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An attempt at an evaluation of Philippa Foot's conception of naturalistic virtue ethics

Since the beginning of her philosophical activity, Philippa Foot focused on arethology, which she considered a perspective that is capable of solving problems faced by modern normative ethics. She contributed to the popularisation of the ideas of her teacher, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, who attempted to reactivate the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas[1]. The most important elements of Ph. Foot's ethical reflections concerning virtue theory included the rejection of emotivism, expressivism and prescriptivism as well as the negation of the distinction between fact and value (which she borrowed from Anscombe), that supposedly was the source of the mixing of descriptive and evaluative meaning[2]. Foot's aim was to create a foundation for morality that would be devoid of metaphysical justifications. I argue that at each stage of the evolution of her project, Foot was forced either to make arbitrary judgements or to adopt metaphysical theses, which she specifically wanted to avoid.

I also point out that an attempt to justify the necessity of morality from a biological perspective is not faultless.

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1 Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, "Philosophy" 33 (1958) no. 124, p. 1–19.
2 P. Foot, *The Grammar of Goodness. An Interview with Philippa Foot*, "Harvard Review of Philosophy" 11 (2003), p. 34.

What is virtue ethics?

Virtue ethics originated in ancient Greece and found its fullest expression in Aristotle's work. In the Middle Ages, it was further developed by St. Thomas Aquinas.

The doctrine of virtues (arethology) teaches us how to act efficiently in order to reach the goal, which is the good of man. Aristotle, and later also Aquinas, distinguished between skills in the intellectual and moral dimensions. Skills enable us to know and properly desire the good of persons in truth. However, it is not enough to know what a virtue is — it is also necessary to train the intellect how to know it and the will how to make the right decisions.

Aristotle emphasised that the rational behaviour should follow nature, which means that we should live according to the conditions set for us within a harmonious cosmic order. For him, ethics was a practical ability to obtain the good by finding the "golden mean" between extremes.

According to Aristotle, virtue is an acquired but enduring disposition to a morally good action. A virtuous person is someone who acts virtuously, which means that he acts in a morally good way and is guided by morally good motives. Thus, virtue has two equivalent dimensions: intellectual and affective. In the intellectual dimension, virtue assumes that a virtuous person knows what should be done in particular circumstances, understands the principles of morally good conduct derived from virtues (including honesty, truthfulness, justice, benevolence, etc.), and applies them correctly in specific life situations. The virtue of prudence, understood as an enduring disposition to make correct moral judgements which stem from correct reasoning in moral matters, is crucial here. Aristotle pointed to a very close connection between the moral virtues and φρόνησις, which means than man is "able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself […] as a means to the good life in general"[3].

3   Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*, 1140a.

According to Aristotle, the sign of having an enduring disposition is pleasure or sorrow that accompany, respectively, actions to be enjoyed (morally good) or grieved (morally bad).

Aristotle observed that virtue is acquired by repeatedly making morally good choices and making the right decisions based on reasoned reflection (φρόνησις). In this conception, human life is a complex process of development in which how we act is a reflection of our previous, conscious and repeated choices. What a person does always imprints its mark on his moral character. For example, someone who regularly tells the truth becomes a truthful person, and someone who acts courageously becomes a courageous person.

Contemporary virtue ethics has taken over from ancient ethics the teleological scheme of justifying morality, in which the goal of human life is the attainment of happiness understood as fulfilment. In this scheme, virtues function as means to the realisation of this good. This is also the role Aristotle assigned to virtues, which for him were a tool that enabled the transition from a state of nature *in potentia* (in which man is born) to a state of nature *in actu* (in which his goal is fulfilled).

It is worth emphasising here that for the ancients every creature had a purpose (telos) and fulfilled its role in a harmonious world. A given role, which was defined by the standard set within the harmonious structure of the world, could be fulfilled in a better or worse manner. Each element of nature, while striving for its own perfection, i.e. to fit as well as possible into the harmony of the cosmos, had its own distinct essence to which it conformed and for the sake of which it acted. Thus, each creature could be judged according to its measure. Man, as a member of a community, fulfilled his role properly when he adequately performed the tasks entrusted to him and behaved with dignity, while adhering to the principle of the "golden mean". As both Aristotle's virtue ethics, which offers a complete list of virtues and their oppositions, and virtue ethics developed by the Thomists, which places great emphasis on education and upbringing, have been extensively analysed in the subject literature, there is no need to repeat these considerations here. So, let us now turn to the proposal for a new approach to arethology formulated by Philippa Foot.

