

1 Introduction

Philippa Foot is well known for the infamous trolley thought experiment and, within philosophy, for arguing that whether morality furnishes us with reasons for action depends on our desires.¹ Yet her later work on natural normativity, as presented in her book *Natural Goodness* (Foot 2001), has received less attention. Like her early work in metaethics, *Natural Goodness* is set against the prevailing philosophical zeitgeist. Although naturalism in various forms is central to current philosophy, Foot presents an ethical naturalism that is at odds with what is ordinarily understood to count as a version of naturalism.

This Element presents an interpretation and defense of Foot's ethical naturalism as found in *Natural Goodness* and later essays, which is to say, her mature metaethical views. It begins with an exploration of the grammatical method, derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Foot's employment of this method, uncommon in current philosophy, is one of the obstacles that stands in the way of a proper appreciation of Foot's mature views. Always a laconic writer, Foot says little about her method. Yet, I argue in Section 2 that this method receives some unfair treatment due to a limited understanding of Wittgenstein among her readers; I propose to remedy that by reading Foot in the context of some fellow Wittgensteinians, especially G. E. M. Anscombe and Peter Geach. The grammatical method is the key to understanding Foot's views on goodness, its role in describing living things, and the importance of human nature for ethics. It sets out a map of our application of terms within a certain domain so as to yield insight into those concepts. In Foot's case, the central goal is to give insight into goodness through mapping the ways in which we employ the term 'good.'

In Section 3, I turn to her idea that goodness has a primary application in relation to different sorts of living things, including human beings. In this, she ties her work closely to some pioneering work on the grammar of judgments about living things carried out by Michael Thompson. Because Thompson's work is so central to Foot's mature ethical naturalism, I will be giving extensive treatment to Thompson's writings here as well. I believe anyone who reads Foot's later work will understand the necessity of doing so. Having an understanding of the grammatical method is crucial here too, for it is key to understanding the often misunderstood role that the concept of the human plays in ethical judgment, according to Foot.

In Section 4, I turn to Foot's understanding of virtue, which is for her a key ethical concept. I look at the brief treatment of the nature of virtue in *Natural Goodness* and argue that her views there can be enriched by some of her earlier

¹ She came to repudiate this view. See Hacker-Wright 2013, chapter 3.

writing on virtue as well as turning to Thomas Aquinas, resulting in an understanding of moral virtue as the perfection of human appetitive powers. This means that goodness in one of its central applications to human beings refers to the perfection of our desires, on this version of ethical naturalism.

The thrust of my interpretation is that Foot presents us with a metaethics that takes ethical judgment to inevitably reflect our self-understanding as a sort of rational animal, and in particular to reflect a view about what makes us good or bad as an animal of this sort. This self-understanding is implicit in our representation of ourselves as engaged in thought and action. Foot's view reflects careful consideration of what is involved in thinking of ourselves as such animals. Ethics is part of the structure of our self-consciousness, on this view. It is inseparable from representing our actions as under the control of reason. In this way, we can think of Foot as engaging in the attempt of "reason . . . to understand its own power" as Kant describes his project in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965: 57, B23). We can understand Foot, on my view, as presenting a *Critique of Practical Reason* focused on attaining self-understanding with respect to our practical nature, that is, our agency. To understand the meaning of good and bad as it applies to human actions, we need to ask: In virtue of what do these terms apply to us? She argues that these terms are employed to assess the exercise of human agency, and so we must attempt to understand human agency. As Foot takes up this task, she insists on the necessity of seeing human agency in the wider context of human animality, while remaining sensitive to the transformation of animality that occurs when reason is among our animal powers. On my reading, Foot's metaethics directs us back to some of the fundamental insights of the Aristotelian tradition; most importantly, it directs us to see human goodness as virtue, and virtue as the perfection of the appetitive and cognitive powers we possess as rational animals.

2 Goodness and the Grammatical Method

"If in everyday life someone said to us 'Pleasure is good', we should ask, 'How do you mean?' – indicating that as it stands the proposition seems void for uncertainty, as a lawyer might say" (Foot 2001: 2).

