

Essays in Philosophy

Volume 5
Issue 2 *Animal Ethics*

Article 28

6-2004

Review of “Natural Goodness”

Brook J. Sadler
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/)

Recommended Citation

Sadler, Brook J. (2004) "Review of “Natural Goodness”, *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 28.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 2, June 2004

Book Review

Natural Goodness, Philippa Foot. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001. pp. 125. ISBN# 0-19-823508-9

Philippa Foot's most recent book, *Natural Goodness*, is so gracefully written that the reader runs the risk of only just wetting her or his feet, mistaking the book's fluidity for shallowness. In fact, the depth of Foot's concerns in this slim volume—seven brief chapters comprise only 125 pages—is remarkable. In the introduction and the first chapter, Foot attempts to escape the grip of non-cognitivism and to reorient our understanding of practical rationality. This is by itself no small job, but it serves primarily as a preliminary for Foot's central project in the second and third chapters where she invigorates a neo-Aristotelian teleology and virtue ethics, providing an account she calls *natural normativity*. Chapter four elaborates upon Foot's view of practical rationality by addressing the skeptic who questions why the natural facts about what is good for a human being should concern or constrain her. Chapter five completes the exposition of Foot's account of natural normativity, arguing that the account does not require a sharp distinction between moral and non-moral assessments of human conduct or character. The final two chapters each address looming objections to natural normativity: Chapter six tackles the objection that practical rationality consists in the pursuit of happiness rather than conformity to natural norms of goodness and defect (or of virtue and vice), and chapter seven addresses the immoralist objection that we can rationally reject such norms. The seven chapters of *Natural Goodness* seem to divide into three stages: the preparatory argument for cognitivism, the central account of natural normativity, and the response to the two objections. Though the final two chapters of *Natural Goodness* address objections to the account of natural normativity, their interest lies less in Foot's argumentative rejoinders than in the astuteness of her several claims and observations about happiness and immoralism, respectively. I will thus focus my remarks on the first two stages of the argument, commenting only briefly at the end on the final two chapters.

I. Clearing the way for cognitivism

Under the broadest description, Foot's project is to reveal the "logical category of evaluation" to which specifically moral evaluation properly belongs. (p. 3) What does it mean to call an action good or just? What is the conceptual structure of such moral evaluations? One cannot responsibly undertake to answer these questions without recognizing the modern impetus for them in G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* and the subsequent non-cognitivist responses that Moore's intuitionism inspired. To gain a hearing for her cognitivist view of natural normativity, Foot must begin by breaking with the now entrenched non-cognitivist orthodoxy set in motion by A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson and maintained and revived by R. M. Hare, John Mackie, Allan Gibbard, and Simon Blackburn.

The swiftness of the initial moves in the introduction and first chapter of *Natural Goodness* will no doubt leave Foot's opening arguments unconvincing to many readers. Foot observes that the several varieties of non-cognitivism that became prominent in twentieth-century ethical theory made a reasonable attempt to account for an important feature of moral evaluation: its action-guidingness. Moral evaluations do more than merely describe the way the world is; they move us to act (or at least shape our motivational psychology). Certainly, any adequate moral theory must be able to account for this commonplace. The mistake in the non-cognitivist approach, Foot argues, is in its construal of action-guidingness as a kind of conative extra that is superadded to the descriptive component of moral evaluations. If the action-guidingness of moral judgments is explained by the agent's attitude, feeling, or commitment to action—or, more generally, by some mental state—moral judgments will have no necessary normative force, nor clear truth conditions. The normative force of the moral judgment will only be present if the agent has the relevant mental state. And because the moral judgment is tied only to a contingent state of the agent, it cannot properly be said to be true or false. Foot argues that the distance between fact and value on the non-cognitivist account leaves a justificatory gap between a moral judgment and its grounds. She writes, "Whatever 'grounds' may have been given, someone may be unready, indeed unable, to make the moral judgment, because he has not *got* the attitude or feeling, is not *in* the 'conative' state of mind, is not *ready to* take the decision to act. . . ." (p. 8) Non-cognitivism leaves the action-guidingness of moral judgments untethered, floating free of any grounding in matters of fact. An agent could know the relevant facts, but not be gripped or bound by the relevant moral judgment because she lacks the appropriate mental state; conversely, an agent may be moved to act on a moral judgment, without an appreciation of the facts that make her moral judgment appropriate or inappropriate.

