefinite colour. I said at least one can *look* at the colour. Pip said she had a queer feeling which she named Hubert. Not of course a log. proper name—H. has certain characteristics otherwise couldn't be named. What is it to be Hubert again?' Clearly, they had all been picking up some Wittgenstein from Anscombe.

Anscombe had returned to a Research Fellowship at Somerville in 1946, and when Philippa was appointed as a lecturer in philosophy at Somerville a year later, she joined Anscombe in the Senior Common Room and the two of them quickly formed the habit of intensely concentrated philosophical discussions after lunch; these were a regular occurrence until Anscombe left for the chair in Cambridge in 1970. Recalling them in an interview in 2003, Philippa said 'She must have been putting to me the questions that Wittgenstein put to her. Practically every day we talked for hours. I was incredibly lucky.' This is not to say that Anscombe force-fed her Wittgenstein. Apparently, she never even suggested that Philippa should read the *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953) after it came out, and when, some years later, Philippa did, 'voraciously', and said 'Why didn't you *tell* me?' she replied, 'Because it is very important to have one's resistances.'

¹ The quotations from Mary Midgley are taken from her autobiography—*The Owl of Minerva: a Memoir* (London, 2005). Those from Philippa Foot are taken from three interviews that she gave. Two of them are available on the web at <http://www.philosophynow.org/issues/41/Philippa_Foot> and <<http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hrp/issues/2003/Foot.pdf>>; the third has been published as 'Goodness' in Julian Baggini and Jeremy Strangroom (eds.) *What More Philosophers Think* (London, 2007), pp. 103–14.

Given her devout Catholicism, Anscombe was naturally as opposed to the prevailing Oxford moral philosophy as the other three, but Philippa, who always described herself as a ‘card-carrying atheist’, was convinced it must be wrong for her own reasons. She never said anything in print about what these were, but in the interviews she gave in the last decade of her life she made it clear that her philosophical conviction that morality must be objective crystallised immediately after the war when the photographs and films of Belsen and Birkenau came out. Her immediate reaction was that the separation of facts from values, the idea that, in the end, the Nazis had their values or attitudes and we had ours and there could be no grounds for saying we were right and they were wrong, ‘*had to be bad philosophy*’. And so she embarked on her lifelong task.

III

Foot’s published work, all in moral philosophy, spans fifty years, consisting entirely of essays until its culmination in her only monograph, *Natural Goodness*. Looking at the first of her two volumes of collected papers, one is struck by how early she found her distinctive voice. Right from the beginning, we have the opposition to subjectivism in ethics and the application of the Wittgensteinian techniques. What she has always been doing is what Wittgenstein says is the work of the philosopher, namely assembling reminders for a particular purpose. The general Wittgensteinian purpose is always to ‘*command a clear view of our use of words*’; the particular purpose in Foot’s case has always been to get clearer about our use of words when we are making moral judgements. When we evaluate someone as a good person, their action as right or wrong, their character as good or bad, what are we doing, what grounds do we typically give for our judgements, what do we expect from someone who has said it, what other uses of these words are these uses in moral judgements like, what background do these uses presuppose, what is the standard role or function of their use, and so on?

In her Introduction to the first edition of *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford, 1978), which collected most of what she had written in the previous twenty years, Foot described the last eight essays as representing ‘the development of a certain line of thought on the theory of moral judgement’ and also as ones in which she was making ‘a painfully slow journey . . . away from theories that located the special character of evaluations in each speaker’s attitudes or feelings, or recognition of reason for acting’. But,

given what was in the collection, that seems to be inaccurate on both counts. There was nothing *slow* about her journey away from the contemporary subjectivist theories of moral judgement that appealed to the speaker's attitudes or feelings or motivating reasons. She was utterly opposed to them when she started, as is clear in the earliest of the essays reprinted—the 'Moral arguments' paper of 1958 (published in *Mind*). But, on the other hand, we do not find her developing her own 'line of thought on the theory of moral judgement' until two papers—'Rationality and virtue' and 'Does moral subjectivism rest on a mistake?' (both reprinted in *Moral Dilemmas and other Topics in Moral Philosophy*: Oxford, 2002)—appeared over thirty-five years later, which prefigure *Natural Goodness*.

