Philippa Foot

Born 03/10/1920
Died 03/10/2010

Dr Lizzy Ventham 20/11/2018
Great Philosophers: Why Philippa Foot?

- Aristotle
- Lucretius
- Thomas Reid
- Mary Astell
- Friedrich Nietzsche
- Gottlob Frege
- Bertrand Russell
- Simone de Beauvoir
- John Rawls
- Philippa Foot
- Judith Butler
Great Philosophers: Why Philippa Foot?

- Philippa Foot was one of the most influential moral philosophers of the 20th century.
- Modern moral philosophy is exciting!
- She was influential in all of the main areas of ethics:
  - Meta-ethics
  - Moral psychology
  - Normative ethics
  - Applied ethics
Great Philosophers: Why Philippa Foot?

- Many women philosophers throughout history have been overlooked (but this is improving!)
- But it’s also important to note that women aren’t the only group who tend to be overlooked.
Great Philosophers: Why Philippa Foot?

- Modern moral philosophy is exciting!
- Many women philosophers throughout history have been overlooked (but this is improving!)
- But it’s also important to note that women aren’t the only group who tend to be overlooked.
- My shortlist was this:
  - (Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Angela Davis, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw)
What I’ll cover in this lecture

1. Brief biography

2. Her contribution to each of the four main areas of moral philosophy
   
   2.1 Meta-ethics
   2.2 Moral psychology
   2.3 Normative ethics
   2.4 Applied ethics
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} US President.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22nd and 24th US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
- She later became a research fellow at the same college.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22nd and 24th US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
- She later became a research fellow at the same college.
- In 1969 she resigned her position and moved to America.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
- She later became a research fellow at the same college.
- In 1969 she resigned her position and moved to America.
- In 1976 she took up a permanent position at the University of California.
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22nd and 24th US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
- She later became a research fellow at the same college.
- In 1969 she resigned her position and moved to America.
- In 1976 she took up a permanent position at the University of California.
- She retired in 1991, when she moved back to Oxford and finished her book, *Natural Goodness*. 
1. Biography - the basics

- Her maternal grandfather was Grover Cleveland - 22\textsuperscript{nd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} US President.
- She had no formal teaching as a child, but was taught by her governess and spoke poorly of her childhood education.
- But despite this, she got into Somerville College at Oxford.
- She later became a research fellow at the same college.
- In 1969 she resigned her position and moved to America.
- In 1976 she took up a permanent position at the University of California.
- She retired in 1991, when she moved back to Oxford and finished her book, \textit{Natural Goodness}.
- She died in Oxford on her 90\textsuperscript{th} birthday.
1. Biography - Foot and her contemporaries
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Of the three of her Somerville contemporaries that I’ve mentioned, she was perhaps closest with Irish Murdoch.

- Their relationship was complicated, to say the least.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris Murdoch and Philippa Bosanquet met at Somerville in 1939.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris Murdoch and Philippa Bosanquet met at Somerville in 1939.

- “They had eager, brilliant minds but were otherwise very different. Philippa was cooler, taller, more elegant and upper class; she grew up in a grand house in Yorkshire with governesses, ponies and plenty of money. Iris's parents were Irish; born in Dublin, she was smaller, rounder, fairer, more intense and better educated.” (Anne Chisholm, writing on the two for The Guardian)
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris Murdoch and Philippa Bosanquet met at Somerville in 1939.

- “They had eager, brilliant minds but were otherwise very different. Philippa was cooler, taller, more elegant and upper class; she grew up in a grand house in Yorkshire with governesses, ponies and plenty of money. Iris's parents were Irish; born in Dublin, she was smaller, rounder, fairer, more intense and better educated.” (Anne Chisholm, writing on the two for The Guardian)

- By 1943 they lived together in a flat in London.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris was dating a man named Michael Foot.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris was dating a man named Michael Foot.
- Philippa was dating a “predatory” man, her former tutor, Tommy Balogh.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris was dating a man named Michael Foot.

- Philippa was dating a “predatory” man, her former tutor, Tommy Balogh.

- Iris then dismissed Michael Foot and took up with Tommy Balogh.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris was dating a man named Michael Foot.

- Philippa was dating a “predatory” man, her former tutor, Tommy Balogh.

- Iris then dismissed Michael Foot and took up with Tommy Balogh.

