

Philippa Foot (1920–)

GAVIN LAWRENCE

Philippa Foot is among the handful of the twentieth century's very best moral philosophers. Her achievement consists not so much of truths presented as of her distinctive voice in philosophy. In this way, she is like Moore or Rawls, or most pertinently Wittgenstein. To read her is immediately to struggle with the real stuff of the subject, to the highest standards; the subject is not the same for one again.

Her work divides into several, diversely overlapping, strands: the major themes of ethics, such as its objectivity and its rationality; middle range issues, such as freedom of the will, virtues and vices, the critique of utilitarianism, and moral dilemmas; more specific ethical distinctions and problems, such as the doctrine of double effect, abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. I will focus on the major themes.

Her treatment of the issues of morality's objectivity and of rationality falls into three phases. These phases relate to three Humean (or neo-Humean) orthodoxies: (1) the fact/value distinction, (2) the practicality of morality, and (3) the end-relative conception of practical reason. Roughly, Foot starts by rejecting (1) while accepting (2) and (3). She then rejects (2) as well. Finally she rejects (3) in favor of a more Aristotelian conception of practical reason and comes to reassert (2).

The first phase (1950s to mid-1960s): the Wittgensteinian defence of the possibility of naturalism

From the first, Foot has taken mainstream contemporary moral philosophy to be dominated by two of the three Humean propositions:

(1) *The fact/value distinction* (anti-naturalism) assumes, against the naturalist, that there is some logical gap between fact and evaluation – between “is” and “ought.” Evaluations go beyond the natural facts. And, in the subjectivist version, they require a contribution from the subject. If so, evaluative judgments, unlike factual ones, are not wholly responsible to the world, and evaluative argument may *break down* in a way that factual argument cannot: two opponents may agree about all the facts, and yet commit their will differently and so be left in a bare opposition of will or attitude, without any rational error (see ANSCOMBE).

Three versions of (1), “the breakdown theory,” particularly concern us. (1a) *Radical subjectivism* claims that no particular, conceptually restricted, range of facts is either

necessary or sufficient evidence for a certain evaluative predicate (i.e. no content restriction). (1b) *Restricted subjectivism* claims that, while necessary, such a range of facts is never sufficient. (1c) *Partial subjectivism* claims that, while necessary and sometimes sufficient, such a range of facts is not *always* sufficient.

(2) *The practicality of morality* is the orthodoxy that morality is somehow “practical” or action-guiding. Although (1) secures a division between fact and value, it allows one to explain the second orthodoxy. It is because morality is a matter of value, not of fact, that it can be action-guiding. It may be that the practicality of morality may be a matter either of its motivational efficacy, or of its rationality and thus the claim that moral considerations universally motivate, or that they universally constitute reasons. (The latter raises the further issue of the nature of practical reason, and thus the relevance of (3).) Further differences exist over the modality of the thesis: does morality just happen to be universally motivating/reason-giving, or is it necessarily, or essentially, so? and over whether the motivation/reason yielded by morality is supposed overriding (or authoritative).

In her first phase – most notably in “Moral Arguments,” “Moral Beliefs,” and “Hume on Moral Judgement” (all in 1978) – Foot argues both that (1) has not been made out by its anti-naturalist proponents, and that (2) doesn’t in fact require it.

Her initial target is (1a) radical subjectivism. According to this view, there are supposedly *no* content restrictions on what can be held to be morally good, or a moral principle, or a moral code. Consistency apart, a person is free to discount the facts or grounds anyone else takes as evidence for something’s being good, and is free to count as evidence facts that no one else acknowledges as evidence. This personal freedom to decide relevant grounds – what Foot terms “the private enterprise theory” of morality – seemingly risks making evaluative predicates meaningless. Isn’t a predicate that can be freely pasted anywhere necessarily uninformative? What initially saves the subjectivist is the “linguistic turn,” so influential in the 1940s and 1950s. This is the recognition that language is multi-functional, and that, in particular, it has other purposes besides the descriptive or informational. Thus, the anti-naturalist need not follow Moore in holding that “good” is descriptive of a non-natural property, rather than of a natural one. Rather the anti-naturalist holds that the primary use of “good” is not to describe the world, but to express an attitude or to recommend.

