

## CHAPTER III

### A CRITIQUE OF HARE'S POSITION; PHILLIPA FOOT : MORAL AND EMPIRICAL CRITERIA

As we have seen, Hare holds a theory according to which there are no limits to what can count as a moral reason, and so far I have tried merely to indicate some of the difficulties into which this leads him. Now, in her articles Mrs. Foot is concerned both to show how Hare's account is wrong and to provide an alternative theory, and it is to this positive theory that I shall now turn my attention, for it seems to be, if anything, less plausible than Hare's own.

I want to begin by asking why it is that Mrs. Foot finds it necessary to advance the sort of theory which we find in 'Moral Arguments', 'Moral Beliefs', and 'Goodness and Choice'. We might be inclined to say that it is simply because she is looking for an alternative to the theory which she had already attacked in her earlier article, 'When is a Principle a Moral Principle?' But while this would be correct as far as it goes, it would be unilluminating, for it neglects many of the deeper issues in the debate between Hare and Mrs. Foot. I suggest that the real answer is to be found at the beginning of 'Moral Arguments', where Mrs. Foot is considering the problem of moral deadlock which I indicate in the Introduction to this essay<sup>1</sup>. As we have seen, this arises because in morals we seem to be

continually faced with disputes where agreement cannot be reached, and yet in which the opinions of both parties are equally well-founded. Yet the same does not seem to be true of most other types of disagreement. It is characteristic of, for instance, scientific and empirical disputes that they are always in principle capable of being resolved<sup>2</sup>. If x and y disagree over whether there is a car in the garage, then there is one way in which they can decide the matter once and for all, namely by going and looking. If a and b disagree over the temperature on the Air Ministry roof, then there are recognised ways of finding out who is right. In both cases it would be absurd to say that their <sup>are</sup> views/equally well founded if they failed to reach agreement. Yet in the sphere of morality the same does not seem always to apply. And this causes difficulties for those for whom the paradigm cases of a dispute is an empirical one. Mrs. Foot sums up the problem well when she says, 'How "X" is good can be a well-founded moral judgement, when "X is bad" can be equally well-founded it is not easy to see'<sup>3</sup>.

Now, one way of solving this problem is simply to deny that it exists, that is to deny that such a state of affairs is conceivable. And this is in effect what Mrs. Foot does. The reason why empirical disputes are never of the above kind is that there is general agreement about the criteria for deciding them. It is always possible to support an empirical statement

with reasons which are both conclusive and whose truth is not disputed by either party. The purpose of Mrs. Foot's later articles is to show that the same is true of moral judgements. That is, she wishes to show that 'it is laid down that some things do, and some things do not, count in favour of a moral conclusion'<sup>4</sup>.

And indeed, if she can establish such a thesis, then the consequences for moral philosophy will be twofold. For not only will she have effectively disposed of Hare's account of moral reasons, but she will also have provided a procedure for settling any ethical dispute. She need only show that there are certain reasons, whose truth is a necessary and sufficient justification of any moral judgement, and she can kill two birds with one stone. We must now see how she intends to accomplish this feat.

In 'Moral Arguments' she begins by considering the word 'rude', which, while perhaps not a paradigm case of a moral term, does at least seem to fall into the class of what Hare would call 'evaluative' terms (or which moral terms are said to form a sub-class). 'It is', she says, 'obvious that there is something else to be said about the word "rude" besides the fact that it expresses fairly mild condemnation; it can only be used where certain descriptions apply'<sup>5</sup>. In the next sentence we are told what the descriptions in question are. A piece of behaviour is rude if and only if it 'causes offence by indicating lack of

respect', and whether it does so or not is a purely factual matter<sup>6</sup>. So there are necessary and sufficient conditions of rudeness, and while of course a man may always refuse to discuss 'points of etiquette', once he does agree to do so, he is committed to accepting these as reasons.

Now this is important, for if the range of reasons which we can give for an evaluative judgement is limited in this sort of way, then Mrs. Foot sees no good reason why it should not be limited in the case of moral judgements. We can, she argues, at the very least admit the possibility of this, and it therefore becomes reasonable.

to enquire whether moral terms do lose their meaning when divorced from the pleasure principle, or from some other set of criteria, as the word 'true' loses its meaning when the criterion of offensiveness is dropped<sup>7</sup>.