The attack on the fact–value dichotomy

'Moral arguments' already exemplifies a number of Wittgensteinian features. One is the avoidance of what he called 'a one-sided diet' of examples, another the resistance to the philosopher's 'craving for generality' which he deplored, and another, the recognition of the fact that our use of words is governed by public criteria and hence that they cannot have any meaning that a speaker chooses to give them. All these are brought to bear on the word 'rude'—not an example one would immediately think to bring up in discussions of the evaluative meaning of 'right' and 'wrong' but one which, according to Midgley, had been the topic of some of those earlier group discussions in which Foot and the others had 'hammered out' their thoughts. Foot argued that 'rude' had all the characteristics attributed to evaluative terms by philosophers, but is correctly judged to apply to a piece of behaviour when and only when that behaviour meets certain conditions, regardless of the thinker's attitudes to it. So even if it is evaluative, it is also descriptive, that is, true or false according to how things are independently of the one who makes the judgement.

Generalising the point that no individual is free to choose which facts about a piece of behaviour are relevant to its being rude, she introduced what was known at the time as 'the content restriction'. This was the claim that an action cannot be *morally* evaluated as a good action unless considerations (however insanely superstitious or wicked) of human good and harm were figuring somewhere in the background against which the evaluation was made. This was a necessary point at the time, because the philosopher R. M. Hare's widely accepted prescriptivism was thought to have the odd consequence that, as she had noted, if someone insisted sincerely

that ‘no-one should run round trees left-handed’ and followed this rule himself, but could say nothing about why this was important, he could be correctly described as holding this as a basic *moral* principle.

Foot’s metaethics is not an attack on the fact–value distinction; it is the rejection of a purported *dichotomy*. She never denied that the judgements the people she was attacking called ‘evaluative’ were indeed evaluative; she insisted that they were descriptive, ‘logically vulnerable to facts’ *too*. Moreover, she accepted that, in some as yet unexplored sense, they were related to choice and action.

At the time of writing ‘Moral beliefs’ (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1958) she was certain—perhaps because of many years of teaching Plato and reading Aquinas—that the sense in which moral evaluations were related to action was that ‘moral judgements give reasons for acting to each and every man’. Further, she thought that, at least as far as judgements about the virtues were concerned, she could show that this was so. Appealing to Plato’s view in the *Republic*, Foot committed herself to the ancient Greek idea that possession of the virtues benefits their possessor, arguing, albeit briefly, that even justice—so often seen as generating the paradigm cases in which morality and self-interest conflict—was ‘more profitable’ than injustice, and hence that everyone had reason to choose to acquire it and act in accordance with it.

Consideration of virtue terminology in the context of metaethics, at that time largely ignored, was a startling move. It was obviously true that ‘just’, ‘courageous’, ‘kind’, and their opposites are terms whose application is strongly governed by facts, and yet equally obvious that they are used in moral judgements. The favoured response was to preserve the fact–value dichotomy by insisting that evaluative terms could be used in two distinct ways which Hare had already introduced. There was an ‘inverted comma’ use, which simply described the facts, and a genuinely evaluative use in which the speaker committed herself to having some sort of favourable attitude to whatever was at issue.

This reaction may have reminded Foot, given her Wittgensteinian predilections, that concentrating on the ‘thick’ evaluative virtue and vice terms was feeding on a rather one-sided diet. So she turned her attention to everyone’s favoured ‘thin’ one, namely ‘good’, and, in ‘Goodness and choice’ (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1961), uncovered a different sense in which evaluative judgements of the form ‘a good F’ are related to choice.

