

Philippa Foot is best known for her revival of Aristotelian ethics with her work on virtues, these playing a significant part on her view of morality. In *Natural Goodness*, Foot aims to prove that there are objective qualities found in all living things that make them a good member of the species that they belong to, simplifying this idea with the phrase 'natural goodness'<sup>1</sup>. Foot's definition of good is inspired by an Aristotelian approach, building on his metaphysical ideas. In this essay, I argue that Foot's theory for moral objectivity is unconvincing, due to the complications that arise when applied to humankind.

For Foot, the key to identifying an organism lies with the concept of natural normativity. To identify anything as an organism, we must first consider it in the context of other members of its species. Once understanding the organism with regards to its species, we must also consider the natural norms of that species. As Foot rightly identifies, a 'good' aspect of an oak tree is to have deep roots, as this characteristic can be seen throughout other members of its species. As a result, the oak tree will absorb minerals from the soil to allow it to successfully perform the process of photosynthesis and compete with other plants for water and sunlight to grow. Thus, one of the natural norms of the species of oak trees is to have deep roots; oak trees without this quality are seen as defective since their chances of survival are diminished.

With plants and animals, it is easier to identify that their sole purpose to function as they do is survival, like in the example of the oak tree. Yet, with humans, many of the actions we perform are not survival based at all, but because of our own personal preferences. There is a greater variability in actions seen in human life in a way which is not observed in either plants or animals. Indeed, we are different to plants and other animals in that we have a more fluid and adaptable existence. As Timothy J. Clewell points out, "this ability to re-evaluate on-the-go, so to speak, makes it very difficult to give any general description of human life"<sup>2</sup>. Yet, Clewell fails to consider that "there are truths such as 'Humans make clothes and build houses' that are to be compared with 'Birds grow feathers and build nests'"<sup>3</sup>. In this way, Foot can – and has – given us a simplistic description of human life.

However, it is wrong to suppose that all aspects of human life can be mirrored with animals and vice versa. The statement "Humans make clothes and build houses"<sup>4</sup> cannot successfully represent the entirety of the human species. Ayer points out this problem of generalisation in the following way: "if experience leads us to entertain the very strong belief that everything of the kind A has the property of a being B, we tend to make the possession of this property a defining characteristic of a kind."<sup>5</sup> Ayer continues to argue that we might not call anything A unless it also has the property B.

In terms of Foot's earlier remark that "Humans make clothes and build houses"<sup>6</sup>, Ayer's logic can successfully be applied. We can substitute 'A' for humans and 'B' for the action of building houses. If all As are Bs, this means that all humans do make clothes and do build houses. Although this is no longer generally the case, we do still have the need for clothes and houses. Thus, this action can be described as good because these actions are helpful for the achievement of good.

Yet, in *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer argues that judgements of value – such as judgements of goodness – are not significant in that they do not contain any scientific meaning. As an empiricist,

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<sup>1</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 1-4

<sup>2</sup> See Clewell, *The Promise and Limits of Natural Normativity in a Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics*. p. 21

<sup>3</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 51

<sup>4</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 51

<sup>5</sup> See Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*. p. 95

<sup>6</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 51

Ayer must be able to observe and measure qualities to make a statement about them. He would argue, for example, that even if an oak tree has deep roots, this does not make it good. The measurement of the roots can be recorded, and we can hypothesise whether the tree will survive based on its environment, but it does not add anything to its description to call it 'good'. Therefore, the judgement of good is nothing but an expression of emotion, which cannot be proven true or false. Surely, then, it must be so that morality is subjective, and not objective as Foot argues?

Nevertheless, it can be said that Foot's argument can survive these criticisms. As Foot herself points out in *Natural Goodness*, survival is not the only thing that contributes to the "human good"<sup>7</sup>. There are many other practices that can promote the goodness of humans, such as promise making. Here, she acknowledges that the concept of natural normativity has its challenges when applied to human beings. These challenges do not necessarily mean that it is impossible to apply her theory to humans, although it does make it harder.

One of these challenges is how promise-making is to be viewed. Foot uses this example herself to illustrate the importance that this practice has in terms of human life. "In giving a promise one makes use of a special kind of tool invented by humans for the better conduct of their lives, creating an obligation that (although not absolute) contains in its nature an obligation that harmlessness does not annul."<sup>8</sup> While promise-making and keeping may not now be seen as survival based, it is quite likely that this practice developed as a survival mechanism. For example, as a society, we give up our 'right' to kill each other to focus toward a common good together. In this way, we effectively promise not to harm each other so that we are all able to get on with our daily human lives without the constant fear of attack. Some may argue that this is what has allowed us to progress in terms of science and discovery. Thus, it can be said that a natural norm of our species is that we do not kill each other on a mass scale. However, this is a societal norm that has developed, and not a natural one. This acknowledgement begs the following question: Can we truly separate societal norms from natural norms when the two are so intertwined in the modern world?