Foot's own answer to this predicament consists in the deceptively simple claim that "acting morally is part of practical rationality." (p. 9) Reconceiving the relationship between morality and practical rationality, Foot argues, is necessary in order to preserve the insight that moral judgments are action-guiding without opening the gap between a moral judgment and its grounds. Foot argues that the primary concept is goodness of choice or acting well, a concept that cannot be reduced to either an account of moral action or intention or of non-moral rationality. Focusing on the goodness of an agent's deliberative choice puts practical rationality and morality "on a par." (p.11) Moral and non-moral considerations may both provide reasons for acting, reasons that the virtuous agent takes into account and weighs appropriately, resulting in good choice and—when intervening obstacles and weakness of will are absent—good action. Foot suggests that this simple approach to practical rationality has been forced out of view by philosophers who have tended to see practical rationality as roughly synonymous with self-interest (or desire-satisfaction) and who have then worked to show *either* that moral considerations coincide with self-interest (or conduce to desire-satisfaction) *or* that all practical reasons are in the end moral. Either way, the fit seems forced: Sometimes the morally right action comes at the cost of self-interest (or personal satisfaction), and some acts about which we deliberate seem far removed from any moral matter. Foot's maneuver here, though refreshing, requires no great subtlety of thought: Instead of giving conceptual, justificatory, or normative authority or primacy to a preconceived notion of either practical rationality or of morality, then forcing the other concept into a fit with it, one acknowledges the diverse sources of our reasons for acting and treats all of them as, at least *prima facie*, on a par. As Foot's example of the imprudently dallying burglar (or any reading of the "News of the Weird" column) shows, there are a variety of ways to "contravene rationality." (p. 14) The subtlety comes from Foot's attempt to link this newly leveled view of practical rationality with the action-guidingness of moral judgments.

Goodness of choice—also called goodness of will—consists in reason-recognition and reason-following. (p. 13) The virtuous agent is one who recognizes the various reasons for action, weighs them appropriately, and is responsive to the determination of her deliberation, i.e., is motivated by and acts in accord with her reasoning. Reason-recognition and reason-following enter the picture hand-in-hand; an agent does not properly recognize reasons, whether moral or non-moral, unless she recognizes the force these considerations have on her choice or will.

But how do moral reasons come by their normative force? How do we know when an agent recognizes and acts on the right reasons? And what rules out the possibility of an agent's being perfectly rational by acting on the right reasons but in pursuit of a bad end? Invoking Anscombe's notion of "Aristotelian necessities" rather hastily, Foot argues that what an animal *should* do depends on the kind of animal it is. The same holds for humans: What we *should* do depends upon our being humans; right reasons are to be understood as derived from the facts of human life. Thus, the action-guidingness of moral judgments is not separable from the facts at hand; moral evaluation does not reside across an insuperable divide—facts on one side, values (*qua* mental states) on the other.

As I have said, the introduction and first chapter of *Natural Goodness* are not likely to be terribly convincing to those of the non-cognitivist persuasion or to those who have labored at making an alternative conception of practical rationality viable (such as Gauthier or Hare); the arguments simply move too quickly here. We want to know something further about just why the gap between the moral judgment and its ground opens irreparably for non-cognitivists. For example, Gibbard's norm-expressivist account in his *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Harvard, 1992), which is a specific target for Foot, purports not to leave the individual agent's moral judgment entirely disconnected from any further objective grounding. Indeed, like Foot, Gibbard, too, calls upon certain biological facts about human life and social organization to put the agent's own acceptance of moral norms into a wider context. He argues for an empirical psychology and an evolutionary account of our normative capacities. If such psychological and biological facts can provide a sufficiently firm ground for moral judgments, relieving the worry that an agent's moral judgment has no reach beyond her own state of mind, then the gap, though it may still exist, is more difficult to descry. To be sure, Gibbard's norm-expressivism is at the end of the day still expressivist, relying upon a picture of moral judgments as expressing the agent's own commitment to certain norms (a mental state). But then the difference between Gibbard's grounding of moral norms in biological facts and Foot's grounding of moral judgments in natural facts appears to have more to do with the viability of a certain picture of the mind and of psychology, i.e., with the nature of mental states, than with the justification of moral judgments and their relationship to a wider context. Indeed, I suggest it is ultimately the plausibility of this notion of mental states that must be called into question if non-cognitivism is to be defeated. Alternately, the difference in the justificatory account that Foot offers and that which Gibbard offers may depend largely on whether one sees Foot's neo-teleological explanation as satisfactory or Gibbard's speculative psychology and evolutionary account as satisfactory. Once again, the problem seems to be relocated outside of the traditional perimeter of moral philosophy. Although I share Foot's emphatic wish to lead moral philosophy away from non-cognitivism, her opening pages in *Natural Goodness* fall far short of the argumentative detail required to provide a satisfactory rejection of non-cognitivism. Nonetheless, her attempt to reclaim the philosophical space needed to air a cognitivist moral theory is—perhaps in part *because of* its sparseness—illuminating. This is where a cognitivist alternative must begin, she suggests: with a

