



## 4 PHILIPPA FOOT

### THE GRAMMAR OF GOODNESS

Philippa Foot was born in 1920 and was educated mainly at home before going to Somerville College, Oxford in 1939 to study Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. She graduated in 1942 and worked as a government economist during the remainder of the Second World War, before returning to Somerville to take her M.A. In 1949, she became a Fellow of the college. In the 1960s and 1970s, she was an itinerant philosopher, holding visiting professorships at Cornell, MIT, UCLA, Berkeley, and the City University of New York, before settling at UCLA in 1976. She is now an Honorary Fellow of Somerville.

At the start of our conversation, Foot reflects on how she would characterize herself as a philosopher. 'I'm not clever at all,' she remarks. 'I'm a dreadfully slow thinker, really. But I do have a good nose for what is important. And even though the best philosophers combine cleverness and depth, I'd prefer a good nose over cleverness any day!'

Foot describes her career as one of slow progress in developing a distinctive line of thought on two questions: the nature of moral judgement and the rationality of acting morally. At first, the position she opposed was moral subjectivism: the idea that moral judgements merely express a person's evaluative attitudes and intentions to act, and that knowledge of the facts about a particular case is not sufficient

for moral judgement, but that people must also place a value on these facts. Radical subjectivism holds that nothing about the facts of the case under consideration constrains people in this evaluative judgement. In her first articles, later collected in *Virtues and Vices*, Foot took issue with this 'free-for-all' version of subjectivism. The rules of moral discourse, she argued, required that only things relating to human good and harm could count as moral considerations. She further undermined the subjectivist distinction between facts and values, or 'description' and 'evaluation', by drawing attention to moral concepts like temperance and courage, which, she claimed, do not allow for a separation of descriptive and evaluative elements in moral judgement. For, Foot argued, these concepts are evaluative, but have a necessary connection both with facts about human good and harm and with the presence of a particular set of factual circumstances and dispositions of the will. The virtue of courage, for example, exists because people may find themselves in circumstances where they have to resist giving in to their fears. Courage thus requires constancy in the pursuit of a good aim in the face of knowledge of threats or risks. Prompted by the thought that virtues like courage provided a way towards a more objective view of moral requirements, Foot gradually became convinced that sound moral philosophy should start from a theory of the virtues and vices.

The question of the rationality of acting as morality requires has also dogged Foot throughout her career. The issue is key to any theory of morality, since, as David Hume stressed, morality is necessarily practical, serving to produce and prevent action. At first, Foot argued that everyone has reason to cultivate at least the virtues of temperance, courage, and wisdom, since their possession is advantageous whatever one's interests and desires. In later work, she took a different tack, arguing that just as one can recognize the requirements of etiquette and have no reason to adhere to them, one could recognize moral norms and have no reason to act as they require. In her latest work, *Natural Goodness*, Foot once again formulates a new answer to this question, arguing that recognizing and acting on certain reasons, among which are moral reasons, is simply part of practical rationality. If she is right,

the question of the rationality of acting morally simply cannot arise, since it is akin to asking, ‘Why should one do what it is rational to do?’, and this is, as she puts it, ‘to ask for a reason where reasons must *a priori* come to an end’.

In addition to her work on these foundational questions, Foot has written widely acclaimed pieces in medical ethics, some of which are reprinted in her collection *Moral Dilemmas*. Aside from a style which is both straightforward and elegant, what unifies her work is an awareness of the ways that the terms in which we think about moral questions in the course of our philosophical debates can lead us astray. Foot is wary of assuming that questions commonly raised in philosophical discourse, such as ‘How good is this state of affairs?’ or ‘Why should I do what is right and good?’, make any sense. In a manner reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s approach in his *Philosophical Investigations*, Foot tries to break the spell of certain ways of thinking in moral philosophy by bringing terms such as ‘a good state of affairs’ back from an abstract sphere of moral evaluation to their everyday use in a characterization of the kinds of things a benevolent person should want. It is in this project, too, that Foot believes that thinking in terms of virtues and vices can help.

