



Natural Goodness

Philippa Foot

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Philippa Foot has for many years been one of the most distinctive and influential thinkers in moral philosophy. Long dissatisfied with the moral theories of her contemporaries, she has gradually evolved a theory of her own that is radically opposed not only to emotivism and prescriptivism but also to the whole subjectivist, anti-naturalist movement deriving from David Hume. Dissatisfied with both Kantian and utilitarian ethics, she claims to have isolated a special form of evaluation that predicates goodness and defect only to living things considered as such; she finds this form of evaluation in moral judgements. Her vivid discussion covers topics such as practical rationality, erring conscience, and the relation between virtue and happiness, ending with a critique of Nietzsche's immoralism. This long-awaited book exposes a highly original approach to moral philosophy and represents a fundamental break from the assumptions of recent debates. Foot challenges many prominent philosophical arguments and attitudes; but hers is a work full of life and feeling, written for anyone intrigued by the deepest questions about goodness and human.

Natural Goodness Details

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From Reader Review Natural Goodness for online ebook

laura says

for a seminar with gavin lawrence on the deep and the shallow in (moral) life.

Setareh Ezzatabadi says

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Piotr Korzynski says

A short, lucid, and well-written philosophical ride towards understanding ethical behavior as "natural" for humankind. That is, this tiny treatise gives footing to the idea that to behave unjustly towards another person is to behave defectively or unnaturally for a human being.

The course of the argument runs into trouble when confronted with accusations of conservatism (i.e., who is to deem what behavior counts as natural? indeed, the very choice of the word "natural" can seem a bit unsettling) and when confronted with specific human behavior (i.e., how do we account for cultural variation among "natural" expressions of justice?).

Further still, there is the issue of what notion of species is at play and where the evolution or history of that species fits in expressing any of a species' natural characteristics.

Foot also gives us a patient, clear, and interesting reading of Nietzsche on the notion of voluntary action.

All in all, an interesting read, if not all together convincing in its ultimate aim.

Matt says

Anyone who wants to talk about grounding ethics in the natural world really needs to read and digest this book. It is short, but the density of ideas is ridiculous.

Lauren Henry says

seen in 02.02 (eleanor's stack of books at mindy st. clair's house), concept (trolley problem) and author referenced in 02.05

Sam says

Foot strives to revive Aristotelian ethics within an evolutionary framework. She argues, in short, that certain behaviors count as deficient just so far as they interfere with human flourishing. I think it's a fascinating argument on her part--although not being an Aristotelian, I ultimately differ. However, anyone looking for a short book that demonstrates just what modern analytical philosophy looks like, or someone who's interested in practical reason generally, would not go wrong with this book.

Daniel says

A recent defense of ethical naturalism that brings a breath of fresh air to the non-cognitivist atmosphere in moral philosophy. If you have read Aristotle and Aquinas, then nothing will be that ground breaking. Nonetheless, a very good (and important) book.

Ken-ichi says

Just read Philippa Foot's obit in the Times magazine. I definitely *don't* believe that morality exists without a moralizer, so I'm sure I could find lots of fruitful disagreement in this book, assuming it's not too far over my head.

Ft. Sheridan says

p.79 fn.24: "A graduate student once said that my lectures had first made him see 'that to be anti-sex could be immoral'. I liked that."

Panda says

kind of boring...Sometimes it's really hard to figure out the argument...

Andrew Flynn says

THE TRUTH

Lukas op de Beke says

“[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?”

This book contains a refreshing new perspective, commonly called "naturalism", on meta-ethics. It is a form of realism and draws heavily on Aristotelian teleology in nature or "natural normativity". In the beginning, Foot lashes out against noncognitivism, arguing that it is not our emotions that underly moral judgments, but reasons for action. Foot's idea is that what we call moral and immoral is that which benefits ourselves or another person as a member of our species. In other words, moral judgments are true because they are grounded in natural facts. Interestingly, by making this connection with what one might call the proper functioning of a member of a certain species, the rigid and, I agree with Foot, somewhat artificial distinction between prudence or self-regarding virtues (temperance, wisdom etc.) and other-regarding virtues and acts disappears. In both cases, what is good is simply that which is beneficial to a typical member of the species.

So the time-old question "why be moral?" can be answered rather straightforwardly: "because that is what human beings naturally do". And person that is wholly evil or immoral ought to be seen as a defective member of its species, much like in the netflix series Westworld some of the bots show defective behavior. In like manner, a polar bear whose fur is not white enough to blend in with its surroundings is defective in that respect, and surely, there are myriad other possible examples of an individual being defective. Note here that also in animals an individual can be defective in a wholly other-regarding respect. A lioness that fails to coordinate with its fellow lionesses in a hunt is defective and in this respect she is "bad" lioness, or at least behaving "wrongly" or "not how she ought to behave". Between this and a human being stealing from another without good reason, there is only a small gap and it is clear why it is wrong: "people don't normally steal from each other".

The final chapter deals with Nietzsche's radical critique of Christian slave- or herd-morality and in my view Foot does wonderfully well at really taking this critique seriously. She argues that Nietzsche's critique can perhaps be put in her naturalistic mold and understood as the suggestion that certain behaviors such as an exaggerated pity for the weak and poor are potentially detrimental to the species at large. But even if this may contain an inkling of truth, on the whole Nietzsche's alternative value system is a sham. I agree with Foot here, as it is probably that herd instinct of ours and hyper-sociability that has propelled Homo Sapiens

into the position of evolutionary success which it currently is in.

Edmund says

Doesn't feel logically complete but does raise some issues for utilitarian accounts of ethics.

Tim Vos says

If nothing else, perhaps one of the more original views on modern moral philosophy in general and virtue ethics in particular. Widening the scope of the moral, of morality as such, to living things like animals and plants provides a new way to reach a form of, more or less, provable objective morality. That which is moral is that which follows the goodness of the species of living being as is. A dog is a good dog if it acts and shows those characteristics common to dogs. A three-legged blind dog unable to hunt shows defects and such is an example of a defect dog. Through a series of clear arguments, both found in secondary literature and formed by Foot herself, and possible counter-arguments Foot attempts and mostly succeeds in showing how the goodness of irrational living things like plants or animals is applicable to the rational humans. Recommended for everyone interested in the question of morality and ethics and perhaps philosophy as such.