Foot argues that radical subjectivists do not prove their case. She begins by considering a middle level, or thick, predicate, such as “rude,” that her opponents would likely concede is evaluative (i.e. to have an expressive or action-guiding function). But, as she points out, if one uses the concept of rudeness, one isn’t free to take just anything one likes as evidence for rudeness (e.g. walking slowly up to a door), or to reject just anything either (e.g. being spat on), any more than one is free to decide what is and isn’t evidence for a brain tumor. (Of course, given a suitably special background story, behavior that normally is not rude may be rude, for example pointedly walking slowly when asked politely to hurry, and vice versa.) Foot then claims that, for all the opposition has argued, what holds for “rude” may hold for *all* evaluative concepts, including the more abstract “thin” ones. For all they argue, there may yet be the “very tightest of relations” between fact and value. Evaluative concepts are, like any others, criteria-governed concepts: they have “definitional criteria” which lay down what is and isn’t relevant evidence for them. Leave these criteria behind and you leave behind the concept. (In

“Moral Beliefs” she puts the point in terms of an object being internally related to the attitude it is an object of. One cannot feel proud of just anything: one has, say, to be thinking of it as an achievement of one’s own.)

At this point subjectivists can go in one of two directions to avoid Foot’s position.

First, they can accept Foot’s point for “thick” evaluative terms, but reject it for “thin” ones. They may claim that we are free to decide what counts as benefit or harm; or they may admit that there are criteria, or rules of evidence, for our existing moral code and our existing moral terms, but claim we are always free to invent new moral terms, new virtues, or moral codes.

To this, Foot replies in a manner reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* §261, that factual constraints apply here too. Not just anything can count as a benefit or a harm, nor just anything count as a virtue or *moral* code. The claim that no one should look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon could not count as a *moral* principle without a special background. More generally, even the word “moral” is content-restricted. Not just any alien, or trivial, code can count as a moral one. Roughly, moral considerations must relate to human good and harm. (Foot does not claim to have thoroughly elucidated the definitional criteria at work in our moral predicates.)

Alternatively, subjectivists can opt for a *restricted subjectivism*, by using proposition (1b). According to this view, Foot’s conceptually restricted descriptive conditions (a) are necessary for an application of an evaluative predicate, and (b) sufficient for a merely descriptive (or “inverted comma”) application of them. But, it claims, these conditions do not suffice for a properly evaluative use. To think they do is to miss the very point of evaluation, namely, that therein agents contribute something of their own after the facts are settled, be it a commitment of will or intention, feeling, or attitude, etc. It is this further element, of its nature linked to a tendency to act, that is needed to secure morality’s practicality, as in (2). It is something entirely up to agents, and cannot be logically required of them by the world.

In “Moral Beliefs,” part II, Foot argues that this position too is mistaken: it puts “the practical implication of value words in the wrong place.” Her argument, as I read it, contains a carrot and stick. The carrot is the offer of a more plausible account of morality’s practicality. Injury, she suggests, offers a helpful parallel. Once we agree that not just anything can be called an injury, we can see that the *reason* for us to avoid injury is not that “reason-givingness” is built into the evaluative use of “injury.” Rather, it is simply that certain kinds of things count as injuries. I have a reason not to poke a sharp object in my eye not because I find myself prepared to call this an “injury” in a full evaluative or full action-guiding, sense, but because I won’t be able to see, and, as things are, I need to see. Similarly the connection between moral judgment and the will does not lie in the will’s commitment being a condition constitutive of evaluative use, but in the content of moral judgment. It is the facts about what the virtues are, given the conditions of human life, that secure that there is reason for each of us to be virtuous, and act virtuously.

The stick is to query how any such extra element – be it attitude, disposition to choose, self-addressed imperative, or whatever – could possibly perform this role of rationalizing actions or character traits. For all suggested candidates seem obviously

unnecessary, as far as reason-givingness goes. I may know that courage is a virtue and that I have reason to be courageous, but, coward that I am, have no commitment, or whatever, to mending my ways.