What then are this limited set of reasons which alone have any relevance in the justification of our moral decisions and judgements? Well, in 'Moral Beliefs' Mrs. Foot tells us that something can only count as a moral reason if it 'can be shown to be such that it is necessarily connected with what a man wants'. True, other philosophers of the same school have expressed this point in many different ways. Instead of 'What

a man wants' Miss Anscombe refers to 'human flourishing'<sup>8</sup>, and Mrs. Foot herself sometimes prefers to talk of 'human good and harm'<sup>9</sup>. But the diversity is more apparent than real. For just as a plant flourishes only when its needs are satisfied, so a man is held to flourish only when his needs are satisfied. Again, if we are to make some sense of Mrs. Foot's doctrines then 'human good' must be whatever satisfies a man's wants, and by the same token, 'human harm' whatever prevents their satisfaction. Whatever Foot, Anscombe, etc., mean by these various phrases, it is clear that for them it constitutes the point of morality and must therefore provide the sole justification for our moral beliefs.

Now, *prima facie* this would seem to be a most implausible theory. In particular it seems absurd to suggest that the only justification for the virtues of courage, justice, etc., lies in the fact that we need them in our dealings with others, or that only by being just and courageous can a man survive. If justice is only some obscure kind of self-preservation, why do we admire the just man? Is not he, as much as the unjust man, merely looking after himself, only better?

Worse still Mrs. Foot's theory might well be regarded as a proposal to do away with moral language altogether by reducing it to a variety of straightforward practical language. And indeed, many Philosophers of Mrs. Foot's persuasion have

openly acknowledged this as their intention. Thus, for instance, in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' Miss Anscombe offers the thesis that 'the concepts of obligation and duty ... and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of "ought", ought to be jettisoned, if this is psychologically possible'.<sup>10</sup> Again, G.H. Von Wright, in *The Varieties of Goodness*, has argued that 'the so-called moral sense of "good" is a derivative or secondary sense, which must be explained in terms of the non-moral uses of the words'<sup>11</sup> and indeed Mrs. Foot herself raise doubts about whether it makes sense to speak of a moral use of the word 'good'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet we are inclined to say that any attempt to reduce the moral uses of 'good' to a variety of its non-moral uses is bound to end up by misrepresenting the former, for it will necessarily ignore important differences between the two types of judgement in which they occur. I shall try to show that this is what Mrs. Foot's theory in fact does.

Despite its appearance of paradox, Mrs. Foot makes no attempt to support her thesis about moral reasons with any sort of proof in the accepted sense of the word. That it is possible that there are reasons which constitute a necessary and sufficient condition for any moral judgement, she does indeed try to establish. That this is so, and that these reasons must be of the kind she says, is never proved and Mrs. Foot does not try to

prove it. She does, however, offer what Mill might call 'considerations ... capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine'<sup>13</sup>, and I now want to consider two of these.

The theory that the only considerations relevant to moral judgements are ones connected with 'good and harm' is often thought to be so self-evidently true that it require no proof<sup>14</sup>. Of course, appeals to self-evidence are generally a rather fruitless method of philosophical argument, but Mrs. Foot's own appeal is of more interest than most, for it points to some of the confusion underlying her theory. She says:

I do not know what could be meant by saying that it was someone's duty to do something, unless there was an attempt to show why it mattered if this sort of thing was not done. How can questions such as 'What does it matter?', 'What harm does it do?', 'What advantage is there in ...?', 'Why is it important?' be set aside here?<sup>15</sup>

I suggest that there is a radical confusion in this passage, which becomes apparent if we consider the following example:

Suppose I say to my young son John, 'You know, you ought to be more obedient', and am challenged by Mrs. Foot to give reasons for this assertion. There are two senses in which the reasons which I give might be said to show why John's obedience is important:

1. In one sense my reasons must show this, for in this sense to admit that it was not important ('did not matter', 'had no point') would be to admit the triviality of my remark. And no one can regard his own moral judgements as trivial, for a man's morality is those sorts of things which he regards as important in his life. 'You ought to do this, but it doesn't really matter whether you do it or not', is a piece of nonsense.

2. In the second sense of 'important', what Mrs. Foot says seems to me to be quite incorrect. We see what this sense is, if we consider the role which the word has in sentence like the following:

- (a) It is important to clean the machine before use.
- (b) Important. Light blue touch-paper and retire immediately.
- (c) It is important to keep on friendly terms with the boss.

In contexts like these, we do show how something is important by giving reasons which link it with 'human good and harm' or with the advantage which it is likely to bring. But I do not think that this is the sense in which it is normally used in moral contexts. Indeed, one is inclined to say that if I do try to show how a judgement is important in this sense, then this is an indication that the judgement is not a moral one. For instance, if, in the above example, I were to answer Mrs. Foot

by saying, 'If John isn't obedient then he'll soon find out why he ought to be', or 'Because he's beginning to get on my nerves', this would surely be a sign that moral issues were not involved. A reason which was necessarily connected with what a man wants, far from being a paradigm case of a moral reason, as Mrs. Foot thinks, would serve to change the whole character of the discussion. And this is even more obvious if we take her own example of justice. For it is clear that if someone were to recommend justice on the ground that 'You really can't get along without it', we should hesitate to call this a moral belief at all.

