



Foot's Grammar of Goodness

Micah Lott

1 Introduction

Before Philippa Foot gave her book the title *Natural Goodness*, she planned to call it *The Grammar of Goodness* (Hursthouse, 191). By “grammar” Foot means the logical connections among a certain class of judgments.¹ The judgments at issue here are those that concern a special type of goodness, which Foot calls “natural goodness.” Such goodness “is attributable only to living things themselves and to their parts, characteristics, and operations,” and it is “intrinsic or ‘autonomous’ goodness in that it depends directly on the relation of an individual to the ‘life form’ of its species” (NG 26–7). In her book, Foot argues both that a distinctive grammar of goodness applies to living things generally, and that moral goodness in human beings is a special instance of natural goodness.²

¹Foot takes this sense of “grammar” from Wittgenstein. See NG 91.

²Of course, Foot also speaks about natural defect, and she argues that moral vice is a form of natural defect in the human will. Judgments of natural goodness and natural defect belong to the same grammar.

M. Lott (✉)

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

My goal in this chapter is to provide a sympathetic interpretation of Foot's grammar of goodness, clarifying and expanding it in a few places, and defending it against some objections. I begin by sketching Foot's grammar. As I understand it, that grammar includes four main notions: (1) THE GOOD OF, (2) GOOD AS/GOOD IN, (3) GOOD FOR, and (4) GOODS/GOOD THINGS. I then consider the relation between GOOD FOR, on the one hand, and THE GOOD OF and GOOD AS, on the other. Is it always GOOD FOR a living thing to be GOOD AS the kind of thing it is? Could something be GOOD FOR an organism without being part of THE GOOD OF that kind of thing? I argue that GOOD FOR, GOOD AS, and THE GOOD OF are inseparable: What is GOOD FOR a living thing *just is* that which furthers or constitutes THE GOOD OF such a creature, and THE GOOD OF any creature is the actualization of those well-formed capacities that make it GOOD AS the kind of creature that it is. In the final part of this chapter, I consider how happiness fits into Foot's grammar of goodness as applied to human beings, paying special attention to the idea that THE GOOD OF any living thing consists in a certain form of activity.

2 A Short Grammar Lesson with Professor Foot

Foot's grammar of goodness begins with a point from Michael Thompson about the representation of living things. Thompson argues that in order to see something *as* a living thing, we must view it as the bearer of some life form. This is because any individual that we represent as living must be viewed as engaging in some vital processes—e.g., eating, breathing, sleeping, blossoming, photosynthesizing. And an individual's life form provides the necessary context for any interpretation of its vital processes. Unless we bring to bear some (perhaps implicit) understanding of the *kind* of organism we are dealing with, we can have no way of interpreting an individual's vital processes—which means we cannot so much as see the individual as a living thing.

We can articulate our understanding of a life form in a system of natural-historical judgments. Such judgments have some canonical forms: "The S is/has/does F" or "S's are/have/do F." For example: "The Asian

elephant has four legs” or “Hawksbill hatchlings crawl to the sea guided by moonlight.” Natural-historical judgments describe an organism’s characteristic features and activities, and they do so in a way that identifies the *function* of those features and activities. An ordered system of such judgments—a natural-history, in Thompson’s sense—provides an interpretation of the life form. It answers the question, “How do they live?”

Importantly, natural-historical judgments possess a generality that is neither statistical nor universal. From the fact that “the Asian elephant has four legs,” it does not follow that Annie the Asian Elephant has four legs, or even that *any* Asian elephant now living has four legs (a horrible, leg-destroying disease might be attacking the elephants). Thus natural-historical judgments do not explain “how they live” in the sense of what is statistically common. Rather, a natural-history describes the characteristic life-cycle of this kind of creature—a life-cycle that might be interrupted or frustrated for most individuals.

We can now identify the central elements in Foot’s grammar of goodness. First, Foot refers to “the pattern of life that is the *good of* creatures of this species,” and “the life that is its good to live” (NG 41, 42). THE GOOD OF an organism is its characteristic way of living, as described in a natural-history. In spelling out the characteristic life of “the mole rat” or “the Bengal tiger” we have articulated THE GOOD OF mole rats or Bengal tigers—or, equivalently, Mole Rat Good or Bengal Tiger Good.