The alternative account of morality's practicality, (2), interprets it as a matter of universal rationality, not of universal motivation. (Foot supposes this the more plausible version.) And, by its very nature, it ushers back on stage another, much older, opponent, the immoralist, who, like Plato's Thrasymachus agrees that morality's rationality is settled by facts about the virtues, but queries whether these favor the recognized virtues, and justice in particular; for justice, on the face of it, is "another's good and self harm." The rest of "Moral Beliefs" attempts to answer this opponent.

But which facts about the virtues and virtuous action would show that there is reason to pursue them? The specific form of Foot's alternative account, and of her reply to the immoralist, is controlled by her assumption of an *end-relative* conception of practical reason, namely the third orthodoxy.

(3) A consideration C is a reason for agents if, and only if, it serves something they desire or care about, that is, it is a reason only in relation to their ends. Given this view of what makes something a reason, we all have reason to be virtuous and to act virtuously if and only if the facts about the virtues and virtuous actions show them to connect up with what each person happens to want or care about. This connection could be instrumental or constitutive. Moral considerations may be reasons either because they further an agent's non-moral end, or because they are constitutive of achieving some moral end of the agent's. Foot supposes that not everyone has moral ends, and that the only end universally shared is a non-moral one of self-interest (albeit not necessarily selfish). Thus she feels that, to defend the universal rationality of morality (her commitment to (2)), she has to demonstrate a kind of moral instrumentalism: that, as things are, the virtues further self-interest.

The resulting position has its problems. One that immediately occupies Foot is the defence of justice. It is not difficult to make a general case that justice furthers an agent's self-interest; but what of the "tight corner," the particular case where to act justly an agent has to lay down her life? How can justice here be more to the agent's advantage or self-interest? The solution she offers was a version of Hume's but, by her own account, it was in part dissatisfaction with this that leads her next to abandon (2). It is not, however, until the third phase that Foot locates the real culprit, the neo-Humean view of practical reason. Only then is the restricted subjectivist presented with a proper alternative account, and the immoralist with an adequate response.

The second phase (1970s): unease over morality and the rejection of (2)

The mark of Foot's second phase is the suspicion that our ordinary moral thought and language contains elements of fiction, in its assumptions of complete objectivity and of rationality or authority. In "Morality and Art" (1970) Foot still rejects the fact/value distinction, (1). The definitional criteria built into the concept of the moral constrain what can count as a moral code or as morally good and explains why so many moral

judgments can be proved from the facts (e.g. that Hitler's treatment of the Jews was wicked). The core of morality is objective, and its truth non-relative. Nonetheless these criteria are not so stringent as to rule out subjectivism entirely. For example, regarding abortion and euthanasia, Foot suggests that different people could, subjectively, choose to go by different principles, and each choice would equally count as moral. And at such points there could be that very kind of breakdown in moral argument that Foot earlier denied. Foot thus embraces *partial subjectivism*, (1c).

An analogous possibility is presented for relativism, where different elective moral principles may be peculiar to different groups. At these points moral truth would be objective but relative to the standards adopted by a particular community.

In the 1978 Postscript to "Morality and Art" and in "Moral Relativism" (1979), Foot is less confident about these points and holds that they cannot be settled without a firmer grip on the nature of the definitional criteria and of certain key concepts such as having a value and happiness. This is still unfinished business (see the end of "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?" (1995)).

More scandalously still, in "Morality and Art" and then in "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," (both 1978) Foot challenges the orthodoxy that everyone *should* be moral and act morally. She distinguishes two uses of "should." One is a non-hypothetical, or desire-independent, use: it says what is required by a certain point of view or system. And in this sense it is tautological that one should, morally speaking, be moral. The other use of "should" is reason-giving. Clearly this is the use at issue here. But, Foot argues, the claim that, whatever their desires and interests, everyone has reason to be moral and act morally lacks a sense; for it implies that moral considerations have a magically automatic reason-giving force. Instead we should concede that moral, like other, considerations offer reasons only hypothetically, that is, on the condition that the agent happens to have the appropriate ends. (Note that now she supposes moral considerations are properly reasons only for those who have moral ends, that is, via a constitutive, not an instrumental, connection.) If so, people who lack moral ends will have no reason to act morally, and to say that they should so act, or should have such ends, is mere bluff. And so Foot abandons the claim of morality's universal rationality (2), viewing it as another piece of moral fiction, complete with a fictitious linguistic use.

