

Towards a Wittgensteinian Metaethics

Dissertation
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Karsten Schoellner

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Introduction

This thesis does not exactly aim to develop a systematic metaethical theory on Wittgensteinian grounds or attribute any such theory to Wittgenstein. He was if anything an anti-systematic and anti-theoretical philosopher who insisted that we should not advance any theses in philosophy. The only legitimate role for the philosopher, according to the *Tractatus*, is to wait until “someone else wanted to say something metaphysical”, and thereupon “to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” (*TLP* 6.53) In the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* he allows that philosophy can also legitimately play the role of “assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (*PU* §127) — reminders of the obvious. “Philosophy simply puts everything before us”, he wrote (*PU* §126); “Philosophy only states what everyone admits” (*PU* §599). I began to develop these considerations about a possible “Wittgensteinian metaethics” when I noticed that many of his remarks on ethics suggest that philosophical theories cannot, in particular, be of any *practical* value to us, and that the idea of a moral theory is something like an oxymoron. He remarked for example to Friedrich Waismann: “Auch wenn die Theorie wahr wäre, würde sie mich nicht interessieren – sie würde nie *das* sein, was ich suche. [...] Wenn ich einem anderen erst durch eine Theorie das Wesen des Ethischen erklären könnte, so hätte das Ethische gar keinen Wert.” (*WWK* 116f.) And Bouwsma’s notes on his conversations with Wittgenstein include the passage:

Now some men may be bewildered and shaken, and may quite sincerely ask: “What is good? What must I do?” But W. hesitated. Would someone in such a case ask for a definition? If he asked for a definition, to what end would he do this? Guidance? How could it guide him? W. pointed out — he worried over this for some time — that in order for it to serve him, it would have to do so as a resolution by which he would come to alter attitudes. [...] Definition of good? What would one do with this?¹

And those moral philosophers who have been most influenced by Wittgenstein have tended to emphasize that a philosophical theory could never authoritatively determine how we should live; Peter Winch writes for example: “Philosophy can no more show a man what he should attach importance to than geometry can show a man where he should stand.”² I assume that the majority of normative theorists and applied ethicists working today would disagree with this; which means, I take it, that they disagree with Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians about the nature of morality and of moral thought, i.e. that we are dealing with a *metaethical* disagreement. In this work I hope to work out a Wittgensteinian metaethical approach, that is: a better understanding of the ways we

¹ Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein: Conversations 1949-1951*, 40.

² Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 191.

speak and think morally. It will not be a theory in the sense that it allows moral thought to be a motley of different forms, and I have tried to restrict myself to criticizing more ambitious theories and assembling reminders of the obvious. It is my hope that this method of assembling reminders and curtailing ambitions can result in a substantial and productive contribution to the project of contemporary metaethics, shared of course by many non-Wittgensteinian philosophers, namely: understanding moral thought and speech. I draw on the available ethical material in Wittgenstein's writings, primarily "A Lecture on Ethics" as well as the remarks we can find in "Lectures on Religious Belief" and scattered throughout *Culture and Value*, his war-time notebooks, the *Tractatus*, etc., but I also turn to the tradition of writing on moral topics under the influence of Wittgenstein, from Peter Winch and Roy Holland and Stanley Cavell through to Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita and Alice Crary and Lars Hertzberg; and I also hope to apply Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical topics generally to the problems of metaethics. The first two chapters are a detailed treatment of "A Lecture on Ethics"; chapters three, four and five articulate the Wittgensteinian tradition of moral writing, focussing largely on Diamond's 1976 article "Eating Meat, Eating People", and bring this into relation to moral expressivism as represented by Blackburn, moral constructivism as represented by Street and Korsgaard, as well as Thompson's neo-Aristotelian naturalism and various forms of non-naturalist realism, including McDowell. A sixth and last chapter addresses various loose ends.

The central "reminder of the obvious" and the recurring motif of this thesis is the *essentially personal* nature of moral thought. Gaita has articulated an aspect of this quite forcefully in writing: "If I must make a moral decision by Monday, I cannot come to you on Friday evening, plead that I have little time over the weekend to think about it and ask you to try to have a solution, or at least a range of options, no later than first thing on Monday morning" — and this, he writes, "condition[s] what we mean by a problem, by a solution and thus by thinking" in the case of moral problems.³ Within philosophical aesthetics this has come to be known as the *autonomy* of judgment⁴: if I have a moral problem, I cannot cede to majority opinion, the way that I can with many empirical questions, without ceasing to treat it as a moral problem — nor are there any moral experts I can consult or archives of moral knowledge where I can look up the solution, nor could there be any. Gaita elucidates another aspect of the essentially personal nature of morality when he goes on to suggest that there are no proprietary methods or procedures available in moral deliberation. People with a range of different characters and different visions of life who desire quite different things can

³Gaita, "The personal in ethics", 129.

⁴ See e.g. Hopkins, "Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgment".

all sign up for a degree program in chemistry, be trained in the essentially impersonal methods of investigation in chemistry, and without having to change themselves in any substantial way can be entrusted to set to work using these methods and produce results that can then (once sufficiently verified by other chemists, using the same essentially impersonal methods) be archived and consulted as information. This is not true of moral thought. As Cavell writes: “To say a dispute is about a matter of fact is exactly to say that there are certain ways of settling it. Just as, to say that something is a *fact* is to say that it can be or has been discovered in certain ways. To say that *other* sorts of disputes (for example, moral ones) cannot be settled in *such* ways [...] is a point of grammar.”⁵ Moreover the autonomy of moral judgment and the lack of any impersonal methods and procedures seem less like odd and puzzling features of moral judgment if we see them in light of the relation of moral judgment to the self, and this is not a point that has gone unnoticed in mainstream, non-Wittgensteinian metaethics. Expressivists such as Blackburn, for example, claim that moral judgments are the expressions of our sentiments. If to make a moral judgment is to feel a certain way, this explains why no-one else can make my judgments for me and I cannot fall back upon any impersonal procedures to address my moral questions. Constructivists like Korsgaard have argued that moral judgments express our “practical identity” or sense of self, a point echoed by Lovibond’s explicitly Wittgensteinian approach.⁶ McDowell has argued that moral judgments are only possible for those whose wills have the corresponding “non-formal shape” and who have a capacity for certain pleasures.⁷ Within the Wittgensteinian tradition, Winch has focused on judgments of what he calls moral impossibility or moral necessity — where I find e.g. that I *cannot* leave the wounded man by the side of the road, I *must* stop to help him — and argued that these judgments are a function of what a person can will.⁸ (This does not mean that they are matters of *decision*; what I can will is not itself alterable at will.) And Diamond has written that certain moral questions call on “capacities which are not narrowly intellectual, but neither are they a matter of mere ‘feeling’”, that demand “a responsiveness involving the whole mind.”⁹ In her writings on our relations to animals she argues for a view of animals that cannot be reduced to a set of theses supported by theoretical argument, but rather “depends on our coming to attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties”.¹⁰ We have seen that Wittgenstein felt that a definition of “good”, to be at all morally serviceable, would have to be “a resolution by which he would come to alter attitudes”. In a journal entry he wrote:

⁵ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 296.

⁶ See section 5.3.

⁷ See section 5.5.

⁸ See Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, 158-60.

⁹ Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts”, 274f.

¹⁰ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 296.

Ein ethischer Satz ist aber eine persönliche Handlung. Keine Konstatierung einer Tatsache. Wie ein Ausruf der Bewunderung. Bedenke doch daß die Begründung des "ethischen Satzes" nur versucht den Satz auf einere zurückzuführen die Dir einen Eindruck machen. Hast du am Schluß keinen Abscheu vor diesem & keine Bewunderung für jenes so gibt es keine Begründung die diesen Namen verdiente. (DB 43f.)

The essentially personal nature of moral judgment does not imply that I can only judge what *I* can do. But if we fully acknowledge this point, it should make judgments of moral impossibility and moral necessity — of what I must or cannot do, how I must or cannot see matters, etc. — more central cases. Moreover, it will affect our view of what we are doing when we judge others and when we make universally prescriptive judgments, and it will have repercussions for the type of objectivity we can hope to achieve. (Some people distinguish between "ethics" as that which pertains to the question of how I should live or how some community should live, and "morality" as e.g. the narrower realm of strict obligations, duties and rights.¹¹ In this thesis I have used the terms synonymously, but borrowing this distinction for a moment I could say: ethics and morals are both essentially personal as I understand them, and this does not necessarily undermine the ideas of morality, but it might undermine any priority or necessity that morality might be thought to have.) Another motif of this thesis is that objectivity in moral thought might not reach all the way to a determination of universal principles of conduct, that, in Cavell's words, moral thought involves "modes of argument whose characteristic feature is exactly that they can secure the rationality of both protagonists in the absence of agreement about a conclusion."¹² A related motif is that insofar as we can speak of moral thought being an investigation of 'reality' and aiming at 'truth', it will not necessarily aim at a set of propositions or make use of propositions, and so we cannot understanding the moral notion of 'reality' in terms of facts or the moral notion of 'truth' as a property of propositions.

The critical portion of this thesis focuses on Blackburn, Korsgaard, Thompson and McDowell — moral philosophers who are to varying degrees outside the Wittgensteinian tradition, who have all acknowledged what I call the essentially personal nature of morality but who, as I argue, tend to forget it or overlook it at various points in their writings. Korsgaard and Thompson lose track of the personal nature of moral thought in their efforts to provide a foundation for the objectivity and truth of moral judgments in their separate ways — in our practical identity as rational agents, or in our human life-form; and McDowell is led astray by his desire to persuade us that what he calls "second

¹¹ See e.g. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

¹² Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 263.

nature” can, if everything goes as he hopes, objectively determine our conduct. Moreover all four of these philosophers have neglected to ask what modes of thought and speech are appropriate to an essentially personal problem. If we say that moral judgments have some expressive relation to the will, as all these philosophers could be said to acknowledge in a rough sense, then it might seem that a *theory* is not the sort of thing that is likely to change my will or to change “what I can will”, or is at least not the most suitable device. If moral thought is essentially personal, then the idea that it consists of deductive arguments to moral propositions loses much of its appeal, and it will not be surprising if essentially literary modes of speech play a greater role in our thought. If we see objectivity and truth in morals as an ongoing problem of our moral life not amenable to any theoretical solution once and for all, as I argue here, and if we take a more realistic view of the variety of figures of thought and speech that can guide us morally, it should be possible to “turn the investigation around the axis of our real need” (*PU* §108).

Any Wittgensteinian approach to anything will have to think hard about the choice of examples, above all avoiding a “one-sided diet” (*PU* §593) and resisting our philosophical prejudices about what *must* be case in advance of looking at what we actually say and think. I argue in this thesis that we should turn away from the sorts of examples typically used in moral philosophy, such as “You shouldn’t murder innocent people”, “It is wrong to torture a baby”, “Pleasure is good”, etc. — since it seems to me that we never say or think these things outside of philosophy. I have not tried to define morality or precisely delineate moral thought, but we might suppose as a rough necessary condition that any utterance recognizable as moral must be capable of guiding me or even changing how I live; and none of these examples would ever change how someone lives. The ‘thin’ moral terms that are still the focus of analytic metaethics, such as *should*, *ought*, *right*, *wrong*, *good*, etc., are for the most part used non-morally, and are seldom used morally, and when they are used in moral contexts it is most often when someone is *moralizing* before an audience; people with a real relationship sincerely discussing a moral question that affects one of them will almost never use these terms. Moralism is an important part of our moral life, so to call these terms moralistic is not to place them outside of what a metaethical investigation is supposed to investigate; but it makes the central place given these terms in metaethics morally questionable and metaethically misleading. Moreover I contend that if we are realistic we will also see that our choice of examples has been biased by our sense that questions of action are central, that ethical thought essentially involves deciding between two courses of action. Iris Murdoch points out, in a passage that has been well received by writers in the Wittgensteinian tradition (above all Winch and Diamond) and is agreeable to Wittgenstein’s own approach to moral questions, that when it comes to a decision between concrete alternatives, “the chips are down” and there is not much left to think — the bulk

of moral thought, the “prior work of attention” that structures the situation, occurs throughout the ordinary course of our lives in our coming to reflect upon our life in various ways and in, for example, coming to a deeper understanding of our concepts.¹³ Ignoring moral thought outside of decision contexts has led to the diet of ‘thin’ examples in moral philosophy, like “torturing babies is wrong”; we are left with examples of moral utterances that say almost nothing because we are looking at contexts in which there is almost nothing left to think. — It can be difficult to come up with any other *sorts* of example of moral utterance. When two people are discussing a moral problem one of them faces, most of what they say will involve characterizing the situation in various ways, characterizing the motives in various ways, characterizing possible courses of action in various ways, and asking themselves e.g. what they really want or what they can answer for; and for the most part they will use just whatever language suggests itself. Their discussion will not necessarily use any particularly moral vocabulary or rely on any particular syntactic structures, and they might say nothing that could be taken out of the total context and presented as a moral utterance. People can also be guided by things that are irreducible to any particular sentence or set of sentences, such as experiences of various kinds, including experiences of works of art. Here I have chosen to look mostly at the concepts, turns of phrase and sentences offered as examples by Wittgenstein and by the writers in the Wittgensteinian tradition, e.g. Wittgenstein’s own example *par excellence* from the “Lecture on Ethics” of seeing the world as a miracle, Diamond’s idea of animals as “fellow creatures”, or Winch’s example: “An innocent man cannot be punished”.

I have found that simply changing the sorts of example we investigate can be productive for many of the questions and problems of contemporary metaethics, even apart from any Wittgensteinian considerations — that attending to more realistic examples of moral expressions can bring out the insights of the various extant metaethical theories as well as their limitations. When we are all looking at a sentence like “It is wrong to torture a baby”, trying to find some indication that points us towards either expressivism or realism, for example, it is unsurprising that the debate becomes intractable. Because the sentence says very little, we are reduced to speculating about what is going on ‘under the hood’, so to speak, whether it expresses a belief-like state or a desire-like state. When we turn to more illuminating examples — that is, examples of things people say that are actually morally illuminating, that make sense of our experience — there is no longer any need to speculate; nothing is hidden. When someone says “an innocent man cannot be punished”, which Winch discusses, we can see how this expresses what Winch calls a possible attitude to ‘life’s

¹³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 35-8.

afflictions”¹⁴; and similar examples can show us in what sense exactly moral utterances can be said to ‘express attitudes’. Wittgenstein’s expression of his own moral view, at least in the early years — that he *sees the world as a miracle* — shows us a way of understanding the expressivist insight that moral thought often involves an essentially personal response that goes beyond *any and all facts*, that is completely disconnected from how the world is. But these examples also show us how limited expressivism is as an explanation of moral thought if we understand the ‘attitudes’ expressed by moral judgments to be *sentiments* or *emotions*, or any discrete mental items. These examples vindicate realism in a sense, since they clearly involve a way of thinking about the world and conceiving the world and are not reducible to bare emotional responses. Similarly we can bring out the real insight behind the forms of constructivism or naturalism that appeal centrally to *the human form of life* or to *what we do* as a species by turning to examples of moral expression that show us how this appeal works in practice — how we appeal to shared practices in saying e.g. “we don’t treat people like that”, how we appeal to our shared human life in saying that “death comes for us all” or that we all share the same human fragility, and how we appeal to images of humanity in coming to understand our lives as a whole, whether as children of God or rational apes; but these examples also show us that the human life-form, *as* we appeal to it in moral reflection, cannot be understood biologically or as any kind of neutrally available foundation for moral judgments — that the reflection on the human life-form in *this* moral sense is an essentially personal effort. I have not tried to locate *the* form of moral judgments here. It will be fine if moral reflection is a motley comprising various but related forms. However here I have focussed on essentially two sorts of moral utterance, or rather two ways of understanding moral utterances — as the expression of *attitudes* and as the expression of our *form of life* — and argue that we can avoid a great number of metaethical problems if we borrow the understanding of the terms *attitude* and *form of life* found in the Wittgensteinian tradition.

This thesis begins with an examination of Wittgenstein’s “A Lecture on Ethics”, as it is his only straightforward and explicit treatment of ethics intended for the public. In the first chapter I discuss the lecture under the aspect of its attack on moral realism; I read this as a version of the “Open Question” argument famously articulated by Moore, and show that the limits and strengths of the argument are clearer in Wittgenstein’s treatment than in Moore’s original discussion or in the more recent literature. It is crucial for Wittgenstein that the Open Question argument can only be posed from the first-person standpoint and aims to explicate a distinction we already operate with implicitly within our own moral reasoning, or that at the very least *he* already operates with. He

¹⁴ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 197-200; see here 2.3.3 and 3.3.

essentially wishes to show us that no matter how complete we might imagine our factual knowledge to be, this totality of facts would pose certain questions to us — one “open” question is *what to do* about the facts, but the more central question for Wittgenstein is *how things matter* or *what they mean*. Hence Wittgenstein’s fact/value distinction resembles Gaita’s distinction between the *realm of facts* and the *realm of meaning*.¹⁵ By hewing closer to the question of meaning and significance we can see that the idea of “open questions”, of tasks that the facts set us and do not resolve for us, relates to what I call our moral creativity: namely that for any fact I can imagine coherent and intelligible attitudes that would make a different or surprising moral significance out of that fact. The greatest obstacle for this Open Question argument is *non-naturalist realism*, which can hold that there are *sui generis* facts about how things matter. The non-natural realist can agree that all the non-moral facts leave us with a question of how those facts matter, but can insist that the facts of *how things matter* obviously close the question of how things matter. In a discussion of Moore’s *Principia Ethica* I show that if these alleged moral facts are meant to underlie and justify our practice of moral judgment, the idea is incoherent as an account of moral reasoning. More contemporary versions of non-naturalist realism tend to argue the other way: they do not appeal to moral facts to justify our practices of moral judgment, but rather appeal to our practices of moral judgment to justify the notion of moral facts, claiming that the standards and resources we have in the “domain” of moral thought are, or can be, robust and determinate enough to lead us to specific answers to our moral questions, which could then, on a deflationary understanding of “facts”, be considered moral facts. I argue that at the very least there is still room here for a fact/value distinction as a distinction between modes of reasoning that are controlled by facts and modes of reasoning that are otherwise constrained, where facts can at best fall out at the end. This is essentially the anti-realist line taken by contemporary philosophers like Blackburn and Korsgaard, who wish to deny that the talk of “moral facts” can in any way explain or justify our moral judgments, even if at the end of the day our settled moral judgments could be expressed in terms of moral facts. But here again an awareness of our *moral creativity* suggests that we do not have the resources within moral thought to speak with full confidence about moral facts. If we cannot appeal to our “intuitions” of independent moral facts to justify our moral judgments, as I argue, and if there are no procedures or methods of moral thought that could not themselves be morally questioned, and if consensus does not have the authority over moral questions that it has in e.g. questions of semantic meaning, then a look at our practice of moral thought will suggest that moral facts do not fall out of an account of our moral reasoning for the most part. This is not to deny that there *is* moral reasoning; and chapters three and four aim to show how moral reasoning can work within the

¹⁵ See Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog*, 95-103.

confines established by the Lecture on Ethics. Moreover this first chapter sets the terms for a closer look at non-naturalist realism in chapter five. — It is worth noting that Wittgenstein’s own first-order moral views, or at least those he held at the time of his early work, also play a role within the Open Question argument. His own moral attitude that everything can be seen as a miracle — which I argue is in fact part of the Christian mystical tradition — seems to be an attitude of attributing no privileged significance to *any* fact. As Meister Eckhart wrote, “wenn ein Ding sie freuen kann und ein anderes sie betrüben, dann sind sie nicht gerecht.”¹⁶ Hence Wittgenstein is *morally* opposed to taking facts to have fixed moral significances; this is itself a kind of *moral* argument against at least certain forms of moral realism; and the intelligibility of this attitude alongside others supports the metaethical argument against realism.

Chapter two discusses what I call the “nonsensicality thesis” in the lecture, namely the claim that all ethical expressions are essentially nonsensical. In recent decades there has been a heated debate within the literature on Wittgenstein concerning his use of “nonsense” as a term of philosophical criticism, particularly in the *Tractatus*, with some readers holding that “nonsense” functions as a technical term marking the failure of certain sentences to reach some formal criterion of “sense” — for example, bipolarity — such that we would first have to understand the sentence well enough to assess whether it fulfills that criterion before calling it nonsense, while others insist that “nonsense” for Wittgenstein simply means that an utterance means nothing, that the speaker has failed to give a meaning to their words. I do not enter into the debate about how to read the *Tractatus*, but I suggest that the use of “nonsense” as a term of criticism in philosophy is only interesting and worth saving if we can understand it in the latter, so-called “austere” sense. This chapter then seeks to understand why one might think that all ethical expressions essentially say nothing. I criticize the efforts of some readers, particularly Diamond and Donatelli, to simultaneously uphold the austere view of nonsense and Wittgenstein’s nonsensicality thesis; I argue that if people can manage to live by certain ethical thoughts and utterances — which is the only thing that would make them recognizably ethical — then these thoughts and utterances must have a use and therefore also have a sense, at least on late Wittgensteinian views of language. However, while I hope to show that the nonsensicality thesis is an error of early Wittgenstein’s that does not come up in his later work, nonetheless it is important to see what speaks in favor of the nonsensicality thesis, as it is not entirely wrong and sheds some light on moral thought. Firstly, Wittgenstein’s own examples of moral utterances in the lecture — for example “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “nothing can harm me” — seem like they must be nonsense, as they seem to be predicating

¹⁶ Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten*, 37.

something of everything in a way that undermines any assignation of meaning to the predicate. (If everything is special, nothing is special.) Here I turn to some of Wittgenstein's later remarks to show how we can make sense of these mystical expressions, though the way they make sense depends on their pretense of being self-undermining propositions; as one might say, we need to see their nonsense in order to see their sense. Secondly, I look at the use of 'thin' moral terms in utterances such as "you ought to do this", "this is just wrong", "torture is bad" etc. Wittgenstein argues in the lecture that the moral or 'absolute' use of "bad", for example, is parasitic upon an empirical and non-moral use of "bad", but abstracts from the criteria that can give the word a meaningful empirical use; thus we end up meaning nothing. In this chapter I suggest that we look at the circumstances in which we are inclined to speak absolutely with such 'thin' terms. Typically it happens when we have advanced more substantial and sensible considerations — e.g., when you act this way, you are hurting this person's dignity, and they will feel bad about themselves and might take it out on someone else, etc. — and these more substantial considerations have failed to move the other. It is at these moments, when we have run out of things to say but feel that we must say *something*, that we start to say empty things: but it's just wrong, you just shouldn't do it, etc. Hence an empty and moralistic use of 'thin' terms arises quite naturally out of our moral practice, in response to our moral needs; a tendency towards nonsense is inherent in moral expression. But moral reasoning is still possible, though not just any conceivable agents will be able to reason together; people who share enough "attunement" will be able to speak to each other morally and sensibly, in fact their moral speech will essentially be the attempt to make sense of certain situations and of their lives as a whole.

The third and fourth chapter take up this topic of how we can speak to each other morally and reason among ourselves; and here I leave Wittgenstein's writing behind for the most part, as it is largely destructive, and focus on others in the tradition who have done more constructive work within these parameters. The third chapter is an examination of Diamond's 1976 paper "Eating Meat, Eating People". Diamond argues against animal ethicists such as Singer and Regan who try to locate reasons why it is wrong to kill and eat humans (our rationality, our sentience, our capacity for pain, etc.) and to then show that these reasons also apply to the animal world in part and thus justify treating at least some animals somewhat analogously to humans. Diamond argues that this strategy radically misconceives the nature of our moral life: there is no *reason* why we do not generally kill and eat one another. Certain facets of the human form of life — such as our not eating each other — have to be given in order for us to have our moral sense of what it is to be human and how humans are appropriately treated. However she makes it clear that she is not guided by a biological notion of humanity so much as by what we have *made* of our humanity together. I discuss this aspect of her

writing under the label “Wittgensteinian constructivism”, showing how it is rooted in Wittgensteinian considerations and how it at the same time shares central aims and insights of the constructivist tradition in metaethics while bypassing the more prominent criticisms of constructivism. However, the case of animals also seems to show the limitations of this appeal to the human life form, since Diamond is ultimately concerned to argue against eating meat, and we are in fact a meat-eating species. In her paper, as I read her, Diamond pivots at this point to a different source of moral significance, arguing that poetic speech and the poetic imagination can transform our relations to the animal world. I discuss this aspect of her work under the label “Wittgensteinian expressivism”, showing how it is similarly rooted in Wittgensteinian considerations and brings out the strength of the expressivist emphasis on personal response and the distinction between facts and “attitudes” to the facts; I try to show that by replacing the emotivist notion of “attitude” by the notion of “attitude” operative in the Wittgensteinian tradition, we can fashion an expressivist metaethics that better withstands the standard criticisms of expressivism. At the close of this chapter I suggest that when we understand the terms “life-form” and “attitude” properly, what I have called “Wittgensteinian constructivism” and “Wittgensteinian expressivism” can be seen to shade into each other, rather than representing two clearly distinct approaches.

The fourth chapter, a critique of Michael Thompson’s moral philosophy, essentially continues and deepens the same line of thought. Thompson hopes to make the concept “human” “safe for practical philosophy”¹⁷ by comparing moral judgments to what he calls “natural-historical judgments” about other species, for example jellyfish. This would make moral judgments capable of being factual and objective in a quite unproblematic way. At the same time Thompson wishes to maintain the essentially personal nature of moral judgment; he does not wish to conclude that biologists or anthropologists are moral experts. Hence he argues that all natural-historical judgments have a unique logical form, with a unique generality, and that in our own case we have a non-empirical, purely reflective access to the natural-historical facts of our own life-form. I argue that he compromises the essentially personal nature of moral thought through the analogy to natural-historical judgments about other animals. Judgments about *what is human* in a *moral* sense have a distinct logical form and a distinct form of generality than natural-historical judgments or any other empirical judgments, such that their truth-value remains problematical. Proceeding again from the work of Diamond and Gaita I argue that we can only understand the appeal to the human life-form as a moral resource (rather than a moral foundation) when we strictly distinguish it from the biological notion of the human; that “the human”, insofar as it has moral force, is an “essentially

¹⁷ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 7.

contested” concept and is accessible *only* through the individual exercise of imagination and feeling.

The fifth chapter turns to the work of McDowell and Lovibond, who are associated with a Wittgensteinian species of realism based on the idea of a “second nature”, as well as non-natural realists outside the Wittgensteinian tradition such as Scanlon and Nagel. These realists all argue roughly along lines that should be amenable to Wittgensteinian metaethics, namely that moral practice must ‘take care of itself’ without any metaphysical presuppositions — that in fact there could not be any metaphysical or epistemological obstacles to moral truth — and that realism in the “domain” of moral thought hinges simply and entirely on whether we have the resources within that domain to explain how moral thought on its own can converge on determinate answers to our moral questions. The difference between the writers in the tradition I articulate here — including Wittgenstein, Winch, and Diamond, for example — and this sort of realism depends on what we see when we look at first-order moral thought, whether we see endless room for improvisation or clear paths leading ineluctably to specific conclusions. I begin by examining the largely overlapping critiques of Lovibond’s realism advanced by Blackburn and Diamond, and argue that her notion of objectivity, with its appeal to communal standards, is inadequate to moral thought. I also criticize the notion that ‘thick’ moral terms offer any kind of evidence in favor of moral realism, even if we concede the “inseparability thesis”, i.e. the thesis that these terms cannot be understood in terms of an evaluative response to some non-evaluatively describable region of fact; a fact/value distinction can survive the “inseparability thesis” and is in fact implied by it. A large section of this chapter is devoted to McDowell’s moral writings. I offer a reading of McDowell as a kind of expressivist who avoids Blackburn’s psychologism, and who acknowledges the essentially personal nature in realist terms by arguing that a person’s conception of value is a perception-like cognitive state that presupposes an involvement of the will and desire as background conditions. I then show how McDowell’s notion of objectivity is skewed by his hope that it must reach all the way to a unique determination of action, such that if two people respond differently, they *must* have different conceptions and one of them *must* be “missing” something that is there to be seen; and I argue that his eagerness to show moral thought to be objective *in the same way* as any other domain of thought leads him to write against the insights of his own “sensitivity theory” and to lose track of the essential personality of moral thought. Finally I examine the ways that Scanlon and Wiggins have tried to show that first-order moral thought is able to compel rational convergence, and argue that we have reason to be less optimistic than they suppose.

The sixth and final chapter ties up the remaining loose ends. Since I deny that some moral

statements that look propositional actually are, and deny at various points in the thesis that we must be wedded to a notion of propositional truth in moral thought, I turn here to the problem of truth-valuedness and the “Frege-Geach problem” for expressivism, hoping to show that Wittgensteinians do not need to deny anything that we would otherwise want to acknowledge. Since I write that the hopes of non-natural realists are exaggerated and emphasize the personal nature of moral thought, one might think I end up with some sort of relativism; hence in this chapter I hope to show to what extent a person could, on the view I develop here, legitimately assert universal prescriptions. Finally I turn to the role of argument and the role of more literary modes of thought and speech in morals, hoping to show to what extent there is a grain of truth in the roughly Wittgensteinian ideas that moral theory is something of an oxymoron and that moral argument and attempts at theoretical justification are a way of evading our moral problems.

1 The Open Question argument and the fact/value distinction in “A Lecture on Ethics”

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I establish the precise nature of the fact/value distinction that figures centrally in Wittgenstein’s early work, and particularly of course in his remarks on value. The distinction is inextricably linked with an argumentative tactic that I construe as a version of the famous Open Question argument deriving from Moore; clarifying this argument, as Wittgenstein uses it, is essential to clarifying the fact/value distinction itself. I hope by the end of this chapter to have worked out a version of the Open Question argument that differs quite markedly from Moore’s own version but that brings out the appeal of the argument for Moore himself and for the anti-realist tradition that has adopted it. I focus on Wittgenstein’s 1929 “A Lecture on Ethics”, as it is his only explicitly ethical work with the possible exception of the *Tractatus*. Many of the thoughts in the Lecture are found in the *Tractatus* and his war-time notebooks, but the Lecture has the advantages of being a finished work written without the use of any ironic devices. It was a talk given to the Heretics Society in Cambridge, a general audience with no specialization in philosophy; and though he was known as a philosopher of logic, Wittgenstein decided not to “misuse” the audience by speaking about anything technical, speaking instead about something “of general importance”, namely ethics, in the hope “that it may clear up your thoughts about the subject”. (PO 37) Hence the Lecture is likely the most straightforward communication of his considered views at the time.

Wittgenstein begins the Lecture by trying to circumscribe the ethical through a list of questions: what is good, what is valuable, what is really important, what is the meaning of life, what makes life worth living, what is the right way of living. However, he immediately notes that these expressions are not ethical independent of context; they all have a “trivial or relative sense” and an “ethical or absolute sense” (PO 38). In their relative use these terms can all be exchanged for a set of factual terms: “if I say that it is important for me not to catch cold I mean that catching a cold produces certain describable disturbances in my life and if I say that this is the right road I mean that it’s the right road relative to a certain goal.” (PO 38) Hence “[e]very judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value”. When these same terms – right, important, good, etc. – are used in ways irreducible to any statements of fact, they are judgments of absolute value: “no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value.” (PO 39) Ethical value is characterized by the way it goes beyond the facts.

Though Wittgenstein calls this “obvious”, he does present natural-language evidence for some sort of categorical distinction in the form of two dialogues:

- 1) A (observing Wittgenstein play tennis): Well, you play pretty badly.
B: I know, I’m playing badly but I don’t want to play any better.
A: Ah then that’s all right.
.
- 2) A: (observing Wittgenstein tell a preposterous lie): You’re behaving like a beast.
B: I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better.
~~A: Ah, then that’s all right.~~
A: Well, you ought to want to behave better.

In 1), the evaluative term *playing badly* is being used non-ethically; not only would ‘playing badly’ be easily explicable as a set of facts (such as missing shots, losing games, swinging with improper form, etc.) its relevance is conditional on another fact: a desire on B’s part to play better. When B denies this fact, the first factual statement is no longer relevant. If A had given some advice of the form “you ought to hold the racket differently”, this ought-statement would in a sense be refuted by B’s response. In 2) A continues to insist on his evaluative judgment; he asserts the ought-statement unconditionally and independently of the facts of B’s mental life. This is what marks it as a value judgment in contrast to the remark in 1). Wittgenstein’s thesis goes beyond the evidence of these dialogues, however, for he contends, not just that the psychological facts of the speaker or the addressee leave the question of value open, but that any and all facts do, as all facts “stand on the same level” (*PO* 40), and no statement of fact could capture what he means by his absolute value judgments.

In an influential article, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton cite Wittgenstein’s Lecture as an instance of Moore’s famous Open Question argument. Since Moore’s own formulations are widely held to be confused, flawed and ambiguous — Moore himself spoke of “a mass of confusions”¹⁸ in his original exposition — I will begin with the reconstruction offered by Darwall, Gibbard and Railton; they call the Open Question

not a proof of a fallacy, but rather an argumentative device that implicitly but effectively brings to the fore

¹⁸ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 3.

certain characteristic features of ‘good’ – and of other normative vocabulary – that seem to stand in the way of our accepting any known naturalistic or metaphysical definition as unquestionably right, as definitions, at least when fully understood, seemingly should be. [...] One asks of any purported account identifying some descriptive property or state P as the meaning of ‘good’ whether on careful reflection we do not in fact find that we understand the question “Is P really good?” If this question is intelligible—even, it seems, to those who hold that having or being P is a good thing (perhaps the only good thing) and who are moved to give nonlinguistic reasons in defense of a positive answer to the question—then, absent some further story, P could hardly be just what we mean by ‘good’.¹⁹

Wittgenstein hopes to elicit our agreement that what we mean by any description of any fact or state of affairs is not yet what we mean if we declare it to be absolutely good or bad, or when we speak about it absolutely (that is, ethically) at all. Where Moore uses the intelligibility of the question “Is x really good”, Wittgenstein could be said to use the intelligibility of various responses to any and all facts — say, either responding with a proper value judgment, “this ought not to be”, or saying “ah then that’s allright.” That is, for any purported identification of x state of affairs with the ethical – that which is desired, or brings pleasure, or is in conformity to Nature or the will of God -- we could imagine a dialogue like the above:

- 3) A: That’s not x.
 B: I don’t care to x.
 A: Ah then that’s all right.

and the intelligibility of this continuation shows that the first judgment can easily lack what essentially characterizes the ethical. We find ourselves perfectly capable of meaning any factual report “That’s x” or “That’s not x” in such a way that nothing ethical follows from it. When we do speak ethically, we have meant something different — in Moore’s terms, we are in a different “state of mind”²⁰.

Darwall et al. quote Wittgenstein’s conclusion that “no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value” (PO 44) and they write in summary: “Description, he [Wittgenstein] concludes, could not be the essential semantic role of a vocabulary with action-guidingness built into it.”²¹ This is a distortion of Wittgenstein’s conclusion in two respects. In supposing Wittgenstein to be investigating the semantic role of a particular “vocabulary” they have

¹⁹ Darwall et al., “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics”, 116.

²⁰ See Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 17.

²¹ Darwall et al., “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics”, 119.

ignored Wittgenstein's insistence that it is not any particular form of words that coincides with the ethical, but a particular use. In speaking of "action-guidingness" moreover they are mischaracterizing what is exactly is left open by all facts. The next two sections take up these two points respectively.

1.2 Ethical vocabulary

Wittgenstein makes it quite clear that he doesn't care about the word "good" itself but rather the absolute use of that word. In his "Lectures on Aesthetics" he criticizes Moore on this point: "If I had to say what is the main mistake made by philosophers of the present generation, including Moore, I would say that it is that when language is looked at, what is looked at is a form of words and not the use made of the form of words." (LC 2) In his "Lecture on Ethics" he begins with an open-ended list of terms, including good, right, important, etc., but every one of these might be used non-ethically; and a moral utterance might not use any term with any recognizably standard ethical use. Though he begins the Lecture with the example "you ought to want to behave better", he eventually introduces as his example *par excellence* of absolute value the expression "how extraordinary that anything should exist", i.e. "the world is a miracle". (PO 41-3).

We could understand this as the application of the Fregean "context principle": "Nach der Bedeutung der Wörter muß im Satzzusammenhange, nicht in ihrer Vereinzelung gefragt werden"²² — a principle repeated in the *Tractatus*, for example 3.3 and 3.314. In "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use" James Conant has argued that late Wittgenstein works with a deeper understanding of this context principle:

Wittgenstein, in his later work, still takes Frege to be on to an important point when he teaches us that we end up looking for the meaning of a bit of language in the realm of the psychological when we detach the bit of language from its context of use and yet persist in asking: what does 'it' mean? But he seeks to generalize Frege's context-principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use, or — as Wittgenstein prefers to call them — language-games).²³

In fact in the section of his "Lectures on Aesthetics" quoted above, Wittgenstein writes: "It is the game it [the word] appears in, not the form of words." (LC 2) Conant argues that this deeper

²² Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, 23.

²³ Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use", 233.

understanding of the context principle is already implicitly present in some of Frege's remarks and in the *Tractatus* as well, for example in §3.326: "In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the context of significant use". Hence it is tempting to think that in freeing himself of the focus on allegedly ethical vocabulary, Wittgenstein is simply applying this context principle.

In fact the context principle by itself does not take us very far. It applies globally to all judgments, and hence it applies to biological judgments as well as ethical ones, and yet biology could be said to have something like a proprietary vocabulary.²⁴ It is better to say that when we *apply* the context principle in ethical philosophy — that is, when we pay careful attention to the actual contexts of recognizably ethical thought and discourse — we will find that there are no words that in their primary function are used exclusively in ethical utterances (no technical terms), there are no words that are necessarily used in ethical utterances, and moreover there are not even any words that are used typically in ethical utterances. But this is something we find when we look to contexts of ethical discourse, not an implication of the context principle itself. Wittgenstein begins his "Lectures on Aesthetics" by noting: "It is remarkable that in real life, when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'fine', etc., play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: 'Look at this transition', or [...] 'The passage here in incoherent'. Or you say, in a poetic criticism [...] 'His use of images is precise'." (LC 3; see also LC 11) He does not make any similar announcement at the opening of his "Lecture on Ethics", but the Lecture subtly establishes the same point. He begins marking off the ethical through a list of terms such as *good*, *right*, etc., but argues that their ethical or absolute use is parasitic upon their more normal, established use (I say more about this in the next chapter); and his own personal examples of absolute value make absolute use of *extraordinary*, *miracle*, *safe*, etc. By the time he confessed to his own temptation to say that "the existence of language itself" is the proper expression of his own ethical sense that the world is a miracle, he has moved far away from any orientation to specifically ethical vocabulary. And in fact it seems to me that the word "good" rarely occurs in any actual ethical debate — and in general the 'thin' ethical terms such as *good* and *ought* and *right* tend to come up frequently when people are moralizing in public but only rarely when people with a real relationship to each other are seriously discussing a moral problem in their lives. The word 'good' is in fact typically used non-morally to denote pleasure or usefulness; as

²⁴ The word "meiosis" is a technical term in biology. The context principle tells us that the presence of this word in a sentence does not *automatically* make the sentence about something biological; but nonetheless we can say that "meiosis" is essentially a biological term, and if there are no terms that are essentially ethical in this sense, this is an interesting fact about ethical discourse *in particular*.

Wittgenstein notes in the “Lectures on Aesthetics”, “[a] child generally applies a word like ‘good’ first to food”, as a kind of interjection. (LC 2) Throughout his life Wittgenstein discussed ethics almost exclusively in terms of either religious symbolism or literary works,²⁵ rather than relying on the sort of propositions typically offered in moral philosophy, such as: one ought not to cause needless suffering; and of course he saw the *Tractatus* itself as an ethical work, the ethical sense of which comes out not in its seemingly ethical propositions in the 6.4s but in its unwritten half.²⁶

This has been emphasized by many so-called ‘resolute’ readers of Wittgenstein under the heading of Wittgenstein’s “non-departmental conception of ethics” — most prominently James Conant, Cora Diamond, and Piergiorgio Donatelli.²⁷ The non-departmental conception they argue for can be divided into two aspects, which these authors do not distinguish as helpfully as they might: 1) that ethics, like logic, is not thought about some domain of reality alongside others, but rather pervades our thought about reality as a whole, that logic and ethics are “each, and each differently, concerned with a pervasive dimension of human thought and action”²⁸; and 2) that there is no semantic or syntactic marker of the ethical – that it has no characteristic vocabulary or form.²⁹ The former

²⁵ In the Lecture he translates his three personal examples of absolute value into theological language: “God had created the world”, “we feel safe in the hands of God” and “God disapproves of our conduct”. (PO 42). Moore’s description of Wittgenstein’s discussion of ethics in his lectures in the early 1930s is characteristic: “He concluded [...] by a long discussion which he introduced by saying ‘I have always wanted to say something about the grammar of ethical expressions, or e.g. of the word ‘God’’. But in fact he said very little about the grammar of such words as ‘God’, and very little also about that of ethical expressions. What he did deal with at length was not Ethics but Aesthetics, saying, however, ‘Practically everything which I say about ‘beautiful’ applies in a slightly different way to ‘good’. His discussion of Aesthetics, however, was mingled in a curious way with criticism of assumptions which he said were constantly made by Frazer in the ‘Golden Bough’, and also with criticism of Freud.” (PO 103) He held up Tolstoy’s novel *Hadji Murat* as an excellent example of moral teaching, in contrast to Tolstoy’s more explicit moral teaching; see for example Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 95-8.

²⁶ See his letter to the publisher von Ficker in *Prototractatus* 15

²⁷ See Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is Not”; Donatelli, “The Problem of ‘The Higher’”; Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics” and “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”. See also Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 39-48.

²⁸ Conant, “On Going the Bloody *Hard* Way”, 87.

²⁹ In explicating the non-departmental conception, Diamond, Conant, Donatelli, as well as Mulhall (“Ethics in Light of Wittgenstein”) and Crary sometimes wander into formulations that suggest that literally *everything* is ethical, or that suggest that ‘ethics pervades all language’ in the sense that every linguistic act is an ethical one. But of course Wittgenstein distinguished between ethical and non-ethical utterances in his Lecture. I think the intentions of these authors are better captured by the two aspects I list here, namely that 1) there is no syntactical or semantic marker of the ethical, such that there is no limit to the sort of language that could be ethically active, and relatedly that 2) ethical utterances might be about anything and nothing, rather than being about some particular domain of allegedly moral properties. For Diamond it is also important to emphasize that moral thought is not “a particular subject” like history or botany, in the sense in which something is “a subject” when there are “particular methods, associated with the subject, of justifying claims about facts”; the lack of any particular methods proprietary to moral thought is the basis for her version of the fact/value distinction. See “‘We Are Perpetually Moralists’”, 106, and footnote 546 here. For a critique of the non-departmental conception, see De Mesel, “Wittgenstein, Meta-Ethics and the Subject Matter of Moral Philosophy”, and Pleasants, “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty”. I do not take a stand on the related issue that comes up in these critiques, namely whether there is a pervasive moral dimension to all of Wittgenstein’s philosophical work.

aspect finds support in remarks of Wittgenstein's in his early notebooks and the *Tractatus* such as that "Die Ethik ist transcendental" (*TLP* 6.421) or "Die Ethik muß eine Bedingung der Welt sein, wie die Logik" (*TB* 172). Concerning the latter these authors have argued that for Wittgenstein "anything can become ethically active for us", that the ethical not "something that we have to look for in the proposition or beside the proposition [...] but in our involvement with propositions."³⁰

This has repercussions for our understanding of Wittgenstein's "test" for absoluteness, if we might call it that. The form of words "Ah then that's alright" by itself does not signal anything, for that might be said sarcastically by someone morally outraged. It only demonstrates non-absoluteness if we read into the statement a certain way it would be meant by someone responding in a certain way, e.g. not seeing a moral issue or not taking a moral stance. Moreover, what looks like a statement of fact might be an absolute judgment. "She needs this water to survive" looks like a simple statement of fact, and it could be; but if we hear it in a certain tone of voice, with a certain emphasis, it conveys moral urgency. And then it would be extremely odd if the conversation went on as follows: "But I don't care if she survives", "Ah then that's all right." But that is because if it is said with moral urgency, then the import of what is being said goes beyond a simple statement of fact; the speaker is insisting that the fact (absolutely) matters here in a certain way. There is no syntactic or semantic marker the presence of which indicates ethical meaning. Hence Wittgenstein can only draw on our own capacity to speak ethically or non-ethically; his dialogue exhibits a distinction we must already implicitly recognize and *read into* the dialogue.

We should amend the reference to "vocabulary" in Darwall et al's summary: "Description [...] could not be the essential semantic role of a vocabulary with action-guidingness built into it." It would be more accurate to say: "description could not be the essential semantic role of any use of language with action-guidingness built into it". But in fact this same point should lead us to question whether the formulation "action-guidingness" really captures that which is left "open" by the facts.

1.3 Which question is open?

1.3.1 What to do

Are descriptions or statements of fact not "action-guiding"? Darwall et al. write that the openness of

³⁰ Donatelli, "The Problem of 'The Higher'", 11.

the ethical question is secured by “our seeming ability to imagine, for any naturalistic property R, clear-headed beings who would fail to find appropriate reason or motive to action in the mere fact that R obtains (or is seen to be in the offing). Given this imaginative possibility, it has not been logically secured that P is action-guiding”³¹. In his introduction to metaethics, Alexander Miller has interpreted their argument as resting on *motivational internalism*: “There is a conceptual or internal link between making a moral judgement and being motivated, *ceteris paribus*, to act as that judgement prescribes.”³² The Open Question argument, insofar as it is intended as an argument for a strict separation between the ethical and the factual, would then be: moral judgments are linked to motivation and action; factual beliefs by themselves are not linked to motivation or action; therefore moral judgments are not factual beliefs. And it might seem like this is Wittgenstein’s idea: “Ah then that’s allright” is the response of someone who’s not going to do anything about the fact in question and is not particularly motivated to do anything, and this is precisely why it shows the speaker’s original statement to have been meant non-ethically. He writes:

Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, “the absolutely right road.” I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. (*PO* 40)

The Open Question argument has often been interpreted this way.³³ It rests on an empirical psychological premise that cognizance of the facts by itself does not issue in action or motivation absent something else, for example: a desire. I do not believe that Darwall et al. intended to require any psychological premises. The point of their claim that “clear-headed beings” might “fail to *find* appropriate *reason* or motive to action in the mere fact that R obtains” is not that the facts cannot get me to act or motivate me, but that if I find myself seriously asking “what should I do” the facts will not *answer* that question. In other words, it is not that facts or factual beliefs do not issue in action or motivation, but that the facts do not tell us what we *should* do. Another way of putting the point is: there is no reason to deny that either facts or factual beliefs can *guide action* in the trivial or relative sense of actually moving us towards particular actions; but the facts do not guide our

³¹ Darwall et al, “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics”, 117;

³² Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 21.

³³ This seems to be how Stevenson understood the argument; he writes: “Whatever scientifically knowable properties a thing may have, it is always open to question whether a thing having these (enumerated) qualities is good. For to ask whether it is good is to ask for influence. And whatever I may know about an object, I can still ask, quite pertinently, to be influenced with regard to my interest in it.” Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, 30. Parfit has interpreted the passage from Wittgenstein’s Lecture quoted here as resting on a confusion of motivation with normativity. See Parfit, “Normativity”, 338-9.

action in an absolute sense.

On reflection we should see that Wittgenstein must also have understood the link to motivation and action normatively rather than factually. Wittgenstein's use of the Open Question argument is intimately connected with his fact/value distinction, with the claim that "no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value." But when we are motivated and act, these are just facts like any other. If the argument hinged on motivational internalism, it could only produce a distinction between one sort of fact and another — for instance, the facts of our factual beliefs on the one hand, and the facts of our desires or motivations or actions on the other; and the supposition of some kind of radical discontinuity between these two kinds could only be a piece of empirical psychology. Moreover, not only might factual beliefs easily guide our action in this factual sense, but there are facts that entail action-guidance in this factual sense trivially, e.g. if *p* is a fact about what I am motivated to do, the fact of *p* & *q* will entail the fact *p*. There is nothing logically impossible about a road with the property that all persons either walked on it or felt guilty, and if there were such a road, this would be a fact, and there would be facts that would entail this fact; but we might still intelligibly ask whether this is *good*, or: whether we *should* all be either walking the road or else feeling guilty. Wittgenstein makes it quite clear, in the Lecture and in the *Tractatus*, that all the facts "stand on the same level". (PO 40) In a later conversation with Waismann and Schlick in January of 1930, he offered a very telling reformulation of the relative/absolute distinction: "Die Ausdrücke in der Ethik haben eine doppelte Bedeutung: eine psychologische, von der man sprechen kann, und eine nichtpsychologische".³⁴ This suggests that Wittgenstein's conception of ethics was anti-psychologistic in the same sense that his conception of logic was, like Frege's, anti-psychologistic: any "action-guidance" in the factual or psychological sense will be irrelevant to Wittgenstein's enquiry, just as "laws of thinking" in the psychological sense – laws of *Fürwahrhalten* rather than *Wahrsein* – were irrelevant to Frege's investigation of logic.³⁵

Wittgenstein's remarks on the absolutely right road go on: "No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge." (PO 40) And this must mean: no state of affairs can *judge for me* whether I am to walk the road or feel guilty; every state of affairs leaves this judgment open. We are not meant to imagine someone who is faced with all the facts and yet unmoved, but rather someone faced with all the facts who still does not know which direction she should be moved in.

³⁴ *WWK* 92. In a later conversation he distinguishes ethical value from the *sociological* facts of valuation (*WWK* 115-117).

³⁵ Frege, "Der Gedanke", 35-6.

William Frankena has argued, convincingly to a great many philosophers, that this is the original force of Moore's argument, despite his own explanation of it. Moore's question "is x good?" is only felt to be open in the face of all purported factual definitions because *good* is a normative notion: "what makes ethical judgments seem irreducible to natural or metaphysical judgments is their apparently normative character, that is, the fact that they seem to be saying of some agent that he ought to do something."³⁶ Frankena was here arguing that Moore was mistaken in holding "good" to be simple and unanalyzable, for if it is a normative notion, then it is relational and thus complex. However, this has become one of the standard interpretations of the Open Question argument, particularly within the anti-realist tradition.³⁷ Korsgaard for example has written: "But the force of the open question argument clearly comes from the pressure of the normative question. That is, when the concept of good is applied to a natural object, such as pleasure, we can still always ask whether we should really choose or pursue it."³⁸ The argument really has two steps: We are first asked to see that someone could have a clear view of all the facts and still be left with a real question, namely: what to do. In a second step, we are asked to see that our moral vocabulary, such as "good" and "ought", is precisely the vocabulary we use to work through *this* decision; so of course these words cannot be defined factually, for they come into real use *after* the facts have been settled. ("After" is of course meant here in a logical rather than a temporal sense.) But we can also formulate this in a more Wittgensteinian spirit without using any notion of moral vocabulary; we can say that when we press specific questions, questions which we recognize as moral, we are responding to facts in ways that are logically independent of the facts.

Hence Darwall et al. are not wrong to attribute to Wittgenstein the conclusion that "action-

³⁶ Frankena, "Obligation and Value", 102.

³⁷ Uses of the Open Question argument within the anti-realist tradition are however often sadly ambiguous between psychological and normative notions of "action-guidance". This brief summary in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is quite typical: "It is worth noting, however, that Moore did not explain the open-question argument in the way later non-cognitivists would. Following Hume, they said that moral judgements are intrinsically motivating, so sincerely accepting "x is good" requires a commitment or at least some motivation to pursue x if that is possible. But then no definition of "good" in purely natural terms can ever succeed, since it cannot capture the term's action-guiding force; nor can an evaluative conclusion be validly inferred from premises none of which have such force." Hurka, "Moore's Moral Philosophy". The notion of action-guiding force is made here to sound simply psychological: the presence of a real motivation. However, if we read it that way, it is simply mysterious why "no definition of 'good' in purely natural terms can ever succeed" — for if I defined "good" as "that which I am motivated to pursue", while this might be a poor definition for other reasons, it would fulfill the requirement as stated. The point, again, cannot be that no fact or nor factual belief can motivate me, but that no fact or factual belief would necessarily close the *question* of what I *should* do, for example, or how I *should* be motivated. The figure we are asked to imagine is not someone who does not *act* in the face of all the facts, but someone who does not *know what to do* in the face of all the facts.

³⁸ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 43. Darwall writes similarly: "What gives the open question argument whatever plausibility it has is that any naturalistic description of a thing apparently leaves it logically open whether there is any reason to desire, seek, or take any other attitude toward that thing." Darwall, "How is Moorean Value Related to Reasons for Attitudes?" 192.

guidance” is what separates our moral judgments from mere description or statement of fact, though the point is more empty than they might realize. For they write that it holds of ‘good’ “and other normative vocabulary” that that question “is P really good?” is open; and the action-guiding function of normative vocabulary is supposed to explain why the question remains open. But “action-guidingness” only represents a problematic feature insofar as we understand the term “action-guidance” normatively rather than psychologically. The idea that the meaning of normative vocabulary cannot be captured by factual description, since factual description is not (normatively) action-guiding, thus amounts to the claim that the meaning of a statement like “you should do *X*”, if it is meant ethically, cannot be captured by factual statements, for factual statements cannot tell us what we should do, ethically speaking. But the second half of this claim does not *explain* the first half, and it is questionable whether this really even amounts to an argument. Soon I will argue that Wittgenstein is fully aware of this emptiness. For the moment it remains to be explained that Darwall et al.’s formulation of Wittgenstein’s “conclusion” is in addition somewhat misleading; it is a solid version of the Open Question argument, and it is present in Wittgenstein’s Lecture, but it is not the primary form of the Open Question for Wittgenstein.

1.3.2 How things matter

[A]ll the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same all way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial [...] The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone.. [...] we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters. (*PO* 39f.)

These remarks take us in a different direction than Darwall et. al.’s talk of “action-guidingness”: one might have all the facts and yet not know *how they matter*. Wittgenstein had written at the opening of the Lecture that ethics might be called the inquiry “into what is really important”, but noted that there is also a relative sense of “important”: “if I say that it is important for me not to catch cold I mean that catching a cold produces certain describable disturbances in my life” (*PO* 38). He now writes that no proposition (by which he means: no statement of fact) will be important “in any absolute sense”. This is a misleading way to put the point. Wittgenstein might want to say, speaking for himself, that the fact of someone’s murder matters absolutely. I am not sure if this entails that the proposition describing this fact matters absolutely. However, his point can only be that if we take the murder (or anything else) to matter absolutely, this is not expressible by any proposition, i.e. this goes beyond any and all factual description. The murder might also cause a great many powerful emotions in various people and prompt any number of actions, and all these will all be

simple facts and nothing more. In saying that “all the facts [...] stand on the same level”, he is not stating his own ethical opinion that nothing matters at all, but noting that the facts do not, in and of themselves, entail the way they matter; and taking them to matter is going beyond the facts.³⁹ This way of understanding the fact/value distinction — as a fact/significance distinction — is predominant in the Lecture, and is also the thrust of the *Tractatus*, which is not concerned with people acting differently in regards to the facts, but rather with people seeing different worlds — “Die Welt des Glücklichen ist eine andere als die des Unglücklichen.” (T 6.43) And of course “Ah then that’s alright” is the response of someone who accords no weight to the matter under discussion.

Posing the Open Question in terms of *significance* or *matter* is not unheard of. Blackburn’s standard objection to moral realism is that, if there such ethical properties in the world as the realist supposes, this would leave us with two profound problems: firstly, the realist must produce some kind of epistemology corresponding to these properties, but secondly, she must explain why they matter at all, “why we should be concerned about the ethical properties of things”, “why we should be remotely interested”, “why we bother about these things”.⁴⁰ This is implicitly, but I think quite clearly, a version of the Open Question argument: if there were such ‘ethical’ properties, they would leave us with the question of how they matter; but if they leave *that* question open, then there’s nothing particularly ethical about them. Yet the notion of *significance* plays very little role in Blackburn’s own theory. Moral judgments are, on his account, the expressions of attitudes, but in the context of his moral philosophy his notion of “attitude” seems to correspond to sentiments or passions, such as anger, guilt, shame, contempt, disdain.⁴¹ In respect of the sort of item that moral judgments express, he is not too far removed from the so-called yay/boo theory of emotivism: his attitudes are positive or negative affective reactions to the facts. He briefly suggests at one point that these sentiments determine what we take to be salient⁴² but these sentiments are more naturally linked to the question “what to do” than the question “how things matter”. I will argue later (in section 3.3) that Wittgenstein’s example of *seeing the world as a miracle* gives us much different sort of example of how things might be taken to matter, and while this might be called an “attitude”

³⁹ As John C. Kelly writes, “Wittgenstein’s point is not that empirical facts are irrelevant to our ethical concerns, which is absurd, but that their relevance is not to be explained by the facts themselves.” “Wittgenstein, The Self, and Ethics”, 570.

⁴⁰ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* pp. 80, 86, *Spreading the Word* p. 216. Michael Ridge poses the question similarly: “So giving all my money to charity has this irreducible non-natural property whose nature cannot be further elucidated; what is that to me?” Ridge, *Impassioned Belief*, 3f.

⁴¹ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 8-13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 254.

— in fact it's very standard in the literature on Wittgenstein to speak here of an "attitude towards the world"⁴³ — it's a much different sort of item than Blackburn's sentiments.

We can see the difference it makes when we emphasize one open question over the other by looking briefly to Iris Murdoch's critique of the mainstream tradition of moral philosophy. The almost exclusive focus within that tradition on the moment of decision, when some action has to be taken, has distorted our view of moral deliberation and of the moral agent, she writes. For the most part such decisions are made automatically; and when they cannot be made automatically, the decision can seem strangely empty. This is what gives plausibility to existentialist theories, as well as theories such as Hare's — which she also labelled "existentialist" in a broader sense — according to which the agent opts to commit to a principle. When we focus on the moment of deciding on an action, it looks as if we can only identify the moral agent with the will: "The agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will."⁴⁴ She was writing mainly against the non-cognitivism prevalent at the time, but it could be argued that this focus on action has equally hindered the realist responses to non-cognitivism. When a realist postulates certain *principles of action* that are supposed to be objectively true independently of the will — perhaps principles that are known by the agent through "intuition" — then the authority these are supposed to have over the will becomes quite mysterious. When we add to this the epistemological and metaphysical difficulties involved, the whole idea starts to seem like a wishful fantasy. Murdoch wishes to oppose this entire conception of moral agency through the notion of *attention*, conceived as a ongoing task:

I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. [...] If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. [...] the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial.⁴⁵

⁴³ See for example Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 97; Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the *Tractatus*", 153; Stokhof, *World and Life as One*, 235; McGuinness, "The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*", 313.

⁴⁴ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of the Good*, 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

If we look at the examples she gives of “attending”, it is arguable that “attention” might amount to something like: a deliberation about how things matter.⁴⁶ It is certainly for her not an empirical enquiry. Many writers in the tradition of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy — for example, Peter Winch, Cora Diamond, and Raimond Gaita — have also appealed frequently to Murdoch’s work. Wittgenstein’s focus on significance suggests that he shared Murdoch’s view that moral thought does not occur primarily at moments of decision and is not centrally concerned with specific actions.⁴⁷ Someone who sees the world as a miracle will act differently and be motivated differently than someone who does not — we do not want to fall into the trap of thinking that our ethical vision of the world is something entirely private (nor does Murdoch⁴⁸) — but the claim that the world is a miracle is not primarily a claim about *what to do*.

1.4 The form of the argument and four objections

It is perfectly legitimate to run an Open Questions argument, so there is no need to settle on one sort of ethical question left open by all the facts; anyway for the purpose of getting the argument into view the exact question does not matter, so long as it is clear that the question must be meant absolutely. This means that in discussion with a certain sort of philosophical opponent there will be no adequate way of expressing the question. We might begin by saying that when all the facts about a certain situation have been stated, there is something we still want to ask, e.g. “but is this good?” But our opponent might *give* the word “good” a sense such that it is definitively closed by the facts — perhaps it is one of the facts already given. We might then respond: “Alright, so it is ‘good’, as you say — but what should we do about this?” The opponent I am imagining might also give “should” a sense such that it is definitively closed by the facts. We might then say: “Let’s say that it is a fact that we ‘should’ do this — but how does this fact matter to us?” But the opponent might well understand ‘mattering’ relatively. Etc. The argument amounts to: whatever facts you give me, that’s not what I meant. But there is no form of words that can unambiguously hold fast what we

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷ Peter Winch and Stanley Cavell have both denied in similar ways that morality is “action-guiding”. See “Moral Integrity” in Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 171-192; Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 254. Their position is, *very* roughly, that moral discourse is not necessarily meant to establish what someone must do so much as to *clarify* what someone is doing or what position or attitude the person is taking. I take it that they are not denying that moral discourse must make some difference to how we live; they are only emphasizing, as Murdoch does, that moral discourse is not primarily concerned directly with specific decisions. Murdoch’s point has been developed in much greater detail by Diamond in “We Are Perpetually Moralists”.

⁴⁸ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, 37.

mean; we must rely on the opponent to have some sense of *how* we mean our words.

If the Open Question argument amounts to “that’s not what I mean”, one might say it is hardly an argument — it is certainly not worth trying to spell it out in a syllogism, as many have done.⁴⁹ But Wittgenstein is not trying to argue an opponent into anything. He is trying to articulate a distinction we already work with, or that he at least already works with; the Open Question is a device for articulating the distinction. He has served his purpose if he helps the audience “to clear up your thoughts about this subject” (*PO* 37).

There are two striking differences between Moore’s deployment of the argument and Wittgenstein’s. Wittgenstein is separating value from any and all facts; he does not make an exemption for one particular property, as Moore exempted the allegedly *sui generis*, non-natural property of goodness. I will expand on this point in section 1.6. Secondly, Wittgenstein is not at all concerned to argue that the notion of goodness is simple or unanalyzable, as Moore was. Nothing about the argument makes it impossible for the notion of “goodness” to be definable in terms of “should” statements, for example, or other (equally problematic) moral terms. (Wittgensteinians would be very surprised if these words turned out to have such *clear-cut* definitions in their real everyday use, but that is another matter.) At best the argument makes it impossible to define any moral terms in any non-moral terms, such that we might call the whole of moral discourse “unanalyzable”. But of course Wittgenstein is not trying to define any moral terms in any terms, because there aren’t any specifically moral terms. To put the point non-compartmentally: what I want to say with a particular moral utterance involving the word “good” might be equally sayable by another utterance involving the word “should”, or by another utterance involving no term that we would ever otherwise classify as ethical.

In the following I will show how this understanding of the Open Question argument renders irrelevant all of the standard objections to Moore’s version of the argument; this will help to further clarify our understanding of the argument and also to make it more plausible that this version captures the essential insight buried in Moore’s explanations. I borrow a list of four standard objections from Andrew Altman (though I will not treat the points in exactly the same order):

⁴⁹ See Miller, 12-24; Kalderon, “Open Questions and the Manifest Image”; Fumerton, “Open Questions and the Nature of Philosophical Analysis”; Pidgeon, “Desiring to Desire”; Nuccetelli and Seay, “What’s Right with the Open Question Argument”.

(1) It begs the question of whether a natural property can be identical with good, (2) It hastily generalizes from a few instances of natural properties, (3) It fails to deal with the paradox of analysis, i.e., the paradox that an adequate conceptual analysis must be nontrivially true and also true simply in virtue of the meanings of the analysans and analysandum, and (4) It fails to take account of the fact that predicates that are not identical in meaning can still refer to the same property.⁵⁰

1.4.1 Property identity

It has been objected to Moore's version of the argument that the question "I know that this is water, but is it H₂O?" might be open for a competent speaker of English, and yet for all that water really is H₂O. As David Brink notes: "synonymy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for property identity".⁵¹ Moreover, on certain theories of meaning, the problem is one of meaning and not just ontology. The "causal theory of meaning" based on the work of Kripke and Putnam interprets natural kind terms as referring to a natural substance, whatever it may turn out to be. Hence the reference of the word *water* is fixed by our initial causal contact with that substance, but what that substance is — and hence what the word really means — is revealed to us by *a posteriori* scientific investigation. We can bring out the difference with a story about fool's gold, where, upon discovering something about the molecular structure of different metals, we do not say: so it turns out there's two kinds of gold, but rather: so it turns out this other stuff is not really gold -- thus revealing that we were not using the word *gold* to mean just anything that fits a certain phenomenal profile but rather to refer to the as yet unknown underlying substance. Stories about a Twin Earth where the residents bathe in a watery substance they call "water" but that is composed of XYZ rather than H₂O have also been used to articulate and support the theory; we would allegedly want to say that the Twin Earth word "water" has a different meaning than our word "water", due to the different substances causally regulating their uses.⁵² With this in mind, we might be able to explain why the question "I see that it's *P* but is it good" for any property *P* might be open, in the same way

⁵⁰ Altman, "Breathing Life into a Dead Argument", 401-2.

⁵¹ Brink, *Moral Realism*, 166.

⁵² As Wittgensteinians, again, we should be surprised if the matter is so clear-cut. I tend to think that our intuitions about the meaning of "water" would depend on how exactly we tell the story. If we discover this chemical difference between their watery substance and ours on the first day of landing on Twin Earth, it might be true that we would disambiguate between their word "water" and ours. If we co-existed with Twin Earthers on Twin Earth for a good couple of years or a couple hundred years, all the while drinking and bathing in their watery substance, and only then made our chemical discovery, I suspect at that point we would be willing to say that there are just two kinds of water. Proponents of the causal theory of meaning for natural kind terms tend to assume that there must be some fact of the matter *now* about how we mean the word "water", in advance of a real-life situation that forces us to go one way or another. This is *not at all* obvious. But this point is not very relevant here; the causal theory describes an intelligible possibility of how *some* words *might* be meant.

that “I know this is water, but is it H₂O” might be open for someone ignorant of modern chemistry.⁵³

It would not be impossible for a human community to have a word meaning *watery stuff* rather than the underlying substance H₂O, and in such a case the real reference of the term couldn't possibly be an open question for them, and the results of the Twin Earth thought experiment would look different; the argument about “water” rests on the *kind* of thing we are doing with the word, i.e. referring to an as yet unknown substance. And no-one would say that if we hesitate to identify the word “hurrah!” with the word “H₂O”, it might simply be because we are not yet certain what exactly the word “hurrah!” refers to; for we are clearly doing something different than *referring* in saying “hurrah!”. Now the Open Question argument has been posed this way: the question is open because what we are doing in valuing is not (only) referring or describing. For example Blackburn has written: “Moore’s argument has been controverted in detail, but it clearly contains an important insight. We might see it as hinging on the fact that valuing and other ethical activities are *different* from describing and explaining, or from purely scientific representations. Something special, and further, is involved in seeing anything that creates happiness *under the heading of the good*, beyond just describing it as creating happiness.”⁵⁴ In Darwall et al’s formulation of the argument, this is how a philosopher might explain our reaction to the Open Question: faced with the question, competent speakers of English might hesitate, and the philosopher might explain this hesitation by postulating a “conceptual link” between “attributions of goodness” and “the guidance of action”.⁵⁵ For Wittgenstein — for Hare as well, I believe — this is a felt aspect of our reaction itself, and not merely a way for the philosopher to explain our reaction: we feel that the facts by themselves, whatever they are, simply set us a task, namely the task of moral thought. He writes in the *Tractatus* “Die Tatsachen gehören alle nur zur Aufgabe, nicht zur Lösung” (6.4321); he ends the Lecture by saying “what I wanted to do with them [his ethical expressions] was just *to go beyond* the world” (*PO* 44).