She begins with the obviously functional Fs—‘knife’, ‘pen’, etc.—regarding which it is generally agreed that whether or not an object is truly

described as a good knife is as much a matter of fact as whether or not it is a sharp one. What 'knife' means is an object used for cutting, and the criterion for the goodness of functional objects is that they perform their function well. She then moves to 'farmer', 'rider', 'liar', noting that, although we do not say that farmers and liars have a function the way knives and pens do, nevertheless, they have a characteristic activity (what Aristotle would call an '*ergon*') which has to be done well if someone is to be a good F. So in these cases too, the criteria of goodness are determined by what the word means.

It may be objected that these are not really examples of evaluative judgements in the intended sense, and it is certainly true that none of them, so far, is what we would call a moral judgement. But the same is not clearly true of her next batch of examples. The criteria for whether someone is a good daughter, or father, or friend are determined by the meanings of the words; a good *father* is one who 'looks after his children as best he can', a good *friend* is one who is 'well-disposed' towards the man whose friend he is, and, as she notes, we may think that a 'wholly good' man could not be a bad father or friend. In support of the claim that these words have such moral connotations, she applies what might be called 'Wittgenstein's (or Quine's) translation test': if a tribe used the expression 'a good F' to apply to a man on the grounds that he offered his children up for sacrifice, we would not translate 'F' as 'father' but as, for example, 'citizen' or 'priest'.

In her discussion of these, and many other examples, Foot established the significant conclusion that a large number of evaluative judgements are not only true or false but also that their truth-conditions do not include any particular fact about the speaker's attitudes, feelings, motivations or recognition of reasons to act. They do so only when context, or the actual words used, signal this fact (as in 'This is a good knife for *my* purposes'). But she was far from denying a prevailing relation between judgements involving 'good' and there being a reason to choose what is, as a matter of fact, a good whatever. She locates it as holding, when it does, between the facts that make the judgements true and (not the individual speaker but) a general background of *people's* purposes, needs and desires. We invented pens because we wanted to write legibly and easily; unless an individual idiosyncratically wants to write illegibly or messily, she has reason to choose a good pen. We need doctors to preserve and restore our health; unless an individual wants to be unhealthy, she has reason to choose a good doctor and to be a good patient. However, the upshot of this is that anyone who does not have the relevant purposes may have no reason to

choose a good so and so, and, at the very end, she says that we ‘may not’ be able to give a particular individual a reason for choosing to be a good, rather than a bad, parent.

The is–ought gap

This closing remark hints at her abandonment of her ‘Moral beliefs’ view that ‘moral judgements give reasons for acting to each and every man’. She makes this explicit in the otherwise rather tentative ‘Reasons for action and desires’ (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1972) and very explicit in the far from tentative ‘Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives’ (*The Philosophical Review*, 1972). Here, to the delight of the followers of Hume who maintained that one cannot get an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, and the consternation of those who believed in the rationality of morality and had thought she was an ally, she argued vigorously against the idea that ‘ought’ has guaranteed reason-giving force when used to make moral judgements.

She pointed to a distinction between the ‘categorical’ and ‘hypothetical’ uses of ‘ought’ and ‘should’. The hypothetical use, typical in the giving of helpful advice as in, for example, ‘You ought to take the 5.15 train’ or ‘You ought to give up eating chocolate’, is desire or interest-dependent. We use it as a shorthand for ‘Given you want to ... or have an interest in ... or have such and such an end, you ought to ...’ and this is shown by the fact that when we discover that the person addressed does not have the relevant desire or interest we withdraw the claim that they ought to. In contrast, when we are using it ‘categorically’, as we do, she agrees, when we intend to make a moral judgement, it is not desire or interest-dependent.

