

Philippa Foot on Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives



Philippa Foot was a pioneer of modern virtue ethics. She rejected the non-naturalist non-cognitivist trends in moral philosophy that were popular in her day, and developed a form of moral philosophy that was firmly rooted in the natural facts of human life and human nature. For Foot, morality was a feature of the kinds of creatures that we are, and not a special realm of thought that was strictly separated off from everything else.

Foot is a useful companion to Kant's ethics for classroom teaching, since her rejection of his notion of a Categorical Imperative, in favour of seeing morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives, helps to cast light on what the Categorical Imperative actually is, and why it holds such importance for Kant, as well as providing an interesting line of criticism which can prompt further discussion.

Foot's views developed significantly over her career. Her view on the comparison of morality with etiquette – a central theme discussed in the accompanying video – is one that she later rejected. In her later career she placed much more emphasis on the significance of moral constraints. A useful

line of questioning for students might be to ask them to consider why she changed her mind.

About these resources

The narrated slideshows in this series outline the thought of Foot and her Oxford contemporaries Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. They provide clear, brief summaries of their ideas on some key topics often taught in the classroom. They can be integrated into teaching, or used as a basis for part of your own lesson planning.

Categorical and Hypothetical Imperatives

We often teach the content of Kant's Categorical Imperative without seriously considering what the term 'Categorical Imperative' actually means. In her famous article 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', Foot does not spend any time analysing the question of universalising maxims and so on. Instead she questions why a moral imperative needs to be categorical at all. A categorical imperative stands in contrast to hypothetical imperatives. These are conveyed in statements along the lines of "if you want a good mark, you should revise for your exams". Kant often writes as though all such imperatives are motivated by rational self-interest, something that Foot firmly denies. By contrast, there are no "ifs" when it comes to the Categorical Imperative. It is not something that we only need to heed if we want to achieve a particular outcome or if we wish to accept other conditions. It is unconditional, and in this sense is supposed to be self-contained, and not justified by reference to anything else. It is the ultimate good, which is pursued for its own sake, and not for any further end.

Kant was following in a long tradition here. Aristotle was also looking for an ultimate good, which was good for its own sake, and not for the sake of anything else. For Aristotle, this good lay in human flourishing.

In 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', Foot challenges this firmly entrenched idea that morality has to be based on the idea of an ultimate good. One way that she does this is to argue that morality is not the special category that Kant makes it out to be. Other things (she gives the example of etiquette) also seem to be things that we can't simply worm out of by rejecting

the conditions upon which they rest. Of course, etiquette is not inescapable in the sense that we *can* simply choose to ignore it, but this will make the person who ignores it a rude person. Similarly, one who ignores the demands of morality will be an immoral or amoral person. We can still condemn bad behaviour and praise good behaviour, but Foot's central point is that moral "oughts" don't contain a special magic that places them in an entirely separate category from the rest of life.

Further Reading

You can read Foot's 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' here:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2184328>

David Brink's notes on Foot provide useful detail on the article:

<https://davidobrink.com/sites/default/files/attachments/Handout-13-Foot.pdf>

The following section in Foot's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* gives a useful outline of the argument:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philippa-foot/#AgaiMoraRati>