Self-interest as the foundation of morality

For a long time, Ph. Foot was influenced by Hume's naturalistic conception, in which the good and duty were defined in terms of individual or social "utility or pleasure". In her early works, Ph. Foot observed that moral issues are the source of the rationale for an action undertaken by the practical subject and that morality is closely linked to the universal human goal, which is the self-interest of each subject. In *Moral Beliefs*, she even argued that self-interest is the only goal to which all moral subjects relate[4], so virtue must serve self-interest.

The pursuit of self-interest is a naturally given and objective goal. Only this goal gives meaning to our actions. During this period, Ph. Foot considered issues such as friendship, marriage and the bringing up of children[5] only from this perspective. Even while defending the concept of the universality of self-interest as the foundation of ethics, she abandoned recognising justice as virtue, because my being just benefits other people. Thus, being just presupposes that I make a concession from what is in my interest, thus I diminish my own benefit[6].

In the later, more significant period, she abandoned such a close connection between the pursuit of self-interest and morality. She accepted the existence of ethical knowledge, i.e. a certain system of beliefs that makes it possible to characterise given actions according to a catalogue of virtues and vices. Morality in such a case would only be enforceable if the subject already possesses the appropriate dispositions to act morally, which he has acquired during his upbringing.

At the same time, however, in Foot's opinion, virtues had a *raison d'être* only because they were based on human nature, which defines unchangeable categories of negative and positive character traits. Foot combined the thesis of the subject's rationality with this notion of human nature.

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4   Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford 1978, p. 125, 128ff.
5   Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 5.
6   Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 125.

In this period of Foot's work, she recognised that "in some general way, virtues are beneficial"[7]. This thesis, however, as she emphasised, opens up the field for reflections on virtue theory only when it is devoid of its utilitarian overtones. What was important here, in her opinion, was that the notion of virtue gives rise to the intuition that what is beneficial for the individual subject is related to the moral good.

In this theory of virtue, Ph. Foot admitted that something can be good for me (as long as I am virtuous) as well as for someone else. To an extent following Aristotle and Kant, she observed that virtues inform the will as to whether an action is good, so moral choices are determined by *intentions*[8]. The notion of *practical wisdom*, whose counterpart in Aristotle's thought was associated with the skills of the intellect (called the dianoetic virtues), was linked to the will. This wisdom, according to Foot, combines the ability to recognise and select appropriate means "to certain good ends" and the knowledge of "how much particular ends are worth"[9]. She equated the capacity to apply both these abilities in practice with virtue[10].

Thus, practical wisdom consists not only in the ability to identify goals that relate to life as such. However, clarifying what skill are necessary to identify these goals is not easy. Foot attempted to answer this question by linking virtues to the idea of *human nature*. In relation to it, virtues "are *corrective*, each one [is] standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good"[11]. For Foot, also in this period of her work, the thesis of the corrective dimension of virtues (e.g. temperance or courage) implied the existence of an unchangeable class of qualities — positive and negative — which are inscribed in the constitution of being human. From this perspective, she attempted to define a good action. "A positively good action" would be one "that was in accordance with virtue, by which I mean contrary to no virtue, and

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7   P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 2: "First of all it seems clear that virtues are, in some general way, beneficial".
8   Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 4.
9   P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 5.
10   Por. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 17.
11   P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 8.

moreover one for which a virtue was required"[12]. This statement does not negate the fact that there may be actions that require virtue but whose purpose is not good. Foot emphasised (while addressing the naturalistic project of morality "devoid of fiction") that a modern theory of virtue must take into account the possibility that *morally bad* actions can also be "virtuous". Thus, the good of an action requires an additional criterion, namely non-contradiction with other virtues. A virtuous, i.e. good, action should not merely define an aspect of a human action in isolation from its goal.

In her project, virtue was still treated as something that is beneficial, which means that virtue should be instrumentally useful. The question arises, however, whether every subject, with his desires and interests, will have a sufficient rationale to be virtuous? Foot recognised that what is useful and beneficial to me can give me an appropriate, *sufficient* and *necessary* rationale to act. However, she admitted, that she did not fully know how to define rationales for an action. Nevertheless, she claimed that all such rationales depend either on the interest of the practical subject (in the sense of what is in his interest) or on his desires[13]. That which is in my interest or that which is the object of my desires is useful and therefore constitutes a good *for me*.

