

Three Degrees of Natural Goodness (Discussion note, *Iride*)

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Philippa Foot's Natural Goodness is among the most beautiful and moving works of moral philosophy yet produced in the analytic tradition. It is so much an integral whole that it will seem barbaric to do as I propose briefly to do, and put it to the scalpel. But Natural Goodness propounds a complex theory with many levels or strata, some of which even the author fails completely to distinguish. I will distinguish three strata, each depending logically on the one that comes before. I will call them respectively logical Footianism, local Footianism and substantive Footianism. My purpose in making these distinctions is simply to advance discussion: I believe that objections to Natural Goodness generally confuse these different dimensions of the doctrine, and that the author to some extent aids this confusion.

1 Logical Footianism

The most abstract and fundamental stratum of the theory, logical Footianism, as I am calling it, itself has a number of components.

Foot's theory presupposes, in the first instance, a certain conception of life and of the grammar of the representation of life. The representation of an individual living organism as living is everywhere mediated by an implicit representation of the species or life form under which the individual is thought to fall. Consider a concrete case in which you would say or think of an individual living being that it is flying, or that it has leaves, or that it has eyes, or that it is blossoming, or that it is reproducing. It is clear that the same phenomenon, eye or leaf or flight, might be constituted very differently in a form of life very different from the one you have imagined.

Similarly, the same materials might constitute quite different phenomena of life in sufficiently different species. Consider, for example, cell division or "mi-

tosis”, a process described at length in elementary textbooks. It is the process of reproduction in bacteria, the coming-to-be of new bacteria from old; but it is a part of growth and self-maintenance in a California condor or in a human being. What phenomena count as reproduction thus depends on the life form in question. Thus the representation of given phenomena as amounting to a process of reproduction depends implicitly on a conception of how things stand in individual’s species or life form. This species-dependence extends to every ordinary tensed description of an individual organism as alive.

What can we say about the representation of the life form or species that is implicit in these ordinary tensed judgments about living individuals? It is made articulate in a connected system of tenseless judgments. A collection of true thoughts which completely develop this system we may call a “natural history” of the life form in question. The components of this system, the “natural history judgments,” attribute to the life form, in a logically distinctive way, predicates which can also intelligibly be attributed to individual organisms. “They have four legs,” we say of cats or of cat-form; “They bloom in spring,” we say of cherries or of cherry-form. “It has four legs”, we say of this cat *hic et nunc*; “It bloomed last spring” we say of the cherry tree in the garden. The properties expressed by these predicates may be said to “characterize” the life forms cat and cherry respectively, and to “hold of” the individual cat or cherry tree in question. The predicates may of course fail to hold of many individual bearers of the life forms they characterize; it may even, in suitable cases, fail to be true of most of them. Where the characterizing predicates do fail to hold – where a cat has three legs or a cherry does not bloom – we have natural defect, a failure of elementary “natural goodness.” Thus judgments of goodness and defect make implicit reference to the species or life form that the individual bears. Such “evaluative” judgments are no more suspicious, metaphysically, than are the “positive” descriptions: the materials on which we base the evaluative judgments are implicitly present in positive description.

In these logico-metaphysical thoughts we find nothing specifically practical or moral. A more important feature of “logical Footianism” is the claim that the following idea is coherent: a natural life form – an item falling into the same logical category as domestic cat, cherry, California condor – might be characterized by practical reason as a power or capacity. That is, practical reason is just as much a “characteristic” of certain (possible) life forms or species as vision or the capacity to feel pleasure or pain are. In order for such a claim to hold of a given life form, it is not necessary (to repeat) that each single one of its bearers develops the power to reason practically. No more than it need be that every bearer of a sighted species develops sight. Some cats, for example, are born blind.

This aspect of logical Footianism may of course seem to be a platitude. Why shouldn't such a practically reasoning form of life be possible? It may, after all, also seem to be a platitude that the human species in particular – the particular terrestrial life form that you and I together bear – is in this sense a practically reasoning one. But surprisingly many philosophers are explicitly or implicitly committed to accounts of intellect and reason generally which entail that the self-same animal species might in one epoch, A, be devoid of concepts and reasoning and the making of practical connections between what is understood and what is to be done, and then in a later epoch, B, develops these powers or "practices," perhaps again losing them in a still later historical period C. Practical thought and calculation are, on such views, to be compared with money and banking, or with a certain style of clothing. They do not characterize the life form; they do not enter into its natural history. (It will be an open question whether the "intellectual interlude," epoch B, in such an imaginary history should be viewed as a period of sickness and psychic deformation – as I suppose it is a sort of forcible deformation of chimpanzee-life, akin to the binding of Chinese women's feet, to remove them from nature, hold them in zoos, and "teach" them rudiments of American Sign Language.)