All three of Foot’s principal concerns — subjectivism, the rationality of acting morally, and the need to be wary of the terms in which we express ourselves when we are doing moral philosophy — come together in *Natural Goodness*. In this book, Foot isolates a form of evaluation that belongs only to living things and argues that moral judgement belongs to this form of evaluation. I speak with her about this idea at her home in Oxford in September 2002.

While we are chatting over coffee, she brings up a remark Wittgenstein once made to a speaker who realized that what he was about to say was both compelling and clearly ridiculous.



**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Wittgenstein said to this man, who was trying to say something sensible instead: ‘Say what you want to say! Be crude, and then we shall get on.’ I open my book with this remark, since I

have found it excellent advice. Whenever I find myself tempted to pass over an odd thought, I press myself to do the opposite. So I'd say, 'Stick with the odd thought, it's gold.'

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *How do you mean, 'It's gold'?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I am sure an analogy will help, though one must always be careful of analogies. If you are working with a therapist, and you find yourself about to say something disreputable, the last thing you should do is substitute something respectable for it. It is the same with our philosophical thinking: the philosophical interest is where the *trouble* is. And that is why we must focus on the odd or crude thought which we are tempted to have. At the beginning of *Natural Goodness*, I give the example of being puzzled by the expression 'If I were you'. I remember someone saying to me when I was a child, 'I'd take my medicine if I were you!', and thinking, 'No you wouldn't, for I am not going to take it!' I later realized that my puzzlement at this expression was in effect a philosophical problem.

By contrast, we don't have a philosophical difficulty when I ask you, 'Do you take your coffee black?', and one would have to think quite hard to find a difficulty in this. One *might* be able to . . . if one had a funny picture that one consults a little book in one's head to see what one would like, *then* one would be off into the philosophy of mind.

Perhaps it is because of this peculiar nature of philosophical questions that philosophy is very difficult to explain to non-philosophers. You know, someone once said, 'One lesson in philosophy is as much good as one lesson in piano-playing,' and I think that's right!

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *How did you become interested in philosophy, and how did you come to study it?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I had no formal education as a child. I lived in the sort of milieu where there was a lot of hunting, shooting, and

fishing, and where girls simply did not go to college. But one of my governesses, who herself had a degree, said, 'You could go to university, you know.' And so I decided to work for it. I was extremely ignorant, which is not surprising because most governesses weren't highly educated, even though they were supposed to be able to teach you everything! Anyway, I took some correspondence courses and to my surprise was accepted by Somerville. I had put in for Somerville because I had heard that it was a college that was intellectually but not socially snobby, and I was working my way out of this socially snobby background. I decided to do the course in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics because I wanted to do something theoretical. I couldn't do mathematics, by lack of education and talent. So I thought economics and philosophy would be the theoretical subjects I could do.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Why did you focus on moral philosophy?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I was always interested in philosophy. But it was significant that the news of the concentration camps hit us just when I came back to Oxford in 1945. This news was shattering in a fashion that no one now can easily understand. We had thought that something like this could not happen. This is what got me interested in moral philosophy in particular. In a way, I was always more interested in the philosophy of mind, and I still am very interested in it. But in the face of the news of the concentration camps, I thought, 'It just can't be the way Stevenson, Ayer, and Hare say it is, that morality is just the expression of an attitude,' and the subject haunted me.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *What was it about the idea that morality is simply the expression of an attitude that seemed to you so wrong in the face of the Holocaust?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** What these theorists tried to do was construe the conditions of use of sentences like 'It is morally wrong to kill innocent