leveled view of practical rationality that rejects the “hydraulic picture” of motivation that has for so long seemed the only way to account for the action-guidingness of moral judgments. (p. 21)

Although only the outlines of the cognitivist account of practical rationality and motivation are visible here, the structure is admirably clear. Moreover, to the extent that the opening moves in the introduction and first chapter seem unsatisfactory, it must be remembered that their primary purpose is to open the door to an account of moral judgments that does not depend upon the radical divide between fact and value that has informed non-cognitivism since Moore. In this respect, *Natural Goodness* continues a line of argument begun in Foot’s early papers (see for example “Moral Beliefs,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59, 1958). Reading Foot’s newest book is edifying in part because of the opportunity it affords to discern the revision and refinement in her thinking but also the tenacity and inventiveness with which she continues to argue her position.

II. Natural normativity

Having moved past the obstacle of non-cognitivism by the end of the first chapter, Foot hopes to have prepared the way for her alternative theory of natural normativity. She remarks,

“[I]t is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species?” (p. 24)

By shining the light on natural normativity, Foot hopes to make the monster disappear.

Chapters two and three answer this challenge, arguing first that an updated teleology allows us to derive norms for a living thing from facts about the species to which it belongs, and second, that the same grounding of norms in natural facts applies to assessments of human conduct, and hence to moral judgments. In making the first move, Foot draws heavily upon an essay titled “The Representation of Life” by her former student Michael Thompson. (The essay is collected in the festschrift in Foot’s honor *Virtues and Reasons*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn [Clarendon, 1995].) She argues that we make judgments of the goodness and defect of living things by reference to a teleological account of the life form of the species to which the thing belongs. In assessing (to use her example) whether a particular peacock is defective if its tail is not brightly colored, we ask what part having a brightly colored tail plays in the life cycle of peacocks. If having a brightly colored tail plays a part in the life cycle of the species—if it has a function—then a peacock that lacks a brightly colored tail is defective. Crucially, this defect is more than a statistical anomaly; it is a normative failure, which can only be ascribed to the individual by reference both to its species and to the teleology that structures the life cycle of that species. Foot summarizes the view this way:

“We start from the fact that it is the particular life form of a species of plant or animal that determines how an individual plant or animal should be. . . And all the truths about what this or that characteristic does, what its purpose or point is, and in suitable cases its function, must be related to this life cycle. The way an individual *should be* is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction. . .” (p.33)

To *evaluate* an individual plant or animal, then, one depends upon knowledge of certain *facts* about

the species to which the individual belongs and the teleological explanations of the characteristics of the life cycle of that species. When it comes to evaluating the behavior or characteristics of plants and animals, we need no special conative state, no commendation, no superadded feeling or state of mind, no special endorsement. Moreover, the facts ground our evaluations directly, without any reference to human interests or purposes.

