



Photo: Norm Schindler

Philippa Foot

Philippa Ruth Foot (née Bosanquet), Tutor in Philosophy at Somerville College from 1950-69, died on 3 October 2010, her 90th birthday.

Philippa Foot was one of the most important moral philosophers of the 20th century, known especially for her pioneering work in contemporary virtue ethics. She was also one of the founders of Oxfam and a granddaughter of U.S. President Grover Cleveland.

Foot matriculated in 1939, and was a Lecturer at Somerville from 1947 to 1950; a Tutorial Fellow between 1950 and 1969; Senior Research Fellow 1969 to 1988 and Honorary Fellow 1988 to 2010. She was also for many years Griffin Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Foot did not publish a monograph until she was over eighty. Most of her work was in the form of highly original, deeply thoughtful, and finely crafted articles. These were mainly on ethics – on the nature of ethical judgements (metaethics), on theories about how we should act (normative ethics), and on particular problems, such as abortion and euthanasia (practical ethics). Many of them are collected in *Virtues and Vices* (1978) and *Moral Dilemmas* (2002).

Metaethics in the 1950s was dominated by expressivism, the view that moral judgements are nothing more than expressions of certain

emotions, attitudes, or prescriptions. In two landmark articles at the end of that decade, 'Moral Arguments' and 'Moral Beliefs', Foot argued that this view of ethical judgements was far too thin. It allows that the judgement 'No one should look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon' – if expressed in the way that moral judgements are expressed – can count as a moral judgement like any other. Morality must have a point, and there are standards of appropriateness for moral evaluations. These evaluations have to be brought within the sphere of some virtue which we recognise.

In these papers, Foot was already taking the view – quite standard among ancient philosophers – that the virtues have to be justified in terms of their benefiting the agent. In 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' (1972), she concluded that morality is no more 'categorical' (to use Kant's term) than etiquette. Whether you have a reason to be moral depends on the desires you have; but, like Hume, Foot expected that many of us would continue to 'volunteer' to be moral.

It is a mark of Foot's philosophical integrity that she published a recantation of this position in 1994, in which she said that she had come to see morality as depending not on contingent desires, but on a conception of practical rationality grounded in facts about creatures such as ourselves. It was this position that Foot set out at more length in *Natural Goodness* (2001). Human beings are co-operative, and we need the virtues to flourish. This view is combined with another Aristotelian thesis – that happiness, at least in part, consists in living virtuously.

From the beginning, Foot emphasized the role of the virtues in ethics, and she is often described as a 'virtue ethicist' (a label she herself rejected, perhaps because she saw herself in normative ethics as primarily in opposition to consequentialism alone, and not the kind of 'deontological' ethics found in the work of W.D. Ross, Prichard, and others). Her 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues' (1985) outlines a significant challenge to utilitarian and other forms of consequentialism: to give an account of what it means for a state of affairs to be 'good, period', rather than good for some being or beings.

One of Foot's most influential legacies is the so-called 'trolley problem', the many variations on which have given rise to what is now jokingly called 'trolleyology'. In 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect' (1967), Foot asks us to compare two cases. In the first, a magistrate can save the lives of five innocent people held by a mob, but only by framing and executing another innocent person. In the second, the driver of a runaway trolley, about to kill five workers on the line, switches to another track, on which there is only one person working. The maths in each case seems the same: five lives in exchange for one. So why do most of us think the driver should switch tracks, while the magistrate should not frame the innocent person?

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■ A Life in Celebration

Somerville College hosted two events on 18 and 19 March 2011 to celebrate Philippa Foot's life. At a memorial occasion held in the Hall, some two hundred people heard accounts of her life and work from former colleagues and pupils, and from a recent Director of Oxfam who described her sixty year association with that charity. A talk by Sir Michael Dummett, read out by his son, paid tribute to her as a friend and praised her work and writings. Dummett called her monograph *Natural Goodness* "the greatest work on moral philosophy since at least G.E. Moore".

To honour her memory, Somerville also arranged and hosted a Moral Philosophy Symposium the day before, with talks from six philosophers on topics close to Foot's work. Gavin Lawrence of UCLA opened the Symposium discussing a topic Foot had written much about: can a wicked life, or for that matter an ultimately fruitless one, nonetheless be counted a happy one? Other talks were given by Sarah Broadie (a former student and now Professor at St Andrews), on 'Aristotle on Practical Truth', and Michael Thompson of Pittsburgh on 'I and You'. Ralph Wedgwood, now of Merton College, defended the Doctrine of Double Effect, acknowledging Foot's important article 'The Problem of Abortion and

the Doctrine of Double Effect'. In 'Teaching Virtue', Anselm Müller argued provocatively that bringing up a child should not be thought of as a skill, but rather as what Aristotle calls a *praxis*. Sir Anthony Kenny closed the Symposium with a paper entitled 'Virtue, Law and Morality'. Fittingly, Kenny and other speakers drew also on the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, who had been a colleague of Foot's at Somerville; Foot often used to speak of the stimulus she got from conversations with Anscombe in the College's Senior Common Room.

Among the ninety who attended the Symposium were professional philosophers from all over the U.K., and from Bulgaria, Germany and Italy as well as the U.S. The event also attracted plenty who would not class themselves as philosophers but as interested amateurs, including some of Philippa Foot's former pupils. They were intrigued and delighted to take part in live philosophical debate again after so many years. As one of them wrote: "It was just great to see so many philosophers so happy and delighted to be with each other, all talking about profoundly meaningful things and trying all the time to discover, or to persuade each other, what exactly the profound meanings are."

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Keynote speaker Sir Anthony Kenny with Julie Jack (seated)

Photo: Keiko Ikeuchi