Mrs. Foot is, of course, right to say that it must always be possible to support a practical judgement with reasons in terms of 'good and harm' or 'advantage'.

For it is reasons of this sort which give what we say its meaning. When I say, 'You ought to water that plant', this would be incomprehensible unless it were understood that plants die without water. But if I am asked to support a moral judgement in this way, then I am at a loss to know what is wanted. As Rush Rhees asks, 'What more could I tell you?'<sup>16</sup>

Now it seems to me that it is only because she conflates these two senses of 'important' that Mrs. Foot's theory has any plausibility. If we do not notice the confusion, we seem to be faced with a dilemma. For while we naturally regard our moral

judgements as anything but trivial, and would never admit that they do not really matter, we feel reservations about accepting Mrs. Foot's theory. Yet the passage which I have been considering gives the impression that the only alternatives are (a) to give reasons which will show the point of a pointless belief, or (b) to accept that her account of moral reasons is correct. The difficulty only disappears when we realise that Mrs. Foot's seemingly impossible task rests on a straightforward confusion of two senses of 'having a point'. In one sense morality is necessarily pointless. In the other it can never be.

I want now to turn my attention to another line of argument which is sometimes used in support of the sort of theory under consideration. It is to be found in Geach's article 'Good and Evil', but Mrs. Foot provides perhaps the most convincing exposition in her 'Goodness and Choice'. Since it seems to pinpoint the fundamental fallacies in the whole approach, I shall briefly summarise the argument before attempting to criticise it. Mrs. Foot's aim is to show that the criteria of goodness of an object are 'always determined and not a matter for decision'<sup>17</sup>, and she thinks that this can be done in the following way.

She begins by drawing attention to a class of words which, when preceded by 'good' yield criteria of goodness. The

reason why this is so, is that these words (generally referred to as 'functional' words) 'name of object in respect of its function'<sup>18</sup>. For example, the function of a knife is to cut. So it will be a minimum qualification of something being a good knife that it cuts well. If asked why a particular knife is a good one, my reasons must at least refer to the fact that it performs its function well. But, it is argued, we can generalise this point to include words which are not functional in any normal sense of the word. For example, it would be straining language to say that a farmer, a horse rider, a book, or a father had a function, yet there is still a limited range of reasons which can be given for commending any one of these. A man can only be a good farmer 'because of his farming, while what counts as good farming must be, e.g., maintaining crops and herds in healthy condition'<sup>19</sup>. Again, 'the minimum condition of good riding is an ability to control a horse'<sup>20</sup>, a good book must 'interest us profoundly'<sup>21</sup>, and a good father is one who 'looks after his children as best he can'<sup>22</sup>.

Now what conclusions can be drawn from all this? Well, Hare had argued that there are no limitations to what can count as a moral reason. Mrs. Foot, by sheer proliferation of examples, seeks to show that this is not true of any of the uses of 'good' outside morals. The conclusion drawn is that if Hare's account were correct with regard to the characteristically moral uses of the term, then these would 'seem to be different from all

others cases in which we talk of a good such-and-such<sup>23</sup> .

Part of the difficulty in criticising this argument is that it is not quite clear what is supposed to be so dubious about this<sup>24</sup> . After all, we expect the moral uses of words to differ from their non-moral uses. It would be rather surprising if they did not. But I want to ignore this point. What I want to suggest is that Mrs. Foot has not even established her thesis in the case of the non-moral uses of 'good'. Nor do I think that any such thesis can be established.

Let us see why it is that there are certain cases where the reasons we can give for commending an object are limited. It seems to me that this is because the object in question has a characteristic purpose or point. The generally accepted point of farming is, as Mrs. Foot says, the maintaining of crops and herds in healthy condition. So the minimum qualification for being a good farmer is that one's crops and herds do not die. But it follows from this that if there were disagreement over the point of farming, or if its points were different, then we could no longer necessarily offer this as a reason for saying that someone was a good farmer. If I ask why Jones is a good sewage-farmer, I hardly expect to hear that herds thrive on his land.

Now this is important, for it means that there can be established criteria by which to settle disagreements, only where an object or activity has some undisputed point. And this does not seem to be the case even outside morality, as becomes apparent when we turn to what Mrs. Foot says about works of art on pp. 52-3 of 'Goodness and Choice'.

'We cannot', she says, 'consider the criteria of goodness in books and picture without noticing the part which literature and art play in civilisation such as ours'. Now this, of course, is true, for it is the part which something plays in a civilisation which determines what the criteria are. But the reason why Mrs. Foot's argument seems so strange is that, while we cannot imagine any dispute about the purpose of a knife, it is obvious that disputes about the point of works of art do constantly occur.