Similarly, Foot believes, the very same conceptual structure applies to our moral evaluations; the facts of human life ground our judgments of natural goodness and defect—of virtue and vice—in human beings. There can be true and false moral judgments just as there can be true or false evaluations of peacocks. The account of natural normativity underwrites Foot's rejection of non-cognitivism and makes sense of her leveling of practical rationality. Foot is fully aware that the extension to human beings of the same conceptual structure of natural normativity, which allows us to make judgments of the goodness or defect of plants and animals, will raise a few eyebrows. Yet she is sanguine that the account of natural normativity does not founder when we make the transition to human beings, rational animals who are capable of sizing up not only their group norms but also their own individual prospects. Foot observes that

“there is so much diversity in human beings and human cultures that the schema of natural normativity may seem to be inapplicable from the start. Nevertheless, for all the diversities of human life, it is possible to give some quite general account of human necessities, that is, of what is quite generally needed for human good, if only by starting from the negative idea of human deprivation.” (p. 43)

She continues, noting that there are certain physical properties, mental capacities, and powers of imagination without which human beings are deprived and naturally defective; they are not as they should be. (p. 43)

However, it is important here to see just how very little really can be said, without substantial controversy, on this “quite general account.” Foot overestimates the ease with which we can move to unassailable normative claims from even the most basic facts about the physical capacities or constitution of humans. Consider Foot's own first specific suggestion about the physical properties needed by human beings and without which their lives are deprived or defective: “There are for instance physical properties such as the kind of larynx that allows of the myriad sounds that make up human language, as well as the kind of hearing that can distinguish them.”(p. 43) Presumably, the point about natural goodness and defect for human beings should be easiest to make with respect to those things that are farthest removed from what we regard as morally or culturally significant. In other words, if the schema of natural normativity works without serious complaint for our assessments of plants and non-human animals (--and I won't speak to this point here), it does so in virtue of the fact that the animal lives, bodies, or behaviors we are assessing by reference to species-given norms are fundamentally, if not wholly, biological and physical. The case of non-human animals is not complicated by the overlay of culture. Accordingly, the schema of natural normativity should be least controversial when its application to human goodness and defect is limited to physical or biological properties. But even here the schema seems doubtful when applied to humans. To take issue with Foot's example (noted above), the debate within the deaf community about the advisability of cochlear implants or other devices that “correct for” hearing impairment should make us hesitate before accepting the claim that human beings who do not hear (or whose larynxes are not suited to spoken language) are naturally defective. Deaf people are divided about

whether to view themselves as deprived or defective, as subject to conditions that they would gladly prevent, alleviate, or remedy as soon as new technologies prove workable.

Foot acknowledges that in the case of animals, physical properties that normally serve a species well and play a part in the life cycle of the species by aiding in survival and reproduction can sometimes work against an individual member of that species. (p. 34) Despite the fact that under certain circumstances, what is normal for a species may prove disadvantageous to an individual (or that what is abnormal may prove incidentally advantageous), the norm still holds. Thus, Foot argues that the normal is indeed *normative*—it is more than a statistical measure of what is typical or usual for the species; it sets a standard by which to assess individuals of the species. The trouble is that human beings are not only the subjects of normative evaluation, but also the evaluators. Our capacity for evaluation allows us to look upon our statistical irregularities or species-irregularities in a wholly different light. For instance, humans may transform deafness from an alleged defect into a rich culture and way of life with its own forms of goodness. Humans can do more than survive in and adapt to their environment, they can alter their environment and their ways of living, through culture, to fit them. If the account of natural normativity looks dubious when applied to matters of human physical properties, it seems even less likely to succeed when applied to matters of moral judgment or rational volition where the impact of human capacities for reason and evaluation is all the more evident—and all the more subtle.

But perhaps there is yet some basic, “quite general” norm for human life, deviation from which must count as defect? I suggest that whatever candidate descriptions or facts of human life are presented for consideration, all will likely succumb to the same sort of trouble that the example concerning deafness makes vivid. Humans are so remarkably resilient, capable of valuing so many different ways of living, that most alleged defects will be found by some to be rich, perhaps surprising, sources of deep value and goodness, generating particular virtues all their own. We are the creators of our norms; we are not created by them.

