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12-28-2010

December 28, 2010: Natural Goodness

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2010). December 28, 2010: Natural Goodness. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/490>

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Title: Natural Goodness

Date: 2010-12-28T16:00:00.002-05:00

12/28/2010--The great moral philosopher Philippa Foot died this year, on October 3. I did not know much about her before reading about her death in the New York Times magazine last Sunday. So much the worse for me, for Foot was quite the hallowed secularist. She argued that moral judgments have a rational basis. Her best-known work was *Natural Goodness*. Reading Foot we can see that there are two questions present in the question often attributed to the evangelist Rick Warren and responded to recently by the humanist Greg Epstein in *Good Without God*: can people be good without a belief in God? (Warren believes no). On one level, this question asks whether people will in fact go on being good without a belief in God? No one knows the answer to that. There has never yet been a genuinely secular society, one without some sort of transcendent reality at its core. This is an issue of social morale. Since we are becoming more secular, we will find out the answer to that question eventually. But there is a much more significant issue in Warren's age-old question. Namely, is there any such thing as "good" without God? Another way of asking that is Nietzsche's description of nihilism: "What does nihilism mean? It means that the higher values have depreciated; that the ends have vanished; that there is no longer any answer to the question, 'What's the use?'" What makes us think that there is any point to being what we used to call Good? What makes us think that certain actions are good and others bad? Without God, why not do anything at all? The universe doesn't care what we do. Foot's great achievement was to describe human vice as a natural defect, not a matter of opinion and not an imposition on the universe of normative judgments the universe lacks that humans make up. She wrote, "I want to show moral evil as 'a kind of natural defect'.

...[T]he fact that a human action or disposition is good of its kind will be taken to be simply a fact about a given feature of a certain kind of living thing." I like Foot because she is so straightforward and there is no smell of Aquinas about her. (I only mean by that, that because she was an atheist, she was apparently not all clutched up about Church teachings on sexual morality. This preoccupation prevents me from really appreciating Alasdair MacIntyre, for example.) I think we are going to appreciate and learn from Foot more and more in the future.