In *Natural Goodness*, Foot relates a joke she tells audiences (students, I imagine). She holds up a small bit of paper and asks her audience to say whether it is good or not. Then, she offers to pass it around for examination (Foot 2001: 2, n. 4). It isn't as though she's asking about some feature of the paper that could be discerned by closer inspection, such as its precise color. By contrast, if she held up a toaster and asked the same question, the response

would be, “let’s plug it in and find out! Fetch some bread!” A discerning expert on toasters might be able to just look at it, perhaps examining the innards, but the real test would be its functioning.

The joke reveals what Foot terms a “logical – grammatical – absurdity,” and though it is a joke, it is about a matter of prime philosophical importance: the nature of goodness. Foot devotes most of her writing to this issue, which falls within the area of contemporary philosophy known as metaethics. The joke also reveals something about how Foot approaches issues in metaethics. She employs a version of the method of ‘grammatical investigation’ pioneered by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later work, a method on display throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*. Fellow Wittgensteinians G. E. M. Anscombe and Peter Geach also employed this method; it is taken up, too, by some contemporary philosophers following in their footsteps, but it is certainly not a standard methodology in contemporary philosophy or metaethics. Further, the method is not well understood, as I will show below in examining some disputes about the method as it is applied in the case of Foot’s metaethics.

Though the grammatical method is not well understood and rarely treated in discussions of Foot’s work, it thoroughly shapes her approach to metaethics. It structures her thinking as she considers the nature of philosophical questions, the relationship between philosophy and natural science, and the status of her philosophical results. Indeed, Rosalind Hursthouse reports that Foot’s original title for *Natural Goodness* was “The Grammar of Goodness” (Hursthouse 2018: 25). Because the grammatical method is so important and not well understood, I start this exploration of Foot’s metaethics with an exposition and partial defense of the grammatical method.² I offer an interpretation of her approach that matches its employment by fellow Wittgensteinians who influenced Foot’s reception of Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Geach. I aim thereby to show how the grammatical method leads Foot to a productive approach to metaethics and defensible insights into goodness.

2.1 The Grammar of Goodness

Foot begins *Natural Goodness* with some reflections on a paper by Peter Geach, who himself conducts a grammatical investigation of ‘good’ (Geach 1956). In “Good and Evil,” Geach argues that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are primarily used as

² One might question whether the ‘grammatical method’ is really a method because it is actually what *all* philosophers are doing, whether they realize it or not. For example, when traditional, pre-Wittgensteinian philosophers are doing metaphysics, they are really investigating grammar. Be that as it may, what I am calling the grammatical method consists of undertaking grammatical investigation self-consciously and explicitly. Thanks to Evgenia Mylonaki for pressing me on this point.

attributive adjectives, rather than predicative adjectives. Geach claims that it is 'legitimate' to say, "Jones is a good man," (with 'good' in an attributive position) but not "Pleasure is good" (with 'good' in a predicative position). He notes that he is using the terms 'predicative adjective' and 'attributive adjective' in a "special logical sense." Though he borrows terminology from schoolbook grammar, the observations he arrives at should get at the logical structure of any discussion of goodness in any language as opposed to merely conventional aspects of English grammar.