According to Foot, all expressions that speak of *what is good* and right, in the sense of what is virtuous and moral, must be formulated in the subjective dimension because, when they are deprived of a perspective that defines what corresponds to the goals and interests of a particular individual, they lose their meaning[14]. Thus, the notions of objective moral good or "an objectively good state of affairs" do not exist[15]. Moreover, it becomes possible that "what is good for me" is unrelated to "what is good in the moral sense".

The moral good and virtue depend on having rationales for an action. These, however, arise when they are the result of interests and desires,

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12 P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 14.
13 Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 130, 156, 179.
14 Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 154.
15 Cf. P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p. 154; P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2002, p. 66–70, 100–102; P. Foot, *The Grammar of Goodness. An Interview with Philippa Foot*, p. 36.

which is also the case with the extra-moral good. Thus, at this stage of her work, Foot did not formulate the objective bases for solving the ethical problem of the good, but in a radical effort to demystify morality, she developed a conception that justified subjectivism and instrumentalism.

An attempt to ground morality in biology

In the final stage of her ethical reflections, Philippa Foot recognised that a rational human action affects humans not only individually but also socially. In her late works, she abandoned Hume's model of practical rationality which linked the rationale for an action to self-interest and replaced it with Aristotelian rationality. As a consequence, Foot also rejected the view, which she had defended in the previous period, that morality is not a source of man's rationales for an action.

Foot admitted that she had previously made a mistake and that most of her earlier reflections had been misguided[16]. She acknowledged that Hume's conception of a rationale for an action does not provide any objective rationale for moral choices — apart from rationales that derive from self-interest. Thus, such normativity cannot be the basis for formulating a conception of morality.

After abandoning Hume's conception of a rationale for an action, Foot returned to his thesis which she defended in her first works that the practical character of morality is the source of objective rationales for a moral action[17]. However, she linked her defence of Hume's thesis of the practical dimension of morality with the turn towards Aristotle's teleological-biological thinking and Kant's conception of the rationality of the will.

In her return to Aristotle, Foot placed reflections on the status of the good in ethics in a biological perspective. Following Peter Geach[18], she as-

16 Cf. P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 169, 199; P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, p. 9, 17; P. Foot, *The Grammar of Goodness. An Interview with Philippa Foot*, p. 41.
17 Cf. P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 173, 193–194.
18 P. Geach, *Good and Evil*, "Analysis"17 (1956), repr. in *Theories of Ethics*, ed. P. Foot, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967.

sumed that evaluating the individual and his action is only possible in the context of his position within the species to which he biologically belongs[19]. As she emphasised: "The central feature of my own account is that it will set the evaluation of a human action in the wider contexts not only of the evaluation of other features of human life but also of evaluative judgements of the characteristics and operations of other living things"[20].

P. Geach inspired Foot by distinguishing between the concept of the attributive good (a good dog) and the predicative good (this dog is good). In his opinion, the word 'good' constitutes the functionality of the subject and is the object of desire. Philippa Foot was further inspired by the article written by her student Michael Thompson *The Representations of Life*[21], from which she took the idea that actions of any organism can only be judged as adequate and correct in the context of this organism's belonging to a species. A good individual is one that satisfies the requirements of a species. The natural good is therefore a good that depends on the relationship which develops between the individual and the "life form" inherent in his biological species[22].

The properties of the life form must be essential from the perspective of the form, i.e. they must be properties teleologically related to that life form. Foot explained the essentiality of a given property and its teleology referring to the category of Aristotelian necessities, which she borrowed from Elizabeth Anscombe. Foot treated the characteristics of living organisms necessary for the realisation of the goods proper to those organisms as Aristotelian necessities. Each creature acts according to its essence and aims to realise potential according to its own nature. A well-behaved human being acts according to his measure, just like a bear, a snail, or a lilac flower do.

The object of evaluation is that which plays an important role in the life of a given species, namely self-maintenance, defence, foraging, and

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19 Cf. P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 163.
20 P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 25.
21 M. Thompson, *The Representation of Life*, in: *Virtues and Reasons. Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, eds. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence & W. Quinn, Oxford 1995.
22 Cf. P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, s. 26; P. Foot, *Moral Dilemmas*, p. 164.

reproduction[23]. Let us say, we observe lionesses and we discover that they take care of their offspring, so when we come across a lioness that does not do it, this means that this particular lioness is a defective specimen. Evaluation here refers to the norm, not to statistical normalities[24].