- Balogh disappeared.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Iris was dating a man named Michael Foot.

- Philippa was dating a “predatory” man, her former tutor, Tommy Balogh.

- Iris then dismissed Michael Foot and took up with Tommy Balogh.

- Balogh disappeared.

- Philippa took up with Michael Foot.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- Philippa was hurt, and Iris felt a profound guilt and regret that heavily influenced the rest of her life and work.

- Iris was affected so much because of her relationship with Philippa.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

- From Murdoch’s journal: ‘Back from Oxford. A world of women. I reflected, talking with Mary, Pip and Elizabeth, how much I love them.’
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

“I rest, as always, in the thought of your love. My dear, you are most precious to me, most close, always in my heart.”

“Pippa, you know without my telling you that my love for you remains as deep and tender as ever - and always will remain, it is so deep in me and so much part of me. I cannot imagine that anyone will ever take your place. I think of you very often. My dear heart, I love you.”

“The fact that you do, after all that, still care for me gives me great hope that the past will fall away and this good thing between us will grow and be stronger than ever. Love can work miracles.”
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

"Thank you for your letter. It said what I would most have wished it to say. Losing you and losing you in that way, was one of the worst things that ever happened to me. I hope very much that we can now recapture something. I have thought of you so much in these years, and dreamed painfully of you too. I would certainly wish only to speak to you from the heart."
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch

1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch


- Philippa Foot and Michael Foot divorced in 1960.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch


- Philippa Foot and Michael Foot divorced in 1960.

- After this time, Foot and Murdoch had an affair.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch


- Philippa Foot and Michael Foot divorced in 1960.

- After this time, Foot and Murdoch had an affair.

- Their friendship and relationship was complex, but enduring.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch


- Philippa Foot and Michael Foot divorced in 1960.

- After this time, Foot and Murdoch had an affair.

- Their friendship and relationship was complex, but enduring.

- Iris eventually died in 1999 after a difficult few years with Alzheimer's.
1. Biography - Foot and Murdoch


- Philippa Foot and Michael Foot divorced in 1960.

- After this time, Foot and Murdoch had an affair.

- Their friendship and relationship was complex, but enduring.

- Iris eventually died in 1999 after a difficult few years with Alzheimer’s.

- Foot and her husband were the only two people she could stand to be around at the end.
2. Her contributions to moral philosophy

- *Meta-ethics*
- *Moral psychology*
- *Normative ethics*
- *Applied ethics*

I’ll say more about what each of these are, and then I’ll say more about her contributions to them.
Meta-ethics

Moral psychology

Normative ethics

Applied ethics
2.1 Meta-Ethics

Meta-ethics is the part of moral philosophy that asks what morality is.
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- Meta-ethics is the part of moral philosophy that asks what morality is.

- You can divide it into two camps: moral realism, and moral non-realism.
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- Meta-ethics is the part of moral philosophy that asks what morality *is*.

- You can divide it into two camps: moral realism, and moral non-realism.

- At the time, non-realism was very fashionable.
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- Meta-ethics is the part of moral philosophy that asks what morality is.

- You can divide it into two camps: moral realism, and moral non-realism.

- At the time, non-realism was very fashionable.

- Many philosophers at the time thought that moral statements weren’t facts, but they were something more like expressions of feelings.
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- Foot was at Oxford when she heard about the horrors in Nazi concentration camps.
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- Foot was at Oxford when she heard about the horrors in Nazi concentration camps.

- “I was always interested in philosophy. But it was significant that the news of concentration camps hit us just when I came back to Oxford in 1945. This news was shattering in a fashion that no one now can easily understand. We had thought that something like this could not happen. This is what got me interested in moral philosophy in particular.” (from an interview published in 2003)
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- As a result, Foot was a great proponent of *Moral Realism*.

- She argued that morality was more than just expressions of approval or disapproval.

- Rather, there are *objective* and *true* moral facts.

- Hitler did something *objectively evil*. 
2.1 Meta-Ethics

- More specifically, Foot was a naturalist.
- She thought that goodness and badness were tangible.
- Goodness and badness are the affect an action has on a person (or many people’s) well-being.
- An act is a bad one if it negatively affects people’s well-being.
- An act is a good one if it positively affects people’s well-being.
2.2 Moral Psychology

- Moral psychology is a relatively new label.

