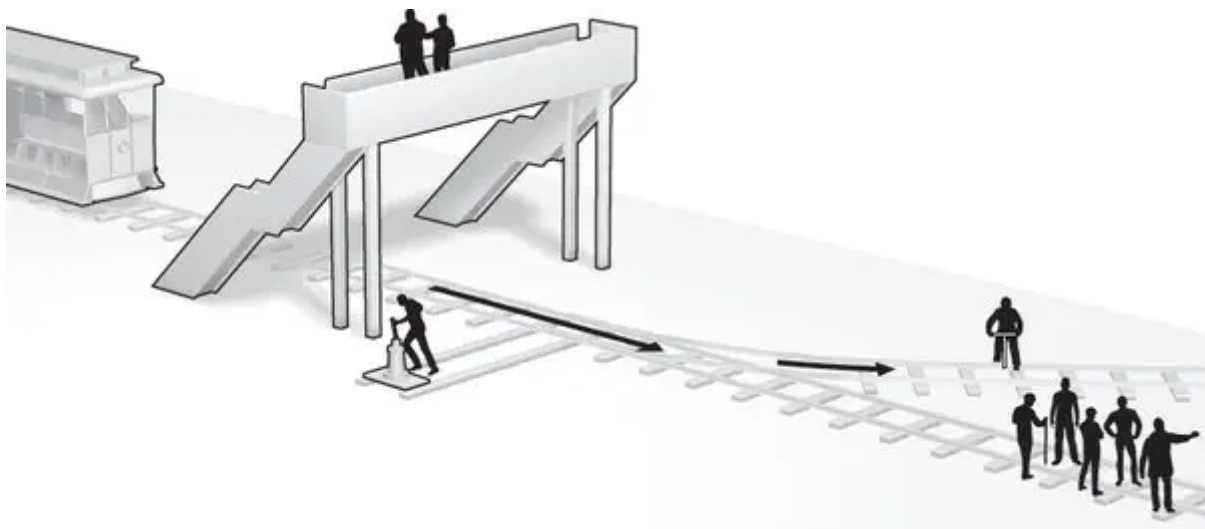


Philippa Foot, Renowned Philosopher, Dies at 90 (Published 2010)

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Credit...The New York Times; Illustration by Frank O'Connell

Philippa Foot, a philosopher who argued that moral judgments have a rational basis, and who introduced the renowned ethical thought experiment known as the Trolley Problem (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fs0E69krO_Q), died at her home in Oxford, England, on Oct. 3, her 90th birthday.

Her death was announced on the Web site of Somerville College (<http://www.some.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford, where she earned her academic degrees and taught for many years.

In her early work, notably in the essays “Moral Beliefs” and “Moral Arguments,” published in the late 1950s, Ms. Foot took issue with philosophers like R. M. Hare and Charles L. Stevenson, who maintained that moral statements were

ultimately expressions of attitude or emotion, because they could not be judged true or false in the same way factual statements could be.

Ms. Foot countered this “private-enterprise theory,” as she called it, by arguing the interconnectedness of facts and moral interpretations. Further, she insisted that virtues like courage, wisdom and temperance are indispensable to human life and the foundation stones of morality. Her writing on the subject helped establish virtue ethics (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>) as a leading approach to the study of moral problems.

“She’s going to be remembered not for a particular view or position, but for changing the way people think about topics,” said Lawrence Solum, who teaches the philosophy of law at the University of Illinois and studied under Ms. Foot. “She made the moves that made people see things in a fundamentally new way. Very few people do that in philosophy.”

It was the Trolley Problem, however, that captured the imagination of scholars outside her discipline. In 1967, in the essay “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect,” she discussed, using a series of provocative examples, the moral distinctions between intended and unintended consequences, between doing and allowing, and between positive and negative duties — the duty not to inflict harm weighed against the duty to render aid.

The most arresting of her examples, offered in just a few sentences, was the ethical dilemma faced by the driver of a runaway trolley hurtling toward five track workers. By diverting the trolley to a spur where just one worker is on the track, the driver can save five lives.

Clearly, the driver should divert the trolley and kill one worker rather than five.

