

## Speech delivered at 15 Walton Street, Oxford on 26th May 2023 at the unveiling of Blue Plaque for Philippa Foot

It's a great honour to be asked to say a few words at the unveiling of the Blue Plaque commemorating Philippa Foot, on this house in Walton St which was her home – her English home at least, when she was teaching in the USA – for nearly forty years, and where she died in 2010. All her friends and admirers are delighted that there is to be a Blue Plaque commemorating Philippa Foot, a seminal moral philosopher and a woman of great charity and integrity.

Foot was a moral philosopher of the first importance, a major figure on both sides of the Atlantic for over fifty years, whose influential work will continue to be widely read and discussed. In an address written for a memorial event for Foot, held in 2011, the late Professor Sir Michael Dummett, himself a towering figure in philosophy over the same period, praised her book *Natural Goodness* (2001) as 'the greatest work on moral philosophy since G. E. Moore' (that is, written in the last hundred years).

### Her life

Born in 1920, Philippa Foot (*née* Bosanquet) grew up in North Yorkshire, with parents who lived an aristocratic life-style where horse-riding and shooting took precedence over a decent education. Her mother was born in the White House to a serving President of the U.S., Grover Cleveland. Schooled by governesses, Philippa nevertheless managed to gain admission to Somerville College where she embarked on PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) as war broke out. After a first in PPE and a spell of war work, she returned to Oxford to pursue her studies in philosophy and was appointed to a teaching post at Somerville, later becoming its first tutorial Fellow in philosophy. She taught generations of students and bore a heavy load of teaching and administration, unselfishly shouldering extra burdens to allow her talented colleague Elizabeth Anscombe to make her own mark in philosophy. As a Somerville undergraduate in the mid-sixties I was lucky enough to study with both these eminent philosophers. After two decades of strenuous teaching for College and Faculty, she resigned her Oxford and Somerville position to seek her philosophical fortune in the United States, on the strength of her high reputation as a moral philosopher. Eventually settling to a permanent position at University of California Los Angeles, she became the first holder of a distinguished named Chair. On retiring in 1991 she returned to live full time in Oxford. Here, in her seventies, she crafted the slim volume *Natural Goodness* (OUP 2001) which brought her widespread acclaim and even greater recognition. It has been translated into many languages, and is in constant demand.

## **Her work**

The monograph *Natural Goodness* was the culmination of studies Foot embarked on early in her career. She maintained a dogged opposition to the then prevailing trend in moral philosophy, subjectivism, whether in the form of A. J. Ayer's emotive theory of ethics, of Stevenson's appeal to attitudes, or—the fashion of the fifties and sixties—the prescriptivist theories of R. M. Hare. Much has been written recently about the so-called 'Quartet of women philosophers', Foot and her friends Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, and Mary Midgley. The four women were friends and fellow students from their undergraduate years, and they all in their very different ways opposed those trends. I doubt Foot would have warmed to the label 'Quartet', with its suggestion that this was somehow a joint project, and I know she disliked the appellation women philosophers. Nonetheless, it is splendid that the work of these philosophers has received so much attention, with two books published in 2022. In her very own way—quite differently from the angry sarcasm of Anscombe—Foot took issue with those subjectivist theories. In some acclaimed articles in the late fifties she gently but effectively skewered Hare's view that what made something a moral principle was its form, not its content. No, Foot insisted, there must be some connection to human good or harm. Otherwise—to quote her famous example—'If people happened to insist that no-one should run round trees left-handed, or look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon, this might count as a basic moral principle'. Throughout her writings she argued for an objective basis for morality, finding it ultimately in the monograph, which defends a version of Aristotelian naturalism. The title *Natural Goodness* reflects her claim that goodness and badness in human beings must be on a par with that in other kinds of living things, such as oak trees, bees, or wolves. Of course, the story for human beings is much more complex than that for other living things. Foot paid early attention to virtues and vices, the title of her first collection of published essays, dedicated to Iris Murdoch. I recall her giving lectures in the sixties on what was then a most unfashionable topic: the virtues. Latterly discussion of the virtues has become far more prominent in ethics, and the work of Foot—who was greatly influenced by Aquinas' writings—is acknowledged to have played a major role here.

## **Oxfam, and other good works**

Foot merits the Blue Plaque for her importance as a moral philosopher. But I'd like to say a few words about another important aspect of her life: her work for Oxfam, first as a volunteer sorting clothes in Oxfam's earliest years, then its youngest committee member and Trustee up to the time she left Oxford in the early seventies. Her active compassion for those in need, together with her administrative acumen and people

skills, made her ideally suited to this role with Oxfam. After her 1991 return to live full time in Oxford, she was asked the following year to give Oxfam's Gilbert Murray lecture to celebrate 50 years since its foundation. There was a huge audience in the Sheldonian Theatre, and she later recalled how she had prepared for it by learning to knit those blankets made from small squares, and by reading up about the Quakers. From her earliest years in Oxford she gave valued support to refugees, and in 1956 made a strong contribution to Oxford's welcome to those fleeing the aftermath of the Hungarian uprising.

### **Philippa Foot and 15 Walton Street**

In the 1960s this house was owned and lived in by Anne Cobbe, a distinguished mathematician who, like Philippa, was a tutorial Fellow at Somerville. Cobbe was an old friend from undergraduate days. With their good sense, financial acumen and devotion to the College, these two women Fellows played important roles for two decades in the governance and development of Somerville under the principalship of Dame Janet Vaughan. After Anne Cobbe's untimely death in 1971, Somerville bought the house from her estate in 1972 and agreed to its being rented by Philippa Foot. By then Foot, a Senior Research Fellow, was spending much of each year in the US, but she would return to spend the late spring and summer here each year, keeping in touch with philosophy in the UK, maintaining links with Somerville College, and gathering together younger philosophers for discussions in the beautiful first floor sitting room. From 1991 she lived here full time, enjoying gardening but above all working on her master piece *Natural Goodness*, completed when she was approaching eighty. Her eighties saw some prolonged periods of ill health and time spent in nursing homes, but, though increasingly frail, she was able to return to the house she loved and died here on her ninetieth birthday, on 3 October 2010. The initial proposal for the Blue Plaque came from the famous jurist Sir Stephen Sedley, who lived here for many years having bought the house from Somerville in 2012; it was a project dear to his heart. It is very fitting that Philippa Foot has been honoured with a Blue Plaque placed on this house, and we are grateful to the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board for arranging this.

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