- It describes the philosophy we do when we think about our motivations, our desires, what we ought to do and what we have reason to do.

- Particularly in cases of morality.

- A key debate in moral psychology: if we judge an action to be good, does that necessarily mean we are motivated (to some extent) to do it?
2.2 Moral Psychology

- Foot was awarded her first-class degree at Oxford for her work on Kant.
- Her most famous paper is also about Kant’s legacy.
2.2 Moral Psychology

- One of Kant’s big ethical claims was that moral imperatives apply to us *categorically* - regardless of what we desire.

- Foot argued *against* this claim.

- Moral obligations apply to us *in virtue of shared desires* we have to be good people.
2.2 Moral Psychology

- She argued that the ability for a moral imperative to apply to us categorically could not be the source of what’s special about morality.

- She used an analogy with etiquette.

- Rules of etiquette, like morality, apply to us regardless of what we desires.

- But we don’t want to say that morality is like etiquette!
2.3 Normative Ethics

- Normative ethics is one step across from meta-ethics.

- Once we’ve decided what we think morality is, normative ethics is about pinning down what goodness and rightness are.

- For example, you might’ve heard of ‘consequentialism’, ‘deontology’, and ‘virtue ethics’.
2.3 Normative Ethics

- One of Foot’s main contributions to modern normative ethics is that, along with Anscombe, she helped pioneer a revival of virtue ethics.
2.3 Normative Ethics

One of Foot’s main contributions to modern normative ethics is that, along with Anscombe, she helped pioneer a revival of virtue ethics.
2.3 Normative Ethics

- Her other huge contribution to normative ethics is her use of thought experiments.

- Most significantly, her introduction of the trolley problem.

- The trolley problems is hugely influential not just in academic philosophy but in popular philosophy.
I find Chidi Anagonye's character on The Good Place extremely unrepresentative of academic philosophers generally in that, among other things, he knows the trolley problem comes from a 1967 essay by a woman named Philippa Foot, and he even remembers to credit her by name.
2.3 Normative Ethics

- There are even memes!
2.3 Normative Ethics
Hedonist’s Trolley Problem

The track is heading towards B.

If you pull the lever, it will switch to A but it won’t do the totally sick loop-da-loop.
2.3 Normative Ethics

Nobody is in any danger. You are a professor for moral philosophy. Do you tie people to the rails to save your job?
2.3 Normative Ethics

- What can we actually learn from the trolley problem?

- A lot of philosophers these days heavily criticise these kinds of thought experiments.

- They’re too unlike anything that actually happens in real life, they say.

- But maybe they’re not so far from real life after all.
2.3 Normative Ethics
2.3 Normative Ethics

- Thought experiments like the trolley problem can help us to pinpoint exactly what our ethical intuitions are.

- They can help us isolate one particular issue and think about our own reactions to the problem.

- And then, what principles we can generalise from these cases.

- By thinking about our competing intuitions and principles we can try to come to a state of “reflective equilibrium”. (Rawls!)
Finally, I’ll briefly say something about Foot’s contribution to Applied Ethics.

Applied ethics (sometimes ‘practical ethics’) is the kind of philosophy we do when we try to understand and apply our principles to real-world issues.

Her trolley problem, although it was influential in normative ethics, was something that she wrote about in order to better understand certain issues in applied ethics.
2.4 Applied Ethics

- She wrote on abortion and euthanasia in particular.

- “it takes more to justify an interference than to justify the withholding of goods and service” (Moral Dilemmas)

- So active euthanasia is more difficult to justify than passive euthanasia, on Foot’s view.

- But not impossible to justify! Foot argued that there are certain basic necessities for living a good life. And if someone’s life no longer meets those, it may be justifiable to euthanise them.
Reading

- Much of Foot’s work can be found in short articles. There are two collections of these, both are great!
- The other main thing Foot published was her book Natural Goodness.
- For secondary reading I’d really recommend Philippa Foot’s Moral Thought by John Hacker-Wright.
- He’s also written an article about her recently on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:
- https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philippa-foot/
In conclusion...
(...to PHILIPPA whole course)
Thanks to my classes PI3007/3107

- For helping me come up with some Philippa Foot” based puns.
- Special mention to my student Jamie who came up with “toed the line” “defeat” and “barely had a leg to stand on”, which I didn’t manage to fit in to the slides.

And thank you all for coming to my talk!