But what about a surgeon who could also save five lives — by killing a patient and distributing the patient’s organs to five other patients who would otherwise die? The math is the same, but here, instead of having to choose between two

negative duties — the imperative not to inflict harm — as the driver does, the doctor weighs a negative duty against the positive duty of rendering aid.

By means of such problems, Ms. Foot hoped to clarify thinking about the moral issues surrounding abortion in particular, but she applied a similar approach to matters like euthanasia.

The philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson added two complications to the Trolley Problem that are now inseparable from it.

Imagine, she wrote, a bystander who sees the trolley racing toward the track workers and can divert it by throwing a switch along the tracks. Unlike the driver, who must choose to kill one person or five, the bystander can refuse to intervene or, by throwing the switch, accept the unintended consequence of killing a human being, a choice endorsed by most people presented with the problem.

Philippa Foot, the writer of an ethical thought experiment known as the Trolley Problem. Credit... University of California, Los Angeles

Or suppose, she suggested, that the bystander observes the impending trolley disaster from a footbridge over the tracks and realizes that by throwing a heavy weight in front of the trolley he can stop it.

As it happens, the only available weight is a fat man standing next to him. Most respondents presented with the problem saw a moral distinction between throwing the switch and throwing the man on the tracks, even though the end result, in lives saved, was identical.

The paradoxes suggested by the Trolley Problem and its variants have engaged not only moral philosophers but neuroscientists, economists and evolutionary psychologists. It also inspired a subdiscipline jokingly known as trolleyology (<http://philosophy.tamucc.edu/story/trolleyology-101>), whose swelling body of commentary “makes the Talmud look like CliffsNotes,” the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah wrote in his book “Experiments in Ethics” (2008).

Philippa Judith Bosanquet was born on Oct. 3, 1920, in Owston Ferry, Lincolnshire, and grew up in Kirkleatham, in North Yorkshire. Her mother, Esther, was a daughter of President Grover Cleveland. Her father, William, was a captain in the Coldstream Guards when he married her mother and later took over the running of a large Yorkshire steel works.

Ms. Foot studied philosophy, politics and economics at Somerville College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in 1942. During World War II, she worked as a researcher at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, sharing a London flat with the future novelist Iris Murdoch (<http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/downloads/iris-murdoch-newsletter-14.pdf>).

In 1945 she married the historian M. R. D. Foot, after Murdoch left him for the economist Thomas Balogh. The marriage ended in divorce. She is survived by a sister, Marion Daniel of London.

Ms. Foot began lecturing on philosophy at Somerville in 1947, a year after receiving her master's degree, and rose to the positions of vice principal and senior research fellow before retiring in 1988. In 1974 she became a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles, from which she retired in 1991.

In the 1970s Ms. Foot revisited some of her assertions about the objective nature of morality, allowing a measure of subjectivism to creep into her discussions of topics like abortion and euthanasia. The influence of Wittgenstein, and his linguistic spin on philosophical questions, became increasingly important in her writing, which dealt scrupulously with the various senses, and pitfalls, of terms like "should," "would" and "good."

In "Natural Goodness" (2001), she offered a new theory of practical reason, arguing that morals are rooted in objective human needs that can be compared to the physical needs of plants and animals and described using the same words.

In a 2001 interview with Philosophy Today (<http://www.philosophynow.org/issue41/41foot.htm>), she addressed a colleague's comment that, in her book, she seemed to regard vice as a natural defect.

“That's exactly what I believe, and I want to say that we describe defects in human beings in the same way as we do defects in plants and animals,” she said. “I once began a lecture by saying that in moral philosophy, it's very important to begin by talking about plants.”

Her most important essays were collected in “Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy” (1978) and “Moral Dilemmas: And Other Topics in Moral Philosophy” (2002).

Despite her influence, Ms. Foot remained disarmingly modest. “I'm not clever at all,” she told The Philosophers' Magazine (<http://www.philosophypress.co.uk/?p=1552>) in 2003. “I have a certain insight into philosophy, I think. But I'm not clever, I don't find complicated arguments easy to follow.”

A correction was made on

Oct. 12, 2010

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An obituary on Sunday about the philosopher Philippa Foot misstated the given name of her mother. It was Esther, not Edith.

How we handle corrections

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 30 of the New York edition with the headline: Philippa Foot, Renowned Philosopher, Dies at 90

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