

**John Hacker-Wright, *Philippa Foot's
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The book *Philippa Foot's Metaethics*, written by John Hacker-Wright, frames Philippa Foot's ethical naturalism focusing on her use of the grammatical method, and goes on to discuss a possible collaboration between Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics and Neo-Aristotelian ethical theory.

In the *Introduction* (pp. 1-2), Hacker-Wright points out that this study “presents an interpretation and defense of Foot's ethical naturalism that is at odds with what is ordinarily understood to count as a version of naturalism” (p. 1). He also examines her use of the grammatical method, “derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy” (p. 1), which shapes Foot's late work on natural normativity, *Natural Goodness* (Foot 2001).

In Section 2, *Goodness and the Grammatical Method* (pp. 2-16), Hacker-Wright clarifies Foot's mature metaethical view by contextualising her work. Some misconceptions of Foot's stem from a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Hence, he sets Foot's philosophical proceeding within a framework that includes fellow Wittgensteinians, namely Peter Geach and G.E.M. Anscombe. The author highlights the crucial role played by the grammatical method in Foot's perspectives “on goodness, its role in describing living things, and the importance of human nature for ethics” (p. 1) – the approach being directly linked with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

Hacker-Wright proposes a reading “that matches its employment by fellow Wittgensteinians who influenced Foot's reception of Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Geach” (p. 3). Such an investigation aims to “road map of how we employ an expression that can guide us as we reflect philosophically about goodness” (p. 5).

Foot introduces the role of the speaker in understanding the sense of “good” and the notions of primary and secondary

goodness, where the former concerns living things and their parts, while the latter relates to things that are “said to be good for living things (including ourselves)” (p. 6). There is a sense in which “good” and “bad” can be used in a predicative way, even if there is a subordination to their attributive use. Her grammatical investigation is crucial for further comprehension of the nature of goodness, since it not only emphasises the confusion which arises from the understanding of goodness simply as a property, but also points out “different categories of goodness, associated with meaningful expressions of goodness: speaker-relative goodness, natural goodness, and secondary goodness” (p. 8).

Using the grammatical method is not just formulating rules but acknowledging what results we can have by using some concepts. What is at stake is a kind of practical ordering which largely depends on “our having coherent goals in using the terms” (p. 13). The argument concerns “the application of our language, the place our terms occupy within our practical life” (p. 15): there is no application for *goodness simpliciter*, “but there is primary goodness in application to living things and secondary goodness in relation to them, as well as a speaker-relative sense of ‘good’” (p. 16). Foot’s goal is “to arrive at the grammar that is necessary for insight into the sort of goodness that can help us get a clear view of the moral evaluation of human actions” (p. 16).

In the third section, *Placing Ethics in Human Life* (pp. 16-44), Hacker-Wright discusses Foot’s “idea that goodness has a primary application in relation to different sorts of living things, including human beings” (p. 1). Foot’s approach connects what is goodness for human beings and what they are themselves, since “the human good is distinctive *in its content*” (p. 17, my emphasis). For example, while the good of an animal or plant is being fitted for reproduction, choosing not to have children is not necessarily bad. As Foot herself underlines, “the idea of the human good is deeply problematic” (Foot 2001, p. 43). Hacker-Wright aims to show that, by following Foot, we can avoid the risk of falling either in the direction of a natural law theory with too conservatory features or in evolutionary accounts of human psychology (p. 17).

Together with the work of Anscombe and Geach, the author underlines the importance of the work of Michael Thompson on the grammar of judgements in Foot’s mature

ethical naturalism, and he widely addresses Thompson's point of view, moving from Anscombe's suggestions "works out a detailed grammar of vital descriptions" (p. 20). Thompson's grammatical framework, which Foot also adopts, "draws a connection of logical dependency between our descriptions of individual actions done by living things and the life-form to which those living things belong" (p. 22). There is a peculiarity of the notion of life-form, which operates in its grammar in a way which is not comparable to concepts implied in empirical biology.

Following Thompson's view, Foot agrees that "we make covert reference to our form of life in even the simplest judgments that attribute vital activity to ourselves or to other humans" (p. 27): there is always a background under which we analyse a human action, namely the one of the life-forms. In fact, "human beings have distinctive capacities that are exhibited in the actions of individual human beings" (p. 27) and they preserve their individuality by being able to reason and to choose. Foot sees this skill as crucial in ethics, which is – in the Wittgensteinian sense – part of human beings' essence: "Otherwise put, getting human beings properly into view requires ethics because in getting a human being into view one is talking about what can (normally) make choices and act well or badly" (p. 28).

In this framework, Foot identifies virtues – the same as the Anscombean Aristotelian necessity – necessary to achieve some good, and Hacker-Wright points out an ambiguity, for this could mean both that virtues "enable us to achieve goods that are specifiable independently, such as well-being" (p. 28) or that they are "necessary because without them we could not achieve a good that consists of a life of virtue" (p. 28) – or even a combination of those two. In his perspective, the third possibility is correct, since Foot saw virtues as instrumentally good and constitutive of virtuous action.