Logical Footianism need not deny that some or even all developed manifestations of practical reason depend on historically formed and contingent "practices." It may be that they do and must. For example, it may be that individual, concrete phenomena of practical reason are everywhere internally related to language, that is, to "practices" of discursive interaction. I suspect that Professor Foot would argue that phenomena of practical reason are essentially bound up with language, at least in the human case. But it is one thing to say that human languages rise and fall in the course of human history; it is quite another to say that human language has arisen in the course of human history. The more reasonable view is surely that our human linguistic power is a product not of history proper, but of Darwinian evolution; it is thus a part of our natural history, a feature characteristic of our peculiar life form. It is the particular language in which this natural capacity is exercised, for example Finnish or Old Irish, which is contingent in relation to that natural history and a product of genuine human history. Thus the two claims that phenomena of practical rationality are always dependent somehow on the agent's possession of language, and that all languages are historically developed practices, are perfectly consistent with the aspect of logical Footianism I am describing. Namely this: that it is possible for practical reason to be a capacity "characteristic" of an animal as a bearer of a specific natural life form, just as wings are characteristic of dove. It would be a defect in an individual bearer of

such a life form if it never develops this power.

But, now, what does it mean to speak of an agent as possessing developed practical reason? It means that the agent applies conceptual thought – thought that is bound up inferentially with other thought – to action. It operates on the strength of calculation. It does things "because it thinks that P", where its "thinking that P" falls into a "space of reasons," in the language of Wilfrid Sellars. Or, put more formally, a practical reasoner is the subject of attributions of the form: X does A because it thinks (conceptually) that ... doing A A practical reasoner is something that does A on the strength of a consideration about doing A.

What can we say, a priori, about the routes or forms that the practical application of thought can take in a practically reasoning animal?

It seems clear that wherever we find phenomena of practical reason we must find the agent applying elementary "instrumental" thoughts to action. Suppose that our agent is engaged in doing C, or is trying to do C, or wants to do C. Given this, the agent might do B because it thinks something about the connection between doing B and doing C; that is, it is doing B because it thinks ...doing B...doing C.... Here the "instrumental" connection between doing B and doing C might be that doing B will supply a condition for doing C or that doing B will make it easier to do C, or that doing B is part of doing C or that doing B constitutes doing C. Suppose then that, on these grounds, our agent is now doing B, or is trying to do B, or intends to do B. The agent might then do A because it thinks that doing A will supply a condition for doing B, or that doing A is a part of doing B – and so on. It seems practical reason could not gain a foothold in an animal's operation unless this "instrumental" structure had a foothold.

Now, can we intelligibly suppose that the practical application of thoughts might take only this form in a given kind of practically reasoning organism? I don't see why not. In that case, we would have to do with a merely Humean form of rational life. Appetite supplies certain objectives, without thought or calculation, and practical calculation moves from there.

It is important to see that Foot can accept the coherence of this idea, though her method of presentation does not make this clear. What Foot must and does claim, as a component of "logical Footianism," is that there are other possibilities. What forms of application of thought to action are possible and sound will depend on the particular form of practically intelligent life in question.

Logical Humeanism, as we might call it, is the claim that applications of instrumental thought to action are the only possible phenomena of practical reason in any life form whatsoever. From a Footian perspective this is an extraordinarily strong claim, and it must indeed be rejected. It is quite as strong as the Kantian claim that

wherever there is practical reasoning of any sort, there are non-instrumental sorts of practical reasoning. (Kant evidently believes that if the application of thought to action occurs anywhere in the whole of Nature, then there is the possibility and necessity of application of the "formula of universal law" to action.)

Logical Footianism rejects of these aprioristic extremes. Different forms of animals have different forms of visual capacity. The incapacity to make a certain color discrimination will count as a defect in one type of animal, but not in another. As it is with vision, so it is with practical reason. There might be merely Humean forms of practical intelligence. That is, in imputing practical reason to a form of life as "characteristic", we might impute to it only application of instrumental thought. But equally, in imputing practical reason to a form of life we might impute the application other, non-instrumental forms of thought. It might be possible, in some forms of life, for an agent to do A because thinks that he promised Jones he would do A, or because he thinks that his previous actions will injure Smith unless he does A, etc. (I am supposing that instrumental considerations do not lie behind these thoughts.)

2 Local Footianism

By local Footianism, I mean the claim that certain of the possibilities articulated by logical Footianism are realized in the specifically human case. For one thing, it belongs to human beings characteristically to reason practically, just as it belongs to them to learn a language. But more particularly it belongs to them to reason practically in certain specific ways. In particular, it belongs to them to act on the strength of non-instrumental thoughts of certain types.