people' in terms of a speaker's feelings or attitudes, or of his or her commitment to acting in a certain way. And this meant that, according to these theories, there is a gap between the facts or grounds for a moral judgement and that judgement itself. For whatever reasons might be given for a moral judgement, people might without error refuse to assent to it, not finding in themselves the relevant feelings or attitudes. And this is what I thought was wrong. For, fundamentally, there is no way, if one takes this line, that one could imagine oneself saying to a Nazi, 'But we are *right*, and you are *wrong*', with there being any substance to the statement. Faced with the Nazis, who felt they had been justified in doing what they did, there would simply be a stand-off. And I thought, 'Morality just cannot be subjective in the way that different attitudes, like some aesthetic ones, or likes and dislikes, are subjective.' The separation of descriptions from attitudes, or facts from values, that characterized the current moral philosophy had to be bad philosophy.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Before we turn to your response to subjectivism, I would like to dwell a bit longer on your early influences in moral philosophy. When one reads your work, one clearly sees the influence of Elisabeth Anscombe and Wittgenstein. How would you say they have influenced your work?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Anscombe, above all, influenced me. My excellent tutor, Donald MacKinnon, was more of a theologian than a philosopher, really. He taught me about Hegelian philosophy. And about Kant, which was wonderful. But MacKinnon didn't really believe in modern, analytic philosophy. So it took Anscombe to get me to see the good in that. She was a difficult character, not quite the person to be a college tutor and help all the undergraduates through their exams. So she was hard to fit into the Oxford setup. But, happily, Somerville saw her merits. They thought she was marvellous, and found one research fellowship after another for her, not wanting to let her go. This was marvellous for me because it was natural for us to talk together day after day. After lunch in college, we would sit down

and talk philosophy. She would propound some topic, and, although she hardly ever agreed with what I said, she was always willing to consider my objections, and to wonder why I had made them. At one crucial moment, I remember describing some sentence as having a mix of descriptive and evaluative meaning. And she said, 'Of what? *What?*' And I thought, 'My God, so one doesn't have to accept that distinction!'

So, you see, my position was incredibly privileged because Anscombe is one of the very best philosophers of our time. And moreover, she must have been putting to me the problems that Wittgenstein had put to her; she must have had discussions with Wittgenstein on topics like the ones that I was discussing with her. She didn't talk about Wittgenstein, but she was teaching me something of his way of thinking. I am sure she didn't think of herself as teaching me, but that's what was going on. She would often come to my seminars, and I would always attend hers, where I usually opposed nearly everything she said. Naturally, I was regularly defeated. But I would be there, objecting away, the next week. It was like in those old children's comics where a steamroller runs over a character who becomes flattened — an outline on the ground — but the character is there in the next episode, unscathed. I was like one of those characters.

This went on for about five years, I think. Then Norman Malcolm gave a talk which got me interested in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. So I began reading it, I mean *really* reading it, and I said to Anscombe, 'Why didn't you tell me?' And she said, 'Because it is very important to have one's resistances.' She thought that it was very important *not* to accept what Wittgenstein wrote, but rather to try everything against it. She would not have liked it if I had too easily agreed with anything that she said, either. On a personal level, we were friends of course. She was, as you know, more rigorously Catholic than the Pope, while I am a card-carrying atheist, so we didn't agree on ideological grounds at all. But we had these marvellous discussions, and her children used to visit me quite often.



**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *You approach moral philosophy by focusing on the virtues. What attracted you to this way of doing moral philosophy?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I believe that it was reading Aquinas that got me started. I was on leave, and Anscombe had said, ‘I think you ought to read Aquinas.’ I got interested in the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*, which is about particular virtues and vices. And it struck me that there were always good reasons for saying of something that it was a virtue or a vice. I recall reading the bit where Aquinas calls loquacity a vice, and thinking, ‘What an extraordinary idea!’ But if you take seriously a particular question about a particular virtue, you see that it isn’t just subjective, that you can’t say anything you like. There must be a *reason* why this is a vice, if indeed it is a vice. I put this question to a pupil of mine—‘Why on earth should loquacity be a vice?’—and she said, ‘Well, if one is always talking, one doesn’t have time to think.’ This wasn’t Aquinas’s reason, but it seemed right to me. I repeated what she had said in a lecture; and a young man caught me on the way out and said, ‘But perhaps *my girlfriend* doesn’t need to think.’ (This was a long time ago, you know.) And I said, straight out, ‘*Everybody* needs to think!’