Hare has presented several variations of an argument designed to show that the full description of all the facts leave us with a different sort of task than factual description, and the argument has been updated by Horgan and Timmons to meet newer versions of moral realism based on the causal theory of meaning. The gist of Horgan and Timmons’ version is: let us first accept the realist’s

⁵³ See Brink, *Moral Realism*, 162-7; Sturgeon, “Moore on Ethical Naturalism” 533-5; Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 205-7; Miller, *Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 17-18.

⁵⁴ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 86.

⁵⁵ Darwall et al, “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics”, 117.

contention that “good” refers to some property; let us also accept the contention that it refers to the property that causally regulates our use of the word “good”, such that, as in the case of water, competent speakers might not be aware of exactly which property is identical with “goodness”. Hence the question “I see that it’s P, but is it good?” might be open for the same reason that “I see that it’s water, but is it H₂O?” might be open. Horgan and Timmons now ask us to imagine that in our world our use of “good” is causally regulated by consequentialist properties, i.e. the properties “whose functional essence is captured by some specific consequentialist normative theory”⁵⁶, and to imagine a Moral Twin Earth where everything is essentially the same; in Twin English-speaking countries they use the term “good” with all of the same “formal marks” we do, i.e. “to evaluate actions, persons, institutions and so forth”⁵⁷, but the use of the word is causally regulated by some deontological property. We should first note that we would take ourselves to be disagreeing with Twin Earthers. Horgan and Timmons write that “[i]f, in Putnam’s original scenario, the two groups learn that their respective uses of ‘water’ are causally regulated by different physical kind-properties, it would be silly for them to think they have differing views about the real nature of water”, but in the Moral Twin Earth case “such inter-group debate would surely strike both groups not as silly but as quite appropriate”.⁵⁸ The disagreement might become acute if one of us made a voyage to Twin Earth and found everyone approving of some action that the deontological theory approved of but the consequentialist theory condemned. But how would we express this disagreement? If we say that the action is “not good”, and we are speaking Twin Earth English, then this will be simply and factually wrong; if we say that the action is “not good” in our English, then this will be trivially true, but of course we will not be saying anything particularly relevant to the situation. The Twin Earthers would be perfectly correct to respond: “So what?”, for we have not yet said the very important things we want to say. At this point we might be forced to say: “But I don’t care if it’s ‘good’, you *shouldn’t do it*”. This shows how how morally inert the realist interpretation of “good” turns out to be. And if the moral realist now offers some factual explanation of the word “should”, the argument repeats itself. As Hare writes, if we accept the realist definitions of moral terms “we debar ourselves from saying something that we do sometimes want to say”.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Horgan and Timmons, “Troubles for New Wave Moral Semantics”, 163.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵⁹ Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 84. Hare’s argument here is roughly that if we define “good” as referring to some real property, we will not be able to say that the property is a good (or bad) standard of evaluation to use (80-86). A later variant of the argument (148-50) is much closer to Horgan and Timmons’ version: a Christian missionary spends some time on a cannibal island and enters into moral discussions with them, trying to convert them. He will not want to agree with them that collecting scalps is “good”, using the analogous word in their language; nor does he just want to teach them something about the English language, namely that the English word “good” is properly applied to collecting scalps. Of course what would actually happen is that he would adopt the analogous word in their language and use it

Wittgenstein's philosophical opponent might at this point simply deny that there is anything else she wants to say after all the facts have been settled. If we feel as Wittgenstein does, we will find this incredible, and we will most likely just believe that she is not paying sufficient attention to her own life with language. But as anything she does say could be given a 'relative' or factual interpretation, there is likely no way to prove her wrong. Nonetheless we might be able to make the point more plausible by positioning the Open Question argument among a family of structurally similar regress arguments.

The first involves logical laws. The *Tractatus* conceives logic and ethics in strikingly similar terms, emphasizing that neither are to be encountered within the world; ethics, like logic, he writes in his notebooks, "muß eine Bedingung der Welt sein". (TB 172) In §5.132 of the *Tractatus* he writes: "'Schlussgesetze', welche—wie bei Frege und Russell—die Schlüsse rechtfertigen sollen, sind sinnlos, und wären überflüssig." Moore's notes on Wittgenstein's lectures in the early 1930s contain a more expansive treatment of the point. Concerning the inference from $p \wedge q$ to $p \vee q$ Moore has Wittgenstein saying that: "'everything here is useless, except the two propositions themselves'; and that if another proposition were needed to justify our statement that the first follows from the second, 'we should need an infinite series'. He finally concluded that 'A rule of inference' (meaning 'deductive inference') 'never justifies an inference'." If a rule r were needed, then $p \vee q$ would only follow from the conjunction of $p \wedge q$ and r , "so that we should need a fresh rule to justify the inference from this conjunction". (PO 86-7) This is ultimately the same point made by Lewis Carroll in his paper "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles", which Peter Winch has summarized as follows: "The moral of this, if I may be boring enough to point it, is that the actual process of drawing an inference, which is after all at the heart of logic, is something which cannot be represented as a logical formula; that, moreover, a sufficient justification for inferring a conclusion from a set of premisses is to see that the conclusion does in fact follow. To insist on any further justification is not to be extra cautious; it is to display a misunderstanding of what inference

differently, not applying it to the collecting of scalps, and would thereby not be making a simple linguistic error, for if the word really is analogous to our word "good" then it does not simply refer to a property or some properties. After the missionary successfully converts them, he is followed some years later by a Communist who brings with him much different standards. Hare's argument seems remarkably close in substance to Moore's argument for the indefinability of "good" in section 11 of the *Principia Ethica*, 62-64. I discuss the application of the Open Question argument to Moore's non-naturalism in 1.6. — It is an implication of Michael Thompson's theory that we would not actually be in disagreement with Twin Earthers, as his "bipolar normative nexus" of justice requires a common humanity, understood in real historical terms; I discuss this in 6.2. But the argument does not essentially require the supposition of Twin Earthers and can be put in Hare's earthly terms.

is. Learning to infer is not just a matter of being taught about explicit logical relations between propositions; it is learning *to do* something.”⁶⁰ Similarly Blackburn has written: “what we do with our premises is not itself construed as acceptance of a premise.”⁶¹

Korsgaard has advanced an analogous regress argument intended to show that “a realist account of the normativity of the instrumental principle is incoherent.” “The agent would have to recognize it, as some sort of eternal normative verity, that it is good to take the means to his ends. How is this verity supposed to motivate him? The obvious way to understand how facts motivate us is by means of a kind of extension of the instrumental principle itself”⁶² — that obeying the instrumental principle is a means to a good action. And this leads to the same dilemma: the principle turns out to be superfluous, but if it were needed, it would not be enough, we would end up with an infinite regress. We can recast her argument using the terms I have developed here: let us suppose that the instrumental principle is just a kind of fact, and that I have gained knowledge of this fact through some means — we might as well just say, “intuition”. If we see the instrumental principle this way, the question arises: what is to be done with this knowledge? When Korsgaard asks “How is this verity supposed to motivate him?” I take it she is not asking by what psychological mechanism a knowledge of the principle might issue in motivation and action; she is saying rather that if we interpret the instrumental principle as a kind of fact, then a person might see that fact and still have a real question, in fact the very same question the principle was intended to cover: what should I do? Korsgaard writes that this is “in a way, the ultimate extension of the open question argument”, and applies it directly to moral principles as well: “If it is just a fact that a certain action would be good, a fact that you might or might not apply in deliberation, then it seems to be an open question whether you should apply it. The model of applied knowledge does not correctly capture the relation between the normative standards to which action is subject and the deliberative process.”⁶³

The third sort of argument comes from late Wittgenstein’s discussions of meaning, typically labelled “the rule-following considerations”. I will come back to this in 2.1; for now I would like to offer as a summary the idea that, in a certain sense, there are no facts of any kind — no facts of what is in my mind, nor of my past or present behavior, or of past and present behavior of the community, etc. — that could tell me how to go on with any concept in a new situation. We can

⁶⁰ Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 57.

⁶¹ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 7. Blackburn here seems to be describing his own repurposed version of Carroll’s argument, intended to show that the will is not controlled by “the apprehension of fact and reason” alone; but it serves as a description of Carroll’s original argument and Wittgenstein’s as well.

⁶² Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism”, 110.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 111.

always imagine alternative ways of going on that are not logically incompatible with any and all of the facts. This is not meant to show that we cannot in fact teach people words and concepts (in other words: that nothing really means anything): but that there is no such thing as the ultimate explanation of the meaning, an explanation independent of our capacities to *take it up and work with in* in reliably similar ways. This capacity cannot itself be represented as awareness of further facts, on pain of infinite regress. The whole of his response to this dilemma is given in the first section of the *Investigations*:

“Wie weiß er aber, wo und wie er das Wort ‘rot’ nachschlagen soll und was er mit dem Wort ‘fünf’ anzufangen hat?” — Nun, ich nehme an, er *handelt*, wie ich es beschrieben habe. Die Erklärungen haben irgendwo ein Ende. (*PU* §1)

These arguments could all be summarized as showing that all the facts might leave us (logically) with a question. If this is true, then it must be a question we could only pose in absolute terms, i.e. in terms irreducible to facts; and it could be put variously, in each of these cases, as “what should I do?” or “how does this matter?” or “so what?”. In each case the argument leads us back to the realization that we are tasked with responding to the facts in some way, and it is useless to suppose that the task is taken care of for us by some further fact we might find out. This is why it is a red herring to argue that competent speakers of English might not be aware of a certain property identity: because we know, if we attend to our own thought, that *this* task of thought couldn’t just be a matter of identifying properties in the first place. In Korsgaard’s metaphor: “If to have knowledge is to have a map of the world, then to be able to act well is to be able to decide where to go and to follow the map in going there. The ability to act is something like the ability to use the map, and that ability cannot be given by another map.”⁶⁴

The argument might seem the weakest if we think in terms of *significance* rather than *action-guidingness*. In the other cases, it is clear that some response from the agent herself is called for — she must take some action, she must do something with the premises, etc. Seeing how things matter seems, in contrast, to be a case of seeing rather than doing; even if we hesitate to describe *seeing the world as a miracle* as knowledge of a fact, nonetheless it seems to be a way of describing the world and not a response to a world already described. I will return to this point in 1.5 and 3.3, arguing that descriptions of the meanings of things, in contrast to empirical descriptions, essentially involve a personal response.

⁶⁴ Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism”, 110.

1.4.2 Hasty generalization

Sturgeon writes that “one might be curious about how Moore could be so confident as to conclude, after illustrating his test on just a few examples, that no identification whatever of goodness with a natural property would turn out to be correct. What justifies so quick a generalization?”⁶⁵ Darwall et al. echo a common sentiment when they write that “the open question argument can do its job case by case.”⁶⁶ Wittgenstein, even more so than Moore, is clearly not proceeding case by case. In the *Tractatus* he writes: “In der Welt ist alles, wie es ist, und geschieht alles, wie es geschieht; es gibt in ihr keinen Wert — und wenn es ihn gäbe, so hätte er keinen Wert.” (*TLP* 6.41) This is justified by his sense that the sort of thing he is doing in his talk and thought about value is not capturable by any statement of fact.

It is worth noting that Horgan and Timmons think that their thought experiment delivers “strong empirical evidence”⁶⁷ against realism, or at least against a particular style of realism founded on the causal theory of meaning. Wittgenstein in contrast is clearly not marshaling any empirical evidence against realism. This comes down to a difference in the way these authors are relating to linguistic intuitions. There are in this case two different levels at which linguistic intuitions might become relevant. If we use the word “water” to refer to an underlying substance — if, in technical terms, the word is a “rigid designator” for a natural kind — then this explains why we may not be able to rely on speakers’ intuitions about what is or is not water. (This is clearer in the case of “gold”.) In this case, the way we mean the word is such that we may not be able to say what exactly we mean by the word, pending further scientific investigation. Still, ultimately meaning is in our hands. When it comes to the question of the *kind* of thing we are doing — whether we mean the word as a rigid designator or are doing something categorically different — there cannot really be any other kind of evidence than speakers’ inclinations to speak in various ways. Timmons and Horgan suppose that “both groups”, the Earthers and the Twin Earthers, would be inclined to “find inter-group argument about goodness” “appropriate” rather than “silly”. Both groups, they suppose would find the question “Given that the use of ‘good’ by humans is causally regulated by natural property N, is entity e, which has N, good?” intelligible. This is the empirical evidence. Now, Horgan and Timmons have not in fact conducted an empirical survey; and Twin Earthers are not around to be surveyed. What seems to have happened is that Horgan and Timmons *themselves* find the question

⁶⁵ Sturgeon, “Moore on Ethical Naturalism”, 535-6.

⁶⁶ Darwall et al, “Toward *Fin de siècle* Ethics”, 116.

⁶⁷ Horgan and Timmons, “Troubles for New Wave Moral Semantics”, 166.

intelligible, and find the supposition of inter-group argument appropriate rather than silly, and they suppose that they are not outliers but speak for the rest of us. Supposing this to be true, they point to this as objective linguistic evidence. Wittgenstein by contrast is not pointing to what competent speakers (including Wittgenstein himself) are saying, but simply speaking for himself. In conversations with the Vienna Circle he mentioned several times how crucial it was that he spoke in the first person in his Lecture. (*WWK* 117-8)

It is possible to be mistaken about what one means. Nonetheless, despite this fallibility, when I say what I mean I am not speaking in the mode of probability but of certainty (except in cases where I actually *am* uncertain about what I'm trying to say); this is connected with the fact that I am not inferring the likelihood of my meaning various things from observations of myself. In the Lecture Wittgenstein explains why no statement of fact could be what he means by his absolute value statements, and in saying what he means he has no need to *generalize* at all from any kind of data. Hence the “hasty generalization” problem is located at another point entirely: why should we assume that Wittgenstein is speaking for anyone but himself?

What Cavell says about Wittgenstein's appeals to “what we say” in his later work is relevant here:

When Wittgenstein, or at this stage any philosopher appealing to ordinary language, “says what we say”, what he produces is not a generalization (though he may, later, generalize) but a (supposed) *instance* of what we say. We may think of it as a sample. The introduction of the sample by the words “We say . . .” is an invitation for you to see whether you have such a sample, or can accept mine as a sound one. One sample does not refute or disconfirm another; if two are in disagreement they vie with one another for the same confirmation. The only source of confirmation here is ourselves. And each of us is fully authoritative in this struggle.⁶⁸

Wittgenstein is speaking for himself, but also inviting us to accept it, to see that we do indeed operate with the distinction between facts and values that he explains. His Lecture does not contain arguments so much as *articulations* of his own life with ethical language. Nor would his position be strengthened by the gathering of empirical evidence. Cavell goes on to describe the situation where others reject the invitations of the ordinary language philosopher:

At such a crossroads we have to conclude that on this point we are simply different; that is, we cannot here speak for one another. But no claim has been made which has been disconfirmed; my authority has been

⁶⁸ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 19.

restricted. [...] when it turns out that I should not like to say that, he is not obliged to correct his statement in order to account for my difference; rather he retracts it in the face of my rebuke. He hasn't said something false about "us"; he has learned that there is no us (yet, maybe never) to say anything about. What is wrong with his statement is that he made it to the wrong party.⁶⁹

If it did turn out that the majority of us felt no inclination to go beyond the facts, or could associate nothing with this idea, this would not solve *Wittgenstein's* problem that he wishes to say something else. Conversely if it turns out that the moral realist is alone in being satisfied with the facts and not understanding what else there might be to say, that would not solve *her* problem that she cannot see what the rest of us are getting at. She is only wrong if in her philosophizing she is missing a distinction she *does* work with in her own life, through not attending properly to her own conceptual life — but this cannot be proven by any empirical evidence about what people in general are inclined to say.

1.4.3 The paradox of analysis

Another objection to Moore's Open Question is that seems to rest on the assumption that no analysis of a concept could ever be informative; hence, it proves too much, and rests on an untenable assumption. If a competent speaker might find the question "I see that it's *P*, but is it good" intelligible for any *P*, this does not show that "good" cannot be analyzed in terms of *P*, but only that the analysis is not obvious to that particular competent speaker. As David Lewis writes: "Whenever it is analytic that all A's are B's, but not obviously analytic, the Moorean open question — whether all A's are indeed B's — is intelligible. And not only is it intelligible in the sense that we can parse and interpret it (that much is true even of the question whether all A's are A's) but also in the sense that it makes sense as something to say in a serious discussion, as an expression of genuine doubt."⁷⁰ The dispositional analysis of color terms, for example — according to which "redness is the property that causes objects to look red to normal perceivers under standard conditions"⁷¹ — is not at all immediately obvious to competent speakers of English, yet it might still capture our concepts of color.

We respond to this objection by noting again that we feel that a fact is the wrong *kind* of thing to answer the kind of question that we have. Where we are looking for something factual, an analysis

⁶⁹ Ibid., 19f.

⁷⁰ Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value", 129-30. See also Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 37-39 and Miller, *Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 16-7.

⁷¹ Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 29.

might inform us what that fact is; but it is unlikely that any analysis will be so informative as to reveal that we are asking an entirely different sort of question than what we thought. However, it is worth pursuing the point in more detail. Let us suppose that I have a real doubt as to whether something that increases pleasure is good. I am in a frame of mind where I cannot see the sense of the human pursuit of pleasure at all — perhaps it strikes in that moment as so much “vanity and striving after wind” — and I cannot see why I should help this senseless pursuit along at all. Now suppose that a philosopher’s conceptual analysis reveals to me that the concept *goodness* is identical to the property of *promoting pleasure*. What is this supposed to mean to me? Will I now see that I must go out and promote pleasure? Will this now seem reasonable and sensible to me? It seems incredible that the definition of a concept could have that sort of authority to convince me to live differently. We could accept this analysis and still be left with the same very real moral question we began with. And now the second step in the “Open Question” argument is to claim: if the conceptual analysis of *good* leaves this sort of question open, then it wasn’t an analysis of a moral concept; and insofar as there is a *moral* concept *good*, we haven’t analyzed *that* yet.

One might object here that I have relied on a preposterously thin and arbitrary notion of conceptual analysis. Michael Smith explains conceptual analysis in terms of capturing “the maximal consistent set of platitudes constitutive of mastery of the term” in question. For example, there are all sorts of platitudes about color terms that constitute a competent speaker’s mastery of the term: platitudes about “the phenomenology of color experience”, about the relations between colors, “corrective platitudes linking real as opposed to illusory colors to features of perceivers and their environments”, platitudes about “the way we learn color terms”, etc.⁷² The dispositional analysis of color terms is correct if it captures all the platitudes *we already are committed to*, that competent users of color terms treat as platitudinous, that govern their “inferential and judgmental dispositions.” Similarly, the correct analysis of goodness, while it might be informative, would nonetheless be an analysis that would capture the platitudes that already govern our use of the term. — But couldn’t I come to question these platitudes, to ask whether these inferential and judgmental dispositions are right? Could it not happen that I step back from the platitudes I have internalized as a competent speaker and question them? And if these platitudes could seriously come into question for me, and if that would itself be a moral question, then surely this shows us that no moral term could be analyzed in terms of those platitudes? Whereas it would be very silly to question the platitudes about color terms we have internalized. Another way of putting the same point: the frame

⁷² Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 29f.

of mind in which I am asking whether it really is good to promote pleasure is a frame of mind in which I don't know what implications and what platitudes to accept. When Moore writes that "so far as the meaning of good goes, anything whatever may be good"⁷³, we can read this as meaning that the concept *good* is such that the platitudes governing its use are essentially contestable⁷⁴ — whereas the platitudes governing other obviously referential terms are comfortably settled. (Whatever platitudes you name, the fact that we infer and judge in accordance with these platitudes is *just a fact* and nothing more.)

Of course in all of these regress arguments, most of the time we are not faced with a real question: most of the time I know what to do with the definition of a word, a set of premises, a means to one of my ends, or an innocent child drowning in a shallow pond. In cases where there is no real question of how to go on, stating the facts is sufficient. I can look up the definition of "fuchsia" and be informed about what the word means, because I already know *what to do* with color terms; similarly, I know what to do with a child in a nearby shallow pond who needs saving from drowning. That a real question could logically arise, is enough to show the existence of a task of thought that can remain open in the face of all the facts, even when the question is not a 'live' one. We can show that a question could arise by imagining people who go on in different and startling ways than we do; Wittgenstein does this constantly in motivating the "rule-following" problem, and this is the point of Horgan and Timmons' Twin Earth thought-experiment. We can also come to feel the existence of the Open Question by thinking of modes of investigation where we are intentionally abstracting from any moral aspects, for example in scientific investigations, or in the investigations of a detective who wants "just the facts"; this shows us that it is possible for us to gather a great many facts in abstraction from any moral commitments, which shows us that moral thinking is something different from the gathering of facts. When Wittgenstein claims in the Lecture that "all the facts stand on the same level", he is not really suggesting that nothing matters to him; he is trying to articulate this possible way of seeing the facts that isolates the facts from their mattering in any way.

It is harder to see this distinction if we focus solely on the question of "what to do", for the point of examples like the child drowning in the shallow pond is to describe a situation where it is exceedingly obvious that there is one and only one thing to do; it seems like the question couldn't possibly be open. When we turn to the question of *significance* we see how much room there is for

⁷³ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 72.

⁷⁴ I return to the notion of essential contestability in chapter 4.5.

moral creativity in the attitudes we take; and this will also filter down to the level of action and affect what actions we see as necessary. If for example someone came to see humanity as an evil, perhaps from ecological considerations, then she might manage to disagree with us about what response is appropriate in the case of the drowning child. If she still felt that she had to save the child, she might see this as a vestige of false sentimentality, as an emotional reaction she rationally disowns. It isn't obvious that her attitude is wrong; in any case it's a perfectly understandable attitude and her cognizance of the relevant facts need not be erroneous. Someone else might believe with something like moral fervor in characterizing all phenomena in purely scientific or value-neutral terms, so that a murder would be, as Hume says of suicide, "turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channels"⁷⁵; she might come to this attitude out of some concern for an ideal of truth or honesty or ruthless adherence to reality. For her as well, if she did manage to actually hold this attitude and not merely entertain it, the question of what to do with the drowning child would not necessarily be obviously closed. (She would perhaps save the child, but not see this as something she did for a reason, or something she did only for instrumental reasons, e.g. to save herself from uncomfortable psychological consequences.) The sense that facts leave a question open can arise when we sense within ourselves a boundless moral creativity; when we come to feel there really are *no limits* to the sort of sensible attitudes people might take.⁷⁶

1.4.4 Question-begging

Finally, it has been alleged that Moore's procedure is frankly question-begging; if a philosopher proposes property *P* as a certain definition of "good", and Moore argues that the question "Is *P* good?" is open and that therefore the definition fails, the original philosopher would surely just deny that the question is open and that anything has been demonstrated; after all, the philosopher's thesis just is that "good" means *P*.⁷⁷ Wittgenstein's Lecture is not question-begging, as he is first and foremost simply articulating his own sense of what he means by his ethical language, and of the distinction between fact and value that this involves. He will be persuasive insofar as he leads us to recognize that we speak and think similarly, that we operate with a similar distinction. I cannot

⁷⁵ Hume, "On Suicide", 320. It is interesting in this connection that Hume's argument for the licitness of suicide involves the claim that "[e]very event is alike important" in the eyes of God, that "the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster". (318f.)

⁷⁶ We can get a sense of Wittgenstein's endless curiosity about various ethical and religious viewpoints in his remarks on Frazer and the notes on his "Lectures on religious belief" and for example in Bouwsma's notes on his conversations with Wittgenstein. This great interest in the variety of intelligible attitudes one could take to one's experience also runs through Winch's work on moral understanding; see for example "Moral Integrity" and "Can a Good Man Be Harmed?" in *Ethics and Action*. Diamond has also repeatedly argued that we cannot place any limits in advance on the ways we might make moral sense of our experience; see for example "How Many Legs?", 177.

⁷⁷ See Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy"; Miller, *Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 15.

argue this here, but one way to read the *Tractatus* is that it seeks to isolate and clarify as far as possible the activity of factual description, so as to bring out the difference between this activity and others: e.g. the development of mathematical techniques or a logical notation, or the ethical task of relating to our lives as a whole. The striking thing about Wittgenstein's conception of these latter activities is that they are not only distinct from factual description but do not hinge in *any* way upon any particular facts obtaining; they require only that *a* world is given. I now turn to Wittgenstein's example of an ethical attitude to any and all facts, "How extraordinary that anything should exist".

1.5 What is the sense of the world?

Wittgenstein's list of the different ways one might define ethics in the opening of the Lecture includes "the enquiry into the meaning of life" (PO 38). The experience that best captures what he means by ethical value is when "*I wonder at the existence of the world*", when he is inclined to say "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist", which he later calls "the experience of seeing the world as a miracle". (PO 41-3) This is not a principle of action, but is nonetheless recognizably an ethical statement; someone who really sees the world as a miracle would live differently. They would at the very least not do anything unethical out of base motives — they would not cheat or steal or harm others out of dissatisfaction with what they have, out of a sense that they deserve more⁷⁸. Wittgenstein's idea is very close to the idea at the heart of G.K. Chesterton's apologia for Christianity, that "the world is a wild and startling place"⁷⁹, and Chesterton brings out clearly how this connects with a sense of gratefulness, humility, and restraint in conduct. Moreover, for both Chesterton and Wittgenstein suicide is the elementary sin, as it is a rejection of the world as a whole — a declaration that nothing in the world is good enough. Wittgenstein writes: "Wenn der Selbstmord erlaubt ist, dann ist alles erlaubt. Wenn etwas

⁷⁸ Nigel Pleasants criticizes the use of this experience of Wittgenstein's as a moral example: "I recognise the experience that Wittgenstein reported in his lecture, and yet it seems to me not to be an experience of ethical value. Nothing of ethical import attaches to this experience or thought; no imperatives for action issue from it. If certain modes of respectful and non-exploitative action towards 'the world' qua natural world were commended on the basis of the experience, it would then be an experience or thought concerning ethical value. But Wittgenstein's attitude to the experience is purely contemplative, and therefore it is, I think, more appropriately described as an aesthetic experience (of 'the sublime', as Kant would call it), not an ethical experience." (Pleasants, "Wittgenstein, Ethics and Basic Moral Certainty", 246) I have already argued that the emphasis on "imperative for action" in moral philosophy is misguided. It is also true that Wittgenstein does not "commend" any modes of response to the world "on the basis" of this experience. Pleasants seems to overlook the possibility that *seeing the world as a miracle* can itself be a mode of response to the world and therefore of ethical import prior to and independent of any imperatives and commendations, or that responding more contemplatively to the world might amount to responding less egocentrically and demandingly. I discuss the ethical import of this example in greater in 2.3.

⁷⁹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 103.

nicht erlaubt ist, dass ist der Selbstmord nicht erlaubt. [...] der Selbstmord ist sozusagen die elementare Sünde.” (TB 187) Chesterton writes similarly: “Not only is suicide a sin, it is the sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence”.⁸⁰

Relatedly, Wittgenstein returned again and again in his war-time notebooks to a hedonistic conception of ethics, but the notion of *happiness* involved in this conception is connected to the notion of taking a certain stance to the world, however the facts may turn out. “Um glücklich zu leben, muß ich in Übereinstimmung sein mit der Welt. Und dies heißt ja “glücklich sein”.” (TB 169; cf. TB 168.) Wittgenstein’s intimate friend Paul Engelmann summarized Wittgenstein’s attitude as follows:

Wenn ich ein Mensch bin, der sich unglücklich fühlt und der weiß, daß sein Unglück in einem wesentlichen Mißverhältnis zwischen sich und dem Leben, wie es ist, besteht, so bin ich doch auf einem Irrwege und kann keinen Ausweg aus dem Chaos meiner Gefühle und Gedanken finden, solange mir nicht die allein entscheidende Erkenntnis kommt, daß an diesem Mißverhältnis nicht das Leben, wie es ist, schuld ist, sondern ich selbst, wie ich bin, schuld bin.⁸¹

If we take this notion of the world as a miracle as the central example of ethical thought, then ethics becomes identical to religion, according to William James’ definition in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “a man’s total reaction upon life”⁸². James himself conflates morality and religion in this sense:

“I accept the universe” is reported to have been a favorite utterance of our New England transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller; and when some one repeated this phrase to Thomas Carlyle, his sardonic comment is said to have been: “Gad! she’d better!” At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe. Do we accept it only in part and grudgingly, or heartily and altogether? Shall our protests against certain things in it be radical and unforgiving, or shall we think that, even with evil, there are ways of living that must lead to good? If we accept the whole, shall we do so as if stunned into submission, —as Carlyle would have us—“Gad! we’d better!”—or shall we do so with enthusiastic assent?⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid., 129.

⁸¹ Somavilla, *Wittgenstein — Engelmann*, 97

⁸² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 42.

⁸³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 46f. In 1912 Wittgenstein wrote to Russell that he was reading this book “[w]henver I have time” —McGuinness, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 14. James also mentions several ideas found in early Wittgenstein, for example the idea of the world bearing an expressive face (“The outward face of nature need not alter, but the expressions of meaning in it alter. It was dead and is alive again.” (408)), the “sense of enlargement of life” (241), and the sense of absolute safety and happiness that comes with abnegation of the self (52).

And ethics is for Wittgenstein largely inseparable from religious belief as he understands it. For Chesterton the view of the world as “wild and startling” is part of his argument for belief in God; he seems to view the startling world as evidence for a divine creator⁸⁴. Wittgenstein, in contrast, says that the extraordinariness of the world is *what people meant* in saying that God created the world. McGuinness speaks of the “the refusal to identify oneself with one part of the world rather than another”⁸⁵, which nicely brings out how Wittgenstein is simply echoing the tradition of Christian mysticism; Meister Eckhart for example felt that we are unjust to the world whenever we are partial: “wenn ein Ding sie freuen kann und ein anderes sie betrüben, dann sind sie nicht gerecht. Wenn sie vielmehr einmal froh sind, dann sind sie allzeit froh; sind sie einmal froher und ein anderes Mal weniger froh, dann tun sie darin unrecht.”⁸⁶ In a discussion of Wittgensteinian ethics, Michael Kremer points us to a verse from Angelus Silesius, whom Wittgenstein had also read around this period: “Mensch, so du etwas liebst, so liebst du nichts fürwahr / Gott ist nicht dies und das, drum laß das Etwas gar.”⁸⁷

This attitude to the world as a whole thus does not depend upon any facts. “Nicht *wie* die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern *daß* sie da ist”, (*TLP* 6.44) he writes, “Wie die Welt ist, ist für das Höhere vollkommen gleichgültig” (*TLP* 6.432) In a conversation with Waismann he is reported to have said: “Die Tatsachen sind für mich unwichtig. Aber mir liegt das am Herzen, was die Menschen meinen, wenn sie sagen, daß “*die Welt da ist*” (*WWK* 118). He does not think that this world happens to be the best of all possible worlds; to say that is still to speak relatively. He makes it clear that when he says that the world is extraordinary and a miracle, he is speaking absolutely, i.e. his application of the concepts has no factual criterion; he does not mean what he says to be conditional upon anything. Moreover, his attitude cannot hinge upon supernatural facts either; and this affects his own understanding and appropriation of religious language. The ethical force of the idea that “God had created the world” cannot depend on it being some kind of a fact that God created the world — that a kind of willed being caused the world to come into existence. If it were a fact that God created the world, this would be a *part* of the world as defined by the *Tractatus*, i.e.

⁸⁴ This may not be the only way or the best way to read Chesterton, but it represents fairly what he in fact says.

⁸⁵ McGuinness, “The Mysticism of the ‘Tractatus’”, 318. Oddly, McGuinness suggests a connection to Russell’s 1914 article “Mysticism and Logic”, and Anscombe goes so far as to claim that Wittgenstein adopted the term “mysticism” from Russell (Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 170). Cf. Russell, “Mysticism and Logic”. On the topic of ethics and religion Wittgenstein did not hold Russell’s work in high regard, and in fact proposed once that, since their worldviews were so far apart, they should restrict their conversation to “die Mitteilung objectiv feststellbarer Tatsachen” and “die Mitteilung unserer freundschaftlichen Gefühle” and avoid all other topics. Von Wright, *Letters*, 52. The Christian mystics that Wittgenstein was familiar with, i.e. Angelus Silesius or St. John of the Cross, are not mentioned in Russell’s article; he considers instead philosophers such as Plato, Parmenides, Hegel, etc.

⁸⁶ Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten*, 37.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Kremer, “To What Extent is Solipsism a Truth”, 76.

“everything that is the case”, and the question of his attitude towards all these facts would be open. We would be perfectly free in that case to resent God for having made an imperfect world. Wittgenstein explained to Waismann:

Schlick sagt, es gab in der theologischen Ethik zwei Auffassungen vom Wesen des Guten: nach der flacheren Deutung ist das Gute deshalb gut, weil Gott es will; nach der tieferen Deutung will Gott das Gute deshalb, weil es gut ist. Ich meine, daß die erste Auffassung die tiefere ist: gut ist, was Gott befiehlt. Denn sie schneidet den Weg einer jeden Erklärung, “warum” es gut ist, ab, während gerade die zweite Auffassung die flache, die rationalistische ist, die so tut, “als ob” das, was gut ist, noch begründet werden könnte.

Die erste Auffassung sagt klar, daß das Wesen des Guten nichts mit den Tatsachen zu tun hat, und daher durch keinen Satz erklärt werden kann. Wenn es einen Satz gibt, der gerade das ausdrückt, was ich meine, so ist es der Satz: Gut ist, was Gott befiehlt. (WWK 115)

His own expression of what he means — good is what God commands — differs from either of the alternatives: the good is good because God wills it, or God wills the good because it is good. In speaking for himself he elides the word “because” and in fact what gives this idea its depth for him is precisely its rejection of *any* explanation. There is an interesting difference between what I will call a global vision of significance, such as “the world is a miracle”, which seems to predicate something of everything and anything, and on the other hand more local attributions of significance. The global version treats everything in the world equally — McGuinness summarizes it as the view that “nothing *in* the world is particularly important or unimportant”⁸⁸ – and thus it seems to put us right back where we started, where “alle Sätze sind gleichwertig” (*T* 6.4), where all facts “stand on the same level”, where “[t]he murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone” (*PO* 39). Using Wittgenstein’s image from the Lecture of a book containing “the whole description of the world” (*PO* 39), and recalling Donatelli’s remark that the ethical is not “something that we have to look for in the proposition or beside the proposition [...] but in our involvement with propositions”, we can distinguish between the local and global cases without overrunning our fact/value distinction. We could imagine value judgments in one case as an underlining of certain sentences in the book of the world, or as a reading of those sentences with a heightened attention. This gives us a neutral metaethical representation of any possible ethical view, and is an appropriate way to see the first half of Wittgenstein’s Lecture, before he turns to his own ethical view, when he is still focused on the more expected type of value judgments such as “you ought to want to behave better”. His own personal ethical vision would then be represented by someone refusing to underline any of the sentences, or underlining all of them, taking in everything

⁸⁸ McGuinness, “The Mysticism of the ‘Tractatus’”, 319.

with the same rapt interest. This is perhaps a limit case of an ethical view on the first, metaethical conception, just as the tautology is the limit case of the meaningful proposition. The suicide, as Wittgenstein and Chesterton conceive him, would on this picture be someone who throws away the whole book in contempt, who has no use for any of its sentences; and this would perhaps be a limit case in the way a contradiction is. In each of these cases however it remains true that ethical value is not represented by any proposition within the book but rather by our involvement with those propositions. Yet this provides a different and additional motivation for the sense of an “Open Question”. We might find it open because we can imagine people intelligibly responding differently to facts, giving different moral weight to certain facts; but we might also find it open if we share Wittgenstein’s own moral vision that *no* fact merits any particular moral prominence.

1.6 Sui generis facts, non-natural facts, supernatural facts

Moore believed that his Open Question argument ruled out the identification of goodness with any *other* property; but goodness was for him a *sui generis*, non-natural property. That something is good is then, for Moore, a fact, though a non-natural and wholly unique fact. Hence where Wittgenstein sees a fact/value distinction, Moore sees a distinction between moral facts and other facts. Moreover, the sort of dialogue Wittgenstein uses to demonstrate the difference between facts and values does not seem to have any force against non-naturalist realism:

A: (observing Wittgenstein tell a preposterous lie): You’re behaving like a beast.

B: I know I behave badly, but then I don’t want to behave any better.

~~A: Ah, then that’s all right.~~

A: Well, you ought to want to behave better.

This dialogue is meant to show that when the facts have been stated, there is still something else we want to say. But the non-naturalist can agree that there is still something else we want to say after all the (other) facts have been named; but she will always end by saying that this last statement is nonetheless a statement of fact, a non-natural, *sui generis* fact irreducible to any other kind of fact.

The non-naturalist can agree that Wittgenstein is perfectly sincere in feeling that he wants to say something that goes beyond the facts, but she will argue that he has nonetheless misunderstood something; for what he wants to say goes beyond only the other, non-moral facts. Wittgenstein’s book of the world is a book of the non-moral world; it leaves value questions open because it needs supplementing, not by our own personal involvement with the propositions of the book, but by an

appendix containing the moral facts. And a contemporary non-naturalist could drop Moore's idea that "goodness" is the foundational concept of morality, and speak of a plethora of non-natural facts of oughtness, mattering etc. — this seems to be Parfit's approach, for example.⁸⁹ The non-naturalist could moreover accommodate the first aspect of the "non-departmental conception of ethics", namely that there are no terms specifically and uniquely suited to discussing the non-natural properties of oughtness, mattering, etc., yet deny the second aspect and hold that we are nonetheless, when we deliberate morally, deliberating about these specifically moral properties. This non-naturalist could agree that in some sense ethics "pervades our whole life", because these moral properties always have a bearing on what we're doing, just like logical properties, even if they are usually not problematic for us and hence do not need to be explicitly thought about. And it seems that within our first-order discourse, this non-naturalist can say everything that Wittgenstein wants to say; she will only say something different philosophically *about* what she has said, namely that in speaking about what matters she has been speaking factually.

We might want to respond with the argument in 1.4.1, holding that the task of moral thought is different in kind than any recognition of facts, and hence all facts must necessarily leave this task unresolved. To use Wittgenstein's metaphor, if the book of the world needs supplementing with an appendix of moral facts, we would still have to decide what to do with this appendix — do we read it with interest, do we throw it away, etc. To put it less metaphorically, if there were such facts about what matters, we would still need to settle our attitude towards these facts. In his defense of non-naturalism Parfit has made it clear that this objection cannot convince any non-naturalist without begging the question. If the idea is supposed to be that I might see that it is a fact that I ought to do some action A, and yet not actually do it or be at all motivated to do it, then this is only a problem for a non-naturalist who assumes motivational internalism. But the premise of motivational internalism is not necessarily compelling, and I have argued that it is anyways entirely orthogonal to Wittgenstein's fact/value distinction. If the idea is supposed to be that I might see that it is a fact that I ought to do some action A but still be left with the question: ought I do do A, then the non-naturalist will simply deny this as absurd. The fact that I ought to do something closes the question of whether I ought to do it. It must be this way: these non-natural moral facts are defined specifically as the facts that close our moral questions. It is important to note, however, that the non-naturalist explains her facts entirely negatively: all we know about them is that they are facts somehow, that they answer moral questions.⁹⁰ If we accept that idea of these sorts of facts is

⁸⁹ Parfit, "Normativity".

⁹⁰ Parfit himself seems to be perfectly frank about this; see "Normativity".

coherent, there is no argument left against non-naturalism.

Wittgenstein had read Moore's *Principia Ethica*, and wrote to Russell: "I do not like it at all. (Mind you, quite *apart* from disagreeing with most of it.)"⁹¹ Though he mentions Moore in the Lecture, he provides no specific argument against non-naturalism. I will suggest here that an argument can be reconstructed from Wittgenstein's objections in his later work to the idea of Platonic "rails to infinity" meant to explain the necessity in our use of concepts, and the argument questions the coherence of the idea of non-natural facts. But it is easiest to present the argument first in a simple form through a different kind of example.

Let us imagine a novelist whose work is going very well: she is perfectly certain how her novel must develop and is setting it down page after page with no hesitation. She is inspired and might say: it's as if the novel's already there and she's just taking dictation, or: a higher power is telling her what to write. It is common for writers to say this sort of thing. We have here something like the idea of a Platonic novel, and the novelist as somehow in epistemic contact with Platonic novel, guiding her own writing through this contact. Now this gives us an image that expresses perfectly well the novelist's sense of necessity: she sees quite clearly how the novel must go. If the image is meant to do more than this, to seriously explain *how* she is writing it or to justify *why* she is writing at as she is, then it is insufficient. For it is, first of all, not much more than an image; it is far from being a clear idea. We are imagining something like an actual novel, but not really like it, not like it in not being actual. We have a clear idea of what an actual novel is, and our Platonic novel is defined negatively in terms of an actual novel. As I will argue below, this is not so much an idea as an image and a certain hesitation in our own meaning, a wavering in our commitment to our words: we mean an actual novel, but not really. It is meant as real, but not *really* real. — For if we did have a clearer conception of some kind of non-physical novel, it wouldn't do the work we want it to do. For the novelist, if she is worth anything as a novelist, did not set out to plagiarize a spooky book. She wants to write the novel that *she* means, and to write it in her own voice. If there really were a voice in her head reciting some already written novel, this could only be a distraction to her as she is trying to figure out what *she* means to write, what *she must* write. The argument against a realist account of the novelist's inspiration is then: we have no real conception of what the ideal novel would be, and if we did, it wouldn't help us.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein develops a line of thought that seems to show that our *meaning*

⁹¹ Von Wright, *Letters*, 9.

something by our words cannot be reduced to any kind of fact. When I say “add 2” as a rule for continuing a number series, what makes it such that this means I am to proceed from 500 to 502 rather than 504? It cannot be that I *do* proceed from 500 to 502, for we must first know how I meant to rule in order to know when I would count as making a mistake. It cannot be anything present to the mind at the time I say “add 2”. We might find, upon introspection, that there is not very much present to my mind except the thought “add 2”; but any images or words we do find will be items that could have been meant any number of ways or meant nothing at all. We cannot appeal to the collective behavior of my linguistic community, for the sum total of their actual behaviors or dispositions are also compatible with any number of interpretations that would make it a mistake to proceed from 500 to 502. It seems that meaning cannot be any kind of fact. Of course when I get to 500 I know how to go on, and I will feel that I couldn’t do anything else than go on to 502 as long as I intend to follow the rule “add 2”; but we can find nothing that makes it right to go on that way or that could explain this necessity. It is at this point that the idea of Platonic rails stretching to infinity emerges, along with the parallel idea of a subject who *sense* these rails somehow — an idea born of desperation. Wittgenstein returns to this point several times:

Du hast kein Vorbild dieser übermäßigen Tatsache, aber du wirst dazu verführt, einen Über-Ausdruck zu gebrauchen. (§192)

“Die Übergänge sind eigentlich alle schon gemacht” heißt: ich habe keine Wahl mehr. Die Regel, einmal mit einer bestimmten Bedeutung gestempelt, zieht die Linien ihrer Befolgung durch den ganzen Raum. —Aber wenn so etwas wirklich der Fall wäre, was hülfe es mir? Nein; meine Beschreibung hatte nur Sinn, wenn sie symbolisch zu verstehen war. — *So kommt es mir vor* — sollte ich sagen. (§219)

“Eine Reihe hat für uns ein Gesicht!” — Wohl; aber welches? Nun doch das algebraische, und das eines Stücks der Entwicklung. Oder hat sie noch eins? — “Aber in dem liegt doch schon alles!” — Aber das ist keine Feststellung über das Reihenglied, oder über etwas, was wir darin erblicken; sondern der Ausdruck dafür, daß wir nur auf den Mund der Regel schauen und tun, und an keine weitere Anleitung appellieren. (§228)

“Die Linie gibt’s mir ein, wie ich gehen soll”: das paraphrasiert nur: sie sei meine *letzte* Instanz dafür, wie ich gehen soll. (§230)

“Aber du siehst doch ...!” Nun, das ist eben die charakteristische Äußerung Eines, der von der Regel gezwungen ist. (§231)

The idea that rails are guiding my use of a concept could be a symbolic expression of the fact that *I know how to go on*, that I feel that I must go on in a certain way and I can see quite clearly what that

way is. The idea cannot serve to explain what the right way to go on would consist in. For in trying to use the idea to explain or justify, we face a dilemma: either we don't really know what we mean, or what we mean cannot do the work we want it to do. Our only model of these rails is actual rails, and actual rails — a real mechanism that caused me to go on in a certain way — could not explain what makes one way of going on *right*. But of course the idea is one of rails that are, in a sense, *like* actual rails, but not really. But how exactly are these Platonic rails supposed to differ from actual rails? If they are merely supposed to be non-physical, it is not clear what a non-physical rail is, but it is also not clear how that would make a difference. The related image of an ideal machine faces similar problems (§193-4), as does the idea of an inner voice: “Nur Intuition konnte diesen Zweifel heben? — Wenn sie eine innere Stimme ist, — wie weiß ich, *wie* ich ihr folgen soll?” (§213)⁹²

We can now turn to Moore's non-natural moral property. Moore's question, “I see that it's *P*, but is it good?” is a test meant to show that goodness cannot be explained in terms of any other property. Moore's own property of non-natural goodness is supposed to pass the test. But it is *defined* only as a property that passes the test; we are given no further characterization of it. If the property seems to pass the test, it is only because we have no real conception of that property in the first place. When I try to imagine encountering the property of goodness, either I am just imagining believing something to be good — in which case the question “is it good” is obviously closed for me — or I don't know what exactly I am meant to be imagining; or I imagine some more specific property, and then find that the question is open. But I have no conception of a property that would underlie and justify my finding something good, such that I would encounter it and then come to my judgment that something is good on the basis of that encounter. — Of course in a sense what I have just said is not true: I could encounter some property and decide on that basis that something is good; if I learn that a certain government policy in fact promotes people's happiness, I will on that basis conclude that the policy is good, because I find happiness generally good. But again this is not what Moore meant. If someone wants to know what makes happiness good, I cannot say that I have encountered a property of “goodness” adhering to happiness.

Moore writes at points as if he has encountered the non-natural property within his own experience;

⁹² In what seems to be a discussion of the idea of causality as a necessary connection between events, Wittgenstein comes to a similar diagnosis: “The idea of something super-strict, something stricter than any Judge can be, super-rigidity. The point being, you are inclined to ask: ‘Do we have a picture of something more rigorous?’ Hardly. But we are inclined to express ourselves in the form of a superlative. [...] Suppose there was a super-mechanism in the sense that there was a mechanism inside the string. Even if there was such a mechanism, it would do no good.” (*LC* 16)

not only that he finds some things good, as we all do, that he has encountered within experience the property that justifies his judgments that some things are good; and he is, unfortunately, not in a position to say anything about it, and can only hope that we all know what he means by reflecting on our own experience. “Whenever he thinks of ‘intrinsic value,’ or ‘intrinsic worth,’ or says that a thing ‘ought to exist,’ he has before his mind the unique object — the unique property of things — which I mean by ‘good.’”⁹³ At these points Moore’s idea of “goodness” resembles the ineffable logical and moral properties that many have read into the *Tractatus* — properties we all somehow know about, though we can say nothing about them. Many of Moore’s critics have picked up on this point. Stevenson writes, for example: “For I recollect no Platonic Idea, nor do I know what to try to recollect. I find no indefinable property, nor do I know what to look for.”⁹⁴

It is in fact plainly to be seen in Moore’s text that he does not really know what he means by speaking of a *sui generis*, non-natural property; it can be seen most clearly in the fourth chapter, where he tries to extend the “naturalistic fallacy” to other non-natural characterizations of ethics, such as the “metaphysical ethics” of the Stoics, Spinoza, Kant, and some people influenced by Hegel. He had spoken in the first chapter of good as a “unique object”, and merely stipulated that it is not a “natural object”⁹⁵. But of course a philosopher such as Kant would also deny that goodness is a natural object. Moore now claims that good cannot be any “supersensible” property either or refer to any “supersensible” reality, that in fact good is not one of the “objects of experience”.⁹⁶ He goes so far as to write:

To hold that from any proposition asserting ‘Reality is of this nature’ we can infer, or obtain confirmation for, any proposition asserting ‘This is good in itself’ is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. [...] [Judgments of goodness] cannot be reduced to any assertion about reality, and therefore must remain unaffected by any conclusions we may reach about the nature of reality.⁹⁷

[...] if our Metaphysics is to have any bearing upon this part of the ethical problem, it must be because the fact that something is real gives a reason for thinking that it or something else is good, whether it be real or not. That any such fact can give any such reason is impossible.⁹⁸

⁹³ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 68.

⁹⁴ Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning”, 30.

⁹⁵ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 65.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

Moreover these systems of metaphysical ethics commit the error of explaining goodness in terms of existents; whereas the attribution of goodness does not assert “either that something exists or that something which exists has a certain attribute.”⁹⁹

It sounds here as if Moore were in agreement with Wittgenstein, who defines “the world” as everything that is the case and then writes that value is not to be found anywhere in the world. I would then, when I call something good, not be saying that *it is the case* that that something has a certain property, non-natural, “supersensible” or otherwise. After all, Moore thinks that *the whole of existence* and *the whole of reality* leave the question of value open.

Moore tries to get out of this implication, however, by distinguishing between *existence* and *being*. Goodness *is*, but it does not *exist*; and here it is similar to other objects such as numbers: “Two is somehow, although it does not exist.” He glosses existence here in terms of spatio-temporal existence, and also in terms of “what we can touch and see and feel”.¹⁰⁰ Goodness is not, then, outside of the world in terms of everything that is the case; it is only outside of all that is the case in space and time or, alternately, that is sense-perceptibly the case. — Yet Moore nonetheless feels that his Open Question argument prohibits the identification of goodness with such metaphysical entities as Spinoza’s absolute substance or Kant’s rational will, even though these are very much non-temporal and non-sensible. He argues that these metaphysical philosophers have conceived goodness as an *existent*, as *real*, even though they are quite explicit about the non-temporal and non-sensible nature of these things.¹⁰¹ At this point it is fair to lose patience with Moore and conclude: he has really no idea how the *sui generis* property of goodness is supposed to differ from anything else. He has no idea how any property could close the Open Question, natural or non-natural. His only grasp on what he means in speaking of the the property of goodness is that it is a property that *somehow* closes this question. It is *sui generis* not in being “non-natural” — that it is not spatio-temporal or sensible is a red herring — it is *sui generis* in that it does what no other property does, and what Moore himself finds inconceivable, namely it closes the question. It is not surprising that he eventually ended up admitting in later years that value predicates are simply not descriptive at all.¹⁰² Moore’s property of goodness looks like the rails to infinity posited by the platonist about meaning, which David Finkelstein has called “mysterious, regress-stopping items”. As Finkelstein writes:

⁹⁹ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 161-2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 161-6.

¹⁰² Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 297.

[...] we can think of platonism as a desperate attempt to block the infinite regress of interpretations [...] The platonist posits special items which — unlike noises, marks and gestures — are, as it were, intrinsically significant [...] the platonist really has no idea how anything *could* block the regress of interpretations [...] The platonist is driven in the course of his theorizing to say that there are — there *must* be — such items, but they seem mysterious even to him.¹⁰³

We can make sense of this idea of goodness as a non-real property just as we can make sense of the idea of the ethereal novel that is already written or the rails to infinity: as a symbolic expression. Moore feels himself under some necessity to respond to social pleasure as a good, to preserve and promote it, quite as if the social pleasure itself were making him; yet of course he also knows that nothing about it really *makes* him respond, and if it did, that wouldn't be what he meant. What he means is perfectly expressed by a hesitation in meaning, by speaking of something that is and yet is not a real constraint on him. His term “non-natural” is misleading, in seeming like a well-defined piece of technical jargon, though he never succeeded in defining it; Wittgenstein gets the point across much better by speaking frankly of the “supernatural”. In the Lecture he writes: “Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural” — but of course we have no real idea of how any supernatural facts could do the work of morally obligating us either. This is to be taken in the same spirit as the statement: “if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.” (PO 40)

1.6.1 Deflationism about facts

There is however a theoretical motivation for speaking of non-natural facts that is worth examining, as it will force us to sharpen our sense of what the fact/value distinction is doing. It is a problem for any anti-realist that on a deflationary understanding of the notions of truth and facts, anyone who is committed to any moral opinions seems necessarily a realist. I had said that when Wittgenstein writes that “all the facts ... stand on the same level”, he is presumably not voicing his own opinion that nothing matters, but rather only claiming that how something matters is not any fact or entailed by any fact. Wittgenstein says for himself: the world is a miracle. If we accept that this is in fact an assertion (though Wittgenstein himself calls it nonsense; I will go into the difficulties involved here in the next chapter) this can be enough to contradict the fact/value distinction. On the deflationary or minimalist understanding of truth, *p* is equivalent in meaning to *it is true that p* — aside from the rhetorical inflation we might hear in the second — and this is the full account of truth in general;

¹⁰³ Finkelstein, “Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism”, 54-7

there is nothing the truth of p would consist in except p . So any ethical assertion will be the assertion of something as truth, and by a similar route we can conclude that any ethical assertion will be the assertion that *something is the case*. If the “world” is “everything that is the case”, then in making ethical assertions we will be saying things about the world. The deflationary account of truth stems from Frege and Ramsey¹⁰⁴, two great influences on Wittgenstein, and by the time of the *Investigations* at the latest he had accepted it (*PI* §136). As the *Tractatus* aligns *fact* and *state of affair* with *truth*, it will be natural to think that a deflationary account of facts and states of affairs must follow; and then moral facts and moral states of affairs would be entailed quite trivially by any moral assertions. And if we include a deflationary understanding of property — “properties are the semantic shadows of predicates”¹⁰⁵ — it might seem that nothing could stop us from speaking as Moore would like us to. Likewise, we might end up saying that our moral judgments are descriptive, since “the world is a miracle” clearly seems to be a description of the world (I return to this point in my discussion of Diamond in chapter three); in this way we could lose every term one might want to use distinguish value. To assert that the world is a miracle is to assert that it is true that the world is a miracle, that it is the case that the world is a miracle, that the world being a miracle is a state of affairs, etc. — we face the problem of “creeping minimalism”.¹⁰⁶

Strictly speaking none of this speaks against Wittgenstein’s Lecture, since there he treats all moral utterances as temptations or inclinations — inclinations shared by him — to speak nonsense; he denies the premise that they assert anything. If Wittgenstein’s fact/value distinction is essentially a sense/nonsense distinction, as Donatelli¹⁰⁷ has suggested, then deflationism does not threaten it at all. Nonetheless it might seem now that the fact/value distinction and the Open Question argument rests on a very tendentious premise that all ethical utterances are nonsense. Hence it is worth examining how late Wittgenstein might respond to the point, as it helps us to locate the real force of the fact/value distinction and the Open Question argument.

In his later writings Wittgenstein frequently acknowledges both this theory of truth and its consequence, namely the shifting of interest from truth-value status per se to a closer understanding of the judgment itself and the way we engage with the world in such a judgment — for example:

The words “true” and “false” are two words on which philosophy has turned, and it is very important to see

¹⁰⁴ Ramsey, “Facts and Propositions”, 38-9.

¹⁰⁵ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ Dreier, “Meta-ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism”. Dworkin’s paper “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It” is seminal for this type of objection to anti-realism.

¹⁰⁷ Personal conversation.

that philosophy always turns upon nonsensical questions. Discussion of these words is made easier once it is realized that the words “true” and “false” can be done away with altogether. Instead of saying “*p* is true” we shall say “*p*”, and instead of “*p* is false”, “not-*p*”. That is, instead of the notions of truth and falsity, we use *proposition* and *negation*. [...] Let us examine the statement that a proposition is true if it agrees with reality and false if it does not. We must look at language games to see what this agreement and disagreement consist in. There are cases where what is meant by agreement and disagreement is clear.¹⁰⁸

“Der Satz ist wahr oder falsch” heißt eigentlich nur, es müsse eine Entscheidung für oder gegen ihn möglich sein. Aber das sagt nicht, wie der Grund zu so einer Entscheidung aussieht. (ÜG 200)

Der Satz: “es ist wahr, daß das aus diesem folgt”, heißt einfach: das folgt aus diesem. Und wie verwenden wir diesen Satz? – Was würde den geschehen, wenn wir anders schlössen – wie würden wir mit der Wahrheit in Konflikt geraten? (BGM I 5)

When in his writings on mathematics or religion or hinge-sentences he tells us what these pieces of language do — for example, that mathematical sentences do not describe a particular mathematical realm of reality, but prepare techniques for description of our ordinary reality — he runs up against an interlocutor who objects that these sentences are in fact *true*, that two and two *really do* make four.¹⁰⁹ Wittgenstein suggests every time that this is a misunderstanding, that truth-valuedness simply means that we subject these sentences to the practices of assertion, e.g. the law of the excluded middle, and should not stand in the way of an examination of how these sentences relate to our experience of the world. In a discussion of ethics he is said to have argued:

Someone may say, ‘There is still the difference between truth and falsity. Any ethical judgment in whatever system may be true or false.’ Remember that ‘*p* is true’ means simply ‘*p*.’ [...] Or someone says, ‘One of the ethical systems must be the right one—or nearer to the right one.’ Well, suppose I say that Christian ethics is the right one. Then I am making a judgment of value. It amounts to adopting Christian ethics. It is not like saying that one of these physical theories must be the right one. The way in which some reality corresponds—or conflicts—with a physical theory has no counterpart here.¹¹⁰

Wittgenstein never advances a deflationary account of “facts” and never speaks of moral facts. The Wittgensteinian thing to say here is, I believe, is that we could speak this way if we want, but it would obscure an important distinction and quickly mislead us. But what is the important distinction? Deflationism threatens to rob us of any terms in which to state it.

¹⁰⁸ Ambrose, *Wittgenstein's Lectures 1932-1935*, 106.

¹⁰⁹ Aside from the above examples, a very similar exchange occurs between Wittgenstein and Smythies in his “Lectures on Religious Belief”, LC 71.

¹¹⁰ Rhees, “Some Developments”, 24.

He says in the quotation above that “The way in which some reality corresponds — or conflicts — with a physical theory has no counterpart here.” Let us take the statement “the world is a miracle”. On the above pattern of response to his interlocutors, Wittgenstein would say that the possibility of inflationary insistence “but it’s true that the world is a miracle” should not distract us from seeing how we are relating to our experience in saying that the world is a miracle. And here Wittgenstein finds that as he means the statement, it is not based upon any factual criterion — *it could never turn out to be the case* that the world is not a miracle. The statement purports to be about the totality of facts, *however* they might be. I have suggested that “the world is a miracle” and similar global predications are not necessarily representative of all moral judgments, and will return to this in the next chapter. But we can equally well take as an example the idea that a certain action is wrong, where “wrong” is meant absolutely, i.e. ethically. What makes the action wrong might be, e.g., the cruelty of it. But if we meet or imagine an interlocutor who asks what makes it cruel, or what makes cruelty wrong-making, we will soon reach a point at which our reasons run out and we find that the other person simply does not respond to the facts as we do; and we cannot point to anything that *makes* their response wrong. We can compare this to “the way in which some reality corresponds — or conflicts — with a physical theory”. If my physical theory is wrong, there could always be results that show me to be wrong, and at a certain point someone who denied the implications of the results would simply not be a competent thinker. But if my moral theory is wrong, what results would show me to be wrong? That I am punished, e.g. imprisoned, or face the disapproval of society, does not necessarily show that I am wrong; that other people are hurt by my actions does not show me to be wrong, for perhaps they deserve to be hurt, or the hurt is outweighed by other considerations, etc. Moreover in moral thought there are not established procedures or standards or methods that any competent thinker must have mastered, as in the case of mathematics; if there were any, then their moral value could become an intelligible moral question. There is no criterion that all competent speakers must recognize as showing anyone to be right or wrong: “so far as the meaning of good goes, anything whatever may be good”.

There is a scene in the Woody Allen film *Annie Hall*, where Allen’s character, overhearing someone discussing Marshall McLuhan’s work, drags McLuhan himself in from just off-camera to explain to the other man how he misunderstood McLuhan’s work. I will suggest that we have a similar sort of fantasy in moral disagreements. I might find that the other person sees everything I see and simply makes something different of the facts than I do. As moral issues are, by definition, quite important, there is an insufferable tension when I cannot get an otherwise reasonable person to see things the way I see them, to respond to them as I do. And here in our desperation we might

want to bring *the moral facts themselves* into the conversation and point to them, to show the other that she's wrong. Or we might think: *she'll find out that she's wrong soon enough*, as someone might find out that their empirical theory is wrong when their plane fails to leave the ground. The fact/value distinction and the Open Question argument aim to reveal something about the differences between different kinds of reasoning, and in particular that in moral reasoning we have nothing like this at our disposal, that this consoling fantasy is incoherent. Moore's work is itself the clearest example of this fantasy. He intends by his investigation of ethics to make "plain exactly what kind of reasons are relevant as arguments for or against" any moral view, or in other words "*what is the evidence for any ethical judgment whatsoever*".¹¹¹ But what reasons or evidence does he reveal? Moore himself feels that contemplation of beauty is good. He also believes that there is a property of goodness, that this property inheres in the contemplation of beauty, and that he has apprehended this through intuition. Now, if this is a long-winded way of saying "the contemplation of beauty is good", the only objection is its long-windedness. Moore seems to imagine that he has found something that *supports* or *justifies* his view. It is here that the Open Question argument operates, showing us that if we had any real conception of this "property" allegedly justifying our view, it couldn't do the justificatory work we intend it to do. The Open Question argument does not need to have any metaphysical implications; it serves to correct our fantasies about how moral reasoning proceeds.

This understanding of the Open Question argument should also sharpen our understanding of the second aspect of the non-departmental conception of ethics, namely that moral thought is not "about" a realm of particular facts. If we are deflationists about facts, then when I say that some action is wrong, I could just as well say that it is a fact that the action is wrong, and of course this fact will not be identical with any physical fact, or any other sort of metaphysical fact; it will be *sui generis*. But this way of talking will quickly mislead us into thinking of the reasoning behind my statement as some kind of investigation into a realm of moral facts, which is not coherent as an account of *moral* reasoning.

This understanding of the fact/value distinction in Wittgenstein also reflects a broader trend in contemporary anti-realism, found for example in the writings of both Korsgaard and Blackburn, who do not deny that we might end up speaking of moral truth and moral facts, but who insist that there is no room for an appeal to some ultimate factual grounding in explaining or justifying our

¹¹¹ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 34, 57.

moral deliberations.¹¹² Moreover this form of anti-realism does not depend on any metaphysical assumptions, in particular not on a naturalist metaphysics that would exclude the possibility of moral facts as metaphysically weird. In a review of contemporary metaethical theories, Finlay has distinguished between the “internal accommodation” that a metaethical theory must accomplish and the “external accommodation”: the theory must accommodate the features of our moral thought and discourse, but must also be answerable to what is epistemologically and metaphysically plausible. Finlay repeats the standard wisdom that realist theories seem naturally better at internal accommodation, while external accommodation is the anti-realist’s strong suit, as “moral facts” seem metaphysically weird and bring with them epistemological difficulties.¹¹³ Moore’s property does involve metaphysical and epistemological weirdness, but the real objection to it is its moral weirdness; we cannot see how any property could have that kind of authority over our own conscience. Wittgenstein’s argument proceeds internally, from a careful attention to what we mean in speaking morally, and finds this to be incompatible with the idea that we can rely on any ultimate factual grounding; he finds that realism fails at the *internal* accommodation. *If* it turns out upon examination that any or all of our moral judgments are subject to the full range of practices of assertion, i.e. the law of the excluded middle, the equivalence of *p* and *it is true that p*, etc. then the realistic vocabulary of truth, facts etc. can harmlessly fall out at the end of our process of moral reasoning once we have settled on our assertions, insofar as we are deflationists about truth, facts, etc.; but these will not play any role in our account of our moral reasoning.

So the fact/value distinction in early Wittgenstein is at least valid as a distinction within our modes of reasoning between empirical reasoning, which can be explained partly in terms of facts impinging on our awareness, and moral reasoning, where facts can at best fall out at the end when we settle on moral assertions; and this is how the distinction seems to be used within contemporary expressivism and constructivism, although it is not clear if this use of the fact/value distinction really has any traction against *every* form of moral realism. In chapter five I discuss modes of contemporary non-naturalist realism that might be thought to evade the force of the fact/value distinction. We should also note, however, that Wittgenstein did not seem to ever favor a

¹¹² See for example Korsgaard *Sources of Normativity*, 34-6 and “Realism and Constructivism”, as well as Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 168, 208. Dreier writes “But what does that non-naturalism amount to? It must, it seems to me, amount to the idea that the property of goodness enters into explanations of phenomena that expressivists would explain by other means.” Dreier, “Creeping Minimalism”, 41.

¹¹³ Finlay, “Four Faces of Moral Realism”, 822. This is echoed, for example, by Brink: “We are led to some form of antirealism (if we are) only because we come to regard the moral realist’s commitments as untenable, say, because of the apparently occult nature of moral facts or because of the apparent lack of a well developed and respectable methodology in ethics.” Brink, *Moral Realism*, 23.

deflationary account of “facts”. In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell writes: “To say a dispute is about a matter of fact is exactly to say that there are certain ways of settling it. Just as, to say that something is a *fact* is to say that it can be or has been discovered in certain ways. To say that *other* sorts of disputes (for example, moral ones) cannot be settled in *such* ways is not a ‘hypothesis’ and requires no ‘psychological generalization’, but is a point of grammar.”¹¹⁴ Chapters three, four and five will offer support for Cavell’s claim; if we understand the term “fact” in this way, then moral reasoning is distinguished by the absence of any facts, and by the problem that we must at times speak and act in the absence of any facts. I suspect that almost no ordinary speakers would accept an equivalence of p and *it is a fact that p* for moral statements for this exact reason. (It would sound strange to say: “it is a fact that abortion is wrong”, precisely because there is no method of determining it.) If we have established ways of settling empirical and mathematical questions, but no established ways of settling moral questions, and if we have an established understanding of “rule-following” and semantic meaning but a much more problematic and contested understanding of moral value and significance (and if the fact of communal agreement is far less decisive in moral questions than it is in questions of semantic meaning) then when people do settle upon answers to moral questions they will be less likely to represent these answers as assertions of facts. Precisely because they will be aware of the endless possibilities of moral creativity, they will be less likely to insist that the answer they have settled on is *true*. I suspect that for this reason most people nowadays would also feel hesitant about an equivalence of p and *it is true that p* for moral statements; and if we do hesitate over this equivalence, this should indicate that our moral statements are not necessarily assertions and thus truth-value might not fall out at the *end* of the process of moral reasoning either. (That is to say: since the question of *what to do* logically with a set of premises does not actually arise for competent thinkers, the question is only “open” in the theoretical sense that we could *imagine* cases of people going on differently; as concerns logic we might agree with Blackburn and Korsgaard that we cannot call upon “logical facts” to explain or justify our logical practices, but also agree with minimal non-naturalist realism that our logical practices themselves are uncontested and determinate enough such that we can at the end of the day speak of “logical facts” if we like. Morality differs precisely in our moral thought involving so much potential creativity and improvisation that every or almost every moral question could *really* become “open” for any thinker.) If moral reasoning is an essentially personal endeavor, as I hope to explain and make plausible in chapters three, four and five, then someone who says a moral utterance p may not *necessarily* say that someone else is wrong to say $\neg p$ even if they are unable themselves to say $\neg p$. If this is true – if ordinary speakers do not necessarily apply the equivalence of p and *it is true that p* or apply the law of the excluded

¹¹⁴ *The Claim of Reason*, 296.

middle to p when p is a moral utterance -- then as ordinary speakers we do not necessarily treat moral utterances as assertions of propositions, and “creeping minimalism” will stop short of much of our moral thought. I discuss the issue of the propositionality of moral thought in 6.1. It is worth noting once more, moreover, that the utterance “the world is a miracle”, because it purports to be saying something about the totality of facts, regardless of how they turn out to be, simply *cannot* be construed as a factual assertion. And within the tractarian account of truth as that which is the case, i.e. the obtaining of facts, we will not be able to say that “it is true that the world is a miracle”, as it purports to describe all that is true, *whatever* it may be. I say more about this particular expression “the world is a miracle” in the next chapter; the issue of *non-factual* or *factually-unconditioned description* raised by this example is discussed in greater depth in chapter three and taken up again the discussion of essentially contestable objects of shared attention in chapter four. Moreover if it is intelligible that someone could feel that they are in some sense right to say “the world is a miracle” -- if it is intelligible that this could be the proper moral stance to take -- this should show us that the notion of *objectivity*, at least as it figures in ethical thought, can come apart from the notion of *propositional truth* (and certainly from any notion of *facts*); I return explicitly to this point in 4.5 and 5.6.