However, as she disconcertingly goes on to point out, the desire- or interest-independent use of ‘ought’ and ‘should’, far from being the distinctive mark of a moral judgement, is to be found wherever there is some system of rules; her favoured example is etiquette and the use of ‘should’ in the judgement ‘Invitations in the third person should be answered in the third person’. Clearly, any follower of Kant will say that the etiquette judgement is not a categorical but a hypothetical imperative, and Foot takes it that their grounds must be that the fact that something is required by etiquette does not, in itself, give anyone a reason to do it, whereas the fact that something is required by morality gives everyone a reason to do it. It is assumed, that is, that moral judgements have a guaranteed reason-giving force and this Foot denies. They give reasons, she maintains, only to those who have adopted moral ends, and thereby have certain interests and desires.

Foot maintained staunchly that she did not regard this position as being ‘inimical to morality’, claiming in the 1978 Introduction to the collection (*Virtues and Vices*) in which this paper was reprinted that ‘[c]onsiderations of justice, charity and the like have a strange and powerful appeal to the human heart’. But given that she had set out to produce a theory of moral judgement which would reflect her conviction that there had to be grounds for our saying that we were right and the Nazis were wrong, she had wound up in a very strange position. We can say, with objective truth, that Hitler was a thoroughly bad person, a wicked man, that, indeed, he acted badly, but we cannot move from that to ‘He had reason to be other than he was and to do other than he did’, since considerations of justice and charity had no appeal to him.

Notwithstanding the staunch denials, Foot knew something had gone wrong somewhere, but, for almost fifteen years, she could see no alternative. So she abandoned her theoretical work on moral judgement and, from the mid-1970s up until 1990, she published most of her influential work in applied and normative ethics.

Applied and normative ethics

This includes her remarkable paper ‘Euthanasia’ (*Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1977), which, discussing the issue in terms of charity and justice, predated any other attempt to apply virtue ethics to a contemporary moral problem by almost fifteen years and is still a frequently read classic. One of its most notable features is that she identifies most unjustified acts of killing as contrary to both justice *and* charity, pointing out that charity is the virtue that attaches us to the good of others, so when life is a good to its possessor, and death an evil to him, as is usually the case, charity forbids killing him as stringently as does justice in respecting his right to life. However, the two virtues do not always speak as one. When, as in cases of genuine euthanasia, life is truly no longer a good to its possessor, but, on the contrary, his death would be a benefit to him, charity would speak in favour of killing him. However, if he does not want to be killed, justice speaks against it. Hence the importance of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary euthanasia.

The subtle interplay of justice and charity and the different sorts of action each require is also brought to bear on the familiar distinction between active and passive euthanasia. Foot argues that, quite generally, the right to life, with which justice is concerned, is a ‘liberty-right’, related to the duty of non-interference, not a ‘claim-right’ related to a duty of

service or aid; that one ought to preserve and sustain the life of others is usually a requirement of charity, but not of justice. So justice rules out killing when the person does not want to die, but does not necessarily rule out allowing to die. However it may do so, especially in the hospital context of euthanasia, where the right to life includes the claim-right to certain services from the doctors. Her complex conclusion is that non-voluntary active euthanasia is never justified, but that the other three combinations sometimes are (though noting that the question of whether they should be legalised is certainly not thereby settled and that we should be very wary of it).

The distinction between killing and allowing to die and its relation to the distinct requirements of justice and charity is prefigured in a much earlier paper, 'The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect' (*The Oxford Review*, 1967), though there it is largely expressed in terms of negative and positive duties. In the course of arguing that the good work done by the Doctrine's distinction between intended and foreseen outcomes of one's action could be done by the distinction between negative and positive duties, she introduced the so-called 'trolley problem', which is discussed to this day. The driver of a runaway tram can steer it onto one narrow track which will kill one man working there, or onto another which will kill five, and she discusses why it is that, in this case, we agree that the driver should steer for the one, but that, in many other cases, such as killing one man to provide needed spare parts for five others, we would be horrified by the suggestion.