Authors such as Anselm Müller, are convinced that there are "supra-utilitarian" virtues, in cases such as the prohibition of murder, which are linked to recognising the intrinsic value of human life (Anscombe 2008). Hacker-Wright answers by arguing that, first, the virtues that we need to live a good life do not necessarily result in our "well-being", since "courage might require risking one's life to defend friends and family" (p. 29). Moreover, he highlights the constitutive bond between

the virtues and acting virtuously: “The good that hangs on the Aristotelian necessity might be related *constitutively* to human goodness and not only instrumentally” (p. 30).

The virtues Foot enumerates are not necessary merely because their absence would make life worse, rather “our lives would be lacking a distinctively human good” (p. 30). Therefore, these virtues are not simply instrumentally beneficial, but inherently valuable to us as humans. Furthermore, in Hacker-Wright’s perspective, Foot’s account also addresses the aforementioned supra-utilitarian virtues even if, by considering the speaker-relative sense of goodness, she does not provide us with an idea of human value which refers to a mystical one. Foot offers “a grammatical framework that dispels the idea of goodness simpliciter and identifies the goodness question in moral judgment with a sort of natural goodness” (p. 32).

Noteworthy is the discussion of the notion of “human essence”, on which Hacker-Wright underlines Foot’s change in her late philosophy regarding “what is to be a rational animal” (p. 35), suggesting a shift from a more rationalistic view regarding the performance of just acts towards a notion of rationality which “is itself shaped by the human good as something *sui generis*” (p. 35).

In her later view, rationality is internal to our form of life “rather than a standard (self-interest) that is specifiable independently of our form of life” (p. 35): practical wisdom becomes central to this framework being not simply “a disposition to reason so as maximize the overall fulfilment of our interests” (p. 35), but “a disposition to reason well qua human, the perfection of the human power of thinking practically, where this cannot be spelled out to coincide with an independently specifiable standard” (p. 35).

Hacker-Wright claims that considering the grammatical role played by the notion of human nature in Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism highlights its engagement “in what can be thought of as transcendental anthropology” (p. 36), which means that “there is a body of knowledge about human beings that is *a priori* and brings into view features of ourselves that are necessary for the possibility of representing ourselves as thinking and acting” (pp. 36-7): the point is to deepen the concept of human self-consciousness. The notion of life-form we employ is a pure one, and “through its application, we

discern different sorts of vital activity in different organisms, which are empirical determinations of the pure life-form concept” (p. 39). There is a second aspect related to our self-understanding, namely “the concept of the life-form I bear” (p. 39). This means that our life form is a priori and “central to the possibility of the self-consciousness of a rational animal” (p. 39).

Neo-Aristotelianism aims at reconstructing the claim that we are rational animals and what it means to have an essence for human beings, which is at the basis of our thinking and acting intentionally: “Our essence yields a distinctive mode of existence that includes the exercise of rational powers to shape our lives. Our essence yields possibilities, though it does so in such a way that there are distinctive excellences that we can acquire or fail to acquire, and nothing in our freedom allows us to escape the relevance of these norms” (pp. 41-42).

Finally, the fourth section focuses firstly on Foot’s understanding of the concept of virtue, central to her ethical framework. Then, discusses the way the notion of *nature* is addressed in *Natural Goodness* and widens it referring to some of Foot’s earlier writings on this subject, also looking at Aquinas’ contribution to the subject matter, which results in “an understanding of moral virtue as the perfection of human appetitive powers” (p. 2), implying that goodness “in one of its central applications to human beings refers to the perfection of our desires, on this version of ethical naturalism” (p. 2).

In this complex conclusive section, Hacker-Wright argues in favour of “a more robust interpretation of human form than Foot or Thompson avow” (p. 53), since “Moral virtues are perfections of our appetitive powers, so these powers are in an important sense naturally directed to morally good acts” (p. 54). He critically discusses what he calls the *strongly sui generis* reading of the human good, “an understanding of the project of naturalism that one can find in John McDowell, Thompson, and Foot on Thompson’s interpretation” (p. 54) in favour of “a sense of the study of human life that does yield substantive results” (p. 54), a perspective he thinks is also shared by Foot (Foot 2001, p. 24; in Hacker-Wright, p. 54). He proposes a *weakly sui generis* perspective, asserting that “there are distinctive standards that apply to human beings qua rational animals, and yet essential features of human beings as rational animals,

including our appetitive powers, determine what it is for us to be good qua human beings” (p. 54).

Giving a different reading of Aristotle from McDowell (pp. 56-58), Hacker-Wright wants to foster collaboration between Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics and Neo-Aristotelian ethical theory “to achieve a full-blooded ethical naturalism” (p. 58). In his perspective, the human good’s goal is “perfecting our appetitive and intellectual powers” (p. 58) by “taking on qualities whereby they respond to our environment in a way that exhibits a principle of reason: They reflect our conception of the good as they reach out to sensible particulars” (p. 58).

In merely sixty-six pages, Hacker-Wright offers a condensed yet complex exploration, beginning with Philippa Foot’s grammatical method and progressing through the reflections of Michael Thompson and Thomas Aquinas to a broader discussion of Neo-Aristotelian theory. The author not only presents his own perspective but also engages with critical debates involving other thinkers – though, in the interest of space, only brief mentions are made in some cases, such as the final, intense exchange with McDowell’s thought. This text is a valuable resource for understanding Foot’s approach in context and gaining an overview of Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. However, given the brevity of the volume, some of the more complex could have benefited from a more detailed discussion.

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