1.7 Expressivism

When the Open Question argument is understood as resting, not on a metaphysical distinction, but on a distinction within our modes of reasoning, we could put the point this way: there is no evidence for value judgments, all the evidence merely sets the task. Or in other words: everything that we can ascertain by impersonal and uncontested methods still demands a further personal response from the moral agent. On the other hand, my personal responses are themselves mere facts and nothing else; if I am angry or hopeful, if I praise or condemn other people, if I act in certain ways, these are all just facts and nothing more. My personal responses are themselves simply a part of the world. In his war-time notebooks and in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein played with the idea of a will that is not *in* the world but a *border* to the world, for example: “Gut und Böse tritt erst durch das Subjekt ein. Und das Subjekt gehört nicht zur Welt, sondern ist eine Grenze der Welt.” (TB 174, 2.8.16) When he wrote: “Der Wille ist eine Stellungnahme des Subjekts zur Welt” (TB 182, 4.11.16) he might well have been thinking that there is a task of responding to all the facts, and that this response therefore cannot, by definition, be counted among the facts. By the time he wrote the *Tractatus* at the latest he was aware of how nonsensical this is. We cannot make any sense of the assertion that (it is the case that) there is a will outside the world (= everything that is the case). This comes down to the same hesitation in meaning, wanting to say something and yet not have said it. It

is perfectly expressive of what he is thinking and in that sense successful as a symbol, but does not add up to the assertion of anything. We might then think that Wittgenstein's confusion gets perfectly cleared up with the advent of emotivism some seven or eight years after he wrote his Lecture. The core of the emotivist idea is astonishingly simple: our moral judgments are not descriptions of our own personal responses, but rather *are* themselves our personal responses; they are not the *descriptions* of my attitude but the *expressions* of my attitude. Values are not the characteristics of a will that is somehow a logically distinct entity; they are of a logically distinct type, the expressions of an ordinary will. Values are not entities that must be located somewhere within the world; we have all the facts and then we turn against some in outrage, look hopefully to others, etc.

This is very Wittgensteinian in spirit; it echoes his treatment in the *Tractatus* of problems such as numbers and logical constants, which are for him not signs representing strange objects but rather signs that have different, non-representational functions in our dealings with ordinary objects. If we take expressivism to mean that values are not anything in the world, that rather valuing is responding to the world, then at this level of abstraction Wittgenstein is a kind of moral expressivist. At this level, after all, expressivism just amounts to the idea that moral thought is inherently practical — that it is not a matter of ascertaining theoretical truths about some practical subject matter. This is the roughly the sentiment behind Wittgenstein's various remarks that it is ridiculous to expect a theory to solve our moral problems for us, and it is the sentiment behind contemporary expressivism and anti-realism more broadly as well.¹¹⁵ At this level expressivism is an appropriate label for what seems to be Wittgenstein's global position about almost all areas of discourse, the idea expressed in *On Certainty* §204:

Die Begründung aber, die Rechtfertigung der Evidenz kommt zu einem Ende; — das Ende aber ist nicht, daß uns gewisse Sätze unmittelbar als wahr einleuchten, also eine Art *Sehen* unsererseits, sondern unser *Handeln*, welches am Grunde des Sprachspiels liegt. (*ÜG* §204)

¹¹⁵ Blackburn writes: "The realist thinks of it as though the moral order is there to be investigated like a piece of geography". (Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 17.) This is also echoed by Korsgaard, who considers herself a constructivist rather than an expressivist, but like Blackburn positions herself largely in opposition to realism; she writes: "The moral realist thinks of practical philosophy as an essentially theoretical subject. Its business is to find, or anyway to argue that we can find, some sort of ethical knowledge that we can apply in action." (Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism", 118) "According to substantive realism, then, ethics is really a theoretical or epistemological subject. When we ask ethical questions, or practical normative questions more generally, there is something about the world that we are trying to find out. The world contains a realm of inherently normative entities or truths, whose existence we have noticed, and the business of ethics, or of practical philosophy more generally, is to investigate them further, to learn about them in a more systematic way." (Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 44)

Yet much remains to be said about how we respond to our experience in moral thought, mathematical thought, etc. The notion of our moral response operative in the moral expressivist tradition has been both thin and narrow — as mentioned above, the “attitude” in question is seen largely as a sentiment, a binary affective response to certain sections of fact. Blackburn writes, for example: “The phenomenology of deliberation is one of some such jumble, with our concerns operating, consciously or otherwise, in their varying strengths, and eventually a decision bubbles up.”¹¹⁶ Or put in terms of Murdoch’s critique of Hare, a moral concept seems for the traditional expressivist like “a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact”, with some kind of emotional reaction attached to that ring.¹¹⁷ Moral thought would then be a matter of shifting rings around. The most important point of deflationism is how it shifts out interest away from mere truth-valuedness in general to a look at how we relate to the world in various modes of thought; and it is on precisely this point that standard expressivist theories are at their weakest, offering us poor pictures of moral reasoning, pictures that are hardly recognizable as reasoning at all. The burden of chapters three and four of this thesis is to develop different models of moral reasoning that are richer and more faithful to how we actually proceed, drawing in turn on the insights of constructivism, expressivism and neo-Aristotelian naturalism and criticizing the way these insights have been too narrowly conceived in application by the proponents of these theories.

¹¹⁶ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 123.

¹¹⁷ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, 40.

2 How should we understand the nonsensicality claim?

2.1 Introduction of the problem of nonsense

Wittgenstein writes in the Lecture that all expressions of absolute value are nonsense; “a characteristic misuse of language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions.” (PO 42) But this is not exactly a simple blunder on our part, for

their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. (PO 44)

This can be cast as a version of the Open Question argument: if expressions of value are nonsensical, then any statement of fact (which must make sense to be a statement of fact) would leave unsaid any and all expressions of absolute value; statements of fact could not possibly capture what we mean by our ethical utterances. In fact Wittgenstein writes at the very end of the Lecture: “I see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the grounds of its significance.” (PO 44) I have left this out of the preceding chapter, as it might seem to weaken the Open Question argument and the related fact/value distinction by association simply by being incredible. Very many people who might be convinced of the fact/value distinction would be unconvinced if it required buying the premise that all our ethical statements are nonsense, never mind purposeful nonsense. (Diamond suggests at one point that the non-departmental conception hinges upon the claim of nonsensicality¹¹⁸, whereas I have also tried in the previous chapter to make the non-departmental conception independently plausible.) Moreover, what I will be calling the nonsensicality claim should be a puzzle for Wittgensteinians above all. We could put the point succinctly by saying: if meaning is use, how could such a broad category of utterances with such an established and widespread use lack any meaning? Wittgenstein sometimes makes sweeping statements about how philosophical speech also tends towards nonsense, but this goes along with an account of how, in philosophizing, we abstract from our ordinary ways of speaking and our ordinary contact with experience, and how are words in those conditions can start to idle. (PU §132) The same could not

¹¹⁸ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”, 160.

be said of ethical utterances, which would seem on the face of it to be utterances people live by, at least sometimes¹¹⁹. Moreover it seems simply overly hasty, and in that sense un-Wittgensteinian but also regrettable in itself, to write off such a broad class of utterances based upon a brief discussion of a few examples. So there are reasons for anyone to feel that Wittgenstein's nonsensicality claim is a bit rash. It is also worth noting that after 1929 Wittgenstein himself never again spoke of ethical or religious statements being simply nonsensical as a whole class; in his "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" and his "Lectures on Religious Belief", for example, the general thrust of his remarks is that the sense of various religious utterances can be quite *dark* and perhaps also quite personal, but not simply lacking.¹²⁰

We could get around this problem by supposing Wittgenstein to be using "nonsense" as a technical term. After all, "how extraordinary that anything should exist" seems to differ in kind from "after between five blued low" — we might want to say that while the former might be somehow logically or semantically illegitimate, the latter simply makes no sense. A great many commentators on the *Tractatus* have taken this route. The *Tractatus* concludes by declaring its own sentences to be nonsense; many have thought that this cannot really mean that all of its sentences simply fail to make any sense. These commentators have assumed that these sentences are "nonsense" in that they fail to meet some theoretical criterion of sense — falsifiability, for example, or bipolarity — and that we can understand them well enough not just to see that they fail to meet this criterion, but also for them to convey something to us; they are not *informative*, but rather *illuminating*.¹²¹ Geach held that the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* give us some insight into logical "features of reality", for example.¹²² These commentators quite often *say* what these features are supposed to be; so these features are only "unsayable" on a technical sense of "saying" — according to which they

¹¹⁹ Joel Backström has argued against the idea that there is any strict distinction between philosophy and our everyday talk and thought or that philosophical nonsense arises only outside of ordinary language games: "if there were a clear demarcation line between 'just living' and reflecting on life, there would *be* nothing to reflect on. Philosophy does not come into being as if out of nowhere, but is rather an outgrowth, continuation, and reflection in sophisticated, intellectual idiom, of the musing and wonderings, the disquiets, yearnings and refusals that go on in everyday life — an outgrowth also of our everyday wishes to declare with a quasi-metaphysical emphasis, 'how things really are (and will always be)', as revealed e.g. in the use of proverbs to reassure oneself that what just happened confirms what we have always known." (Backström, "The Moral Dimension of Philosophical Problems", 738) I believe that I can agree with his point and still insist that there is some sense in which, for Wittgenstein, philosophical confusions begin (within everyday life!) at the point where we lose track of what we are using words for; hence if we feel that ethical utterances have a real use (otherwise there could scarcely be anything "ethical" about them) then it is hard to see how they could simply mean nothing.

¹²⁰ Anne-Marie S. Christensen writes "here [in the *Tractatus*], Wittgenstein does not allow for ethical sentences, a claim that later simply seems to disappear." "Wittgenstein and Ethics", 800.

¹²¹ Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 85.

¹²² Geach, "Saying and Showing", 54.

can only be “shown” and not “said” — but are otherwise quite sayable in the ordinary sense of the term.¹²³ I have argued in the last chapter that ethical expressions do not essentially reveal any “features of reality” to us, unsayable or not, but we might still suppose that ethical and religious expressions must nonetheless convey something, that we understand them in a sense. To adapt Peter Hacker’s comments on the *Tractatus* to the ethical expressions in the Lecture, we might suppose that “what Wittgenstein means or intends by these remarks [...] is, he thinks, quite correct, only it cannot be said. What someone means or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the remark itself is strictly speaking nonsense”.¹²⁴

If this reading is true, then it makes the “Lecture on Ethics” quite disappointing. If in calling ethical expressions nonsense Wittgenstein only meant that they are *a priori*, or that their negations are inconceivable, this would not be original or even very interesting; the only novelty would lie in the coy obscurantism in his presentation. Why should anyone say that we cannot “say” anything ethical if we can perfectly well say something ethical; why should anyone call ethical expressions nonsense if we can perfectly well make sense of them?¹²⁵ Why shouldn’t Wittgenstein simply say what he means? This point has been overlooked in the prevailing focus on the interpretation of the *Tractatus*, which explicitly complicates its own interpretation and proceeds *indirectly*. The Lecture on Ethics in contrast was a talk given to a general audience of non-philosophers; although he was known as a philosopher of logic, he declined to talk about any “scientific matter”, as he thought it would take more than a single talk to bring about any meaningful understanding in the audience. He decided to speak about ethics instead in the hope “that it may help to clear up your thoughts about this subject” (*PO* 37). If he were using “nonsense” *here* in some unexplained technical sense, it would be surprising and disappointing.

The debate around the *Tractatus* is divided between those who believe it allows for “substantial” nonsense, i.e. nonsense transporting an ineffable insight that we can somehow grasp, and those who see in it an “austere” conception of nonsense, according to which all nonsense simply lacks meaning, and does not “show” an ineffable content but rather has no content — a view propounded by Cora Diamond, James Conant and Piergiorgio Donatelli, among others. (For reasons I cannot go

¹²³ Moyal-Sharrock is particularly clear that her reading requires us to take a series of terms as technical terms — see Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s On Certainty*, 43-47, and “The Good Sense of Nonsense”.

¹²⁴ Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, 29.

¹²⁵ Gunnarsson puts the point quite sharply when he writes that if we assume that the nonsensical utterances of the *Tractatus* do manage to convey ineffable insights, then “[i]n diesem Fall erweist sich tiefer ‘Unsinn’ als tiefer *Sinn!*” Gunnarsson, *Wittgensteins Leiter*, 60.

into here, readers who hold an “austere” view of nonsense are also generally known as “resolute readers”.¹²⁶) This latter view of nonsense has the advantage that Wittgenstein stated it in the *Tractatus*: “Frege sagt: Jeder rechtmäßig gebildete Satz muss einen Sinn haben; und ich sage: Jeder mögliche Satz ist rechtmäßig gebildet, und wenn er keinen Sinn hat, so kann das nur daran liegen, dass wir einigen seiner Bestandteile keine Bedeutung gegeben haben. (Wenn wir auch glauben, es getan zu haben.)” (*TLP* 5.4733) (It has also been noted that resolute readers who wish to rely on this definition must suppose that *this* sentence from the body of the *Tractatus* does make sense.) Moreover this view of nonsense has the advantage of precluding a certain amount of silliness one would otherwise have to attribute to the *Tractatus*: if I have to understand a sentence to categorize it as nonsense, then I understand it, so what exactly is nonsensical about it? If the answer is supposed to be that I must understand the sentence to see whether it flouts some criterion of sense, then the obvious rejoinder is that if I understand a sentence that flouts some alleged criterion of sense, this is too bad for the criterion and not for the sentence. Hence one way of putting the austere conception of nonsense is to say: you can say whatever you want, but you must want to say *something*. The problem with philosophical utterances alleged to be nonsensical, like “A is an object”, is not that those words couldn’t mean anything, but that the philosopher (it is claimed) has meant nothing by them¹²⁷. The great difficulty of Wittgensteinian therapy is then to get philosophers to recognize that they have been ‘hovering indeterminately’ between different assignations of meaning, and that *no* assignation of meaning will satisfy them. Philosophers speak nonsense out of “an incoherent desire with respect to their words”¹²⁸ — the philosopher “can have whatever he wants; but he does not have a singleness of purpose in his wants.”¹²⁹

While resolute readers have various and subtle accounts of how exactly the *Tractatus* aims to show philosophers that they have failed to mean something, in the context of the Lecture it is worth noting two different and very prominent techniques. The first is the establishment of a Fregean *Begriffsschrift* or formal notation. On the resolute reading, the formal notation in the *Tractatus* is not meant as a theory about the essence of language so much as a “proposal”.¹³⁰ As Silver Bronzo

¹²⁶ For a good overview of this debate between “resolute” and “standard” readers see Bronzo, “The Resolute Reading”.

¹²⁷ “But someone who utters ‘A is an object’ may have two desires which appear to be able to coexist because they are not brought fully to awareness: she may want to use ‘object’ so that it is the ordinary-language term for a logical kind, in which case it would go over in logical notation to a combination of quantifier and variable, and she may also want to use it in a way that is parallel to ‘tortoise’ in ‘A is a tortoise’. (The latter desire comes out in the form of words she uses; the former is involved in the failure to notice that the word ‘object’, in her use of it as predicate, has been given no meaning.)” Conant and Diamond, “On Reading the *Tractatus* Resolutely”, 62.

¹²⁸ Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together”, 275.

¹²⁹ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”, 159.

¹³⁰ Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism”, 47.

writes:

By using a Begriffsschrift, we can present the potential victim of a philosophical confusion with different ways of meaning the words that she wants to use, each one being clearly distinguishable from the others. Our interlocutor can then accept one of these “translations” as an accurate rendering of what she wanted to say, or, alternatively, she may come to recognize that she was hovering indeterminately between different options, without decisively meaning any one in particular. In the latter case, the person should come to realize that there was nothing at all that she wanted to say.¹³¹

Conant emphasizes that this technique is continuous with quite ordinary techniques for clarifying our meaning in everyday discussions:

We are familiar in ordinary critical discussion with procedures in which confusion in thought can be brought to a person’s attention through a procedure of reformulation — in effect, through substituting one expression for another. This is most commonly accomplished by substituting one expression in the speaker’s native language for another. But if the speaker is familiar with a foreign language then that familiarity can be exploited to bring further elucidatory resources to bear on the situation. Thus, an equivocation involving “or” in ordinary English can be brought to a speaker’s notice, if he speaks Latin, by asking him whether he wants to translate his English sentence into Latin using “aut” or “vel”. ... By being forced to reflect upon what is involved in the task of having to choose one of these Latin expressions over the other, the speaker can be made to realize that he has been hovering between alternative possibilities for meaning his words without determinately settling on either one. According to resolute readers, this is what nonsense is for the author of the *Tractatus*: an unwitting wavering in our relation to our words — failing to make genuine determinations of meaning, while believing that we have done so.¹³²

The second technique is closely related: rather than waiting for the interlocutor to say something that needs clarification, we might begin by talking sense ourselves. Referring to the idea of a book entitled “The world as I found it” (*TLP* 5.631) and the book of the world in the Lecture, as well as the passage in the *Tractatus* asking us to imagine that “all *possible* scientific questions” have been answered (*TLP* 6.52), Diamond writes that “talking sense can be a method of philosophy if one thinks of it as directed towards helping someone to recognize that no talking of sense would be a solution to the problem with which she is concerned.” In these and similar passages Wittgenstein asks us

¹³¹ Bronzo, “The Resolute Reading”, 54.

¹³² Conant, “A Development in Wittgenstein’s Conception of Philosophy”, 63.

to imagine a vast body of sayings and writings, the sayings and writings that add up to “all possible questions” having been answered. Imagining this to have been achieved is what can play a role in the transformation of our understanding of what we had taken to be the questions we wanted to put. We can come to see that nothing in all those *answers* could be what we were seeking. As I have noted, such a realization is not in and of itself the realization that we were not asking a question at all.¹³³

This is what it means to explore “the limits of language” “from the inside”.¹³⁴

There is still an obvious felt difference between “the world is everything that is the case” and “after between five blueed low” — but on the austere view this is a difference “on a purely psychological level”¹³⁵, in that we are tempted to experience the former as if it meant something, indeed something profound, that the former induces the “hallucination of meaning”.¹³⁶ There is a further distinction between plain gibberish and the self-conscious nonsense of the tractarian sentences: we can distinguish them by their intention — but this is, once again, a non-logical, ‘external’ distinction. The tractarian sentences are meant to represent the temptations to nonsense of philosophical interlocutors and lead the reader from disguised to patent nonsense. Thus in a sense these nonsensical sentences *do* convey something, but it is not an ineffable insight: the sentences are meant to convey the insight that they mean nothing, i.e. that we have meant nothing by them; and presumably this is also meant to convey a more general insight into how great and common a danger it is in philosophizing that we might unwittingly mean nothing by our words.¹³⁷ In other words these nonsensical sentences are traps meant to catch us in the act of failing to mean anything by our words. Nonetheless on a logical level the sentence “the world is everything is the case” means as little as “after between five blueed low” and for the same reason: that we have given no meaning to some or all of the terms. The sentence is distinguished ‘externally’ by the intention and by the “use of imagination”¹³⁸, as Diamond writes, that goes into writing such sentences to seduce philosophers into the hallucination of meaning.

¹³³ Diamond, “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense”, 244.

¹³⁴ Wittgenstein writes in the Preface to the *Tractatus* that the limits of thought can only be drawn “in language”; in a letter to the prospective publisher von Ficker he wrote that the book drew the limits of the ethical “from the inside as it were”. (*Prototractatus* 16) — These two techniques are each present in Wittgenstein’s description in *Tractatus* 6.53: “Die richtige Methode der Philosophie wäre eigentlich die: Nichts zu sagen, als was sich sagen lässt, also Sätze der Naturwissenschaft [the method of talking sense] — also etwas, was mit der Philosophie nichts zu tun hat —, und dann immer, wenn ein anderer etwas Metaphysisches sagen wollte, ihm nachzuweisen, dass er gewissen Zeichen in seinen Sätzen keine Bedeutung gegeben hat [the method of proposing clarifications or proposing a formal translation].”

¹³⁵ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 104; see also Conant, “Must We Show”, 249.

¹³⁶ Conant, “Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use”, 247.

¹³⁷ “The book should teach us that we are all too likely to take ourselves to be using words with some determinate meaning when we are not doing so”. Diamond, “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense”, 253.

¹³⁸ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”, 159.

Some authors have explicitly tried to bring the austere view of nonsense together with a defense of Wittgenstein's claim in the *Lecture* that all ethical and religious expressions are nonsensical, which I will call here the *nonsensicality claim* — Cora Diamond in her paper “Ethics, imagination, and the method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*”, and, following her, Piergiorgio Donatelli and Viktor Krebs.¹³⁹ In this chapter I will be arguing that the conjunction of these theses is for the most part untenable. When we speak nonsense in philosophy we are under an illusion, and when we come to see that we have meant nothing we will lose our attraction to the words we had been using. But Wittgenstein does not seem to want us to stop speaking ethically, nor does he seem to feel that there is any illusion involved; he says of himself at least that he is perfectly aware that he is speaking nonsense when he speaks ethically and is doing so intentionally. Diamond acknowledges this difference; she writes:

The attractiveness of philosophical sentences will disappear through the kind of self-understanding that the book [the *Tractatus*] aims to lead to in philosophers; the attractiveness of ethical sentences will not. But if we understand ourselves, ourselves the utterers of ethical nonsense, we shall not come out with ethical sentences under the illusion that we are talking sense. ... Words like “This is what I am inclined to say”, used to frame such sentences, may thus mark both that they are recognized by the utterer as nonsense, and that that recognition does not involve their losing their attractiveness, their capacity to make us feel that they express the sense we want to make.¹⁴⁰

Though I hesitate to read too much into this passage, we might get the following idea: those of us who simply speak ethically from time to time in the course of our lives are under the illusion that we are making sense in doing so, but when that illusion is unmasked, the only thing that will change is that we will from then on preface our ethical remarks with certain qualifications hedging our commitment to our words. It seems to me that something has gone wrong here in Diamond's defense of Wittgenstein, and we could perhaps put our finger on it best by asking: suppose it is true that we are spouting nonsense and would continue to do so, *why* do we do so? Diamond suggests that nonsensical ethical utterances differ from tractarian nonsense in the intention behind them: “So ‘ethical sentences’ are distinguishable from those of the *Tractatus* by the intention with which they are uttered or written.”¹⁴¹ She repeats the point a bit later: “We may, though, recognize that the

¹³⁹ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”; Donatelli, “The Problem of the Higher”, “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Religion”; Krebs, “‘Around the axis of our real need’”.

¹⁴⁰ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”, 161.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

person who utters some sentence speaks with an intention that would (though he himself may not be aware of this) be frustrated by his sentence's making sense. [...] There are no 'ethical propositions' on Wittgenstein's view, because what he calls ethics is characterized by the linguistic intention to 'reach beyond the world'; any sentence which was not nonsense would not be what one wanted."¹⁴² But so far as I can see she does not offer any account of what that intention might be; she only says that it differs from the intention behind the tractarian sentences: "The intention of the would-be engager in ethics is not like that, is not in that way therapeutic".¹⁴³ It is important to see how necessary some account of this intention is. When Diamond argues that the tractarian sentences really are just plain nonsense, and not nonsense conveying some non-logical and ineffable insights, the most obvious question is: why would Wittgenstein write a book of nonsense? It seems to me that her account of the intention behind the *Tractatus* is adequate; but obviously some sort of account is needed. This account cannot be used for ethical utterances; when I say "Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar", I am not trying to show someone what goes wrong when they philosophize. I might also speak nonsense purposefully with the intention of distracting someone, or feigning madness, for example, but this will also not do as an account of my ethical utterances.

We might find an account of the sort of intention at work in ethical nonsense Donatelli's writings. He focuses on such as example's as Wittgenstein's "the world is a miracle" or Chesterton's remark "The world is a wild and startling place", along with examples where we are absorbed in wonder at various things or events, and writes that:

the sense in which the world is seen to be 'wild and startling' is not expressive of a concept but of a hesitation in our intention of speech which shows an ambivalent attachment to words. We want to see things both as part of the natural world—which delivers to us things with their ordinary connections—and as cut off from such world, seen in their own right, as if causal connections were not behind our view of them as what they in fact are.¹⁴⁴

Elsewhere he writes: "The sense of beauty and wonder comes from the hesitation between attributing to a certain thing the role it plays in the practices in which it is involved *and* imagining that we can cut it off from those practices and be able to retain enough of its meaning to imagine that *that* very thing is the sole occupier of the world, that it has a quality which that thing *is not*

¹⁴² Ibid., 163.

¹⁴³ Diamond, "Ethics, imagination", 161.

¹⁴⁴ Donatelli, "The Problem of the Higher", 31-2.

actually.” Being absorbed in wonder involves a use of concepts that empties them of meaning — hence the comparison with nonsense such as “Socrates is identical” (*TLP* 5.473), which involves a similar hesitation and hence a similar failure to assign meaning to one of more of the terms¹⁴⁵, “can render perspicuous to us what happens when we are touched by the ethical significance of things.”¹⁴⁶ Hence we could say that the intention behind our ethical nonsense is to express this experience, an experience constituted by an empty exercise of our concepts, a failure to use them meaningfully. This seems also to suggest that ethics amounts to a disinterested aesthetic contemplation of things. Of course Wittgenstein had claimed that “Ethics and aesthetics are one” (*TLP* 6.421), but I will argue that Donatelli’s account represents an overly hasty identification of ethics and aesthetics.

If I say “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar”, or when Chesterton writes “the world is a wild and startling place”, the most natural thing to say here is that our intention is that we live and act differently. I have argued in the previous chapter that moral utterances do not need to directly concern specific actions, and might instead offer a certain vision of life; but they must be action-guiding in a broader sense in order to be recognizable as ethical. “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar” is at the very least incompatible with torture and genocide, whereas on Donatelli’s account, or any account that labels the sentence plain nonsense, it is hard to see how the sentence could rule anything out. If it means nothing, then it means nothing, and it doesn’t exclude anything. Of course someone who experiences a sense of wonder as Donatelli describes it might come to act more generously and selflessly; but if they didn’t, it wouldn’t be in contradiction to their expression of wonder if this expression is nonsense, since nothing contradicts nonsense. Moreover, we don’t

¹⁴⁵ On Diamond’s account of nonsense, strictly speaking *none* of the terms in a meaningless utterance can mean anything — this follows from the Fregean context principle, i.e. the principle that words only have meaning in their occurrence in meaningful sentences and not in isolation. She writes: “On the Frege-Wittgenstein view, if a sentence makes no sense, no part of it can be said to mean what it does in some other sentence which does make sense any more than a word can be said to mean something in isolation.” Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 100. Nonetheless in treating particular cases of nonsense, it is the practice of Diamond, Conant and Donatelli to identify a hesitation in the use of one or more particular terms. I do not see this as a real contradiction; for the view that this is a tension in Diamond’s account, see Vilhauer, “On a Tension in Diamond’s Account”, particularly pp. 235-6: “When she explains the nonsensicality of the phrase ‘attitude to the world as a whole’, her explanation appears to be grounded in the role of the word ‘attitude’ as a logical element in the sensical sentences in which it appears. In other words, she seems to be saying that ‘attitude to the world’ is nonsense because of the role ‘attitude’ must play if it is to yield sense. And this is exactly what her account rules out.” I guess a defense might look like this: the phrase “attitude to the world as a whole” differs from “piggly wiggle tiggly” non-logically in looking like it makes sense, inducing a hallucination of meaning; and this hallucination of meaning is specific enough that I could clearly rule out certain explanations of what I mean. I could tell you straight away that if I mean anything by speaking of an “attitude to the world as a whole”, I am not using the word “attitude” in the sense of the orientation of a plane towards the horizon; my associations with the phrase provide enough of a constraint that they rule that out right away. A comprehensive explanation of the nonsensicality of the phrase would then focus on the word “attitude” in the only sense it could be meant there, and show that I both do and do not wish to use it in that sense; whereas I unequivocally and obviously do not wish to use it in its aeronautical sense.

¹⁴⁶ Donatelli, “Wittgenstein, Ethics and Religion”, 455.

want to say that an ethical utterance like “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar” might *cause* someone to act differently, the way ““after between five blueed low” might cause someone to be distracted — it might or it might not — but that someone who understands and believes it will come to act differently (barring something like weakness of will, for example) because of what they thereby understand and believe.

In short, if we assume that ethical teaching is possible in language, i.e. that I might say something to someone that changes how they live because of their understanding of what I said, then we can only maintain that ethical expressions are nonsense on a substantial, i.e. ‘ineffabilist’ understanding of nonsense. Here Conant and Diamond’s critique of these ‘ineffabilist’ readings can be turned against Diamond’s defense of the nonsensicality claim; they write:

If one has a sentence S, which is meaningless and which is supposed (alone or together with other meaningless sentences) to convey some particular insight, there presumably has to be some connection between the words actually used in S (and the other meaningless sentences) and its being I, and not some other insight, that is supposed to be conveyed. [...] But any kind of system for reading such sentences (or in some other way extracting insights from them) would appear to explain in what way they were meaningful, and thus would not be consistent with regarding them as meaningless.¹⁴⁷

If I could live differently because of my belief that “the world is a wild and startling place”, as Chesterton seems to have done, and live differently because of the words actually used in that statement and the vision they are supposed to capture, then this must be a meaningful statement — it could only be “meaningless” in a technical sense. We can only maintain that ethical expressions are all nonsensical in the austere sense by denying that ethical teaching is possible in language — and this is not only independently implausible but involves us in defending an extravagant and revisionist philosophical thesis, which should be particularly disturbing to Wittgensteinians. (“Die Philosophie ... läßt alles, wie es ist.” *PU* §124) Hence there is an untenable tension between the austere view of nonsense and the claim that all ethical expressions are essentially nonsensical. While the next chapter will seek to articulate and defend Diamond’s views on ethics generally, she is mistaken in trying to defend Wittgenstein’s nonsensicality claim.¹⁴⁸

Diamond herself raises the question of whether the nonsensicality claim is really consistent with

¹⁴⁷ Conant and Diamond, “On Reading the *Tractatus* Resolutely”, 53.

¹⁴⁸ This is largely confined to her papers “Ethics, imagination and the *Tractatus*” and to a lesser extent “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense”. Where she is not interpreting Wittgenstein but speaking about ethics in her own voice, she never claims that the expressions she uses are *nonsensical*, though she does sharply distinguish them from factual discourse.

late Wittgenstein and answers that we might still have a sense of a kind of evil that differs from “how things are” in the world, and that this difference “may also be marked in our language by our setting talk about such evil apart from talk about how things go in the world, this way or that. The removal of thought and talk about the evil will from empirical talk is a technique of our language”. On a late Wittgensteinian view of the great variety of language games we live with, we might still find that “we mark our talk about it [evil] through the logical feature of cutting such talk off from ordinary talk about what goes on, not giving it entry there”; and that “the will to move good and evil into the world is a will not to make certain distinctions in one’s talk and thought about life”, which is a will to evade the ethical¹⁴⁹. But to distinguish ethical talk from empirical talk, or from any talk about how things are in the world, is only to reject ethical realism, not to conclude that ethical expressions are nonsensical. There are signs that Donatelli is similarly motivated to defend the nonsensicality claim out of an anti-realist impulse; he writes that “being able to express a sense of the world as marvelous, as in the *Lecture on Ethics*, comes with not taking ourselves to be *saying* something, e.g., to be giving some kind of information about something”,¹⁵⁰ seemingly conflating *saying anything* with *giving information*, and that what certain of Wittgenstein’s early remarks on ethics “want to show is that there is a profound confusion in the idea that finding an object morally significant is like being aware of one of its properties, that a response to the sense of things is like a response to certain features of things.”¹⁵¹ In another article Diamond seems to derive the nonsensicality claim from a version of the Open Question argument:

At 6.52, he invites us to think of a situation in which all possible scientific questions have been answered. If we are able to recognize that none of the gazillion speakable answers to questions will reach to our concern with the problems of life, that none of the speakable answers can be an answer to the questions we take ourselves to be putting, we should see ourselves as rejecting all answers, rejecting anything that would be an answer to any question. If we could have, as it were, *all* answers, we should still not have the answer to the questions we took ourselves to be putting. Here our understanding of ourselves can reach a further point: that the purported questions are not questions at all.¹⁵²

Diamond is clearly adhering to an austere notion of nonsense here. She advances no criterion of sense that would rule out “the problems of life”; instead the idea of a total description or a book of the world is an imaginative device that should lead us to the recognition that we have been asking

¹⁴⁹ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”, 169-71.

¹⁵⁰ Donatelli, “Reshaping Ethics”, 211.

¹⁵¹ Donatelli, “The Problem of the Higher”, 14.

¹⁵² Diamond, “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense”, 243.

no question. Nonetheless she seems to jump over a gap between the claim that the totality of scientific description will not answer our questions about life, to the claim that we do not have any real questions.¹⁵³ One might suspect that Diamond and Donatelli see that moral utterances are nonsensical *on a realist reading* and conclude from this that they are nonsensical; or more specifically, because the realist reading is nonsensical and the expressivist reading in terms of sentiments misses the mark, there is no sensible explanation left. Yet this cannot be Diamond's considered view nor, if she is right in her interpretation of Wittgenstein, can it be Wittgenstein's considered view; in the same article she writes that in the *Tractatus*

three sets of remarks (the 6.1s, the 6.2s, and the 6.3s) are concerned with three different non-picturing uses of signs, none of which is meaningless. What we can see clearly from these three sets of remarks is that there are sign-constructions that may look as if they are picture-propositions, but that have a quite different use. The same point is indeed evident in Wittgenstein's remarks about expressions of the form 'a=b': that they are aids to representation. I am claiming then that there is no argument in the *Tractatus*, about any use of signs, that because it is not the picture-use it is excluded, and lies beyond the limits of language.¹⁵⁴

There is, she claims, "a real variety of cases in which proposition-like constructions, although they do not have the use specified in the variable at TLP 6, may appear to us to be representations or reports or descriptions of something that is the case."¹⁵⁵

Furthermore it is odd and unexpected, on the austere reading, that Wittgenstein draws such a clear line in the Lecture between scientific statements and ethical utterances. Diamond writes that

¹⁵³ In this article, "The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense", she continually seems to conflate "sense" or "senseful language" with the totality of scientific description or with the totality of all *propositions* — e.g. on p. 259 where "the lineaments of senseful language" are conflated with "the language of propositions". In many "resolute" writings on the *Tractatus* it is unclear whether "sense" is used as a technical term, or used non-technically like "nonsense", since Wittgenstein distinguished in the *Tractatus* between *unsinnig* and *sinnlos*, or nonsensical and senseless. Diamond writes elsewhere: "And, like tautologies, mathematical propositions can be described as senseless, where this indicates their lack of sense but does not imply nonsensicality. (As I read the *Tractatus*, nonsensical propositions count as senseless, but the inverse doesn't hold.)" ("What Can Only Be True", 13.) In "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense" Michael Kremer writes: "We must be using 'sense,' 'nonsense' and other such words here in other (pre-theoretical) meanings" (43), but writes ten pages later: "Thus he [Wittgenstein] has to make clear that tautologies, while lacking sense since they do not divide the space of possibilities into those with which they agree and those with which they disagree, are nonetheless not nonsense since they are built up out of expressions that have a determinate meaning, or use, in the language" (53), thus seeming to rely on a technical criterion of *sense*, though not of *nonsense*. It is possible that Diamond is only defending the senselessness of ethical expressions in this technical sense in "The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense"; in "Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", she clearly means to be defending the plain nonsensicality of ethical expressions.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 256. Elsewhere she mentions the discussion of definitions as "a kind of rule of translation" at 3.24 and 3.343 — see "Finding One's Way", 177. In a very recent article she makes the point quite plain: "there is no general inference from some sentence's not being a contingent description of things, nor a tautology nor a contradiction, to its counting as nonsense on the *Tractatus* view." ("What Can Only Be True", 14)

“Wittgenstein does not try to demarcate such a limit [to the expression of thoughts] by specifying kinds of sentence which are meaningless because of the kind of sentence they are.”¹⁵⁶ But he does draw a line between kinds of sentence — scientific sentences which make sense on the one hand, and “*all* ethical and religious expressions”, which are nonsensical, on the other. He contrasts value statements with “our words as we use them in science” (PO 40), and he seems to paraphrase his conclusion that ethical utterances are nonsensical by writing that ethics “can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense.” (PO 44) This echoes a similar tendency in the *Tractatus*, which suggests that the proper method in philosophy would be to begin by saying nothing but “was sich sagen läßt, also Sätze der Naturwissenschaft” (TLP 6.53). The problem is not so much that Wittgenstein in the Lecture ignores the domains discussed in the 6.1s, 6.2s and 6.3s, namely logical and mathematical sentences and the principles of mechanics, and only contrasts scientific description with value statements; rather, the problem is that it is hard to see why he should expect such a clean break between scientific description and value statements unless he had some formal criterion of sense at hand, such as falsifiability.

These are the problems with reading the Lecture with an austere conception of nonsense — it does not seem at all plausible that *all* ethical expressions are nonsensical, if this is taken to mean that they simply mean nothing. I will nonetheless not be working with any substantial notion of nonsense in this chapter. I hope to take no position on how to read the *Tractatus*, and am not convinced that there is any completely coherent reading of it, but the austere view of nonsense is what one should *hope* to find in early Wittgenstein, as it is the only way to preserve the unique strength and interest of his use of *nonsense* as a term of philosophical criticism. Moreover adhering to the austere view of nonsense strikes me as the only sensible exegetical practice if we are interested in *clarifying* his philosophy. If Wittgenstein had meant at times that statements *x*, *y* and *z* are “nonsense” in the sense that they lack bipolarity, for example, for the sake of clarity it would be best for exegetes to summarize his results by stating that *x*, *y* and *z* lack bipolarity, and to reserve the term “nonsense” for cases where the statements really do make no sense. Where the issue appears to be that moral expressions are non-descriptive, I will say that they are non-descriptive, as I have in the previous chapter; since this the chapter about nonsense, *here* I am only interested in pressing the issue of whether some or all ethical statements really just fail to make sense to us. Moreover, in the Lecture to all appearances Wittgenstein does not offer or pretend to offer a theory of sense; he really seems to be trying to show us that we have failed to assign any meaning to our ethical utterances. The oddity of the Lecture is that he expects that a careful attention to what we

¹⁵⁶ Diamond, “Ethics, imagination”, 151.

mean will reveal a very clean break between scientific description and expressions of value, that the fact/value distinction will overlap perfectly with the sense/nonsense distinction. (I will be ignoring mathematical and logical statements and the principles of mechanics, as Wittgenstein does in the Lecture.) I aim to show that Wittgenstein had good reasons for thinking that he could mean nothing by his ethical expressions, but that from the perspective of his later work it seems that he hadn't paid sufficient attention to his life with words. A look at how the Wittgensteinian critique of philosophy as nonsensical actually works on the austere view will show that just as we can easily hallucinate meaning, we can also hallucinate nonsensicality; precisely because there is no clear criterion of sense except for our ability to make sense of words, we can believe we have given words a sense through inattentiveness or complacency, but we can also lose our grasp of the sense we have given words through misleading philosophical expectations of what sense can look like. While Wittgenstein pursues the nonsensicality claim in the Lecture using austere methods, nonetheless he is mistaken because of his sense of what could make sense. And yet I will at the end leave *some* role for the claim that there is something essentially nonsensical in our ethical discourse, or at least that a temptation towards nonsense is essential to ethical discourse.

2.2 The absolute use of 'thin' moral terms

Wittgenstein begins leading us toward the nonsensicality claim with the following passage:

The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, "*the* absolutely right road." I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge. (PO 40)

If Wittgenstein really believes that talk of the absolute good makes no sense — if his nonsensicality claim involves the austere notion of nonsense — then the "chimera" here cannot be anything he has actually succeeded in describing with the preceding sentences, for if he could describe it then it would make sense. A road with a magical property such that it moulds everyone's desires or actions is surreal but not nonsensical; if Wittgenstein thought that the absolute good was an outlandish

metaphysical assumption, he would be committed to an error theory in the style of J.L. Mackie¹⁵⁷ instead of his nonsensicality claim. And yet Wittgenstein seems to be describing something rather than nothing. Again, on the austere view, tempting nonsense differs from obvious nonsense like “piggly wiggle tiggly” (Diamond’s example of obviously plain nonsense) in looking and feeling like sense and in playing with various mental associations and images; also, we should add — this will be important in the course of this chapter — in that the temptation to speak of absolute value, unlike “piggly wiggle tiggly”, arises on real occasions in our lives in response to real needs. The hallucination of meaning provides real constraints on what I might mean if I am to mean anything, and so to some extent we can describe, not the chimera itself so to speak (since there is nothing there), but the general neighborhood it would have to be in.¹⁵⁸ In speaking of the absolutely right road I am imagining, on the one end, some unspecified state of affairs, some real fact, and, on the other end, and following from this, the moral resolution, or perhaps: the truth of some moral resolution. It is nonsense because we have no clear idea of how it is supposed to *follow*, and would reject any concrete and sensible proposal as not being what we mean. It does not follow causally, for example; if a road did really exert some causal force on my will, this would simply give rise to moral questions about whether I should be ruled in that way by the road. Wittgenstein writes that it must follow with “logical necessity”. But we cannot think of any deduction that would satisfy us either. The fact that I am taking this road to the grocery store, for example, would entail logically that I am taking this road; but this is not at all what I mean. What I want to come out at the other end is not that I am (in fact) doing something, but that something is to be done, that something *should* or *must* (in some unexplained sense of *must*) be done. It might also be thought that *that I should take this road* might follow logically from a complex state of affairs including a goal of mine that would be served by taking the road. But even if we could formulate the exact inference, this would not be what I mean — in speaking absolutely I am making my meaning independent of any goals a person might happen to have. And when he says “No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge”, he cannot be describing something we can understand and then ruling it out, but rather capturing our own incoherent fantasy. (We have no

¹⁵⁷ See Mackie, *Ethics*, Chapter 1.

¹⁵⁸ Resolute readers sometimes say things that might imply that they have painted themselves into a corner where they must deny that we can say anything sensible about what is going on in the mind of someone speaking nonsense; if a statement makes nonsense, then you cannot of course say what it is trying to say (there is nothing there) but on this view you also cannot in any sense say what the person is thinking in saying it. Logi Gunnarsson has suggested to me that this is in fact a consequence of the ‘austere’ view of nonsense, but I do not think that it has to be. To say that someone is hovering between different senses of a word is to meaningfully characterize what is going on in their mind when they speak nonsense, and does not amount to saying *what* they are trying to say in any problematic sense. Wittgenstein as well as his resolute readers often deal with nonsense by speaking more nonsense, going “von einem nicht offenkundigen Unsinn zu einem offenkundigen” (*PU* §464), but they also can and do give sensible characterizations of how the speaker is, for example, equivocating at a certain point.

clear idea of what an “absolute judge” would be, for example — a real judge such as we know here on Earth will clearly not do.) We have some sense of what our own fantasy is, and can describe *that*: it is, I think, a fantasy of my moral judgment happening without me, arriving already accomplished along with the facts, and thus being rock-solid, objective. But we must hold that this fantasy fails to describe anything in the sense that we don’t have any idea of how the judgment might arrive like that or what we mean exactly by the idea of a rock-solid moral judgment.

So far this merely repeats the argument from the previous chapter that a realist reading of moral judgments is incoherent — that however we assign the reference of “right”, this will not be what we mean when we call something “absolutely right” if we are speaking morally. Wittgenstein opens his Lecture by pointing out that there are ‘relative’ uses of all of what we might call ‘the moral words’, right, good, important, etc., where they are used simply to refer to specific facts, for example: “If for instance I say that this is a good chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon.” (PO 38) Wittgenstein then points out that the moral use of these terms seems to function analogously, but we cannot locate any specific analogy:

Thus it seems that when we are using the word right in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not right in its trivial sense, it’s something similar, and when we say “This is a good fellow,” although the word good here doesn’t mean what it means in the sentence “This is a good football player” there seems to be some similarity. And when we say “This man’s life was valuable” we don’t mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewelery but there seems to be some sort of analogy. [...] But a simile must be the simile for *something*. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be simile now seems to be mere nonsense. (PO 42-3)

If we read this uncharitably or in line with a very crude understanding of Wittgensteinian philosophy, we might say: he shows us here how the “language game” of these terms works, and shows us as well that in speaking morally we are speaking ‘outside’ of this language game and hence nonsensically. This is to suggest that extant language games serve as a formal criterion of sense, ruling out expressions we would otherwise understand, and hence it runs counter to the austere conception of nonsense found in *TLP* 5.4733. In addition it is just unpersuasive; if there were rules stating that I had to use words as we have always used them, they would be bad rules, and I would not have to accord them any authority. Nothing in Wittgenstein’s work suggests that

we cannot give words new meanings or use them in new ways.¹⁵⁹ It is worth noting that when, in discussing the case of the “absolutely right road”, he asks “what we could possibly mean”, he is not canvassing the field of literally all possibilities. He is not imagining that we might be speaking in code, for example, or that I mean not the several roads meandering vaguely rightward but the road that diverges *sharply* right. He is imagining himself in a situation where he would naturally express himself in absolute language and asking what he might actually mean. It is nonetheless strange that he only raises one sort of possibility — that his talk of “absolutely right” proceeds analogously to relative, fact-stating uses — and concludes, when he does not recognize his meaning in this possibility, that he means nothing. This seems an overly hasty application of the technique described by Conant of offering various reformulations. The Lecture was written in 1929, shortly before the advent of emotivism as a theory, so we might suppose that for Wittgenstein at the time, the options were exhausted by various sorts of fact-stating construals; but on this reading, the Lecture is simply outdated and from our perspective a poor piece of philosophy. (Moreover this excuse is compromised somewhat if we believe Diamond’s reading that the 6.1s, 6.2s and 6.3s of the *Tractatus* describe three different types of non-representational *yet not meaningless* uses of language.) The Lecture is stronger if we suppose that for Wittgenstein, the one possibility offered by relative uses was enough to show him that he was hovering over *this* use, wanting to mean it but not really — that he was using words in a sense given by the criteria of their relative use while at the same time wishing not to be beholden to these criteria. This seems to me accurate; but for an expressivist who thinks that moral judgments are expressions of emotion, e.g., or imperatives, it will be simply question-begging.¹⁶⁰

In the Lecture Wittgenstein now moves on to the second technique mentioned above:

Wittgenstein’s book of the world is meant to show that insofar as we can imagine all the facts being stated all at once, we see that we will still be left with moral questions in the face of all these facts; or, as he put it in the *Tractatus* 6.52, that the complete catalogue of all scientific truths would not even touch the “problems of life”. This technique is also clearly and obviously useless against an expressivist. The idea of a book of the world only works as a clarificatory tool if I think of my ethical utterances as claiming something about the world. If I say “can you hand me the salt” it would be absurd to suggest that I might mean nothing by my words, and to try to persuade me by

¹⁵⁹ See Conant and Diamond on this point: “We cannot tell, merely from the fact that some word or words is not given the use that it normally has (or that its surface grammar suggests that it ought to have) that it has been given no other use.” Conant and Diamond, “On Reading the *Tractatus* Resolutely”, 76. See also Hertzberg, “The Sense Is Where You Find It”, esp. p 101, for an excellent discussion of this point.

¹⁶⁰ Strictly speaking it is not question-begging, as Wittgenstein is only speaking for himself and explaining what he means by his words; but the point remains that it will be unpersuasive for an expressivist.

showing me that I could not find what I mean anywhere in the book of the world. Again this technique only reveals us to be talking nonsensically if it gets us to recognize a certain hesitation in ourselves, for example: meaning our ethical utterances *as if* they must correspond to something in the world and yet not being willing to accept anything in the book of the world as our meaning.

Moreover there is an additional problem in prosecuting these techniques, that to my knowledge has gone unnoticed by resolute readers: this “hovering” between various commitments is only a problem if it is contrary to my purpose. This is shown by *puns*. If I say “Did you hear about the optometrist who fell into a lens grinder and made a spectacle of himself?” I am clearly hovering between two different commitments, wanting to mean *making a spectacle* in two different ways. But as we all understand the pun perfectly well, it would be strange to call the pun *nonsense*, and not in the spirit of an austere notion of nonsense, which consists precisely in the claim that the only criterion for the sense of an utterance is our ability to make sense of the utterance. We all make sense of puns perfectly well for the most part. In punning I have not given one of the words *a* meaning, but I have also not *failed* to give a word *a* meaning. If in saying (in philosophy) “A is an object” I am hovering between different meanings, this is a problem only because I understand myself as entering a descriptive claim about the world in a way that requires the unequivocal assignment of meaning; otherwise we should be perfectly free to hover if we want to. (For precisely this reason it is difficult to understand the claim that in speaking ethically someone might be speaking with an intention that would “be frustrated by his sentence’s making sense”. The clearest case of speaking with an intention that would be frustrated by my sentences’ making sense would be if I am feigning madness; but ethical utterances are not like this. The clearest case of speaking with an intention that would be frustrated by the unequivocal assignment of meaning is puns and double-entendres; but these are for that reason not nonsense, as I am equivocating precisely and purposefully. The case of tractarian nonsensical sentences is a bit more complicated. In posing as philosophical claims they are assuming representational intentions as part of their pose, and this intention requires the unequivocal assignment of meaning; but the real intention (Wittgenstein’s intention) behind them, namely to ape philosophical nonsense, would be frustrated by the unequivocal assignment of meaning. Hence we might say that in a sense what the sentence is posing as requires the unequivocal assignment of meaning and is therefore not anything like a pun, and yet in another sense their ultimate intention behind them would be frustrated by giving every component a clear meaning. This strikes me as a good reason to doubt whether they really *are* nonsense on an austere view of nonsense. However, the point I wish to make here is that if we are to believe Diamond’s account we very badly need some account of how the *intention* behind ethical utterances would be frustrated by their making sense.)

Postponing this problem for now, we might think that we can update the Lecture for a post-expressivist world as follows: the idea of a book of the world shows us that nothing within the realm of the descriptive would give us what we mean; if, in addition, it can be shown that we do not mean just an imperative or an exhortation or anything of that sort, then there is nothing left and we might have to conclude that we mean nothing. Of course very many people feel that all of the expressivist accounts offered so far do fail to reach what we mean, for example that in calling something absolutely wrong we do not just mean to be expressing a sentiment. Nonetheless this remains question-begging for an actual expressivist. However, the bigger problem is that one doesn't necessarily need to be committed to any other account, expressivist or otherwise, to find this unsatisfactory, as a comparison with the case of "secondary sense" makes clear — that is, with utterances such as "the vowel *e* is green", or the question "is Wednesday fat or thin?" that Wittgenstein discusses in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In saying that the vowel *e* is green, Wittgenstein is clearly not applying the word in accordance with its ordinary criteria, yet he also does not feel that he has given the word a different meaning or is using it in a different sense, though it is a different use. "Ich will diese Wörter (mit den mir geläufigen Bedeutungen) hier gebrauchen", he writes; "Die sekundäre Bedeutung ist nicht eine 'übertragene' Bedeutung. Wenn ich sage "Der Vokal *e* ist für mich gelb", so meine ich nicht 'gelb' in übertragener Bedeutung — denn ich könnte, was ich sagen will, gar nicht anders als mittels des Begriffs 'gelb' ausdrücken." (*PU* II p. 556f.) Wittgenstein clearly finds something puzzling in these uses of language, but he does not declare them nonsensical. In "Secondary Sense", one of her earliest papers, Diamond discusses this phenomenon; she compares these examples with the description of music as *sad* and writes:

sad music is not music conducive to sadness in the listener, nor music which sounds as if it had been written by a sad man, nor music which is nice to hear when you are sad, nor... (The only reason for thinking it is something like that is the idea that it must be, that if it is not meaningless, some such account must be given. But to recognize that expressions may be used in a secondary sense is to see that they are not meaningless in these secondary uses even if we cannot give an account of what they mean in words used in their primary senses. If you know what it is to be sad, and you call some music sad, you mean precisely that.)¹⁶¹

In fact here she draws an explicit parallel between these cases of secondary sense and Wittgenstein's examples of absolute use of language from the Lecture, writing:

¹⁶¹ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 228-9.

The tendency to see “absolute safety” and “absolute ought” as misuses was a result of being struck by logical features of both which could not be handled on the view of language Wittgenstein had when he wrote the Ethics Lecture. [...] One source of difficulty with “ought” is, I think, removed if we look at its relation to the more obviously secondary uses in ethics, such as talk of what is wanted, when there is no one (in a plain sense) who wants (plain sense); of what matters, when there is no one (plain sense) to whom it matters, no observable result which will be different; of *the* way, which is not the way to go some place (plain sense) someone wants (plain sense) to go; and so on.¹⁶²

Hence, while in her later articles “Ethics, imagination, and the method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” (1991) and “The *Tractatus* and the Limits of Sense” (2011) she is inclined to defend Wittgenstein’s nonsensicality claim, in the 1966-7 paper “Secondary Sense” she saw the nonsensicality claim as an error.

The problem goes beyond the need to accommodate secondary sense; after all, it would not be a stretch to say that “the vowel *e* is green” is just nonsense. Rather the larger problem is how to understand the technique of proposing reformulations of the interlocutor’s meaning in the hopes of getting the interlocutor to see the emptiness of her words. If we are not careful we might suppose that Wittgenstein and Conant set up *paraphrasability* or *translatability into other words* as a criterion of sense. (Conant’s descriptions of the technique often seem to invite this reading, but I do not think he really means this.) In principle it is perfectly legitimate to say: I meant just what I said and nothing else. In her article “Secondary Sense” Diamond also refers to the examples of poetry that Cavell suggests cannot be paraphrased, such as “The mind is brushed by sparrow wings” or “as a calm darkens among water-lights”.¹⁶³ These are precisely the cases where one can say: “I know what it means but I can’t say what it means”, without this undermining the person’s claim to really *know what it means*. Wittgenstein himself suggests a much different sort of case where one might legitimately resist the demand for any kind of explanation: “Die Antwort auf die Frage nach der Erklärung der Negation ist wirklich: verstehst Du sie denn nicht? Nun, wenn Du sie verstehst, was gibt es da noch zu erklären, was hat eine Erklärung da noch zu tun?” (*PO* 176.)

This suggests a way of preserving something of Moore’s own moral philosophy; rather than talking about *sui generis* moral properties, he could have simply insisted that the meaning of moral utterances is *sui generis*. In explaining moral discourse in terms of reference to properties Moore

¹⁶² Ibid., 236.

¹⁶³ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 81; Diamond refers to this discussion in *The Realistic Spirit*, 232.

has already said too much, explaining the meaning of moral utterances in terms foreign to moral discourse when he should have simply refused to offer any explanation¹⁶⁴. The answer “I know exactly what I mean and I mean just what I said” *can be* perfectly reasonable in certain cases; and there seems to be no way of showing that moral utterances are not just such a case. For someone who confidently sticks to this answer, the Wittgensteinian techniques described by Diamond and Conant seem to have no traction at all.

I do not mean to criticize these techniques, but to show what they rest upon: our sense of what makes sense, of what clarity looks like and what is unclear. The techniques by themselves are useless without some sense of where to start and where to stop.¹⁶⁵ The Lecture begins with the sense that moral utterances require clarification, and that unearthing the facts that the utterances describe would be a way of clarifying them, if it were possible. Several times in the Lecture Wittgenstein reformulates his own ethical expressions; for example, “how extraordinary that the world should exist” is what people have always meant when “they said that God had created the world” (PO 42); and there is no suggestion that an utterance involving the absolute use of *good* could not be equally well put with an absolute use of *ought* or *right*, for example. Wittgenstein finds however that all of these reformulations are equally nonsensical; we have been moving about within a circle of equally problematic terms. He thinks that the relative use of language such as “this is a good chair” is perfectly well explained by “saying the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose” (PO 38); that an allegedly factual statement has been reformulated in factual language does not strike him as a problem. On a formal level these two kinds of language use are on an equal footing: I can reformulate ethical utterances with more ethical language, and I can reformulate my factual utterances with more factual language. At this level there is nothing marking one of these two kinds of language use as any clearer than the other. The entire dynamic of the Lecture starts from a sense of what counts as clarity, or in other words of where we feel at home in our words. If late Wittgenstein teaches us that we are at some point simply at home in our words, he also teaches us that we might easily lose track of where exactly this is, particularly in philosophizing. We are inclined to think that the idea of “the absolutely right road” makes no sense, at least pending some

¹⁶⁴ In fact Moore wavers between these two possibilities. His initial statement in the *Principia Ethica* is: “good is good, and that is the end of the matter [...] my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.” (58) But he of course says a great deal more about it; among other things, that it cannot be defined only in the sense in which “a definition states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole” (61), because *good* has no parts; it “denotes a simple and indefinable quality” (62), in fact a “unique property of things” (68), or a “unique object” (72). If he does not notice that to consider the term referential is already to say more than nothing about its meaning, it is probably because he is implicitly assuming the ‘Augustinian’ picture of language criticized in the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

¹⁶⁵ It is however part and parcel of the ‘resolute’ reading that there is no “infallible method” for determining whether any utterance has been given sense — see e.g. Gunnarsson, *Wittgensteins Leiter*, 75-9.

further explanation of what exactly the person means by it. But if someone says that they don't understand what it means to say that torture is absolutely wrong, we will sometimes be inclined to say: But don't you understand this? What is there to explain? And yet the only real difference we can find between these two cases is that we don't generally care very much about roads in and of themselves.

But some people, at least in some circumstances, will also agree that they don't really know what it means to say that torture is absolutely wrong. We might speculate that moral philosophy has always existed precisely because people have always felt, at least at certain moments, that there is something curiously unreal about morality itself. I might feel this way when I am seriously tempted to do something I consider wrong and I begin to give way to temptation by thinking: well, let's say I do what's wrong, so what? And in these moments there doesn't seem to be any answer. There might be consequences that I don't want; but if I find I don't care about the consequences, then, again: if I do the wrong thing, so what? When we look around us to find something real, all we find our ingrained habits of character, stemming from our upbringing and education, and institutions of real force such as police, courts of law, the disapproval of our peers etc. I do not mean to be referring to these things when I say that something is wrong — I do not just mean that I would be castigated or jailed or that I have been raised not to do certain things — but there seems to be nothing else there. Nor do I think of myself as just expressing a sentiment — for in the situation where I am sorely tempted to do something “wrong”, if “wrong” only expresses a sentiment I have, it would be quite reasonable of me to try to quash this sentiment or simply go against it. In these moments it is not crazy to think that moral necessity is just a phantasm produced by indoctrination, the mental shadow cast by our childhood training or the force of punitive institutions. In our desperation we might now appeal to God and His commandments, or to a divine order, or a Platonic order of rules; as I have argued, however, if there actually were a more powerful being who commanded us, or if there actually were some set of actual laws “up there”, however we want to spell that out, they wouldn't be what we wanted; nothing actual could give us any ultimate justification. (“It was in fact just the occult character [...] which you needed for your purposes.” (BB 5)) These symbolic expressions are just unfulfilled gestures in the direction of *something* beyond our own emotions and institutions. If we read Wittgenstein's Lecture in this light, it might offer us something like an “error theory”: we are all essentially committed moral realists, but we

have no idea what we mean by it.¹⁶⁶

Some authors have argued that Wittgenstein is an ordinary sort of expressivist. In his article “Wittgenstein on Realism, Ethics and Aesthetics” Mario Brandhorst makes use of a remark of Wittgenstein’s in his “Lectures on Aesthetics”:

You could regard the rules laid down for the measurement of a coat as an expression of what certain people want. (...) The rules of harmony, you can say, expressed the way people wanted chords to follow—their wishes crystallized in these rules (the word ‘wishes’ is much too vague.) (*LC* 5f.)

Applied to ethics, this would make sense of our moral utterances, without, as Brandhorst notes, reducing them to expression of purely personal preferences.¹⁶⁷ (Hence the suggestion verges on a kind of constructivism.) Brandhorst writes that “the situation is essentially the same in ethics and aesthetics”.¹⁶⁸ It is true that Wittgenstein said “Ethics and aesthetics are one”, but this again strikes me as a too simplistic and hasty an identification, as they might be thought to differ in precisely this point: that when I see “morality” as the crystallization of wishes in rules, I immediately see a genuine *moral* question whether these wishes and these rules are right, whether I should follow these rules, etc.; hence the description of any actual wishes crystallized in rules cannot give me the meaning of my absolute use of moral language.

Here we might also take Wittgenstein’s suggestion about what to do when we “look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics and ethics”, namely: “In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we learn the meaning of this word (‘good’ for instance)? From what sort of examples? in what language-games?” (*PU* §77) A passage from the “Lectures on Aesthetics” (also quoted by Brandhorst) applies: “A child generally applies a word like ‘good’ first to food. One thing that is immensely important in teaching is exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. The word is taught as a substitute for a facial expression or a gesture. The gestures, tones of voice, etc., in this case are expressions of approval.” (*LC* 2) This clearly will not do as an account of the moral

¹⁶⁶ This view differs from Mackie’s error theory in that Mackie thought the supposition of absolute values false and not nonsensical. It shares the structure of his position however in first diagnosing us as realists and then arguing against realism. The more ordinary approach is either to argue that our ordinary moral practice is essentially realist *and* to also argue for the truth of realism, or else to argue against the truth of realism *and* also argue that our ordinary moral practice is not essentially realist.

¹⁶⁷ Brandhorst, “Wittgenstein on Realism, Ethics and Aesthetics”, 67f.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

use of “good”.¹⁶⁹ — We might also look, not to “good” as an ejaculation, but to children’s use of ‘thin’ moral terms in general. How do children learn to say: you must do this, you should do that, etc.? Their parents give them commands, accompanied by force or at least by positive and negative incentives; and children begin to parrot these to each other to the best of their interpretation. Children also sometimes impose their own rules when they are trying to play together. One child might say to another: “You must first step on this rock, and then say ‘bulla bulla’, and then you must touch your nose and fall down”, and when the other child deviates they might well get indignant and say “No, you’re doing it wrong! You *must*...” etc. This might be modeled on the necessity statements given by adults; though here the only source of the necessity is whatever whim happens to please the child and the only force behind it is whatever force the child can muster by yelling and insisting. We have here a nice overview of perfectly understandable language games; but we do not think that we are doing this when we speak morally as adults. It of course happens that we do impose rules on each other and try to make them stick by sheer insistence, and by bluffs and threats and persuasion, and that we maintain institutions that force compliance; but we think of ourselves as doing so because we have in some sense recognized these rules to be right, and we do not think that the force of this “right” is given by our own bluffs, threats, etc. But again we have no clear sense of what else we might be thinking of. — Moreover it does not make any essential difference if we suppose that our moral judgments might not be mere descriptions of our own psychology or of our shared institutions and customs, but *expressions* of them; the problem affects expressivism and realism equally. When I imagine that my moral judgments about what anyone *must* or *should* do are only backed by sentiments, customs and institutions, they lose the value I had thought to have seen in them. Hence something like the Open Question argument can be turned against expressivism as well.¹⁷⁰ The Open Question turns against *realism* when we ask: let us suppose that my moral judgment is just the description of our customs: so what? I could take up any number of attitudes to these facts, so the moral question is open. The expressivist supposes at this point that the argument speaks in favor of expressivism; my moral judgments must be expressions of these customs. I am not, for example, describing our customs but endorsing and enforcing them in speaking morally. When I say “we help our neighbors” as a moral judgment I am not just describing what we do but insisting upon it. Hence it seems that the question “what attitude should

¹⁶⁹ In fact Wittgenstein couldn’t accept this as an account of all aesthetic judgments either: “I see roughly this—there is a realm of utterance of delight, when you taste pleasant food or smell a pleasant smell, etc., then there is the realm of Art which is quite different” — *LC* 11. Hans-Johann Glock has suggested that Wittgenstein’s later metaethics is best seen as a “communitarian variant of expressivism”, according to which “[a] moral framework expresses the stance not so much of a person but of a community towards the question of how to act and how to lead and conceive one’s life”. (Glock, “Wittgensteinian Anti-Anti Realism”, 122f.) I suspect that as soon as this suggest were worked out in any detail it would run into the problems I discuss in connection with Lovibond’s approach in 5.2-5.4.

¹⁷⁰ There is a similar argument in Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, 18-25.

we take” is not open, that this is precisely what the expressivist judgment closes, in that the judgment *is* the taking of an attitude; we are not just describing things, we might want to say, but moving in a certain direction. But in giving us this explanation the expressivist has given us a kind of neutral description of our moral judgments: our moral judgments are our expressions of our customs, for example. The expressivist sees herself as giving us an objective description of what we are doing in judging morally, “from sideways on”; and this distance opens the space for an evaluation of the practice of moral judgment thus described. Specifically we might look at the image of us expressing our own customs and think: this doesn’t have that much value, and this couldn’t possibly be what I had meant to be doing in speaking morally – at least not when we are thinking of absolute prescriptive judgments. We had meant to be expressing what is right and good, not expressing our customs. If the expressivist picture of what our moral judgment is doing fails to have the same weight we attribute to moral truth, then we are right to say that it fails to capture what we meant or thought to mean. So the elements used in the explanation, extant customs and institutions and extant sentiments, do not reach what we thought we mean, whether these elements are deployed realistically or expressivistically.¹⁷¹ But again: it is then not clear what we do mean, since we seem to have exhausted all the alternatives.