Thus, according to Foot, evaluation has an objective dimension, as it is based on characteristics that play a role in the life of the entire species. She tried to demonstrate that the same axiological structure appears at the level of human beings as at the level of plants and animals.

Problems with justifying further conceptions

Foot did not provide any general, holistic outline of the hierarchy of duties. When she analysed individual cases in which she referred to this hierarchy, the basis on which she established it were ordinary solutions people use to solve problems in their daily lives. She seemed to forget that that her reflections were devoted to material grounds and that what she presented was not analyses of the structures of judgements or definitions of moral concepts and their mutual, formal relations. However, it is impossible to determine what is an objective and real good (and the objectivity and reality of the good is a postulate of the system under discussion) from the material perspective on the basis of what the users of language call the good, that is, on the basis of what is considered to be the good. This is a certain version of the naturalistic fallacy, a version that is rather common in analytic metaethical studies, and at the same time particularly blatant: inferring from how things actually are in language about how they are or ought to be in reality.

According to the general principles of Foot's system, if it turned out, for example, that reproduction was man's natural good, then the proper means of realising this good for our species, i.e. heterosexual relations, would of course have to be considered naturally good and thus intrinsically

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23 Cf. P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 41.
24 Cf. P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 33.

morally good. However, Muslims would probably consider that polygamy is an even greater good.

Risking certain oversimplification, one could consider that a pregnant woman who drinks alcohol and smokes cigarettes would be preferable to a woman who is for some reason infertile. In order to defend her theory from such objections, Foot might argue that there are necessary conditions that must characterise and *de facto* characterise moral judgements: for example, that they concern acts that are performed consciously and voluntarily. But what about a raped girl who gives birth to a child? Is she a "worse" reproducer (a member of the species homo sapiens) than a woman who intentionally gives birth to a child only to claim an allowance?

Foot tried to solve such problems by combining the norms of practical rationality with moral norms; she granted moral norms a status of primary norms and claimed that taking them into consideration is a necessary condition of practical rationality.

Again at a risk of simplifying her thought, it can be claimed that Foot assumed that if something is good in a moral sense it should be regarded as a rationale and thus as a requirement of rationality, which is a sufficient condition for considering an action to be rational and morally justified.

Unfortunately, such an assumption also holds true for propaganda or dogmatic beliefs. She tried to defend her position by claiming that such rationales for an action are not necessarily rational, since they do not have justifying norms external to them and, after all, cannot justify themselves. Critics, however, point out the weakness of such reasoning because what norms and beliefs we recognise depend largely on what kind of people we are. This is where we encounter a volitional factor of a subjective nature, which, for example, may be the result of our general genetic predispositions, life events, upbringing, the books we have read, a meeting with a person who fascinates us, etc.

Philippa Foot did not specify what we should considered to be human goods. She sometimes pointed to love and friendship as specifically human

goods, but at the same time she emphasised that the list of goods of the animate world ceases to be fully adequate when we consider the world of humans[25].

What, then, might Foot's strategies for determining the goods be? If she were to apply the same principle that she applied to plants and animals, she might simply consider anything that constitutes the main goal of the aspirations of most individuals of our species to be the good. A strong point of this strategy is that it allows us to legitimately call such defined goods "natural". However, many members of the human species prefer conformism or particularism, many are cruel or even sadistic or masochistic, and many are long-suffering and passive. But all these features are not what Foot wanted to acknowledge as "natural" aspirations, goals, or goods. Thus, she was forced to arbitrarily choose certain character dispositions and types of behaviour which she previously valued positively from a moral but unspecified point of view, and then assigned to them the status of natural. The latter merely means that they realise the respective goods inherent in the human life form, which, however, she no longer explicitly mentioned. The failures of such an approach are apparent. First, Foot reversed the direction of reasoning inherent in the basic structure of her conception: instead of first defining goods on a morally neutral, value-free basis, and only from this perspective to define virtues and thus the sphere of goodness, she defined goods on the basis of what she considered to be virtues. Second, there is no justification for associating the area of values she delineated along the way with what is natural, either in the sense in which we use the term philosophically or in the sense in which Foot used it when discussing evaluations of plants and animals. This latter point was discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre in his review of Foot's book *Natural Goodness*[26].