THE GOOD OF a given life form provides the criterion for judgments of excellence and defect in individual bearers of that form. It provides the standard for determining whether an individual is GOOD AS that type of organism—its GOODNESS AS a mole rat, or Bengal tiger, etc. Evaluations of natural goodness and defect are made possible by joining two kinds of judgment, one about the life form and the other about individual bearers of the form. From the fact that “the Asian elephant has four legs,” combined with the fact that “Annie the Asian Elephant has three legs,” we can conclude that Annie is missing a leg. *Qua* Asian elephant, Annie is defective leg-wise.

Foot also speaks about an organism’s “goodness in various respects” (NG 41). Evaluations of GOODNESS IN the parts or operations of an organism capture the same notion of excellence or defect *qua* type of living thing as GOODNESS AS. So in terms of the grammar of goodness

we can group together judgments of GOODNESS AS and GOODNESS IN. When it comes to such judgments, understanding and evaluation are two sides of the same coin. We grasp what an organism has or does by seeing it as the bearer of some life form, and the life form determines THE GOOD OF such creatures, which is the criterion for evaluating the organism's parts and activities. Thus judgments of GOOD AS/GOOD IN must be indexed to a particular life form—good eyes in a mole rat, proper flowering *qua* marigold, etc.

In addition to THE GOOD OF and GOOD AS, Foot's grammar includes the notion of GOOD FOR. Whereas GOOD AS refers to an organism's excellence, GOOD FOR refers to what benefits an organism. And just as there is a conceptual connection between THE GOOD OF and GOOD AS, there is also a connection between THE GOOD OF and GOOD FOR (NG 94). What is GOOD FOR an individual living thing, *qua* its kind of organism, is that which fosters or sustains that individual's GOOD—i.e., THE GOOD OF the individual, *qua* its kind of organism, as defined by its life form.

Finally, Foot speaks about “goods” and “good things.” For instance, she refers to “the diversity of human goods—the elements that can make up good human lives” (NG 44). She also speaks about “a readiness to accept good things” (NG 79), being conscious of “the good things in” one's life (NG 84), “the ordinary human goods of affection and friendship” (NG 91), and enjoyment of “the best things in life” (NG 95). How should we understand this notion of GOODS/GOOD THINGS? We might suppose that this is simply another way of talking about those things that are GOOD FOR an organism. And in many contexts this seems to be the case. For instance, we seem to express the same thought by saying either “mother's milk is good for baby giraffes” or “in the life of baby giraffes, mother's milk is a good thing.”

However, I doubt that Foot's notion of GOOD(s) is simply the same notion as what is GOOD FOR an organism. At the end of her discussion of happiness and human good, Foot says: “In my own terminology ‘happiness’ is here understood as *the enjoyment of good things*, meaning enjoyment in attaining, and in pursuing, right ends” (NG 97). Here, the phrase “good things” refers to “right ends,” and it implies being desirable or choiceworthy. Of course, it might be the case that everything that is

properly pursued and enjoyed by an individual is also good *for* that individual, or good for someone else. Still, the concept of an end—even a right end—is not the same as the concept of what is beneficial. Clearly organisms sometimes desire and choose things which are in fact bad for them. More importantly, even if organisms were to always pursue and choose what they *took* to be good for them, it is still the case that we express two different thoughts by saying “Y (rightly) desires / values X” and “X is good for Y.” Thus, although Foot does not say so explicitly, I take it that the notion of a GOOD/GOOD THING cannot be equated with any of the other three main elements in Foot's grammar of goodness.

At the same time, I think that Foot would hold that the idea of a GOOD/GOOD THING in the life of an organism needs to be understood as an aspect of the grammar of goodness, rather than as standing outside of it. For that reason, I have included the notion in my reconstruction of Foot's grammar. This issue calls for much more discussion than I will give it here. But at the least, I think we can say that nothing could be a GOOD/GOOD THING in the life of an individual if it did not belong to THE GOOD OF such creatures to pursue and/or enjoy that sort of thing.³

3 The Swiftest Deer and the Hunter's Trap

In Foot's grammar of goodness, the relation between THE GOOD OF and GOOD AS is fairly straightforward. But things are trickier in the case of GOOD FOR and its relation to both GOOD AS and THE GOOD OF. In discussing natural goodness (GOOD AS), benefit (GOOD FOR), and an organism's good (THE GOOD OF), Foot writes:

Very often, to be sure, a living thing is benefited by itself being made better, and there must be a systematic connection between natural goodness and benefit – whether reflexive or other-related as in the case of

³Cf. Foot's gloss of “human goods” as “the elements that can make up good human lives” (NG 44). For another passage relevant to this issue, see Foot's brief remarks on the notion of “good and better states of affairs” (NG 48–51), and also the arguments in her earlier essays “Utilitarianism and the Virtues” and “Morality, Action, and Outcome,” both collected in MD.

stinging bees. But it does not follow that benefit of either kind follows goodness whatever circumstance an individual happens to be in. In our earlier example, it was the swiftest deer, ahead of the others, that fell into the hunter's trap; and the properly acting bee that stings a gardener may well bring about the destruction of the nest. Whether an individual plant or animal succeeds in living the life that is its good to live depends on chance as well as on its own qualities. (NG 41–2)

And later, Foot says:

Let us ask what it is to benefit a living thing, as this seems, after all, to be the same as doing something that is for its good... To benefit an individual it may be necessary to act on it – to make it better – or on the other hand to act on its environment. St. Jerome healed the lion's paw, but Noah sheltered his animals from the flood. We may notice in passing, however, that neither making a plant, animal, or person better by providing what makes him or it better, like medicine, nor improving environmental circumstances, is necessarily beneficial as things work out. St. Jerome would not have benefited the lion had it leaped forward in relief from pain, but fallen straight into a trap. (NG 93–4)

I do not disagree with anything Foot says in these passages. But in teaching and discussing *Natural Goodness*, I have found that these passages give some readers the impression that Foot believes that there is a merely statistical connection between being GOOD AS and GOOD FOR. Because Foot highlights the unfortunate deer and bees and lion, it is tempting to interpret her as saying that while being excellent is *usually* beneficial for an organism, it might not be. However, I think that is a misleading way to understand the connections between these notions, and it misses the deeper insights of Foot's grammar.⁴

To see why, let us make a distinction that Foot does not make in *Natural Goodness*, between: (1) a well-formed vital capacity or

⁴A recent example of this misinterpretation of Foot is Harcourt (2016): "But although Foot too wants to connect excellence and flourishing in some sense, she is not trying to connect excellence with benefit or well-being or happiness, for she thinks that excellence of one's kind and benefit need not go together: 'the swiftest deer falls into the hunter's trap' (Foot 2001, 42)" (220).

disposition, and (2) the proper actualization of a capacity or disposition in non-interrupted vital activity. If Annie the Asian Elephant has properly formed elephantine lungs, then she has (1) with respect to pulmonary matters. And if Annie is breathing easily in the forests of Sri Lanka, then she also enjoys (2). However, if Annie has well-formed lungs but finds herself at the bottom of the Indian Ocean and unable to breathe, then she has (1) but lacks (2). Borrowing traditional Aristotelian terminology, we can refer to (1) as “first actuality” and (2) as “second actuality.” First actuality refers to an organism’s properly formed, developed capacities. Second actuality refers to the proper exercise of those capacities.

How does this distinction between first actuality and second actuality relate to Foot’s grammar of goodness? Foot applies the notion of GOOD AS to both. With respect to first actuality, she speaks about excellence or defect (GOOD AS) in an organism’s “parts,” “capacities,” and “dispositions.” With respect to second actuality, Foot speaks about excellence or defect (GOOD AS) in “operations.” The distinction between first and second actuality is also implicit in Foot’s notion of THE GOOD OF. For Foot, THE GOOD OF is a conception of a life form’s characteristic suite of capacities (first actuality) as those capacities come into being, develop, and are exercised (second actuality) over the course of the life-cycle. THE GOOD OF a mole rat or Bengal tiger is the proper unfolding of its species-specific vital capacities, which is its distinctive type of *activity* (or set of activities, depending on how we wish to describe it/them).⁵

Let us return, then, to Foot’s swift but unlucky deer.⁶ An aspect of the creature’s GOODNESS AS a deer (its swiftness) has resulted in a situation that is bad for the deer. Why is being in the hunter’s trap bad for the deer? For two related reasons. First and foremost, being in the trap

⁵In speaking about vital activities, in the plural, we focus on the various things that an organism does, such as breathing, hunting, reproducing. But since those various activities are teleologically related to one another as aspects of a unified whole, we can also talk of an organism’s whole way of living as an activity, in the singular.