I have been trying in the last paragraph to motivate this sense of something unclear about moral expressions. None of this necessarily has any traction against someone who simply insists: “when I said ‘these rules are right’ I know what I meant, and I meant what I said.” We might object that while they might legitimately reject any paraphrase, they should be able to give *some* account of what follows from their statement, for example — some ‘grammatical’ account, in the Wittgensteinian sense, of what they’re doing with those words. (We cannot allow their statement to be unconnected to anything else they would say or do). If they say “this rule to do *x* is right”, then someone not doing *x* will count as doing something wrong, and depending on the precise context the utterer will be angry or indignant or disappointed, or generally have some negative reaction, and perhaps reproach the other, etc. However, none of this takes us very far from the use of necessity statements by children described above; and we might suppose that we will never arrive at any grammatical feature that will sufficiently distinguish the meaning of moral utterances. It is not clear however if this would have to budge the confident *sui genericist*. It might or might not be the case

¹⁷¹ Wittgenstein writes in the Lecture: “But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad.” (PO 39) As formulated this is not an objection to expressivism, but rather invites the expressivist response that in our judgment we are not describing but rather expressing a state of mind; and this is one of the clearest signs that the Lecture was written prior to the work of Stevenson and Ayer. Some commenters, for example Friedlander (*Signs of Sense* 26), overlook this and suppose that this line can be used as a direct response to expressivism. Nonetheless these expressivist accounts do seem to only shift the difficulty to a second level, as I have argued here.

that a difference would come out somewhere if we characterized the grammar sufficiently; but since it is far from easy to give a very fine-grained description of the grammar of anything, and since every description is extremely context-dependent and subtle and contestable by other native speakers, the question is rather fruitless. The *sui genericist* is by all appearances perfectly entitled to continue to say that she knows what she means, and she means exactly what she said. The nonsensicality claim only becomes compelling if it taps into some puzzlement that we already feel about our own utterances. I have been assuming that a great number of us are puzzled by our own sense that there is some kind of moral necessity that differs from causal and logical necessity, and that this is why there is and always has been moral philosophy. We are fluent in the use of moral terms, and yet oddly when we reflect on them — whether this reflection stems from purely philosophical concerns, or from moments of temptation — it seems like we have no idea what we could mean in speaking that way.

As we may not want to leave matters at a simple impasse between what we might call the skeptic and the *sui genericist*, I close this section by proposing two substantial lessons we might draw from the impasse. On the one hand, we might diagnose the skeptic's puzzlement as stemming from the scientific world-view, or a naturalistic metaphysics. This has been suggested in one way or another by Charles Taylor and John McDowell¹⁷². On this view, our fluency in moral language is genuine, and the puzzlement some of us feel in moments of reflection is the product of modern philosophical prejudices that gives us a false sense of what clarity must look like: i.e., scientific description. This is to deny that our puzzlement is very old, perhaps as old as morality itself; many will feel that this misrepresents the depth of our puzzlement, a puzzlement found in the *The Republic* or *Gorgias*, hence long before the rise of modern science. One might think that we only look for scientific-sounding explanations of our moral utterances nowadays for the same reason that we used to look for theological explanations, i.e. our desperation to find something we might mean. I cannot prove this here, so I will simply move on.

If we do feel that our puzzlement is far deeper and more legitimate than this diagnosis allows, then we might conclude that we should *drop the practice of moral judgment*, i.e. of using moral terms absolutely within declarative sentences such as: *x* is right, *y* is wrong, *z* is bad, one should *a b* and *c*, etc. That is: *we should cease being judgmental*. Either we will simply be silent, as Wittgenstein proposes at the close of the *Tractatus*; or, as Diamond suggests, we might continue to voice our inclinations to speak this way, but to voice them as inclinations — “I am inclined to say *x*...” —

¹⁷² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, chapter 3.1; McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 83.

and to stop asserting them. It is true that Wittgenstein does not propose we stop speaking absolutely in the Lecture, and in fact ends by emphasizing his great personal respect for this kind of nonsense; elsewhere he approvingly repeated Augustine's remark: "Was, du Mistvieh, du willst keinen Unsinn reden? Rede nur einen Unsinn, es macht nichts!" (*WWK* 69) But it is hard to see how it could fail to change our relation to our words when we recognize them as nonsensical. Michael Kremer has argued along very similar lines that the notion of ultimate ethical justification is "meaningless nonsense" Wittgenstein wishes to relieve us of, and that the ethical systems we build to justify ourselves are "thinly disguised manifestations of the will to power, the will to place oneself at the center of the universe."¹⁷³ The ethical point of the *Tractatus* is, on his reading, that it should enable us to see the emptiness of our justificatory talk and thereby free us to live and act in the world. Wittgenstein felt that we should accept the world rather than lay down conditions on it; and our absolute use of moral terms clearly involves the self laying down conditions upon the world. But of course this critique of moral judgmental is not amoral, it is itself a moral vision; there is something left of the moral life beyond moral judgment. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the use of 'thin' moral terms such as "ought" and "right" is more rare in our own moral thought and talk than moral philosophy would suggest, and is far more common in *moralizing* than in real moral deliberation.

In this section I have been investigating the absolute use of "thin" moral terms; in the next section I will turn to the expressions Wittgenstein used for his own moral vision, such as *seeing the world as a miracle*. In closing I will briefly summarize the results of this section. Since the "austere" view of nonsense and the associated methods of critique presuppose a substantial sense of what clarity and unclarity look like and hence where to start and stop in using the methods, they could be applied so as to replicate the results of any theory of meaning. If for example we start asking for reformulations wherever we see apparently non-factual discourse, and stop when we have reached either an apparently factual paraphrase or an admission of unparaphrasability within apparently factual discourse, then we might think of ourselves as using a non-technical and austere notion of nonsense and yet still exclude whole areas of discourse quite as if we were logical positivists. Someone proceeding this way could quite conceivably insist that they have no theory of nonsense and simply do not understand what might be meant by ethical, aesthetic, religious, logical or mathematical utterances and are trying to clarify them. We might not believe that this person is being sincere; or we might say that they are blinded by philosophical prejudice and are therefore misunderstanding what they can make sense of. We might point out that as soon as they put

¹⁷³ Kremer, "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense", 51.

philosophizing aside and begin speaking naturally, they seem fluent in all these regions of discourse and are able to elucidate, expand upon and paraphrase statements in these realms quite as if they were perfectly in command of their sense. Strictly speaking none of this provides irrefutable evidence of anything. Firstly, when a philosopher asks a question that Wittgenstein would clearly hold to be nonsensical, such as “What is time?”, they are (or seem to be) giving their words a use — they are using them to ask a philosophical question. Secondly, they might be able to put their question differently; and in his later work Wittgenstein is continually putting the confused notions of his interlocutors into his own words, hoping to elicit their recognition; so the ability to paraphrase or to expand upon an utterance does not show that we truly mean something by it. And thirdly: the *sense* that we make sense also proves nothing — hallucinations of meaning *are* possible. Hence the value of the “austere” techniques of criticism depends entirely upon the soundness of the user’s judgment and the depth of their self-examination; they are not techniques that can be used impersonally by someone who simply wants to generate results.¹⁷⁴

To return to the Lecture: Wittgenstein might have felt that absolute uses of ‘thin’ moral terms are nonsensical because they are parasitical upon factual uses, and that parasitical use of this sort is per se illegitimate; and there might be very little difference at the end of the day between having a theory of sense that rules out such parasitical use on the one hand, and on the other hand not having any theory of use and simply finding such uses nonsensical. Someone might rule such uses out because of a philosophical prejudice that ultimately turns out to be false; and this might have been the case with Wittgenstein. But even if we overcome this prejudice we might still find that something remains deeply puzzling about these uses of language.

2.3 Mystical expressions

I have reached a tentative conclusion that our absolute use of thin moral terms might be nonsensical, but that this does not force us into any very broad moral skepticism; these uses of language are far less typical of moral thought and discourse than most philosophers assume, and moreover there is a moral criticism of these ways of talking, i.e. that they are judgmental and belie a false relation to the world. We come now to the ways of speaking that Wittgenstein used to express his own moral vision, for example: that the world is a miracle. And we must now face the problem that Wittgenstein thought these expressions equally nonsensical. Moreover, on the face of it, “the world is a miracle” or “how extraordinary that anything should exist” will strike some people as far

¹⁷⁴ See on this point Gunnarsson, *Wittgensteins Leiter*, 75-9.

more obviously nonsensical than, e.g., “torture is absolutely wrong”; so it will not seem like we could be making any progress here. And if we take seriously the idea that “the world is a miracle” is simple nonsense in that it fails to make sense, i.e. that one or more of the terms have been given no meaning, then we must also believe that these expressions do not point to some kind of attitude or way of living that cannot be “said” but is somehow shown in them; if the words “the world is a miracle” fail to make sense, then they have not described any way of life or any vision, and they certainly could not guide our lives in any sense.

2.3.1 Local forms of mysticism

Why are all these expressions nonsensical? Wittgenstein precedes the introduction of the phrase “seeing the world as a miracle” with a discussion of the word “miracle”:

[...] we all know what in ordinary life would be called a miracle. It obviously is simply an event the like of which we have never yet seen. Now suppose such an event happened. Take the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion’s head and began to roar. Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to? For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say “Science has proved that there are no miracles.” The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle. For imagine whatever fact you may it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of that term. For we see now that we have been using the word “miracle” in a relative and an absolute sense. (PO 43)

He has not yet gotten to say what he wants to say, “the world is a miracle”, which I will call the global use of the term and which seems to bring additional problems that I discuss below. His exposition here is not the clearest, but he distinguishes between an absolute and a relative use of the term “miracle”. The relative use is: “an event the like of which we have never yet seen.” By the time he writes “where would the miracle have got to?” and notes that “everything miraculous has disappeared” he seems to have shifted to an absolute use of the term. After all, during the scientific investigation the event is still “an event the like of which we have never yet seen”, so that which is miraculous *in a relative sense* has gone nowhere. (One might suppose that enough time has gone by that the event is now a past episode, i.e. something ‘the like of which we have seen’ — but the question “where has the miracle got to” seems to me to have a different force than this.) He tries to elicit our recognition that we wish to use the word “miracle” in a way such that it would make no

sense to speak of proving or disproving the existence of miracles. The totality of facts, or the book of the world, would contain no miracles in that sense, at least not if we take “the scientific way of looking” at the facts, nor would the book of any *possible* world contain any miracles: “imagine whatever fact you may it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of the term.” (PO 43) It seems that when we call something miraculous in the absolute sense, we are applying the term to objects with no criteria of application in the objects; it is nothing in the object itself but rather a “way of looking” at the object that compels us to call it a miracle. Wittgenstein only explicitly says that the global form “the world is a miracle” is nonsense, but we might read him as implying that this absolute use of the term “miracle” is already in itself nonsensical; after all, the drift of the Lecture seems to be that our absolute uses of language make no sense, for the reason that they take their aura of sense from relative uses with their criteria of application and yet wish to abstract at the same time from these criteria; there seems to be “some sort of analogy”, but we cannot actually spell it out.

Wittgenstein’s early remarks on art can shed some light on this; in the remarks collected as *Culture and Value* he writes:

Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone who thinks himself unobserved engaged in some quite simple everyday activity. Let’s imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up & we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating himself, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes, — surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything that a playwright could cause to be acted or spoke on the stage. We should be seeing life itself. — But then we do see this every day & it makes not the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view. (CV 6-7)

When Wittgenstein calls this “wonderful”, he is surely speaking in a sense he would consider “absolute”; we could also just as easily say that we would suddenly see these banal events as “special”, or even as “miraculous”. The events are not in any sense “wonderful” “in themselves”, of course; the whole point is that the events on the stage would be the most ordinary and would not be distinguished by anything except “the point of view” that we take on them. Wittgenstein concludes: “The work of art compels us — as one might say — to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is a piece of nature like any other”. He seems in his early period to have seen this as the essential task of art, at least if we can interpret his remark “Das Kunstwerk ist der Gegenstand sub specie aeternitatis gesehen” (NB 7.10.16) in light of this phenomenon. Of course if this was his view of art at the time, it was an overly simplistic view; but art *can* accomplish this sanctification of

the ordinary, and one might argue that this is one of the hallmarks of the high modernism flourishing in the first half of the twentieth century. In his treatise on film Siegfried Kracauer describes this common film scene:

Two or more people are conversing with each other. In the middle of their talk the camera, as if entirely indifferent to it, slowly pans through the room, inviting us to watch the faces of the listeners and various furniture pieces in a detached spirit. Whatever this may mean within the given context, it invariably dissolves a well-known total situation and thereby confronts the spectator with isolated phenomena which he previously neglected or overlooked as matter-of-course components of that situation. As the camera pans, curtains become eloquent and eyes tell a story of their own.¹⁷⁵

With specific techniques film can estrange us from the familiar and everyday physical reality we live in, Kracauer writes, thus getting us to see things for the first time:

Intimate faces, streets we walk day by day, the house we live in — all these things are part of us like our skin, and because we know them by heart we do not know them with the eye. Once integrated into our existence, they cease to be objects of perception, goals to be attained. In fact, we would be immobilized if we focused on them.¹⁷⁶

In recording and exploring physical reality, film exposes to view a world never seen before, a world as elusive as Poe's purloined letter, which cannot be found because it is within everybody's reach. ... Strange as it may seem, although streets, faces, railway stations, etc., lie before our eyes, they have remained largely invisible so far.¹⁷⁷

Most people have had this sort of experience of becoming absorbed in the contemplation of some very ordinary sight, in its particularity, in its being exactly the way it is and no other way; and the experience can be prompted by certain techniques, for example when in film the camera intentionally yet purposelessly fixes our attention upon some ordinary object, say leaves blowing in the gutter, not using the shot to advance the plot or serve as a symbol, but simply lingering there. The device Wittgenstein imagines, of simply putting ordinary life up onto a stage with curtains, is similar. These experiences are naturally expressed by saying that what we see is "wonderful" or "special", and in speaking this way we are clearly not relying upon any criteria in the objects depicted, for the objects could be anything and we would say the same thing. But we should not for that reason call it nonsense. Our experience is marked by a kind of attention to the object that is

¹⁷⁵ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 55.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

similar to the attention elicited by things that are, in a relative sense, wonderful or special; we are arrested and absorbed in the same way. Hence in saying that the ordinary events on the stage are special we are relying on the sense that the term has when used with specific criteria, but borrowing this for the context where the criteria are absent. This is a natural way to speak and not at all nonsensical; it makes perfect sense. It is simply an error on early Wittgenstein's part to consider this sort of talk nonsensical, and an error that "simply seems to disappear" from his writings after 1929.¹⁷⁸ Here again it is hard to say whether Wittgenstein had a *theory* that sensible language use requires criteria in the object or simply felt that he had not reached clarity until he had traced *these* expressions back to some relation to real properties. Of course seen relative to ordinary empirical language, this absolute use of language is *strange*, and it is hard to say whether it counts as a case of propositionality or of description. For to call something wonderful, speaking absolutely, is in a sense quite obviously to describe the object, yet the description does not inform us about the object, as we would have offered the same description no matter how the object happened to be. Similarly we might count "These events are quite wonderful", said about the experience of seeing ordinary life on a stage, as a proposition if the speaker applies the practices of propositionality to it, e.g. the law of the excluded middle and the equivalence of *p* and *it is true that p*. But it is hard to say whether we would necessarily want to say, in the situation Wittgenstein imagines, "It is true that these events are wonderful", or if we would want to call the negation false. So in comparison with ordinary empirical speech there is certainly something funny going on here.

While this use of language does make sense, however, it is hard to see any connection to ethics. The examples of seeing a person's ordinary life on a stage or of "contemplating the oven" Wittgenstein offers and the examples I have taken from Kracauer are all examples of disinterested contemplation — if the experiences essentially *moved* us to change our lives in any way it would not be the same. Perhaps seeing a person as special in this absolute sense might serve to correct our habits of seeing the person only in terms of our own wants and needs, but nonetheless the connection to ethics seems rather faint so far. Wittgenstein himself spelled out the connection this way: "Das Kunstwerk ist der Gegenstand sub specie aeternitatis gesehen; und das gute Leben ist die Welt sub specie aeternitatis gesehen. Dies ist der Zusammenhang zwischen Kunst und Ethik." (NB 7.10.16) So I now turn to the global formulations, "the world is a miracle" and "how extraordinary that anything should exist".

¹⁷⁸ Christensen, "Wittgenstein and Ethics", 800.

2.3.2 The global form of mysticism

It has a perfectly good and clear sense to say that I wonder at something being the case, we all understand what it means to say that I wonder at the size of a dog which is bigger than anyone I have ever seen before or at any thing which, in the common sense of the word, is extraordinary. In every such case I wonder at something being the case which I *could* conceive *not* to be the case. I wonder at the size of this dog because I would conceive of a dog of another, namely the ordinary size, at which I should not wonder. To say “I wonder at such and such being the case” has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case. [...] But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. (PO 41f.)

We can begin to see the problems by looking at “the world is a miracle”. If “the world” means the totality of facts or “everything that is the case”, as defined in the *Tractatus* (TLP 1, 1.1), then nothing could be asserted about the world — we render the nonsensicality perspicuous by formulating it as: “it is the case that everything that is the case is a miracle”. Similarly if “the world” means the totality of facts then it can mean nothing to speak of “the existence of the world”, i.e. the fact that the world exists, for the same reason. And Wittgenstein notes here at the end of the quotation that he cannot imagine the world not existing. This is of central importance; if we try to put ourselves into the state of “wondering at the existence of the world”, we will probably try to imagine there being nothing, in order to then feel a surprise at there being something. But we cannot imagine nothingness in any sense that would do the job we need it to do — we cannot imagine it being the case that nothing is the case, for then something would be the case. Nothingness is not a possible state that lies beyond the reach of our imaginative capacity, and when we phrase our meaning perspicuously, we can see that we meant nothing. This is a perfect example also of how a hallucination of meaning is possible. I can think that I mean something by “nothingness” because I imagine something — in my own case I imagine a certain stretch of empty blackness. But this is not what I had meant to mean, for there being a certain stretch of space empty of any objects is an example of *something* being the case; though this is something one *might* mean by “nothingness”, i.e. no light and no solid objects, it is not what I had wanted to mean.

In this quotation in the Lecture, Wittgenstein takes a slightly different tack, arguing that his global expressions are nonsensical since they fail to draw any contrast among possibilities. The statements “the world is a miracle” or “everything is extraordinary” do not, as Kremer puts it, “divide the space of possibilities into those with which they agree and those with which they disagree”.¹⁷⁹ It might be conceivable that everything in existence has some universal property, and that in this sense “the

¹⁷⁹ Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense”, 53.

world is a miracle” might make sense (here we are imagining the world as a totality of things rather than a totality of facts) but this only makes sense if we are contrasting this with the possibility of things not having this property. When Wittgenstein speaks of the world as a miracle, however, he does not mean that in the actual world everything contingently has the property of miraculousness, but that everything, however it may turn out to be, is miraculous. For he is not acquainted with everything in the actual world, nor is he speculating inductively; and if this is not clear in the Lecture, it should be clear in light of remarks in the *Tractatus* and the war-time notebooks, for example “Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern *dass* sie ist.” (TLP 6.44) He is interested in an attitude to any possible experience. It seems then that in calling everything miraculous or extraordinary, we are speaking “wrongly, in a typically metaphysical way, namely without an antithesis”.¹⁸⁰

Now that our use of language draws a contrast among possibilities cannot be set up as a universal criterion of meaning. If I ask “What time is it?”, I have not divided up possibilities, but I have asked a question that makes perfect sense. We might suppose that language is only nonsensical by way of failing to divide possibilities if it is intended to put forth a descriptive claim. It would clearly be nonsensical to say that all possibilities are “miraculous” in the relative sense; it only means something to predicate “miraculousness” of anything, in the sense of being “something the likes of which we have never seen before”, when we thereby contrast it with other things that are not miraculous. Because the predication of miraculousness in a relative sense intends to be informatively descriptive, it requires a contrast among possibilities — this is just what it is to be informatively descriptive. But I have described the absolute use of “miraculous” as not depending upon how the thing happens to be, as expressing a sort of attention that could be given to *anything*. So if to call something miraculous in an absolute sense is not to say anything about how it is in contrast with other things, couldn’t we sensibly call everything and anything miraculous? This is to ask: Couldn’t we bring this sort of attention to everything?

In fact we cannot; the attempt would be self-defeating. While the absolute use of “miraculous” is a strange case of description, it shares with ordinary description a reliance on contrast. We can illustrate this with the case of the filmic device of estranging ordinary scenes by intentionally yet purposelessly fixing the camera on them. If I saw everything in my life projected onto a screen, it would not have the same effect. In fact my eyes and my brain are just such a camera and screen, and

¹⁸⁰ BB 46; see also the remark in “Philosophy”, “Nur was wir uns auch anders vorstellen können, kann die Sprache sagen.” (PO 91)

yet my everyday perception of life is not particularly sanctified in any way. Our ordinary experience must be given as the background in order for us to estrange something and lift it out of this background, to *privilege* it. Wittgenstein's example of seeing ordinary life proceeding on a stage can illustrate the point just as well: what if we saw everything that way, so that "all the world's a stage"? This would just be our ordinary life. In saying "the world is a miracle" we are trying to privilege something against the background of ordinary life, but also to include that background in the scope of the "something" we are privileging. So we are just wavering between two sensible possibilities, satisfied with neither — we could privilege something in this way, or nothing, but we cannot privilege something while privileging nothing, which is what privileging everything would have to be.

In the above quotation at the beginning of this section, Wittgenstein does not say that *predication* requires a contrast with other conceivable possibilities; he writes: "To say 'I wonder at such and such being the case' has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case", i.e. he says that taking the attitude of wonder towards something requires a contrast with other conceivable possibilities. Wonder in its ordinary occurrence, where it is prompted by something relatively wondrous or at least by the appearance of something relatively wondrous, requires a contrast; and we have found wonder in its "absolute" occurrence also requires a contrast, even though the contrast is not founded in the nature of the object but rather is a contrast that we draw. This will be hard to accept if we imagine "wonder" or "astonishment" as states of mind that can be characterized in their own right, independently of the circumstances in which they arise, and that can then be matched with any object; in that case it would be imaginable that the state of mind that is "wonder" might be present in a person throughout that person's whole life. It is one of the achievements of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to show, perhaps most concisely argued in "Blue Book", that this is a false view of mental phenomena. There is no state of mind, or state of any affairs, that would count as "wonder" cut off from all circumstances of life. There might be typical signs of "wonder" such as quickened breath, widened eyes, etc., but in the absence of circumstances that make the reaction of wonder intelligible these would simply be a medical condition. Similarly — though I do not have the space to argue this here — there is no 'internal' or subjective state that would count as "wonder" independently of circumstances; there is nothing it is "like" to feel wonder apart from specific intentional engagements with our circumstances. In the case of the estrangement of objects through artistic techniques, our wondering at some object is our relating that object to its surroundings in a certain way, elevating the object out of the ordinary. We can do this, or we can not do it, but we can not both do it and not do it at the same time.

Wittgenstein writes that what he means in speaking of the world as a miracle is what people have always meant by saying that “God created the world”. We can locate the same incoherence in this expression. I might think I mean something definite in saying “God created the world”, since I have a definite picture: in my case, I imagine a ball of matter that I think of as being “everything”, and then behind this the hands of God, having made it, setting it in space. But this picture cannot translate into any claim I would recognize as my meaning. For if I mean the ball to be “everything”, i.e. everything that is the case, I cannot also be claiming that (it is the case that) God created *that*. To borrow Lars Hertzberg’s image, the meaning I want to assign to the ball of matter “pushes out” the claim I want to make about God; or conversely, the fact that I want to make a claim about an intelligent being creating everything pushes out the possibility of meaning “everything” as “everything that is the case”.¹⁸¹ “Everything” could only mean “everything else”. But on this reading, where God makes everything else, the statement doesn’t really do what I want it to do; it becomes a speculative metaphysical claim that does not settle my attitude to anything, for if it were true that there were an intelligent being who created the world I see and live in, I might for example think that He did a bad job and resent Him. If the statement simply depicts a metaphysical fact it does not do the job it was meant to do of regulating my attitude towards any and all possible states of affairs.

It seems that whichever way we turn we cannot give any sense to these expressions. Nonetheless this is itself unsatisfying. If there is such a thing as a person really living differently based on their belief that “the world is a miracle”, or living in such a way that we would describe them (in contrast with other people living other ways) as seeing the world as a miracle, then our words must make some kind of sense, as they make some kind of difference in our lives; and if there is no such thing as living by these expressions, as they fail to mean anything, then it is hard to see why we would even consider them ethical.

2.3.3 Rehabilitating mystical experiences

In a remark in the *Culture and Value* collection from 1950 Wittgenstein discusses a very similar example:

Wenn der an Gott glaubende um sich sieht & fragt “Woher ist alles, was ich sehe?” “Woher das alles?”, verlangt er *keine* (kausale) Erklärung; und der Witz seiner Frage ist, daß sie der Ausdruck dieses Verlangens

¹⁸¹ Hertzberg, “The Sense is Where You Find It”, 91.

ist. Er drückt also eine Stellungnahme zu allen Erklärungen aus. — Aber wie zeigt sich die in seinem Leben?
(*CV* 96f.)

I will argue that his treatment of this utterance gives us an idea of how we should treat statements like “the world is a miracle” or “how extraordinary that anything should exist”, by giving us a much broader sense of the very different kind of functions such statements can have. It is important to the function of these latter statements that they pose as descriptive claims, and taken as descriptive claims we cannot make any sense of them, yet they do not function as descriptive claims. Similarly Wittgenstein takes an utterance here that poses as a question, and it is probably important that it takes that form, yet it is not really a question. The question expresses the demand for an explanation, but the questioner is not demanding any explanation, at least not a causal one – and I take it that the word “causal” is in parentheses to allow room for something like “God created the world”, which has the form of an explanation but is not an explanation, which in fact simply cuts off all explanation. The speaker who is asking this does not mean the question such that anything would count as an answer — you would simply be making fun of the person if you answered “the Big Bang” — yet here, in 1950, Wittgenstein does not say that the utterance is therefore nonsensical. He writes instead that it expresses an attitude towards all explanations. If I have understood the person who says this, I would characterize it as “the futility of explanation”. There are a couple of typical situations in which explanations are futile. One is, for example, aesthetic appreciation; Wittgenstein emphasizes again and again in the “Lectures on Aesthetics” that causal explanations, or any explanations of origin, typically simply have no bearing on our aesthetic consideration. If I ask why a certain figure occurs in the bass of a piece of music, what I want is an articulation of the musical sense it has within the piece and not an explanation of how it got there. And secondly there are situations in life where we must accept things and move on, and we say: It is what it is. If it is puzzling how any piece of nonsense could convey ethical teaching, it should be equally puzzling how a tautology could convey any ethical teaching. It is important that “it is what it is” takes the form of a tautology, for this makes it compelling and final; but it does not really get said simply to inform someone that if something is something, it is that something. Sometimes when something bad happens we look to assign blame, and someone might say “it is what it is” to cut this off this entire line of thought. Other times we are simply complaining or regretting, saying that something is deplorable or unlucky or a disaster, and someone might say “it is what it is” to express “the futility of all predication”.

Wittgenstein then asks the question which is absent from the Lecture on Ethics: “How does this manifest itself in his life?” And he writes:

Es ist die Einstellung, die eine bestimmte Sache ernst nimmt, sie aber dann an einem bestimmten Punkte doch nicht ernst nimmt, & erklärt, etwas anderes sei noch ernster.

So kann Einer sagen, es ist sehr ernst, daß der & der gestorben ist, ehe er ein bestimmtes Werk vollenden konnte; & in anderem Sinne kommt's darauf gar nicht an. Hier gebraucht man die Worte "in einem tiefern Sinne". (CV 97)

We get a hint here that these sorts of statements are made on specific occasions, for example when someone dies; in the Lecture he seems not to find the occasion of saying "How extraordinary that anything should exist" relevant.¹⁸² The contextuality of these statements is important and yet entirely absent from Wittgenstein's treatment of them in the lecture on ethics. When someone dies, we often seek to assign blame – we blame the deceased, we blame ourselves – or we might seek explanations – why did it have to happen? The question "where does all this come from?" can serve to calm our demand for explanation and reconciles us. An aura of generality is important for this purpose — that is, while the question might be asked on specific occasions, it appears to be asking about *everything*. It would be crude and disrespectful to relativize the importance of someone's death compared to other events; hence this question seems to relativize the importance of everything at once compared to something unspecified. The "all this" is in a sense not limited in its scope, but that does not mean that it refers literally to everything. "All this" might mean the total scene, delimited only in a very rough and open-ended way, and extending to anything that might enter the scene, whatever it would be. The speaker is not referring to the totality of facts, she is simply not referring to any particular thing and has not set any limits to the scope of her meaning, and it is important that she does not set any such limits. And "all this" is brought to something like aesthetic contemplation, which involves a certain suspension of the will along with the irrelevance of certain sorts of explanation. We might say: this remark gives us an aesthetic view of the death as part of a larger but unspecified whole, and encourages an attitude of wonder towards that. Then we can take it seriously up to a point, but we also detach, we put it in perspective and reconcile ourselves. This gives us the outlines of a perfectly sensible way of understanding Wittgenstein's expression "How extraordinary that anything should exist" — it is conceivable that he means something like "all this" in the sense of an unlimited total scene; this scene is seen as a unity and apprehended aesthetically. The scene is lifted out of the flow of ordinary experience, and hence involves a contrast within our experience, and yet it is important that nothing in the scene justifies that it should be thus privileged. This serves as an ethical intervention in life as it cuts off certain

¹⁸² Rhees notes similarly: "The *Tractatus* speaks of 'problems of life.' But it does not ask—as Wittgenstein later did—when, or in what circumstances, anyone would speak about problems of life." Rhees, "Some Developments", 21.

lines of thought and redirects us; among other things, it acts as a counter to judgmentalism, and it undermines the sense of necessity behind our demands and complaints and dissatisfactions. We will inevitably fall back into complaining and demanding, but perhaps with less of a sense that these our demands are rationally compelled by our situation, with more of an awareness that we can let go of them.

In another remark from *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein had written:

Der Gebrauch des Wortes "Schicksal". Unser Verhalten zur Zukunft & Vergangenheit. Wieweit halten wir uns für die Zukunft verantwortlich. Wieviel spekulieren wir über die Zukunft. Wie denken wir über Vergangenheit & Zukunft. Wenn etwas Unangenehmes geschieht: — fragen wir "Wer ist schuld?", sagen wir "Jemand muß daran schuld sein", — oder sagen wir "Es war Gottes Wille", "Es war Schicksal"?

Wie, eine Frage stellen, auf ihre Antwort dringen, oder sie nicht stellen, ein anderes Verhalten, eine andere Art des Lebens ausdrückt, *so*, in diesem Sinne, auch ein Ausspruch wie "Es ist Gottes Wille" oder "Wir sind nicht Herren über unser Schicksal". Was dieser Satz tut, oder doch Ähnliches, könnte auch ein Gebot tun. Auch eins, was man sich selbst gibt. Und umgekehrt kann ein Gebot, z.B. "Murre nicht!" als Feststellung einer Wahrheit ausgesprochen werden. (*CV* 69f.)

Here Wittgenstein describes one of the uses of our talk of God and of "fate". He begins by quickly listing a variety of basic conceptual practices: questioning, insisting, apportioning blame, taking responsibility, speculating about future events. Wittgenstein says that how and when we exercise these practices – whether in a certain situation we seek explanations or not, whether we assign blame or not – expresses what he calls a "way of living"; and that the statement "it is God's will" similarly expresses a "way of living" in this sense. Our idea of God is of a powerful and loving agent behind events. When a person with authority gives an order, typically we do not ask for justification but just do it; nor do we typically question the motives of those who love us or hold grudges. Hence to say "It is God's will" on certain occasions is to express a "way of living", that is, a way of responding to events, for example by forgoing explanation and blame here. And if it expresses my "way of living" when I say it, I could surely also say it as a way of recommending this way of living to someone else, to help them through certain situations. We can now shed some more light on the idea that "God created the world" can be an ethical utterance — and we do this by reconstructing the *sense* it might have. The utterance "God created the world" could also be a way of encouraging certain lines of response; and a fuller investigation would have to again look into the occasions on which we say it. The problem of nonsensicality was due partly to the universality involved in the term "the world"; we could not mean "everything" by "the world" and still claim that (it is the case that) God (who is surely something) created the world. But we can see now how important it is that we frame the idea such that it could be applied to anything and everything within

our experience. It would be a poor comfort to tell someone grieving for their partner that God caused their death specifically, though He usually refrains from intervening in our affairs. The idea would be radically altered if it were not formulated as a completely general schema. Moreover I had said that if it were simply a metaphysical fact that an intelligible being created the world, this would have no necessary moral implications; we could easily resent Him for having created an imperfect world. Here it is again important that we are not distinguishing between possible worlds, that “God created the world” is something we would be willing to say (if we are the sort of people who say it) regardless of how the world happens to be. The statement assumes a sense of gratitude on our part; and if this gratitude is meant to be justified by the particulars of the world, then it might be largely unjustified. (I can think of many ways this world could be better.) I had said earlier that I could associate a picture with “God created the world”, but this picture could not be translated into any stable proposition I would want to assert. But the picture might have other kinds of use; and if every aspect of the picture is adequate to its use, then the picture makes perfect sense.

We can also illuminate in this manner Wittgenstein’s second example of absolute ethical expressions: I am safe, nothing can harm me. It might be said that this must also be nonsensical: if we would not count any possibility as harm, then it means nothing to speak of “harm” and consequently it means nothing to say that nothing is harmful. But if we needn’t interpret this as a proposition predicating “harm” of nothing or predicating “safety” of everything, and are free to see it as a kind of conceptual gesture or picture that can express or direct conceptual practices, then there is no reason we shouldn’t say: the sense of the utterance is precisely that it withdraws the concept of *harm*, that it abandons this distinction between harm and safety. Wittgenstein describes an experience of absolute safety, where he is inclined to say “nothing can harm me”, and it might seem odd that an experience could be constituted by this sort of conceptual maneuver. But it is not odd at all; it only seems odd on a very empiricist view of experience. In “Secondary Sense” Diamond discusses two examples of experiences constituted by a certain use of concepts: Anscombe’s example of “a sensation of flying”, where this is not necessarily the sensation one would actually have in flying, or like that experience — “flying” is here a metaphor, yet “*that* this metaphor strikes one is part of the experience it expresses”; and her own experience of standing on a ledge behind a powerful waterfall and thinking “Now I know what ‘down’ means!”¹⁸³ — The rejection of the concept of “harm” is most likely related to a rejection of any notion of “self”; if there is nothing I would count as “mine”, neither my body nor my personality nor anything else, then by the ordinary grammar of “harm” there is also nothing that would count as “harm”. The

¹⁸³ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 233.

experience is marked by the lack of any attachment to the world, and shows us that our attachments lack necessity, as do our concepts of “self” and “harm”. Yet if the experience is that of withdrawing the concept of “harm”, then it is only available for someone who has the concept; someone who simply lacks the concept could not have that experience. Similarly, if several like-minded people formed an intentional community and accorded the ideas of *harm* and *safety* no role in the upbringing of their children, such that after several generations this community simply lacked those concepts — insofar as we can imagine this — such an experience as Wittgenstein’s would not be possible in that community. When Wittgenstein says “nothing can harm me”, he is working against the easier and more ordinary view. This is why “nothing is harmful” differs from “everything is harmful” or “nothing is safe”. If we really were trying to predicate “safety” of everything, this would rob the term “safety” of any ability to capture any distinction, and so it would be indistinguishable from “everything is harmful”. Yet we feel there is a difference. There are certain types of response associated with harm or danger *as opposed to* safety and certain types of response associated with safety *as opposed to* harm or danger; the speaker who says “nothing can harm me” is expressing the responsiveness associated with safety and yet expressing this regardless of the particulars of the situation. But this means that they are still relying on the ordinary contrast between safety and harm; in one sense they are relying on the ordinary criteria backing the relative use of the word, while in another sense they are abstracting from those criteria in their use of the word. But this is not simply a confused wavering; the speaker is doing exactly what they mean to be doing with their concepts and is making no error.

In the Lecture Wittgenstein connects the utterance “nothing can harm me” to a momentary experience; and it is clear that this experience might have an ethical influence on me in lessening my attachments and undermining their obviousness and purported necessity. We might ask whether “nothing can harm me” might also express a conviction one lives by rather than an episode. In his “Lectures on Religious Belief” Wittgenstein imagines a person who “is inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment” with someone who “doesn’t think of this at all”; this comes in an explication of what a belief in a Last Judgment might mean, as a picture that works by “regulating for in all his life”. (LC 54) In his article “Can a Good Man Be Harmed”, Peter Winch pursues a couple of possibilities along these lines; he compares Wittgenstein’s experience of absolute safety with Kierkegaard’s idea that no-one could be punished for doing good and with Socrates’ claim that a good man cannot be harmed. These notions also involve withholding the concepts of “harm” or “punishment”, not as an episode of experience but as a way of living in general. He writes that this sort of utterance “expresses the speaker’s attitude, his realization of the possibility of meeting the afflictions of life in a certain way. It is an attitude which the concept of

punishment makes possible; or, to adapt an image in the *Tractatus*, it is an attitude which is possible in the ‘logical space’ defined by the concept of punishment, a space bounded by the notions of guilt and innocence.”¹⁸⁴ His article articulates quite clearly the sort of difference it could make in our lives to creatively deploy the concepts of “harm” and “punishment” in this way; and thus *makes sense* of these kinds of utterance.

My explanation above of “how extraordinary that anything should exist” might have seemed like this would only represent an episodic experience; I interpreted “anything” in line with “all this” as referring open-endedly to a total scene that is elevated (hence contrasted) with ordinary experience. But the other formulations in the Lecture — that it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle, which is what people have always meant in saying that God created the world — sound like they could refer to convictions regulating one’s life as a whole rather than a single episode of experience. I had explained the possibility of the *conviction* that “nothing can harm me” as involving the withdrawing of the harm/safety distinction, where withdrawing the distinction is not the same thing as not having it, and involves working against it. In both cases the use of the term “safe” or “harm” or “extraordinary” only does any work when the utterance relies on a contrast among possibilities, even where the terms are not being used to straightforwardly mark that distinction empirically, as they are in their relative use. In the next section I offer an explanation of what it could mean to live by the *conviction* that the world is a miracle. The explanation proceeds along lines very similar to my treatment of absolute safety, but I also try to indicate how central the issue is to moral thought as a whole, hence justifying Wittgenstein’s introduction of the example as a paradigmatic ethical expression.

2.3.4 Rehabilitating mystical convictions

I will start by placing the idea that the world is a miracle among a series of similar ideas with a considerable ethical force, for the sake of a perspicuous presentation:

— that the world is “a wild and startling place”¹⁸⁵ is part of G.K. Chesterton’s ethical vision, in fact part of his argument for Christianity; he also uses formulations such as “the world is a shock” and “existence is a surprise”¹⁸⁶. He deploys a couple of imaginative devices to motivate this — the Humean idea that the only necessary connections are logical ones (an idea repeated in

¹⁸⁴ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 197.

¹⁸⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 103.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*) serves for him as a reminder that every series of events is astonishing, that the world is in fact a fairy tale. Moreover, he reminds us of how grateful Robinson Crusoe was for every little item that washed up ashore with him, and asks us to see everything as similarly saved from its possible nonexistence: "all things have had this hair-breadth escape: everything has been saved from a wreck."¹⁸⁷ He is, however, very much aware of how it verges on nonsensicality to predicate anything of existence as a whole (this comes out in his argument, in this same chapter, that since we have no term of comparison, we might just as well see the universe not as vast but as small and cozy if we please.)

— the idea found in various forms of Buddhism and Buddhism-inspired spirituality that "the world is a dream" or "the world is an illusion."

— the idea, often invoked in educational contexts, that "every child is special". People criticize the idea almost as often by saying, "if everyone is special, then no-one is special."

— The notion of *human dignity*.

This last example can illustrate the problem all of these expressions run into. The concept of dignity expresses a certain elevation; for example, we speak of dignitaries, and the dignity of certain offices. When we dignify something we raise it above the rest. What could be meant by speaking of human dignity, of the dignity of every person? It is like "every man is a king": if it were true, it wouldn't be true. If every man were a king, then no-one would be. At best this could only mean that there were no kings, that we were all equal; we are withdrawing any distinction among people. But then what we are trying to say would be captured equally well by saying "Every man is a worm." But *that's* not what we wanted to say. — Now we could return the concept of human dignity to good sense by supposing it means to elevate us above animals, as the dignitary is elevated over the rest of us. This sort of analogy would give a concrete content to the idea, but I think only by weakening the idea's practical import. For if this only means that humans are appropriately treated in ways different from other animals, this sets a pretty low bar.

Let us start by accepting that it is nonsensical and is meant to be nonsense, that in speaking this way we are consciously sawing off the branch we're standing on. As Diamond notes, there is still a difference between "every man is a king" and "piggly wiggle tiggly"; there is at the very least a

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 114.

psychological difference. The idea that “every man is a king” or the idea of human dignity invites us to do something specific in our imagination, which we could describe by saying: it sends us around in an endless circle. We fixate on the sense of someone especially elevated or lofty, and then see everyone in this light; no sooner have we done so then we have lost our sense of anyone as particularly lofty, and must start over again. In this way it fails to cohere as a stable description of any state of affairs; it is a dynamic exercise of the imagination. Now we might think that the practical import of this concept is precisely that it sends us around in this endless circle. We are continually backsliding in our attention to people, getting used to them, taking them for granted, perhaps only caring about the powerful and privileged. And hence we must continually renew our attention, that is, renew our sense that people are worthy of our attention, that they are really present, that they matter. This really is a Sisyphian task: you have never done this sufficiently and you are never finished doing this. You simply have to keep pushing the boulder up the mountain forever. — Similarly, “every child is special” succinctly expresses the task of the educator, which is also an endless task, the continual renewal of one’s appreciation. And both of these ideas structurally resemble the Christian notion that the least among us, the beggar on the street, might be God Himself. One way of misinterpreting this notion would be to respond: if that’s God, then who cares about Him? Then I might give God a quarter if I’m feeling generous, but that’s about all you can expect of me. Of course we are meant to hold on to our notion of God as something absolutely awe-inspiring, which requires a contrast to everything else, and yet also and at the same time extend this to the least among us. This both can and cannot be done. We cannot ever arrive at a stable description of the world, but we can occupy ourselves with this imaginative exercise indefinitely.

The ideas of the specialness or dignity of everyone are still not global, like the ideas that the world is a miracle, a wild and startling place, or a dream or an illusion. Still we can explain at least the global examples from the Christian tradition along similar lines: they set us an endless task, asking us to continually renew our appreciation — not just of people, but of everything. We are slipping when we take any part of our experience for granted. Of course someone might question this as an ethical ideal and argue that it is better to be largely bored by the world; but it is an ideal that makes sense. Moreover we can come closer to understanding Wittgenstein’s idea in the Lecture that “the right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition in language, is the existence of language itself.” We might think of the form that the celebration of existence takes in Walt Whitman, for whom poetry is “hymns of the praise of things”¹⁸⁸; his long catalogues of various people and scenes could be compared to the “book of the

¹⁸⁸ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 8.

world” in Wittgenstein’s Lecture. There is a sense in his work that the complete poem would have to include *everything*. It would have to be an ecstatic recital of the book of the world; but there would seem to be no difference in content between that and a dry, bored reading of the same book. In this sense — for someone who holds this global ethical vision — ethics could seem to be unsayable, to lie beyond the world and beyond significant language.

But of course it is possible to *say* “the world is a miracle”. Once we see the ethical work being done by such expressions, we should be satisfied that they are meaningful. In the two passages from *Culture and Value* quoted above, from 1947 and 1950, Wittgenstein goes on to say that it is very important to distinguish these uses of language precisely to avoid the temptation to consider them nonsensical, and that “Die Praxis gibt den Worten ihren Sinn” (CV 97). Yet it is interesting, and goes some way towards justifying Wittgenstein’s nonsensicality claim in the Lecture, that the sense of these expressions requires them to pose as nonsensical propositions; in this way nonsensicality really is a part of their essence. It is likely important that they strike us as ineffable, unsayable truths, or as metaphysical truths. And yet this aspect also leaves us vulnerable to a certain kind of corruption — we can evade their ethical import precisely by taking them as metaphysical propositions. For example, if in the statement “the world is a miracle” we take “the world” to signify something within the totality of existence, for example the creation of God, and the word “miracle” to signify that the creation is not explainable by the scientific laws we know; or if in the statement “the world is a dream” we suppose “world” to signify this world in contrast to another (realer) world where the dreamer sits, dreaming of us. If we understand them as theoretical propositions, we leave them open to the demand for justification, which of course cannot be found (for they purport to refer to the whole of our experience), and moreover we obscure or entirely distort their practical import, which is to change the quality of our attention in this world. One might even suppose that the alleged ethical point of the *Tractatus* was simply to combat this form of corruption. “The world”, the *Tractatus* tells us in the very beginning, is simply the totality of facts, facts being the holding of states of affairs. Hence there can be no domain outside the world; we cannot say that there is anything outside the world, for any statement of the form “There is...” would be a report of the holding of certain states of affairs, hence a report of something innerworldly. It can mean nothing to think or speak of anything outside the world, and the *Tractatus* couldn’t make this point any clearer. Yet at the end Wittgenstein still wishes to say that we can see the world, in a mystical frame of mind, as a limited whole; that “God does not reveal Himself in the world”; and that the world is a miracle. To start fiddling around with the extension of “world” at this point so as to make some kind of clear sense out of these expressions is to evade the moral problem we face, that of resolving how we are to attend to the things of this world. Hence the idea

of Heaven, if taken in this spirit as the doctrine of the existence of another world, is an evasion of our deepest problems:

Not only is there no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say of its eternal survival after death; but, in any case, this assumption completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. Or is some riddle solved by my surviving forever? Is not this eternal life itself as much of a riddle as our present life? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time. (*TLP* 6.4312)¹⁸⁹

2.4 The problem of absolute judgments returns

The preceding section explained the mystical statements Wittgenstein offers to exemplify his own moral vision in a manner that is *expressivist* in the broad sense: the words “the world is a miracle”, insofar as they meant ethically, cannot really be explained as the report of any kind of fact, but they can be understood as a response to the facts, as expressing a way of going on with our conceptual practices; and if the statement expresses this way of going on, it can also be used to model that way of going on for others or recommend it to them. In other words, the statement could serve, not just as ethical self-expression, but as ethical teaching, directing someone’s conceptual responses to events. My explanations differ from standard moral expressivism in that I do not reduce these ethical statements to expressions of *emotional* responses, though emotional responses are certainly importantly involved in seeing the world as a miracle. To see the world as a miracle is not just to feel an emotion but to apply concepts in certain ways. The statement is distinctive in that it is essentially a way of describing the world, but a description that is not straightforwardly determined by any facts, though it *is* intrinsically connected to emotional responses and to action. In allowing this sort of utterance to count as description, if a strange kind of description, my explanation seems to go some way towards a compromise between expressivism and realism. However, in another sense my explanation is further removed from realism than standard expressivism, since expressivism typically holds that our emotional responses are strongly controlled by the facts — that we must respond identically to relevantly identical situations, for example — whereas the global examples discussed above give facts absolutely *no role at all*. This also perhaps indicates why Wittgenstein felt that these expressions must be nonsensical, even though he could account for other non-representational uses of language in the *Tractatus* such as mathematical and logical

¹⁸⁹ Wittgenstein’s friend Engelmann says of him: “Vor allem war er nie in dem Sinne ein ‘Mystiker’, daß ihn mystisch-agnostische Phantasien innerlich beschäftigten. Nichts lag ihm so ferne wie eine Ausmalung eines Jenseits (ob vor oder nach dem Tode), von dem man nicht sprechen kann. (Er saht ja im *Tractatus*, daß die Tatsache eines Lebens nach dem Tode gar nichts erklären könnte.)” Somavilla, *Wittgenstein — Engelmann*, 98.

propositions; these latter uses of language are not representational, but their function is to aid representation in one way or another. (Definitions are characterized as “Behelfe der Darstellung”, for example — *TLP* 4.242.) The ethical expressions he examines in the Lecture are however not tied to our representation of the world at all.

In orienting myself around Wittgenstein’s Lecture I have discussed two sorts of example of moral speech: the absolute use of thin moral terms, and what we might call mystical expressions. There are other sorts of moral speech as well; ‘thick’ moral terms, for example, such as *courageous* and *cruel*, and also *language in general*. Cavell’s examples of moral arguments are illuminating:

A: You owe it to your family and friends not to go through with this farce.

B: I respect and love the city which has found me guilty, and I will not break her laws by escaping.

A: Come off it. If you respect and love her so much, don’t force the issue by making her do something she’s going to regret.

B: Let’s put it this way. I will not be put in the position of becoming an ordinary law-breaker.

A: And your friends, your family . . . ?

B: My friends will respect my position.

A: You must stay with him. The consequences of leaving him now would be that people will call you “loose”; you will be an object of scorn.

B: Yes. And if I stay and marry him people will smile indulgently, think me a bit racy, and in a while I’ll be a respected member of the community again. Only the consequence will be that I would have lost respect for myself in living with someone I do not love.¹⁹⁰

The speakers in these dialogues do sometimes use thin and thick moral terms, but for the most part they are simply talking; they are using whatever words come to them as the best articulation of their positions and the situation at hand. Hence we might say, if we like, that there is a fourth category of moral speech, alongside thin and thick moral terms and mystical expressions, which is simply language of no category at all. And of course what these people are saying makes perfect sense; the whole point of their speech is to make sense of the situation. The question of nonsensicality doesn’t really come up here at all. However, someone might object that every moral use of language essentially leads us back to an absolute use of thin terms, and if the sense of this absolute use of thin terms is questionable, then so is the sense of all moral language. For example, when the speaker in the second dialogue above says “I would have lost respect for myself in living with someone I do not love”, one might say that this only represents a reason if we assume the premise *you should*

¹⁹⁰ Taken from Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 265-7.

respect yourself or else *you should only live with someone you love*, and it only represents a moral reason if these premises are meant absolutely and not conditionally. If we cannot make sense of these premises — and this is at any rate the position of early Wittgenstein — then the utterance “I would have lost respect for myself in living with someone I do not love” only makes sense insofar as it is *not* moral but merely a factual report. And we could create a similar problem for the examples discussed above, such as “the world is a miracle”. In saying this I am expressing a certain way of going on with our conceptual practices — but aren’t I also proposing it or modeling it, not just expressing it, aren’t I also suggesting that it’s the right way to go on? And in that case the explanations I offered above are incomplete, and they leave off precisely at the point where the utterances might have some moral force.

It seems to me that one of the advantages of taking an example of moral speech like “the world is a miracle” as central, rather than “one shouldn’t kill innocent people”, is that it reveals that we have a moral life outside prescriptivity. In living my own life, I have to decide how to relate to the world; this is a logical space I necessarily move in by virtue of leading a human life. But I do not have to have thoughts of the form: *one should do this*. This is simply optional. If we start our metaethics with the example “the world is a miracle”, we might end up saying that moral thought is first and foremost a kind of self-expression or an articulation of how the person lives. Though articulating their own “way of life” more clearly might also lead the person to live differently, still they are not necessarily prescribing to themselves or to others how they should live, and hence they might have no need for any thin use of absolute terms. A person might also recommend seeing the world as a miracle, but only recommend it in the hope that it will bring someone else clarity and peace, and not recommend it absolutely.

This might be even clearer if we look at ordinary moral conversations between people with a genuine relationship, such as the ones Cavell offers as examples above. In such conversations people rarely simply give each other moral prescriptions; rather, they try to help each other to understand the situation better or differently or to understand each other’s positions or suggest other possible positions. In basing his own investigation on realistic moral conversations rather than maxims like “You ought to keep promises”, Cavell comes to a view of moral thought that does not essentially begin with prescriptivity: “Questioning a claim to moral rightness (whether of any action or any judgment) takes the form of asking ‘Why are you doing that?’, ‘How can you do that?’, ‘What *are* you doing?’, ‘Have you really considered what you’re saying?’, ‘Do you know what this means?’ ... the point is to determine *what* position you are taking, that is to say, *what position you*

are taking responsibility for — and whether it is one I can respect.”¹⁹¹ Rhees’ notes on his conversations with Wittgenstein also suggest that on Wittgenstein’s later view of ethics, the solution to ethical problems is the articulation of one’s own attitude to the problem:

I suggested the problem facing a man who has come to the conclusion that he must either leave his wife or abandon his work of cancer research. “Thanks,” said Wittgenstein, “Let’s discuss this.”

“Such a man’s attitude will vary at different times. Suppose I am his friend, and I say to him, ‘Look, you’ve taken this girl out of her home, and now, by God, you’ve got to stick to her.’ This would be called taking up an ethical attitude. He may reply, ‘But what of suffering humanity? how can I abandon my research?’ In saying this he may be making it easy for himself: he wants to carry on that work anyway. (I may have reminded him that there are others who can carry it on if he gives up.) And he may be inclined to view the effect on his wife relatively easily: ‘It probably won’t be fatal for her. She’ll get over it, probably marry again,’ and so on. On the other hand it may not be this way. It may be that he has a deep love for her. And yet he may think that if he were to give up his work he would be no husband for her. That is his life, and if he gives that up he will drag her down. Here we may say that we have all the materials of a tragedy; and we could only say: ‘Well, God help you.’”

“Whatever he finally does, the way things then turn out may affect his attitude. He may say, ‘Well, thank God I left her: it was better all around.’ Or maybe, ‘Thank God I stuck to her.’ Or he may not be able to say ‘thank God’ at all, but just the opposite.”

“I want to say that this is the solution of an ethical problem.”¹⁹²

Similarly, Peter Winch has argued that “morality is wrongly conceived as a guide to conduct”¹⁹³, arguing that “when I come to deliberate — to consider reasons for and against doing something — ... ‘the chips are down’”¹⁹⁴, that a person’s morality is found in their perspective on the situation and the range of alternatives they consider there to be. One hallmark of the Wittgensteinian tradition of moral thought, running from Wittgenstein through Cavell and Winch to Diamond and Gaita, is precisely a focus on moral conversations between people with genuine relationships, and less focus on the sorts of things one could just as well say to oneself alone in a basement; consequently they often seem to mainstream moral philosophers to be simply ignoring the subject of prescriptivity. Seen from the perspective of this Wittgensteinian tradition, however, mainstream moral philosophy’s emphasis on prescriptivity not only reveals a failure to attend to the ways of our ordinary conversation, but could also be seen as revealing or at least feeding a kind of judgmentalism and a moral laziness in its wish for general prescriptive rules.

¹⁹¹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 268.

¹⁹² Rhees, “Some Developments”, 22-3.

¹⁹³ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 187.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178. See footnote 29 in the previous chapter.

I do not propose to correct this by focusing exclusively on moral conversation or on non-prescriptive moral utterances. We may not be able to avoid prescriptivity entirely; insofar as we are political creatures, we may have to say something about what we should do collectively and absolutely. Someone has to set policy for hospitals, for example. At any rate most people want to judge others and want to be right in doing so, and it is quite natural to feel that an expression like “the world is a miracle” is only recognizably moral if it doesn’t just express a way of living but expresses that it is the *right* way of living. We might call this a metaethical intuition; while I suggested above that there might be moral reasons that speak against this metaethical intuition, not everyone is swayed by these reasons, and they do not make the intuition any less natural.

The problem is more directly pressing if we look at thick terms such as *cruel*. Thick terms are at the same time descriptive and prescriptive; to call something or someone cruel is, on the one hand, simply to describe it, and the description will be either true or false; on the other hand, something that is cruel is also, *ceteris paribus*, something not to be done. If we suppose that the descriptivity and the prescriptivity are two separate components, as Hare seems to have thought — that for example *cruel* involves descriptive criteria we can specify in non-moral terms, such as causing pain unnecessarily, and also the thought that *that is absolutely wrong* — then in terms of my exposition so far, the first part will make perfect sense, and the second part brings us back to our dilemma of the absolute use of thin terms. As the second component is what makes the term a moral one, the term’s sense is problematic precisely insofar as it is moral. Now, many authors have denied that the two components can be separated so neatly. Bernard Williams and McDowell have argued that the descriptive criteria cannot be given in non-moral terms; to understand how members of a linguistic community project the term from one context to another, one has to “grasp imaginatively its evaluative point”¹⁹⁵, i.e. share at least empathetically if not actually in the community’s moral valuations. This argument against “separability” is supposed to undermine the fact/value distinction and allow for a kind of moral reality. However, a kind of separability remains. The descriptive content and the valuation may not be *epistemically* separate, we could say, but we can still separate them *morally*. We may not have any access to the extension of the thick term without an understanding of the community’s values; but if we can access the extension without *sharing* their values, then we could see that something falls under the extension of that term without drawing the moral conclusion that the linguistic community draws. If I am a gifted ethnologist with an excellent empathetic understanding of a community I am studying, and one of them says that a certain action “is womanly” as a way of condemning it, I might be able to see that they have spoken correctly; I

¹⁹⁵ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 142.

would express this by saying that the action really is ‘womanly’. My use of the term in scare quotes will be a descriptive equivalent that lacks precisely the valuation. Hence while the use of thick terms might be inseparable from a community’s *valuations*, it is not therefore inseparable from moral *value*.¹⁹⁶ I have argued in the first chapter for Wittgenstein’s anti-psychologistic conception of moral value according to which value is logically distinct from acts of valuing. — The difference between the ethnologist and the community member above could be put by saying: they both agree that something falls under the extension of the term “womanly” as used in that community, but they disagree over whether one *should* use the term “womanly”, or: they disagree over whether ‘womanly’ things are *bad* or *wrong*. Even if we do not suppose that this absolute use of thin terms is part of the meaning of the term “womanly” for them — let us say, we allow it to be a background condition of their use of the term and not a part of the meaning — nonetheless we can see that disagreements over the use of thick terms can inevitably lead us to questions that are most naturally formulated with thin absolute terms.

I have said that people seldom use “ought” in real moral conversation. Moral philosophers have most likely focused on this moral “ought” not just out of insufficient attention to ordinary language, but also because it serves as a placeholder for our needs in the situation where we disagree with someone morally and the appeal to a common life-form or shared moral understanding is not working. When I say to someone “I would have lost respect for myself in living with someone I do not love”, I can normally assume that they will see the force of this. But what if they don’t? Either I am in fact talking to someone whose own culture or life-form is sufficiently different from mine that this is a mere fact for them, of little moral relevance; or else in philosophizing we might imagine such an interlocutor, as a way of pressing the question of how deep our justification goes. Justification comes to an end somewhere; but when it does, we might find that we still want to say something. I have written above that the absolute use of thin terms characterizes moralizing more than ordinary moral discourse. As Gaita writes, “Moralizing (in the pejorative sense) goes deep in what we call morality”.¹⁹⁷ Some people moralize frequently simply because they are tiresome people; but all of us are tempted to moralize on certain occasions when *we have nothing left to say* and yet *cannot be silent*. Then we might say: “You just shouldn’t do this”, “It’s just wrong”. This might be a “bluff”, as Williams says in a different context¹⁹⁸; or it might be the insistence that I will accept nothing else insofar as the other person has any dealings with me. (Parents speak in this mode to their children all the time.) But it is not hard to see how we might also console ourselves

¹⁹⁶ I discuss this at greater length in 5.4.

¹⁹⁷ Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, xvi.

¹⁹⁸ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 111.

with the fantasy that in saying “you just shouldn’t do this”, we are appealing to a moral fact that the other can’t see, but that makes us right. We have no such fact, of course; if we did, we could simply give the other person that fact and would not have to resort to thin assertions. When we are out of attunement with others, and they simply live in a different moral world than us, *we cannot stand it*. Philosophers frequently try to get out of this uncomfortable feeling by misdiagnosing the situation as an intellectual puzzle, calling for a metaphysical justification of the existence of moral facts. (This is a clear example of what Cavell and Diamond call *deflection*, and of Wittgenstein’s critique of Frazer as deflecting his own feeling of discomfort into an intellectual puzzle.¹⁹⁹) This is not the only role the moral philosopher might occupy: if she can reach deep inside herself to come out with a greater articulation of her own view that does reach the other, this is of course commendable. But if this too fails, it will mean very little to continue speaking of the *good* and the *right* and an absolute *ought*. I argued above that there is evidence that later Wittgenstein would no longer call his own mystical expressions in the Lecture nonsensical; but he never seems to have changed his opinion about the absolute use of thin terms. According to Rhees’ notes on his conversations with Wittgenstein in the 1940s, for example, Wittgenstein says:

Someone might ask whether the treatment of such a question in Christian ethics is right or not. I want to say that this question does not make sense. The man who asks it might say: ‘Suppose I view his problem with a different ethics -- perhaps Nietzsche’s’ — and I say: “No, it is not clear that he must stick to her; on the contrary, ... and so forth.” Surely one of the two answers must be the right one. It must be possible to decide which of them is right and which is wrong.’

But we do not know what this decision would be like — how it would be determined, what sort of criteria would be used, and so on. Compare saying that it must be possible to decide which of two standards of accuracy is the right one. We do not even know what a person who asks this question is after.

[...] Or suppose someone says, ‘One of the ethical systems must be the right one — or nearer to the right one.’ Well, suppose I say Christian ethics is the right one. Then I am making a judgment of value. It amounts to *adopting* Christian ethics. It is not like saying that one of these physical theories must be the right one. The way in which some reality corresponds — or conflicts — with a physical theory has no counterpart here.²⁰⁰

A different view is suggested by Cavell’s deflationary reading of “ought”. In speaking of the example “You ought to castle now” (O) he writes that “Its content is completely exhausted by the reasons you give; and if you have none, then a statement like O is incompetent.”²⁰¹ There is no gap between *is* and *ought* for him because there is no inference from *is* to *ought*; the ought statement

¹⁹⁹ See Cavell et al, *Philosophy and Animal Life*, 57, and Wittgenstein’s “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*” in *PO*.

²⁰⁰ Rhees, “Some Developments”, 23-4.

²⁰¹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 317f.

here just means something like “Castling will neutralize his bishop and develop his rook”, or else it means nothing. In non-moral contexts such as games, there is no gap between *is* and *ought*, because in these contexts we are not assuming the premise that, e.g., a person should try to win. Of course games differ from moral interactions:

In games, what the other person is doing, the goal he aims for, his way, is clear; what it is you tell him to do is defined; what alternatives he can take are fixed; what it would mean to say, the grounds upon which you say, that one course is better than another are part of the game; whether he has done it is settled. In morality none of that it so. [...] What alternatives we can and must take are not fixed, but chosen; and thereby fix us. What is better than what else is not given, but must be created in what we care about.”²⁰²

But this does not bring him to revise his deflationary understanding of “ought”; rather, he wishes to revise our understanding of what rationality in moral discussion consists in. Moral rationality involves “modes of argument whose characteristic feature is exactly that they can secure the rationality of both protagonists in the absence of agreement about a conclusion.”²⁰³ “What I *cannot* do, and yet maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the *relevance* of your doubts.”²⁰⁴ Rationality consists more in coming to an understanding of what position the other is taking responsibility for. It is ultimately not clear what becomes of his deflationary account of ought in moral contexts; an *ought*-statement must stand for a specific reason, and people who are morally competent will have to see the relevance of the reason, but if they do not find the reason conclusive, it seems that a gap *will* open between *is* and *ought*. But here I am interested here not in outlining Cavell’s complete theory of *ought*, for he doesn’t really have one, but rather outlining his metaethical intuition of where morality is situated. He writes: “*one* property that makes a reason a moral one is that it is conceived in terms of what will morally benefit the person the speaker adduces his reasons to. Who’s to say? Anybody who knows that person and cares enough about him to say, and can assume responsibility for saying it to him.”²⁰⁵ This suggests that moral reasoning and discussion can only happen between people with a real relationship to each other, who are attuned to each other and can understand each other’s position; in the absence of this kind of relationship, moral *ought*-statements and talk of moral reasons will be equally empty. But Cavell more than anyone is aware of how fragile this attunement is, particularly in moral contexts; it is central to his reading of Wittgenstein generally and emphasized continuously in his discussion of morality in *The Claim of Reason*. But *we cannot stand* coming out of attunement, finding that we

²⁰² Ibid., 324.

²⁰³ Ibid., 263.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 267.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 283.

live in different moral worlds and cannot reach each other. If we accept Cavell's metaethical intuition that moral speech requires some shared understanding, and accept his sense of how precarious this understanding is, we see that morality itself is constantly the occasion of frustration for us, it constantly leaves us wishing that morality were more than this. And one could just as easily have the opposite metaethical intuition and think: as long as we are all attuned enough to have some common moral understanding, morality is entirely superfluous; it only comes into its own where our actual reasons come to an end. Where it is actually needed, it is also necessarily empty. If we see take this view of where morality is essentially located, we will have to concur with early Wittgenstein that *all* our moral statements are *essentially* empty. — Anscombe famously wrote that the language of moral obligation, once it is divorced from a conception of divine law, is meaningless, and that “ought” is not derivable from “is” simply because it means nothing, having become a word of “mere mesmeric force”.²⁰⁶ But if we are horrified by what someone else is doing, and give them our reasons, and the reasons do not take, we might want to essentially *mesmerize* them; we want to somehow make them see things our way.²⁰⁷

This allows us to shed some light on a potential problem in the literature on the austere view of nonsense. Diamond has written that the difference between obvious nonsense like “piggly wiggle tiggly” and nonsense that tempts us to take it for sense, like our talk of ethereal moral facts or Platonic rails to infinity, is merely psychological and not cognitive.²⁰⁸ But Diamond also insists that there is a way of understanding the person who speaks tempting nonsense — Wittgenstein talks about the reader understanding him (Wittgenstein) in coming to see that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense. There is a kind of understanding we can achieve of our tendency to want to speak of rails to infinity, while in the case of “piggly wiggle tiggly” there is nothing much to understand. And Diamond insists also that we cannot achieve this understanding through empirical psychology. She writes:

The *Tractatus* invites us to understand Wittgenstein, the utterer of nonsense. What is such an understanding supposed to be? When you understand someone who utters nonsense, you are not, on the one hand, remaining

²⁰⁶ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, 32.

²⁰⁷ One might then accuse some resolute readers of having an overly rosy picture of what will happen when we realize we have been speaking nonsense; Diamond takes a view similar to Kremer's, for example, that “making clear everything that can be said leaves the space for ethics clear, precisely in leaving for ethics nothing but silence; a silence not of recognition that what one wants to say cannot be said, but that there is nothing that one *wants to say*. This does not mean that there are not then in life tasks for be performed, but there are not ethical problems whose solutions are thoughts.” Diamond, “Wittgenstein, Ludwig”, 1321. It is not clear that one's desires will be reformed in any meaningful sense by the realization that one has nothing to say; one might still want to say something even while knowing one has nothing to say, that is, the desire to go beyond the world and beyond meaningful language might be simply a perennial part of the human condition.