Morality then turns out to be inescapable in one sense but not in another. The application of the moral predicates – just, courageous, mean, cruel, etc. – is an objective matter. But whether moral considerations are reasons turns on the subjective matter of what the agent happens to care about. In short Foot's position is that of moral objectivity, rational subjectivity. Once again the controlling assumption is her commitment to the end-relative conception (3), as being the only non-mysterious view of reason.

The third phase (1980s–1990s): rejecting (3); objective morality, objectivity rationality, and the facts of human life

Foot's more recent phase is most apparent in "Rationality and Virtue" (1994) and "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?" (1995). Central to it is the replacement of the subjective theory of practical reason, (3), by an objective one. This allows Foot

both to reaffirm morality's rationality, (2), by offering the restricted subjectivist an alternative account of it that is more convincing than her earlier "instrumentalist" defence; and also to use the objectivity of reasons to get at what is really wrong with immoralism and thus successfully to conclude her long struggle with Nietzsche.

Foot now claims it is a mistake of strategy to start from some preconceived theory of practical reason, such as the maximization of perceived self-interest, or desire-satisfaction (cf. (3)), and then try to show that moral action is rational in its terms. Instead the rationality of moral action is on a par with that of self-interested action: they are not rival theories, but different parts, of practical rationality.

There are three main elements in her new position. First, she elucidates the concept of a moral virtue as an excellence that ensures that an agent is good in respect of action (and feeling). A virtue does this by being a disposition correctly to count certain considerations as reasons, and then to act on them, that is, to do well in respect of acting on reasons. So a moral virtue is goodness in reason-recognition and reason-following. As such it is part of what it is for practical rationality to be in good order. Given this formal connection between moral virtue and rationality, there can be no question of whether a virtuous act is rational. (If justice is a virtue, then an unjust action will thus be contrary to practical reason.)

However the connection is *only* formal. We are still left to determine what actually are the moral excellences of acting on reasons (e.g. that justice is one). Foot then argues that this is settled, quite objectively, by facts about human nature and life. We readily grant that there are objective factual evaluations of what count as excellences and defects in such faculties as sight or memory – be it in an elephant, owl, or human – on the basis solely of the natures, needs, and forms of life of the respective species (e.g. lack of good day sight is not a defect in an owl). Foot calls this "autonomous species-dependent goodness." It applies equally to behavioral operations: nest-building, hunting in packs, etc. And, allowing for certain differences, Foot argues, the same basis of evaluation applies to the human operation of acting on reasons, to determine its excellences and defects. Because of what we are and what we do, we need such things as being able to bind others by promises, and mutual helpfulness. So we need to recognize and follow the reasons they present. These general facts of human nature and form of life fix what considerations are reasons for humans, and do so quite objectively, that is, regardless of whether or not some individual (e.g. an immoralist) recognizes them.

Finally, Foot extends the same account to the other part of practical rationality, prudence. That considerations of self-interest are reasons is validated once again by general facts of human nature and life: that adult humans plan and look out for themselves better than others can for them. The basic ground of the rationality both of moral virtues and of prudence is the same, allowing us to have in this respect a unified theory.

The general shape is neo-Aristotelian, albeit with distinctive elements. Much is controversial: the treatment of self-interest, the normative view of human nature, the swiftness of the answer to immoralists (who will complain they see no reason to be "good humans"). More needs saying, and Foot's book (forthcoming) will say more. It will, I believe, offer the twenty-first century a much better start than Moore's *Principia Ethica*, of 1903, did to the twentieth.

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