In three later papers, she develops her own account of the general distinction between 'doing and allowing' (of which killing and letting die is an instance) in terms of whether or not someone is 'the agent' of harm that befalls someone else. She argues that someone brings about, or does, a harm when they initiate (by act or omission) a sequence of events that leads to the harm, or sustain a sequence leading to harm which would otherwise have petered out. In contrast, if a harmful sequence is already in train and someone could forestall it but does not, then they do not bring the harm about, but allow it.

She adds to this the distinction between intended and foreseen outcomes which she had earlier rejected, noting that allowing a harmful sequence to continue with the intention of exploiting the result, even for good purposes, is morally distinct from allowing it to continue as a foreseen outcome while one does something else. The examples are allowing a beggar to die in order to use his body to save others, and allowing a single man who will die without all of a scarce drug to die while one saves five others who need less by giving it to them.

In two of these three papers, 'Morality, action and outcome' (in *Morality and Objectivity*, edited by Ted Honderich: London, 1985) and 'Utilitarianism and the virtues' (*Mind*, 1985), Foot argued that these distinctions, so essential to our moral evaluation of action, could not be accommodated in utilitarianism, because it assumes that such evaluation is wholly dependent on an action's outcome and whether or not this is the best available state of affairs. Thereby, she concludes, utilitarianism is a deficient moral theory.

Moreover, she went on to argue, its neglect of the virtues leads us astray about 'good (or best) state of affairs'. What makes the 'best state of affairs' as the sole determinant of moral action seem irresistibly rational, she says, is the simple thought that surely it must always be right for an agent to bring about the best state of affairs that she can. How could it be *better* for her to produce a worse one! But given that this view infamously entails that one not only may but *must* do an unspeakably evil deed if that is what it takes to produce 'the best state of affairs', there must be something amiss with that simple thought, and Foot identifies it as the unexamined use of 'best state of affairs'.

She begins by arguing that 'good state of affairs', like 'good thing' and quite unlike 'good pen', 'good doctor', and the other examples she had discussed in 'Goodness and choice' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1961), is far too speaker-relative to play any role in moral judgement; to do the work it is supposed to do, it has to be understood as 'good state of affairs from the moral point of view'. And utilitarians are right to say that from *within* morality, anyone with the virtue of charity—or, in modern parlance, benevolence—will indeed see states of affairs in which people are happy and free from suffering as good. Utilitarianism is often described as 'the ethics of benevolence', and, perhaps especially when we remember that benevolence encompasses compassion, this is just what attracts many good-hearted people to it.

However, Foot points out that, in a way, this is just what is wrong with it. From within morality as we have it, benevolence is but one amongst other virtues and is circumscribed by their requirements, particularly those of justice. It is only from within the utilitarian morality itself that we could always speak of someone who refuses to torture one man to save others, or who tells a hurtful truth rather than a bare-faced lie as failing in benevolence or compassion, for it is the ethics of benevolence *alone*.

IV

This was all splendid philosophy, but it was not, quite, what she had set out to do in the 1950s. She returned to her original concerns around the mid-1980s, when the work of Michael Thompson, then one of her graduate students at UCLA, suggested to her some new thoughts about moral judgements. Impressed by the ideas that Thompson would eventually publish as ‘The representation of life’ (in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Hursthouse, Lawrence and Quinn: Oxford, 1995), she began the work which was to culminate in *Natural Goodness*.

Foot’s original title for her book was actually ‘The Grammar of Goodness’. With hindsight, it seems that this would have been a better title, making it clear that the book has little to do with the natural, biological sciences, let alone evolutionary theory. Given her commitment to Wittgenstein, this was bound to be so. Foot was anti-foundationalist and anti-reductionist to the core, and the most unlikely philosopher in the world to think that any of the natural sciences had any bearing on the philosopher’s task, especially, perhaps, if that were moral philosophy; she was back in the business of talking about the logical grammar of moral judgements. For what struck her so forcibly about Thompson’s work was that it represented our talk about—and hence our evaluations of—*living* things as being *sui generis*, with its own distinctive grammar.