²⁰⁸ See footnote 17.

as it were outside his thought and describing what goes on from the point of view of empirical psychology. But, on the other hand, you are not inside his thought as you are when he makes sense and you understand what he says, because there is no such internal understanding, there is no thought that such-and-such to understand. You are not inside, because there is as it were no inside; you cannot remain outside, because outside all you can see is someone inclined to put together words, to come out with them in certain circumstances, to associate with them images, feelings and so on: from the outside, there is nothing to be seen that could be called his being in the grip of an illusion that so-and-so, as opposed to his being inclined to come out with certain word-constructions. There is, as I said, no inside. [...] But, as I said, remaining outside, and just talking about how the person puts together words and associates with them feelings and so on, would not give you what you want. To want to understand the person who talks nonsense is to want to enter imaginatively the taking of that nonsense for sense.²⁰⁹

The problem is not just that this imaginative entrance remains rather vague, but that it is hard to see how that would be necessary if we are dealing with nonsense that is exactly like “piggly wiggle tiggly” except that it comes with different *psychological* accompaniments. As we have seen, however, our talk of a kind of magical necessity — ethereal moral facts that make me right, although no-one can see them, rails to infinity that justify our concepts — arises on real occasions in response to a real need; *this* is what makes it different from “piggly wiggle tiggly.” We have run out of actual reasons to give someone, but we cannot simply let things stand as they are, with this great gulf between us, so we fantasize about an unspecified further reason, a super-reason. We can see how the picture seems to meet our need; it is essential that the picture is blurry, is in fact the picture of a blur. My own association with the idea of platonic moral facts, for example, is of something blurry up in the clouds, something I can’t really see. An ethereal, platonic facts is just “a fact, but not really”; the blur represents our own hesitation. “It was in fact just the occult character [...] which you needed for your purposes.” (*Blue Book 5*) There is a kind of “logic”, in the colloquial sense, to what we say; it arises out of the “logic” of our moral practice.²¹⁰

2.5 Summary of the issue of nonsensicality in ethical discourse

The connections between nonsense and morality are several, ultimately. There are ethical statements that essentially *pose* as nonsense, in that they pose as descriptive propositions that fail to describe, and must do so to fulfill their ethical function — such as “the world is a miracle”. It was not crazy of Wittgenstein to think that these ethical statements are essentially nonsensical, the

²⁰⁹ Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination”, 157. See also Donatelli, “The problem of the higher” 22-3, Conant, “What Ethics in the *Tractatus* is Not”, 54-8.

²¹⁰ This is a way of accounting as well for Backström’s argument that our tendencies towards an empty and philosophical use of words arise within our ordinary lives and not just within the institutions of philosophy. See footnote 119.

attempt to go beyond significant language. I have argued that he was wrong about this, however, and that he changed his view about these sorts of statements later. But if “the world as a miracle” expresses a certain conceptual life and also recommends it as the right one, we run into the problem of nonsensicality again; and it is a problem that might seem to affect all of our sensible ethical statements. If we keep pressing for justification, it will eventually come to an end, but at the point where it ends, we might still feel that we want to say something, and here we are tempted to empty metaphysical assertions: this is just right, you should see things this way, there are moral facts and this is one of them, etc. One could easily have the metaethical intuition that all ethical discourse essentially involves this kind of empty absolute assertion, and hence it is all essentially nonsensical. This seems to be Wittgenstein’s early view — insofar as our language makes sense, it cannot be conclusive for any possible interlocutor, and thus insofar as it makes sense it is not ethical; ethical language is necessarily the attempt to go beyond significant language. Later Wittgenstein seems to have moved past this absolutist metaethical intuition, and to have reconciled himself to a more modest view of morality, to be satisfied with less. His examples are moral argument are of people with real relationships trying to articulate their situation and their positions, or perhaps to move each other and change their view given certain shared points of appeal; and Cavell is explicit about locating morality within these parameters. If we accept this more modest sense of the domain of morality, then moral language does make sense insofar as it is successful — for the most part it just *is* the attempt to make sense in certain ways of the situations we find ourselves in. But still it is an inherent danger in our attempts to reason and make sense together that we might always be lead to the point where we are tempted to nonsense.

3 Wittgensteinian expressivism, Wittgensteinian constructivism

3.1 Introduction – going on from early Wittgenstein

The last two chapters have had a negative focus; the first argued for the untenability of moral realism as an account of moral reasoning, and the second sought to correct early Wittgenstein's overly broad claims about nonsensicality in ethics but at the same time to locate a perennial tendency towards nonsense within ethical discourse. So it may still seem mysterious how exactly we can actually think and speak meaningfully in ethics at all. This is the burden of the next two chapters. In this chapter I look into the work of Cora Diamond, who wishes to change the way we see and treat animals and argues in a manner that is thoroughly influenced by Wittgenstein. I focus largely on her 1976 paper "Eating Meat, Eating People" and argue that it reflects two slightly different senses of what moral reasoning looks like, which have both been prominent within the reception of Wittgenstein in moral theory, and I argue for a way of reconciling the two.

To put it briefly, one strand in the reception of Wittgenstein has turned to the idea of an extant life form or extant practices as a foundation for moral thought. This is tempting once we see the parallel between Wittgenstein's problems with value in his early work and his problems with meaning in his later work, and when we see that the resolution of the problem of meaning or the so-called "rule-following considerations" involves some appeal to the life-form or to shared practices. The problem of meaning in his later work could be put this way: as soon as I try to locate what my meaning anything by any sign, or meaning *this* rather than *that*, actually *is*, all I find is a bunch of facts that could mean anything or nothing. If I look at my past or future behavior, all I see is a series of actions that could be interpreted to mean any number of different things. If I look into my own mind, I might find some kind of image, but that image might be meant any number of ways. Adapting the tractarian idea "Wenn es einen Wert in der Welt gäbe, so hätte es keinen Wert", we could say: "Wenn es ein Meinen in der Welt gäbe, es würde nichts meinen." As long as we are looking to find our meaning or value given in the world, we find ourselves running in the endless regress described in *PU* §201: "daß wir in diesem Gedankengang Deutung hinter Deutung setzen; als beruhige uns eine jede wenigstens für einen Augenblick, bis wir an eine Deutung denken, die wieder hinter dieser liegt." This could tempt us to the idea of a transcendental subject of meaning, just as Wittgenstein was tempted to notions of an ethical subject outside the world; and it could tempt us to think that the facts of meaning must be strange, ethereal sorts of facts, facts that are

somehow there — “self-standing *sources* of significance”²¹¹ — just as we are tempted to believe in self-standing values. In both cases the problem is motivated by imagining people who go on differently from us and our seeming inability to reach them. The problem recurs in various places in Wittgenstein’s work, but the famous discussion in §§185-242 of the *Investigations* seems to get wrapped up with the thought that we are attuned in our form of life (§241); and Wittgenstein also seems to place some weight on the ideas of “einen ständigen Gebrauch, eine Gepflogenheit” (§198), “*Gepflogenheiten* (Gebräuche, Institutionen)” (§199) or “Praxis” (§202). If the answer to the problem of meaning is somehow in the life-form or in practices, then this could solve the problem of ethics.

Grounding ethics in the life-form leads to a charge of conservatism, and indeed it is hard to see how any life-form approach could explain any change in our way of living *as progress* rather than as mere historical drift. Moreover it is not clear how the appeal to the life-form is supposed to work exactly. In the case of meaning there is a long debate on this point I do not plan to go into. In the case of value we could put the point as follows: it is a moral non-sequiter to conclude that I should do something because everyone else is doing it or because we have always done it. I suggest in this chapter and the next that we must be very careful in how exactly we appeal to the life-form for it to begin to be plausible.

But there is another lesson we might take from the regress of value and meaning. Someone might think: we cannot find meaning or value in the world because whenever we locate any fact, *what it means for us* or *what we mean by it* calls for some personal response that is not given by the fact itself. Again I do not plan to spell out here precisely how this would work for the case of linguistic meaning. In the case of value the idea is more familiar, and seems to have been late Wittgenstein’s idea. There is of course, as many have noted, a striking lack of any explicit philosophizing about ethics in Wittgenstein’s later work, which is why many have looked for some way to apply his philosophical treatments of other topics (such as linguistic meaning) to the problem of value. But we do find an occasional remark from him insisting on the radically personal quality of all moral thought. I have already briefly discussed the Rhees’ recollections of his discussions with Wittgenstein in the previous chapter (2.4). In a 1931 journal remark he wrote:

Ein ethischer Satz ist aber eine persönliche Handlung. Keine Konstatierung einer Tatsache. Wie ein Ausruf der Bewunderung. Bedenke doch daß die Begründung des “ethischen Satzes” nur versucht den Satz auf einere zurückzuführen die Dir einen Eindruck machen. Hast du am Schluß keinen Abscheu vor diesem & keine

²¹¹ Finkelstein, “Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism”, 54.

The tension between these two approaches can be seen in the dispute between McDowell and Blackburn within metaethics, both of whom claim to have Wittgenstein on their side; I go into this debate in more detail in chapter five. The same tension can be found in an exchange between Peter Winch and Roy Holland; in his early paper “Nature and Convention”²¹² Winch sought to argue that lying must be thought generally wrong in any human society by virtue of the *form* of any possible society. In “Is Goodness a mystery?” Holland conceded that “life-form arguments” could account “for 90 per cent of all ethical phenomena”, and could explain “how ethical concepts first get off the ground”, “the situations in which ethical language is taught and learned”, and in fact “every kind of customary and mediocre goodness”. Yet it could not explain how, for some people in the society, “not to falsify became a spiritual demeanour”, nor could it account for Wittgenstein’s example of “wonder at the world.”²¹³ This critique in fact led Winch to change his position. A similar tension is then found between this changed Winch and Anscombe. In an article comparing Winch’s sense of moral necessity with Anscombe’s idea of “stopping modals”, Lars Hertzberg notes that for Anscombe this modality seems to only make sense in connection with “shared practices”, whereas Winch focuses on how a situation can strike the individual, that is, what possibilities and impossibilities they see in it, and that this notion of “impossibility” need not derive from shared practices.²¹⁴ John C. Kelly has argued quite cogently and with textual support that for Wittgenstein ethics originates in “deeply felt personal responses to life and the world” and that for later Wittgenstein “ethics continued to remain outside of any shared constituting framework”²¹⁵; while Jeremy Wisnewski argues at length for a Wittgensteinian view of moral theories as the “clarifications of (certain dimensions of) our form of life”.²¹⁶ Etc.²¹⁷

²¹² Winch, *Ethics and Action*.

²¹³ Holland, “Is Goodness a Mystery?”, 106-9.

²¹⁴ Hertzberg, “On Moral Necessity”, 104-110. The gist of his discussion is very close to the reconciliation of expressivism and constructivism I offer in this chapter. Anscombe and Winch can however be seen as switching sides when faced with a slightly different question: when two world-pictures conflict, can we say that one of them (ours, for example) is *right*, or are we left just with the facts of these two world-pictures and our attempts to fight or somehow convert the other? In “Criticizing from Outside” Diamond looks at a disagreement between Anscombe and Winch (along with Ilham Dilman) about the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein on this point. Winch (and Ilham Dilman) seem to think that we cannot say that one is right, *because* we cannot say that one is right with reference to any “established universe of discourse” or (Dilman’s words) any “mutually acceptable criteria”. Anscombe seems to leave room for the possibility of saying that one world-picture is right, without relying on appeal to one or the other of the established world-pictures, which, Diamond writes, seems to involve a different notion of reality than the reality entailed by either of the two, an idea of “*reality as contested*”. See “Criticizing from Outside”.

²¹⁵ Kelly, “Wittgenstein, the Self, and Ethics”, 575 and 588.

²¹⁶ Wisnewski, *Wittgenstein and Ethical Inquiry*, 5.

²¹⁷ Robert Arrington’s discussion of fundamental moral principles as descriptions of the grammar of moral words is worth mentioning; see Arrington, “A Wittgensteinian Approach”. Nigel Pleasants has argued that there are moral

Wittgenstein seems to have been sorely puzzled by the whole phenomenon of morality in his 1929 Lecture on Ethics. I have suggested that his sweeping conclusion about nonsensicality is simply untenable and “disappears” from his later work; but the whole subject of ethics has in a sense disappeared as well. Both the personalist approach and the life-form approach do the best they can with the meager scraps they find in late Wittgenstein, and both approaches have inversely related strengths and weaknesses. The personal response approach threatens to render moral thought too arbitrary; however, while the appeal to the life-form seems to offer the sort of foundation the other approach lacks, it is not clear why I should accept it as a foundation, that is, why its authority should mean anything to me personally. Here I will be arguing that when we understand the two approaches properly we will see how they are stronger than might first appear and in fact can converge towards each other.

I hope to show this by working through Diamond’s 1976 paper “Eating Meat, Eating People”, which exemplifies both these tendencies in the reception of Wittgenstein. She offers arguments of a kind against eating meat, but she also offers arguments against certain arguments against eating meat, namely the arguments of Peter Singer and Tom Regan. These bad animal rights arguments “attack significance in human life”, Diamond writes, by getting the “starting point”²¹⁸ of our moral life entirely wrong. Her explication of the starting point of ethical life can look like an argument *for* eating meat and is certainly an argument for a categorical difference in the significance of animals and humans. If we focus solely on this strand in her work, we can locate a view of ethics that I will call Wittgensteinian constructivism, which derives value and obligation from our form of life. In the following section I turn to her own argument against eating meat, which seems to rest on an entirely different metaethical approach, one I will call Wittgensteinian expressivism. Here Diamond suggests that we can be moved to see the world differently through poetic invention. In a concluding section I suggest how we can begin to reconcile these two different approaches to form a powerful metaethical view.

certainties analogous to the other fundamental certainties discussed in *Über Gewißheit*. If this position were worked out in more detail it would have to converge with what I call the “Wittgensteinian constructivist” aspect of Diamond’s work discussed below, since these certainties discussed in *Über Gewißheit* are unquestionable certainties in being anchored in our form of life in countless ways, in being presupposed by countless ‘modes of response’, as Diamond calls them. Pleasants writes: “...our lives, comportment and judgements show that there are many things of which we are certain in a very fundamental (basic) way, but which are immune to justification, challenge and doubt”. (Pleasants, “If Killing Isn’t Wrong, Then Nothing Is”, 197) If he had written an article entitled “If Eating People Isn’t Wrong, Then Nothing Is” then the parallel to Diamond’s work would be a lot clearer.

²¹⁸ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 325.

3.2 Wittgensteinian constructivism

There is a view that what makes it wrong to kill people is our rationality; hence, because animals are not rational, it is not wrong to kill them. Peter Singer and Tom Regan have convincingly pointed out that this has counter-intuitive and even grotesque implications for our treatment of the mentally disabled or the comatose, i.e. humans that lack rationality for one reason or another. Singer and Regan argue that it is instead our capacity for suffering that makes it wrong to kill people; hence, because animals have the capacity to suffer, it is wrong to kill animals as well, and the distinction we draw between us and them is mere prejudice, similar to prejudices against ethnic minorities. Diamond writes: “It is a mark of the shallowness of these discussions of vegetarianism that the only tool used in them to explain what differences in treatment are justified is the appeal to the capacities of the being in question.”²¹⁹ Both of these views make certain central moral facets of our life very mysterious, for example our horror of cannibalism: “*We do not eat our dead* . . . We also do not eat our amputated limbs.”²²⁰ On Singer’s view there would seem to be nothing wrong in eating an animal that dropped dead in front of you. “But if the point of the Singer-Regan vegetarian’s argument is to show that the eating of meat is, morally, in the same position as the eating of human flesh, he is not consistent unless he says that it is just squeamishness, or something like that, which stops us eating our dead. If he admitted that what underlies our attitude to dining on ourselves is the view that *a person is not something to eat*, he could not focus on the cow’s right not to be killed or maltreated, as if that were the heart of it.”²²¹ It would be squeamishness or sentimentality to object to eating human limbs, or to object to consenting sex with animals; and it would be prejudice to find something amiss in giving a dog a funeral. This common structure of argument, which Alice Crary has called the “argument from common capacities”²²² — that it is wrong to kill those who are rational, or that it is wrong to kill those who suffer — cuts both ways, making it “hard to see what is important either in our relationship with other human beings or in our relationship with animals.”²²³

If Diamond opposes any capacity-based view, what does she put in its place? What does make it wrong to kill people and eat them, if not one or several of their capacities? In a sense, Diamond believes that there is nothing morally wrong with eating people; but this needs to be carefully

²¹⁹ Ibid. 322.

²²⁰ Ibid., 321.

²²¹ Ibid., 322

²²² Crary, “Humans, Animals, Right and Wrong”, 383. See also Diamond: “I am suggesting we look with some serious puzzlement at attempts to establish moral community, or to show it to be absent, through attention to ‘marks and features.’” Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality”, 116.

²²³ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 321

explained. Here Diamond turns to the example of pets; “it is not ‘morally wrong’ to eat our pets; people who ate their pets would not have pets in the same sense of that term.”²²⁴ “We can most naturally speak of a kind of action as morally wrong when we have some firm grasp of what kind of beings are involved.”²²⁵ But these kinds are constituted by what Diamond calls our “modes of response”; and the kind *pet* is constituted by our not eating them, among other things: “A pet is not something to eat, it is given a name, is let into our houses and may be spoken to in ways in which we do not normally speak to cows or squirrels. That is to say, it is given some part of the character of a person.”²²⁶ Diamond reverses the direction of explanation: it is not that we don’t eat them because they are pets; they are pets because (among other things) we don’t eat them.

Now this might make it seem like it’s *per definition* impossible for anyone to eat a pet, for as soon as you did eat it, it wouldn’t be a pet. Of course this can’t be right. Suppose that my neighbor keeps a sheep and calls the sheep by name, speaks to her, sleeps next to her in bed, etc.; and then one day I go next door to borrow some eggs and see her roasting that same sheep on a spit. There is nothing impossible about this scenario, but I believe one might be morally repulsed by it. She engaged in the personal modes of response with the pet, and then she ate it; Diamond’s point is that there is a kind of contradiction here.²²⁷ But it is not impossible for a person to contradict themselves in this way, any more than it is impossible in certain circumstances to believe *p* and *not p* simultaneously. But doesn’t this mean that we should stick to the more intuitive order of explanation? After all, I would want to say to my neighbor: it’s wrong to eat this sheep because she’s a pet. Whereas I would hardly ever have occasion in life to say: this animal is a pet because no-one’s eating it.

Diamond speaks of “pets” in the plural and uses the passive formulation “a pet is not something to eat”, just as she writes “a person is not something to eat”. The “modes of response” she talks about are practices that constitute a shared moral world. Individuals can make mistakes and can deviate from our practices. The person who engages in all the practices of personal relationship with a pet and then eats it is deviating from what she had meant, or at least from what her actions had meant;

²²⁴ Ibid., 323.

²²⁵ Ibid., 323.

²²⁶ Ibid. 324

²²⁷ Every time I’ve presented this material on Diamond to philosophical audiences, someone in the audience has said to me something to the effect of: I grew up on a farm and the sheep walked around our house freely, they all had names, and then we ate them. This might seem to constitute an objection, and as such it will be more relevant when I turn to Diamond’s argument that viewing animals as “fellow creatures” rather than as resources would lead to different norms of treatment. Yet every one who says this presents it as something strange and disconcerting or inexplicable, as something that they as children had to struggle to adjust themselves to; one person said to me: “we simply got hardened to it.” It seems to me that even if what we might call the *mixed attitude* to certain domestic animals is typical in a great many societies, nonetheless it is also typically felt to be a kind of ugly contradiction that everyone has gotten used to and learned to work around. Hence I take this to be a demonstration of Diamond’s point more than a refutation of it.

there is no way of interpreting her such that she isn't going back on herself and betraying her pet, betraying their relationship. Similarly, Diamond writes "we do not eat our dead", but she is of course aware that this can happen. Hence she should have no objection to saying on a particular occasion: you shouldn't do this, because it's a person. But there can be no philosophical justification for the practice of not eating people of the form: we do not eat these things because they are people. If we did eat these things — these organisms of the species *homo sapiens* — there wouldn't be people as we know them. And in fact, Diamond's position is that there cannot be any philosophical justification for this at all. That we do not eat each other is part of our starting point, namely: that there are people. In other words, we must start with our form of life.

It is important to see that we cannot make sense of anything having any moral significance if we do not presuppose that we live in certain ways, ways that are not justified by empirical facts. We can show this by starting with the case of a life-form that is cannibalistic and adding empirical traits. Lions sometimes eat each other, and I assume that most of us would concede that there is nothing morally wrong here — not only is the lion of course not morally culpable, but there is also no real duty on our part to intervene and fix the situation when one lion is eating another. This is simply a part of nature and not within the scope of morality. It does not seem to change anything if we now suppose that the lions evolve opposable thumbs or an upright gait; nor if they evolve the ability to think up new means for their ends and use tools. It does not essentially matter morally if members of some animal species eat one another, and there is no empirical trait we can add that *makes* it matter. We *do* live such that we treat each other in myriad ways in which we do not treat other animals or things. Wittgenstein hoped to show us in the *Tractatus* and the "Lecture on Ethics" that we could imagine having the totality of all facts in front of us, and yet nothing in that totality would necessarily matter. Certain facts *do* matter to us because we have a life with these facts; we could take a remark Wittgenstein made in another context as the *late* Wittgensteinian key to his early puzzle about value and significance: "Das Hinzunehmende, Gegebene — könnte man sagen — seien *Lebensformen*." (PU II p. 572)

Diamond offers a very short (and presumably very incomplete) list of basic practices or modes of response that constitute personhood: we do not eat them; we give them names; more generally, "we treat human sexuality or birth or death as we do, marking them — in their various ways — as significant or serious"; and she even writes: "We learn what a human being is in — among other ways — sitting at a table where *we* eat *them*. We are around the table and they are on it."²²⁸ This last

²²⁸ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 324.

quotation is what I meant when I said that she seems to be arguing *for* eating meat before she argues against it. Part of what makes us human is the way we distinguish ourselves from other animals by eating them together. This is a claim that should bother both vegetarians and metaethicists. Are our basic practices themselves automatically right? Is it right to eat meat because we eat meat, and if we ate each other, would that be right too? I have explained the possibility of individual actions being wrong relative to our practices, but is there no space for the question of whether are practices themselves are right or wrong?

Diamond postpones this question while she is articulating the “starting point”. But she thinks that the existence of our interpersonal modes of response require no justification. We could abandon the practices of pet-ownership, and then it would not be wrong to eat the animals we would have formerly classified as pets — at least, it would not be any more wrong than eating any other animal. That a dog is not something to eat would simply no longer be true. Likewise, if we abandoned the great web of practices that constitute personhood, again it would no longer be wrong to eat other humans. After all, it is not morally wrong when lions eat each other, and there is nothing inherently wrong in members of a species known as *homo sapiens* eating each other.²²⁹ The act simply would not have the same meaning anymore; it would not, in fact, have any moral significance. And while one could intelligibly question whether we should have pets, it is hard to imagine circumstances in which we would question whether we should go on being people.

If we wish to take Diamond’s treatment of this point and expand it into a full metaethical view, and set it in relation to contemporary metaethics, we should start by noting that she seeks to be “realistic” about morality, in the sense she outlines in “Realism and the Realistic Spirit” of cautious and meticulous attention to the particulars of moral thought and talk. Hence she does not focus on unrealistic examples like “murder is wrong”; here she begins with statements that recall to us our shared form of life, such as “a person is not something to eat” or “a person is given a name”. These can be moral statements in that they recall to us how people matter; like Wittgenstein she is concerned more with significance than with prescriptivity, especially prescriptivity in isolation from anything that makes sense of our moral relations to others. This focus on moral significance ties directly into Diamond’s critique of traditional metaethical theories. Because they do not look at how we live they cannot make sense of how anything could matter to us; at the same time because they do not think to concern themselves primarily with moral significance, they do not think to look to

²²⁹ “[...] it is not members of one among species of animals that have moral obligations to anything.” Ibid., 333.

our form of life; this lends an air of artificiality and irreality to the entire investigation. For example she takes up the idea: “This *thing* (whatever concepts it may fall under) is at any rate capable of suffering, so we ought not to make it suffer.”²³⁰ Here we are supposed to assume that, given simply a moral agent on the one hand and, on the other, a thing – which kind of thing is supposed here to be irrelevant – that can suffer, a relation of obligation springs up between them. But seen this way it is of course very mysterious where this obligation should come from, and in fact the sentence looks like a *non sequiter* — just as much of a *non sequiter* as the more traditional idea, “This thing is at any rate capable of reasoning, so we should not make it suffer.” And this point cuts against traditional realisms and traditional expressivisms equally. To say of this thing that because it can suffer, therefore it has the property that I ought not to make it suffer, is hand-wavy metaphysics borne of desperation; it is hard to see what it could mean to speak of such a property, or, if there were such a property, what it would mean to me²³¹. But it is equally unhelpful to say that we start with a neutral world, including the fact of suffering beings, and then decide to will the principle of avoiding their suffering, or commit ourselves to a negative attitude towards suffering — it’s hard to see what the necessity for that principle would be, or why a person would start willing any such principles at all, unless something already mattered. We cannot see how the suffering thing would matter if we just see it as any kind of thing and ourselves as mere moral agents — “whatever force our words have comes from our reading in such notions as human being and animal”²³², which, as those types of things, “are not given for our thought independently of such a mass of ways of thinking about and responding to them.”²³³

In other words, we cannot make any sense of our notions of duties or obligations unless we can see how things matter, and mattering is not something a thing does by virtue of its inherent properties, cut off from its role in our lives — which means that ultimately it has no value apart from our modes of response; yet this does not mean that how things matter is up for individual choice. In another paper, “Losing your concepts”, she writes: “I cannot choose what weight it shall have that I fail you, or betray you, or that I on some occasion look at you but with a look that leaves you a mere circumstance and not a human being.”²³⁴ Or, as Martha Nussbaum has written: “To the extent to which it is appropriate to say of a principle or belief that it is optional for us, to that extent it is not deep in our lives.”²³⁵

²³⁰ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 335.

²³¹ See Korsgaard, “The realist move is to bring this regress to an end by fiat; he declares that some things are intrinsically normative.” (Korsgaard, *Sources*, 33)

²³² Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 333.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 331.

²³⁴ Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts”, 265.

²³⁵ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 225.

If we want to get a metaethical foundation for moral reasoning out of this part of Diamond's work, we might be tempted to put it in the following nutshell: there are deep-rooted practices — or a deep-rooted grammar of our form of life — that bind us such that certain actions contrary to those practices are therefore wrong and bad; our moral judgments describe this grammar. If this were all, however, it would be hard to see why these practices should command any authority over our individual actions. Why shouldn't I disobey the practices of my society? Diamond is talking firstly about quite fundamental practices, those that belong to *personality per se* — practices we are committed to as humans who live within this life form; they are not the commitments incurred by any conceivable rational investigator, nor are they just the fashions of once society or another.²³⁶ Secondly, they are of interest first and foremost insofar as *they make our acts what they are*, and thus make an act of mine betrayal, heartlessness, etc. These practices *characterize* the actions of those within our form of life. And if an act of mine is a betrayal, it is also an act that is generally not to be done. Hence the life-form can characterize and thereby *guide* my actions. And the characterization and guidance are intertwined: for if we did not shun betrayal as we do, betrayal would not be what it is; and yet we shun it because of what it is — because of the countless ways we rely on others, because of the importance of trust for us and hence because of what it means for us when someone breaks that trust²³⁷. When we see significance in terms of our modes of response, we should be able to see that prescriptivity is not something mysterious that gets added to the characterization of our actions as an extra. My form of life has the authority to characterize *and* guide my actions because I am committed to that life-form; but this commitment is again not to be seen as an extra ingredient that needs to come between the life-form and myself, such as an act of will or a decision. Here “commitment” to the life-form just means that the life-form is mine, that I live my life within that form. Only within this life-form do things matter, such that I can even arrive at points of decision, such that I can exercise my will at all.

²³⁶ Diamond is also sometimes interested in culturally variant modes of response, which presumably give rise to non-universal moral obligations, for example in discussing our obligations towards our parents in “Losing Your Concepts” (271f.) I have focused on universal, basically human modes of response and correspondingly human obligation to avoid giving the impression of an overly relativist view.

²³⁷ It is worth distinguishing the view I am presenting here from allegedly Wittgensteinian views that make normativity a matter of semantic meaning — i.e. if something is a ‘betrayal’, *ceteris paribus* one shouldn't do it, *because that's what the word means*. I do not think it makes sense to suppose that semantic meaning can have that kind of authority over my will; at most I might find that I must either desist from betraying *or* withdraw that word from my vocabulary. In that case it is not the meaning of the word but my life with the word that obligates me. When I speak of meaning in the sense of ‘what it means for us to betray someone’, I am speaking of significance and not semantic meaning. — It is also worth noting here, however, that the “modes of response” that ground our moral life can include modes of conceptual response, applications of specific concepts. Though there is a sense in which certain modes of response are logically prior to our concept of morality, this does not mean that they are necessarily pre-conceptual.

I will try to sketch how this view might work in practice with an objection Diamond raises against herself. She writes about slavery in the southern United States: “For do we not learn — if we live in a slave society — what slaves are and what masters are through the structure of a life in which we are here and do this, and they are there and do that?” If her view implied that slavery, where it exists, must be beyond argument and justification, simply because it exists, this would be a *reductio* of her view. Here she only writes: “In fact I do not think it works quite that way, but at this point I am not trying to justify anything,” but rather only indicate something about our “starting point”.²³⁸

We can find the lines of a defense in Stanley Cavell’s discussion of slavery in *The Claim of Reason*. He writes that “There comes a time when the institution of slavery cannot be justified on any ground other than the sheer denial of the slave’s humanity”,²³⁹ and then of course some slaveholders might be heard denying that slaves are people; and we might want to say that the slaveholder doesn’t see or treat the slaves as human beings. Cavell suggests that we cannot really understand this straightforwardly, and that slave-holding then involves “an increasing effort to mean something that cannot be meant”.²⁴⁰

What he [the slaveholder] is missing is not something about slaves exactly, and not exactly about human beings. He is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation to them, so to speak. When he wants to be served at a table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. When he tips a black taxi driver (something he never does with a white driver) it does not occur to him that he might more appropriately have patted the creature fondly on the side of the neck. He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human – his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments...²⁴¹

The slave-holder does not really see his slaves as not human – his “modes of response” to the slaves *are* the modes of response to other humans, in corrupt and perverse form. By treating slaves in ways that outwardly resemble his treatment of animals, he does not really succeed in seeing or treating them as animals, no matter how hard he tries — he only succeeds in corrupting himself. This is a wonderful example of the authority that our form of life has over us in making our acts what they

²³⁸ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 324f.

²³⁹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 373

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 377.

²⁴¹ Ibid. 376.

are: what the slaveholder is doing is not husbanding animals but treating fellow humans inhumanly, and in his heart he knows this. Because he knows this, he knows that he must not do it — he cannot really mean what he is doing, cannot afford to see it; he must stay confused and conflicted to continue living as he does. The modes of response we all share characterize and guide his actions, and he evades this guidance only by evading himself.

One of the great themes of the literature on American slavery is how personally intertwined the lives of slaves and slave-masters were and accordingly how much self-deception the system required. But what if there were a people who really did see those of a different skin color as work animals rather than as people? Would they then be right in doing what they did? If we are imagining a people who really did not extend the personal modes of response to creatures with whom they could reason together because of a difference in skin color, this would be a life-form in which skin color had a much different and greater significance (in a way that is really incomparable with racism as we know it) and in which reasoning had a much different and lesser significance. But if these things were different, *everything* would have to be different. It might help to compare this to Goodman's invented concept *grue* — observed before t and green, or not so observed and blue. *Grue* is arguably a possible concept; but if a life-form actually operated with this concept then the point in time t would have a significance for them that is baffling for us, and this could not possibly be the only point of difference between us. They would have to live entirely differently; and until we've done the work of more fully imagining how they live, we cannot be certain that there is any such possible life-form, and thus any such possible concept. — This, then, is why the slave-holder cannot choose to see the slaves as not human: because he cannot choose what weight things have for him, though he can cause plenty of damage trying to deny that weight. If we take seriously the idea that we live our lives from within a *web* of practices, then it is no longer clear if we can really coherently imagine the life-form that would go with these sorts of cases of *thoroughgoing* deviance, and in any case it would not be a life-form that is very close to ours in other respects. Hence a people who really did see those of a different skin color as something other than people and enslaved them would not be morally wrong, *nor* would they be morally right; they would be outside of our moral community, and we would do our best to avoid them, as we avoid other dangerous animals.

Many people who are familiar with Diamond's work or simply with Wittgenstein will feel that a certain artificiality has crept into the last few pages, as I seem to be attributing a metaethical theory to Diamond, and suggesting that it could serve as a foundation for first-order moral reasoning. I will call the theory "Wittgensteinian constructivism". I will argue soon that the theory is overly narrow,

both substantially and as an interpretation of Diamond, but for the moment I wish to present it as a full-fledged metaethical theory and compare it with other versions of constructivism so we can see the advantages before we come to its shortcomings. Wittgensteinian constructivism is *constructivist* in the way it reverses the order of explanation relative to realist positions. Constructivism is frequently characterized as a family of theories that specify some procedure that *constructs* moral facts, thus reversing the order of explanation, “moving from procedure to facts and not vice versa”.²⁴² It is hard to locate anything like a specific *procedure* in Diamond’s work that plays this role, unless we take the evolution of humanity and the development of our human culture as a “procedure”. But the constructivist Sharon Street has recently argued that proceduralist formulations miss the real point of constructivism as embodied in the work of philosophers like Rawls and Korsgaard, where in fact the “procedure” only serves as a heuristic device, “whereas the philosophical heart of the position is the notion of the practical point of view and what does or doesn’t follow from within it.”²⁴³ Street glosses constructivism as the position that “[n]ormative truth consists in what is entailed from within the practical point of view,”²⁴⁴ which could equally well describe Diamond’s position as I have described it so far. What makes it Wittgensteinian constructivism is the way it forces us to change our understanding of what a “practical point of view” is and what “entailment” is. The practical point of view that generates moral facts is not the individual’s given set of *valuing judgments*, as in Street²⁴⁵, but rather is found in the modes of response or the form of life, something logically prior to valuing judgment. Diamond is much closer to Korsgaard in this regard, who relies on the idea of a “practical identity” including not just normative judgments but “roles and relationships, citizenship, memberships in ethnic or religious groups, causes, vocations, professions and offices.”²⁴⁶ This is still a relatively contingent self-understanding, and Korsgaard’s strategy is essentially to first ground normativity and obligation in this rather contingent practical identity, and then present an argument that she thinks should push everyone towards a universal practical identity as creature of reason.²⁴⁷ (That argument towards a

²⁴² Lenman and Shemmer, *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, 3. Korsgaard wrote famously that substantive moral realism holds “that there are correct procedures for answering moral questions *because* there are moral truths or facts which exist independently of those procedures, and which those procedures track”, whereas procedural realism – which is of course her position – holds that “there are answers to moral questions *because* there are correct procedures for arriving at them.” (Korsgaard, *Sources*, 36).

²⁴³ Street, “What is Constructivism”, 366.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

²⁴⁵ It is anyway not clear if Street should really want to describe the basic materials of her constructivism as “judgments”. For the problems involved in understanding the nature of these valuing “judgments” see Michael Ridge, “Kantian Constructivism: something old, something new”, pp. 143-157; Michael E. Bratman, “Constructivism, Agency, and the Problem of Alignment”.

²⁴⁶ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 20.

²⁴⁷ I am drawing here largely on *Sources*.

more formal and universalist self-understanding is precisely the point where many critics feel that her project fails.) In appealing to modes of response to explicate what it would mean to eat a human, Diamond is appealing from the start to a practical identity that is deeper and shared, not arguing *to* it from a more contingent practical identity. But the spirit of Korsgaard's reaction to the Open Question argument is remarkably similar to Wittgensteinian constructivism as I have outlined it here. She insists that outside of the practical perspective, we cannot locate anything of value in the world.²⁴⁸ This is for Korsgaard not so much a metaphysical assumption as a truism about the nature of moral thought: no fact we could locate would that kind of necessary authority over us. Hence normativity, she concludes, can only come from "the authority of your own mind and will"²⁴⁹ and not by anything external; "If moral claims are worth dying for, then violating them must be, in a similar way, worse than death. And this means that they must issue in a deep way from our sense of who we are."²⁵⁰ Korsgaard's thought could, I think, be put this way: if our moral judgments are not to be simply empty, they must address us personally and speak to our self-understanding; and the different contingent self-understandings should all rationally converge on a self-understanding as a rational subject. (Even if our moral self-understanding ends up being universal rather than individual, then, moral understanding is still *personal* as I understand the term in stemming from a sense of self.) Diamond in contrast could be said to argue that moral judgments must address our "self-understanding" or "practical identity" in addressing our sense of what it means to be human and in showing how the modes of response that constitute our human life can shape our sense of what we must do.

If we include Wittgensteinian constructivism within the family of constructivisms as defined by Street — such that "[n]ormative truth consists in what is entailed from within the practical point of view" — we will also have to revise our view of entailment. Whereas Street's own position uses the ordinary notion of logical entailment, the sense in which Diamond's "modes of response" accord or fail to accord with certain actions goes far beyond any traditional notion of logic. That our attitude towards other humans (the attitude towards a soul, we might say) excludes simply using them for

²⁴⁸ Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism", 119.

²⁴⁹ Korsgaard, *Sources*, 104.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18. This is a common theme in the literature on constructivism: Bagnoli writes that the "task" of constructivism "is to establish a constitutive relation between knowledge of oneself as a practical subject and knowledge about what one ought to do. (Bagnoli, "Constructivism about practical knowledge", 154) while James speaks of "the best conception of ourselves, of what we ultimately are." ("Constructing Protagorean Objectivity, 63). Compare Diamond: "You cannot see what is involved in our moral thought about such things as saving life if you do not see how we think about life; and you cannot see what we think about life if you take into account only certain limited types of thought: if you are willing to look at what we think to be good, but not at how we shape our notions of what we ourselves are." Diamond, "How many legs", 170. But of course Diamond is referring to how we see ourselves as humans, not individually.

meat, for example, is not a contradiction in the way that two propositions such as *p* and *not-p* contradict. The sense of what we are to each other and the sense of our attitude towards meat make eating each other morally impossible, and this is felt by anyone who knows their way around our life-form.

Hence Wittgensteinian constructivism can be made to rhyme formally with Street's formulation if we shift our understanding of *the practical point of view* and of *entailment*. However, it is helpful to take up Korsgaard's own characterization of constructivism as well. It is important for her view that while at the end of the day we can speak of a moral reality, there is no point in beginning our account of moral reasoning by appealing to some notion of a moral "piece of reality", some realm of moral facts alongside biological facts, chemical facts, etc.²⁵¹ Korsgaard defines moral realism as precisely the view "that propositions employing moral concepts may have truth values because moral concepts describe or refer to normative entities or facts that exist independently of those concepts themselves."²⁵² Since she is here contrasting constructivism with realism, we can infer a provisional definition of constructivism: "that propositions employing moral concepts may have truth values because moral concepts describe or refer to normative entities or facts whose existence depends on those concepts themselves."

It is easy to square this perfectly with Diamond's argument that *human* functions as a moral concept. There is of course a biological concept of the human that does merely track an independently existing reality. On Diamond's view, the moral concept of the human does not differ in extension from this biological concept — but "grasping a concept (even one like that of a human being, which is a descriptive concept if any are) is not a matter just of knowing how to group things under that concept; it is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept."²⁵³ An essential part of a concept is our life with that concept. If we assume that what she calls "life-with-the-concept" amounts to or includes what she calls "modes of response", and that these modes of response are what create our world of moral significance, then of course moral significance will not exist independently of the concept of the human.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism", 118. Bagnoli even writes that "whether there is a distinctive 'subject matter' of practical knowledge identified by a fixed domain of facts is precisely what is under dispute between realism and constructivism." Bagnoli, "Constructivism about practical knowledge", 168. This obviously relates to the "non-departmental conception" of morality I discuss in section 1.2.

²⁵² Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism", 100.

²⁵³ Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts", 265f.

²⁵⁴ Korsgaard's more detailed explanation of how exactly moral concepts create new normative entities and facts is hard to follow and not very illuminating for a discussion of Wittgensteinian constructivism. An offhand remark by Carla

Wittgensteinian constructivism has three great strengths which perfectly exemplify the strengths of constructivism generally as a metaethical view. Firstly: there is, on this view, no possibility of so-called “brute error”²⁵⁵. It cannot turn out that we have been wildly mistaken in our moral views; it cannot turn out to be the case, for example, that torture is a good rather than an evil. In the empirical disciplines things can turn out quite differently than we expected: it turns out that the earth revolves around the sun, that time is relative, that space is curved. In the empirical disciplines we can think quite clearly, even flawlessly, make no mistake in our reasoning, and yet still find that the facts turn out quite different. Traditional realist metaethics, which posit a morality that exists independently of us and awaits discovery by us, have trouble explaining how we could ever have any certain knowledge of this moral reality, or indeed any knowledge of it at all, i.e. by what special faculty this is supposed to occur; and they have equal trouble explaining how, if we could have this knowledge, it could motivate us, or why it should matter to us at all²⁵⁶. On Wittgensteinian constructivism, insofar as there is moral truth it is ours, and we know it as we know our own minds. Secondly, Wittgensteinian constructivism precludes brute error but allows for the possibility of individual error, and even error at the level of whole societies. This is because it distinguishes between the sum of behavior, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that which is entailed by the modes of response we are committed to. This is again important to Street’s constructivism; but Street’s understanding of the kind of error that is possible is much narrower, because of her narrower understanding of the practical point of view and of practical entailment. And thirdly — following from this distinction — Wittgensteinian constructivism offers a non-empirical account of moral reasoning²⁵⁷. We cannot read moral significance off of behavior. What modes of response are deeper, what sense they have for us, what possibilities of moral sense they entail and what they preclude, can only be determined by a native of the life-form; just as only a native speaker of a

Bagnoli is better suited to Wittgensteinian constructivism: that to master an ethical concept is “to organize a mode of awareness”. See Bagnoli, “Constructivism about practical knowledge”, 131.

²⁵⁵ James, “Constructing Protagorean Objectivity”, 64. Similarly in “Expressivism and Constructivism” Lenman has written that constructivism “disallows any possibility that moral rightness might consist in something mysterious and epistemically inaccessible and remote to us.” (215)

²⁵⁶ The former epistemological objection has been pressed forcefully by Sharon Street, while the latter point, which I treat in great length in the first chapter here, is a frequent emphasis in Korsgaard’s writing.

²⁵⁷ This is also emphasized by Street: because constructivism defines moral reality in terms of what is entailed by the practical standpoint, our moral knowledge is non-empirical, since our knowledge of entailments is non-empirical. Cf. Street, “What is Constructivism”, 16, and also “Constructivism about reasons”, 231: “according to metaethical constructivism, when we ask whether the judgment that X is a reason to Y (for A) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A’s other normative judgments, we are not asking what A or anyone else thinks withstands scrutiny from that standpoint.” But her notion of entailment is simply logical entailment as traditionally understood. When we modify this notion of entailment as I suggested, we deepen this point about the non-empirical quality of our moral knowledge; for the only way to know what is entailed *in this way* by our modes of response is to be fully immersed in the life-form.

language can tell us what can be said in the language and what it would mean to say it. This cannot be deduced from rules, at least not independently of the way native speakers grasp and use these rules. This explains the democracy of moral judgment: while there is true and false and right and wrong, these judgments cannot be left to experts to judge or settled once and for all.

Wittgensteinian constructivism seems moreover to avoid the problem that Enoch among others wishes to press against constructivism generally: if we wish to suppose that our reasons are all generated by a constructivist procedure, then it is hard to imagine how or why we would prosecute this procedure in the absence (per hypothesis) of any reasons.²⁵⁸ There is only a constructivist “procedure” in Wittgensteinian constructivism to the extent that we might call the development of human culture a “procedure”; and this doesn’t need to have been guided by reasons from the beginning. Finally, it works out very nicely that this Wittgensteinian constructivism suggests a notion of moral argument and reasoning that is perhaps corroborated by Wittgenstein. Moore’s notes on Wittgenstein’s lectures in the early 1930s contain some hint of what moral reasons are for Wittgenstein:

Reasons, he said, in Aesthetics, are “of the nature of further descriptions”: e.g. you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of different pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him with a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is “to draw your attention to a thing”, to “place things side by side”. He said that if, by giving “reasons” of this sort, you make another person “see what you see” but it still “doesn’t appeal to him”, that is “an end” of the discussion; and that what he, Wittgenstein, had “at the back of his mind” was “the idea that aesthetic discussions were like discussions in a court of law”, where you try to “clear up the circumstances” of the action which is being tried, hoping that in the end what you say will “appeal to the judge”. And he said that the same sort of “reasons” were given, not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy. (*PO* 106)²⁵⁹

This essentially looks like what Wittgenstein described as the method of “perspicuous presentation”.²⁶⁰ Wittgensteinian constructivism, in holding that value and obligation derive from the deep commitments to “modes of response” in our form of life, helps to explain why this method would serve as a mode of moral discourse. We can recall to ourselves what it would mean to eat people by considering, for example, what it is to caress a person, how we touch each other generally, and how this differs from our much more instrumental attitude towards the bodies of animals. By placing things side by side and drawing attention to their relations, we can recall to ourselves our form of life, for example: what our humanity means to us — making our concept of

²⁵⁸ See Enoch, “Can there be a global, interesting, coherent constructivism about practical reason?”.

²⁵⁹ This is discussed by Diamond in “Injustice and Animals”, 118.

²⁶⁰ *PO* 133, *PU* §122.

humanity perspicuous.

It is worth noting as well that Wittgensteinian constructivism can be brought closer to Kantian and Habermasian views in a certain respect if we formulate it right. We could say that Wittgensteinian constructivism is Wittgensteinian among other things in rejecting any purely formal notion of rationality: rationality begins with specific practices, in responding to circumstances in specific ways²⁶¹. Yet like Kantian and Habermasian ethics, it seeks to find all specific obligations and values in this rationality, which every rational creature (that is, every human) must be committed to insofar as it has a will and insofar as, for us humans, that will is rational. And a Kantian philosophical ambition is now very tempting: to think that what we should do in specific situations could be determined by reasoning that involves no more substantial commitments than a commitment to rationality itself.

If we could work out a complete system of moral truths from within the practical point of view in this way, it would tend to undermine the early Wittgensteinian view of ethics I outlined in the previous chapters; it would rob the fact/value distinction of much of its point (except, perhaps, as a metaphysical distinction between truths knowable from within the practical point of view and truths knowable from outside), and would undermine the emphasis on moral creativity and the various possibilities of moral sense. Of course neither Diamond nor Cavell nor Wittgenstein aspire to anything like a complete system of moral truths. Diamond is interested in fleshing out the “starting point” or our moral life, the conditions of possibility of all moral argument; and Cavell does not think that every immorality shares the incoherence of American slavery. If we really wish to uphold Wittgensteinian constructivism as a global metaethical view we must address the problems of *specificity* and *change*. Gaita has pushed the problem of specificity in reference to Peter Winch’s work, arguing that the modes of response that constitute personality in its most basic sense cannot be used to ground the difference between moral and immoral actions — that one can act immorally while still seeing people as people in the most basic sense.²⁶² We might say, paraphrasing Holland, that these personal modes of response might account “for 90 per cent of all ethical phenomena”, or particularly for “how ethical concepts first get off the ground”, but they cannot take us all the

²⁶¹ We can find a very substantial and motley conception of rationality simply by tracking the use of the italicized indexical in *Über Gewißheit*: “*Das ist* urteilen. So habe ich urteilen gelernt; *das* als Urteil kennengelernt.” (ÜG §128-9) “Jeder ‘vernünftige’ Mensch handelt *so*.” (ÜG §254) “*So* überzeugen wir uns, *das* nennt man “mit Recht davon überzeugt sein.” (ÜG §294) “Der Vernünftige zweifelt *daran* nur unter den und den Umständen.” (ÜG §334)

²⁶² See Gaita, “Ethical Individuality”, 132-145.

way.²⁶³ It might alleviate the problem somewhat to note that moral thinkers in this Wittgensteinian tradition do not expect morality to be so specifically action-guiding as to identify the right action in every situation; very often there simply is no obviously right answer. But the problem of specificity can be posed in terms of significance rather than action-guidance: the modes of response constituting personhood cannot explain how some people feel a moral demand to see the divine in every person or to love their neighbors as themselves. These modes of response can at best ground a few quite unproblematic moral notions, such as that people are not something to eat – and only for those who have not come unmoored from the human form of life, and only assuming that our form of life cannot fundamentally change such that these things can intelligibly come into question. — In “Eating meat, eating people” Diamond seems to pivot to a different metaethical approach when our practices of meat-eating pose the problem of *change*. It is to some extent part of our form of life to eat meat, but she does not think that we should eat meat.²⁶⁴ Yet this cannot be argued from the grounds of inconsistency, since our form of life does not give us the basis for any consistent answer. She writes: “There is, you could say, a built-in tension in our modes of treatment of animals.”²⁶⁵ Elsewhere in writing on the problem of animal experimentation she remarks: “A laboratory rat is *neither* a machine *nor* a person; if it really were one or the other there would be no problem how to draw the boundaries of morality.”²⁶⁶ Hence in our relation to animals we are *exposed*:

We want to be able to see that, given what animals are, and given also our properties, what we are like (given our “marks and features” and theirs), there are general principles that establish the moral

²⁶³ In Nigel Pleasants’ defense of the idea that the wrongness of killing is a fundamental and universal moral certainty (see footnote 7), he acknowledges that there is a great amount of historical and cultural variation in the exceptions we make; “[w]hat is subject to variation and change is the scope, range and circumstances of application of those rules.” (Pleasants, “If Killing Isn’t Wrong, Then Nothing Is”, 208f.) He does not seem worried about the possibility that these exceptions might stem from divergent *understandings* of the wrongness of killing, such that “the wrongness of killing” might cover a variety of different principles rather than any one universally shared moral certainty. Even if there is a shared universal moral certainty that killing is wrong, however, this could be developed in a variety of different directions and ground a variety of different norms. Paraphrasing Holland, we might say that this moral certainty cannot account for the difference between a society where killing is seen as damaging to the social order, and hence something that the state needs to keep within certain well-defined limits, and a society where respecting the sanctity of each individual human life becomes a spiritual demeanor. This latter point is not necessarily an objection to Pleasants, who is not trying to found a complete moral system upon the moral certainties he defends. It is also compatible with Pleasants’ comparison of this alleged moral certainty with the ‘hinge’ certainties discussed in *Über Gewißheit* that what was bedrock might become part of the river and vice versa – so if not eating each other or not killing each other has the status of certainty in the sense of *Über Gewißheit*, this offers no *justification* at all insofar as these practices can be intelligibly questioned.

²⁶⁴ This might be an oversimplification of her position. She calls herself an ethical vegetarian, but says nowhere that it is categorically wrong to eat meat. In fact she seems to think that *some* ways of eating meat can, for some people, be reconcilable with the view of animals she espouses — see *The Realistic Spirit*, 326, 330. I think the implication of the argument I describe in the following pages is at the very least that our practices of factory farming are morally untenable.

²⁶⁵ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 347f.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 346.

significance of their suffering compared to ours, of their needs compared to ours, and we could then see what treatment of them was and what was not morally justified. We would be *given* the presence or absence of moral community (or thus-and-such degree of moral community) with animals. But we are exposed – that is, we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise.²⁶⁷

If our life-form leaves us exposed in the case of animals — if, to borrow a phrase from Wiggins, our need to relate to animals in some way reveals a point of “cognitive underdetermination”²⁶⁸ within our given form of life — then, if the question of animals is susceptible of some kind of moral reasoning at all, it will fall under a different metaethical account. And in fact Diamond seems to suggest at several points that there are two different tasks of moral reasoning, moral evaluation relative to our practices firstly and secondly the moral critique of these practices. In “Eating Meat, Eating People”, when arguing that “This *thing* [...] is at any rate capable of suffering, so I ought not to make it suffer” cannot be true in the abstract, but rather presupposes at least one of a number of special relationships to that thing, she writes: “What a life is like in which I recognize such relationships as the former with at any rate some animals, how it is different from those in which no such relationships are recognized, or different ones, and how far it is possible to say that some such lives are less hypocritical or richer or better than those in which animals are for us mere things would then remain to be described.”²⁶⁹

3.3 Wittgensteinian expressivism

Diamond’s argument for a different and, in her eyes, better treatment of animals depends on “the *extension* to animals of modes of thinking characteristic of our responses to human beings”²⁷⁰ (my emphasis). As an example of what might move us to extend our modes of response in this way, she offers, not an argument, but a poem, by the English writer Walter de la Mare. The poem’s subject is a titmouse, a kind of bird; “If you would happy company win”, he writes, you should hang a palm-nut from a tree on a string, and soon enough, “Out of earth’s vast unknown of air”, a titmouse will appear. The final stanza reads:

This tiny son of life; this spright,
By momentary Human sought,

²⁶⁷ Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality”, 111.

²⁶⁸ Wiggins, “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life”, 124.

²⁶⁹ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 325. For a similar distinction see also “Losing your Concepts” 271f. and “The Importance of Being Human”, 52.

²⁷⁰ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 329.

Plume will his wing in the dappling light,
Clash timbrel shrill and gay –
And into Time's enormous Nought,
Sweet-fed will flit away.

De la Mare's poem seeks out some kind of commonality with the animal, but it is far from an argument from common capacities. The poem does not respond to the titmouse in a way that the bird's empirical marks and features justify or make appropriate; here the poem responds to animals "as our fellows in mortality, in life on this earth". Diamond connects these lines with the poet Robert Burns' description of himself to a mouse as "thy poor earthborn companion,/An' fellow mortal." De la Mare's poem could be said to accomplish "the extension to animals of modes of thinking characteristic of our responses to human beings", which Diamond summarizes under the heading "fellow creature". This latter concept is "extremely *labile*", she writes, because "it is not something over and above the extensions of such concepts" to animals, concepts such as justice, charity, friendship, companionship, cordiality, independence, dignity, pity. De la Mare's extension brings us imaginatively into a relation to an animal that would contradict eating it; borrowing from Cavell and Wittgenstein, we could say that it constructs a different *internal relation* between ourselves and the bird. The seeing of animals as "fellow creatures" competes with other conceptions of animals such as "a stage [...] in the production of a meat product" or "very delicate pieces of machinery", as well as with certain subdivisions we draw within the animal world such as "vermin"²⁷¹. These competing ways of seeing animals make different kinds of treatment appropriate, and in fact can only be characterized in terms of different ways of treating and responding to animals. To see an animal as a stage in the production of meat is to see it entirely in terms of something to eat and to prepare for eating; and though the connection of vision to action is more open-ended and multifarious in the case of "fellow creature," nonetheless to see an animal as a fellow creature *is* to extend our personal modes of response to it, to a greater or lesser extent. The poem shows us a way of extending to animals the concepts so important for our way of life — concepts of companionship, of mortality, etc.; if the poem moves us, the extension will take and we will see animals in a new way.²⁷²

Diamond says that the poem very crucially gives us no justification for this change. I will suggest in

²⁷¹ Ibid., 330.

²⁷² A comparison with the phenomenon of "seeing-as" is tempting here but potentially misleading. Diamond is not suggesting that we can idly switch back and forth between two different readings of animals by an act of will. She might contrast her position with someone else's by saying "I see animals as fellow creatures"; but she could just as well straightforwardly espouse her position by saying "animals are fellow creatures". She certainly does not wish to say "now I see animals as fellow creatures", the way one would say about the duck-rabbit drawing "now it's a rabbit".

a moment why this is a misleading characterization of her own view. For now we should just note that if this way of seeing animals is beyond justification, this is not because it is always already presupposed in our life-form, as is the horror of cannibalism, but because it is a kind of thinking with the heart, being moved by a vision. The poem gives us pictures and conceptual figures, such as “this tiny son of life”, that reconceptualize our relations to animals. — It might at this point be worth noting as well, though Diamond does not register this anywhere, that this notion of “fellow creature” might be working against itself in a similar manner to my examples in the previous chapter of human dignity or the specialness of every child: for Diamond is inviting us to attribute significances to animals that are borrowed from the significances of our life, but the significance of our life is of course built partly upon a *contrast* with other animals.

Similar examples from “Eating Meat” and related works of Diamond include:

- 1) That animals are fellow mortals, who *lead a life*, like us, that ends in death.
- 2) The possibility of being struck by the difference between us and animals, of an “imaginative sense of the otherness of animal life” – in the words of D.H. Lawrence, “A gorilla is a live thing, with a strange unknown life of its own.”²⁷³
- 3) Commenting on a Dickens story: “For Dickens, in contrast, the sense of death as a common fate is tied to the idea of life and death as solemn and mysterious matters, and to that of death as our common enemy, an enemy of a special and terrible sort.”²⁷⁴
- 4) That a mentally disabled person can be seen as a “soul in mute eclipse”²⁷⁵ and as partaking in humanity not through the capacities that are supposed to mark us out (i.e. rationality) but by having, in that person’s own way, a human fate.
- 5) Socrates cannot try to escape, because the Laws of Athens are his parents, and we ought to obey our parents.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human”, 41.

²⁷⁴ Diamond, “How Many Legs”, 170.

²⁷⁵ Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human”, 55; the phrase comes from de la Mare again.

²⁷⁶ *The Realistic Spirit*, 312.

6) “That we have all of us one human heart” – a line from Wordsworth’s poem “The Old Cumberland Beggar”²⁷⁷.

This is a one-sided selection; I am ignoring her talk about how styles of narrative in prose works,²⁷⁸ for example, can also exert an ethical force, and am focusing on certain isolated figures of thought that reorient us. “This tiny son of life” pictures life as a father or mother, making us siblings to every living creature; this changes our internal relation to the titmouse, and thus changes what it is for us, though it does not exactly change any of the facts and is certainly not justified through factual investigation — Diamond writes: “It is not a *fact* that a titmouse *has a life*”²⁷⁹, i.e. that it leads a life as we do. Some of these conceptual figures are almost literally pictures, and it is worth comparing them to the “pictures” Wittgenstein discusses in his “Lectures on religious belief”, e.g. that “God’s eye sees everything” or the notion of the Last Judgment, which “regulate” the lives of believers (the notes on these lectures confusingly say that this sort of belief shows “by regulating for in all his life” — *LC* 54). Moreover Diamond’s examples resemble the examples of various moral “attitudes” presented by Winch in “Can a Good Man be Harmed?”; Winch groups Wittgenstein’s expression “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” alongside the idea that a good man cannot be harmed (which he takes from Socrates) and that an innocent man cannot be punished (which he takes from Kierkegaard).²⁸⁰ These last two examples pose as grammatical statements²⁸¹, and if we look at how most of us actually speak they seem to be simply inaccurate grammatical statements; we do talk meaningfully and correctly of innocent people being punished. Kierkegaard seems to be proposing a new grammar, in other words. Wittgenstein frequently describes the metaphysician as someone who proposes a new grammar and confusedly takes himself to have made a real discovery²⁸²; but in this case Kierkegaard is not confused, and the new grammar is not *idle* but rather intended to change the way we live in certain regards. Winch writes that the notion that an innocent person cannot be punished “expresses the speaker’s attitude, his realization of the possibility of meeting the afflictions of life in a certain way. It is an attitude which the concept of punishment makes possible; or, to adapt an image in the *Tractatus*, it is an attitude

²⁷⁷ *The Realistic Spirit*, 298.

²⁷⁸ For example in Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics”, 242-6, and *The Realistic Spirit* 299-301.

²⁷⁹ *The Realistic Spirit*, 330.

²⁸⁰ Winch’s discussion of this point also recalls Wittgenstein’s discussion of punishment in the “Lectures on religious belief”: “One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment, and another person doesn’t think of this at all.” *LC* 54.

²⁸¹ In her notes on Peter Winch’s lectures on ethics that Lynette Reid was kind enough to send me, Winch says about this claim: “it’s not an empirical claim. One might call it a grammatical one.” Reid, “Peter Winch”, 33.

²⁸² See e.g. *PU* §401, *BB* 56f.

which is possible in the ‘logical space’ defined by the concept of punishment, a space bounded by the notions of guilt and innocence.”²⁸³ For the person who links punishment internally with true guilt, punishment is something to be squarely faced, not gotten out of; though it must be unpleasant to count as punishment, it is also essentially beneficial. Hence this person “would be acting *inconsistently*, were he to say of a certain affliction that it is a punishment and try to avoid it.”²⁸⁴ (Though this seems a bit too strong, since the person might be overwhelmed by fear or temptation when the moment arrives; but surely they could not consistently *intend* to get out of their punishment.)

The word “consistently” here brings us back to the broader notion of entailment I discussed in the previous section under Wittgensteinian constructivism: it is inconsistent to see something as one’s pet and then eat it; it is (arguably) inconsistent to see something as a “tiny son of life” and then eat it; it is inconsistent to see punishment as *internally* connected to guilt and then try to get out of a punishment. But these necessities are not grounded in our life-form in any obvious way, nor do they derive from an accurate description of the “grammar” of our concepts or our language-games. Winch’s examples are innovative grammars; and seeing a bird as “a tiny son of life” is a creative conceptual improvisation that is natural to some extent but also, to some extent, goes against the grain of certain aspects of our life-form. It is easy to see how a poem might move someone to stop eating animals, but as philosophers we might want to know what makes it *right* and not just *moving*. We seem to have abandoned the resources that Wittgensteinian constructivism had to allow for some notion of objectivity.

It is here I would like to introduce the idea of a “Wittgensteinian expressivism”, both because this strand in Diamond’s work inherits the same problems as traditional moral expressivism and because it finesses them better and shows us a way of improving upon traditional moral expressivism, so that the virtues of this Wittgensteinian approach come out best in comparison. Moral expressivism can be characterized as the idea that moral judgments are not statements of fact but rather expressions of our attitudes. This clearly works as a rough characterization of Diamond’s examples above. In the literature on Wittgenstein’s early remarks on ethics in the *Tractatus*, his war-time notebooks, and the “Lecture on Ethics” it has become almost canonical to speak of an “attitude to

²⁸³ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 197.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

the world as a whole”.²⁸⁵ Winch says explicitly that the statement that an innocent person cannot be harmed “expresses the speaker’s attitude”²⁸⁶, and Wittgenstein himself writes in his notebooks about the belief “es geschieht alles durch Gottes Willen”: “Und dies ist nicht eine Meinung — auch nicht eine Überzeugung, sondern eine Attitude den Dingen & dem Geschehen gegenüber. *Möge ich nicht frivol werden!* (DB 95f.) However, though what motivates Wittgensteinians and moral expressivists to turn to the notion of “attitude” here is similar, as I will argue shortly, the notion of “attitude” differs relevantly. Expressivism began life as emotivism, which has been called the “yay!/boo!” theory, as it holds moral judgment to be essentially a matter of yaying or booing certain facts. Blackburn has worked out a far more sophisticated and elaborate version of expressivism — he describes values as stable attitudes, he has a Humean story about how our attitudes can evolve through adopting a common point of view, and he has developed a subtle account of how these attitudes can take propositional form and mimic a robust world of moral facts — but ultimately he still seems to be working with a notion of “attitude” that is not far from the booing or yaying of certain facts. Attitude is for him a *binary affective response* to facts; he uses the term “attitude” interchangeably with “sentiment”, and his examples of attitudes are anger, guilt, shame, contempt, disdain, etc.²⁸⁷ And this holds of the entire expressivist tradition within metaethics. Though Hare is somewhat exceptional in de-emphasizing the role of feeling or emotion, his picture of moral judgment as endorsing universal prescriptions can still be seen roughly as booing and yaying — it still fits Blackburn’s notion of “attitude” as a “conative state or pressure on choice and action”²⁸⁸, and moreover an essentially *binary* pressure directed at *actions*. The attitude expressed by “a tiny son of life” is not a feeling, though it makes certain feelings possible and appropriate, and is a thought that can only be entertained by those who are capable of entertaining certain feelings; and it is not a yes/no response to the eating of meat, though again it obviously has implications for the eating of meat. This sort of “attitude” is first and foremost a way of conceiving the world, a *use of concepts*.

I will argue that this difference enables Wittgensteinian expressivism to effectively skirt the problems of traditional moral expressivism; but I want to first canvass some of the structural similarities between the positions. Both take the same trajectory out of the Open Question

²⁸⁵ See e.g. Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the *Tractatus*”, 153; Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 9-10; Mounce, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, 97; Stokhof, *World and Life as One*, 235, McGuinness, “The Mysticism of the ‘Tractatus’”, 313.

²⁸⁶ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 197.

²⁸⁷ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 8-13.

²⁸⁸ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 168.

argument. As I wrote in the first chapter, many people understand the question that is “open” to be one of attitude; Blackburn writes as a *reductio* of realism, for example: “if moral commitments express beliefs that certain truth-conditions are met, then they could apparently co-exist with any kind of attitude to things meeting the truth-conditions”.²⁸⁹ The expressivist solution — that moral judgments are the expressions of attitudes — falls out of the statement of the problem: that facts leave open the question of attitude. Expressivism is motivated by the sense that whatever facts you name, whether purportedly moral facts or simply plain natural facts, could never have the kind of authority over me that morality does, and that we need to look to something internal to the person or their will to explain not just how moral judgments actually motivate me but how they can legitimately *direct* me at all. Diamond unfortunately seems to deny precisely this connection to the will at one point:

I have emphasized this idea of a figurative use of words which is forced on us partly because it helps to show the difference between this view of ethical statements and any view of them as expression of will. Of course there is no denying that someone might use moral language to express his decisions; but there is no reason to think we must be doing this if we are not describing the world we observe. We may – some of us, sometimes – speak as if we were giving a description of another world, of superfacts, or very queer facts.²⁹⁰

She is here arguing against understanding ethical and religious uses of language as “*merely* the expression of an emotion” or as expressions of *decision*. This does not stand in the way of seeing moral judgments as expressions of the will in a certain sense — in the sense in which *what we can will* is not subject to the will, not a matter of decision. It is important to her that we are *moved* by the figurative uses of language in her examples — which look as if we were giving very strange descriptions — and that these strange descriptions can change what we want and what we can will; if I am moved by “a tiny son of life”, what I can mean and will in my relations to animals will be transformed. (Hertzberg has also argued that the notions of moral necessity and moral impossibility, notions of “what a person may will”, are central to Winch’s moral writings.²⁹¹) To speak more metaphorically, we could say that the examples of ethically potent figurative language in Diamond are functions not necessarily of the will by itself but of the whole person. She writes that the transition to a different view of animals “depends on our coming to attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties”²⁹². Expressivism has always insisted

²⁸⁹ Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, 188.

²⁹⁰ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 237

²⁹¹ Hertzberg, “On Moral Necessity”, 110-16.

²⁹² Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 296.

upon the essentially personal nature of moral reasoning and moral judgment — that I cannot outsource my moral deliberation to experts or to majority opinion, which is hard to explain if we assume a realist foundation; Stevenson lists as one of the three conditions of adequacy for any moral theory that moral questions not be answerable by scientific method, for example.²⁹³ On the simplest expressivist view, no-one can do my moral judging for me simply because no-one can be, for example, *outraged* for me; I have to feel my own emotions. Diamond’s view involves a deeper understanding of the essential personality of moral judgment. Firstly, no-one can be moved by a poem for me — but again, when we are moved by a poem, we are not necessarily moved to an emotion of an easily identifiable type, like outrage, but rather moved as a whole person, so to speak. Moreover the conversion to this attitude involves not so much a new belief about the titmouse, for example, but rather a *Gestalt*-switch; an ornithologist could give me new information about birds, but no-one else can reconceive the bird for me in that way, since it involves a transformation of my will. Secondly, if I do find myself adopting a view of animals as “fellow creatures”, no-one else can say what I exactly I mean by that. It is essential to her approach that Diamond does not simply say yes or no to eating meat, for example. Seeing animals as fellow creatures means extending modes of personal response to animals; I will find that I can intelligibly extend *some* of these modes, *more or less*, to *various* types of life-form. Only I can say exactly how much I have achieved with this imaginative response, *how far* it takes me into a real personal community with *which* animals; and only I can say what exactly it means for me in terms of my treatment of them. After all, I could see an animal as a “tiny son of life”, yet also see it as a natural and essential part of life that animals eat each other; so I might find that I can still eat animals, but perhaps I can no longer tolerate factory farming or animal experimentation. As no-one else can say exactly *what I mean* by “fellow creature”, no-one else can determine for me *what I can will* now. — Finally, Wittgensteinian expressivism shares with traditional moral expressivism a naturalistic view of ethics — not because we are committed to a naturalist metaphysics, but because we avoid all metaphysical commitments, seeing it as incredible that our moral practice might hinge upon metaphysical facts that might turn out (upon metaphysical examination) to be lacking; “die Praxis muß für sich selbst sprechen” (*ÜG* 139). We need not bother doing metaphysics to find moral facts that ground our moral practice, not because we know in advance that these would be “metaphysically strange”, but because it would be morally strange for any fact to have that kind of power.²⁹⁴ I have argued in the last two chapters that

²⁹³ Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, 16f.

