

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

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### Book Review

Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 2002) 1st Edition 1978. ISBN: 0-19-925286-6 (Pb)

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*Virtues and Vices* brings together fourteen essays by Philippa Foot, all of which were written between 1958 and 1977.

Considered in terms of broad themes, *Virtues and Vices* is a sustained attack on the basic tenets of subjectivism in ethics (including its various forms of emotivism and prescriptivism), a sustained development of a sophisticated form of ethical “naturalism,” and a sustained struggle to clarify the relationship between ethics and rationality. In the *Preface to the 2002 Edition*, Foot describes the third issue with admirable clarity: “The problem is to see how for every person and in every case it can be rational to follow moral edicts—in particular the demands of justice and charity—when these seem to clash with self interest or desire”(p.ix). Central to Foot’s treatment of all three topics are incisive explorations of the concept of a moral virtue as well as of particular virtues such as justice, benevolence, courage, and prudence.

Foot is a philosopher whose genius comes to the fore when one considers her work in detail. And this is especially so when we take her up as philosophical practitioners and not merely as theoretical philosophers. There is something of value—an excellent example, an illuminating characterization of a problem, a novel insight—in each of the essays in *Virtues and Vices*. Since space is limited, I will single out only three essays for detailed description.

In “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect” (pp. 19-33), certain cases of medically motivated abortion motivate the question of how central the “doctrine of the double effect” is to ordinary ethical judgment. Foot does an excellent job explaining the distinction on which the doctrine rests, that between intended and foreseen-but-not-intended results of an intentional action. She offers a clear and compelling account of why the main thrust of the doctrine—the claim there are cases in which it is unethical to intend a result that it is not unethical to bring about as (merely) foreseen—is worth taking seriously (see pp. 24-26 in particular). Both the explanatory and the apologetic portions of her discussion are apt to be useful for philosophical practitioners working with issues of intention, moral responsibility and guilt. The essay has more to offer, however: For her main goal is not to defend “double effect” but to motivate a different doctrine as more central to ordinary ethical judgment. The account she prefers trades on a distinction between duties to refrain from interfering with someone and duties to provide a service to someone. And, although it is not entirely clear, to me at least, how the duties-based doctrine succeeds where “double effect” fails, her treatment of the structure of different types of duties is rich in insights and useful examples (see especially pp. 26-7). These aspects of Foot’s discussion make it useful to practitioners engaged in helping clients think through some of the many ethically and emotionally challenging situations that face us all—especially those cases in which considerations of justice and of kindness appear to pull in opposite directions.

“Euthanasia” (pp. 33-61) begins with an illuminating discussion of the conditions under which to save a person’s life would be to do them a service, and the conditions under which it would *not* be one (see pp. 34-43). Foot is here attuned to many of the ideas that are likely to strike a person who is genuinely struggling with the question of when life is “worth living”: Is life worth living

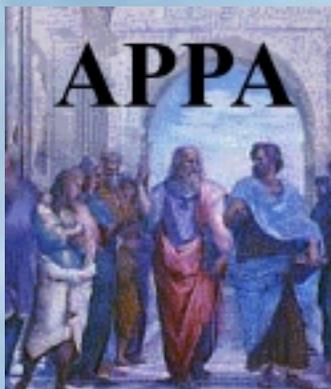
only when it contains more good than bad—say, more contentment, health, and success than discontent, sickness and failure? In addition to pointing out shortcomings of such a principle, considered theoretically, Foot offers several examples (some taken from *The Notebooks of Sologdin*, Dimitri Panin’s account of life in the prison camps under Stalin) that vividly illustrate that a calculation of good and bad *within* a life is often profoundly off the mark. Does experience itself—the *fact* of experience, as it were—add some extra “weight,” so that saving, or extending, a person’s life might do them a good turn even if their life is very hard indeed? Well, it is difficult to see why experience itself should count as a benefit if *what* is experienced is, by hypothesis, thoroughly wretched. Foot herself favors the view that life is “worth living” when it contains a minimum array of basic human goods. Although this view, like the view about the balance of good and bad within a life, enjoys a certain common sense appeal, Foot does not rely on this appeal. She argues for the view, at some length, by investigating how the concepts of life and goodness are related. An interesting aspect of her approach to the problem is that she begins with ordinary judgments about plants and non-human animals, so as to “get away from the temptation to think that the connexion [*sic*] between life and benefit must everywhere be a matter of happiness and unhappiness or of pleasure and pain” (p.38). Here again, her discussion is rich in the sort of details that help a person who is genuinely struggling with these issues to pause and think, and in this respect the essay has much to offer the practitioner, quite independently of whether one agrees with her stance on the ethics of euthanasia.

“Goodness and Choice,” (pp. 132-47) is an examination of the logical, or conceptual, relations between thinking that some A is a good A and choosing to do, have, or use that A. The view that arises out of her discussion is not merely that to evaluate responsibly, we must be careful not to confuse apples with oranges, but that the evaluative standards relevant to different contexts of evaluation can be set in very different ways. Her examples include judgments involving essentially functional kinds, both artificial and not (good pens and good roots); kinds of activities and social roles (good fathers, liars or farmers); “natural” kinds (good coal); certain types of “aesthetic” cases (good books and good pictures), and even “competition” examples (good basset hound). For the philosophical practitioner, the discussion is a very useful reminder of the different ways evaluative standards can be determined. But there is also something deeper at issue in the discussion, if we care to take it up: the examples cover such a range cases and fit together in such a way that they provide us with a good reason to ask *ourselves*—not only those we hope to benefit though our practice—whether we are quite sure we understand what *we* mean when we say (what we very often do) that it would be a *good thing* if so-and-so did this-and-such, or if such-and-such happened, or didn’t happen.

In a brief review, it isn’t possible to discuss all the essays in this collection. Suffice to say in conclusion that as a source of excellent examples, clearly drawn distinctions, and cogent discussion on matters evaluative and ethical, *Virtues and Vices* contains a great deal that must interest and delight philosophers engaged in practice as well as theory.

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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

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