On Geach's view, nothing is simply 'good' full stop. Rather 'good' is always explicitly or implicitly associated with what Judith Jarvis Thomson nicely terms a "goodness fixing kind." Goodness must be related to a kind of thing because we must name something that has a characteristic function and can be good by fulfilling that function well (Thomson, 2008: 21). Of course, we do sometimes say, simply, "Jones is good," and we certainly aren't suggesting that he is good qua Jones, because there is no way of being good qua Jones. 'Jones' does not name a kind of thing, and there is no sort of function that pertains to all things named 'Jones.' In such cases, there is instead an implicit kind to which the goodness attaches: a good dentist, for example, so that the statement, fully spelled out, reads "Jones is a good dentist." By contrast "pleasure is good" is a perplexing expression – provoking, Foot thinks, the response, "How do you mean?" In form, it is like "my house is red," and seems to attribute a free-floating property, goodness, to pleasure. But, as Geach points out, goodness is an *alienans* adjective: We can't take "good dentist" and parse it into "x is a dentist" and "x is good," as we can parse "red car" into "x is a car" and "x is red." A good dentist may, for example, be a lousy brain surgeon, and so the goodness attaches to the dentist only concerning his dentistry. In this, 'good' is like 'big.' "Big mouse" does not divide into "x is a mouse" and "x is big." Foot follows Geach: The grammatical construal of goodness as a predicative adjective is mistaken, and it is a mistake with philosophical consequences, as it kicks off a mistaken trajectory in metaethics that leads from nonnaturalism to non-cognitivism in a hopeless attempt to make sense of the property of goodness.

Properly construing the grammar of goodness is, Foot believes, philosophically important. Moore works with a certain presumed grammar of goodness, but one that does not reflect how we, in fact, employ the concept. Taking up 'good' as a predicative adjective arguably led G. E. Moore astray. After all, if one thinks something is just 'good' full stop, just as something can be 'red' full stop, this thought invites the question of what the common property is that are we ascribing to *anything* when calling it 'good.' G. E. Moore famously argues that it is a distinctive nonnatural property. His Open Question Argument appeals to the appearance that we can ask of any property held to make something good –

“that may be x, but is it good?” Since this question always sounds open, ‘good’ must not refer to the same thing as those terms refer to. On Moore’s view, ‘good’ must refer to a distinctive nonnatural property that cannot be defined. Although some philosophers accept such a view, Geach and Foot reject it. It is a depiction that raises problems we need not face; and it stems from a mistaken view of how we operate with ‘good.’

Geach and Foot believe that through carefully examining the grammar of this expression, we can gain insight into goodness. The point of a grammatical investigation is to get a road map of how we employ an expression that can guide us as we reflect philosophically about goodness. As Anscombe points out, in using the grammatical method Wittgenstein’s interest is not in the structures of language for their own sake, but rather in the help that the appreciation of the grammar of our expressions could provide in resolving philosophical problems (Anscombe 2011: 202). In particular, this help is necessary if we are “held captive” (as Wittgenstein puts it) by a philosophical picture based on too narrow a view of how the expression can be used. If we assume that there is just one such form or that one among many forms is somehow primary, it may suggest that one philosophical view is exclusively possible, even when it generates further problems. It may seem as though goodness simply *must* be a property like being red. Foot thinks this is what has happened with Moore, who was held captive to the idea that goodness must be such a property based on the assumption that ‘good’ has an appropriate predicative use in expressions like “pleasure is good.”³

Foot extends Geach’s argument in two important respects that fill lacunae in his very brief paper. First, she notes that there is a speaker-relative sense of ‘good’ that gives sense to saying “that’s a good thing!” – for example, if one’s team has scored a goal, or one’s friend has got a job. This sense can be extended to cases in which we say it was a good thing that surprisingly few people were hurt in a natural disaster. These uses have a sense against the background of the interests of the speaker or the aims that they have.⁴ In the case of it being a good thing that fewer people are injured or killed, this has a sense against the background of the aims of benevolent agents. She denies, however, that there is a non-speaker-relative sense of the idea of “a good state of affairs,” which is a notion she sees as crucial to consequentialism. Second, Foot, as part of the

³ Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that Moore mistook the grammar of goodness and that, through him, the mistaken grammar shaped the entire course of twentieth-century metaethics. It led to emotivism and expressivism in metaethics and contributed to the emergence of consequentialism in normative ethics. On these points, Foot and Thomson are in total agreement. See Thomson 2008: 10–12.