For example, when Brecht's play *Mann ist Mann* was first staged in Germany, many critics objected to the performance of Peter Lorre on the grounds that it was wooden, unemotional and monotonous. Yet Brecht in his reply to Lorre's critics made it clear that he regarded these qualities as virtues<sup>25</sup>,

How could such a situation arise? The answer seems to be that both had different conceptions of the point of the theatre.

According to the traditional concept of the theatre in Germany, the actor tried to make the audience experience the feelings and emotions of the character whom he was playing. He 'lived his part'. But, for Brecht, the theatre had a different purpose. It was intended to appeal less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason .

Because of this, Brecht and his critics reached different conclusions. By traditional standards, Lorre had given a mediocre performance. Yet for Brecht, Lorre's acting was good precisely because it was wooden and unemotional.

Now, surely examples like these show the futility of attempting to base any sort of aesthetic criticism on the alleged purpose of a work of art. Mrs. Foot's thesis is, no doubt, and illuminating one when restricted to activities which do have a clear-cut, non-controversial point; it is particularly illuminating when applied to games, where the whole activity is directed towards some agreed end, such as scoring a goal or winning a trick. But it would be wrong to assume that even all non-moral activities were of this sort.

But now, what are we to say about morality itself? Do all our moral decisions have some common, undisputed point, such that we can say with certainty what reasons will count as relevant to any moral judgement, as Mrs. Foot thinks?

It seems to me that it is here that the theory under consideration really breaks down. For it is surely quite implausible to suggest any one point for all moral action. True there are a host of candidates for this role : 'human good and harm', 'what all men want', 'human flourishing', as well as such traditional stand-bys as 'happiness', 'pleasure', and 'self-interest'. But the majority of these suffer from being either too narrow, like 'pleasure', or too vague, like 'human flourishing'. Now part of the value of Mrs. Foot's work is that she tries to say in precise terms what is involved in conceptions like these. The arguments in 'Moral Beliefs' make it quite clear that for her, human flourishing or human good consists at least in freedom from physical injury. This is why she thinks it possible to impose strict limits on what is to count as a moral reason. If I wish to give a reason why someone ought to do x, I can do so by showing that x leads to something which he wants. And what all men want it to escape injury. So to say that some action will lead to injury is to give a reason for not doing it. It may not always be a conclusive reason, but at least it is always a reason.

The question is, then, whether the fact that some action will lead to injury is always a reason for avoiding that action. I think that it is not. We have no difficulty in imagining the kind of person for whom questions about the possible injury resulting from a proposed course of action are quite irrelevant

to whether they ought to do it or not. The Jehovah's Witness, refusing to allow a blood transfusion for his dying child, is quite aware of the injuries which may result from his decision. It is just that, for him, such matters have no relevance. Again, consider the following passage from Malcolm's memoir of Wittgenstein:

Moore's health was quite good in 1946-47, but before that he had suffered a stroke and his doctor had advised that he should not become greatly excited nor fatigued. Mrs. Moore enforced this by not allowing Moore to have a philosophical discussion with anyone for longer than one hour and a half. Wittgenstein was extremely vexed by this regulation. He believed that Moore should not be supervised by his wife. He should discuss as long as he liked. If he became excited or tired and had a stroke and died-well, that would be a decent way to die : with his boots on. Wittgenstein felt that ... a human being should do the thing for which he has a talent with all his energy his life long and should never relax his devotion to his job merely in order to prolong his existence .

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It seems to me that here Malcolm is not portraying a man for whom philosophy was so important that any injury which might result from it would recede into relative insignificance,

but rather someone for whom any personal injury done by his life's work would be quite irrelevant. It was not just that, for Wittgenstein, the possible loss of one's life was not an overriding reason for 'taking it easy', but that, for him, it was not a reason at all. Any appeal to 'human good and harm' would have cut no ice at all with Wittgenstein, for as far as he was concerned 'dying with one's boots on' did not count as harm. In the face of cases like these we must surely conclude that the concept of 'what all men want' is an empty one.

It does not, however, follow that all of Mrs. Foot's argument is equally futile. Certainly her positive thesis is not a convincing one, and I think that any attempt to confine moral reason within the scope of a simple formula would be equally unconvincing. It is my purpose to show that the reasons we give for moral judgements are limited in a quite different way. But it is to her credit that she saw the absurdity in Hare's suggestion that anything can count as a moral reason. Her mistake was to assume that the only alternative was that there must be some simple and strict formula governing what could do so. In the following chapter I shall try to show that there is a third alternative which will allow us to rectify the faults in both theories.