Perhaps a helpful way to put the point is through an imaginative exercise. Imagine that you someday succumb to a disease or suffer an accident, which substantially alters your capacities, physical or otherwise—for instance, leaves you deaf, paralyzed, blind, or unable to speak. Most of us, I suspect, no matter how bravely we might rally under the circumstances and fight to reclaim a meaningful and valuable life despite the misfortune, would still see the alteration *as a misfortune*, as something we wish had not happened. But this is because we see our life stories as aiming at certain ends or virtues or goods which were determined by our capacities before the unfortunate accident or illness; naturally, afterward, we may see our new state as one of deprivation, even defect. However, it is crucial that, both individually and collectively, we do not *necessarily* view the new condition as one of defect or deprivation. Whether we do see ourselves as defective or deprived will have much to do with our individual capacity or opportunity for re-valuing ourselves and with whether our communities are structured to accommodate and incorporate us. We must recognize that just as we make value and meaning and goodness given the capacities that we actually have, those humans whose capacities are different make values and meaning and goodness in light of *them*. The hearing teenager who loses her hearing may (or may not) see herself as newly deprived, as sadly defective. But the person deaf from birth need not see herself this way. If it is not too tortuous, the point might be put this way: A hearing person can reject the counterfactual that he would have preferred to have been born deaf even as the deaf person may sensibly reject the

counterfactual that she would have preferred to have been a hearing person. What I mean to suggest is only that Foot's account of natural normativity underestimates the way in which the individual and social facts about humans (not the biological and species-wide facts) play the determining role in most, if not all, our normative assessments of defect and deprivation. And even if the account succeeds in providing a foothold in the normative at a "quite general" level, this hardly seems to take us all the way to moral virtue and vice; the account will be so thin that it will yield no specific normative guidance commensurate with moral evaluations. It is, after all, this rich and specific form of moral evaluation, exemplified in the moral judgments of individuals, that the account of natural normativity was designed to explain. In fact, it has often been noted that the special virtue of virtue ethics is the "thick" character of the ethical assessments it offers. But natural normativity, in tying the normative to biological facts—facts about the species—loses precisely this thickness, the way in which moral judgments provide real, concrete guidance and yet are grounded in facts about what constitutes flourishing in a particular community.

As I noted at the outset, the final two chapters of *Natural Goodness* address outstanding objections to the account of natural normativity. Chapter six is clearly motivated by the need to rebut a utilitarian objection to the effect that practical rationality consists in the pursuit of happiness. But the discussion is obviously also in keeping with Foot's neo-Aristotelianism, and not surprisingly, she develops a fitting notion of happiness as flourishing. Foot concludes with the observation that "happiness is a protean concept, appearing now in one way and now in another." (p. 97) Most enjoyable about this chapter are Foot's descriptions of the various appearances of happiness. It is perhaps surprising that Foot disagrees with McDowell about whether virtue and happiness can conflict. Whereas McDowell argues that the virtuous agent who must sacrifice for the sake of virtue will not feel the sacrifice as such and will not see herself as relinquishing her own happiness, but rather as sustaining her happiness through the exercise of virtue, Foot believes this leaves too little room for "genuine tragedy." (p.97) Natural normativity, though it determines what is good for human beings, does not guarantee that we can achieve it.

Chapter seven valiantly takes up Nietzsche's challenge, his attack on morality and its premises. As in her discussion of happiness, Foot's remarks are insightful and valuable, quite independent of their relationship to the account of natural normativity. But it must be said that Foot walks a fine line here between unmasking Nietzsche's sometimes hyperbolic rhetoric and stylistic excess to reveal a camouflaged argument, which can be rationally analyzed, and dismissing his remarks as mere posturing and dissembling, ultimately bearing no fruit. The discussion strikes me as eminently sensible, though I can also see how one might find it deflationary or even flat. The task is to show that even though humans have the capacity for abstract thought that allows us to engage in a project of revaluation such as that recommended by Nietzsche, we are nonetheless limited by the life form of our species; to be supermen would require us to be a different species. Ultimately, whether one sees Foot's response to Nietzsche as a successful defense of her own position will depend in part on how one reads Nietzsche and whether one thinks there are further resources available to sustain the position of the Nietzschean immoralist. If the final two chapters of the book seem to offer less by way of argument and more by way of reflection and quiet insight, the one-page postscript that closes the book ends on a decidedly quietist note. Foot observes that with respect to "substantial moral questions," "in a way nothing is settled, but everything is left as it was." (p. 116) Some may well think this could be the motto for moral philosophy. Even so, *Natural Goodness* is an illuminating discussion that will leave the reader not just where she was, but better off.

Brook J. Sadler
University of South Florida

Copyright © 2004, Humboldt State University