⁶The following points also apply to the unlucky lion who falls into a trap after being healed by St. Jerome, and to the bees whose nest is destroyed by the gardener.

prevents the deer from fulfilling some of its most important vital activities. It does not belong to the life of “the deer” to be in a hunter’s trap, and being in the trap impedes an individual deer from living the life that is its good to live. The trap frustrates second actuality. Second, suppose that the trap has also damaged some part of the deer—e.g., broken its leg, leaving it unable to run. In this respect, the deer has been made less healthy, less excellent *qua* deer. The deer’s vital capacities (first actuality) have been diminished. To damage a living thing in this way is clearly to harm it. Why? Because damaging an organism’s vital capacities prevents it from exercising those capacities in characteristic, unimpeded activity. It prevents an organism from living some aspect of the life that is its good to live.

In cases like the unlucky deer, the organism is harmed because the activities that constitute THE GOOD OF the organism are impeded, or because the organism has been damaged and made less GOOD As, or both. Such cases give us no reason to suppose that the condition of being GOOD As itself is ever harmful to an organism, whatever further harmful situations might result from that condition in unfortunate situations. On the contrary, we have reason to think that the connection between GOOD As and GOOD FOR is not merely statistical but conceptual in the following way: Something is GOOD FOR an organism if it furthers or sustains THE GOOD OF that organism. THE GOOD OF an organism consists in its proper, unimpeded vital activities. Such activities require the individual to be GOOD As that kind of organism, because the well-formed capacities that make an individual GOOD As its kind of organism *just are* those capacities that fit the individual for its characteristic vital activities.

I believe this is the best way to interpret Foot’s grammar of goodness. But interpreted this way, the view faces two important objections, each of which seems to be backed up by examples that are ready to hand.

Objection #1: Even if being GOOD As is never itself bad for an organism, something can be GOOD FOR an organism without furthering, fostering, or belonging to THE GOOD OF an organism as defined by its life form. For example, it belongs to wolves to hunt in packs. However, wolves in a zoo are benefited when they given healthy food by the zookeepers

without having to hunt. Indeed, the wolves who get food this way are better off than their cousins in the wild, since hunting is a difficult and dangerous task. But being given food by a zookeeper does not belong to the life of “the wolf” – it is not part of Wolf Good, as defined by natural-historical description. Thus furthering or sustaining THE GOOD OF an organism (as that notion is defined by Foot's grammar) is not necessary for something to be GOOD FOR an organism.

In response to this objection, we can begin by acknowledging that a wolf in a zoo is benefited to the extent that it gets healthy food. But if we ask *why* this benefits a wolf, we see that it confirms rather than undermines the connection we have found between characteristic vital activities (THE GOOD OF) and benefit (GOOD FOR). Healthy food is good for a wolf precisely because it enables the wolf's organs to function and its vital activities to unfold properly. Indeed, what counts as “healthy food” for an individual wolf—as opposed to something unhealthy, or even poisonous and harmful—is precisely the material that is suited to the characteristic digestive processes of “the wolf.” Now, we can also focus not on the healthy food per se, but on the fact that this wolf is prevented from carrying out its characteristic activity of hunting. And there is no reason to think that such inactivity is itself beneficial to a creature. On the contrary, insofar as the wolf fails to carry out this characteristic activity, the wolf is *not* better off but worse off.⁷

A second objection attempts to pry apart THE GOOD OF and GOOD FOR in a different way:

Objection #2: Not everything that belongs to THE GOOD OF an organism in the sense defined by its life form is GOOD FOR an organism. On the contrary, aspects of an organism's characteristic life are sometimes harmful to that organism. For example, bull elk fight one another for control of the harem during the fall rut. While amazing to watch, these fights often result in injury, and sometimes even death. Such fighting is part of the life

⁷Cf. Groll and Lott: “[Z]oos that are better for their animals are ones that allow them to be active to a greater degree – and active precisely in those ways that are most naturally good for them (i.e., re-creating habitat, climate, objects of interest that engage the organism's capacities and allow those capacities to develop and be active)” (Groll and Lott, 23).

of “the elk,” but it seems to be *bad* for these creatures, not good for them. Thus, furthering or sustaining THE GOOD OF an organism (as that notion is defined by Foot’s grammar) is not sufficient for something to be GOOD FOR an organism.

