

Review

By Mary Midgley

Natural Goodness

By Philippa Foot

Oxford University Press, 130 pp, £15.99

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Being Good; A Short Introduction to Ethics

By Simon Blackburn

Oxford University Press, 162 pp, £9.99

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Natural Goodness is a joyful book, a book that is really needed. It resists a long-standing and deadening error that has long deformed academic moral philosophy in the English-speaking countries. To be exact, that error hit the headlines in 1903, when G.E. Moore published his *Principia Ethica*. That ambitiously-named volume separated moral judgment sharply from the rest of thought, launching a campaign against Naturalism – that is, against the idea that values could depend in any way on facts, especially on natural facts. Morality, said the philosophers, stood alone, quite apart from any factual grounds.

Philippa Foot has long resisted this orthodoxy. Though she writes from within that academic tradition, she has published a string of powerful articles against its central doctrine. Now she confronts it fully and directly in an impressive and highly concentrated little book. She points out that certain natural facts – namely, facts about the natural constitution of human beings – are actually crucial for any morality. Our views about them cannot fail to be relevant to our valuing -

The grounding of a moral judgment is ultimately in facts about human life... Vice is a form of natural defect... Anyone who thinks about it can see that for human beings the teaching and following of morality is something necessary. ... In that we are social animals we depend on each other as do wolves that hunt in packs... Like the animals, we do things that will benefit others rather than ourselves... I am therefore, quite seriously, likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behaviour in animals... It will surely not be denied that there is something wrong with a free-riding wolf that feeds but does not take part in the hunt... [And, quoting Geach] "Humans need virtues as bees need stings".

She makes clear at once that this insistence on our continuity with the rest of nature does not involve the kind of crude reductiveness that has often been associated with naturalism. Since the evidence clearly shows that we are not in fact Hobbesian animals, there is no reason to believe in a brash Hobbesian 'state of nature'. Actually, all social animals are too complex to be Hobbesian. And we are especially so because we have culture. Our intelligence further complicates the matter by loading us with the extra duty of trying to understand the reasons for what we do.

But culture and intelligence themselves are not alien imports from outside nature. They are natural facts in the world like any others. They are facts about the peculiarity of our species. If we were Centaurian megalizards our duties would

probably be different from what they are now. But this does nothing to undermine those present duties. 'We have to live as human beings'.

It is, of course, essential to understand here what gave rise to the anti-naturalist campaign. It sprang from a justified revulsion against crude, reductive doctrines such as those of Hobbes and Bentham, which have often had great influence. Slapdash views about human nature have been used to prop up misguided moralities. But it can't possibly follow from this that all beliefs on that subject should be dismissed as irrelevant to moral thinking. This is much like proposing to give up food because some meals have proved poisonous.

The trouble about these crude, reductive doctrines is not that they deal in facts. It is that they are crude and reductive – simplistic, determined to flatten out the rich and confusing landscape of human nature so as to make it easy to map. Their failure cannot be a ground for giving up the mapping project altogether.

Professor Foot carefully exposes the emptiness of that drastic solution. In this she is, of course, following what may be called the A-tradition – Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe, and also B for Butler – which has long opposed it. But she carefully avoids the faults that have often distorted that tradition. She rejects moral absolutism – the unbalanced commitment to particular moral judgments. What we need, she says, is to choose the right facts about our nature and to keep them in perspective.

We can never do this in any final form. It is a continuous ongoing project in which we may always be mistaken. But at least, in attempting it, we are looking for relevant considerations that can help our choice, instead of dismissing the whole question of relevance as meaningless. We struggle with substantial issues rather than just discussing general formal points about the nature of choice – questions, for instance, about whether moral judgments should be viewed as "the expression of pro-attitudes or feelings, or again ... the performance of 'speech-acts' such as **commendation or commitment**"

As she points out, this kind of carefully abstract discussion is just as simplistic as the psychological theories that it denounces. The attempt to reduce morality to a single ruling form, when obviously it uses so many, merely perpetuates Moore's mistaken ambition to do a Newton – to bring this most complex of topics tidily within a simple set of laws. In practice, the result is usually so thin that its proponents have to back it by quietly taking for granted some substantial moral theory or other, and the one normally chosen for this work is, at present, Utilitarianism. Since this is the species of Naturalism that was Moore's principal target, that is a rather quaint outcome.

Natural Goodness is clearly and forcefully written. Its only obscurities are, I think, ones due to the obscurity of the views that it attacks. Readers who have so far not heard of those views may well wonder at times why anybody should say such things. The book is perhaps mainly addressed to those who are already familiar with the essentially negative 'anti-naturalist', 'non-cognitivist' gospel. But it does not just negate that negation. Its positive message is clear and surely very important.

By contrast, Being Good is, as it says, an introduction meant for the general reader. But it is one of a special and very perceptive kind. It grew, says Simon Blackburn, out of a conviction –

that most introductions to ethics failed to confront what really bothers people about the subject. What bothers them, I believe, are the many causes that we have to fear that ethical claims are a kind of a sham. The fear is called by names like relativism, scepticism, and nihilism. I have tried to weave the book around an exploration of them.