Foot had, in fact, had the germ of this idea right back in ‘Goodness and choice’, but was only now able to appreciate its significance. Amongst her many examples of ‘good F’ judgements in that paper, she had mentioned good roots, claws, eyes, stomachs, and other parts of living things, and had pointed out that, like good knives, these were all correctly called ‘good’ in virtue of being such as to perform their function well. She also pointed out the absurdity of supposing that someone could set up their own criteria for ‘good cactus’ without any reference to the fact that a cactus is a living organism, ‘which can therefore be called healthy or unhealthy’. She even noted that the goodness of the parts of a living thing, and hence its overall goodness as a specimen of its kind, had to do with the role each part played in the life of that kind of organism, and nothing whatsoever to do with us and what we want or use or need or take an interest in.

However, back then, she did not notice that, in this last respect, the evaluations of living things and their parts are grammatically distinct from the evaluations of manufactured objects, or works of literature, or riders or doctors or any of her other examples. Plants and animals have a

special sort of goodness which she came to call ‘autonomous’ or ‘natural’ goodness—‘autonomous’ in contrast to the sort of ‘secondary’ goodness we ascribe to living things when, for example, we say of a specimen of a plant that it is good because it is growing the way we want it to grow, or of a horse that it is good because it wins races.

In the light of Thompson’s work, she saw that when we ascribe autonomous goodness (or defect) to a living thing, we look not to ourselves but to the ‘life-form’ of the kind of living thing it is. The life-form of a particular kind of thing, S, is laid out in a set of ‘Aristotelian categoricals’. These take the form of ‘The S is (or has or does) F’ or ‘Ss are (or have or do) F’. These say, of a *kind* of thing, the S, that ‘it’ has certain characteristics or features (has a tap root, is four-legged, has eyes that can see in the dark) or that it operates or behaves in a certain way (self-pollinates, sees in the dark, hunts in packs). The Fs are the features that, in the life of the S, have the function of achieving what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction. She sometimes expresses this by saying that the Aristotelian categoricals describe a particular life-form’s ‘mode of operation’—how it ‘manages’ or ‘gets along’ in its life.

The Aristotelian categoricals about plants and the other animals are the sorts of factual claims that botanists and ethnologists who observe kinds of living things in what they take to be their natural habitat make. One striking thing about them is that they are not merely statistical; if things have been going badly for the Ss, it may well be that hardly any of them are F and still be true that ‘The S is F’. Another striking thing is that, though factual, they supply a standard—a ‘natural norm’ in Foot’s terminology—for evaluating individual Ss. If it is true that ‘The S is F’, then an individual S which is not F is defective in that respect—not ‘as it should be’ or ‘as it is supposed to be’. But if it *is* F then it is, in that respect at least, a good F—it has ‘natural goodness’. Hence they supply the norms we use to evaluate individual Ss as strong or weak, healthy or diseased, good or defective, Ss. An individual good or excellent S, defective in no respect, thereby has the Fs it needs in order to flourish, to live the life it is its good to live, notwithstanding the obvious point that whether it actually succeeds in doing so depends on chance as well as on its own qualities.

Once Foot had this idea of the distinctive ‘grammar of goodness’ in living things she had her new approach to moral judgements. Her thought was that they have the same ‘conceptual structure’ as the evaluations of other living things. She first made it public in 1989 in her Romanell Lecture on Philosophical Naturalism (a public lecture delivered annually at an American Philosophical Association meeting), which she began with the

riveting remark, 'In moral philosophy it is useful, I believe, to think about plants.'