Like the first objection, this objection contains an element of truth. Clearly, when an individual elk is injured in a fight over the harem, that injury is bad for it. But we can distinguish between the injury and the activity of fighting. For a bull elk, possessing the properly developed capacities to fight makes it GOOD As an elk, and the exercise of those capacities in fighting is an aspect of THE GOOD OF an elk. The activity of fighting itself is not bad for them. On the contrary, it is GOOD FOR an elk to exercise its capacities in this way. An injury that results from fighting is bad for an elk precisely *because* it impedes its ability to carry out some of its vital activities.

What is noteworthy about a case like the elk is that one of their characteristic activities (fighting for the harem) exposes them to harm in a consistent, even systematic, way.⁸ And it is not hard to imagine a different way of breeding that would expose the elk to less harm. So it seems the elk would be *better off* if fighting for the harem were not an aspect of their characteristic life. It seems it would be GOOD FOR the elk if they could depart from the way of life that, according to the grammar of goodness, constitutes THE GOOD OF an elk.

Does this thought pose a problem for Foot’s grammar? I don’t think so. But it does raise an important issue about how the formal grammar of goodness relates to what is substantively true about “the human.” To begin, it is important to realize that Foot’s grammar does not claim that THE GOOD OF any organism—the proper unfolding of its characteristic vital activities—will be such as to minimize the risk of danger or injury. Rather THE GOOD OF determines what *counts as* danger and injury. What is harmful to an organism is whatever damages its capacities or impedes its species-specific vital activities. That is why something that is harmful for one type of organism can be beneficial for another. Any sense that

⁸Of course, there are many other examples with the same features as the elk case.

the elk would be better off departing from their characteristic way of life depends upon this very point. After all, the problem with fighting over the harem is that it exposes the elk to injury. But what counts as injury for an elk is whatever damages elk capacities and impedes elk vital functions. To the extent we can make sense of the thought that elk would be better off with a different way of living, that is only because we imagine that different way of living as allowing for a great degree of unimpeded elk-activity. What is GOOD FOR an elk still consists in THE GOOD OF the elk—in its species-specific way of being alive, as described in natural-historical judgments about “the elk.” This is confirmed by the fact that whatever better way of breeding we might imagine for the elk would strike us as GOOD FOR them only if it fit with the proper unfolding of their *other* characteristic activities. And some ways of doing things would be so radically incompatible with elk capacities that to imagine the elk doing things that way would be tantamount to imagining a different life form altogether. For example, would the elk be better off if they settled all their communal disputes with a parliamentary style debate followed by a vote? No. Doing that would not be GOOD FOR an elk, because any creature that could live that way would not *be* an elk. Harm and benefit for an individual living thing are rooted in the same thing that makes that individual one type of organism rather than another: its life form.⁹

Still, it might seem that we have not gotten to the bottom of the worry. For even if we can in principle distinguish between the activity of fighting and the suffering of injury, isn't it also the case that to fight is to *attempt* to injure or incapacitate one's opponent, or at least to prevent him from doing what he is trying to do? And if we accept that thought, then it seems like elk form is at odds with itself, insofar as the characteristic activity of some elk not only results in but *aims at* frustrating the characteristic activity of other elk. It looks like it belongs to THE GOOD OF a bull elk to attempt that which will hinder the realization of another bull elk's GOOD.¹⁰ What should a Footian say about this?

⁹For further discussion, Groll and Lott, 20–7.

¹⁰Related to this, we might also consider the sexual cannibalism of some species of arachnids and insects.

We might start by pointing out is that there is a *function* to this particular fighting. Elk fighting is part of how they acquire mates and reproduce. And that's why we don't think that the bulls who are fighting over the harem are suffering some disease or madness. Rather, the fighting has a part to play in the life of "the elk." This is how *they* live, and something is achieved by this whole process—elk reproduction.

Unfortunately, this point does not remove the worry that THE GOOD OF the elk is at odds with itself in the sense identified above. In fact, it seems to confirm that worry. For it seems that how *they* live is to compete for the chance to live a characteristically good life, as defined by their life form. The characteristic life of a bull elk includes acting to prevent other bull elk from carrying out the vital activity of reproduction in an unhindered way. In effect, their naturally excellent way of living seems to involve doing what is bad for other members of their kind.