⁴ See “Utilitarianism and the Virtues” in Foot 2002a: 64ff.

grammatical map she draws of 'goodness,' draws a distinction between natural goodness and secondary goodness. Natural goodness is a sense of 'good' applied to living things and their parts, as in the case of 'good roots' said of a particular tree (Foot 2001: 26). Secondary goodness occurs when things are said to be good for living things (including ourselves). For example, some soil is good in this sense when it is of the right kind for a particular plant. These two additions work together, as when a gardener says "it's a good thing" that a plant she's tending is well situated in good soil; or when we, as benevolent agents, say that it's a good thing that nourishing food has got through to people on the brink of starvation.

It is worth considering how these distinctions relate to choice, since one might think that good can get its sense practically, meaning something like 'choiceworthy.' From her 1961 article, "Goodness and Choice" through to her last writings, Foot consistently denies that choice is necessary or sufficient to ground the use of the word 'good' in the "proper evaluative sense" (Foot 2002b: 132ff.). This means that our commitment to choosing something does not suffice, nor is it necessary, to make sense of our saying of that thing that it is good. Nevertheless, there is a significant sense in which a human being's natural goodness relates to choice. Things that we deem good for us will be chosen by prudent agents for themselves, and by benevolent agents for others. And what we deem good for us will have grammatical connections to what we consider a good human life. Hence, large amounts of bourbon will seem good and choiceworthy to someone who believes it best to live fast and die young, but not to someone who values longevity and sobriety.

Employing Foot's distinctions, we can qualify and thereby extend Geach's insight about the attributive use of 'good.' As Charles Pigden points out in an argument against Geach, one can say "that nuclear missile is bad (or evil)" without it being bad qua missile (Pigden 1990: 132). In other words, it is the missile in perfectly good working order that is bad and, Pigden thinks, bad simpliciter. After all, there seems to be no kind that we can fit the missile under that would yield some aspect under which it is bad or malfunctioning as that sort of thing; it is not, for example, bad qua artefact. Therefore, Pigden concludes, there is a freestanding use of 'bad' or 'evil,' if not of 'good.'

It isn't clear how Geach could respond to this charge, at least as he presents his views in "Good and Evil." Yet, Foot's grammatical map shows two possible interpretations of this statement which make sense of the claim but avoid the notion of goodness simpliciter. On the first interpretation, it is a claim of secondary goodness, and it makes sense to say of missiles that it is a bad thing that they exist against the background a benevolent agent considering their impact on human beings (and for this reason, it is not choiceworthy to such

an agent). Although the artefact might work perfectly well, one might think that it is bad for us that there are such destructive artefacts because of the havoc they wreak on living human beings and their environment: Such missiles are bad for us, and this is something that matters to benevolent people who share the aim of ridding the world of whatever is highly destructive of human life. Another possible meaning is that there is no way in which the missiles can be used that is good. Anyone using them would be acting badly and bad qua human being.

On the first account, the judgment of the badness of the nuclear missile is not autonomous, not a judgment of intrinsic or absolute badness, but badness in relation to human well-being, which is something that the benevolent agent cares about. It is derivative from judgments of natural goodness: The judgment that they are bad for us is derivative inasmuch as it is on the basis of our conception of human goodness that what is good or bad *for* us is determined. In the second sense, it is an aspect of our natural goodness as human beings that we cannot use weapons of mass destruction well. There is simply no activity that we can engage in, using these devices for their typical function, that would be a good activity. Someone might say something similar of implements of torture: Torture is an intrinsically bad activity because doing it makes one bad qua human; there is no proper use for implements of torture, even or perhaps especially when they accomplish their design effectively, so they are simply bad. Foot's grammar thereby admits that there are roles for a predicative use of good and bad. Still, she insists that they are, in general, subordinate to the attributive use of 'good' or natural goodness: what it is to be good qua human.

On Foot's view, then, there are admissible predicative uses of 'good,' but there still seems to be no context of application for "pleasure is good." Someone might claim that pleasure is good for an organism and so truly saying that something is pleasant surely gives some reason for pursuing it – though it also makes a big difference how the pleasure is obtained. These points do not advance the case for the philosophical usage, which is saying something different: The good that adheres to pleasure for Moore is quite independent of whose pleasure it is, and whether they are inclined to pursue it or not. Apparently, the idea is that there are states of affairs consisting of pleasure, that is, states of affairs consisting of pleasant mental states, and these are intrinsically good. Hence, it is a different case than those just canvassed that can be translated into claims of secondary goodness. In what ways states of affairs can be intrinsically good such that 'good' attaches to 'pleasure,' even though there are some appropriate predicative uses of good, remains stubbornly mysterious.