Her point is that, like plants, we are living things; when we make moral judgements about ourselves and each other, we are evaluating living things which can therefore be called healthy or unhealthy, good (or excellent) or defective specimens of their kind, just as plants can. It might be thought that moral evaluation was bound to be different, but, from her earliest days, Foot had maintained that it was a mistake to think that the uses of 'good' and 'ought' in moral judgements were grammatically distinct from their non-moral uses. Insofar as they are distinct, this is because moral judgements have a distinct subject matter, namely human character, action and will. When we evaluate an individual human being as healthy or unhealthy, or a good physical specimen of *homo sapiens*, the evaluations are not moral but medical or biological. When we drop the 'healthy' and 'unhealthy', and the use of 'specimen', but keep the terminology of excellence and defect, we find, when talking about ourselves in this way, that we are back with talk about the virtues and vices as excellences and defects, all within the same conceptual structure. The (moral) virtues are natural excellences; the vices are natural defects.

This gives her the new version of her original position on the fact/value dichotomy with respect to good, i.e. virtuous, human beings. Nothing has been said so far which determines that, for example, justice and charity are amongst the natural excellences or that an unjust human being is, in that respect at least, a bad or defective one. However, employing the conceptual structure, Foot finds many parallels between our recognition of defect in the other social animals, who, as we do, depend on each other, and the orthodox list of virtues.

One of her favourite examples is the Aristotelian categorical 'Wolves hunt in packs'. Given that this is part of the description of the wolf's way of getting on, of what wolves, in the wolf's way of life, need to do to sustain themselves, a 'free-riding' wolf which eats what the others have caught but does not join in the hunt, is thereby a defective wolf. Similarly, a chimpanzee that does not groom others is a defective chimpanzee. Part of the way we get on, Foot claims, is by making and keeping contracts, and helping each other when misfortune strikes. Such facts about human existence—different facts and details for the different virtues—figured in 'Moral beliefs' as the objective grounds for saying that everyone had a self-interested reason for aiming at virtue. Now they are fitted into the general conceptual structure, with no insistence on self-interest or the 'profitability' of justice. There are factual judgements to be made about

what human beings, given what we are and what we do, need in order to flourish or live well as human beings, and in these we will find the objective grounds for maintaining that, for example, justice and kindness are virtues, or forms of natural goodness. So a just human is, in that respect, a good human being—or ‘person’ as, colloquially, we say when making moral judgements.

But what of the is–ought gap—the idea that ‘moral judgements give reasons for acting to each and every man’? At the beginning of *Natural Goodness* she describes this problem as ‘the fence at which I myself have repeatedly fallen, trying now this way, now that, of getting over it’, reminding her readers that her first attempt dated as far back as 1958, with ‘Moral beliefs’, and that it was the problem that had brought her to a halt after she had written ‘Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives’ in 1972 and concluded, but not happily, that moral judgements did no such thing. She now locates the source of her persisting difficulty in her unquestioning acceptance of an instrumentalist account of practical rationality, namely that its function is to achieve the maximum fulfilment of the agent’s desires or the agent’s self-interest. It was a mistake in strategy to start with a pre-established concept of practical rationality and then try to bring moral action under it. What is needed is a fresh start in which one sees goodness in reason-recognition and reason-following as another form of natural goodness.

That ‘The human being acts for reasons’ is certainly an Aristotelian categorical about the human life-form; indeed philosophers have long had a term for this aspect of our behaviour; it is the operation of our ‘practical reason’. Viewed one way, our practical reason is, as far as moral philosophy is concerned, our most significant feature, the thing that, in philosophical tradition, makes us distinct from the other animals in being moral agents. But viewed another way, it is just one of our features, albeit unique, *as* an animal, a living thing, namely a faculty like our sight and hearing, which can be, or fail to be, in good working order in a good, or defective, human being. And it is as the latter that Foot could now view it.

She argues that the two forms of instrumentalism each capture *an* aspect of practical rationality in human beings, given the nature of the human life-form. The human being desires pleasure and enjoyment; an individual who does not is sadly defective. Moreover, many human pleasures are harmless and innocent, and it is rational to satisfy desires for them when there is no reason not to. A human being who does not ever recognise ‘That would be enjoyable’ as an ‘all things considered’ reason for doing it, or, recognising it, self-denyingly fails to act on it, is defect-

ive. That is one aspect of practical rationality. The human being can look out for itself much better than anyone else can. (She notes that, in theory, there could be a kind of rational being which found it impossible to think calmly about its own future and had invented a ‘buddy system’ in which each person had someone else to look out for him. But we are not like that.) An adult human being who does not often recognise ‘That might well be my undoing’ as an all things considered reason for avoiding it, or recognising it, does it anyhow, is defective. That is a second aspect of practical rationality.

