Foot’s “Rationality and Goodness”

I. Rationality and Moral Action (1-4)

A. How do the cases of ‘the moral doubter’ and ‘the Letter Writers’ illustrate the problem of the rationality of acting morally in ‘the tight corner’? (1-3)

B. What are the two instrumentalist conceptions of practical rationality Foot discusses? Why does she believe that if we restrict our understanding of what a rational choice is to these two conceptions, the choice of the Letter Writers cannot be understood to be rational? (3-4)

II. Quinn’s Suggestion (4-8)

A. Why does Quinn believe that we should “count any conception of rationality deficient if an action known to be shameful (like joining the SS) would be tolerated or even recommended by its canons? (4-5)

B. Pro Tanto vs. All-Things-Considered Reasons: “Pro Tanto” basically means “only to that extent.” So a pro tanto reason is a consideration which gives you some reason to do something, but is not final or conclusive, as in “I really enjoy smoking” gives you a reason to continue to smoke, but not a conclusive reason when other reasons against smoking are taken into account (“Smoking increases my likelihood of lung cancer, heart disease, etc.”). An all-things-considered reason is, as the name suggest, a reason for or against some course of action that is regarded as conclusive, as in “All things considered, the health risks of smoking make quitting the only rational thing to do.” (6-8)

I don’t think this part of Foot’s essay is that essential to her main thesis about the rationality of moral action. We’ll discuss it in class only if it naturally emerges as relevant to our conversations.

C. What does Foot mean when she argues that Quinn’s suggestion leads to conceiving the three categories of reason she has been considering (the two instrumentalist conceptions of rationality along with moral reasoning as the third) as having “logically equal status”? (8)

III. Natural Goodness (8-13)

A. What does Foot mean in speaking of the natural goodness of some form of behavior? How does her discussion of the way we can judge how an animal should behave relate to this? (8-9)
B. How does Foot argue that “Good rules, including moral codes, are not mere conventions but things that are needed in human life.” (10-11)

C. How is human “flourishing” different from the ways in which other animals can be said to flourish? What is the relevance of her observation that “human beings act on reasons as animals do not” to her thesis about the natural goodness of moral action? Finally, how do these considerations help her to defend the rationality of the Letter Writers decision? (11-13)