



Natural Goodness in Philippa Foot (1920-2010)

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Philippa Foot introduces her concept of natural goodness in response to expressivist and prescriptivist theories that interpret any statement of goodness as an expression of either approval or recommendation. In disagreement, Foot asserts that such theories would have to account for some evaluations of an organism's traits in terms of which traits one should choose if they were such an organism, and she takes this interpretation to be absurd. Instead, Foot maintains that there exists a type of judgment mostly special to living things. Incorporating ideas from Michael Thompson, she terms these special judgments as "Aristotelian categoricals" or "natural-history propositions" and takes as an example the judgment expressed in the claim "Rabbits are herbivores." For Foot, such claims are not logically quantifiable: they are not assertions about all, some, or even most organisms of a species.

These Aristotelian categoricals permit evaluative inferences regarding members of the species. If an Aristotelian categorical that is true does not hold in the case of an organism belonging to the relevant species, then that organism is naturally defective in that respect. For example, if rabbits are herbivores and one rabbit is carnivorous, that rabbit is defective. Foot remains concerned that this schema might allow for the inference that any unusual organism is consequently defective and so introduces the restriction that only those traits serving some function or "playing a part" in the life of the larger organism can ground evaluations of that organism with respect to its natural goodness. While the function of traits belonging to non-human organisms deal with survival and reproduction, what counts as functional traits in the lives of human beings can be more problematic. Foot sees human natural goodness as including things like practical reasoning, and thus understands moral goodness to have the same conceptual structure as natural goodness.

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Keywords:

ethics, function, goodness, metaethics, morality, nature, reason, virtue