So we have it, in both cases, that practical rationality—good practical reason, or the faculty in good working order—is goodness in reason-recognition and reason-following. Her argument for the third aspect connects this with the concept of a virtue. What distinguishes someone with a virtue from someone who lacks it, she points out, is not simply how they act, but their reasons for acting in that way. Virtuous people, defective in no respect, recognise certain considerations as powerful, and in many circumstances compelling reasons for action, and follow them. So any virtue is a form of goodness in reason-recognition and reason-following and hence a further aspect of practical rationality.

In rejecting the instrumentalists’ restriction of reasons for action to considerations related to the agent’s desires or interests, Foot agrees with Kant in accepting what is called ‘externalism’ about moral reasons—the view that someone who says of them ‘That’s not a reason for me’ is defective in practical reason. But, for Foot, there are no such things as the principles of *pure* practical reason; practical reason, as we know it, is not a feature of rational beings or rational agents as such, but simply a feature of us—terrestrial hominids. Kant’s purely formal account of practical rationality is displaced in Foot by a substantive conception of non-defective, particularly human, agency.

To establish, within the conceptual structure, that a certain character trait is a virtue, is also to establish that a human being who does not recognise certain considerations as reasons for acting is thereby defective in practical rationality. As she recognises, common usage does not really allow describing the actions of the Great Train Robbers as ‘irrational’ which was what had led to her earlier rejection of externalism in ‘Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives’, but she can now express the point she wanted in terms of defect, and she is happy to say that what they did was ‘contrary to reason’, or that in saying truly that what they did was dishonest and callous we *would* be giving them reason to do other than they did, regardless of whether they recognise it or not.

Throughout the book she emphasises the fact that she is outlining a conceptual structure which our moral evaluations share with the botanists' and ethnologists' evaluations of the individual members of whatever kind of living thing they are studying. In both cases, the evaluation is based on natural facts about the nature of the kind of living thing being evaluated and how it lives. However, she also argues that, within this structure, a great 'sea-change', as she wonderfully puts it, occurs when we move from the talk about the other living things to talk about ourselves, for what we are and how we live is, indeed, rich and strange. The life that is the human good is far from being merely a matter of development, self-maintenance and reproduction as it is for all other living things, but essentially related to the concept of happiness, and facts about the nature of human beings and how human life goes, in the relevant sense, though natural facts, are far from being a matter on which the human sciences have authority. All of this is taken into account, but the differences between us and the other living things still fit into the same conceptual structure.

V

Philippa inspired love in many of her colleagues and pupils, and those of us who loved her find *Natural Goodness* expressing many of the qualities we loved in her: her delightful sense of humour, her rich capacity for enjoyment, the clarity of her thought, her originality, her tender consciousness of lives less fortunate than her own, her generosity, her willingness to admit to past mistakes, her moral wisdom, and, perhaps, above all, the evidence of her steely determination to work things out about moral judgement, no matter how difficult it seemed or how long it took her. Few academic philosophers wrestle with a single problem throughout their careers, and of those that do, few bring it to a successful culmination. But Philippa did. At the remarkable age of eighty, she achieved what she had always been aiming at—a satisfactory theory of moral judgement. Had she managed to publish *Natural Goodness* just two years earlier, many would have hailed it as the greatest work in moral philosophy of the twentieth century. It is very short and hence, philosophically, very dense. But it is written with such lucid simplicity, and filled with such a wealth of real life examples, that non-philosophical readers frequently describe it as 'beautiful', which, indeed it is.

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