Consider again the linguistic parallel. It might be argued that it belongs to human beings to learn, not just language, but a language containing the first person. It is perhaps characteristic of the developed human being to be able to use a first person in discursive interaction: if a human language does not contain a first person employment of verbs, it is a defective human language; or if it does, but one of its speakers cannot learn this use, then that speaker is a linguistically defective human being. I don't know whether this is true. But it does not seem to be something that is contained analytically in the idea of language in general. (Subject-predicate structure and the use of singular terms do seem to be contained analytically in the idea of language.) Similarly, the ideas of action on grounds of considerations of prudence or action on grounds of considerations of justice or action on the ground of a thought about what would be most pleasant are not

contained analytically in the idea of practical reason in general. (By contrast, a capacity for action based on instrumental considerations does seem to be contained analytically in the idea of reasoned practice.)

Note that someone might accept logical Footianism, but reject local Footianism about human beings. He might argue that, as a matter of fact, human life is a Humean form of life, even if we can imagine or describe other forms of practical intelligence.

Against this "local Humeanism" Foot is in a position to argue from appearances. We humans describe certain choices as good or bad, reasonable or unreasonable, irrespective of the agent's further objectives. We advise for and against certain courses of action without a close study of the agent's ends. Indeed, it seems clearly to belong to the well-developed human intelligence to think of the actions of other human beings in such terms. In accepting logical Footianism, we accept that such thoughts could be true in some possible form of life. We make room for them in logical space, so to speak. We see that there would be nothing mysterious about them if they were true.

But we do think such things about ourselves and our fellow human beings. What reason, then, have we to think that some such thoughts are not true, and thus that our form of life is not a Humean form of life? I will come back to this point.

3 Substantive Footianism

By substantive Footianism, I mean Foot's belief that something like the traditional table of virtues provides an apt characterization of the specifically human form of practical rationality. In particular, she believes that considerations of justice, benevolence and prudence are among those a well-reasoning human being will act upon, even where they conflict with other objectives. Foot's chapters on happiness and on the traditional immoralists belong to this level of her theory. Figures like Callicles, Thrasymachus, Hobbes, Gide and, to some extent, even Nietzsche may be characterized as accepting both logical and local Footianism. They reject logical and local Humeanism and see the soundly operating human practical understanding as applying non-instrumental thoughts to action. But they reject the validity in the human case of either benevolence or prudence or justice. They have different conceptions of human life.

Once again, we misunderstand Foot if we suppose that her critique of such thinkers is purely a priori, or that she means it to follow immediately from the more abstract strata of her theory. Perhaps another form of intelligent life would

be one in which Hobbesianism is true: the forms of practical reason that are "characteristic" of such life would be instrumental and prudential. Or perhaps the idea of a Calliclean form of practical intelligence is coherent. Again, I think that Foot does not make this clear, though it must be her position. She is, as it were a substantive Hobbesian about other possible forms of life; but about human life, she is a substantive Footian.

But faced with the idea of such a form of practical intelligence, Foot's more abstract theory has positioned her to pose the question "But is it so with us?" and to argue from appearances. What can seem to exclude these appearances is the thought that something else must be the case. But logical Footianism ought to convince us that, though such immoralisms might be true in given types of life, they needn't be true of every such form. Once the thought is posed clearly, we see that other, non-Hobbesian, or non-Calliclean, forms are possible – if indeed the Hobbesian and Calliclean forms really are coherent.

In the end, substantive Footianism rests on something structurally akin to Kant's "fact of reason". Again, Foot's form of presentation covers this up: she often seems to be justifying certain claims about human practical rationality where she might have emphasized the extent to which these thoughts are self-validating. The human form of life is one in which considerations of justice, for example, characterize a sound practical reason. But this is not something we properly discover from a close study of human life. It must be given to us from inside, so to speak. For our taking such thoughts as reason-giving, considered as a general, characteristic, phenomenon of human intelligence, is part of what makes our species to be the sort that it is. It is part of the constitution of this peculiar structuring of a kind of animal life. That we operate with these thoughts is thus a part of what makes these thoughts true. The situation would be structurally the same in a Hobbesian or Calliclean species, if the idea of such a life form makes sense. Thus Foot's view, properly understood, is not one in which "ethics" can be justified "from outside," as John McDowell seems to suppose it is.¹ If her teaching were like that, she would have to rule against the "immoralist" possibilities I have just mentioned.

For Foot, as for McDowell, our confidence in the validity of considerations of justice and other fundamental forms of practical thought must, at a certain level, be groundless.

¹"Two Kinds of Naturalism," *Reasons and Virtues*, edd. Hursthouse, Quinn and Lawrence, Oxford University Press, 1995.