That kind of approach is the key to all my work right down to the writing of *Natural Goodness*. One doesn’t just have to say, ‘There *must* be grounds for moral judgements.’ For it was obvious in the case of individual virtues and vices that one could ask *what grounds there were*. One could ask, for instance, ‘Is there a virtue of chastity, and, if so, what might the grounds for it be?’ And with this, the whole subject of moral philosophy thickened up in my mind. Before that, I had simply thought, ‘There *must* be objective grounds for moral judgement,’ without being able to say much except that they would have to be connected to human welfare or something like that. But looking in detail, as Aquinas made me do, made me see that a virtue/vice point of view provided an excellent way to make an idea of objectivity in moral judgement concrete. A proposition such as ‘This

act is wrong' didn't lead one on to particular reasons or judgements in the way 'Loquacity is a vice' did.

However, after this discovery, I still didn't have the general conception of goodness as pertaining to the capacities, dispositions, and actions that are necessary for a particular way of life, which forms such an important part of my arguments about the grounds of moral requirements in *Natural Goodness*. For a long time, I couldn't find such a general basis for morality, and I was too lazy to write more than a few articles with my inconclusive thoughts. So I went on to medical ethics, which was very much in demand. I didn't despise the subject, but I left it as soon as I could see how to approach the foundational questions that I address in *Natural Goodness*. That wasn't until the mid-1980s. And it took me a long time after that to get around to publishing the book. At the launch of *Natural Goodness*, my editor, Peter Momtchiloff, picked up on the line from Wittgenstein with which I open the book—the one that says that it is difficult to do philosophy as slowly as it should be done—and he said, 'Well, that is a problem that Philippa seems to have solved.'

So that was the progression of my thought: from thinking that subjectivism must be wrong to thinking that when we look at the individual virtues and vices we can actually begin to see an objective basis for particular moral judgements, and on from there.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *You didn't see this basis for morality in other foundational concepts used in contemporary moral philosophy, like the ideas of 'good states of affairs' or rights and obligations?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Exactly. You see, all I could do at first was to reject subjectivism and insist that somehow there was objectivity in moral judgement, and that it had something to do with human welfare, without sinking into utilitarianism. But I couldn't get my feet on the ground with concepts like 'the best state of affairs' or 'good' in the abstract, whereas concepts like virtues and vices made sense to me. I realized, however, that to really answer those who had a different

theory of morality, I needed a whole alternative theory of moral judgement.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *So where did you find this alternative?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I found a new beginning by thinking about plants and animals. Not that I thought that you could argue from 'Such and such is important to animals' to 'Such and such is important.' Rather, I was saying, 'Look, there is a particular logical category here.' I had an absolutely excellent graduate student at UCLA, Michael Thompson, who is now at Pittsburgh. He had been influenced by Anscombe, even at a distance, because he had very good taste in philosophy. He had this super idea, which he had picked up from her writing, about the proposition 'Humans have 32 teeth.' Very few humans actually have 32 teeth. So what is the logical status of this proposition? It is not that it says, 'All people have 32 teeth.' It doesn't even state, 'Most people have 32 teeth.' Nor does it mean merely, 'Some people have 32 teeth.' So if you think of quantification, you see that it simply doesn't fit the logical categories that we have. It is of a different logical status from propositions like 'Gardens have railings.' Michael Thompson realized that there is a logical peculiarity to the way we talk about living things, and we both started thinking about this special way in which we can talk about them. That is what got my latest work going.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *You write that this special way of talking reveals itself in our judgements about plants and non-human animals either when we think about the way we judge particular members of a species to be defective or as they should be. You argue that two things enable us to make such judgements about plants and non-human animals: firstly, a set of propositions describing the life-cycle of the species, with particular focus in the case of plants and animals on growth, self-maintenance, and reproduction; and secondly, a set of propositions saying how, for the species under consideration, these things are achieved: how nourishment is obtained, how it defends itself, how development takes place, and how*

