

Philippa Foot obituary

The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/05/philippa-foot-obituary>) ·
by Jane O'Grady

The moral philosopher Philippa Foot, who has died aged 90, started a new trend in ethics. She challenged, in two seminal papers given in the late 1950s, the prevailing Oxbridge orthodoxy of AJ Ayer and Richard Hare; and, for the next few decades, passionate debate over her naturalism, as against Hare's prescriptivism, occupied most moral philosophers in Britain and America. She was also one of the pioneers of virtue ethics, a key development in philosophy from the 1970s onwards.

From her essay *Moral Beliefs* (1958) to the collection *Moral Dilemmas* (2002), and throughout her academic life at Oxford and universities in North America, she was always passionate that "the grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life" and in what it is rational for humans to want.

Suppose, she famously demanded in *Moral Beliefs*, that morality really were (à la Ayer and Hare) just a matter of each person commending and prescribing ways of acting that they happened to approve of – then why not commend a man who clasps his hands three times a day, or prescribes that this be done? No one would, of course, unless the clasping somehow had some relation to human wellbeing or harm, which is what morality must surely be about – "unless you change the facts of human existence".

Foot was one of the impressive band of women, including Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Warnock and the future novelist Iris Murdoch, who studied at Oxford during the second world war. She went on to teach at her college, Somerville, in 1947, becoming its first philosophy tutorial fellow in 1949, and vice-principal in 1967, a post she abandoned for visiting professorships in America, at Berkeley, Cornell, Princeton and Stanford, among others.

She finally settled at the University of California in Los Angeles in 1976 for 15 years until her retirement, and earned its philosophy department international cachet. But she maintained her connection with Oxford (she had been made senior research fellow of Somerville in 1969), and once, when asked by US immigration where she lived, answered crossly, "England, of course," only escaping the resultant fracas when her lawyer proclaimed her "not only one of the world's greatest moral philosophers but the granddaughter of President Cleveland".

Her mother, Esther Cleveland, had been the first president's child to be born in the White House; William Bosanquet, her father, managed a steelworks in Yorkshire. Born in a small village near Durham, Philippa was educated at home by governesses and at St George's school, Ascot, and rode to hounds with the Zetland hunt. When, during their first riding lessons, her sister Marion held on to the saddle, she thought it not at all the thing, and was "very shocked". To the question of whether she had asked the name and address of a little boy at her dancing class who had asked for hers, she replied, "Of course not – you don't ask for names and addresses if you are a girl." Decades later, she was described as the "grande dame of philosophy".

Yet her comparison, in a well-known paper (*Morality As a System of Hypothetical Imperatives*, 1972) between Immanuel Kant's view of moral law as "inescapable" in some special way, and the demands of etiquette, was intended to argue that people who follow either morality or etiquette without questioning them "are relying on an illusion, as if trying to give the moral 'ought' a magic force". Later, she rejected this position, and was irritated to be still credited with it. Moral constraints, she came to believe, were indispensably a rational part of flourishing as a human being – in this, they did not resemble etiquette.

Her rebound from the drilling in good form was a brusque, no-nonsense capacity to cut to the heart of philosophical and everyday cant, and doggedly to uphold her principles and views in the teeth of convention and orthodoxy. A

lifelong socialist and Labour supporter, she was one of only four academics to vote to prevent President Harry S Truman (architect of Hiroshima) from having an honorary Oxford degree.

Foot's friends were often wild and bohemian, like Murdoch, with whom she shared a flat during the war. She married the historian Michael (MRD) Foot, who had been one of Murdoch's lovers, in 1945, and the two women then saw little of one another until the marriage ended 15 years later, when they had a brief affair. Murdoch, who portrayed Foot as Paula in *The Nice and the Good* (1968), called her "my lifelong best friend".

Foot pooh-poohed what she called the "rigoristic, prissy, moralistic tone" so frequent in moral philosophy, and the way it had lost touch with real life. "I do not know what could be meant by saying that it was someone's duty to do something," she said, "unless there was an attempt to show why it mattered if this sort of thing was not done."

Non-cognitivist theories (Hare's prescriptivism, Ayer's emotivism, more recently Allan Gibbard's expressivism), which variously deny that moral statements can be true or false, render moral judgment so subjective and capricious that, strictly speaking, it might just as well extend to "the wrongness of running round trees right-handed or looking at hedgehogs in the light of the moon".

But she opposed such theories not just because they were too wide, but because they were too narrow. In the 1950s she had begun, along with Anscombe, to shift the focus away from what makes an isolated action good or bad, to the Aristotelian concentration on what makes a person good or bad in the long-term. Morality, she argued, is about how to live – not so much a series of logically consistent, well-calculated decisions as a lifetime endeavour to become the sort of person who habitually and happily does virtuous things. And "virtuous", for Foot, meant well-rounded and human. She condemned as moral faults "the kind of timidity, conventionality and wilful self-abnegation that may spoil no one's life but one's own", advocating "hope and a readiness to accept good things".

Foot continued, and modified, her onslaught on subjectivism in ethics throughout her life. She also attacked utilitarian theories, which see goodness as a matter of actions' consequences, and tend to equate the badness of failing to prevent an evil outcome with perpetrating it. In a paper on abortion ('The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect, 1967), she used what became a much-cited example to pinpoint fine distinctions in moral permissibility where an action has both good and bad results – the dilemma facing the driver of a suddenly brakeless trolley-bus that would hit five people unless he steered it on to another track into only one person.

Unlike many philosophers, Foot never strained our basic intuitions in the interests of pursuing some wild theory to its (il)logical conclusion. She said that, in doing philosophy, she felt like a geologist tapping away with a tiny hammer on a huge cliff. But her resolute tapping hit many fault-lines and reduced several inflated edifices. "Very tender and adorable, yet morally tough and subtle, and with lots of will and self-control," was how Murdoch described her.

In *Human Goodness* (a paper included in the book *Natural Goodness*, 2001), Foot wrote that wisdom and temperance are important virtues, but that often we revere those who lack them and live chaotic lives, which, she added, is probably not "just romantic nonsense". "Of course what is best is to live boldly, yet without imprudence or intemperance, but the fact is that rather few can manage that." She, however, was one of those few.

Her sister Marion survives her.

Philippa Ruth Foot, philosopher, born 3 October 1920; died 3 October 2010

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