Foot's grammatical investigation appears to lead to some substantial insights into the nature of goodness. Negatively, it shows that there is confusion

involved in the idea of goodness simpliciter as a property: We have no applications of 'good' that point in the direction of such an idea. Rather, there various ways of being good in a certain respect. Further, it highlights some different categories of goodness, associated with meaningful expressions of goodness: speaker-relative goodness, natural goodness, and secondary goodness. These categories help to make sense of some of the legitimate instances of predicative employments of 'good,' complicating Geach's initial grammatical insight.

Still, these results have not gone unquestioned. Richard Kraut, following Charles Pigden, denies that the methods Foot and Geach employ are sufficient to reject the notion of goodness simpliciter. Kraut agrees with Geach's conclusion; specifically, he concurs with Geach's rejection of the concept of goodness simpliciter, or "absolute goodness," as Kraut calls it. On Kraut's understanding of Geach's argument, Geach charges the "friends of absolute goodness" with violating a linguistic rule – a rule that governs the use of 'good' (Kraut 2011: 27). Kraut questions whether that is really the problem with absolute goodness. Instead, following Charles Pigden, he compares absolute goodness to phlogiston, the stuff once supposed to be responsible for combustion. Phlogiston is not a conceptual impossibility, but rather an empty concept: Nothing corresponds to it, as experiments with combustion have shown. "Phlogiston causes combustion" is undoubtedly not unintelligible since careful experimentation have shown it to be false. Likewise, in Kraut's view, "pleasure is good" is not unintelligible, but rather, it is false.

Kraut attempts to show that absolute goodness does not exist by showing that it does not provide the best explanation for why we should evaluate things like pleasure positively. In his view, the best explanation for this is that pleasant things are good *for* us. Absolute goodness is one way of explaining pleasure's goodness, but relative goodness is better, on Kraut's view. Relative goodness better accounts for how we learn about what is good for us. We never learn about what is good simpliciter: "it is not by learning about goodness (period), then learning about human beings, and then putting these two independent inquiries together, that we grasp what is good for human beings" (Kraut 2011: 32). This is part of a larger case that relative goodness ('good for') does the explanatory job better than absolute goodness. My interest here is in whether that case needs to be made as Kraut claims; that is, do Geach's arguments and by extension Foot's, fall short in the way that Kraut claims?

In Kraut's presentation of the method, Geach and Foot seem to be insisting on arbitrary linguistic rules and asserting that the friends of absolute goodness are not using proper grammar – understanding grammar in terms of conformity with explicitly stateable rules. Yet, the friends of absolute goodness themselves think they *are* speaking intelligibly and meaningfully. Of course, people can

believe they speak intelligibly when they do not, but the problem is that we are then in an irresolvable standoff. Strategically, it may be best to adopt a different line of argument if, for nothing else, to avoid that situation. I aim to show that Kraut misconstrues the grammatical method; it is not a matter of insisting on linguistic rules, but rather of exploring the practical employment of our terms. If I am correct, Kraut has misrepresented the grammatical method, at least as Foot and Geach employ it. Further, I will show the analogy he and Pigden draw between phlogiston and absolute goodness to be faulty; the best way to handle “pleasure is good” is as a piece of plain nonsense, just as Foot suggests.

2.2 The Grammatical Method Defended

As mentioned at the beginning of this Section, there is debate about the nature of the grammatical method in Wittgenstein, and Foot unfortunately does not elaborate on her understanding of the method.⁵ There can be little doubt that she was influenced in her views about these matters by Geach and Anscombe, who did have something more to say about grammar and the grammatical method, and in what follows I will draw on their work as well as on that of others who elaborate an interpretation of the method consistent with theirs.