*reproduction is secured. From these two kinds of propositions, you claim, we can derive norms for individual members of the species. These norms state that the key functions should be carried out by the means specified.*

*I'd like to question a few elements of what you call this 'grammar of natural normativity', starting with the idea of certain capacities or characteristics being necessary for the way of life of a certain species. What kind of necessity do you have in mind here? For in the case of teeth, for example, it is not necessary for our way of life, not even of any great consequence, if we do not have a full set of teeth. And yet, this was Anscombe's original example.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Well, it is an imperfection if you have fewer than 32 teeth, since it is typically when the tooth gets knocked out, or gets rotten, that one loses it; so there is still a tie-in with health and disease and accident, even though it isn't always a problem, since one can chew one's food with fewer teeth. I admit that the original example of teeth is not the best one. But I have a different example. Compare the colour in the tail of a peacock with that of a bird I have in my garden, the blue tit. Now, the colour in the tail of the male peacock is necessary: it needs it to get its mate. On the other hand, as far as I know, the little patch of blue in the tail of the blue tit has no such role in the life of that bird. So if it lacked it, it would be an oddity, a rarity, but not a defect.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Does the concept of necessity you are using depend on the particular circumstances in which the species in question finds itself? Would one say that in humans a lack of natural teeth used to be a defect, but that it has ceased to be one because of the availability of false teeth?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I think that there is a certain amount of play here. It isn't easy to draw the line, for one occasion doesn't change what counts as a defect in a member of a species. Certainly, things change all the time. Now that foxes are becoming urban creatures, they need different things, speed being, for example, less important because

food can be obtained without it. But this doesn't mean that you can narrow down the reference situation for an attribution of natural goodness as much as you might like. For example, the characteristics animals need in a zoo may actually be defects. For it might be useful for a predatory animal kept in a zoo to lack fierceness. So one must realize that the conditions one can use must not be too limited. And after all, it is only a very small proportion of the human race that has false teeth and a very small proportion of predatory animals that live in zoos, which are not their natural habitat.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Why should we look only at the way of life of a species? Why not of a group, or troupe, or herd, a society, a family, or an individual? What privileges the species in the account of natural normativity?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** In the case of urban foxes, one might come up with different necessities than one would for their non-urban counterparts. But it doesn't really matter where precisely this kind of grammar begins to lose its grip, as long as it is recognized as a general category of judgements about goodness.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Still, focusing on the species for the derivation of natural norms seems particularly odd in the case of human beings. For you derive natural norms from the fact that certain things are necessary for a way of life. But in humans, the phrase 'way of life' is often used not to refer to the species as a whole, but rather to refer to a society or group with a shared set of institutions, practices, and outlook.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Again, perhaps there are no strict boundaries here. This is not of very great importance. Some things are species-wide in our way of life. All human beings, for example, need courage to face danger, challenges, and loss. There are many things that all humans need, though some amount of relativity does emerge from different ways of life in different times and places and different social, economic, and cultural circumstances. I think it is one of the

advantages of this approach that it doesn't have to claim that all moral norms are the same for all human beings. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that there are many things that are absolutely basic human needs.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *You mentioned moral norms. How is this kind of natural goodness related to moral goodness?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Starting again from plants and animals, we see that all kinds of things are necessary for them in their normal way of life, such as certain kinds of roots for certain kinds of trees or good night vision for an owl. Now, humans have an entirely different range of activities and capacities that are part of their way of life. A corresponding different set of defects is possible, most obviously those defects relating to specific human capacities such as language, imagination, and the will. Human beings can know, for example, that certain things are bad for them. And while animals that liked alcohol and that were supplied with enough of it would probably drink themselves to death, humans can realize its effects and may control their urge for it. Thus, humans need and can develop the virtue of temperance, whereas an animal cannot. But where have I moved on to something grammatically different in this progression? Why make *that* kind of distinction between the way temperance is needed by a human being and swiftness is needed by a deer?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *So you would say that moral goodness and badness, the virtues and vices, are a subclass of the general class of ascriptions of natural goodness and badness?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Exactly. The move from plants to animals and the move from animals to human beings are similar. You have different possibilities, different ways of managing, different needs, and there is not the slightest ground for saying, 'Oh, moral goodness — now that must be something we judge quite differently.' It is very important, of course, that the subset of the class of ascriptions of natural goodness