As a scholar that draws inspiration from Aristotle, it is clear to see how Foot has developed his key ideas, such as those surrounding Aristotelian necessities. A key metaphysical idea of Aristotle was that certain things needed to be achieved in one's life to obtain *eudaimonia*. One of the ways in which he suggested that this could be executed was by living with others in "city-states"<sup>9</sup> to achieve the common good; "such membership is necessary for human beings in the sense that it is required for the achievement of good."<sup>10</sup>

The question that remains is whether we have strayed too far from our natural habitats to deduce what our natural functions truly are? Humankind poses a unique problem, when compared to plants and animals. Out of these, we are the only species that currently live in environments different to where we evolved. As such, it is hard to determine which of our virtues may be natural and which may be a product of our unique environment.

However, we are clearly able to distinguish the vices of humankind, otherwise laws condemning certain acts like murder would not exist. To add to this, it is accepted that doing harm is a bad thing. Harm can be defined as actual or potential ill effects or danger. Foot encourages us to imagine the example of a doctor who, when out in public, must treat a patient unexpectedly. In doing so, they administer a standard drug. The patient dies, and it is later revealed that they were allergic to that

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<sup>7</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 51

<sup>8</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 51

<sup>9</sup> See Curren, *Aristotelian Necessities*. p.247

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

drug. Foot argues that the “goodness of the will”<sup>11</sup> is irrelevant, and that “step-motherly Nature”<sup>12</sup> should be blamed instead. Regardless of accountability, we can recognise that this harm was a ‘bad’ thing, even though the doctor did not mean to kill the patient. Accordingly, surely morality must be objective when considering our collective acknowledgement that doing harm is morally wrong? Thus, Foot’s argument for moral objectivity could be described as successful.

Nonetheless, it must be said that a degree of moral consistency is different from complete moral objectivity. A good example of this is the changing role of women. When it was first established, the United States Constitution “made it clear that neither slaves nor women deserved the full rights of citizenship. A few years after emancipation, male former slaves were granted the right to vote, but it took another half a century for women of any color, born slave or not, to earn the same right in the United States and in England. Symbolically and actually, women were seen as less than fully human.”<sup>13</sup> This simple fact illustrates that morality has not always been objective, because what society deems as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is constantly fluctuating. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a woman’s purpose – or ‘final cause’ to use Aristotelian terminology – was to get married and rear children. Women who did not do so were regarded as spinsters, not to be trusted and not to hold any real place in society. Nowadays, looking back, we would regard this as wrong. In fact, some women at the time most probably thought so too. But, in the eyes of 19<sup>th</sup> century society, this degrading social position was a ‘naturally good’ thing for women to aspire to.

Casting these criticisms aside, let us imagine that Foot’s theory is objectively true. If natural goodness were somehow innate or biologically determined, would not the reception of her theory have been overwhelmingly positive since we would be ‘programmed’ to understand it and therefore would receive it positively? To expand on this, surely if we are living proof of her objective theory, it would be contradictory for us to even be able to disagree with it?

Clearly, there is no natural good. If natural goodness truly existed, we would not live in a patriarchal society. Moreover, equality still has not been achieved. In America, black people are continuously harassed and killed by police officers. People still do not have equal pay everywhere. The sex-trafficking industry is still widespread and problematic. To supporters of Foot’s argument, I ask the following question: How can you support the idea of natural goodness when so much evil exists in this world?

To conclude, Foot’s argument for moral objectivity is unconvincing. This is due to several flaws in her argument, these being: her assumption that plants, animals, and humans can successfully be compared; the fact that societal norms and natural norms cannot be successfully separated; her failure to consider that natural normativity has fluctuated over time in the human species. Morality is not objective, and certainly not in the way that Foot argues. Despite this, Foot’s work has been convincing enough that modern day philosophers are still considering it, therefore her argument cannot be deemed as wholly wrong. I conclude that more research is needed into the similarities and differences in life between plants, animals, and humans for her theory to be definitively proven right or wrong.

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<sup>11</sup> See Foot, *Natural Goodness*. p. 70

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Gorsky, *Femininity to Feminism: Women and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. p. 2

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