²⁹⁴ Some people might feel that this is an obvious difference between traditional moral expressivism and Wittgensteinian expressivism — that the former is metaphysically naturalistic and the latter anti-metaphysical. I cannot go into this in detail here, but this strikes me as a severe misreading of the expressivist tradition. Naturalist metaphysics

Wittgenstein's examples of moral expressions that seem to be in a metaphysical mode, "as if we were giving a description of another world, of superfacts, or very queer facts", do not hinge upon any facts, metaphysical or otherwise.

I hope I have shown that Wittgensteinian expressivism deserves to be called expressivism; I now want to suggest that it copes better with the problems of traditional expressivism. To begin with, Wittgensteinian expressivists do not run into the "attitude problem" — namely the need to specify the particularly *moral* attitudes expressed by moral judgments.²⁹⁵ If I say that moral judgments express emotions such as anger, shame, etc., it could be objected that I might be angry at any number of things, or ashamed of any number of things, in contexts which clearly involve no moral considerations at all and where I would not say of myself that I had reached any *moral* judgments. Nor would it necessarily help to suppose that my anger or shame might be particularly "stable". So the traditional expressivist must explain what makes an attitude moral in one context when it is non-moral in another. This objection simply does not make very much sense once we adopt the Wittgensteinian notion of attitude. It is hard to see how anyone could present me with a recognizably non-moral context where I express the same attitude expressed in moral contexts by saying "an innocent person cannot be harmed". The latter attitude is, firstly, not episodic, and secondly, is not a state of mind that can exist independently of its application in specific circumstances, but a rich and specific way of structuring my experience. The objection could only take the form of asking what makes moral attitudes *in general* moral, i.e. asking us to delineate the whole field of "moral attitudes" from other sorts of exercises of concepts. But the simple answer to this is that we may not be able to define morality; there may not be any one criterion or any brief list of criteria that constitute moral attitudes. We could perhaps put a necessary but not sufficient condition in quite vague terms: the 'attitudes' must intelligibly be able to guide me in my life in some way. My aim in this chapter is not to delineate morality precisely — the concept of morality might be quite fuzzy and open-ended — but by examples to remove our puzzlement about how there could be any such thing as moral necessity, a necessity generated by moral thought that is

plays some role in Blackburn's work, though even there it strikes me as secondary. As Sias notes, ontological parsimony was quite decisive in motivating Ayer's emotivism but not at all decisive for Stevenson's (see Sias, "Ethical Expressivism"). Metaphysical assumptions play very little role in Hare's project and in Horgan and Timmons' extension of Hare's arguments (see chapter 1). Like Stevenson, Hare turns to expressivism simply as what he sees as the most accurate account of our moral thought and talk; the idea of moral realism is for him simply morally strange, at most epistemologically strange, but not metaphysically strange. There has been an unfortunate tendency to conflate Mackie's arguments against realism with those of the expressivists; this also leads to the idea I criticize in chapter 5, namely that late Wittgenstein somehow paves the way for an unproblematic moral realism by getting rid of the metaphysical or epistemological obstacles that are thought to be the primary or sole motivation for anti-realism.

²⁹⁵ See Sias, "Ethical Expressivism", and Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 43-51.

neither logical necessity, nor physical, nor psychological.

Secondly, arguably the largest problem for traditional expressivism is the so-called Frege-Geach problem, first introduced by Geach in his 1965 article “Assertion”²⁹⁶. He begins by noting “a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition”²⁹⁷ — for the *modus ponens* p , if p then q , therefore q to be valid, p must mean the same when it is asserted in the first premise and unasserted in the second. If an expressivist explains the meaning of “murder is wrong” as condemning murder, it is hard to then explain what it means to say “If murder is wrong, then...”, where I am not at the moment condemning anything. If we want to represent “murder is wrong” as Boo!(murder), we have to explain how “If Boo!(murder)” is to be understood. This problem extends beyond implication to all logical operators, as Schroeder has recently and thoroughly argued:

We get almost nowhere, for example, by simply substituting Ayer’s paraphrases: we do not even understand ‘boo murder?’, let alone is it clear why this question would be answered by ‘boo murder!’. We do not even understand ‘not boo murder!’, let alone is it clear why it is inconsistent with ‘boo murder!’. And we do not even understand ‘if boo murder, then boo defenestration!’, let alone is it remotely clear how it, together with ‘boo murder!’, should yield a logically valid argument for ‘boo defenestration!’. Yet ‘murder is wrong’ has precisely these relationships with ‘is murder wrong?’, ‘murder is not wrong’, and ‘if murder is wrong, then defenestration is wrong’.²⁹⁸

The Frege-Geach problem affects Blackburn’s expressivism, since he sees moral judgments as expressions of attitudes in the sense of emotions or “desire-like states” in contrast with “belief-like states”, as do almost all other moral expressivists. His “quasi-realism” is then meant to be a story of how these judgments, despite being something other than propositions or ‘starting life’ that way at least, can come into propositionality and fit seamlessly into all logical operations alongside genuine propositions. There is quite a large debate as to whether any of the numerous semantic proposals made by Blackburn and other expressivists succeed, which I will not go into here. I want to suggest that the problem simply does not arise for Wittgensteinian expressivism. The problem arises for Blackburn when he looks at an expression like “murder is wrong” and thinks that something else is going on under the hood, something that is in a sense more accurately represented by a different form of expression such as a boo! operator; and then he has to work his way back up to the propositional form. The Wittgensteinian expressivist holds that “murder is wrong” says very little

²⁹⁶ I discuss this problem in greater detail in 6.1.

²⁹⁷ Geach, “Assertion”, 449.

²⁹⁸ Schroeder, *Being For*, 5.

by itself; but a statement like “it is impossible to punish an innocent person” can say a lot. There is no reason to deny that this latter statement is a *belief* of a kind; and since it poses as a description, there is no reason not to treat it logically as a descriptive proposition. The fact/value distinction as it applies here only means: we do not arrive at that belief by examining punishments, or people, or even the concept of punishment -- the statement does not provide information about anything but rather describes a possible grammar that would restructure our responses to experience. But it is absolutely essential from the beginning that the statement takes the form of a descriptive proposition, and we do not wish to offer any paraphrases that have different logical forms (such as exclamations, imperatives, etc.).²⁹⁹ The argument is somewhat harder to make in the case of “fellow creatures”, since we *do* arrive at that belief by attending to animals in a way, but Diamond still wishes to distinguish this way of attending very sharply from factual investigation (nor is it logical investigation, mathematical, etc.) We can see how these sorts of beliefs incorporate both “directions of fit”, becoming compelling for us when we reflect upon our experience (world-to-mind) and at the same time restructuring our responses to experience (mind-to-world)³⁰⁰.

The third objection to moral expressivism concerns precisely this alleged world-to-mind direction of fit. The objection has often been put that on the expressivist view, morality does not engage us with the world at all, but rather only with ourselves. Blackburn has answered this objection quite forcefully, pointing out that we can only sort out our attitudes to the world by looking at the world, not by looking at our attitudes; my own attitudes need never be at the forefront of my

²⁹⁹ We might put this point by saying that Wittgensteinian expressivism denies the two theses Sias offers as essentially characterizing ethical expressivism, namely “psychological non-cognitivism” or the thesis that ethical judgments express mental states with a mind-to-world direction of fit, and “semantic ideationalism”, the thesis that “the meanings or semantic contents of [ethical] claims [...] are in some sense given by the mental states that those claims express”. Sias, “Ethical Expressivism”. When we look at what we do with an expression like “the world is a miracle” or “animals are fellow creatures”, though we could be said to be primarily investigating a mind-to-world direction of fit (since we will primarily want to know what it is to live in accordance with these beliefs, though we might also be interested in knowing what speaks in favor of believing them) it is quite misleading to say that we are looking for the *mental state* that this statement expresses. Blackburn to the contrary looks to the mental state for the meaning of the sentence; at one point he frankly laments the “hostility to psychologism” in the “Fregean tradition in semantics” (*Practical Tortoise Raising*, 145.)

³⁰⁰ The possibility of Wittgensteinian expressivism should also reduce the appeal of the many “hybrid” theories that have been proposed lately — these theories are partly meant to get around the Frege-Geach problem and suggest that moral judgments express two distinct states at once, a desire-like state and a belief-like state. Of course this is motivated by the insight that moral judgments seem to incorporate both directions of fit, being something we hope to get right and also to live by. When we look at a sentence like “murder is wrong”, however, it is hard to locate either of these aspects, because the sentence says nothing about anything and would not move anyone to do anything. Hence the hybrid theorists end up *speculating* that there must be two states behind this expression (I do not know whether we should consider this metaphysical speculation or speculative psychology). With an example like “an innocent person cannot be punished”, we do not need to speculate — nothing is hidden. It is clear how a person might come to this through experience and thereafter be guided by it. For a critical review of the hybrid theories, see Schroeder, “Hybrid Expressivism: Virtues and Vices”.

consciousness. If my moral judgment that some act is horrific is an expression of my attitude, nonetheless in expressing this attitude I am attuned entirely to the act itself, and my attitude structures the way I attend to the act, what features of it are salient. Thus moral deliberation is, he writes, “an active engagement with the *world*” — “It is the *world* that we contemplate, not our own psychologies”³⁰¹ This is a good answer, but it leads us straight into a related objection when we recall that for the expressivist, nothing in the world can compel any particular attitude. Hence it would seem that, on the expressivist account, we attend to the world in our moral deliberation, not because the world offers any kind of real tribunal for our attitudes, but only because attending to the world is the only way to prompt these attitudes to come out, so that we can try on various attitudes and settle on one of them. As Wittgenstein might say, we look to the facts as a way of pushing buttons on the attitude piano. In fact Blackburn describes the process of moral deliberation at one point as follows: “So if you bring me a story about people and their doings, I can train my thoughts on it, and according to the attitudes it elicits, I will admire it, or condemn it, or hold a whole variety of more or less nuanced responses.”³⁰² We might not count this as the sort of engagement with the world we wish to find in moral deliberation. The troubling objection for expressivism is thus that Blackburn, and moral expressivists generally, only give us the thinnest notion of moral reasoning. With their notion of “attitude”, I will find that I have attitudes towards the facts, I might have conflicting attitudes, I will have some attitudes towards some of these attitudes, some of these attitudes will be such that I find I cannot give them up, that they sit too deep with me (which is itself the expression of an attitude), and I will hopefully work these attitudes up into some sort of coherent response to the world, when some attitudes — the stronger, more durable ones, presumably — come out on top. This is the description of some kind of mental process, but many would hesitate to describe it as any kind of reasoning.

Blackburn takes up something like this objection in the same chapter where he discusses the problem of world-orientedness of moral reasoning, but he phrases the objection in terms of the agent’s alleged *passivity*: that this jostling of desires is something that happens in me, not something that I control.³⁰³ He argues that this is only a problem if we see the true self in abstraction from our actual desires and concerns, for example on the Kantian (rather than the Humean) notion of the self. However, the force behind this objection is that on Blackburn’s picture, we can’t seem to locate any reasons for any attitude. This objection is both true and false in a way. Blackburn can say that there are in fact reasons for attitudes — for example, the reason for our

³⁰¹ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 254f.

³⁰² Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 113.

³⁰³ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, 250-6.

negative attitude towards cruelty to animals is the pain and suffering it causes animals — but of course our taking these facts as reasons for the attitude is itself the expression of an attitude. At which point we might respond: precisely, there is no reason for or against the attitude, nothing that makes the attitude right or appropriate. And Blackburn will respond that an attitude can perfectly well be right and appropriate — though what this means, that it is right and appropriate, is of course itself the expression of an attitude, our attitude. And the objector will say: precisely, at the end of the day we have a picture of moral deliberation as attitudes jostling each other and the stronger one coming out on top, and it is no comfort to be told that when the stronger attitude does come out on top, the attitude’s owner would express this in realist language of correctness or truth, for this still amounts to the mere jostling of attitudes. And here I think Blackburn’s defense goes to ground in his questioning the rhetorical force of this “mere” — there is nothing “mere” about attitudes, and nothing about this picture that makes morality look silly or trivial or that upsets the dignity of the moral agent or of morality itself. Hence the issue turns on how exactly we feel about this picture of emotions sorting themselves into a hierarchy within the individual — where again the crucial point is not so much the passiveness of the process (with different rhetoric we could describe it so as to make it seem less passive) but the arbitrariness. In chapter two I argued that the Open Question argument could be turned against expressivism in precisely this way: we might look at this picture of attitudinizing and feel that while it might be interesting in its own right as a psychological phenomenon, it doesn’t have the significance that morality does for me, and hence it couldn’t really capture what I mean by my moral judgments. We could put the objection this way: if *that’s* morality, then I don’t care for it very much.

I will argue here that by turning to the Wittgensteinian notion of “attitude” we can at least ameliorate the force of this objection. The circularity remains — what makes an attitude right or good can only be seen from within that attitude — and this circularity is essential to any form of expressivism, but we can gain the resources to explain (from within an attitude or at least from within an empathetic understanding of that attitude) how an attitude might constitute an improvement and amount to getting things right.

Though Diamond says that de la Mare’s poem offers no justification for its view of animals, Diamond is clearly concerned with a way of *thinking* about animals and not with simple affective responses.³⁰⁴ In the conclusion of “Eating Meat, Eating People”, she describes Singer’s mistake as

³⁰⁴ On this point see also Cray, “A Brilliant Perspective”, p. 339f.

thinking “that the callousness [of our treatment of animals] cannot be condemned without reasons which are reasons for anyone, no matter how devoid of all human imagination or sympathy.”³⁰⁵ The reasons for treating animals differently presuppose both imagination and sympathy, but they are nonetheless reasons. I think it is likewise a mistake to abjure all talk of “justification” for changing our view of animals; Diamond’s point is most likely that the demands of consistency alone cannot rationally compel us to change in this case, and, more importantly, nor can any kind of external fact (“It is not a *fact* that a titmouse *has a life*”³⁰⁶).

Diamond writes (on behalf of Stephen Clark, a philosopher she sympathizes with) that the transition to a better view of animals “depends on our coming to attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties; and that religion, poetry, and science, if uncontaminated by self-indulgent fantasy, are the most important modes of thought leading to that kind of attentive imaginative response to the world.”³⁰⁷ When she writes about the role of creativity and improvisation in moral thought, it is important not to read this as implying that moral thought is arbitrary or a matter for simple decision – creativity is not needed to settle arbitrary matters. Hence Socrates’ imaginative reshaping of his situation in seeing the Laws of Athens as his parents, this “exercise of his moral creativity, his artistry”, is at the same time a “struggle to make sense of things”³⁰⁸. Likewise, when she writes about the role of poetic imagination in moral thought, it is important to distinguish this from fancy and fantasy -- from the willed recombination of ideas and impressions according to whim and from a self-indulgent retreat from the constraints of reality. Poetic imagination demands an *impersonal* discipline, though it is *personal* in being something that only I can exercise for myself; it is a kind of thought about the world and as such can be objective or fail to achieve objectivity.

To clarify this I would like to look at a notion of objectivity we can find in Hume and in Iris Murdoch. Hume’s discussion of the objectivity of the good critic (or art of literature) assumes that there is such a thing as getting it right when one judges art (though there are also spots of cognitive underdetermination that are impossible to resolve), but that accuracy of judgment does not mean freeing oneself of affect but rather being moved in the right way.³⁰⁹ Objectivity is understood

³⁰⁵ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 334.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 330.

³⁰⁷ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 296.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 311f.

³⁰⁹ Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste”. Similarly Gaita writes in *A Common Humanity*: “A dispassionate judgment is not one which is uninformed by feeling, but one which is undistorted by feeling. This fact separates legitimate uses of the words ‘emotive’, ‘emotional’ or ‘rhetorical’ as terms of criticism from illegitimate insistence that objective thought must always be separable from feeling.” (89)

negatively for the most part — it is in a sense what is left over after particular mistakes are avoided. If I like a film because my cousin directed it, I am not objective, for example. There are many films that pander to a white middle-class audience; once I see that I enjoy these films because they flatter me, and that other, aesthetically competent viewers from different backgrounds cannot enjoy them as I do, I will no longer be able to enjoy them in the same way, and my taste will have become more objective. Hume writes that the critic must sample widely and if possible across all nations and across all ages so as to make his own pleasure more objective, by weakening that which is merely idiosyncratic, and must above all be vigilant about uncovering his own prejudice. Hume is largely concerned with responses of simple pleasure; hence he does not really do justice to the reception and critique of literature as a mode of thought. As he relies so much on the model of literal taste, e.g. wine-tasting, he does not really explain what a critic is doing when she offers a better *reading* of a novel, nor can he account for the fact that the author is not exactly just trying to please but to *say* something. We can find a more nuanced but structurally similar notion of objectivity in the work of Iris Murdoch, who focuses less on affect and more on questions of “attitude” in the Wittgensteinian sense I have elucidated here as well the application of thick moral concepts. Objectivity in moral thought amounts for her to overcoming the “fat relentless ego”³¹⁰ that threatens to distort all our perceptions, preventing us from seeing things as they really are; objectivity involves achieving “detachment” or, as Hume would say, struggling against one’s own prejudice and narrowness. She writes: “The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one”.³¹¹

We can easily see this same notion of objectivity at work in Diamond’s arguments for different attitudes toward animals. She claims to say very little in defense of her view of animals as “fellow creatures”, trying to establish it as metaethically legitimate rather than arguing for it normatively; what she writes is: “What a life is like in which I recognize such relationships as the former with at any rate some animals, how it is different from those in which no such relationships are recognized, or different ones, and how far it is possible to say that some such lives are less hypocritical or richer or better than those in which animals are for us mere things would then remain to be described.”³¹² I will focus here on the term “richer”; it is not wrong to see this as an essentially aesthetic characterization. However, this does not mean that it is in her interest to see animals as fellow creatures, since she then experiences more beauty and, perhaps, more pleasure. She does not enrich

³¹⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 52.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³¹² Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 325.

herself in that sense by seeing animals as fellow mortals; one might lead a richer life in that sense by eating lots of foie gras. She means, I think, that we see more in the world when we see animals as fellow creatures; that the view brings us into the world more, as a good reading of a novel brings us further into the novel. We can say that the view shows us animals not in terms of our own needs and desires but as they really are; that it draws us out of the self more and into an independent reality. But what exactly “self” in the inimical sense is, and what belongs to “reality”, are themselves only visible from within these imaginative achievements that Diamond is describing. In discussing a similarly moralized notion of “reality” elsewhere Diamond has written: “After all, why should it not be ‘attention to reality’ to note all the things that could be made out of the cut-up body of some animal?”³¹³ To speak of “reality” or “things as they are” as a general characterization of objectivity means very little; to paraphrase Cavell, its content is completely exhausted by *what* the view in question actually reveals. Hence Diamond says little in defense because de la Mare has already said it in his poem, and she has already said it in drawing our attention to certain lines in the poem and juxtaposing them with Burns’ image. (It is important not to rely on philosophical prejudices about what *clarity* might look like; the force of the view Diamond recommends might be *clearest* in its original expression by de la Mare, and of course this will only be clear to someone who can be moved in a certain way by the poem or whom a critic can bring to be moved by it, and this might not be a flaw in the view itself.) This notion of objectivity, and this moralized notion of reality, do *not* necessarily involve getting the facts right or seeing the truth of certain propositions. A person might be sunk in self-absorbed misery, and then experience a Gestalt-switch in coming to see the world as a miracle – in early Wittgensteinian terms, their whole world is now different, though nothing in the world has changed. This person might wish to say that they have now come to see things *as they really are*, but they have not come to revise any of their propositional beliefs, and if my explanations in the previous chapter are right then the belief this person comes to have – that the world is a miracle – cannot be understood as a proposition, though it is a kind of description. The necessity of understanding this global vision in non-factual and non-propositional terms can reveal the possibility of understanding more local examples, such as seeing animals as fellow creatures, along similar lines – the De La Mare poem can achieve a kind of objectivity without containing or implying or being reducible to any truth-valued proposition. Moreover it is possible that a novel could change our view of life, in a way that involves greater objectivity, without that

³¹³ Diamond, “Injustice and Animals”, 139. Elsewhere in the context of animal experimentation she writes: “In this sphere, one can attend with the highest and truest scientific respect — or even awe — to the reality of the things one is investigating, and nevertheless fail to take the things one is studying seriously *except* as things it is fascinating and rewarding, or frustrating, to study.” (Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 361) Gaita makes a similarly moralized use of the notion of “reality”, “a distinctive concept of reality”; see *A Common Humanity* 22. I discuss the way Gaita’s notion of moral reality goes hand-in-hand with a kind of fact/value distinction in 5.4 and 5.5.

change being expressible in a proposition or in anything less than the whole novel itself. We can speak of “truth” here as well, but then we will be using the word “truth” in a looser sense than the standard philosophical idea of truth as a property of propositions or of sentences.

We are perhaps on more solid ground in characterizing the objectivity of Diamond’s view negatively by pointing to the errors and distortions it overcomes. Someone who sees animals as “stages in the production of meat” is someone who’s clearly not attending to animals, at least not with all their faculties. This is only a natural view of animals when we are literally not seeing them but only seeing the meat products in the store. It might be nonetheless possible to literally look at animals and still see them as “stages in the production of meat” — attending to reality by thinking of all the things that can be made of their cut-up body parts — but we can do this only by turning off certain faculties of response, i.e. empathy and the ability to see them as leading *lives* of their own. So *that* response is faulty in exactly *this* way; *this* is what the other is missing. (Again this is not a *fact* that the other is missing so much as a possibility of imaginative participation.) Of course I am presupposing here that Diamond’s notion of “fellow creatures” does have merit. (And I am presupposing that Diamond’s view makes sense of our relations to animals, and that our prevailing view does not make sense of our relations to animals and constitutes instead a kind of evasion of the issue, but this does not imply that Diamond’s view is the only way of making sense of the issue. The achievement of objectivity is not necessarily the achievement of an exclusively right response.) It could be objected that Diamond’s idea is flawed, not in involving an appeal to emotion per se, but in involving a *false* appeal to emotion, in being kitsch or sentimental or appealing to emotions too cheaply. Gaita has argued that the language that articulates the “realm of meaning” rather than the realm of fact does not support any clean distinction between form and content. Thus while our investigations into some matter of fact might go wrong because we are led astray by sentimentality, an articulation of the *meaning* of something could be false *in* being sentimental.³¹⁴ So it is possible that Diamond’s notion of “fellow creatures” is false in being *sentimental*, for example; and then she will have failed to be objective in specific ways that the objector might be able to articulate.

Hence Wittgensteinian expressivism maintains the distinguishing feature of traditional expressivism: that moral judgments are an essentially personal response without independently fixed criteria, and that therefore there is a kind of circularity in every notion of “getting it right” or of objectivity or improvement in moral outlook. For when a sophisticated and modern expressivist like Blackburn maintains that moral judgments are the expressions of attitude, he does not mean to

³¹⁴ Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog*, 95-103.

claim that attitudes cannot be right or wrong; but he insists that to call an attitude right or wrong is itself the expression of an attitude. In evaluating moral judgements we are moving within the same sphere of personal response, and cannot be led by the philosopher to some foundation. Diamond is as explicit about this as Blackburn.³¹⁵ This seems a disadvantage to some; others see it as an advantage, as it simply accurately reflects the autonomy of moral thought. I have argued that Wittgensteinian expressivism improves upon traditional expressivism not in getting out of this circularity, but in showing us how many resources we have *within* this circle beyond simple emotional responses, and thus by giving us a picture of moral thought that counts as actual and legitimate thought about our experience and a real engagement with the world.³¹⁶ It is worth noting that this difference stems from the sorts of examples that Wittgensteinian expressivism begins with — more realistic and less empty examples than “murder is wrong” — and also from the place in our lives in which Wittgensteinian expressivism locates moral thought. We should recall Murdoch’s argument that by the time we come to a real moral decision, “the chips are down”, that moral thought occurs throughout one’s life and expresses itself in the way we frame our experience. Emotivism, like all prevalent metaethical theories, looks almost exclusively to decisions between alternate actions, and as an account of these judgments it is likely a very good theory, particularly if supplemented by a Humean story about how we might converge in our emotional responses through broadening our experience.³¹⁷ In situations where one really must decide between alternate courses of action, there usually isn’t very much to think, and so in regards to these situations it is not really a flaw that emotivism gives us a very thin notion of moral reasoning. Emotivism and traditional expressivism generally is a poor account of moral reasoning primarily in not even attending to the bulk of moral thought that occurs throughout our lives and outside of contexts of decision.

3.4 Reconciling Wittgensteinian Expressivism and Constructivism

I have been describing two metaethical tendencies that we can extrapolate from Diamond, which I

³¹⁵ Diamond see e.g. *The Realistic Spirit* 301. Blackburn writes about this very clearly in “Must We Weep for Sentimentalism?”, for example; cf. *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 109-128.

³¹⁶ It seems to me that importing the Wittgensteinian notion of “attitude” into expressivism should also help overcome Wiggins’ objection to versions of traditional expressivism, namely that they fail to do justice to the ‘inner’ view, the view from within moral deliberation: “By the [anti-realist’s] lights it must appear that whatever the will chooses to treat as a good reason to engage itself is, for the will, a good reason. But the will itself, taking the inner view, picks and chooses, deliberates, weighs, and tests its own concerns. It craves objective reasons; and often it could not go forward unless it thought it had them.” Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 99. The “attitudes” described here are putatively objective characterizations of the world we find ourselves in.

³¹⁷ Unfortunately Hume’s discussion in “Of the Standard of Taste” relies on the assumption that by broadening our exposure and experience we can discover the *universal* dispositions to pleasure that are already there and distorted by individual factors. However it would not be unhuman to abandon this assumption and argue that by broadening our experience we can create a shared reality of sentiment through culture.

called Wittgensteinian constructivism and Wittgensteinian expressivism. It might now seem that I am arguing that Wittgensteinianism offers us two different views of moral judgment, one of which explains extant conventional morality while the other is responsible for change processes. If I were trying to build a traditional metaethical theory explaining the whole realm of moral judgment, this dualism would invite a host of systematic problems — for example, which mode of thought is supposed to regulate the switch between these two modes of thought? — and might just seem generally implausible. In fact I have only been trying to provide examples that remove our puzzlement about the very phenomenon of moral necessity — to show how thoughts and expressions can alter how we see our lives and compel us to change our way of living generally or to take specific actions, and how we can speak to each other morally and sensibly. If I have shown two different ways that this is possible, it is better than showing only one way. But someone might still feel vaguely dissatisfied with the presentation so far; and they might, for example, find the constructivism too conservative and the expressivism too liberal. In closing this chapter I will suggest that the two approaches I outlined here can be seen as having a deeper unity; the distinction I developed here is ultimately artificial if we understand “life-form” and “attitude” properly. However, I will only give the broadest outlines of this point here, and the next chapter is meant to provide a more complete understanding of how we must understand the notion of the human life-form in its moral relevance.

Of course we can start by noting that the expressivist possibilities canvassed in the previous section could not even get off the ground unless a life-form were already given such that some things already mattered — so expressivist thought is dependent upon the significances explained by constructivism. But we need to look at how we understand the idea of a “life-form” when we appeal to it as a moral foundation. We cannot generally give someone moral guidance or say anything morally illuminating just by stating what other humans do. The life-form, in the sense in which it can be conceived as a moral foundation or as morally relevant at all, is not empirically accessible; it is not given by the sum of our actual behavior. The life-form only exists in being exercised by us, and insofar as the ‘life-form’ represents the way things matter for us, it only exists in being implicitly understood and felt by us. For the most part we are in attunement with each other, and share a common understanding at the most basic level of how things matter, e.g. that a person is not something to eat, and this is a necessary precondition for there to be any such thing as a life-form. But if we come apart from one another and go on in different ways, then it is not so clear how we can determine which way is mistaken. After all, I have nothing external to myself I can point to beyond my *sense* that *this* is the way we go on *here*, and my hope that others will find that I speak for them. There will be situations where in the face of new needs and new problems, what to do

here is rather open; the situation will call for creative improvisation. But this just means that in some cases description of our life-form *is* creative improvisation; the description of our life-form is the *proposal* of what our life-form is here. There are cases where every description is a contested personal expression; and most of the cases that call for moral thought will be of this sort. (Hence there is a strong sense in “Eating Meat, Eating People” that our horror of cannibalism is in a sense pre-moral rather than a real example of moral judgment, since the question of whether we should generalize cannibalize each other is settled, in fact quite deeply anchored in our moral life; whether or not we should eat others as a general practice simply isn’t a live issue for us.) In cases of moral deliberation we seek to be faithful to ourselves and to our form of life, but it is not clear what faithfulness would consist in here; or rather, if it is clear to me, that is itself part of my ethical position. Hence the thing that serves as a foundation here, the life-form, is only determined from within an ethical outlook. It is less a foundation than a particularly potent and resonant resource within moral outlooks. Diamond is clear that the way “imagination shapes our moral concepts, shapes what counts as the same and what counts as different, what is fitting and appropriate to what” is “not something to be done *for* us, or done once and for all, and embodied in a system that would ensure impartiality”.³¹⁸

I hope that this shows us a way of reconciling the two approaches by reconciling the tension between the conventional and the personal, the descriptive and the expressive, which can be seen as two poles of a spectrum. We can perhaps see this better with an analogy. Firstly, we could perhaps reach the same result I have reached here simply by reconciling Diamond’s interests in Wittgenstein and Iris Murdoch. If we agree with Murdoch that moral thought at least sometimes involves finding out what moral concepts mean, such as “courage”, that is, moving from a more superficial to a deeper understanding of courage, and if we also agree with Wittgenstein that our words only have the meaning we give them, we could say that in moral thought we are finding out what meaning we give our moral concepts. How do we find out what we mean? Here it might help to ask, by analogy, how *I* know what *I* mean. If someone asks me what I meant by a remark I made in the past, I can usually say what I meant, but not by looking at any previous act of meaning — introspectively I don’t find very much, and certainly nothing that would entail any “meaning”. I can say what I mean by thinking about the subject matter of my remark and expanding on it, by saying what I want to say.³¹⁹ This involves both faithfulness and improvisation, or rather: faithfulness through

³¹⁸ Diamond, “How many Legs”, 177.

³¹⁹ This point could be put in terms of the “transparency” of self-knowledge as Moran discusses it: “I can report on my belief about X by considering (nothing but) X itself.” Moran, *Authority and Estrangement*, 84. Similarly, I can say what

improvisation. Cases where I find it harder to say what I mean will involve more improvisation and the sense of “faithfulness” to *what I had meant* will be thinner. If (as in cases that require moral deliberation) we find it hard to say what we mean by our moral terms or by our practices, then we might end up expanding on them in divergent ways. I might also find that I am divided within myself, that I feel a temptation to say various things, and then my judgment will be as much a decision as it is a discovery, just as Winch says that some moral judgments “seem to span the gulf between propositions and expressions of decision”.³²⁰

While we can perhaps see how the *conventional* and the *personal* involved in Wittgensteinian constructivism and expressivism respectively are not strictly distinct, and how the corresponding modes of *description* and of *expression* are likewise not strictly distinct, it might seem that the two approaches nonetheless reference two basically distinct items in their explanation of moral reasoning: the life-form and “attitudes”. Again however there is an internal relation between these two items. The life-form as it matters morally on Wittgensteinian constructivism does not refer to the sum of our behavior, nor exactly just to typical dispositions of behavior, nor to bare biological facts (“bare” meaning: considered in isolation from what we have made of them in the imagination, what they have come to mean for us). Of course we must begin the story with humans sharing certain typical behaviors, such as not eating one another, and eating other animals together. But these behaviors guide and are guided by an understanding of how things matter, i.e. of how things are placed in regards to us and what we do; for example, that people are not something to eat. Eating people could not have become so horrific for us if it were simply a regular part of the behavior of *homo sapiens*, but we understand the horror of it, not by counting the number of people who do or don’t do it, but by reflecting upon what people are for us, what our bodies mean to us, what eating is, what *use* of something generally is, etc. The “modes of response” that comprise the life-form in its ethical relevance, in other words, are not just behaviors; they give rise to ways of seeing and feeling about aspects of our lives. The life-form is essentially a matter of “attitudes” in the Wittgensteinian sense, then; Wittgenstein writes: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul”. (*PI* II p. 178) If the “life-form” in the Wittgensteinian sense essentially consists of “attitudes” in the Wittgensteinian sense, this of course does not guarantee that converse that all moral “attitudes” can be understood in reference to the human life-form, rather than being cultural or individual innovations. It is after all part of

I meant in saying X about Y only by looking to Y itself. If our knowledge of our life-form, in the sense in which the life-form is morally relevant, is transparent, this would mean that I can only know what, say, life and death and love mean for us by thinking about life and death and love, and that I can only know what we do in situations by thinking about what to do in those situations.

³²⁰ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 165.

Diamond's program to emphasize the improvisational character of moral thought, and we should not be too eager to force all moral judgments into one uniform mold. Nonetheless there are reasons to think that any and all moral attitudes must be intimately related to our sense of who we are as humans. Since moral attitudes are essentially ways of making sense of our experience and must be compelling and illuminating, we cannot just slap together any arbitrary collection of actions and conceptualizations from scratch and call it an "attitude". A moral attitude must start from how things matter to us and make sense of this in a different way. It is important to Diamond that the figures of thought that change us morally move us deeply, and arguably nothing is deeper for us than our sense of what it is to be human. Hence moral "attitudes" will often be characterizations of what it is to be human; and they will always be characterizations of the meaning of some aspect of our lives.

One might also object that my discussions of Wittgensteinian constructivism and expressivism focused on different sorts of statement. Diamond begins by talking about statements like "a person is not something to eat"; and she then turns to statements like "this tiny son of life", which I compared with similar poetic expressions such as "the world is a wild and startling place". It is fine and unproblematic to find that there is a wide variety of different forms of speech and thought that carry moral force, and there is little point in trying to come up with any kind of complete catalogue. But the differences between the superficial forms these expressions take is entirely orthogonal to any difference there might be between Wittgensteinian constructivism and Wittgensteinian expressivism. Statements that look like descriptions of our life-form, or descriptions of our extant practices or our "grammar", can be improvisations that radically alter how we live. Winch's example "an innocent person cannot be punished" poses as a description of our grammar, but of course it deviates markedly from the way most people are inclined to speak. Similarly, in a discussion of Winch, Lars Hertzberg notes that, even when I am expressing a moral necessity that only strikes *me* as necessary and is not an accepted practice, I might still find that I must use "the language of practices" to express this.³²¹ On the other hand, statements that take the form of descriptions of the world around us, but that seem to be "a description of another world, of superfacts, or very queer facts", can be used to recall to us our entrenched practices, practices which are not in any sense novel or contested or controversial; it seems to me that Kant's image of a "kingdom of ends" does this.

³²¹ Hertzberg, "On Moral Necessity", 107. The example, taken from a fictional story, concerns someone of particularly noble character who says of an enemy who has wronged him again and again and now fallen on hard times: "we can't let him starve", who then provides anonymous charity.

Finally, the most striking difference between Wittgenstein constructivism and expressivism as I have presented them might seem to be that constructivism seems to offer us a foundation for moral judgments in the life-form and hence gives us a more reliable basis to speak of truth and objectivity in moral reasoning; whereas expressivism leaves the notions of moral truth and objectivity open to continuous moral dispute. It will seem to many that this is the central advantage of constructivism over expressivism. I will argue in the next chapter that it is a disadvantage, and that any understanding of the life-form that would allow it to serve as an *independent* foundation for moral judgment would render it morally irrelevant and hence no foundation. When we understand the concept of the “life-form” properly, such that it could be morally relevant, it will not be an independent foundation of moral judgments but a particularly potent and resonant resource within moral thought. I suggested in the previous chapter that in moral thought we are driven to reach some kind of attunement with others that may not in fact, always, be attainable, and hence it is perfectly natural for us to desire an independent foundation; but this idea is a chimera, and any theory that pretends to offer such is falsifying the phenomenon if seeks to comprehend. The problem of truth and objectivity in moral thought is an ongoing practical problem in our lives, not amenable to theoretical solution once and for all.

Nonetheless Diamond’s work illustrates, contrary to early Wittgenstein’s view, two broad types of meaningful moral thought that can make categorical moral demands intelligible, even if they do not give us any foundation of moral facts. Firstly, we can remind ourselves of aspects of our form of life that we are all committed to in countless ways, such that we can see that in trying to take some more personally convenient route we are being false to ourselves *qua* humans, and we can say with genuine necessity: I *can’t* do x, I *must* do y. And secondly, we can creatively redescribe our form of life or aspects of our life such that people can be moved to live differently as a result. These two possibilities will often be indistinguishable from one another, and both could be called, in a broad sense, characterizations of humanity — since even the lines “thy poor earthborn companion,/An’ fellow mortal” redescribe the mouse by redescribing *our* relation to the animal. The next chapter examines two different ways one might take our humanity to be the “controlling theme”³²² of moral understanding, contrasting Michael Thompson’s neo-Aristotelian naturalism with the ways that Diamond and Gaita appeal to the human in their moral writings.

³²² Thompson, “Forms of Nature”, 707.

4 Making the concept “human” safe for practical philosophy

4.1 Introduction

In recent decades several philosophers have formulated a version of “naturalism” in moral theory that ties moral judgments to the life-form, its primary proponents being Michael Thompson, Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot; Foot and Thompson at least have been quite influenced by Wittgenstein, and could roughly be considered moral philosophers in the Wittgensteinian tradition. On this version of naturalism, species-membership is supposed to bring with it a standard of critique or evaluation that displays the logical form shared by moral judgments; this logical form is exemplified by what Thompson calls “natural-historical judgments”, otherwise known as “Aristotelian categoricals”, such as “The umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles” or “The polar bear hibernates in the winter”. On the more ambitious formulations of this program moral judgments are simply a subset of natural-historical judgments, those pertaining to the human species and, moreover, to certain characteristics of the human species — our will and practical reason, or our character traits, and not, say, our number of toes. In this chapter I begin by drawing out the attractiveness of this appeal to natural-historical judgments in moral theory; I then try to show that the comparison is also unattractive and at best misleading in several ways that have possibly been overlooked or at least underemphasized by Thompson, and that undermine the use that Foot and Hursthouse make of Thompson’s work. There are logical and epistemological differences between natural-historical judgments and moral judgments stemming from the essentially *personal* nature of moral judgments, and these differences point us towards the different use of the concept of the “human life-form” found in the moral writings of Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita. In a fourth section I argue that the use of “humanity” in moral philosophy can be elucidated by different model, the use of “essentially contested concepts”. I argue that these judgments about essentially contested concepts more closely model the features of moral judgments and are much more amenable to the strengths of Thompson’s approach to moral theory. Yet while this model complements Thompson’s overall approach, it draws us away from the model of natural-historical judgments. In seeing what is right and what is wrong in Thompson’s quite sophisticated model, we should get a better sense of how our understanding of our own life-form can be morally authoritative and what moral objectivity might look like.

4.2. Can natural normativity be truly authoritative?

Natural-historical judgments are a very appealing model for moral judgments first and foremost

because they depict *plain facts* — that the polar bear hibernates in the winter is a plain fact, and not, say, the expression of an attitude, or an imperative — and yet these judgments lead seamlessly to evaluative or critical judgments. Natural-historical judgments can be “transposed into an evaluative key” to give us what Thompson calls “judgments of natural standard”,³²³ i.e.: “A *proper* specimen of the umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles”; and these lead to “judgments of natural goodness or badness”, i.e. critique of individual specimens. On the basis of natural-historical judgments we can say: “This jellyfish is defective, it’s missing one tentacle” or “There’s something wrong with this polar bear, it should be going into hibernation now.” Thus it is hoped that with reference to the human life-form we could form judgments of natural goodness or badness about people and their actions; and then we would have located plain worldly facts that are, at the same time, intrinsically action-guiding, the goal that has eluded moral theory so far. (Thompson seems unworried about the transition from evaluation to prescription of action, though he seems to find it possible³²⁴; below I will discuss Foot’s view of this transition.) We can isolate two features of natural-historical judgments that, in combination, make them an especially appealing model, which I will call, following Thompson’s related discussion of practices, *actuality* and *generality*³²⁵. By “actuality” I mean that the life-form inheres in individuals such that we can truly describe the individuals and explain their behavior by reference to the life-form, as well as criticize them; for example, natural-historical judgments can lead us to what Thompson calls “vital descriptions”, such as that the creature in question is now *hunting its prey*. Hence natural-historical descriptions of human goodness would at the same time be descriptions of us as we are, and not just what we should be. This nicely satisfies the intuition that has led to various “internalisms” as conditions upon any valid metaethical theory — the sense that moral reality cannot be something independent of us and imposed on us, that if anything is to have the kind of necessary and legitimate authority over my will that morality does, it must belong to me in some sense; hence if moral judgments are not an expression of my feelings, or of our feelings, then they must be an expression of my especially stable attitudes, or of what my rational self would desire, or of my practical identity. It is Korsgaard who, in developing a moral theory in reference to “practical identity”, has most forcefully articulated this sense that anything that does not come from me in some way is something that I

³²³ Michael Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, 55.

³²⁴ Michael Thompson, *Life and Action*, pp. 74, 80.

³²⁵ Thompson defines these terms more narrowly for the purposes of his discussion of practices (see *Life and Action*, 157-61); here I am drawing on his work as a whole to articulate what I see as the appeal of the form of naturalism he proposes. It should also be noted here that Thompson is “agnostic” about the success of this naturalistic appeal to the life-form in ethical theory, but since he defends it tentatively, I am treating him in this section as a proponent of this sort of naturalism. I say more about the ambivalences in his considered position at the end.

could legitimately question and is therefore not binding as the moral law is³²⁶. And as Thompson writes: “The life-form is evidently not something to which the individual bearer is externally related; it is in some sense present in the individual bearer”³²⁷, hence allowing for a kind of “immanent critique”³²⁸. And of all the terms thrown up by the history of metaethics (emotion, attitude, identity, etc.) it might seem that “life-form” is the strongest candidate for the sort of internal authority that moral reality holds over us, being after all the *form* in which we all necessarily *live*. Secondly, these natural-historical judgments are distinguished by their peculiar generality, which differs from statistical generality and what Thompson calls Fregean generality (i.e. involving universal quantification). If the umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles, this will not mean that every umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles (some will have been born with less or lost them in a skirmish), nor does it give us the average number of tentacles. Natural-historical judgments do not even necessarily describe the majority of individuals; if the female of a species produces millions of eggs, for example, and of course the vast majority of them will not survive, then any number of natural-historical judgments describing the development of the individual into adulthood will not hold true of the vast majority of individuals. And this sort of generality might remind us of the things we say in raising our children: “we keep our promises” or “we don’t hit each other”, which might get said when someone just did hit someone else; or “in this house we don’t play with our food”, which a person might say while a majority of the people in the house are, in fact, playing with their food. Moral judgments seem to enjoy precisely the same kind of generality that natural-historical judgments do; if they possessed Fregean generality, they would never need to get said and would, in fact, for that reason cease to be particularly moral. For there has always been this tension in metaethical theory between the demands of actuality and generality: moral judgments must be real enough to be authoritative, yet unreal enough to be prescriptive — they must tell us *what we should do* in telling us *what we do* or *what we are*. Natural-historical judgments seem to give us a logical form that can make sense of this tension, so that it is not simply a contradiction, by suggesting that a different kind of generality can inhere in statements of *what we do*.

We can begin to get a sense of the potential disanalogies to moral judgments by looking at an example like: “This wolf should see small human children as its natural prey.” We could imagine this being said by a baffled biologist, who went on to say that there was something wrong with this particular wolf, who seemed not to understand this and, though hungry, walked right by an unprotected human infant. If we hear this as a “judgment of natural badness”, then it can be

³²⁶ See especially Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 1 (pp. 7-48).

³²⁷ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 201.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

perfectly true, and it leaves open the question of whether it would be a good thing for the wolf to prey on human infants and the question of what we should do about this wolf, if anything. (We might not want to do anything to help return it to its true nature.) If we want to call the statement “This wolf should see small human children as prey” normative at all, it is a quite different sort of normativity than that involved any claim about what is to be done about the wolf.

Of course the idea of this neo-Aristotelian naturalist program is not that all natural-historical judgments are moral judgments, nor that all related judgments of natural standard, judgments of natural goodness or badness, etc. are moral judgments. Rather, only natural-historical judgments about *humans* can be ethical judgments; moreover, not just any natural-historical judgments about humans will be moral judgments — for of course we would not want to say that a baby born with 9 fingers is a morally deficient baby — but only natural-historical judgments about our will and practical reason, Thompson writes³²⁹; or, in Foot’s version, “dispositions of the human will”³³⁰ or simply “the rational will”³³¹ and for Hursthouse human “character traits”.³³² But then the idea seems to be that ethical judgments, which share a logical form with “The umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles”, will be marked off as a class purely by their subject matter, i.e. by which animals they are about and which parts of capacities of those animals. Yet it seems doubtful whether the difference in subject matter can really capture the difference we noted, for it seems that moral judgments have a different sort of normativity, that they are, in a way, binding or authoritative, that they are action-guiding, while the judgment about the wolf is in the first instance merely informative.

To my knowledge Thompson and Foot do not address this point, but I suppose the obvious rejoinder is that of course the difference in subject matter makes the judgments different in being action-guiding, for the will and practical reason are precisely those things that are essentially action-guiding, so of course natural-historical judgments about our will and practical reason will be action-guiding for us in a way that natural-historical judgments about wolf parts will not be.

I do not think it is this simple. Suppose it is characteristic of our species that we eat meat. To make

³²⁹ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 29.

³³⁰ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 66, 72. In fact Foot is delineating a class of evaluations that includes moral judgments along with evaluations of imprudence or foolishness, corresponding to the broader class of virtues and vices. I do not think that this affects my point in any way; the differences I am drawing attention to between natural-historical judgments such as “The umbrella jelly has 140 legs” and moral judgments could equally well be formulated as differences between ordinary natural-historical judgments and ethical judgments in this broader Footian sense.

³³² “[...] according to the form of ethical naturalism I am defending, what is particularly evaluated are character traits, not, directly, actions or lives.” Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 226f.

this an example of a judgment about will and practical reason, suppose that we do not just characteristically eat meat, or desire meat, or take pleasure in the taste, but that we in fact characteristically accord a different value to animal life and suffering than human life and suffering, that we distribute reasons differently, that we will the subordination of animals to our will and pleasure. I do not know if this is true or if it is precisely the sort of example Thompson is thinking about, but I will take it as my example. (It seems to be the sort of example that Foot is talking about, for she locates virtue in the fact that, for virtuous people, “*certain considerations count as reasons for action, and as reasons of a given weight*”.³³³) Now this fact is simply not morally decisive. If it is true, then in a sense it is action-guiding, that is, if people characteristically exercise their practical reason this way, then they *will* characteristically eat meat. But if I sit up and wonder about my relation to animals, then the fact that this characteristic use of reason *does* lead people to eat meat cannot legitimately guide my action. When I am looking for guidance, I am not looking for facts about what *does in fact* guide our action. What we characteristically do, even with our will and practical reason, cannot enter into my deliberation that way. The exercise of practical reason is not guided in this way by facts about how humans characteristically exercise their practical reason. Thompson would surely agree that these natural-historical facts do not explicitly enter into our reasoning in this way. When I think about whether I can eat meat, I do not look at what others are doing; rather I look at the animals themselves. But then it is hard to see what work the idea of a natural standard could be doing. It seems to me that the only other way it can enter into the issue at all is as follows: someone decides whether it is right to eat meat, not by looking at what others of the species do, but by deciding for herself, exercising her own human judgment for herself. But her judgment will be a good one if it accords with the exercise of practical reason that is characteristic of the species. But this seems to merely shove the problem from the agent onto the spectator.³³⁴ For if someone else judges that it is wrong to eat meat, and I am judging whether her judgment is good or right, then whether her way of judging is characteristic of our species is again simply irrelevant to my judgment about whether her judgment is good or right. In fact, I already know that she is atypical, yet I’m still left with the question of whether she’s right. But if we agree that as a spectator I also have to simply exercise my own judgment, then it is again unclear what use we are supposed to make of the idea of a natural standard — and here I do not just mean how we are supposed to use it in our everyday life, but what philosophical use it is being put to. There is no way the fact of how

³³³ Foot, “Natural Goodness”, 12.

³³⁴ Thompson collapses agent and spectator into one: “In thinking this thought that is implicitly about the human form or human nature, I must further implicitly think that this thought itself is an apt expression of precisely the nature it is implicitly about”. Thompson, “What Is It to Wrong Someone?”, 378. I have held agent and spectator apart as two different people simply as an expository device. The problem remains, or is if possible acuter, if every time I judge something I also judge that my judgment is right.

we characteristically exercise our practical reason can legitimately enter our moral deliberation as something decisive and finally authoritative. (This line of argument is in essence a version of the Open Question argument: the natural-historical facts leave us with questions we still want to be answered, such as What should we do? or What should I think here?, and since these are the questions of moral theory, and it is for the purpose of posing and answering these questions that we have reserved our moral use of the word ‘good’, the natural-historical facts cannot capture the *moral* sense of ‘goodness’.)

It might seem that I have so far been unfair to Thompson, implicitly treating natural-historical judgments too much like statistical generalities and supposing our access to them to be empirical, which is precisely and centrally what he wishes to deny. This objection will lead me to a second line of argument in section 4.3. First we should note how Foot and Hursthouse draw the connection from natural-historical judgments about the human to action, for though they claim to be relying on Thompson’s model, they are in fact pushed away from his model by this exact pressure. After arguing for a picture of natural normativity along Thompsonian lines, Foot writes: “Now I come face to face with an apparently unanswerable objection, which is that human beings as rational creatures can ask why what has so far been said should have any effect on their conduct.”³³⁵ Foot is emphatic that judgments of natural human goodness do not move us to action in being expressive of an emotion, say, or a commitment to a norm; they are plainly descriptive and nothing more. So we might ask: why should the plain fact that members of my species characteristically act or think a certain way give me any reason to act or think that way? Foot writes that we have reason to react in certain ways to these plain facts of natural goodness or defect — doing what would be ‘naturally good’ and avoiding what would be ‘naturally defect’ — simply because it is *rational* to do so. Foot uses Warren Quinn’s idea that it is rational to do what is good. We should not assume that rationality is essentially instrumental, for example, and then go about looking for (instrumental) reasons to do what is good; rather, our notions of what is good must inform our notions of what is rational. Specifically, a substantial notion of goodness must inform a substantial, non-formal notion of rationality. What, she asks, following Quinn, “would be *so important* about practical rationality if it were rational to seek to fulfil any, even a despicable, desire?”³³⁶ Given that rationality holds the place for us that it does, as “the most authoritative practical excellence”³³⁷ or “the authoritative

³³⁵ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 52.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, also 62.

³³⁷ Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place”, 81.

perfection of man *qua* agent”³³⁸, we must hold that “there is no criterion for practical rationality that is not *derived from* that of goodness of the will.”³³⁹

I do not wish to dispute Quinn’s argument, only the use that Foot puts it to. It could seem that part of the force of the question “Why should I do what is good”, coming at this point in the dialectic, is precisely to put pressure on the idea that Foot’s explication of goodness really does capture our moral notion of goodness. The question really amounts to “Why should I do what is ‘naturally good’?” Let us consider a simple substitution. On Thompson’s account, goodness is simply what characterizes the species. The question “Why should I do what is characteristic of my species?” is a very good question. If it is answered by suggesting that we should do it because it is rational, we could answer: “Why should it be rational to do what is characteristic of my species?” And here the rhetorical question, “What would be *so important* about practical rationality if it were rational to act in ways not characteristic of our species?”, simply falls flat.

Here it is relevant that Foot modifies Thompson’s notion of natural goodness. Goodness in an individual organism is not just that which *characterizes* the species, but that which *also* serves the goals of “development, self-maintenance, and reproduction”³⁴⁰ or, in other words, serves “the *good* of creatures of this species”.³⁴¹ A natural-historical statement like “The blue tit has a round blue patch on its head” has, for Foot, no connection to the standard of natural goodness/defect unless the blue patch somehow plays a role in development, self-maintenance or reproduction. Now we can modify our question to ask: “Why should I do what is ‘good’, i.e. what serves the good of members of our species in ways characteristic of our species?” And of course serving the good of our species in ways characteristic of our species sounds like a good idea, but there might be better ideas available. Eating meat is our characteristic way of getting enough protein, for example, but there are other ways too. And again it would be a poor rhetorical question to ask: “What would be *so important* about practical rationality if it led us to seek our good in ways not characteristic of our species?”

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

³³⁹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 11. Similarly Wiggins criticizes the idea that “in advance of morality itself, the notion of rationality is already complete, together with all sorts of canons or norms of rationality that one might have learned to apply in advance of considerations of ethics or value.” Wiggins, *Ethics*, 208.

³⁴⁰ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 33.

³⁴¹ Ibid. 41. In fact she is never very clear on this, writing in one place that “To flourish is here to instantiate the life form of that species” (91), and elsewhere writing that “The way an individual should be is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction” (33), a formulation that seems to make no reference to characteristic ways of securing these needs.

Now in practice Foot seems to do without any reference to our *characteristic* ways of securing our good. Late in the book she outlines a procedure for reevaluating our evaluations, for example the belief that “it was good for human beings to be as fat as possible” or our attitudes towards masturbation and homosexuality. This procedure involves looking closely at the consequences and seeing whether they really do promote or hinder our good. Thus it seems that the life-form only determines the ends and not the means; she does not care at all whether some disposition is *characteristic* of us, only whether it serves our natural ends. And Hursthouse arrives at a similar result by an oddly roundabout way. She writes: “Looking back at the evaluations of other living things, we should be struck by the extent to which they depend on our identifying what is *characteristic* of the species”³⁴². Yet ethical naturalism as a theory is “doomed to failure *if* it depends on identifying what is characteristic of human beings as a species, in the way their pleasures and pains and ways of going on are characteristic of the other species.” In this regard she raises the troubling examples of “the human ethnological fact that human beings (male human beings?) are characteristically aggressive” and the fact that “human beings resemble a large number of other species in which (to coin a phrase) step-fatherly nature bears much harder on the females than it does on the males.” She then writes, seemingly in contradiction of this ethnological fact, that there is only one way of going on that characterizes us: “Our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do.”³⁴³ Of all the things that might characterize the human species, she only has any use for our rationality. However, what we have reason to do is constrained by the good of our species, which is in rough outline the same for us as it is for other social animals, namely: individual survival, the continuance of its species, freedom from pain and enjoyment, and the good functioning of the social group.³⁴⁴ Hence the life-form only determines the ends we are to secure and only bids us think as well as we can about how to achieve these.

Thus ultimately Foot’s and Hursthouse’s theories end up looking like a kind of consequentialism. Of course both deny being consequentialists. Foot writes that consequentialism “has as its foundation a proposition linking goodness of action in one way or another to the goodness of *states of affairs*”, and “*there is no room for such a foundational proposition in the theory of natural normativity*. [...] In evaluating the hunting skills of a tiger do I start from the proposition that it is a

³⁴² Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 218.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 221f.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

better state of affairs of the tiger survives than if it does not?”³⁴⁵ But I believe she has slipped exactly such a proposition into the foundation through the back door. For she has baked it into her theory of practical rationality that we have reason to pursue what she describes as the ‘good’ of the human species — let us say for now, “development, self-maintenance, and reproduction” — and this is argumentatively based on an explicit value judgment about the ‘good’ of the human species, such that practical rationality would not *deserve* the status we give it if it contradicted this ‘good’. Hence it is built into her theory of rationality that certain states of affairs matter particularly; and this *must* be so. For without this piece of the theory, she would be left with too close of an analogy between “good person” and “good roots” — “good person” would signal a piece of mere information, like “good roots”, that doesn’t necessarily matter to us one way or another and is not necessarily any reason for action one way or another, and would thus be unrecognizable as a moral notion.

In this last paragraph I have again relied on an oversimplification of Foot’s theory. She differs from Hursthouse in that for her the human good, unlike the good of other species, extends to more than just “development, maintenance, and reproduction” — for some individuals, for example, “the demands of work” might be a reason not to have children. Our good also might include jokes, for example, and love and friendship. “The idea of human good is deeply problematic”³⁴⁶, she writes. In fact she does not seem able to say what exactly it consists in, at least not fully, and simply leaves the question open. I believe that this reinforces my point in the previous paragraph that her theory relies on foundational judgments about the goodness of various states of affairs, though it seems she has not finished building her foundation. But we could also take this facet of her theory to open another problem. If we had a closely defined sense of the good, as we do for other species — say “development, self-maintenance and reproduction”, or Hursthouse’s 4-point list — then it would make sense to say that our judgments of individual goodness in action or character occur against the background of this given sense of “our good”. If on the other hand the notion of “our good” is as open-ended as Foot leaves it, then it seems inevitable that our judgments about individual goodness will not occur against an assumed background notion of our good, but rather will at the same time be judgments about *what our good is*. But these judgments about what our good is can obviously not be explained on the model of natural-historical judgments, such as “The umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles.” We will need to look elsewhere for our model.

³⁴⁵ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 48f.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 42f.

4.3 Is natural normativity beholden to empirical quantity?

We have seen that Foot and Hursthouse end up a good distance removed from that which is most promising in the way Thompson prepares the concept of the ‘life-form’ for use in ethical theory: namely, that *what we do* can serve as the model for *what we should do*, the standard of an “immanent critique” of character and action. I have also tried to show what sort of pressure drives them away from this model; for it can seem that, if it is characteristic of our species that we are omnivorous, this means that ethical vegetarians are mistaken simply by virtue of being untypical — and this seems to be just a very bad mockery of moral reasoning. Many writers in moral theory, for example Stevenson and Hare³⁴⁷, have urged that vegetarians are not wrong simply by being in the minority, that moral reasoning does not proceed by survey, etc. Put less polemically, moral thought is essentially characterized by what we might call *autonomy*: if you do not judge for yourself, but get your opinion by asking experts or consulting majority opinion, then your opinion is quite simply not a moral opinion at all, or at the very least not arrived at by moral reasoning. Gaita has put the point quite forcefully: “If I must make a moral decision by Monday, I cannot come to you on Friday evening, plead that I have little time over the weekend to think about it and ask you to try to have a solution, or at least a range of options, no later than first thing on Monday morning” — and this, he writes, “condition[s] what we mean by a problem, by a solution and thus by thinking” in the case of moral problems: “The fact that there can be no manual of morals, no theory of its practice which plays the same role as does mountaineering theory to mountaineering practice, no quiz show and no whiz kids of moral dilemmas, no Nobel Laureates in Morality, is intrinsic to our understanding of what it is to have a moral problem and what it is to think about it.”³⁴⁸ This can be laid down as a condition upon any moral theory: if the theory bypasses individual judgment and puts moral truth in the hands of the majority or of experts, then the theory has simply missed the phenomenon of morality completely. For Stevenson and Hare, this ruled out all forms of realism and suggested lodging moral authority more intimately within the individual self.

Now when I say that we as a species are characteristically omnivorous, and yet — allowing myself, for succinctness, a polemical expression — that vegetarians are not wrong by virtue of being a minority, it might seem that I have overlooked the two most central points in Thompson’s work,

³⁴⁷ Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”, 16f. This comes under Stevenson’s third condition on any account of goodness, that “the ‘goodness’ of anything must not be verifiable solely by use of the scientific method”.

³⁴⁸ “The personal in ethics”, 127-9. Bernard Williams has written simply: “There are, notoriously, no ethical experts” (Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity*, 205).

namely: natural-historical judgments are not statistical generalizations, and in the case of the human life-form they need not be known empirically, i.e. ‘by survey’. I will take these two points in turn. Thompson emphasizes that the generality of natural-historical judgments can be consistent with “a really vanishing rate of realization.”³⁴⁹ The umbrella jelly could have 140 tentacles even while only a slim percentage of umbrella jellies have 140 tentacles. Yet these natural-historical judgments still arise from empirical survey, and their truth is tethered to empirical quantity; Thompson has simply discovered that there is a curious amount of slack in the connection. In “Apprehending Human Form” he begins the story of the discovery of the umbrella jelly by supposing that a jellyfish scholar sees one such umbrella jelly and classifies it as a defective instance of an already known species. Only after seeing a sufficient number of them is the researcher certain of having found an unknown species. Thus the judgment is controlled by numbers, in endless possible ways. If the researcher noted idiosyncrasies in his umbrella jellies found at a different location several miles away, and in fact at several distant locations, he might have to conclude that his original specimens had developed idiosyncratically and defectively due to a local pollutant, for example. If all umbrella jellies began developing differently as a result of an environmental disaster, he would at first count all specimens as defective; but if they continued to survive and reproduce generation after generation in the new environmental conditions, after a certain number of years he would eventually have to count the new environmental conditions as their standard environment and their new post-disaster development as the standard form of development for that species in its typical environment. Moreover, if the umbrella jelly lays millions of eggs, then of course it must be true that “only a tiny fraction of umbrella jelly eggs”³⁵⁰ ever go to the next stage. But the natural historian’s description of the next stage will then presumably depend on what the majority of jellies *that do reach this stage* are like at that stage. The generality of natural-historical judgments is absolutely tied to quantity. Foot is mistaken when she claims that these judgments do not result from “the counting of heads”³⁵¹ — the natural historian does absolutely count heads (legs, tentacles, etc.), though his judgments are derived from the raw count differently than statistical generalizations or universal quantifications are.

When I said that we are characteristically omnivorous, as a natural-historical judgment, I presumed that this is ascertained by noting that the vast majority of humans all over the world and at all times choose to eat meat regularly when they can. A natural-historical truth can in principle come apart from the behavior of the majority, but what, in this case, should lead us to think that it does? At any

³⁴⁹ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 72.

³⁵⁰ Thompson, “Human Form” 50.

³⁵¹ Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 31.

rate, my argument in the following will only rely on the fact that natural-historical judgments are tied at all to quantity, as they clearly are. The tension in the analogy with moral judgments is that these latter judgments seem absolutely untethered to quantity in any way; I do not support my moral judgments by counting how many people act in accordance with my judgments, nor by counting how many people share my judgments. And this brings us to the second point concerning our empirical or non-empirical knowledge of our own life-form.

Thompson is very concerned with this point: “I must think of this thought [about an injustice] as something other than the product of field-work or empirical investigation”.³⁵² Our knowledge of our life-form can only serve as moral knowledge if it does not come “from outside”³⁵³, and he endeavors to show that we do have such non-ethnological, non-empirical knowledge of our own life-form: “[...] we have ways of knowing some substantive propositions that bear the generality that is our theme apart from anything like biological observation; we have, if you like, ways of knowing things about our own life form ‘from within’.”³⁵⁴

He begins by noting that the concept of the life-form is itself an a priori concept rather than an empirical one, a “quasi-logical” concept like *relation* or *object*.³⁵⁵ In the case of other life-forms we go about “filling in” this form through empirical observation. However, we have a non-empirical representation of at least one member of our own life-form, namely the concept “I”.³⁵⁶ And if “I” and “life form” are both non-empirical concepts, then we can attain a non-empirical representation of the human life form under the title “The life form that I bear”³⁵⁷. Hence the concept *human*, he writes, “is a pure concept of the understanding devoid of even the least empirical accretion.”³⁵⁸ The next step is to demonstrate that we can arrive at concrete “vital descriptions” of humans non-empirically — “vital descriptions” being descriptions of individuals in terms of their life form, for example: this umbrella jelly is now hunting. But of course we have non-observational knowledge of our own mental doings — I know, without observing myself empirically, what I am feeling and thinking — and moreover Anscombe has shown that we have non-observational knowledge of what we are doing non-mentally, in that for example I know that I am now writing a paper without having to look at myself and see what I am actually getting up to.³⁵⁹ And we can now see that we

³⁵² Thompson, “What Is It to Wrong Someone?”, 378.

³⁵³ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 31, see also “Three Degrees of Natural Goodness”, 7.

³⁵⁴ Thompson, “Human Form” 72.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

have available, through non-empirical means, natural-historical descriptions of the human species as well. For I know non-observationally that I am hungry or in pain, and I know non-observationally what I am thinking and doing, and as Thompson writes:

Individual states and episodes coming under the general types pain, hunger, conceptual thought and intentional action must always be realizations of a capacity that is characteristic of the life form of the pained or hungering or thinking or intentionally acting individual organism. These are not things that could break out in a rogue individual where they have no place in the description of the life form it bears; no more than a case of long division could break out in a person unacquainted with any methods of calculation, whatever it may be that he is doing with his pencil.³⁶⁰

Hence we do have a priori knowledge, knowledge arrived at through simple reflection, of the human life form. If I know that I am now thinking something, I can also know the natural-historical judgment that *humans think* (or that *members of the life form that I bear think*); and from there it is a short step to the judgment of natural standard that *a proper human is able to think*, and to the judgment of natural badness: *this human who is unable to think is defective*. And presumably if I can know that I am writing a dissertation, I can also know, by reflection, that *humans act intentionally*, and *this human who cannot act intentionally is defective*. (That is, I presume that Thompson would not want to derive the natural-historical judgment *humans write dissertations* from the judgment *I am writing a dissertation*.) Now these are in fact natural-historical judgments, and judgments of natural standard, concerning the human capacities of will and practical reason. But this is still less than what we wanted. For a human who cannot think or act intentionally cannot be morally in the wrong or in the right, and hence these judgments of natural goodness and defect are not moral judgments at all. What we want to know, when we want moral knowledge, is what thinking *well* and acting *well* would consist in; *if* we are to equate these with judgments of natural standard, they must be much more substantial judgments of natural standard, and Thompson does not show us any a priori path to such judgments.