in human beings that we call 'moral' has to do with the goodness of the will and with practical rationality. Virtues, after all, are intelligent dispositions to take certain things as reasons for action, and vices are defects of the will. Note, however, that I am not too keen on the word 'moral' to mark out this subclass, since it has a certain association with concern for others that separates out things that I should like to bring together. For example, the defect of not looking after oneself, which usually isn't thought of as a moral defect, is equally a defect of the will.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *How does this way of thinking help us to determine what morality and justice require of us? The virtue of justice requires that we respect others' rights. But it is a disputed question just what these rights are.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I must admit that I have never thought as much as I should about issues in political philosophy. But I suppose that I would proceed in a way similar to Anscombe in her work on promises, when she stresses how important a practice of promise-keeping is for us to be able to bind one another's will. I don't see any reason why a right, which is a very strong claim—a stronger claim than 'You should help me!'—should not be argued for in the same way, that is, with reference to the good that hangs on it. I mean, society simply depends on certain requirements being strict requirements, like not killing someone and taking their tools. By contrast, one couldn't say, 'You don't have the right to annoy me!' and be taken seriously. Not being annoyed is simply not that important in human life.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *So in determining which rights we have, you would appeal to the kinds of necessities that exist either for individuals or for society?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Exactly. I have no doubt that this is the basis of moral requirements.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *These necessities have changed throughout human history, and they are set to change even more. What does this mean for the category of natural goodness?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I think I would be very permissive here. Where human beings have changed their environment so that things that were once a defect are now useful, different standards might apply. Of course, a change in what counts as a virtue is only natural when people's way of life changes. It is a good thing to be relativistic on this point. But I stress that, taken as a whole, the approach is radically non-relativistic because there is so much that human beings quite generally need, like courage, temperance, and wisdom. Of course, there are great technological differences between tribal cultures of the world and the modern culture of the 'developed' nations. Yet there is still so much in common between human beings in different cultures, and it is because of this that the idea that there is a universal need for certain character traits and for certain rules of conduct is a strong one.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *I would like to turn to the topic of practical rationality . . .*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Oh good! Can I tell you why I had to deal with the topic of rationality in *Natural Goodness*? It was part of my attack on the subjectivism that identified moral propositions as expressing some subjective state of mind. In opposition to subjectivism, I argue that moral propositions are about the natural goodness of a human will. And I was open to attack on the ground that I couldn't give a proper account of why anyone should have reason to follow morality. Why? Because subjectivists had the idea that only if you had particular feelings or desires could you have reasons for acting. I myself used to have this view of reasons, and in a notorious article called 'Is Morality a System of Hypothetical Imperatives?' I was brash enough to say that reasons were desire-dependent. As a consequence, I had



to explain how one could have reason to do good actions and avoid bad ones, whatever one's aims or desires.

So I needed a better account of what it is to have reasons, and at this point in time I was lucky enough to work with my friend, the late Warren Quinn. He made what I think was an absolutely brilliant suggestion, though perhaps neither he nor others at the time saw the force of it. His move was to ask, 'What would be so *important* about practical rationality if it could be rational to do despicable actions?' Now, this thought was extraordinarily original. For it has been more or less taken for granted in modern moral philosophy that one must first develop a theory of practical rationality in terms of, say, the maximum satisfaction of desires, and then somehow show that even the greatest self-sacrifice could be rational. And no one, not even the cleverest, could do it. But Quinn's remark suggested that one shouldn't tackle it like that at all. One shouldn't think that morality must pass the test of rationality, but rather that rationality must pass the test of morality.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *The answer to Quinn's question would seem to be that a more limited conception of rationality relating to the consistent pursuit of things a person cares about can easily be shown to be important to that person, since it involves the pursuit of ends that are hers.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Why would you think that the only way of justifying the claim that it would be rational for a person to do something should make reference to her own desires? If you look closely at the theory of rationality as the maximum satisfaction of your most important desires, you immediately get into a whole series of problems. Is it only present desires that we are concerned with? What of something that you don't want now, but you know that you will want in twenty years' time? Is it irrational to discount the future?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Well, all these things still have some connection to what are, or will be, the projects of the person concerned, whereas the pursuit of goodness may not. In your earlier work, you mention*