It is worth mentioning here that MacIntyre, at least as prominent a representative of virtue ethics as Foot, proposed a conception based on dual teleology. He defined virtues as character traits that enable the attainment of goods that are internal to practices. But practices must be consistent

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25 Cf. P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 44.
26 A. MacIntyre, *Virtues in Foot and Geach*, "The Philosophical Quarterly" 52 (2002) no. 209, p. 621–631.

with the human good, understood as the search for the unity of human life as a whole. Thus, virtue is that disposition which fulfils the function of moulding human life into the shape of some individually defined unity. The problem, however, lies in answering the question of how this unity is to be understood. MacIntyre treated the human *telos* as something undefined, something that needs to be sought and discovered throughout one's life rather than merely realised as a "predefined" universal conception of the good.

Summary

Philippa Foot attempted to justify the rejection of the distinction between facts and values, treating the latter as special cases of the former. For her, values and facts had the same status. However, if the spheres of practical rationality and morality are fully equated, moral considerations alone will define rationales for an action. What is moral will be both practically rational and what is practically rational will be moral. But such equation is not a valuable proposition, since it is based on an arbitrary assumption that morality is a necessary condition of practical rationality.

Philippa Foot did not present any conception of the human good that would be independent of prior moral evaluations, nor did she introduce any criterion for defining what constitutes the human good that would be independent of the notion of virtue. Moreover, she was inconsistent in her reflections: on the one hand, she made what we consider to be virtue dependent on what we discover to be our good, but on the other hand, what she valued highly determined whether something was worthy of being considered good.

This inconsistency is instructive insofar as the author, who followed Hume's assumptions in all her reflections, at one point had to contradict these assumptions in order to pursue her own project. I see the reasons for the unsatisfactory outcomes of her deliberations in the fact that her concepts of morality, virtue and justice were originally detached from a broader vision of the world (such as the ancient harmony or the Christian divine order in classical theories of virtue). The turn to metaphysics

in the last period of her work seems a rather good idea for solving her earlier problems, which cannot be said about the overly narrow naturalistic perspective from which she attempted to answer the questions related to goodness, morality and virtue. Solving the problems of morality from such a perspective, as her subsequent unsuccessful attempts confirmed, probably was not the right path to follow.

However, one can admire Foot for her consistent search for a solution to the problem of the objectivity of morality, even though the assumptions she adopted severely limited the range of possible solutions. Undoubtedly, Philippa Foot was a seeker of wisdom. She was not afraid of abandoning previously adopted theoretical frameworks in order to seek better justifications for her intuitions. Her work can inspire us and at the very least prompt us to ask ourselves whether our assumptions are likely to meet intended targets.

When I look at the evolution of Foot's conception of virtue ethics, I cannot help thinking that the most important function of philosophy is not to find ultimate solutions to problems but to indicate problems that can inspire philosophers to undertake further studies. One of such problems can be related to demonstrating the inadequacy of the naturalistic grounding of morality.

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Abstract

*An attempt at an evaluation of Philippa Foot's
conception of naturalistic virtue ethics*

In this article I present subsequent stages of the evolution of Ph. Foot's conception.
I point out that her concepts of morality, virtue and justice are detached from earlier
visions of the world (ancient harmony, Christian divine order). At each stage
of the evolution of her project, she is forced either to make arbitrary decisions
or to make metaphysical assumptions. I emphasize that biological references in
justifying the need for morality may be legitimate as long as we understand ethics
as a practical science that aims to achieve practical goals (including the protection
of the human species).

Keywords: virtue, justice, morality, nature, metaethics

Abstrakt

Próby uzasadnienia moralności w naturalistycznej metaetyce Philippy Foot

W artykule prezentuję poszczególne etapy rozwoju koncepcji Philippy Foot. Wskazuję,
że jej koncepcje moralności, cnoty, sprawiedliwości, są oderwane od wcześniejszych
wizji świata (antyczna harmonia, chrześcijański boski ład). W każdym
z etapów ewolucji tego projektu autorka zmuszona jest albo do podejmowania
arbitralnych rozstrzygnięć, albo do przyjmowania założeń metafizycznych. Podkreślam,
że odwołania biologiczne w przypadku uzasadnienia potrzeby moralności
mogą być zasadne, o ile rozumiemy etykę jako naukę praktyczną, której celem
jest realizowanie praktycznych celów (w tym ochrona gatunku ludzkiego).

Słowa kluczowe: cnota, sprawiedliwość, moralność, natura, metaetyka