Thompson seems happy to have demonstrated the *formal* possibility of such a priori yet substantial judgments about a natural standard, and thus to have shifted slightly the burden of proof. He writes: “For it seems that the character of knowledge *as knowledge of a substantive general proposition about a life form* does nothing to settle its character as empirical or biological”³⁶¹ Yet Thompson

³⁶⁰ Thompson, “Human Form” 71.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

himself is officially “agnostic” about the success of the naturalistic program he outlines³⁶², and his agnosticism seems to hinge on precisely this point: “But if each of us is in possession of a non-empirical, and thus non-‘biological’, representation of the specifically human life form, it might be doubted whether we have any substantive knowledge *about it* that is not empirical”³⁶³

Yet I think Thompson has mislocated the problem; the only truly insuperable obstacle to the naturalistic program arises *after* we assume that we could arrive at such substantial knowledge non-empirically through reflection. In “Apprehending Human Form” — writing here in an optimistic rather than an agnostic vein — he writes: “Of course we have no way of judging what practical thoughts and what range of upbringings might be characteristic of the human, and sound in a human, except through application of our fundamental practical judgments – judgments about what makes sense and what might count as a reason and so forth.”³⁶⁴ I have suggested that this must be the end-result of any adequate moral theory, and Thompson seems to agree, yet his own theory does not entitle him to say this — and it certainly doesn’t entitle the prefatory “of course”. For if it is simply a natural fact which practical judgments and upbringings are sound and right, then there will be at least one other way of arriving at these facts: empirical survey, observation. Thompson admits this: “Of course, the self-same facts *would* be matters of empirical cognition for a Martian investigator, and in that case known very much from sideways on, as the correlative facts about *Martian* are for me. Here again there are two forms of knowledge, but not two things known.”³⁶⁵ And elsewhere he writes: “For we do not want to call this knowledge empirical. [...] I must, that is, think of *certain* features of my life form as given to me in some other way, even if they might be given to, say, Martians by a subtle sort of field-work.”³⁶⁶

If there are two forms of knowledge here but only one thing known, why should we rely only on reflection? Might we not achieve far greater moral accuracy through empirical anthropological methods? Why does Thompson reserve this anthropological task for Martians? For of course our method of reflection will often fail us; “in individual bearers of the human form, some of this knowledge will often enough go missing, of course, as often some teeth are missing”³⁶⁷. Shouldn’t we immediately seek to complete and perfect our moral knowledge through anthropological study? And then it would not matter so much if certain individuals lacked some moral knowledge by

³⁶² Thompson, *Life and Action*, 9.

³⁶³ Thompson, “What Is It”, 377.

³⁶⁴ Thompson, “Human Form”, 73.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁶⁶ Thompson, “What Is It”, 377.

³⁶⁷ Thompson, “Human Form” 73.

reflection, as others lack teeth, for we would all be able to consult the body of knowledge we have accumulated ‘from outside’. — It might be argued that perhaps our knowledge ‘from inside’ will be more reliable; perhaps the empirical methods of gathering moral knowledge will be more inexact. But how are we to decide this? Let us suppose that our empirical methods suggest that we are characteristically omnivorous, or that we characteristically give greater weight to the considerations and well-being of those geographically or genetically closer to us, but I cannot reconcile that with my conscience (i.e. the opinions I have derived from reflection). We might think that in cases of conflict between the reflective and the empirical method we could only judge based on what makes more sense to us or is more intuitively plausible. But this is simply to suggest that we use the method of reflection to adjudicate between empirical observation and reflection; whereas we have not yet settled whether this is the better access.

In short, we face a dilemma. If these two forms of knowledge really are knowledge of the same thing, we might end up having to give up our steadfast moral convictions in the face of what experts discover about us. This is, again, simply unacceptable; a theory that puts us in this position has simply missed the very phenomenon of morality. But if we take the other horn of the dilemma, and suppose that these judgments pick out different facts, then we will end up with two sets of statements that might differ -- over there we will have natural-historical facts about the human will and practical reason, knowable through anthropological study; over here we will have our moral judgments formed through reflection, and though these might be judgments of the human will and practical reason, and might even in some sense be judgments about the human will and practical reason, they will not necessarily correspond to the *natural-historical description* of the human will and practical reason.

When Thompson discusses the necessarily non-empirical, reflective quality of our moral knowledge, he seems to have in mind only the very narrow philosophical pressures within his own work that drive him towards this requirement: specifically, he needs to explain how our convergence in what he calls dikaiological moral judgments could be non-accidental³⁶⁸. For this purpose it is enough if our moral knowledge *can* be achieved through reflection. I have suggested that upon taking a broader view we find that our moral knowledge must *only* be knowable through reflection; and this explodes the analogy with “The umbrella jelly has 140 tentacles”. We can hold on to two closely related points: firstly, my own sense of what I must do or how I must live is not answerable to empirical quantity the way natural-historical judgments are. Secondly, anything that

³⁶⁸ See Thompson, *Life and Action*, 198, “What Is It”, 371. For a brief discussion of this point see section 6.2 here.

is knowable empirically could not have the kind of normative authority over me that we are looking for in moral theory; the sorts of information we can collect by observation cannot directly instruct me what to do or how to live, bypassing my own conscience and practical reflection. (If they did thus instruct me, this would mean a loss of our practice of moral reflection.)

4.4 A different understanding of the ‘form of life’

I had said at the opening that the analogy between natural-historical judgments and moral judgments has a great plausibility if we consider the sorts of things we say in raising our children, for example: “We don’t hit”. In fact I would guess that most recognizably moral judgments can be put in a form that 1) looks, on the face of it, like a simple description of ourselves, and yet 2) is clearly not meant as a statistical or a Fregean generalization. Examples include *we keep our promises* or *one keeps one’s promises* or, more colloquially, *you don’t let people down like that*. An ethical vegetarian would not be able to say *we don’t eat meat* in this spirit without being misunderstood, but she might say *we don’t cause needless suffering* or *you don’t cause needless suffering just for your own pleasure*, or she might point to the abuses on a typical factory farm and say *is this who we are?* with the implication being that this is hopefully not who we *really* are. I have argued that these ethical descriptions of ourselves could easily come apart from natural-historical descriptions of our species, and yet be no less valid for that. This might remind us of the difference between my own empirical descriptions of myself, e.g. that I am not particularly courageous, and the sort of ethical resolve expressed in a statement of the form *that’s not who I am*. A statement of *who I am* as an ethical resolution should match my future behavior more or less, or I will be suspect of insincerity, but it need not match my past behavior at all; in fact it could be my way of drawing a close on a period of depravity I’m now ashamed of. Similarly, if an American expresses a moral resolve by saying that some action isn’t what an American does, this does not need to match an anthropologist’s report about what Americans in fact tend to do. The patriotic American is not necessarily blind to her own history; she could see perfectly clearly how often American society has failed and still fails to live up to her standard of *what Americans do*. I will call the latter form of this sort of statement about *who I am*, *what we do*, etc. “self-identification” to distinguish it from “factual self-description”. Self-identifications seem, to borrow a phrase from Peter Winch, “to span the gulf between propositions and expressions of decision”.³⁶⁹ I might then also say something about what humans do — or about “what we do” where “we” essentially refers to every human — as a *statement of identification* rather than as a natural-historical description; this

³⁶⁹ Winch, *Ethics and Action*, 165.

sort of statement seems to span the gulf between description and decision. It is very tempting philosophically to conflate self-identifications with factual self-descriptions. They might, after all, be syntactic twins. Moreover, self-identifications are recognizable as moral judgments, and they clearly involve a movement of the whole person, a resolve of the will based in part upon our desires that is also not unrelated to the imagination. Factual self-descriptions, on the other hand, represent plain facts, though they are logically compatible with any attitude on my part towards those facts. Hence if we can squint and blur the two together, it will seem that we have solved the problem of the truth and objectivity of moral judgment.

My examples above show that the scope of the “self” in our moral self-identifications might not always extend to all humans, which is in itself a challenge to Thompson’s naturalist program. In fact I think that judgments about *what humans do* are likely foundational to judgments about *what Americans do* or *who I am*, but I will not argue that here. (If Diamond is right, then some sense of *what humans do* has to be given for anything to matter enough that our other identifications could even get off the ground.) Here I only want to show that if we want to make the concept of “life form” “safe” for practical philosophy, as Thompson does, we will have to rely on a non-empirical notion of the *human* that differs from the biological classification. Thompson himself echoes this sentiment. The threat of “biologism”, he claims, “only holds if the concept *human* [...] is an empirical and biological concept, and only if all of substantive knowledge about the human life form is empirical and biological knowledge.”³⁷⁰ But it is unclear to what extent he has shown anything different. If his arguments are successful, then some of our knowledge of our life-form will come, not from a biological research program, but from reflection. But on the thesis that there is one thing known and two ways of knowing it, this knowledge will be the same knowledge that has a place within the body of biological knowledge generated by biological research; hence it is, in that sense, biological knowledge. And he must suppose that the Martian anthropologist is using the same concept of human in her empirical research that figures in our own moral reflection. Hence it is fair to say that in a certain sense Thompson is relying on the biological concept of the human life form as it figures in biological knowledge.³⁷¹ We find a much different way of making the concept

³⁷⁰ Thompson, “Human Form”, 62f.

³⁷¹ This is a bit too quick. The bare concept “the life form that I bear” is for Thompson unequivocally a non-empirical concept; it refers to humans when I use it, and refers to Martians when the Martians use it, just as the concept “I” can equally refer to Karsten Schoellner or Michael Thompson depending on who uses it. Yet as soon as we begin to fill in our conception of our own life form, we will be talking about humans specifically, a life form that exists contingently on the planet Earth; and our Martian anthropologists will be studying this exact same life form. — Thompson might also wish to insist here that the concept of “life-form” originates in “pre-scientific” thought, and is “different from and less determinate than any likely to be deployed in a developed biological science”, belonging to the “manifest image” of

of the human “safe” for practical philosophy in the work of Cora Diamond; as we have seen, she relies on a specifically non-biological notion of the human, involving our sense of humanity, including our sense of what life and death mean for us; she argues that “the importance of the notion human being in ethics can be seen only with its importance for the imagination”³⁷², with what we “may make in imagination [...] of what it is to have a human life to lead”³⁷³. Of course natural-historical facts about humanity form some of the conditions that our imagination has to work with; when she writes that we do not eat each other, she is likely expressing a natural-historical judgment. But this is only one of the starting-points of our moral life, of our reflection on what it means to be human. Diamond emphasizes that we primarily make sense of our humanity through the work of the literary imagination, and in fact imaginative images of who we are have always played a central role in moral reflection: for example, that we are all children of God, or that we are all fallen. Or: that we are beings of reason and as such possessed of a higher dignity. In his story “The Philosophers and the Animals” the writer Coetzee has a character contest this image of humanity with a counter-image, that we are instead merely “monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies”,³⁷⁴ as a way of morally challenging the very idea of dominion. Or we might think of the Catholic writer Chesterton’s moral vision of humans as monsters wandering in bafflement a world they do not fit in (which relates also to his self-identification: “Whatever I am, I am not myself.”)³⁷⁵ That these images of humanity, of what we as humans truly are, have such a direct ethical relevance, speaks for and against Thompson; it shows that he is looking in the right direction, to our sense of what we as human selves are, but these examples already suggest that he is mistaken in thinking that this could ever be available to a neutral observer as the life-form of the jellyfish is.

It is worth looking also to the use of the concept of “humanity” in the work of Raimond Gaita. Gaita credits Diamond³⁷⁶ with showing him the importance of the concept of humanity to our ethical thought, and the acknowledgement of the other’s humanity is the central topic of his own ethical writing. He makes it clear that he is speaking of humans and not persons, that it is our

the world rather than the “scientific image”, for which reason he prefers to say “life-form” rather than “species”. (Thompson, *Life and Action*, 199f.) This strikes me as making our problems more awkward, since our biological use of the *life-form* or *species* concept is surely continuous with our pre-scientific thought about life-forms, and moreover continuous with it in *improving* and expanding upon it.

³⁷² Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human”, 38.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁷⁴ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 32.

³⁷⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 144, 292.

³⁷⁶ Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, xii.

peculiarly embodied human existence that matters.³⁷⁷ To acknowledge another's humanity, to see them as fully human, is to see their preciousness, their absolute value and irreplaceability, and to see them as a limit to one's own will. That another human is essentially irreplaceable and a limit to my will is not derived from neutral observation, however; it is revealed in the experiences of love and remorse.³⁷⁸ Empirically speaking there is nothing essentially irreplaceable about anyone. Nonetheless in Gaita's view we are guided morally by what a human essentially is, as revealed by love. But of course we typically fail to acknowledge one another's humanity in Gaita's sense. Much of Gaita's work is a reflection on racism, which he sees as a failure to acknowledge the other's humanity, the failure to see any depth in the other's personal life, which amounts to seeing them as sub-human. But this is a quite prevalent and natural failing, and a failing that takes other forms than racism; Gaita writes also about how "the poor" are invisible to us,³⁷⁹ for example, and indeed all kinds of people are frequently "invisible" to us in this sense. Hence while *what we are* as humans in the fullest sense is normative, what we humans typically *do* is not at all normative. (Formally this bears a certain resemblance to the Christian view that we are essentially broken, that we cannot realize our better nature through our own power and can only hope for grace. This is an image of humanity that describes us and also guides us, but its descriptive content diverges from its prescriptive content; *what we should do* is derived in a sense from *what we are* but is explicitly contrasted with *what we do*) If these are coherent moral views, whether or not they are right, they present a problem for Thompson's identification of moral judgments with natural-historical judgments. The natural-historical truth about us might be that we fail to acknowledge one another's humanity in Gaita's sense, that this ethical failing is our typical nature; but of course we should not affirm this nature but rather strive against it. The difference between Diamond's and Gaita's approach and Thompson's Aristotelian approach might be, as I suggested earlier, that for Diamond and Gaita the human life-form is not so much a moral foundation as it is a moral mode — that reflecting on human life and on what it means to be human is a mode, perhaps the central mode, of

³⁷⁷ Ibid., xxi, 14f. On 263-9 he explicitly connects a non-biological conception of the human with Wittgenstein's work.

³⁷⁸ Or more generally through "the power of human beings to affect one another in ways they cannot fathom" (Gaita, "Ethical Individuality", 126.) The discussion of love and remorse specifically is found in this piece as well as *A Common Humanity*, *passim*. It is relevant here that Gaita discusses a passage from Simone Weil that Peter Winch has used to describe the Wittgensteinian idea of "an attitude towards the soul": "The human beings around us exert just by their presence a power which belongs uniquely to themselves to stop, to diminish or modify each movement which our bodies design. A person who crosses our path does not turn away our steps in the same manner as a street sign, no one stands up or moves about, or sits down again in quite the same fashion when he is alone in a room as when he has a visitor." (Quoted in "Ethical Individuality", 132) Gaita argues that this attitude does not take us all the way to the moral sense of humanity; a slave-owner could see his slaves as humans in this minimal sense and yet still fail to acknowledge their humanity in a deeper sense, to think that anything in their personal lives — their sexuality, their grief, etc. — could have the same human depth as his own. Racism is dehumanizing in the sense that "it denies its victims any possibility of responding with depth and lucidity to the defining features of the human condition." (*A Common Humanity*, 60) Hence the acknowledgement of another's humanity in the fullest sense is an achievement and not a reliably automatic response.

³⁷⁹ *A Common Humanity*, xx.

moral reflection. This might be what Thompson had in mind when he wrote that the concept “human” is a “controlling theme” of practical understanding. But I hope to have shown that our understanding of what being human is in this moral sense has very little connection to our understanding of what an umbrella jelly is; and the only advantage to linking moral judgments to these natural-historical judgments about other species would be to provide an objective, factual foundation for morality.

We have seen that there are lots of ways of speaking about humans — we can quantify universally, or make statistical generalizations, or make natural-historical judgments about them — and none of these are necessarily moral judgments in and of themselves if they lack the right kind of actuality. It is not enough to simply describe the species I happen to belong to, for this may describe *who I really am* or *who I essentially am*; in order to be morally authoritative, the description of humanity has to show me *who I really am* in showing me something that I cannot deny, that I must acknowledge as part of myself, thereby changing or clarifying what I can will. This notion of actuality obviously explains the normativity these judgments have for me, and it also explains their unique kind of generality, the way that, unlike natural-historical judgments, they are not tied in *any* way to observed quantities. But it might seem that I have failed to account their objectivity at all, and that in this point the neo-Aristotelian approach remains superior. The entire point of naturalism is to provide an objective foundation for ethical judgments, and when I say that the concept of the human provides us with a mode of ethical reflection rather than an ethical foundation, I am undermining this. In the next section, I will return to the point emphasized in the previous chapter, that objectivity and truth in morality are essentially *problematic*, i.e. they are ongoing problems in our moral life and cannot be resolved once and for all by theory; but by appealing to the model of “essentially contested concepts” I hope to show how the concept of objectivity can nonetheless have some application.

4.5 The life-form as an essentially contestable object

In a 1956 article the philosopher W. B. Gallie focused on a class of judgments employing what he called “essentially contested concepts”, though it has been suggested that “essentially contestable concepts” more accurately describes the phenomenon he has in mind. He begins by describing a fictional sport, a kind of bowling where a team wins essentially based on style, but where there are no fixed criteria and no formal procedures of judging; appreciators of the sport simply judge for themselves who has “won” based on which team’s performance was the best. The concept that is “essentially contestable” is “the champions”, though we could just as easily choose to focus on “the

best” or “the winner”. We can suppose that at any given moment there might be a team thought by the majority to be “the champions”, but that each team will also have its own supporters who think that their own team is “the champions”. The majority will “effectively” hail a team as the champions, but minority boosters might speak of “the true champions”, “the destined champions”, “morally the champions”.³⁸⁰ And of course we can imagine the sorts of things people might say in debate: they might say that the alleged champions didn’t *really* win, they aren’t *actually* the best, etc.

Now that we have the Internet and can observe how we discuss cultural phenomena informally with each other, we are probably much more familiar with this sort of argument than Gallie was. For example, the arguments about the true bowling champions resemble contemporary arguments about “who’s the best rapper” — where of course there are no formal procedures of judging and no fixed criteria of excellence, but people nonetheless can feel that they are *right*.³⁸¹ But while Gallie is primarily interested in this judgment of “the champion” or “the best”, he notes by the way that someone might say of a particular team, “they have shown us what speed bowling really is”, or that a team working a particular approach to bowling might “put up an outstanding performance in this method and style of bowling, a performance which will make all other methods and styles look ‘not really bowling at all’”.³⁸² This is arguably the more interesting sort of debate; while debates about “the best rapper” might be juvenile and pointless, anyone who takes an artistic field seriously will be familiar with discussion about what *really* exemplifies the field, what the essence of rap or delta blues or atonal music really is (or Bauhaus, or imagist poetry, etc.), what its true developments are and what counts as a deviation from it, etc. People debating what an artistic field *really* is try to convince each other by pointing to various competing exemplifications and offering various descriptions of these, and artists can try to change the field by offering new exemplifications that bring out new qualities and relations among the exemplifications already recognized, getting us to see them in a new light.³⁸³ (T. S. Eliot claimed in fact that each new work of literature reorders the entire canon.³⁸⁴) Now the point is that these descriptions of what a certain field of art or sport *really*

³⁸⁰ Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, 171.

³⁸¹ In *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, in a chapter “Essentially Contested Concepts” containing a revised version of the material in the original article, Gallie uses the example of equestrian show-jumping. If we imagine that the performances are judged by the spectators rather than a jury, we would have a perfect manifestation of essential contestedness in various spectator’s disputes about who *really* won or who was *really* the best. See Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, 160.

³⁸² Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” 173f.

³⁸³ In “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept” Gallie focuses exclusively on judgments of what a certain artistic tradition *really* is rather than on judgments of who or what is “the best” or “the champion”. Gallie, “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept”, 108f.

³⁸⁴ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, 15.

is pose as simple descriptions, but they entail at the same time a standard of evaluation and critique of individual performances, just as natural-historical judgments do. And presumably these descriptions of what the field *really* is — I will call them, perhaps unhappily, descriptions of essence — also inform our descriptions of what is going on within individual performances, i.e. they can lead to “vital descriptions”. Hence individual performances are both described and critiqued in virtue of what they are *in form*, i.e. in light of the form they are instances of. And yet the descriptions of essence are *essentially contestable*. Part of what this means is that there is no way of ascertaining ‘from outside’ which description is right — outside of the perspective of someone who is passionately involved in the field and who is moved by certain authoritative instances of it. Here there can be no view ‘from outside’ competing with the view ‘from inside’.

Gallie specifies four initial conditions that need to be met for a concept to be essentially contested:

it must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement. (II) This achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole. (III) Any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features; yet prior to experimentation there is nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible rival descriptions of its total worth, one such description setting its component parts or features in one order of importance, a second setting them in a second order, and so on. In fine, the accredited achievement is initially variously describable. (IV) The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance.³⁸⁵

In response to the worry that each team might simply be using a different concept of “champion” and thus talking past each other, Gallie goes on to specify a further condition: “each of my teams could properly be said to be contesting for the same championship if, in every case, its peculiar method and style of playing had been derived by a process of imitation and adaptation from an *exemplar*, which might have the form either of one prototype team of players, or of a succession (or tradition) of teams.”³⁸⁶ We then have essential contestability when all teams acknowledge the

³⁸⁵ Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” 171f.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 176. There are in fact seven conditions in Gallie’s original article; I have listed the first four and the sixth. The fifth is: “that each party recognizes the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties, and that each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question. [...] to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively.” (172). And the seventh is meant to justify contesting the concept rather than simply deciding to disambiguate: “the probability or plausibility, in appropriate senses of these terms, of the claim that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion.” (180) This latter condition strikes me as overly

authority of an exemplar that is “open”, i.e. has an “internally complex and variously describable character”. In this context he speaks of one team claiming to be the “truer” or “more orthodox” development of the exemplar, embodying “the true line of descent”.³⁸⁷ Thus, again, in debating what counts as a true development of the exemplar they will be debating what the exemplar *really* is, and the description of the exemplar thus sets a standard of critique of individual performances. It has been noted that this requirement of an *Ur-exemplar* seems overly restrictive³⁸⁸; a tradition of acknowledged excellence that is largely agreed upon seems sufficient to guarantee that everyone is in fact talking about the same thing. Moreover we could import T.S. Eliot’s idea of a constantly shifting canon, reconvened by every new work, without doing any damage to the idea of essential contestability³⁸⁹. One of Gallie’s central examples of an essentially contestable concept is *art*. If we feel ourselves to be talking about the same thing when we talk about what art is and is not, and contesting each other rather than talking past each other, this is surely not because we have a memory of some original *Ur-work*.³⁹⁰ Rather, we find that we meet each other’s minds in our shared appreciation of enough works. If two disputants disagree about whether some performance is *really* bowling, or *really* Bauhaus, each will be assured that the other is talking about the same thing by their shared appreciation of certain exemplars, and by the *way* they both appreciate these (they don’t just both have some kind of pro-attitude towards these exemplars, but rather both ‘get it’ — which will be revealed by the way they can talk about it together, the way they can illuminate each other’s experience). Hence each will have reason to think that the other is mistaken about the performance under dispute, i.e. they will take themselves to be contesting each other. While this might turn out to be an illusion, I would suggest that we do not need to pre-empt this possibility through any kind of formal guarantee. — Now this is how empirical quantity gets a toehold in judgments of essence: I cannot dispute the excellence of too many canonical instances without being deemed simply incompetent. Yet which instances are canonical is itself contestable and can only be judged by someone invested in the field. And I might be alone in how I describe the

complicating Gallie’s idea through seeking justification for the practice where none is needed, but I will say nothing about that here.

³⁸⁷ Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” 177f.

³⁸⁸ See for example John Kekes, “Essentially Contested Concepts: A Reconsideration”, 82f.

³⁸⁹ Eugene Garver has argued forcefully in this direction: “two competing uses of an essentially contested concept can compete for its ownership while sharing nothing beyond the competition.” Eugene Garver, “Essentially Contested Concepts: The Ethics and Tactics of Argument”, 257.

³⁹⁰ Gallie admits this and shifts here to the notion of an artistic tradition or set of traditions as the “exemplar term”. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, 177. This strikes me as roughly accurate but also potentially misleading. The disputants do not need to have extensionally identical notions of a shared canon; they will simply know from talking to each other how much they really meet each other in a common subject matter. Nowadays people are likely to hear the requirement of an *Ur-exemplar* or a shared tradition in terms of the Kripke/Putnam “causal” theory of meaning, whereby the meaning of natural kind terms is given by our initial contact with some real specimen; it seems to me that we do not need anything like this to justify our practice of taking ourselves as contesting each other, that the intrusion of causal history here is simply irrelevant. I return to this point in 6.2.

achievement of these canonical instances without for that reason being wrong, and my description need not vindicate the majority of alleged exemplifications. The only authority I need is that I am legitimately moved by the canonical instances, and the way I am moved will lead me to see them in a certain way and hence to go on from them in a certain way. And I cannot be proven wrong by anything one can point to ‘outside’ our passionate engagement with the field. But within this engagement we can sometimes convince people that they have been seeing things wrong, that they have been mistaken about what the achievement really is. The best critics can change our view of what a certain artistic achievement really is; moreover new achievements can compel us to change our view of previous achievements. Gallie writes that a certain performance of bowling might exert a “logical force” on spectators, rationally compelling them to at least “sit up and take notice” even if they are not swayed to the other team’s side.³⁹¹ The participants are truly responsive to a shared reality, though this reality is inaccessible to anyone who cannot be moved in certain ways and who cannot care about these achievements.³⁹²

Two of Gallie’s central real-life examples of essentially contested concepts are *Christianity* and *art*. However, Gallie seems to overlook an interesting feature of these examples. The *Ur*-exemplar of Christianity crucially involved a rebellion against the ossified structures of received religion and a rejuvenation of the spirit against the letter. This suggests — and certain lines of Protestantism bear this out — that faithfulness to this original achievement must involve continuous rebellion against the settled understanding of it. And in the fine arts, where originality (or perhaps novelty) is a feature of the canonical achievements, we could say: if you do the same thing as some canonical achievement, you haven’t really done the same thing at all. In these cases all authentic judgments might really be “essentially contested” and not just “essentially contestable”, and it might turn out in the case of Christianity, for example, that a true judgment of what Christianity involves *must* deviate from the established consensus.

Is the human life-form essentially contestable? For this would explain the generality of moral

³⁹¹ Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts” 190.

³⁹² It is worth noting that there is a large literature on Gallie’s article within political philosophy and political theory. The literature has however largely focused on much different examples of concepts; beginning with Gallie’s own example of “democracy” as an essentially contested concept, the political literature has looked into seeing essential contestedness in such questions as: what is power? what is a state? what is a religion? etc. Though I cannot say that this is a falsification of Gallie’s work, it is a direction that is strangely orthogonal to my concerns here, as I am interested in Gallie’s original example of a kind of bowling and his discussion of art as an essentially contested concept. It seems absolutely central to *these* latter examples that we participate, at least vicariously, with our will and imagination and feeling, in specific works or performances, and then diverge from one another based on the different ways in which we feel and move within these instances. In contrast, a concept such as “power” strikes me as involving just ordinary vagueness (even if this vagueness involves evaluative or moral considerations). For this reason I have made little effort to shoehorn references to the literature on essentially contested concepts into this chapter.

judgments insofar as they are tied to representations of the human life-form, i.e. their independence of any empirically observable quantity. If we conceive “the human life-form” analogously to “the life-form of the umbrella jelly” such that it includes our number of teeth, our digestive mechanisms, etc., then there is no reason to think that any of this is essentially contestable; these are precisely the things we can pin down through observation. If we only focus on natural-historical descriptions of our will and practical reason as a subset of the total natural-historical description, there is again no reason to think that these are essentially contestable; they could in principle be nailed down pretty solidly by an advanced anthropology. If on the other hand we see “the human life-form” as a cultural achievement — the way we have come to live and the sense we have given our lives, e.g. the way “we treat human sexuality or birth or death”³⁹³ — then it is not hard to believe that “the human life-form” fits Gallie’s four criteria: 1) the concept must be appraisive — as “human” in its moral use certainly is; 2) the achievement must be internally complex, 3) rival descriptions of its total worth must be possible; and 4) the model must admit of considerable modification in light of changing circumstances. And we will only be able to say *what humans do* in new circumstances — to “go on the same way” and extend the human life-form faithfully — through some contestable sense of what the value and sense of the human way of life is. And we contest this by examining how we are moved by certain exemplifications and by offering new exemplifications intended to sway others. Or as Thompson writes: we have no way of judging these matters “except through application of our fundamental practical judgments” (where “our” should refer to those participating and personally invested in the practical life of humanity) — just as it is the fact that I can participate in a work of art, vicariously mean it, that gives me the authority to say how it is meant and what its value is, and nothing else can do this. And Gaita and Diamond make it explicitly clear that different imaginations of what it is to be human can convince us to see our lives differently partly by moving us in ways we cannot disown; and that there is no other, more neutral and non-affective access to what it means to be human. Gaita writes about a nun who he observed in a psychiatric facility where he worked as a young man:

The wonder of the nun’s behavior has inspired much on my philosophical work because it revealed what a human life could mean. Even people like those patients, who appear to have lost everything that gives sense to their lives, are fully our equals. Yet if I try to explain what it means to say that her love showed me that they were fully our equals (‘proved’ it to me, indeed for I could not doubt it), I could only say that she responded without a trace of condescension and that the wondrousness of it compelled me to affirm its rightness.³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Diamond, “Eating Meat, Eating People”, 324.

³⁹⁴ Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, xiii.

If what matters to us morally is what we have made of humanity, the cultural achievement of humanity, and our biology only matters insofar as it conditions our cultural achievement, then we will do better to model our knowledge of humanity in the moral sense on our understanding of other cultural forms rather than on our understanding of other biological species. This does undermine the *sort* of objectivity that naturalism hopes to find in our moral life, but it does not erode *every* claim to objectivity, particularly if we recall the Humean-Murdochian view of objectivity discussed in the previous chapter. A bowler or bowling fan in Gallie's imagined scenario could quite coherently and legitimately feel that she is right in her judgments about bowling and what bowling 'really is' – and it is of course quite conceivable that she is not missing anything or being biased by any idiosyncratic factors external to bowling itself -- and it is easy to imagine that she could succeed in convincing others of this. There is no neutral access to 'real bowling' apart from the way the participants are moved by the various exemplifications and the way new performances transform their appreciation of the sport, but this does not mean that everyone's judgment is merely subjective. If we have accepted everything I have argued for so far, then our notion of what objectivity in morality consists in should resemble the notion of objectivity in aesthetic judgments. Someone's view of bowling could be objective in the sense that they have come to their view through an effort to share the viewpoints of as many other people as possible, thus overcoming their own affective idiosyncrasies, which is essentially the Humean notion of objectivity in a critic. And the critic's objectivity is also validated if we experience more of the work under her guidance, if her reading takes us deeper into the reality of the work, which is something Hume ignores in his empiricist focus on the pleasures that art causes in us at the expense of appreciative *understanding*. If T.S. Eliot is right, a work of art proves itself by deepening our understanding of the entire tradition. Similarly, on the approach that Diamond and Gaita take — which might be called *humanism* to distinguish it from Thompson's *naturalism*³⁹⁵ — the moral agent is corroborated by the way her actions transform and deepen our understanding of what it is to be human. And it is as participants in being human that we are able to judge what amounts to a deeper or shallower understanding of what it is to be human; in short, we know what it is to be human in knowing ourselves. — Moreover we can see here how the notion of objectivity might come apart from propositional truth, although it also doesn't necessarily have to. Gallie is concerned to emphasize that the participant who says what 'bowling' really is, or who the 'champions' really are, could be *right* and could think others wrong. Precisely because of the open-ended nature of the essentially contestable object, however, it is also conceivable that I might feel that I have gotten something right, but that others have also, likewise, gotten something right; I might be confident that *p* without

³⁹⁵ I am indebted to Joachim Toenges for this suggestion.

being confident that *it is a fact that p* or *it is true that p* or that someone else who claims that $\neg p$ is wrong, even if I am unable to say, *in propria persona*, what they say. I might have settled on my own view and be willing to champion that, confident in the objectivity I have achieved, without necessarily treating it fully as a true proposition. Moreover it is possible that what I feel the ‘truth’ of bowling or of humanity is may not be reducible to a proposition or to any kind of sentence. Perhaps only a performance of bowling can convey the ‘truth’ about bowling; perhaps only a lived human life could convey the truth of what it is to be human – or perhaps one could describe in words, but not necessarily in a sentence rather than a narrative or a poem.

Foot writes, “the idea of human good is deeply problematic”. But she seems to interpret her statement to mean that the idea of human good is difficult to ascertain; whereas I have been suggesting that it is only given to us as a *problem* and not as a fact. Now all that I have said here might be taken as naturally complementing Thompson’s theory. After all, it is ultimately not clear how far Thompson wishes to take the analogy between moral judgments and natural-historical judgments. In “Apprehending Human Form”, where he is concerned to defend the possibility of Footian naturalism, he notes that judgments about reasoning in humans “must introduce numerous peculiarities”³⁹⁶ relative to other natural-historical judgments, and my paper could be taken to describe these peculiarities. His larger work *Life and Action* is structured as a sort of ladder, with a “break” or “categorical shift” occurring at each step; the discussion of “life form” occupies the first section, leading into a discussion of “action” and then “practice”, all of which is merely prefatory to an investigation of “ethical reflection” that might follow.³⁹⁷ He might only be committed to the claim that ethical judgments and natural-historical judgments share a “logical form”, but as he also wishes to expand our notion of logical form, it is unclear whether the differences I have been emphasizing really disqualify them from sharing logical form. (The difference in generality between moral judgments and natural-historical judgments, i.e. the way the latter depend loosely upon observed quantity and the former not at all, strikes me as a clear logical difference in Thompson’s sense of “logic”.) Here I only wish to emphasize that the analogy, while partially quite illuminating, is misleading, and it is misleading precisely where it is most appealing. Natural-historical facts are just plain facts and we have a very clear notion of how we secure objectivity in judging them. With the “essentially contested” judgments about cultural forms, in contrast — descriptions of essence — how we achieve objectivity remains itself essentially contestable. This is precisely what makes them a more accurate analogy for moral judgments. Just as we could not

³⁹⁶ Thompson, “Human Form”, 60.

³⁹⁷ Thompson, *Life and Action*, 2-5.

imagine any philosophical theory determining once and for all what would count as “good bowling” in Gallie’s scenario in advance of specific achievements of bowlers and the way they affect the participants’ appreciation, so we should not expect any philosophical theory to deliver us a foundation for our moral judgments that secures truth and objectivity in advance of specific ways we go on making sense of ourselves and our human life.

5 Non-naturalist realism

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I look at several related examples of what is sometimes called “non-naturalist realism”. The bulk of the chapter concerns forms of moral realism that are meant to be explicitly Wittgensteinian: I discuss the work of Sabina Lovibond in sections 5.2 to 5.4 and turn to the work of McDowell in 5.6. Lovibond has written that we directly perceive moral reality through habituation into a form of life, understood as a specific cultural form that is open-ended and contested and subject to change, and only authoritative for the individual insofar as it *expresses* the individual’s “true being” as well. This is very similar to McDowell’s “sensibility theory” in several aspects: in using a perceptual model, in appealing to habituation into a form of life, and in simultaneously emphasizing the essentially personal nature of moral judgment — McDowell argues that the moral reality of a certain community can only be perceived by those whose will and emotional life have been given a particular “non-formal shape” by their habituation into the form of life; someone who cannot will and desire in certain specific ways cannot make certain moral judgments. Both could be said to agree very roughly with Diamond that moral deliberation necessarily involves the whole person and all of that person’s faculties, and that therefore (in contrast to Thompson’s view) our “form of life” can only serve as the “controlling theme” of moral deliberation insofar as we understand the form of life as something both broadly cultural and essentially personal rather than seeing it in biological terms. Both Lovibond and McDowell have been understood as *Wittgensteinian realists* in a sense. Lovibond is explicit about her commitment to realism: she thinks that late Wittgenstein’s understanding of language — and his repudiation of his earlier view of language — clears the way for an unproblematic moral realism by undermining any metaphysical fact/value distinction. This bears some similarity to the way McDowell has been received in the metaethical debate; he has been seen as defending a version of realism against Blackburn’s expressivism. It is interesting that Blackburn and Diamond offer largely overlapping critiques of Lovibond’s work, and that those critiques have some application to McDowell’s work as well. I begin in 5.2 with a discussion of the Blackburn/Diamond critique of Lovibond’s realism. A third and fourth section go into what is right and wrong in her view of moral reality as grounded in cultural ways of life. A fifth section turns to the appeal to “thick” terms more generally and shows that the existence of these terms in itself does nothing to underwrite moral realism. A sixth section discusses McDowell’s “sensibility theory”. A seventh section looks briefly at the similar form of metaphysically modest, non-naturalist realism associated recently with Parfit, Nagel, and Scanlon among others and typically unassociated with Wittgenstein. These authors

escape the force of the Open Question argument I discuss in the first chapter: they do not appeal to moral facts as something that should underlie and justify our moral reasoning, as Moore did; rather, they look to our standards of moral reasoning to explain the existence of moral facts. Like Lovibond and McDowell, they argue that our moral practice does not need any metaphysical grounding, that the practice can take care of itself, and that a simple unprejudiced look at our moral practice will show that we have sufficiently robust resources of moral argumentation and understanding to believe that certain moral propositions are simply and objectively true and others false. It is striking that McDowell and Lovibond both argue that the prospects for realism depend entirely upon our first-order resources, yet neither spends any time saying what those resources are or how they lead us ineluctably to any specific conclusions. Section 5.7 discusses the prospects for an immanent defense of moral realism by examining the attempts of two authors — Scanlon and Wiggins — to show how our moral resources do lead us to certain conclusions.

5.2 The Diamond/Blackburn critique of Lovibond

What Wittgenstein offers us [...] is a homogenous or ‘seamless’ conception of language. It is a conception free from invidious comparisons between different regions of discourse. [...] Just as the early Wittgenstein considers all *propositions* to be of equal value [...], so the later Wittgenstein — who has, however, abandoned his previous normative notion of what counts as a proposition — regards all *language-games* as being of ‘equal value’ in the transcendental sense of the *Tractatus*. On this view, the only legitimate role for the idea of ‘reality’ is that in which it is coordinated with [...] the metaphysically neutral idea of ‘talking about something.’ [...] It follows that ‘reference to an objective reality’ cannot intelligibly be set up as a target which some propositions — or rather, some utterances couched in the indicative mood — may hit, while others fall short. If something has the grammatical form of a proposition, then it is a proposition: philosophical considerations cannot discredit the way in which we classify linguistic entities for other, non-philosophical, purposes. [...]

The only way, then, in which an indicative statement can fail to describe reality is by *not being true* — i.e. by virtue of reality not being as the statement declares it to be. [...]

Thus Wittgenstein’s view of language confirms us — provisionally, at least — in the pre-reflective habit of treating as ‘descriptive’ or fact-stating, all sentences which qualify by grammatical standards as propositions. Instead of confining the descriptive function to those parts of language that deal with a natural-scientific subject matter, it allows that function to pervade all regions of discourse irrespective of content.³⁹⁸

Diamond excerpts these passages from Lovibond’s book *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* at the

³⁹⁸ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, 25-7.

beginning of her critique³⁹⁹, and Blackburn refers to essentially these same passages in his critique⁴⁰⁰. The argumentative context is roughly: we can understand how ethical judgments might have truth conditions just as much as any other judgment if we look at ‘thick’ moral terms, which describe reality by way of the evaluative sensibility of a particular people or a particular form of life. She refers to the standard argument offered by Bernard Williams, McDowell, Charles Taylor and others that we cannot understand the extension of these thick terms — how to ‘go on’ projecting them from one context to the next — without at least some empathetic understanding of the evaluative sensibility underlying them; the truth-conditions for something being “decadent”, for example, cannot be given in neutral, non-evaluative terms. This might lead to an objection that ‘thick’ judgments are not quite as objective as, say, scientific judgments, or that their truth conditions are somewhat fishier, more relativistic or culturally contingent, or that the judgments are therefore not purely descriptive but (also) *expressive* of a contingent sensibility. Lovibond’s tactic is to undermine the comparison by arguing that all language, even scientific discourse, is expressive of some shared but ultimately contingent sensibility. She argues with late Wittgenstein for an “expressivist” view of language against an “empiricist” view: there are no ‘rails to infinity’ built into the universe that lay down the correctness conditions for any use of concepts; every concept lives from some communal agreement in judgments. The “expressivist” theory of language holds “(a) that thought is necessarily embodied in a linguistic medium, (b) that language is necessarily embedded in a shared form of life”⁴⁰¹. If we undermine the foil for the “invidious” comparison, we should be led to conclude that the use of thick moral terms can be just as objective and truth-valued as anything else. Hence the expressivist view of language, taken globally, leads to a global realism, or at least clears the way of metaphysical obstacles to a global realism. The most important characteristics of Lovibond’s argument for the present are that, firstly, a view of language *in general* that she finds in late Wittgenstein is to lead us to a realist understanding of a *particular* region of discourse, namely moral discourse; and as we see in the larger quotation above, this gets mixed up (rather unnecessarily) with a notion that the superficial grammar of sentences is evidence of their descriptive, truth-valued status. Blackburn and Diamond both begin by tackling this most obvious target.

5.2.1 The argument from (superficial) grammatical form

³⁹⁹ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics: Resisting the attractions of realism”, 227f.

⁴⁰⁰ On page 200 of “Wittgenstein’s Irrealism”, in Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*.

⁴⁰¹ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 31.

As Blackburn points out⁴⁰², Lovibond could not be claiming that the “grammatical” form in the Wittgensteinian sense of “grammar” indicates its underlying function; firstly, this would be trivially true, and secondly, she is using the term “indicative mood”, which is not a classification of Wittgensteinian grammar but of ordinary grammar of the kind we all learn in school. Diamond and Blackburn are quick to point out that this flatly contradicts the main thrust of Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophy, which is, as Diamond says: “What looks like a proposition may be quite useless; what we say may fail to make sense, and we may be unaware of that failure.”⁴⁰³ She points to Wittgenstein’s remark “What I want to teach you is to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (*PU* §464), and writes: “Wittgenstein’s point there connects directly with his idea that the grammatical appearance of a sentence is no guide to whether it *has* a role in language or is a mere useless thing that, in philosophy, we are tempted to count as a proposition.”⁴⁰⁴ And of course the grammatical appearance of a sentence is also no guide to whether it has a *descriptive* role in the language, even when it does have some sensible role; Blackburn adduces a number of Wittgenstein’s remarks on mathematical necessity “which openly embrace the possibility of a surprising or puzzling verbal form masking the real function of the mathematical remark, its place in the game.”⁴⁰⁵ As he writes, “At the most cursory glance, Wittgenstein’s later work is shot through with warnings against taking surface uniformity as a safe guide to deep similarity of linguistic functioning.”⁴⁰⁶

In his “Lecture on Ethics” Wittgenstein’s central point is that certain utterances that look like sensible descriptive propositions in fact fail to say anything at all; and he emphasizes in the strongest terms that he is not thereby comparing them *invidiously* to factual discourse. I have argued in chapter two that we can come to an understanding of how Wittgenstein’s central examples make moral sense, and I made room for the idea that their grammatical form is indispensable to the utterances’ function, but nonetheless the full story of their ethical function involves seeing beyond their grammatical appearance. Even if one rejects my explanations in that chapter, surely they are real possibilities of language. And there is something very odd in Lovibond’s suggestion that to say that some seeming proposition does not really function as a proposition would be to “discredit the way in which we classify linguistic entities for other, non-philosophical, purposes.” No linguist would be surprised to learn that one can state something using a question or ask a question in the form of a statement, and this does not “discredit” the usefulness of a classification such as

⁴⁰² Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 203.

⁴⁰³ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics” 229.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁰⁵ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 207.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

“indicative mood”.

5.2.2 The argument from language in general to moral language

Lovibond moves from an account of language in general — the “expressivist” account — to a theory about a particular region of discourse — moral realism. And even before going into the details of the argument we might suspect that something has gone wrong here and that there can be no such argument. Surely we cannot decide whether to be, for example, realists or expressivists about moral discourse in advance of looking at moral discourse itself? (We might be reminded of the Wittgensteinian slogans “look and see” and “I’ll teach you differences!”, the latter mentioned by Blackburn.) This issue arises in the debate between Blackburn and McDowell as well. As Diamond argues the point against Lovibond: “There is an underlying source of the trouble in Lovibond’s argument. It comes out in her moving from an account of language to an account of ethics. In the sense in which she puts forward a general account of language, Wittgenstein himself does not have an alternative general account, but none.”⁴⁰⁷

There is a slightly different and stronger way of putting this point, it seems to me. The idea that “language is necessarily embedded in a shared form of life” is minimal enough as a general account of language that we might be able to attribute it harmlessly to Wittgenstein. In denying that Wittgenstein has a “general account of language”, Diamond might be thinking that Wittgenstein is not a global *realist* or a global *descriptivist* — and what is at issue is precisely how Lovibond intends to move from the idea that all language is *somehow* embedded in a shared form of life to the idea that all language (or at least all language in the indicative mood) describes some reality or is about some region of reality. Surely it only means something to say that any piece of language describes a reality if we can contrast this with something else we might do with language, e.g. express an emotion. (That is to say: while the idea that language is embodied in a shared form of life might not have any intelligible alternative, and might thus be merely a reminder of our conceptual grammar, we can surely imagine an intelligible contrast to *description*.) Now any general account of language that ruled out perfectly intelligible linguistic possibilities would for that reason fail to be a *general* account of *language*, just as any theory of sense that ruled out understandable utterances would for that reason fail as a theory of sense.

We can illustrate this with two examples. First, consider people discussing “secondary senses”, e.g.

⁴⁰⁷ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics”, 238.

whether Wednesday is the fattest day or *e* is the darkest vowel. We can imagine someone saying quite heatedly “No, *e* is the darkest vowel”, and yet declining to escalate to the assertion “It is true that *e* is the darkest vowel”, despite the fact that the original utterance looks like a proposition and thus *should* (if appearances are any indication) sustain the equivalence of *p* and *It is true that p*. On Lovibond’s account, the only reason someone might decline to say “It is true that *e* is the darkest vowel” is if they think it false in the sense that, say, actually *u* is darker. There is no room in her account for the possibility that someone might feel that their propositional-looking utterances in fact simply aren’t descriptions of any reality. One might hazard a guess that what we are doing in this sort of discourse is not describing a weird reality but trying on various conceptual associations that feel pleasing or natural to us. This is at the very least a real possibility in language, and if any general account of language rules out this possibility, that’s too bad for that account. Secondly, many have felt that the emotivist account of moral judgments as expressing and/or promoting certain emotions is inaccurate as it concerns our actual moral discourse, but to my knowledge no-one has denied that it describes a possible language-game. The expression of emotions through indicative sentences is a possibility in language; and a general view of language discredits itself if it rules out perfectly intelligible language games.

5.2.3 The range of examples

Blackburn discusses essentially two kinds of counter-example to Lovibond’s argument: those seeming propositions, such as those of philosophy and (on early Wittgenstein’s view) ethics, that fail to say anything; and utterances in the indicative mood that look descriptive but in fact, on Wittgenstein’s and/or Blackburn’s account, have some other, non-descriptive function. He is more thorough and systematic about this than Diamond, and discusses, in turn, ethical statements, Wittgenstein’s remarks on mathematical necessity, his treatment of first-personal avowals, and the so-called hinge propositions in *On Certainty*. His treatment of these non-descriptive indicative sentences centrally invokes the deflationist theory of truth, such that even if speakers of indicative sentences about arithmetic necessity, bedrock certainties etc. do accept the equivalence of *p* and *it is true that p* in these domains as well as the entire realist apparatus of *facts*, *reality*, etc., this does not even begin to touch the central issue between realism and anti-realism, namely whether the appeal to some reality and the attempt to accurately capture that reality is the best way to understand what these speakers are doing. He believes that he has Wittgenstein on his side and adduces numerous instances of Wittgenstein’s impatience with objections of the general type: “But it’s *true* that ... (e.g. $2+2=4$)”, replying that *it’s true that p* just means that *p* and represents no advance in our

understanding of p ⁴⁰⁸; and he adduces as well numerous instances where Wittgenstein, despite this deflationism, contrasts the function of p in the domains of arithmetical sentences, bedrock certainties, etc. with the way empirical sentences can be said to really correspond to some independent reality, i.e. where he finds he can draw a meaningful contrast between descriptive and non-descriptive sentences. As Blackburn writes (and this is a pervasive theme of his own philosophy and not just his exegesis of Wittgenstein): “The effect is the same as with ethics: invocation of truth and fact is useless, playing no part in an illuminating description of the activity, the form of life, from which the judgement emerges”.⁴⁰⁹ He is exegetically quite thorough about this and seems at the least to be far closer to Wittgenstein than Lovibond is⁴¹⁰; but Diamond achieves a deeper critique of Lovibond through canvassing a broader range of examples of moral discourse, including examples of moral thought that are not in the indicative mood, do not pose as propositions, and do not even exist at the level of the sentence-unit. She begins warming up this point by showing that “Sabina Lovibond’s idea that it is primarily the use of moral predicates in a language that reflects human moral interests.”⁴¹¹ Lovibond herself writes “It is our use of moral concepts to describe our own, and one another’s, behaviour which endows that behaviour with moral meaning”⁴¹² — she only seems to concern herself with a distinction between ‘thin’ moral concepts, which tend to be emphasized by non-cognitivists, and ‘thick’ concepts, which are the realist’s bread and butter⁴¹³. Diamond brings up an example of Simone Weil’s, who

suggests that one meditate on chance, chance that led to the meeting of one’s father and mother, chance that led to one’s being born. Suppose one is thinking what to do, and brings to that deliberation the thought “It is only through chance that I was born”; and suppose that one acts in the light that that thought casts. It may put what one values in a different perspective, helping one to recognize what is precious, and to accept its and one’s own vulnerability to chance, its and one’s own ephemeral existence; such recognition and acceptance may then inform one’s action.⁴¹⁴

Of course “it is only through chance that I was born” can be a piece of moral thought, and it contains no particularly ‘moral’ words. She goes on to note that certain stories can express a unique moral sensibility with no use of ethical vocabulary, noting also Wittgenstein’s admiration for

⁴⁰⁸ See section 1.6.1 for a discussion of these remarks of Wittgenstein’s.

⁴⁰⁹ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 208.

⁴¹⁰ For a somewhat critical discussion of Blackburn’s response to Lovibond, see Conant, “On Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Mathematics”.

⁴¹¹ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics”, 244f.

⁴¹² Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 63.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 14-6.

⁴¹⁴ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics”, 247.

Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*. Moreover:

[...] a word may be brought into contact with a situation; one may act in the light of a word, or understand the situation in its light: the word "chance" for Simone Weil (say), or "abundance," "overflow" for Blake [...] rather as a sort of organizing concept. [...] Whole sentences, stories, images, the idea we have of a person, words, rules: anything made of the resources of ordinary language may be brought into such a relation to our lives and actions and understanding of the world that we might speak of the thinking involved in that connection as "moral." There is no limit to be set.⁴¹⁵

If what we might call the unit of moral meaning could easily be smaller or larger than the sentence, then the fact that some judgments might take the indicative mood is no longer particularly central to any investigation of ethics in general. In this regard Blackburn is at a disadvantage: since he seems to accept the prevailing idea that moral discourse consists essentially of sentences that at the very least look and act like propositions, he has to construct the enormous technical apparatus that he calls "quasi-realism" to deal with issues of truth and inferentiality; whereas a more realistic look at the real diversity of moral thought undercuts the need for much of this.

5.2.4 The notion of moral features of reality

Diamond argues that the ideas of *moral vocabulary* and of *moral propositions* seems to consort quite naturally with the idea of moral reality as a region of reality alongside, say, biological reality or physical reality. On Lovibond's view, she writes, "there are moral features of the world, as there are botanical features of the world; the propositions of botany are about the latter and the propositions of ethics about the former."⁴¹⁶ But this is misleading; and "[i]f we want to see what moral thinking is, we need to be able to look away from the case of 'moral propositions' and to free ourselves from the idea that goes easily with exclusive focus on that case, of sentences as about moral subject matter through the presence in them of moral words."⁴¹⁷

To some extent Diamond is simply articulating a classic critique of moral realism in general. Blackburn for example has written elsewhere: "The realist thinks of it as though the moral order is there to be investigated like a piece of geography"⁴¹⁸. However, the way this critique gets deployed within traditional expressivism differs slight in at least two regards. Firstly, insofar as Blackburn

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 248. This has some relation to the views of constructivists like Korsgaard and Bagnoli; see section 3.2, footnote 254.

⁴¹⁶ Diamond, "Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics", 241.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 252.

⁴¹⁸ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 17; see footnote 115 in chapter 1 as well as section 3.2.

implicitly accepts the restriction of moral examples to indicative sentences containing moral vocabulary, he is fighting against appearances; whereas Diamond would argue that mainstream metaethics has not even begun to properly address even the actual appearance of moral thought. Secondly, Blackburn tends to oppose the idea that we describe the “moral” part of reality by arguing that we are instead responding emotionally to certain parts of our reality; whereas Diamond can be read as arguing that insofar as our moral thought is an exploration of reality in some sense, it is not an exploration of any particular *part* of reality. This is brought out in her characterization of early Wittgenstein’s view of ethics:

The comparison Wittgenstein makes between logic and ethics, in speaking of both as “transcendental” (*TLP*, 6.13, 6.421) has at its heart a contrast: between propositions with a specific subject matter, and logic/ethics, “symbolized,” as it were, by the variable for every particular thing we might say, a variable none of whose values is a proposition with logical or ethical subject matter. There is not, on this view, a “moral vocabulary,” a vocabulary through which we mean moral things. If one wanted to give sense to “moral vocabulary” one might mean: vocabulary we use in saying things that might have application in moral life, but that excludes no words.⁴¹⁹

Of course Lovibond sees herself as arguing on the basis of *late* Wittgenstein’s view of language. But Wittgenstein never said anything to contradict his earlier views in this regard; and nothing about the thesis that Lovibond attributes to late Wittgenstein — that language is necessarily embedded in a shared form of life — implies in any way that there is a part of our reality that is the “moral” part. This idea is only natural if we assume that moral thought and discourse essentially involves the indicative use of a particular class of moral predicates.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics”, 252f.

⁴²⁰ In his critique of this idea, De Mesel concedes that the set of words that are given moral uses is “indefinite” and far richer than moral philosophers typically seem to expect, but he objects to the idea that there is no moral “vocabulary”; he seems willing to count a potentially infinite list of concrete speech-acts as a “vocabulary”. If this is what we mean by “vocabulary”, then it is true that there is, in that sense, a moral vocabulary; but this does not represent any substantial critique of Diamond. De Mesel argues more pertinently that Diamond and associated writers “seem to presuppose that characteristics of moral language (as they understand it) carry over to its subject matter” (De Mesel, “The Subject Matter of Moral Philosophy”, 75.) Diamond’s idea, at least as she presents it here in her critique of Lovibond, is, I think: moral utterances might use any and all words because they might be about anything and everything; they might be about a titmouse, e.g., or a mountain. If we drop the assumption of a closed and proprietary vocabulary of moral thought, the idea of a closed domain or subject matter of moral thought is no longer natural or compelling; and if we look to the actual rich variety of moral thoughts, we will see that they could be about any subject matter. De Mesel focuses on the term “subject matter” and the formulation that “ethics has no particular subject matter”, and cites against this Wittgenstein’s words in his “Lecture on Ethics”: “And to make you see as clearly as possible what I take to be the subject matter of ethics I will put before you a number of more or less synonymous expressions [...]” (*PO* 38, quoted in “The Subject Matter of Moral Philosophy”, 76.) It is unclear if De Mesel is speaking for Wittgenstein or for himself when he says “The subject matter can be roughly specified: ethics is about what is good.” (*Ibid.*, 77) But Wittgenstein makes it clear in the lecture that the word “good” only serves as an *example* of moral discourse (never mind a demarcation of the moral) if it is used in a moral sense, and that in fact the moral sense is not, according to him, any

5.2.5 Realism as the default option

Moral realists influenced by Wittgenstein sometimes tend to write as if realism is the default option, and that anti-realists are only deflected from realism by some relatively external obstacle, such as an empiricist view of language (Lovibond), a metaphysical natural or scientism (Taylor) or an 18th century philosophical psychology (McDowell); they feel that late Wittgenstein leads us to realism by removing this obstacle. I have argued that this is a very narrow reading of the philosophical motivations of the expressivist tradition in general⁴²¹; but it ignores above all the possibility of a Wittgensteinian anti-realism driven entirely by a careful attention to real examples of moral thought. I have argued that Wittgenstein's examples of his own moral expressions in the "Lecture on Ethics" resist any straightforwardly realist reading; and his attack on realism there is also motivated, not just by his range of examples, but by his sense that he is left with a moral question in the face of any and all facts, and by his sense of the creativity and improvisatory nature of moral deliberation.

If we ask why realism would seem to be the default answer absent some metaphysical obstacle, the answer seems to lie in the choice of examples. Lovibond had argued that (in the mainstream metaethical tradition) realists are more impressed by 'thick' predications and anti-realists by 'thin' predications; we might suppose that within the Wittgensteinian tradition, realists are thinking primarily about the case of moral propositions (and more specifically, propositions using 'thick' predicates) while anti-realists are impressed by the wide and open-ended range of forms that moral thought and talk might take. Hence Diamond writes of Lovibond's implicit assumption that "[s]ome form of moral realism is what we would all accept, or take for granted, unless we were led away from it by some philosophical confusion capable of leading us to find fault with the indicative form of moral judgments"⁴²² and her most incisive critique of Lovibond's realism is simply that moral thought is by no means wedded to the indicative form or even the level of the sentence-unit. Of course the assumption that remains tacit in Lovibond often gets explicitly trotted out by realists

sense at all. If the De la Mare's poem "The Titmouse" or "How extraordinary that anything should exist!" are "about" "what is good", then only in a *very* roundabout sense; they are first and foremost about a tit mouse and about everything, respectively. In short, while Wittgenstein begins the lecture by tentatively working with Moore's demarcation of ethics in terms of *good*, De Mesel seems to underestimate how quickly and radically the lecture moves beyond that initial demarcation.

⁴²¹ It is odd that she accuses Hare of coming to his decisionistic view in virtue of the "special *metaphysical* status" of moral judgments — see *Realism and Imagination* 82.

⁴²² Diamond, "Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics" 251.

outside of the Wittgensteinian tradition; in his pioneering defense of moral realism David Brink argues that moral realism is the default option for the reason among others that

moral discourse is typically declarative or assertive in form. We say things like ‘The government’s tax plan is unfair’, ‘Waldo is just’, ‘It would be wrong to work for that cause’, and ‘My obligation to Maurice is greater than my obligation to Malcolm’. This language is putatively fact-stating (because it is declarative in form) and certainly seems to ascribe moral properties to persons, actions, policies, and so forth.⁴²³

Diamond agrees with Blackburn’s point that these aspects of the superficial grammar mean very little. It is surprising that outside of the Wittgensteinian tradition few if any anti-realists and non-cognitivists have bothered to go further and dispute the received idea, as Diamond does, that our moral discourse typically involves saying things like “Waldo is just” to each other, or — even more implausibly — that our moral thought essentially involves thinking things like “Waldo is just” to oneself. Diamond provides a great variety of examples of moral thought that do not even “seem to ascribe moral properties”. This does not mean that we cannot speak in some sense about her examples being true or corresponding to reality in any sense. People speak of works of art as “true” when the works profoundly illuminate their experience, and in this same way one might speak of Blake’s use of the word “abundance” as being true in being morally illuminating. In speaking of different ways that reality might be said to correspond to what we say, Diamond refers to Wittgenstein’s discussion, in his “Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics”, to the way reality could be said to correspond to a word. As she writes:

For there to be a reality corresponding to a word is then for there to be things (about us, about the world) which make it useful to have the word as part of our means of description. Wittgenstein emphasizes the difference between activities in which we develop our means of description and linguistic activities in which we are using, in experiential propositions, the means of description we have developed. Mathematical propositions look as if, in them, we were using a language of mathematical description to describe mathematical reality; but Wittgenstein tries to get us to see mathematics as like other activities in which we develop the means of description used in experiential propositions. If I say to someone who does not know the meaning of “chair,” “This is a chair,” the use of that sentence is as a “preparation” for descriptions like “The chairs are all terribly uncomfortable.” Analogously, “ $20 + 20 = 40$ ” is a preparation for description...⁴²⁴

Similarly, for Diamond’s examples of moral thought we might be able to give the talk of *correspondence to reality* some sense — if they prove their *usefulness* in one way or another. But

⁴²³ Brink, *Moral Realism*, 25.

⁴²⁴ Diamond, “Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics” 233.

this does not mean that moral thought corresponds to reality in anything like the way that empirical propositions do, by accurately describing a part of our reality, namely the moral part, or by recording moral properties.⁴²⁵ In this regard her critique is a bit subtler than Blackburn's; he refers to Wittgenstein's treatment of mathematical necessity as well, and to the use of language in mathematical practice to prepare for descriptions rather than to describe, but he also tends to write under the assumption we have *no use* in either ethics or mathematics for the idea of correspondence to reality, or that it could *only* be an empty way of insisting upon an attitude, e.g.: "in certain language games mathematical propositions play the part of rules of description, as opposed to descriptive propositions; perhaps mathematics teaches us no mathematical facts, but creates the form of what we call facts; a statement of necessity corresponds only to the inexorability of an attitude [...]"⁴²⁶

5.3 The expressive nature of moral judgment

It is worth noting that the overlapping critiques of Blackburn and Diamond focus on a section of the text that does not necessarily represent the strengths of the work as a whole, a section where, as Conant puts it, in her eagerness "Lovibond allows herself to wander into formulations of the doctrine she attributes to Wittgenstein which are difficult to sustain exegetically"⁴²⁷ — and that in my view are difficult to sustain even non-exegetically. However, the thrust of her work is in some ways very congenial to the views I have been developing in previous chapters. (While Blackburn doesn't say anything good about the book, Diamond calls it a "a rich and thoughtful treatment of ethics"⁴²⁸.) Lovibond begins from the fact that humans characteristically get habituated into ways of life that structure how they perceive and conceive the world around them in ways that impinge on their deliberation about action and how to live in general — such that our cultural upbringing gives rise to a "publicly observable moral reality"⁴²⁹. The way in which she appeals to forms of life and to perception seems responsive to the flaws of Thompson's naturalism and Blackburn's expressivism, respectively. Taking these points in order:

⁴²⁵ In her later book *Ethical Formation*, Lovibond tries to accommodate Diamond's objection to the idea that ethical thought requires or privileges any specific vocabulary, but she still wishes to hold on to the idea that it nonetheless pertains to a particular domain of reality; she writes, for example: "we can think of moral judgements — when they are true rather than false — not just as bringing us into harmony with a certain consensus of feeling or opinion, but as disclosing to us the 'layout' of a certain domain of reality, namely, the moral domain" (*Ethical Formation* 45) and presents a terse argument for the talk of 'reality' in a footnote on page 46.

⁴²⁶ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 207.

⁴²⁷ Conant, "On Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics", 200.

⁴²⁸ Diamond, "Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics" 226.

⁴²⁹ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 194.

a. It seems that she is alive to Diamond's argument in "Eating Meat, Eating People" that we must take it as given that we live in certain ways — that if we try to reconstruct our moral life from scratch, we will never see how anything could be of any moral significance, and all our principles will be fatally arbitrary. Moreover we might tentatively say that for Lovibond, as for Diamond, it is not the bare fact of human biological life, but what we have made in the imagination of what it is to be human, that gives rise to a "publicly observable moral reality". After all, she makes it clear that it is the habituation into *cultural* forms of life that bring individuals into contact with an independent moral reality, and also accords some importance to the role of the imagination. (Although the title promises to make imagination central to her realism, in fact she only discusses it vaguely and briefly towards the ends of the book; the gist seems to me that imagination allows us to creatively deploy the moral resources we have gained through habituation.⁴³⁰) More importantly, in contrast to Thompson, Lovibond notes that we can become legitimately alienated from our form of life, and emphasizes that forms of life can only be authoritative for me if they stand in some essential relation to how I see myself or are expressive of my self. She writes, for example that

[...] concepts of unconditional value — whether in morals or politics or aesthetics — are available for our (non-ironic) use only in so far as we can 'find ourselves' in the specific repertoire of social practices which happen, historically, to 'lie at the bottom' of evaluative discourse within the community to which we belong. They can be said to be available to us only in so far as an expressive relation can be said to exist between those practices and ourselves.⁴³¹

[...] we shall be able to integrate the so-called 'inner' and 'outer' viewpoints — to 'put our minds where our mouths are', while at the same time retaining our consciousness of the historicity of the language-game — just to the extent that we can 'find ourselves' in the public, or institutional, framework of the game. If we are to accomplish the desired integration, we need to be able to recognize the relevant institutions as an adequate expression of our 'true being', i.e. of the values and beliefs by which we define our identity.⁴³²

Hence moral realism is in a sense a historical achievement for Lovibond: "as far as the individual is concerned, the question of the meaningfulness of life can present itself as a historical question"⁴³³, i.e. the question, we might say, of whether the public 'morality' of the community expresses the individual selves and hence engages them as a true public *morality* rather than an oppressive or bothersome system of imposed norms.

⁴³⁰ Her discussion of the role of imagination is found in sections 44 and 45 of *Realism and Imagination*, pp. 189-200.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 91.

b. Lovibond writes that we can see a great deal more than can be accounted for on an empiricist notion of perception. We do not just see spatial configurations of color and infer the rest; she quotes Wittgenstein's remark in *Zettel* that "[w]e see emotion.' — As opposed to what? We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features [...]"⁴³⁴ Here again Lovibond seems to think that once we have abandoned empiricism we can stroll into the idea that we see moral value just as plainly as we see anything else, and so the moral realist need not postulate any special faculty of moral intuition. She does not anticipate the possibility that a look at moral thought specifically might reveal genuine differences between that kind of thought and any modality of sense perception⁴³⁵. Diamond notes in her response that while we do sometimes see quite literally in moral terms, for example when we see "courage in someone's walk", this only describes a "narrowly circumscribed region" of our moral life. "But the courage of acting in a certain way [...] is not the object of sight. Similarly with justice: to say that it would be unjust to do so-and-so is not to say what it will look like, and eyewitnesses are not usually the best judges of justice and injustice".⁴³⁶ We might add: a blind person is not necessarily morally blind. Similarly, in a response to both McDowell and Lovibond Blackburn has written: "Literal talk of perception runs into many problems. One is that the ethical very commonly, and given its function in guiding choice, even typically, concerns imagined or described situations, not perceived ones. We reach ethical verdicts about the behavior or describe agents or actions in the light of general standards. And it is stretching things to see these general standards as perceptually formed or maintained. Do I see that ingratitude is base only on occasions when I see an example of ingratitude? How can I be sure of the generalization to examples that I did not see?"⁴³⁷

However, we can also read Lovibond charitably as not committed to literal talk of perception, since she also writes that "the philosophical point of labelling oneself a moral intuitionist will lie [...] simply in the implication that moral judgements are to be regarded as non-inferential".⁴³⁸ If this is the case, then Lovibond's talk of perception may not be any more objectionable than Wittgenstein's talk of *seeing* the world as a miracle. We have seen that writers in the Wittgensteinian tradition such

⁴³⁴ Z §225, quoted in Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 47.

⁴³⁵ Blackburn has a helpful list of six important differences between secondary sensory properties and moral value in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 159-61.

⁴³⁶ "Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics" 250.

⁴³⁷ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 170.

⁴³⁸ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 50.

as Winch and Diamond have developed a point they take from both Wittgenstein and Iris Murdoch, namely that moral thought is often not directly related to decisions of action but rather involves a struggle over how to properly conceive various situations, oneself, others, or life in general — what Wiggins calls “situational appreciation” forms a large part of this and seems to the Lovibond’s implicit model⁴³⁹. This point is directed against a deductive model of moral thinking that pictures moral thought as the application of principles of action on the basis of the specific empirical features of situations, as well as against an overly simple expressivism that pictures moral thought as emotional responses to various factual situations rather than a more substantial kind of thought about those situations. Hence these two points about the life-form and perception — that we must see ourselves as part of a way of living for anything to begin to matter morally, and that the ways things matter to us morally within a way of living inform our ‘perception’ of the world both literally and figuratively — offer us a more accurate characterization of our moral life than most other metaethical schools.