*the case of the 'cool calculating man', who cares nothing for morality, neither now nor in the future. What good does it do to call this man irrational?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** You are right that 'irrational' may not be exactly the word one would choose to describe him. Nevertheless, he is defective—he is failing to recognize and act on something that is a reason. I am curious, though, about your own position. I wonder what *you* would say about a young person who says, 'I don't care about the chance of getting lung cancer due to smoking in twenty years' time.' First, do you call this contrary to practical rationality?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Well, it would depend on what this person's attitudes towards the future were, and whether his actions consistently expressed this indifference towards his future.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** What if this young person cares about being well dressed at 40, but not about his health at 40?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Although he is being consistent, I might want to say that he is not recognizing something that he should recognize.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Ah. And where do you get that 'should' from?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *[pauses] Well, I guess from some idea of normalcy, that it would be normal to care about this . . .*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Normalcy?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Perhaps you are right that normalcy isn't the right concept here, since it may be uncommon to care only about living stylishly, but it could still be something someone can rationally pursue . . .*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** So I take it that you are conflicted about whether such attitudes and behaviour are indeed irrational?

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *I guess so.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** The problem is—and this is really crucial in this argument—that it is very difficult for someone to deny that it is contrary to rationality not to care about one's future health to the degree that one doesn't when one starts to smoke. For it is difficult to deny that prudence is part of rationality. But then it is very hard to find a basis for our concept of practical rationality that makes prudence a part of rationality and that doesn't make justice or charity a part of rationality. That is what someone in your position has to do. Either you have to accept that it isn't contrary to rationality to imprudently ignore one's future well-being, or you have to accept some conception of practical rationality that makes reference to things other than what one cares about. And I think that you definitely want to say of the young smoker that he is defective with regard to the standards of practical rationality. After all, he is being silly!

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *And 'silly' is a word that points to a defect?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Absolutely. So this is my challenge: it is going to be difficult for you to find a ground for saying that imprudence is a vice, a defect, but that lack of charity or injustice isn't. Here I think there is something useful in *Natural Goodness*. Because if you treat a defect in the way that it is treated there, they come together. They are different parts of what human beings need.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Still, one would say different things to someone who is not acting on reasons for action that he himself accepts than one would say to someone who isn't recognizing something as a reason that you believe he should recognize as such. In the first case, we are concerned with a defect in the way he pursues means to his given ends, while in the second case, we are concerned with his ends. What is the conception of practical rationality that brings together these disparate notions?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I argue that thinking in terms of natural goodness provides this unity. Both the taking of means to ends in an efficient way and the recognition of relevant reasons are things needed in human life, and a defect in either of these is a defect in practical rationality.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *In Virtues and Vices you write: 'Wise men know the means to ends and know what these ends are worth.' Are practical rationality and wisdom the same?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Yes. They are absolutely the same. Take someone who says, "The most important thing in life is to be fashionable." If you think of the way someone would spend his life if he believed this, of the sort of friends he would have and the celebrities he would try to emulate, well . . . one would have to look into that. I haven't been able to explore this very far, but I think that the question of what is deep and superficial has to come in here. I certainly don't claim to have dealt adequately with this notion of the depth of one's happiness, but it does seem to me that one understands when someone on his deathbed says, 'I have wasted so much of my life on things that didn't matter!' And the idea of being defective in recognizing the weight of reasons seems appropriate here.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *I feel a resistance to this way of thinking about practical rationality because it seems like preaching—saying to people, 'Such and such is really important, and if you don't see this then you are defective.'*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** It is preaching! There is good preaching and there is bad preaching. I think a preacher who is worth his salt would be right to say to a fashionable congregation that they are living a very superficial life (though he had better not say it in an offensive way and, in fact, should probably not say it at all!). But he might think that they were old enough to know better, being grownups, not teenagers.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *Still, before you can preach, you must have an idea of the good life for human beings. Aristotle and Aquinas had their own fully developed accounts of what a complete and fulfilled human life was like and could derive from these accounts the reason human beings have to live in a certain way and cultivate the virtues. In Aristotle's and Aquinas's accounts, the virtues would be conducive to and constitutive of a person's well-being, even if he did not see it this way. But we do not share their views of the one correct goal in life. Do you have an alternative account of how a person should live?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** The idea of the 'good' for humans is indeed a difficult one. I think that we can get a handle on the problem by looking at human deprivation. One serious challenge to my view lies, I think, in the idea that happiness is Man's good, and that happiness may be achieved in the pursuit of evil. Now, happiness is a protean concept. But what I want to suggest is that we have a conception of happiness (among different possible conceptions) in which it is *the enjoyment of good things*, with 'good things' defined as objects of a good—an innocent—will; and that we have to understand it in that way when we say, 'Happiness is Man's good.' I think that we can approach this concept of happiness indirectly via our idea of what it is to benefit someone. Consider the murderous child abusers Frederick and Rosemary West, and ask what we should say of someone who had made it possible for them to continue getting their horrible pleasures. Should we say that this person had *benefited* the Wests? Surely not!