However, perhaps we should not be too quick in accepting the idea that losing a fight is bad for the losing elk, or that it necessarily hinders the elk's characteristic activities. Granting that it is characteristic of bull elk to fight over the harem, and granting that fighting implies some losers who will not have access to females, we might conclude that what is characteristic for a bull elk is *either* to win and reproduce *or* to lose and not reproduce (at least not that season, or at least not as much as some other elk). And the simple fact that an organism does not reproduce (or reproduces less than others) does not show that its characteristic vital activities are being impeded. After all, honeybee workers are typically sterile, but that is part of the characteristic life of "the honeybee," and we need not think that being sterile is bad for any individual worker bee. We might suppose that something similar is true of elk, with the only difference being that, with the elk, whichever (equally characteristic) path an individual takes is determined by fighting.

I am not satisfied with this line of thought. There seems to be an important difference between a sterile worker bee and a losing elk, which can be brought out by considering first and second actuality. A losing elk has first actuality with respect to its reproductive capacities, and it is attempting to exercise those capacities, although its attempts fail. The same cannot be said for the worker bee. That underlies our sense that the worker bee is *supposed to be* sterile, whereas no particular

elk is supposed to lose a fight for the harem. The losing elk is missing out on something that belongs to the actualization of its capacities in a way that the worker bee is not.

At the same time, I do not think that a case like the elk actually poses a problem for Foot's grammar of goodness. It simply might be the case that, for some organisms, it belongs to THE GOOD OF those organisms to do that which will prevent their conspecifics from living the life that is THE GOOD OF such organisms. In itself, that possibility does not violate any of the conceptual connections that Foot finds between THE GOOD OF, GOOD AS, and GOOD FOR.

However, it does raise an important question: How do things stand with human beings? Is "the human" such that some individuals can realize THE GOOD OF human beings only by doing that which will prevent other humans from realizing that same GOOD? I believe that the answer is: No. And I am confident that Foot would agree. However, I think a case like the elk shows that the grammar of goodness on its own does not guarantee that this is the correct answer. If we are to show that our characteristic form of life does not involve competition over the chance to realize THE GOOD OF humans beings, and hence to show that being GOOD AS a human not require doing that which is harmful to other human beings, then we must appeal to something more than the conceptual connections that make up Foot's grammar.¹¹

4 Virtuous Activity, Happiness, and Human Good

In the last section, I attempted to clarify and defend some aspects of Foot's grammar of goodness, and I focused on examples of plants and non-human animals. In this section, I turn to the case of human beings, and in particular to the question of how happiness fits into the grammar of goodness. I first reconstruct some of Foot's main arguments about happiness and THE GOOD OF human beings. I then suggest one way that we might extend Foot's account.

¹¹Thanks to Daniel Groll for helping me to think about the issues in this section.

In Chapter 6 of *Natural Goodness*, “Happiness and Human Good,” Foot writes:

Given that goodness in respect of bodily health, of faculties such as intelligence and memory, and so on is precisely that which fits a living thing for the instantiation of the life form of its species, and that this counts as the good of a living thing, then in so far as this instantiation in humans can be identified with having a good life, the question that concerns us in this chapter is the relation between virtue and a good life and the connection of that with the happiness of the one whose life it is. (NG 92)

By this point in *Natural Goodness*, Foot has argued that: (1) the grammar of goodness applies to human beings, (2) the moral virtues make a person GOOD As a human being with respect to the rational will, and (3) considerations of the moral virtues are partly constitutive of practical rationality—i.e., virtue has a claim on reason even apart from how it might serve the desires or self-interest of the agent, and it is rational to do what virtue requires. In chapter six, Foot turns to the concept of happiness, and the idea that “happiness is Man’s good.”

Foot begins by noting a couple of ways that this idea, combined with other premises, might threaten her effort to apply the grammar of goodness to human beings. One argument goes like this: Happiness is the human good, and it is therefore rational to pursue happiness. But happiness can sometimes be achieved best through evil actions. And thus rationality sometimes favors or even requires actions that virtue forbids—a conclusion that Foot rejects. A second, related line of thought is: Happiness is the human good (“the instantiation of the human life form lies in happiness”). And given the framework of natural goodness, this means that happiness is “the determinant of virtue,” in which case virtue could never require the sacrifice of happiness. But virtue does sometimes require the sacrifice of happiness in those cases when happiness can only be obtained by wicked means—so there must be something wrong with the framework of natural goodness.¹²

¹²This paragraph contains my reconstructions of arguments that are presented, in a highly compressed form, at NG 82. Foot says that there is a “tangled skein of ideas” in this area, and she aims to unravel them in Chapter 6.

