Chapter 1

Foot: Virtue as Natural Goodness

I. Introduction

II. What is virtue?[1]

Foot's account of virtue unfolds across five points: Virtue is

- beneficial, to self and others, while vice is bad for people.
- distinct from skills, fromm strengh, keen eyesight, reliable memory, etc. because these do not involve the will.
- corrective of some tempting vice.
- only operative toward good ends.
- natural goodness.

She begins with necessary conditions: A virtue is beneficial.[2] She says, "Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some

1. John Dupré, "The Miracle of Monism," in *Naturalism in Question* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 36–58 test2.

2. She recommends examining Aristotle and Aquinas (and others) for their view on virtue, but cautions against terminological misunderstandings. *Arete* for them refers "also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice" (Philippa

measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity re lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror."[3] But whom is benefited? Does a person possessing a virtue benefit the virtuous person or the society in which the virtuous person lives? For some virtues, the answer is more clearly "both": temperance benefits oneself and one's family or community. For other virtues, such as justice or charity, the answer is less clear. "It is a reasonable opinion that on the whole a man is better off for being charitable and just, but this is not to say that circumstances may not arise in which he will have to sacrifice everything for charity or justice."[4]

> Let us say then, leaving unsolved problems behind us, that virtues are in general beneficial characteristics, and indeed ones that a human being needs to have, for his own sake and that of his fellows. This will not, however, take us far towards a definition of a virtue, since there are many other qualities of a man that may be similarly beneficial, as for instance bodily characteristics such as health and physical strength, and mental powers such as those of memory and concentration.[5]

Strength

So, what differentiates virtue from strength? At first glance, the answer seems to be something about the will; Foot thinks virtues are revealed not only by a person's abilities but by his or her *intentions.* But what are intentions? Foot argues that the 'will' must be understood in its broadest sense, "to cover what is wished for as well as what is sought."[6] Intentions are not the *only* thing we judge, for a well-intentioned nincompoop who always harms when helping is rightly judged as deficient in virtue. Neither do we only judge the result of a person's action, for we sometimes exculpate a failing

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Foot, *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002) 2). *Arete ethikai* (or virtues morales) do not correspond to our moral virtues. For us, there are four moral virtues: courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. For them, wisdom or *phronesis/prudentia* is an intellectual virtue.]

3. Ibid., 2–3.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid., 4.
6. Ibid., 5.

performance in part because the person *meant well*, though it also perhaps it the exculpation is called for because circumstances were not favorable, chances of success were low, etc.

Foot attempts to capture the point that

> In his novel A Single Pebble John Hersey describes such a man, speaking of a rescue in a swift flowing river: It was the head tracker's marvellous swift response that captured my admiration at first, his split second solicitousness when he heard a cry of pain, his finding in mid-air, as it were, the only way to save the injured boy. But there was more to it than that. His action, which could not have been mulled over in his mind, showed a deep, (p.5) instinctive love of life, a compassion, an optimism, which made me feel very good . . . What this suggests is that a man's virtue may be judged by his innermost desires as well as by his intentions; and this fits with our idea that a virtue such as generosity lies as much in someone's attitudes as in his actions. Pleasure in the good fortune of others is, one thinks, the sign of a generous spirit; and small reactions of pleasure and displeasure often the surest signs of a man's moral disposition.[7]

Skill

What differentiates virtues from skills? Foot presents the puzzling thought that "in the matter of arts and skills… voluntary error is preferable to involuntary error, while in the matter of virtues… it is the reverse."[8] The thought seems to be that deliberately erring in an art or skill is compatible with mastery, whereas deliberately erring in morality is still an error.

Foot also argues that virtues are "corrective". That is, each one stands "at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good."[9] In this discussion, she is illuminating a statement of Aristotle that "virtues are about what is difficult for men" and also objecting to a statement of Kant that *only* "actions done out of a sense of duty" have moral worth.

Kant's error, according to Foot, is in failing to distinguish that which is "in accord" with virtue from that which is *virtuous* full stop. It may be, for example, that a novice tennis player makes

7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid., 8.

an expert shot while remaining merely a novice. The hit is in accord with excellence but is not, in this case, an instance of excellence – only beginner's luck.

Can virtue enable the more efficient achivement of ignoble aims? On the one hand, examples are easy to furnish: a murderer displays courage; a prude displays temperence. It seems commonsensical that whatever attributes we designate as courageous can be found in agents pursuing bad ends. On the other hand, the Aristotelian line excludes such a possibility by definition. Jonathan Sanford's recent monograph, *Before Virtue*, argues that Aristotle's doctrine is "ethics insists it is impossible to exercise any virtue, with the exception of technical skill, wrongly."[10] Foot attempts to do justice to both these concerns. The analogy is to poisons or solvents:

> It is quite natural to say on occasion 'P does not act as a poison here' though P is a poison and it is P that is acting here. Similarly courage is not operating as a virtue when the murderer turns his courage, which is a virtue, to bad ends. Not surprisingly the resistance that some of us registered was not to the expression 'the courage of the murderer' or to the assertion that what he did 'took courage' but rather to the description of that action as an act of courage or a courageous act. It is not that the action could not be so described, but that the fact that courage does not here have its characteristic operation is a reason for finding the description strange.[11]

An agent's commission of an otherwise virtuous action may be a mistake *for that agent* at that time. This may seem ad hoc, but we must remember that Foot is attempting to make space for the "commonsense" observation that some good traits operate to bad ends *within* the philosophically rigorous definition of virtue as beneficial.

One objection Foot responds to is the worry some might have that she is saying *only* those who are completely virtuous are virtuous at all. She has two responses: wisdom always operates as a virtue. So we admire wisdom perhaps most of all. I would add that when we admire another virtue such as courage, or justice, or moderation, we are often admiring the *wisdom in* the courage, the justice, and the moderation.

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10. Jonathan Sanford, *Before Virtue:Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (The Catholic University of American Press, 2015), 163.

11. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, 16.

A second response, though, is that we do admire some who have only a subset of all the virtues:

> There are some people who do possess all these virtues and who are loved and admired by all the world, as Pope John XXIII was loved and admired. Yet the fact is that many of us look up to some people whose chaotic lives contain rather little of wisdom or temperance, rather than to some others who possess these virtues. And while it may be that this is just romantic nonsense I suspect that it is not.[12]

Even those whose overall life is a mish-mash of virtues and vices are admirable. My interpretation of this sentiment is that such are admirable insofar as they demonstrate some excellent qualities.

III. Natural Goodness

Foot argues that virtues are instances of 'natural goodness.' This is a powerful thesis that she defends at length in her 2001 monograph.[13] I would like to hazard a summary of the dialectic before offering responses.

Foot is aware that her offering in *Natural Goodness* is "crude" in that she is aware it will offend the ears of some listeners. Her defense is the though from Wittgenstein that often crude beginnings are a necessary start to something refined.

She calls the inquiry a "fresh start." The "fresh start" is to throw out many of the assumptions of Moore and Hume. Moore assumed that "good" was the ultimate predicate under review in ethics; however statements like "pleasure is good" are not good paradigms for philosophical reflection. The term 'beautiful' in 'the house is beautiful' doesn't need a complement. The house is beautiful full stop. But 'good' has a different logical function than predicates like 'red' or 'beautiful.' But 'good' always means *good for someone* or *for something*. 'Good' (like 'useful') always needs a complement. 'The house is useful' does need a complement – the house is useful for a mom of six, or useful for an artist, or what have you.

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12. Ibid., 17.
13. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001).