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *How does one use the notion of benefit as a way into an idea of happiness?*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** Benefiting someone means doing something that is for his or her good. If I am right, then the concept of benefiting someone reveals a way of thinking about the human good that excludes the pursuit of evil things, as is shown by my observation

of what we should say about prolonging the pleasures of the Wests. But then the concept of happiness that one finds in the expression 'Happiness is Man's good' must also exclude the pursuit of evil. So considering the notion of benefiting someone offers us a glimpse of a way that we have of thinking about happiness that involves goodness.

**ALEX VOORHOEVE:** *On the final page of Natural Goodness, you consider what your arguments mean for moral philosophy. Echoing Wittgenstein, you conclude that your philosophy 'leaves everything as it is'. Wittgenstein, however, was referring to philosophical analysis leaving our everyday activities as they are and wouldn't have thought that our philosophizing could go on as before. So this seems a curious answer to the question about where your approach leaves moral philosophy.*

**PHILIPPA FOOT:** I was only talking about certain parts of moral philosophy, such as medical ethics, when I said that I would not expect disturbance. Perhaps rashly, I do hope that my approach might—just might—affect the way moral philosophy is done. For my approach is different from that of most contemporary moral philosophers. I do not start with moral judgement, asking directly, 'What is morality?' or 'What is moral goodness?' Rather, drawing on the work of Anscombe and Thompson, I make a general, grammatical point about the evaluation of living things and their parts and features in terms of what I call 'natural goodness and defect', and then suggest that moral judgement is just one case of this kind of evaluation. This is what I think is new, at least to contemporary moral philosophy, and I hope that thinking about moral goodness and badness in this way offers the potential for a change in moral philosophy.

### References and further reading

Philippa Foot's principal essays, including all those referred to in the interview, are collected in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978) and *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

*Natural Goodness* was published with Oxford University Press in 2001. David Hume remarks on the necessarily practical nature of morality in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), book 3, part 1, sect. 1. The view that moral statements are merely expressions of an attitude is advanced in C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), A. J. Ayer, 'Critique of Ethics and Theology', in *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), and R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). A popular edition of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* was published by Blackwell in 2001 (this edition has the original German and an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe). Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is easily accessible online at <[www.newadvent.org/summa](http://www.newadvent.org/summa)>; a more recent, standard edition is the Latin text and English translation by the English Dominicans reissued by Cambridge University Press (2006).

Foot also refers to G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights, and Promises', in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), and Michael Thompson, 'The Representation of Life', in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