In response to these worries, Foot argues that we have a way of understanding the concept of happiness that precludes the combination of happiness and viciousness and has conformity with the virtues as part of its meaning. And this sort of happiness is the happiness that we should accept as being identical to the human good. To avoid confusion, let us call this sort of happiness *eudaimonia*. The first argument fails because the sort of “happiness” that can be achieved best through evil actions is not the sort of happiness that is equal to human good. It is not *eudaimonia*. The second argument fails for a similar reason. For if we understand happiness as *eudaimonia*, then virtue does not require one to sacrifice happiness in cases where happiness might have been achieved through vice. Rather, the “happiness” achievable through vice is not *eudaimonia*. What is true instead is that in extremely unfortunate circumstances, *eudaimonia* might not be possible for a person, no matter what choices she makes.

For Foot, it is important to show that the relevant concept of happiness is not merely the invention of philosophers but already present in our ordinary practical thinking. To show this, she appeals to two examples: the horrible Wests, murderers and sexual abusers, and the honorable Letter-Writers, Germans who were murdered for their opposition to the Nazis. Foot's line of thought about the Wests can be reconstructed as follows: To benefit an organism or person—to do what is GOOD FOR them—is to help them realize their GOOD, i.e., THE GOOD OF their life form. But if one were to have helped the Wests to pursue their way of life, one would not have thereby benefited them. Offering assistance to the Wests to keep up their wicked ways would not have been doing anything GOOD FOR the Wests. Thus, living the way the Wests lived is *not* THE GOOD OF a human being. The attitudes and actions of the Wests are incompatible with human good. And what *explains* this is the fact that the Wests were so vicious. That is why we think their way of living was incompatible with human good, and hence why we think that assisting them in their wicked ways would not have been a genuine benefit for them. And this shows that we have, implicit in our thinking, a conception of human good that is incompatible with wickedness and has conformity with the virtues as part of its meaning. If we claim that “happiness is Man's good,” then this is the understanding of human

good with which happiness is properly equated. And that brings to light a kind of happiness that is incompatible with evil and inseparable from moral goodness.¹³

The case of the Letter-Writers leads to the same conclusion from a different direction. The Letter-Writers resisted the Nazis out of conscience, even though their resistance led to their persecution and death. Foot invites us to suppose that these individuals were given a choice between returning to their families, if they would give up their resistance, or being executed, if they would not. And they chose to accept death rather than collaborate with the Nazi's evil schemes. We might say, then, that the Letter-Writers knowingly sacrificed their happiness. However, we might understand the situation differently. As Foot says:

One may think that there was a sense in which the Letter-Writers did, *but also a sense in which they did not*, sacrifice their happiness in refusing to go along with the Nazis. In the abstract what they so longed for – to get back to their families – was of course wholly good. But as they were placed it was impossible to pursue this end by just and honourable means. And this, I suggest, explains the sense in which they did not see as their happiness what they could have got by giving in. Happiness in life, they might have said, was not something possible for them. (NG 95)

The key thought is this: Happiness was not possible for the Letter-Writers because, given their circumstances, what might otherwise have constituted a happy life could only be achieved by vicious means, but if achieved this way it would not *be* genuine happiness. If we accept this thought, then we recognize a sort of happiness that is inseparable from the virtues, because it is exactly that sort of happiness that was unavailable to the Letter-Writers.

¹³“Benefiting someone means doing something that is for his or her good. If I am right, then the concept of benefiting someone reveals a way of thinking about the human good that excludes the pursuit of evil things, as is shown by my observation about prolonging the pleasures of the Wests. But then the concept of happiness that one finds in the expression ‘Happiness is Man’s good’ must also exclude the pursuit of evil. So considering the notion of benefiting someone offers us a glimpse of a way we have of thinking about happiness that involves goodness.” Foot quoted in Voorhoeve, 106–7.