Kraut characterizes Geach as claiming that the friends of absolute goodness use ‘good’ in a way that violates a linguistic rule – a rule that governs the proper use of the word ‘good’ (Kraut 2011: 27). The rule is, “Do not claim of anything that it is good *simpliciter*” (Kraut 2011: 175). This is an odd linguistic rule. In form, it seems like an ordinary grammar book rule, similar to “Always put adjectives before nouns” or “Don’t use ‘a’ before a word that starts with a vowel sound.” Yet in content, it is another thing, as it does not explicitly refer to nouns and adjectives or other grammatical structures. Linguistic rules for English present conventions for well-formed sentences in English, but they are arbitrary and breaking them does not always result in unintelligibility. Insisting on them is often merely pedantic. If the linguistic rule is meant in this sense, a friend of absolute goodness might rightly insist, “but you know what I mean even if it isn’t *en bonne forme!*”

There are other possible senses of grammar that are not so arbitrary. In Ryle’s famous example, someone who is shown the various buildings of a university and then asks, “But which one is the university?” is mistaken about the sort of

⁵ For an overview of clashing interpretations of what Wittgenstein means by the grammatical method, see Dobler 2011. Dobler usefully distinguishes a standard interpretation that takes grammar to consist of explicitly formulable rules, to be found in works such as Baker and Hacker 2005. She distinguishes this from an ‘anthropological’ interpretation of grammar and the grammatical method which denies that there are such formulable rules of grammar. That interpretation can be found in works such as Cavell (1976) and Diamond (1991).

thing the university is – not just another building but an institution that owns the buildings and employs faculty, etc. Geach and Foot might seem to be pointing to a category mistake at least analogous to this. After all, Geach explicitly states that he is taking up terms from grammar in “a special logical sense.” Foot’s joke from the beginning of this section might be taken as an application of Ryle’s (2009: 190) absurdity test. According to that test, two expressions belong to different logical categories if importing them into a sentence results in absurdity in one case but not in the other: For example, ‘Saturday’ cannot be inserted in “. . . is in bed” to produce a meaningful sentence, whereas ‘Jones’ can.

There is a question, then, of how to understand the impossibility of producing a meaningful sentence with “Saturday is in bed” as with “Pleasure is good.” Is it the upshot of applying a rule governing what can be said to be in bed or forming sentences with ‘good’? In a discussion of the meaning of the past tense, Anscombe notes that “the past has changed” does not have a sense, for in that case “When was the battle of Hastings in 1066?” would have a sense (and *not* the sense of “When *exactly* was the battle of Hastings in 1066?”) (Anscombe 1981c: 112). As Anscombe points out, a change in the system of dating could provide a context in which this question could have a sense, but without some such a context, the question is nonsense. One is not here saying of something intelligible that it is impossible.

Another example from the same paper helps to drive this point home. Anscombe imagines a child wanting to hear a bang that it just heard again. Not a bang that sounds the same, but the same individual bang. She imagines naming the bang ‘A,’ and putting the demand as “I want A again!” Wanting A again is unlike wanting a piece of cake that one has eaten. Due to the physical nature of the cake and the process of digestion together with certain laws of nature, it is not possible to get it again after it has been eaten. It is physically impossible to eat the cake again. We may be inclined to think it is due to the ‘logical nature’ of the bang that we cannot hear it again. But rather, Anscombe thinks rejecting the possibility of ‘getting A again’ has nothing to do with the nature of a bang; it is rather part of its being the proper name for a bang that we do not speak of getting A again. If we asked for A and got another bang, that would show that it was not the proper name for a bang. The “real reason” that we can’t speak of ‘getting A again,’ according to Anscombe, is that we haven’t invented a use for the phrase, and not that we have found a logical law that is something analogous to the laws of nature that undergird the physical impossibility of eating the same piece of cake again.

Anscombe provides valuable context for properly understanding Foot’s grammatical approach. It is not claiming to uncover a linguistic rule or a logical law, but it is the exploration of what Anscombe elsewhere calls the