Thus the idea that “happiness is Man’s good” does not prevent us from applying the grammar of goodness to human beings. The virtues make a person GOOD As a human being, and they fit one for a life of virtuous activity—happiness as *eudaimonia*. That sort of life is THE GOOD OF a human being. And what is GOOD FOR a human is that which fosters or sustains our characteristic way of being alive.

Aristotle, of course, stresses that *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activity, not merely in possessing the virtues or the condition of being GOOD As a human being (NE I.8.1098b30-a7). Aristotle also claims that a *eudaimon* life requires a degree of favorable external circumstances, which is (at least partly) a matter of fortune. Although Foot endorses both of these claims from Aristotle, she does not discuss the connection between them. What Foot should say, I suggest, is that the claim about activity explains the claim about circumstances. That is, the reason that a happy life requires favorable circumstances is that *eudaimonia* consists in virtuous activities and those activities require favorable circumstances. How favorable? Certainly not ideal or even rare. Still, the world must cooperate to some extent if a person is to be active in the ways that constitute happiness.

To see this, consider a modified version of the Letter-Writer case. Suppose that instead of being threatened with death, a person who steadfastly refused to cooperate with an evil regime was imprisoned in isolation for many years, away from friends and family, and without the opportunity to read or write or go outside. Let us grant that taking such a stand is virtuous, even noble and heroic. However, as a result of her choice, this person is placed in circumstances in which many forms of virtuous activity become impossible, including those virtuous ways of listening, speaking, feeling, and understanding that are possible only in personal relationships. This does not mean, of course, that the person has a less than virtuous character or is acting viciously. But it does mean that her *eudaimonia* is compromised, because her possibilities for being active in characteristically human ways are severely diminished. We should distinguish between the claim that one can make a virtuous choice, or proceed virtuously, in any circumstances, and the claim that those virtuous activities that constitute the human good can be realized in any circumstances. Whether or not the first claim is true, the second

is not. And that is why a *eudaimon* life requires a (minimal) level of favorable circumstances.¹⁴

These points about activity and circumstances bring out a continuity between the grammar of goodness as applied to human beings and to non-human organisms. They also help us to identify what is distinctive about the human case. As we have seen, THE GOOD OF non-human organisms consists in the proper unfolding of their characteristic vital capacities. Such unfolding requires both that the organism's capacities be in good condition (a matter of GOODNESS AS) and that its circumstances not frustrate or impede its activities. Since what is GOOD FOR an organism is what furthers or sustains THE GOOD OF such a creature, these points about activity and circumstances explain Foot's observation that to benefit a living thing, "it may be necessary to act on it – to make it better – or on the other hand to act on its environment." For these are two ways of making possible the proper unfolding of its characteristic vital activities.

If human good is understood as activity in accordance with virtue, then it is clear how to apply the same conceptual structure to human beings. THE GOOD OF a human being is the actualization of our species-specific vital capacities in virtuous activities. Living virtuously is our characteristic way of being active, and the virtues make one GOOD AS a human being because they fit one for that sort of activity. And what is GOOD FOR a human being is what furthers or sustains the characteristic unfolding of our vital capacities. Thus what is distinctive about human beings is not that our GOOD lies in characteristic vital activity. That is true of living things generally. What is distinctive about humans is the nature of our vital activities—rational, self-conscious, and linguistically infused activities, guided by a developing grasp of our own GOOD.¹⁵

¹⁴For very helpful discussion of these issues, see Russell (2012), especially Chapters 4, 5, and 8.

¹⁵In my view, the best contemporary account of virtuous activity is found in Brewer (2009). Brewer's notion of "dialectical activities" gives considerable substance to Foot's grammar as applied to human beings.

For helpful feedback on this chapter, I thank Anne Baril, Daniel Groll, and Richard Kim.

References

- Brewer, T. 2009. *The Retrieval of Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foot, P. 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2002. *Moral Dilemmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Groll, D., and M. Lott. 2015. Is There a Role for 'Human Nature' in Debates About Human Enhancement? *Philosophy* 90 (4): 623–651.
- Harcourt, E. 2016. 'Mental Health' and Human Excellence. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 90: 217–234.
- Hursthouse, R. 2012. Philippa Foot. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* XI: 179–196.
- Russell, D. 2012. *Happiness for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, M. 2008. *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Voorhoeve, A. 2009. Philippa Foot: The Grammar of Goodness. In *Conversations on Ethics*, 87–110. Oxford: Oxford University Press.