Unfortunately her presentation of these aspects is distorted by her need to press them into the service of “realism”. I will argue in the next section that these aspects of the life-form and moral perception do not help to secure truth and objectivity the way she intends. Here I will argue that what makes her way of appealing to a shared way of life plausible also undermines her global strategy for defending realism.

The lesson she takes from late Wittgenstein is that all language use expresses a shared sensibility, or as she puts it somewhat more weakly: “language is necessarily embedded in a shared form of life”. This should lead us to see that language expressing a shared sensibility can still be objectively about the real world, as we no have conception of any *more* objective way of speaking or thinking to contrast it with. Hence “an expressivism which extends to the whole of our discourse can clear itself, merely in virtue of its global character, of the irrationalist taint which it carried when it was asserted only in respect of a limited subject-matter.”⁴⁴⁰ However, as she moves away from this global argument into an examination of morality in particular, she wanders into a different notion of expressivism. We can see this by turning back to the quotation from above:

[...] we shall be able to integrate the so-called ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ viewpoints — to ‘put our minds where our mouths are’, while at the same time retaining our consciousness of the historicity of the language-game — just to the extent that we can ‘find ourselves’ in the public, or institutional, framework of the game. If we are to

⁴³⁹ Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 237.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

accomplish the desired integration, we need to be able to recognize the relevant institutions as an adequate expression of our ‘true being’, i.e. of the values and beliefs by which we define our identity.

If Wittgenstein has taught us that the extension of the “+2” series from 100 to 102 ultimately rests on nothing more than a shared sensibility, he has certainly not taught us that I can only extend the series in the way that expresses my “true being” or the values and beliefs by which I define my identity.⁴⁴¹ We can also easily contrast this with color terms. Like everyone else, I have learned how to speak about colors; and color-talk is probably the most famous case of a language-game that rests upon a shared sensibility. Nonetheless despite my fluency in color-talk it sometimes happens that I disagree about e.g. whether a certain sofa is blue or grey. If I thought that a sofa was grey but the next twenty people asked all said that it was blue, I would accede to majority opinion; after all, our only reference point for color attribution is our *shared* sensibility. If I found that twenty people disagreed with me about a moral question, this should lead me to reconsider my opinion, and it might also happen that I simply cave to peer pressure, but it would not be obviously incompetent or foolish or stubborn of me to stick to my opinion. We might suspect that this is precisely because color-talk *only* expresses a shared sensibility and unlike moral talk does not also need to express my “true being” — thus in the case of the sofa it would not occur to me to say that I was “alienated” from the color-talk of my community.

It is worth noting that Lovibond does draw a distinction among different areas of assertoric discourse:

A moral realist who bases himself on Wittgenstein’s conception of language should agree that there are some “language-games” within which it is not essential to secure a high degree of uniformity in the way people respond to a given situation. Some linguistic practices are, indeed, premised upon our interest in the *variety* of individual responses [...] Others, by contrast, involve a training process which is not complete until all personal idiosyncrasies have been eliminated. For instance, the goal of a child’s training in the use of the word “table” is that he should come to apply it in such a way that, ordinarily speaking, he never disagrees with other people about the truth of “That’s a table” (accompanied by pointing). Learning to apply such predicates is an

⁴⁴¹ Another way of putting this critique is to say that while her strategy is to turn a global expressivism into a global realism, she does make any distinction among different kinds of expressiveness and does not even care what kind of expressivism she is arguing for. This comes out when she asks the rhetorical question “[b]ut can it seriously be maintained that in reporting on the objective features of our world — for example, on rock formations or aerodynamics or the digestive system of the earthworm — we are doing anything that could properly be characterized in terms of emotional expression?” (*Realism and Imagination* 27) and seems tacitly to answer this in the affirmative. She seems happy, then, to accept a global *emotivist* theory of language, even though the theory that all language expresses emotion is different from the theory that all language expresses our true being, and both differ (and cannot be derived from) the theory that all language expresses some shared sensibility. But it is implausible to hold that when I say something about rock formations I am necessarily expressing an emotion, and it does not follow from anything Wittgenstein wrote. *Emotion, attitude, identity, way of life* etc. all seem to get lumped into the same category of *subjective stuff*.

experience almost as hostile to individualism as learning to count — a technique in which we are trained “with endless practice, with merciless exactitude” [...] As an example of the first type of language-game, we might take the use of the predicate “fun”. In this game — that is, in talking about whether or not such and such an activity, etc. is fun — complete agreement is not only absent, but the pursuit of it would actually run counter to the spirit of the game. Thus if you tell me, for example, that it is great fun to ride on the big dipper, and I then undertake to prove to you that you are mistaken and that in fact it is not really fun at all, you will be right to infer that (for whatever reason) I have failed to make myself at home with the concept of “fun” [...] Those areas of discourse which cater to our interest in individual peculiarities — whether of taste, temperament or commitment — are marked out by the fact that they do not assign to the quest for consensus that “ultimate kind of significance” which it possesses, notably, in natural science (rationalistically conceived). We might say that in the application of certain predicates there is a partial — or, in extreme cases like “fun”, near-total — analogue of “first-person privilege” vis-a-vis the ascription of sensations. And this privilege seems to exist even though the statements concerned are in the third person. Thus, “It’s great fun to ride on the big dipper” is a third-person statement, but in relation to it, the “pull toward objectivity” hardly acts upon me at all. Within the limits of intelligibility, I have the last word on what is fun — and not “fun for me” either, but “fun” tout court. There is no such thing as an authoritative verdict as to whether it is fun to ride on the big dipper: and a person who did not understand this phenomenon — who did not, in other words, grasp that his judgement was not in all respects answerable to intellectual authority — would not be a fully competent user of the sort of natural language with which we are familiar.⁴⁴²

An initial problem with this idea is simply that it undermines her framing of the issue between realists and anti-realists. She seems to feel on the one hand that realism is the default option for any assertoric discourse, and that one would only be moved to deny realism either from an empiricist view of language and/or some metaphysical obstacle (it is never clear whether these are meant to be the same), and yet she herself points to an internal or “phenomenological” feature of moral thought that undermines the aspirations of realism:

The kind of realism we are considering maintains, then, that there is no valid metaphysical reason to equate the “evaluative” with the “subjective”, as non-cognitivism effectively does. It does not, however, rule out the possibility that evaluative judgements might have a non-metaphysical way of failing to be objective. It can thus accommodate, not indeed an absolute “fact/value *distinction*”, but a “fact/value *continuum*” based on the more or less extensive role played by intellectual authority-relations within different regions of discourse. The role of intellectual authority within any given region of discourse will then be a phenomenological question; i.e. the right way to determine it will be by “describing language-games”.⁴⁴³

In fact she concedes that “there is room for a certain amount of decision-making” in ethics, since “[t]he rules which govern our use of moral words have to be applied, not only ‘without guidance’ in

⁴⁴² Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 66f.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

the transcendent sense (cf. *PI I* §292) — i.e. without guidance from any authority external to human practice — but also ‘without guidance’ in the immanent, or material, sense, sc. because intellectual authority is not so extensive in morals as to determine every detail of the practice which counts as obeying the rule.”⁴⁴⁴ Since she also argued that non-cognitivism arose “as a tendency in moral philosophy” out of our historical conditions in which many fail to find any “legitimate intellectual authority in questions of value”⁴⁴⁵ they can identify with, it is puzzling that she at the same time plans to establish *moral* realism simply by undermining the empiricist view of language in general.

However, the larger issue in this context is that she may have misidentified the immanent distinguishing features of moral thought in arguing that it is one of the language-games in which “it is not essential to secure a high degree of uniformity in the way people respond to a given situation” and is in this way like talk of what is “fun”: “Thus if you tell me, for example, that it is great fun to ride on the big dipper, and I then undertake to prove to you that you are mistaken and that in fact it is not really fun at all, you will be right to infer that (for whatever reason) I have failed to make myself at home with the concept of ‘fun’.” This analogy simply does not hold at all for moral discourse. If you tell me that pre-marital sex is morally wrong and I then undertake to prove to you that you are mistaken, this does not show that I have failed to make myself at home with the concept “morally wrong” (unless we have scruples about the word “prove”). Nor is this simply a matter of degree — that we allow more variance in fun-talk than in moral talk, but less variance in mathematical talk than in moral talk. I have argued in the second chapter that much of our moral life does not involve prescriptivity. Nonetheless most of us do sometimes make universally prescriptive judgments, and insofar as we do we demand *exactly* as much uniformity as in mathematical discourse. The difference is that in morals we don’t often *get* what we demand. This is not because children are more recalcitrant or incorrigible on the subject of morals than on the subject of mathematics, but because teaching them moral language is not simply teaching them a set of impersonal techniques. In morals they must learn to use moral language to speak for themselves, to express their ‘true being’ with their words, and the habituation into the established use of these words does not guarantee that their responses will match ours. This is the truth behind Moore’s remark that “so far as the meaning of good goes, anything whatever may be good”⁴⁴⁶. Christensen makes a similar point when she writes: “we do not consider agreement a goal in itself in ethics, and this difference in purpose affects our ethical concepts. When parents teach a child to use an

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁴⁶ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 72.

evaluative word like ‘good’, they may consider it a sign of understanding if the child starts to use the word about objects that differs substantially from the ones that were used in the teaching — even if the parents do not consider these objects good.”⁴⁴⁷ If our children simply adopt our ways of speaking, they have not learned to speak morally; they must authentically speak for themselves. In this sense Christensen is right that “we do not consider agreement a goal in itself in ethics”. But at the same time we do hope to some extent that when our children do come to authentically speak for themselves, they will agree with us. When we demand a kind of uniformity in ethics, as we often do, what we are demanding is not just a generic sort of attunement in sensibility but a much deeper attunement in our sense of who we fundamentally are, and that while late Wittgenstein has shown us that a kind of generic attunement in sensibility is given (if it were not, language would not be possible), nonetheless this deeper attunement is an ongoing problem for us.

Hence Lovibond’s formulations of the immanent distinctions of moral discourse are at times misleading. It is not exactly true that “it is not essential to secure a high degree of uniformity in the way people respond to a given situation”. It *is* true in a sense that our moral judgments are not “answerable to intellectual authority” in the way that other judgments are. But this does not make moral judgments similar to judgments about what is fun, and it does not dissipate the problems of objectivity and thus clear the way for moral realism. I do not want to offer a theory of what “fun” means here, but it would not be surprising if the truth-conditions for “x is fun” were straightforwardly subjective; at any rate, when someone says that roller-coasters are fun and I say they aren’t, I am not bothered by the thought that one of us must be right and the other wrong. The problem that confronts us in morals is that we do sometimes think that one of us must be right and yet, to put it in Lovibond’s terms, there is no intellectual authority we can appeal to.

The reason we cannot have such “intellectual authority” come from the more profoundly self-expressive aspects of moral discourse; and yet we take our judgments to contest others in a way that leads us to demand precisely such intellectual authorities. Hence Lovibond is onto something when she seeks to understand our moral life in terms of a shared way of life that *at the same time* expresses my own “true being”. Lovibond commendably leaves it open whether this shared way of life is always a contingent cultural phenomenon or whether we might sometimes appeal to nothing more than our shared *human* way of life. Yet in either case the tension remains between the appeal to the shared way of life and the need for this to express *myself* in order for it to be morally authoritative for *me* -- these are not unremarkable features of all types of assertoric discourse. It is

⁴⁴⁷ Christensen, “Wittgenstein and Ethics”, 809.

possible that “fun”-discourse *only* needs to represent the individual’s dispositions, and color-discourse *only* needs to represent our shared sensibility; children learn to use color words correctly by using them the way others do, and they learn to use the word “fun” correctly by *not* always using it the way others do. If moral judgments must express a shared way of life and also express not just my dispositions but something like my “true being”, then the conjunction of these features raises a problem of objectivity and truth that is not settled by appeal to the one pole, the shared way of life.

5.4 Types of objectivity and ‘thick’ moral terms

Though Lovibond allows at points for an *immanent* failure of moral realism, the general thrust of her book is nonetheless to argue that moral language can be just as objective as any other type of discourse. For example a very typical remark of hers is: “Moral reasoning, then, can be restored to parity with scientific reasoning on the strength of its answerability to similarly public canons of evidence.”⁴⁴⁸ While she characterizes moral discourse as expressive both of shared forms of life *and* of the individual’s “true being”, in establishing its potential objectivity and truth-valuedness she appeals only to the shared form of life. In fact this emphasis continues into her later work, such as the 2004 book *Ethical Formation*. Here she also takes up parts of Diamond’s critique, conceding that moral thought need not involve explicitly ethical vocabulary or even indicative sentences, but could just as well involve telling stories, as Diamond writes. However, Mulhall notes:

[...] Lovibond’s stress upon the need for a shared form of life strongly suggests that forms of ethical intercourse that make vanishingly small use of explicitly moral vocabulary can work only if speaker and listener already share an orientation to the world. In other words, the moral force of apparently non-moral stories and words accrues from a pre-existing common sense of ethical significance; it reinforces, or at best further unfolds the implications of, an existing mode of responsiveness to the world. But it is implicit in Diamond’s examples of morally forceful story-telling that their effect is just as likely to be one of radically reorienting one’s ethical attitude towards life.⁴⁴⁹

And her later work in fact seeks to defend what she calls “a modern (and fully naturalistic) ethical cognitivism — that is, with the idea of moral intelligence as consisting in a grasp of certain concepts or rules, and so in a different kind of ‘form’ — the kind that consists in patterns of social or linguistic usage, transmitted by upbringing from one generation to another.”⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁸ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 43.

⁴⁴⁹ Mulhall, “Ethics in Light of Wittgenstein”, 309.

⁴⁵⁰ Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, x.

Lovibond can allow for change and reform insofar as our shared form of life might contain tensions or contradictions and hence we need to make alterations in the form of life in the name of coherence. She could also argue — perhaps this is part of the same response — that insofar as the shared form of life is underdetermined in certain situations, improvisation is necessary. But this means that while she argues for the objectivity and truth-valuedness of moral judgments insofar as a shared form of life determines our values and obligations, and she allows for change and improvisation insofar as our shared form of life fails to fully determine our values and obligations, she cannot do both at the same time and allow the improvisations and deviations themselves to have any objectivity; it seems on Lovibond's picture that anytime someone takes their own line without the guidance of a shared moral sensibility, it is a bit of uncontrolled arbitrariness that is *unfortunately* necessary at times.

Hence her way of securing objectivity of moral judgment sidelines cases of improvisation and radical reorientation such as the belief that “a good man cannot be harmed”, cases where someone can see themselves as becoming more objective in improvising and moving beyond shared understanding of their community. Of course Diamond does go some of the way with Lovibond; she argues that some form of life must be taken as given for anything to matter to us at all. But in Diamond's writings what we do with this starting point is not either controlled by the extant form of life or else arbitrary to the extent that it is not thus controlled.

So Lovibond's notion of moral objectivity restricts the possibilities of moral thought unnecessarily; but it is also, I will argue, not a notion of *moral* objectivity at all. Her picture of moral thought, insofar as it is objective, is not particularly moral, and insofar as it is moral, it is not objective in the way she describes. We can see the problem in her discussion of the “semantic depth” of ‘thick’ moral terms. She takes the idea from Platts, who writes that “experience can enrich our concept of what, say, courage is; our concept meanwhile can remain the same.”⁴⁵¹ The idea that moral growth can involve a deepening understanding of a concept such as ‘courage’ is also found in Murdoch, Diamond, and Donatelli⁴⁵². Lovibond explanation of this phenomenon is that “while a speaker may master the use of a moral word adequately for the purposes of participation in a certain limited range of language-games involving that word, yet the same word may also figure in various other language-games into which he has not so far been initiated.”⁴⁵³ One gains a deeper understanding of “courage”, then, through a more comprehensive understanding of how the word is used in one's

⁴⁵¹ Quoted in *Realism and Imagination*, 31.

⁴⁵² See for example Donatelli, “The Problem of the Higher”, 29-31.

⁴⁵³ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 70.

linguistic community. And Lovibond seems to offer this as a general account of the possibility of individual moral error: “But the induction of an individual into a communal form of life is a gradual process: until it is complete, there will be come ‘correct judgements’ which escape him, and hence some moral facts which transcend his awareness.”⁴⁵⁴

Lovibond describes the deepening understanding of the communal use of moral terms as progress up a scale of semantic forms, and asks:

[...] can we ever get to the top of a scale of semantic forms? [...] I think the correct answer will be that, relative to the form of life in which we participate, we can in principle reach the top of the scale; but that, in an absolute sense, we cannot do so — for our form of life will undergo further historical development in the future, so that the semantic depth of, for example, the concept of courage (as employed in our community) will be enhanced in ways that go beyond the experience of any existing speaker.⁴⁵⁵

This seems to suggest that it might turn out that I am using the word “courage” wrong *now* if my linguistic community uses the word differently several centuries from now. This is problematic enough on its own, but this passage points to the great gap in her work, namely the question of what we can say about changes in the life-form, whether we can ever judge those changes morally. If the current language use of my community constitutes correctness in the use of moral terms, then there will be no logical space to commend or criticize any change in use. If on the other hand the future language use of my community constitutes correctness in the use of moral terms, as this passage might seem to indicate (it is a point she does not return to), then it seems that any change my community happens to go through will count as correct. Being chained to my own community norms is bad; being chained to the norms of a future community I know nothing of is worse. Of course the possibility of individual alienation from community norms is a central topic of the book; but it is hard to reconcile this with the notion of historical development she sketches here. It is conceivable that the future norms of my community will express my “true being” in ways I cannot anticipate (possibly on a Hegelian view of history this must be so), but it seems more likely that they will be simply alien to me, particularly if we look long enough into the future. In this case we are most likely all alienated from the moral terms in our communities; the immanent failure of moral realism seems almost inevitable.

We should perhaps ignore this reference to historical development as a simple misstep. But it brings out a problem we can develop under a synchronic or diachronic aspect. Diachronically, the problem

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 35.

is simply that if the objectivity of moral judgment is constituted by the shared norms of the form of life that underwrite the use of moral terms, then there cannot be any question of whether any change constitutes progress or deterioration (except insofar as the form of life becomes more or less *internally* coherent). But this seems to be an intelligible question that we do sometimes face. She shares this problem with Michael Hampe, who, also under the influence of Wittgenstein, considers the question of what is rational to be entirely exhausted by the extant paradigms of communities, by those paradigms children are initiated into through training and repetition; any change in these paradigms has to be seen as an *arational* interruption of these paradigms, perhaps retroactively justified under the new paradigms but not susceptible of any justification in the moment.⁴⁵⁶

Seen synchronically, the problem looks far more threatening. The objectivity Lovibond offers us is that a shared sensibility makes ‘thick’ moral terms truly evaluative and also truly descriptive; they can only be applied correctly by someone who sees the evaluative point of the terms, but they really do have a fixed extension (though it is fixed in part through this shared evaluative sensibility) so that it is then simply a fact whether something is “courageous” or not. But if I am alienated from the moral terms of my community, then this will still be a fact for me (it will be a fact that this action does indeed count as “courageous” according to the prevailing use of that term) but this will be a mere fact, not a moral fact at all. As Lovibond acknowledges, however, this does not first become a problem when I do in fact become alienated; rather the possibility of alienation points to my continual responsibility for my commitment (or discommitment) to the moral terms of my community. She writes:

At the moment when the individual gets the idea of the language-game — of language as a system of practices in which he participates — the expressive relation between himself and his community becomes problematic. The knowledge that “words are also deeds” introduces the logical possibility of asking: do the available words represent deeds of a kind that I can perform without shame?⁴⁵⁷

In terms of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the acquisition of this consciousness may be identified with our discovery of the moral dimension of language-use: for that [...] was a discovery of the individual’s moral complicity, each time he participates in a language-game, with the institutions in which the prevailing form of life is embodied.⁴⁵⁸

Hence it seems that the question of whether these extant moral terms really express my true being, whether I should continue to go along with them, seems to always be an open question — and the

⁴⁵⁶ Hampe, *Die Lehren der Philosophie*.

⁴⁵⁷ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 123.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

facts that my community does speak this way, that their terms do have real extensions, that various actions either do or do not fall under those concepts, etc., are all merely facts that raise, but do not answer, this continual moral question. The objectivity she finds in thick terms does not reach the moral question implied by every use of ‘thick’ terms.

Again the problem is not just that Lovibond has offered a partial explanation. Because of her “homogenous” conception of language and her global strategy of locating the same kind of objectivity in all kinds of assertoric discourse, she seems to imply by omission that we have *no* resources to settle this moral question of whether I can or should speak for myself using the moral terms of my community. If I come apart from my community, I am simply lost — if I cannot work within their moral rationality, I have none.

A similar criticism could be made of her emphasis on moral perception. The idea that we ‘see’ the world, both literally and figuratively, through the moral terms of our communities, does contribute to a more accurate characterization of our moral life, but it does nothing to secure the objectivity of moral discourse. There is good evidence that American police officers tend to perceive African-American boys as older than they are; this literally an aspect of their perception. And of course in many societies women are seen as *aggressive* when they engage in behaviors that are considered unremarkable in men. The problem can be seen quite clearly in a case Lovibond herself raises, which she calls “a pleasing example of practical necessity residing in the nature of the situation” — it is apparently the case that the Nuer people leave “monstrous” newborn babies, i.e. physically disabled babies, in a river, saying that the mother has unfortunately given birth to a baby hippopotamus rather than a human. Lovibond writes: “The Nuer might say that, when a woman had the misfortune to give birth to a baby hippopotamus, this fact could be directly perceived (who, indeed, could overlook it?); and that anyone who perceived it would be provided, *eo ipso*, with a sufficient reason to take the infant and place it in the river.”⁴⁵⁹ But though this is “correct” by the norms of that community, one might find it wrong, and not just factually mistaken. It is worth noting that Winch shares the emphasis on perception and sensibility with Lovibond, but in his writing this tends to pull us *away* from the idea that morality is objectively determined, as for example when he writes: “My central point is that in questions concerning our understanding of each other our moral sensibility is indeed an aspect of our sensibility, of the way we see things, of

⁴⁵⁹ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 53f.

what we make of the world we are living in.”⁴⁶⁰

To conclude the discussion of Lovibond: the claim that moral judgments express both a shared form of life and the individual’s true self is quite appealing. Lovibond tends to frame this as a feature of all assertoric discourse, but we might feel that she has inadvertently found the exact features that *distinguish* moral discourse. A moral problem can occur when I am pursuing some other, non-moral end, and begin to wonder whether I can take a certain means to that end. Nothing about the means or the end makes that means inexpedient or imprudent; but I start to wonder whether it is morally wrong, which I might also put with the words: “I don’t know if I can do this.” But I could physically do it; nor is it logically impossible. It is not a mere psychological impossibility in the sense of a hang-up or a neurosis. If I find something psychologically impossible — say I cannot bring myself to leave the house without a ritual chant — it could be pertinent to ask “Are you sure that you can’t? Have to tried?”, whereas if I say in a moral sense that I cannot to something, it would be quite impertinent to ask “Are you sure that you can’t? Have you tried?” As Winch notes, a moral impossibility is not a limit on what I can carry into effect, but on what I can *will*.⁴⁶¹ — Hence many (such as Korsgaard) think that this type of necessity and impossibility could only come from some deep sense of who I am — that nothing else could have this kind of necessity for me. But what does this sense of self come from? Any contingent features of my identity are things I myself am likely see as relatively unimportant or trivial. Particularly things that are subject to my *decision* will register as relatively unimportant — as Nussbaum writes “To the extent to which it is appropriate to say of a principle or belief that it is optional for us, to that extent it is not deep in our lives.”⁴⁶² So one might look to my understanding of myself as a human for the source of moral necessity; and I have been using what I call *self-identifications as human* as a central case of moral understanding. Of course I might also be constrained by my understanding of what I am as an American, for example, or as any other larger whole I could identify with to the extent of seeing it as a source of unconditional demands — any shared form of life that expresses my true being. Since I am not patriotic, I would not expect any representation I would not expect any representation of Americanness to mean very much to me, but it is always possible that someone might present me with a image of America that I am forced to recognize as speaking to myself as well; we can be surprised by what we find we cannot deny. Now first of all we do not need to think that *all* cases of

⁴⁶⁰ Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, 166. Gaita frames the difference between Winch on the one hand and Wiggins and McDowell on the other in terms of Murdoch’s claim that “two great metaphors dominate philosophy — the metaphor of vision and the metaphor of movement”, writing that “Winch’s lesson is that even if this is historically true it is a mistake to be decidedly partial to one rather than the other”, whereas Wiggins and McDowell (and surely Lovibond as well) are overly partial to the metaphor of vision. See Gaita, “Ethical Individuality”, 146f., notes 11 and 25.

⁴⁶¹ See Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, 158-60. See also Hertzberg, “On Moral Necessity”, 110-16.

⁴⁶² Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 225.

moral thought take this form. But even in these cases I have tried to show that we are speaking with what Thompson would call a unique kind of logical generality when we make judgments of self-identification (though it is not the generality of natural-historical judgments) — and this generality renders the objectivity of these judgments problematic, as they cannot be verified or falsified by any empirical observations; at the risk of some kitsch we might say they are necessarily judgments of the heart. It is true that all use of language relies on the shared sensibilities of native speakers; nonetheless I can usually consult others and defer to others if I want to know whether this sofa is really “grey” or whether what we saw in that bush was really a “crested finch” or whether twelve multiplied by thirteen really is “156”. I *cannot* ask others to speak for me morally in this way. In Lovibond’s haste to locate a theoretical criterion of objectivity for moral judgments she has turned to the type of objectivity they share with all language-use — the reliance on a shared sensibility, to some extent inborn and to some extent taught to every child — and she has obscured the point that this type of objectivity simply fails to address the *moral* questions we are implicated in whenever we use moral language, questions that go beyond settling the extension of a term in common circulation. She errs not just in overhastily generalizing from one kind of case, but also in looking for a theoretical criterion of moral objectivity in the first place.

5.5 On ‘thick’ terms

It is not entirely surprising that ‘thick’ moral terms have taken on such importance among some of the Wittgenstein-influenced moral philosophers; in discussing the work of Murdoch in relation to Bernard Williams, McDowell and Foot, Justin Broackes notes that “[a] recommendation to study precise rather than dully generic evaluative terms was something of a commonplace among those who head heard, or heard much about, Wittgenstein’s Lectures on Aesthetics. (And, as Anscombe said: ‘It would be a great improvement, if, instead of ‘morally wrong’, one always named a genus such as ‘untruthful’, ‘unchaste’, ‘unjust’.’)”⁴⁶³ In these lectures Wittgenstein asks us to look at the things we actually say in aesthetic appreciation and at the contexts in which we say them; and his examples of what we actually say include “Look at this transition”, “The passage here is incoherent”, “His use of images is precise”, “That’s too short”, “The bass is not quite loud enough”, etc. These examples certainly point us away from ‘thin’ evaluation, and some of them do involve ‘thick’ terms. In his “Lecture on Ethics” he begins with an examination of the ordinary ‘thin’ terms such as *ought* and *good* and ultimately turns to the examples “The world is a miracle” and “I am safe, nothing can injure me” — and it could be argued that *miracle*, *safe* and *harm* are all ‘thick’

⁴⁶³ Broackes, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, 15n.

terms. I have argued that the Lecture undermines the idea that any specific class of vocabulary could be thought to uniquely embody our ethical life, and Diamond has developed this critique at great length and not just in her response to Lovibond. So it is not at all surprising that under the influence of Wittgenstein philosophers would turn their attention to thick descriptors among other things; but it is surprising that Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers would focus almost exclusively on a specific class of descriptors in the belief that they lead us towards moral realism — or in the belief, as Blackburn writes, that the class “tells us surprising things about ethical objectivity, and even perhaps undermines the fact-value distinction.”⁴⁶⁴

Thick terms are thought to favor realism in light of the way they are simultaneously *world-guided* and *action-guiding*, in Williams’ terms⁴⁶⁵; “courageous” is a *description* applied to something in virtue of how it is — you inform someone about *x* when you tell them that *x* is courageous — and yet they are also action-guiding in the sense that if an action is “courageous” we have reason to do it. Now there is no general philosophical problem of being guided in action by uses of language that are themselves guided by the world. If my wife tells me that my son fell off the trampoline and broke his arm, she is guided by the world in this use of language, in the sense that she observed that this is the case; and my action will also be guided by her language if I take my son to the hospital upon hearing this. But one could take a number of different courses of action in response to any fact; the philosophical problem is whether there are facts that by themselves lay down which course of action we are to take. It is not part of the meaning of “arm” or “broken” that one has to do anything; but it might seem to be part of the meaning of “cowardly” that it casts whatever it applies to in a negative light, that *pro tanto* one should not do cowardly things, that if an action is cowardly one has at least that reason not to do it. So the marshaling of thick terms into an argument for realism looks like an attempt to answer the perennial question of where these unique necessities and impossibilities of morality come from — from God, from reason itself, from the nature of humanity — by pointing us to the meanings of our words.⁴⁶⁶ And this raises the question whether it is at all plausible that the meanings of words could ever have this sort of authority over me.

Judgments using ‘thick’ terms are thus supposed to be judgments that are both objective and

⁴⁶⁴ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 129.

⁴⁶⁵ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 140f.

⁴⁶⁶ I do not want to suggest that all Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers who focus on thick terms in their defense of moral realism always commit the error I describe in this section. Sometimes thick terms are adduced merely as a counterexample to the flawed phenomenology offered by an overly simple expressivism, which insists that moral judgments must take the form of some apprehension of a fact in neutral terms combined with an emotional reaction or decision.

practical at the same time, in Lovibond's terms — “objectivity” meaning that the judgments are “accountable to standards of correctness”, “practicality” meaning that the judgments are ‘internally’ related to action, motivation, reasons for action, etc.⁴⁶⁷ On a well-known non-cognitivist view associated primarily with Hare, these ‘thick’ terms combine a *morally neutral* descriptive component and a prescriptive or somehow emotive or attitudinal component. The word “courageous”, for example, could mean, descriptively, being undeterred by danger — this is an overly simplistic definition for the purposes of illustration, and one that assumes that “danger” can be spelled out in morally neutral terms — and this is combined with e.g. a *commending* of those things that fit that description. Hence when a person really — objectively — is “courageous”, the fact will be that the person is undeterred by danger, and this fact by itself will not entail any reason for action or any practical attitude; more specifically, the element of attitudinizing that is yoked to this fact will not be entailed by this fact. The objective part is not practical, on this view, and the practical part is not objective, or at least not in that way. Things are not any better on Blackburn's model of how an attitudinal element might drive the extension of the term. Blackburn imagines a practice of using the term “fat↓” that combines the descriptive content of “fat” with “a sneery intonation to express their derogation of it”.⁴⁶⁸ But we are not asked to imagine that everyone who uses the term “fat↓” is therefore compelled to sneer at *everyone* who is fat; rather they only call people “fat↓” when they feel contemptuous of *that* fat person. In this case the practical sensibility would drive the extension; I would not be able to predict how the person uses the term “fat↓” without some empathetic insight into their feelings or their evaluative life. But here again the objective part is not practical, and the practical part is at least not made objective by the objective part — though we might be able to come up with some other account of what objectivity would amount to. For when I call someone “fat↓”, the only fact I am stating is that they are fat. The view associated with Bernard Williams, Wiggins, McDowell, Taylor, Lovibond and Crary, among others, is that at least some ‘thick’ terms have a descriptive content that cannot be given in non-moral or

⁴⁶⁷ I am referring to Lovibond's later book *Ethical Formation*, where she frames the problem of moral philosophy in terms of “objectivity” and “practicality” (3). In this book she tries to acknowledge Diamond's objections to the idea that any specifically ethical vocabulary is required for ethical judgment (34-8), but there are indications throughout the work that she is still thinking of ‘thick’ judgments for the most part. Alice Crary frames her book *Beyond Moral Judgment* in similar terms, beginning with the problem of how moral judgments can be “objective”, i.e. “essentially a matter of sensitivity to how things really — or objectively — are in the world”, and also display “internalism”, which is “to have a direct bearing on — or to be internally related to — what we have reason to do.” (*Beyond Moral Judgment* 11f.) The case of ‘thick’ terms plays an important role in her argument for modifying the standard understanding of “objectivity”, although ultimately she wishes to get beyond the model of moral judgment, “understood as judgments that apply some moral concept or other.” (1) Lovibond seems to have been inspired by Michael Smith's framing of “the moral problem” as the problem of reconciling “the objectivity of moral judgment” with its “practicality”; see Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 5-7.

⁴⁶⁸ Blackburn, “Disentangling Disentangling”, 131; cf. *Practical Tortoise Raising* 133f.

non-evaluative terms⁴⁶⁹. It is not enough to suppose that the practical sensibility drives the extension in combination with a descriptive element; the practical sensibility must help to constitute the descriptive element itself. On the view associated with McDowell, the affective reaction does not autonomously determine the extension of the term; rather, the extension is whatever merits that reaction. The “comical”, to use the favored example of Wiggins and McDowell, is a descriptive term, but it describes something as having features that merit laughter or amusement, and for that reason we can only determine the extension if we can share the sensibility that it internally involves. For the most part we will find that things are “comical” by laughing or being amused, but there is room to examine whether one is right to be amused in a particular case or whether it is in fact not actually “comical”. In the case of “fat↓”, if someone is in fact fat and I do feel contempt for them, there is no room for the feature of fatness to serve as a check on my reaction. In the case of the “comical”, if McDowell and Wiggins are right, the extension of the “comical” will remain a mystery to anyone who doesn’t by and large share our reactions of laughter, and yet the fact that something is comical can also *justify* one’s reaction of laughter; so it is a description that is internally related to reasons for actions and/or attitudes in a way that purportedly also makes this practical aspect objective.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ See e.g. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 140-2; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 54; McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 200-3; Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 35-9.

⁴⁷⁰ Though Williams initially writes that ‘thick’ concepts are action-guiding and typically give reasons for action, later in this same work he denies that they entail ‘ought’ statements. If a “hypertraditional” society punishes actions it deems “womanly”, for example, we could say that their fluency with term “womanly” represents knowledge even though we would also say that they ought not to be doing what they do and ought not to be using the term — because, he claims, if it is a largely pre-reflective society, their use of the term “womanly” does not entail any ought-statements, which are only intelligible after a certain level of reflection. Hence he argues that in such cases reflection destroys knowledge (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 148), rather than showing it to not have been true knowledge in the first place. It is unclear to me how ‘thick’ terms are supposed to be action-guiding if they cannot be somehow brought into relation to ought-statements; and it is unclear to me how reflection is supposed to undermine our use of certain ‘thick’ terms at all if they are not inherently normative in the first instance. (That is, if the term “womanly” is not connected with a sense that *ceteris paribus* one ought not to be womanly, then what objection to that term is reflection supposed to reveal?) However, for the purposes of this section I do not need to suppose any specific connection between ‘thick’ terms and actions or motivations or attitudes or normative propositions. My argument in a nutshell is: If ‘thick’ terms have any practical aspect as part of their meaning, then practical questions could arise for this practical aspect, and these would not be answered by reference to the objective standards fixing their extension, even if these objective standards involve valuation. Recently Debbie Roberts has argued that ‘thick’ evaluative terms do not necessarily imply any ‘thin’ evaluation (Roberts, “It’s Evaluation, Only Thicker”), and Dancy has argued that “we should allow that thick concepts are, or at least can be, both multi-attitude concepts (expressing a mix of attitudes at once, most of which will be neither pro nor con—think of the embarrassment associated with even acceptable instances of lewdness) and variable in their practical relevance” (Dancy, “Practical Concepts”, 45). I do not go into the complexities of this debate here, as I am only concerned with the use made of ‘thick’ concepts within the Wittgensteinian moral realist tradition, and I only hope to establish a very general structural point: insofar as the application of ‘thick’ concepts is thought to deliver answers to practical questions such as *what we should do* or *what attitude* we should take, these answers themselves can come into *question*, and the objectivity provided by the “world-guided” aspects of ‘thick’ terms is then not enough to answer these practical questions.

It might be objected that, while our shared sensibility might deliver a determinate enough extension such that it is actually simply a fact whether or not something is comical, nonetheless the derivation of this extension from the shared sensibility should undermine the claim that these facts are in any way *objective*. It is at this point that Lovibond, Crary and McDowell all point us to Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language⁴⁷¹. If Wittgenstein has shown that every use of every concept, even "+2", rests on some ultimately uncodifiable shared sensibility, then there should be no particular problem accepting the potential objectivity of 'thick' terms. But here again it seems awkward to argue from a view of language in general to some specific issue in moral discourse. We could put the problem this way: if the lesson of late Wittgenstein is supposed to be that all language is 'thick', then this undermines the attempt to appeal to a *specific* class of 'thick' terms in moral philosophy. (This consequence might be perfectly amenable to Crary's project of going "beyond moral judgment", but it seems antithetical to the use that Lovibond and McDowell make of 'thick' terms.) It does not seem to be the case, however, that all language is action-guiding or attitude-guiding in the moral sense — though I have argued that all language could in principle be given a moral use. If on the other hand there is some difference between the way that language in general relies on a shared sensibility and the way that 'thick' terms are internally related to attitudes, then whatever this difference is, it might turn out to *make* a difference, and we cannot assume that the issue of objectivity is resolved by an appeal to the nature of language in general.

In the notes that are available on Wittgenstein's Lectures on Aesthetics, we find:

Suppose I talked of the deterioration of the style of living. Someone asks: "What do you mean by deterioration?" I describe, give examples. You use 'deterioration' on the one hand to describe a particular kind of development, on the other hand to express disapproval. I may join it up with things I like; you with the things you dislike. But the word may be used without any affective element; you use it to describe a particular kind of thing that happened. It was more like a technical term — possibly, though not at all necessarily, with a derogatory element in it. You may say in protest, when I talk of deterioration: "But this was very good." I say: "All right. But this wasn't what I was talking about. I used it to describe a particular kind of development."
(LC 10f.)

He is not denying here that every use of concepts relies in some sense on a shared sensibility; but this does not mean that "deterioration", even when used correctly, binds the person to a certain attitude. He does not deny that a typical attitude of disapproval or derogation forms a part of the background of the term's sense; but this does not settle what *I* make of the word. I might make use

⁴⁷¹ See Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 11-39; McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 203-12.

of its descriptive capacities without committing myself to any evaluation or to any affective reaction; and I might join the term with entirely different attitudes.

In her essay “Losing Your Concepts” Diamond writes:

To this point I now want to add that, although the terms we use will have a place in a network of evaluative thought, to participate in the life in which the terms are used does not mean that one must share those evaluations. There is an illuminating discussion of that point by Maskell in the essay I cited earlier. He writes in criticism of Bentham’s argument that, the word ‘lust’ being associated with disapprobation, we need a ‘neutral’ term for the same motive (‘sexual desire’ was Bentham’s suggestion). Against this, Maskell writes that when the word ‘lust’ was alive as a serious condemnation it was also, and therefore, equally alive as serious praise. When it was available to say

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action

you could also say with it,

And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.

We have lost the capacity to use the word ‘lust’ with the conviction exemplified in Shakespeare’s sonnet. [...] we think of ourselves as having gained (through the coming into use of a term like ‘sexual desire’) the capacity to look at sexual desire as a fact and to decide for ourselves how to judge it. We do not see the issue as Maskell does: have we lost the conceptual life in which both Shakespeare’s and Marvell’s evaluations could be weighty, could belong to orderings of human experience beyond what is possible for us in our depleted vocabulary?⁴⁷²

There is a clear difference between the neutral term “sexual desire” and the ‘thick’ term “lust”. But this difference is not necessarily a difference in extension; in fact she seems to tacitly accept that they are co-extensional or at least is not worried about whether our evaluative sensibility drives the extension of the latter term. We had a different life with the term “lust”, due to its place in the network of evaluative thought, and her essay is concerned with the question of what we lose when we lose concepts. Roughly it would seem that “lust” was something greatly significant in one way or another, while “sexual desire” means less to us. She is opposing a picture in which we are now freed to decide, as private persons, which attitude we wish to join up with “sexual desire”. If we are all free to attitudinize upon the term as we please, then it does not have the same weight for us as

⁴⁷² Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts”, 267f.

“lust” once did — since it is now a matter of individual prerogative — and *that* attitude, the attitude that “lust” is a greatly significant matter, is no longer available. We might decide to disapprove of it or to commend it, but we can no longer do so with the same depth of conviction. It has become a lesser thing for us. But she does not believe that the term “lust”, when it was in currency, determined particular attitudes of disapproval, commendation, etc. on the part of every individual. (Nor does she deny that the term “lust” could have been used on occasion with clinical detachment; and she does not deny that the term “sexual desire” could be given new life. But to give it new life would be a great achievement of the imagination and not a private decision.)

Blackburn criticizes the realist deployment of ‘thickness’ in similar terms:

It is actually extremely difficult to say *which* attitude, if any, is fixed as part of the literal meaning of most of these terms. If Amanda and Clive set up house, something would lie behind my describing them as yuppies, but what exactly? I suggest that there is no stable connection between any single attitude and such a term. Rather, the social phenomena that give rise to it permit a wide variety of responses. Even if a term is introduced as a derogatory term, it can be washed cleaner: we refuse to be coerced by usage into accepting an attitude. Even a term of deliberate abuse stands ready to be orphaned. [...] The choice of term is *significant*, but this is not to say that there is just one thing [one attitude], still less a linguistically certified thing, that it signifies. [...] This is why instead of claiming that the concept [‘lewdness’] is not thick, I could put my point by saying that it is too thick: it carries such a complex drapery of religious, cultural, and ritual history that thinking of it as tied to just one attitude is impossible. No single layer of its drapery is to be given the privilege of being essential.⁴⁷³

Moral judgments *can* take the form of descriptive statements; and they can take the form of descriptions driven entirely by a moral sensibility rather than any non-moral factual criteria, as in the case of “The world is a miracle” or “I am safe, nothing can injure me.” I have also discussed the cases where descriptions of humanity that are not derived from factual criteria can have a moral sense. Insofar as writers such as McDowell and Lovibond wish to count ‘thick’ descriptors such as *cruel*, *courageous* etc. among our repertoire of moral resources, this is commendable. But the phenomenon of ‘thickness’ does not alter the problem of objectivity at all; we certainly cannot secure moral objectivity through semantic meaning. But this has too often been the intent of the appeal to ‘thick’ concepts, starting even with Foot’s 1958 “Moral Arguments” where she hoped to show that “it is laid down that some things do, and some things do not, count in favour of a moral conclusion”.⁴⁷⁴ Once more to suppose that the existence of the term closes all moral questions is to

⁴⁷³ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 137-9.

⁴⁷⁴ Foot, “Moral Arguments”, 99.

ignore the phenomenon of moral creativity. Even if I am fully at home in my culture and use all its ‘thick’ terms unironically to express myself, the expressive possibilities are very open. This is seen by Ivan’s argument against God in *The Brothers Karamazov*. He accepts the existence of God, and argues that he cannot accept a world in which children suffer — even if it is all part of God’s plan, even if it is all somehow necessary for the great harmony to come in the afterlife, he refuses to accept it. For many believers it is surely analytic that God is good and that if God made the world then the world is good. But Ivan is well educated and quite fluent in the use of Christian language — we can hardly hope to show that what *he* does with this language is simply erroneous. It is hard to avoid Blackburn’s conclusion that “the usual notion of thickness, where attitude is cemented by convention, is the horrid offspring of marrying a Wittgensteinian picture of thought to a simple attachment to analyticities that the picture in fact undermines.”⁴⁷⁵

5.5.1 The separability of fact and value

Those who see ‘thickness’ as an argument for moral realism are quite emphatic that there cannot be evaluatively or attitudinally neutral terms with the same extension as thick terms. If I can only pick out what acts are ‘courageous’ through my awareness of the evaluative sensibility — if the extension cannot be given in terms of any evaluatively neutral criteria — then there could also be no term that served the descriptive function but did not carry the evaluation with it. I have been arguing that even for those who are fully at home in their own culture and society and not at all alienated from that culture’s repertoire of ‘thick’ terms could nonetheless use these terms in quite various ways to express various possible attitudes; and Wittgenstein claims that he could be using the term “deterioration” purely as a technical term. But the case of those who are alienated or simply alien is much clearer. It is typically conceded that one does not need to *believe* in the pertinent evaluations to determine the extension of a ‘thick’ term — one simply has to “grasp imaginatively its evaluative point”⁴⁷⁶. Thus it would be possible for an outsider with sufficient sensitivity and imagination to understand how to use the term — though if they did not come to share the evaluative sensibility, they would not think that an act is *courageous*, for example, *in propria persona* but rather that it is ‘*courageous*’. And it is possible for those who have grown up within a culture to become alienated in one way or another and cease to use certain ‘thick’ terms, without thereby losing their *ability* to determine the extension. (I grew up in a culture where various

⁴⁷⁵ Blackburn, *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 140.

⁴⁷⁶ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 142. McDowell’s target is the idea that “one would be able to predict applications and withholdings of it [the value concept] in new cases — not merely without oneself sharing the community’s admiration (there need be no difficulty about that), but without even embarking on an attempt to make sense of their admiration.” (McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 201f.)

homophobic ‘thick’ terms were used, and I would have no trouble nowadays saying *how* they would be applied.)

Lovibond writes that “it is far from self-evident that we ‘could have’ an array of evaluatively neutral words with precisely the same extensions as our current moral concepts. We have no business to assume that the individual language-learner could grasp the unifying principle which brings together various phenomena under the concept of ‘courage’, unless at the same time certain systematic feelings of respect, admiration, etc. were being imparted to him.”⁴⁷⁷ This would rule out the possibility of an outsider coming to understand how to use ‘thick’ terms, except perhaps through an arduous process of reeducation⁴⁷⁸. But she allows for the possibility of alienated insiders: “We can grant that, as Wittgenstein puts it (*OC* §160), ‘doubt comes after belief’, and hence that the possibility of using moral words in Hare’s ‘inverted-commas’ sense is dependent on some prior experience of their naive use.”⁴⁷⁹ But then we *can* obviously have “an array of evaluatively neutral words with precisely the same extensions as our current moral concepts” — ‘*courageous*’ has the same extension as *courageous*, ‘*ladylike*’ has the same extension as *ladylike*, etc. These terms could perhaps never be in general circulation; the term ‘*ladylike*’ only has any point relative to a community who uses the term *ladylike*. Nonetheless this is enough to make the fact/value distinction perfectly intelligible. The shared linguistic standards of a community could underwrite the fact that someone is ‘*ladylike*’, which that community would express by saying that someone is *ladylike*; but the shared linguistic standards of the community could not possibly establish by themselves that someone really is *ladylike*. The community’s valuations are first and foremost facts and not values. (That someone values something is a fact and not a value.)

Lovibond acknowledges this point; she writes that Wittgenstein’s later “still displays a conviction that empirical value, ‘if it did exist, ... would have no value.’ For it shows us that the mere existence of a language-game in which moral facts are recorded is not enough to endow our life with meaning. The only thing which could do that would be the advent of a moral language-game which was expressive of ourselves.”⁴⁸⁰ Lovibond does not seem to acknowledge that this point undermines the framing of her project, i.e. that the expressivist tradition rests only on an erroneous metaphysics and/or an empiricist view of language, and that the shared communal standards of valuation render ethical discourse precisely as objective as any other discourse. And her allowance that there might

⁴⁷⁷ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination*, 160.

⁴⁷⁸ Though in the footnote 4 on this page she concedes this possibility as well.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

be less “intellectual authority” in our moral discourse is again beside the point. Self-expression does not just pick up the slack when our communal ethical standards fail to provide fully determinate answers to every problem. If the ethical standards of my community entirely determined every aspect of my life, I could still find myself asking what these standards mean to me. And if Lovibond is right that I continually bear responsibility for the standards of my community whenever I use my community’s ethical language, then those standards always leave me with an open ethical question; they cannot be presumed to objectively answer that question.

Moreover we do not need to rely on the ironic use of ‘thick’ terms. Someone might use the terms of his community unironically and yet fail to be invested in them the way someone else is, without for that reason being alienated. Gaita’s discussion of racism brings out this point. It is not, on his view, essential to racism that the racist holds the empirical belief that those of the othered race are in fact less intelligent, have less self-control, etc. The racist might fail to fully acknowledge the humanity of others without being mistaken in any belief; his acknowledgment simply fails to “go deep”. It is Gaita’s practice to mark this distinction using scare quotes: “‘They’ can do and feel almost everything we can except not as we do, not as deeply we do. We grieve, but they ‘grieve’, we are joyful, they are ‘joyful’, we love and they ‘love’, we feel remorse, they feel ‘remorse’ and so on.”⁴⁸¹

But the racist would not necessarily use these scare quotes. The racist might acknowledge that the other *suffers* and does not just ‘suffer’, that they have *thoughts* and not just ‘thoughts’, etc.; but I take it that Gaita’s talk of the racist acknowledgment not ‘going deep’ means to indicate that these facts mean a lot less to the racist in the case of the ‘other’ race, that they lack any force for him. Hence the list of the facts that people acknowledge could make a difference in ethical vision invisible.⁴⁸² There is no reason to think that this couldn’t or doesn’t happen with the ‘thick’ terms of a community — people might apply them more or less as purely descriptive technical terms even without attaching scare quotes. And as Gaita also notes, a good number of people nowadays seem to use the words *moral* or *morality* in some purely descriptive sense⁴⁸³ — one might say “but that’s a moral objection” as a way of putting the objection aside as irrelevant, for example.

For this reason Diamond’s discussion of our “life” with concepts is far more pertinent than any discussion about the extension of those concepts and whether the extension is driven by any extent

⁴⁸¹ Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 63.

⁴⁸² I am indebted here to Donatelli’s reflections on the “invisibility” of ethics in “Wittgenstein: Pictures, Concepts, and Moral Thought”.

⁴⁸³ See Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, xv.

moral sensibility. Diamond feels that the concept of the “human” is “of the greatest significance in moral thought”⁴⁸⁴ — it is clearly, for her, both *world-guided* and *action-guiding*. She concedes that *homo sapiens* and her moral notion of *human* are extensionally equivalent⁴⁸⁵; and *homo sapiens* is obviously not action-guiding in the way her moral notion of *human* is. This is because our sense of what it means to be human is part of the moral notion of *human*. In other words, the sorting of objects into human and non-human is the easy bit, and in both biology and morality it is governed by relatively uncontested communal standards. I have suggested that what it means to be human is essentially contestable, and no answer to that question is made objective by any extant linguistic standards. “Part of the difficulty here is that we think of learning to use a term as learning to follow the rules for that use; we think of language in terms of rules fixing what can and cannot be done. But the most essential thing about language is that it is not fixed in that way. Learning to use a term is coming into life with that term, whose possibilities are to a great extent to be made. The possibility of making sense as Marvell did is dependent on what life with ‘lust’ was like before the composition of that poem, but it is also dependent on Marvell’s own activity.”⁴⁸⁶ Of course what we make of the term’s possibilities might also end up changing its extension, but this shouldn’t be particularly interesting for any investigation of our moral life.

Diamond sees the discussion of thick concepts as a distraction from the important philosophical tasks: “If we merely add the possibility of *such* concepts to the kinds recognized in linguistic philosophy, we still miss a central point: that grasping a concept (even one like that of a human being, which is a descriptive concept if any are) is not a matter just of knowing how to group things under that concept; it is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept.”⁴⁸⁷ And the issue does seem to distract Lovibond — she focusses exclusively on the question of whether a term that a community uses to guide action has an objective extension; when she arrives at the questions that are not answered by the fact of this extension, such as whether I can in good conscience express myself with these concepts, she has no notion of objectivity left. One gets the impression that for her there is simply nothing to be said about what makes any answer to this question better or worse.

⁴⁸⁴ Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts”, *Ethics*, 264.

⁴⁸⁵ An objection from Gunnarsson reminds me to add that the terms do not *need* to remain extensionally equivalent, as the extension of Diamond’s moral notion of the *human* is not tied to the extension of *homo sapiens* except by a moral sensibility that groups together all *homo sapiens* for moral purposes, and that *could* evolve into a different grouping. If for example we came into contact with the Moral Twin Earthers in Horgan and Timmons’ thought-experiment, it is conceivable that they would not count as *homo sapiens* by biological criteria but would be instantly be recognized by us as *human*. See 6.2 for a discussion of this point.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

(This is different from the ‘quietist’ position I discuss below, according to which there is not very much to be said *in general*, apart from specific cases, about these questions.) In contrast, this is one of the central concerns in Diamond’s work: the way that these questions call on “capacities which are not narrowly intellectual, but neither are they a matter of mere ‘feeling.’ [...] a responsiveness involving the whole mind.”⁴⁸⁸

It is worth noting again what Lovibond gets right, however. As Diamond clearly states, these questions are not merely questions of “feeling”. The moral notion of the *human* does not combine the extension of *homo sapiens* with a certain attitude — at least not if we read “attitude” as a sentiment or an emotional reaction. If one person calls something “tawdry” as a way of condemning it, and another calls it “tawdry” in a purely technical sense as a way of characterizing it without any evaluative implications, the difference need not be found in any particular feeling or in any act of the will that occurs in the one person and not in the other. The difference might only be found in general circumstances of the utterances and in the way that the two people live with those concepts. Both utterances are equally descriptive; and both are expressive, in different ways, of a certain way of living. They need not be expressive of any item in anyone’s head. In this regard Lovibond’s account is superior to a traditional form of expressivism such as Blackburn’s, which looks to specific items in the speakers’ psychology in order to distinguish moral meaning from purely descriptive meaning.⁴⁸⁹

5.6 McDowell’s “sensibility theory”

McDowell has been credited with developing a “sensibility theory” in metaethics, along with David Wiggins, and he has frequently rested it on Wittgensteinian considerations, particularly in defending it against Blackburn’s quasi-realism and Mackie’s error theory. Although his idea can look very similar to Blackburn’s quasi-realism, it is generally thought to represent a form of moral realism⁴⁹⁰.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 274f. Strictly speaking Diamond is talking here about the “significance of conceptual change” at the societal level, rather than an individual’s reflection on whether she can speak using the concepts of her culture and society.

⁴⁸⁹ The way that Blackburn’s specific formulation of expressivism in terms of the expression of particular mental states runs contrary to Wittgenstein’s work comes out most explicitly perhaps in his lamenting the “hostility to psychologism” in the “Fregean tradition in semantics” — see *Practical Tortoise Raising*, 145.

⁴⁹⁰ McDowell seems to position himself on the side of “ethical realism” in “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, *Mind, Value and Reality* 186. Elsewhere however he describes his position as “anti-non-cognitivism” (*Mind, Value and Reality* 213). In a response to Honneth he notes his dissatisfaction with the label “realism”, writing: “All I have aimed to do in the direction of ‘moral realism,’ in my writings about ethics, is to counter bad reasons for supposing that the idea of attaining truth— getting things right—is unavailable in the context of ethical thinking.” (Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell*, 300) Wiggins likewise refers to “anti-non-cognitivism” in *Needs, Values, Truth*, p. 106. In his survey of

It can be quite difficult to identify what exactly the position is; one could see it as an inchoate version of Lovibond's project, and to that extent my criticisms of Lovibond could be applied to McDowell. (In particular, his emphasis on a shared sensibility brings the danger that "in McDowell's development there is no room for the concept of moral truth which allows that a man who dissents from the herd may yet be right"⁴⁹¹, or that in the truly interesting "hard cases" which our shared sensibility underdetermines, he has no notions of correctness or objectivity left, as Blackburn charges.) However, there is another way of reading McDowell that brings out the strengths of realism without running into the same problems. McDowell is known for defending the thesis that values are analogous to secondary qualities in that they are objective features of the world that can be 'perceived' broadly speaking, even though they are only intelligible in light of our contingent human sensibility — they are objective but anthropocentric, in Wiggins' terms⁴⁹². I can allow myself to say that something *really* is red — it isn't really brown that I'm seeing in a poor light — even though the ascription of this predicate only makes sense in a community of speakers with the human visual apparatus, and is not intelligible to just any hypothesized rational creatures. Though McDowell acknowledges important differences between color-ascriptions and value-ascriptions, the case of color-ascription is meant to show that objectivity does not exclude dependence on human sensibility. A person habituated into an ethical sensibility will 'see' situations as calling for certain actions or responses, McDowell argues — "In moral upbringing what one learns is not to behave in conformity with rules of conduct, but to see situations in a special light, as constituting reasons for acting"⁴⁹³ — and this way of seeing the situation can fully determine and explain our action, without any need to suppose the intervening step of a desire, sentiment, or act of the will. And like Lovibond and Diamond in their separate ways, he appeals not to some universally given human nature (as one might do in explicating color-ascriptions) but to what we have made of our humanity — the sensibility is a product of *second nature* or culture; that is to say, while it is part of our human nature to have a culture, nonetheless "[a]ny actual second nature is a cultural product".⁴⁹⁴ Here I begin by examining the implications of his way of understanding the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge, i.e. that a virtuous person's way of understanding situations is inherently practical and does not need to be supplemented by

contemporary metaethics Miller includes a chapter on "McDowell's Moral Realism", see Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 243-283.

⁴⁹¹ See Blackburn, "Following a Rule and Ethics", 171. Blackburn's objection might simply be a valid critique of McDowell. In chapters three and four I have tried to show that we can conceive the form of life or shared sensibility as an essentially contestable object and account in that way for its authority while at the same time preserving the legitimacy of individual dissent from the "herd" and individual improvisation in hard cases. In 5.5.3 I try to read McDowell charitably along these lines.

⁴⁹² See for example Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 101.

⁴⁹³ McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 85.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

independent affective or orectic states or events. In a second section I show how much of the difference between Blackburn's position and McDowell's — between one kind of anti-realism and one kind of realism — comes down to the difference between a *sensibility*, properly understood, and a *sentiment*. A third section turns to the problem of objectivity and justification in morals, which is where McDowell's account differs from Lovibond's.

5.6.1 Virtue is knowledge

I would like to bracket out for now the question of whether the 'knowledge' McDowell identifies with virtue could ever be *actual* knowledge, i.e. whether sufficient justification is possible, to focus instead on the question of whether moral thought takes the form of a purported perception or cognition rather than taking the form of, say, an emotional reaction to a perception. McDowell offers the rough outlines of an argument to this conclusion from our moral practice, namely that actions do not count as virtuous if some extra incentive is needed to spur the action over and above the perception of the demands of the situation: "...the requirement imposed by the situation, and detected by the agent's sensitivity to such requirements, must exhaust his reason for acting as he does. It would disqualify an action from counting as a manifestation of kindness if its agent needed some extraneous incentive to comply with the requirement — say, the rewards of a good reputation."⁴⁹⁵ Of course these requirements are only there to be seen by the agent in the situation, alongside the more empirical facts, if the agent has had the corresponding ethical upbringing, which means "the acquisition, simultaneously, of a way of seeing things and of a collection of motivational directions or practical concerns, focused and activated in particular cases by exercises of the way of seeing things."⁴⁹⁶ There are two points we should note. Firstly, McDowell's view shares a certain structural similarity with expressivism. Expressivism is born with the notion that while only sentiments can explain how moral judgment works, nonetheless they play no role in the content of our moral judgments; we are not (typically) thinking about ourselves in thinking morally. And McDowell holds that the "collection of motivational directions" we acquire, for example, enables us to perceive certain moral requirements, but this does not enter into the content of our perceptions or judgments, at least not in typical cases; moral thought is anthropocentric yet fully world-directed rather than self-directed. Secondly, the ethical upbringing shapes the person as a whole and hence all of their faculties together; it brings them to see situations in certain ways in giving their will and emotional dispositions a certain shape. It is a kind of amalgamation of cognitive, affective and orectic formation, variously referred to in his writings as "second nature",

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 101.

“sensibility”, or an “evaluative point of view”. He writes, for example: “In acquiring one’s second nature — that is, in acquiring *logos* — one learned to take a distinctive pleasure in acting in certain ways, and one acquired conceptual equipment suited to characterize a distinctive worthwhileness one learned to see in such actions, that is, a distinctive range of reasons one learned to see for acting in those ways.”⁴⁹⁷ Again he could not be arguing that every virtuous action is taken for the sake of a distinctive pleasure; rather, only someone who is capable of this distinctive pleasure can see a situation as calling for certain things to be done. McDowell does not wish to deny any role to desire or sentiment, but rather to insist that for someone who has been formed by their ethical upbringing, we do not need to suppose a separate desire or emotion at work in every virtuous action or every moral judgment; the person’s ‘view’ of the situation exhausts their moral reasons.

The thesis that virtue is knowledge leads McDowell to deny the possibility of weakness of will, as Socrates did, insisting that no-one could see a situation as the virtuous person does yet fail to act virtuously. Since this represents a very interesting overreach of his position, it is worth looking at the argument in detail. He sees himself threatened by

the following possibility: a person’s perception of a situation may precisely match what a virtuous person’s perception of it would be, although he does not act as the virtuous person would. But if a perception that corresponds to the virtuous person’s does not call forth a virtuous action from this non-virtuous person, then the virtuous person’s matching perception — the deliverances of his sensitivity — cannot, after all, fully account for the virtuous action that it does elicit from him. Whatever is missing, in the case of the person who does not act virtuously, must be present as an extra component, over and above the deliverance of the sensitivity, in a complete specification of the reason why the virtuous person acts as he does. [...] If we are to retain the identification of virtue with knowledge, then, by contraposition, we are committed to denying that a virtuous person’s perception of a situation can be precisely matched in someone who, in that situation, acts otherwise than virtuously.⁴⁹⁸

Now McDowell is arguing for more here than a generic realist needs. The Open Question was whether the facts answer the question of *what to do*, for example, not whether the facts or knowledge of the facts by itself could actually *get* someone to do something, which is surely an empirical question and not a question of moral rationality. The generic realist must claim something along the lines of: the facts by themselves entail the truth of what we should do, and *can* in principle, perhaps even reliably, determine the will to corresponding action. But they do not need to suppose that the facts correspondingly determine the will in every case. And if we bracket out for

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 54.

now the philosophical pressures within McDowell's own thought driving him to take this line, on a commonsensical level we have no reason to deny that a person might know perfectly well what they must do and simply panic and run away. McDowell thinks that cases we would normally classify as *akrasia* must be cases of clouded moral perception; "his appreciation of what he perceives is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise."⁴⁹⁹ But why shouldn't we be able to imagine someone with flawless appreciation and perception of the moral demands of the situation who simply finds themselves fleeing when they know they should stand their ground? There must be a way of taking on McDowell's point that "the relevant conceptions are not so much as possessed except by those whose wills are influenced appropriately"⁵⁰⁰ without understanding the point so rigidly as to suppose that any single action contrary to virtue shows the agent to lack that conception. (If in fact McDowell makes a formation of the will a *background condition* of the corresponding moral perception, as I read him, then one should be able to easily accommodate a looser connection between perception and individual actions.)

Moreover McDowell seems to slip into a false dichotomy in the quotation above: "But if a perception that corresponds to the virtuous person's does not call forth a virtuous action from this non-virtuous person, then the virtuous person's matching perception — the deliverances of his sensitivity — cannot, after all, fully account for the virtuous action that it does elicit from him. Whatever is missing, in the case of the person who does not act virtuously, must be present as an extra component, over and above the deliverance of the sensitivity, in a complete specification of the reason why the virtuous person acts as he does." If we allow by stipulation that a person A perceives virtuously and acts accordingly, and that another person B perceives virtuously but fails to act virtuously, then something in the circumstances must be different; it does not follow that person A is the bearer of any extra component. It could be that B displays an extra component of panic, for example, that is lacking in A; or the surrounding circumstances could differ in any number of conceivable ways. All that McDowell should need for his anti-non-cognitivism is to show that a virtuous person's specific perception or conception of a situation *can* determine them to virtuous action by itself, not that it *does* so with machine-like predictability.⁵⁰¹

It is worth looking at a subtle passage of Wiggins' on the alleged need for a "commitment" as an extra item giving any cognitive belief its moral or motivational force:

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁰¹ Wiggins makes a roughly similar point in "Moral Cognitivism", 81-3.

[...] one might wonder how someone could come to the point of recognizing or even suspecting that it was God's purpose that he should be a composer (say) and yet be indifferent to that. Surely no extra anything, over and above some suspicion that this or that is God's purpose, is required to create the concern we should expect to find that that suspicion would have implanted in him. On the other hand, if this extra thing were supplied, as an extra, then it would bring too much. For the commitment to submission seems to exclude rebellion; and rebellion against what is taken as God's purpose has never been excluded by the religious attitude as such.⁵⁰²

In one case we might imagine, a person comes to see that it was God's purpose that he should be a composer, develops an expected "concern", let us suppose the concern to dedicate his life to composing, and then carries this out. We can concede there might be no "extra anything" needed to explain this sequence; the recognition clearly can have a moral force for this person without the advent of any independent desire or emotion. Wiggins is here concerned with the question of "the meaning of life" and not with immediate questions of action. In fact he also imagines a case of someone whose actions diverge, someone who recognizes God's purpose for him and yet rebels. Wiggins is perhaps thinking that anyone who has this cognition has to also take it to matter greatly, to be of momentous significance, even if the course of action is not fully determined by it; no-one could be indifferent to it. It is unclear what Wiggins means by "rebellion", whether he is imagining pride and stubbornness or considered disagreement. It is easy to imagine a second case of someone who sees God's purpose for himself and takes it to matter greatly, but fails to act accordingly, out of pride or perversity or, say, alcoholism, or any number of other causes. We could perhaps imagine a third case of someone who recognizes God's purposes and then, after thinking about it, *decides* to commit. This would substantially alter the character of their faith as well as the character of their eventual submissions and their corresponding actions. As Nussbaum writes: "To the extent to which it is appropriate to say of a principle or belief that it is optional for us, to that extent it is not deep in our lives."⁵⁰³ And we could perhaps imagine a fourth case, someone who sees God's purpose and simply disagrees, as in the case of Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan is not concerned with God's purpose *for him*, but the case could easily be modified. Ivan argues at great length that he believes in the existence of God but cannot accept the world God has made, since it is a world in which children suffer. After reciting a catalogue of stories of tortured children, he says that he does not care what God's purpose is, he does not care if it is all somehow necessary for a great cosmic harmony, etc. Ivan could be described as "indifferent" in a sense to God's purpose. In McDowell's terms we might say: he would have cared greatly about it, but the torturing of innocent children simply *silences* God's purpose as a consideration of any weight at all.⁵⁰⁴ (Of course it

⁵⁰² Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 90f.

⁵⁰³ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 225.

⁵⁰⁴ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 306-321.

could also not possibly help him to be told that it is ‘part of the meaning of the word “God”’ that His creation is good.) We can describe the differences between these four cases in terms of “commitment” without supposing this “commitment” to be any explicit act of the will or any separate mental item; the differences in the way they go on from their recognition of God’s purpose is a difference in their commitments that is part and parcel of a difference in their belief, in what their belief amounts to. Hence we can take on the thesis that a person’s cognition of a situation can be the whole of their moral judgment and move them to action without any extra affective or orective element, without denying that the entire expressivist vocabulary of affect, commitment, etc. might be needed to characterize the cognition itself or at the very least the background conditions that enable that cognition.

McDowell’s most well-known article is perhaps “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following”; this is one of his central engagements with Blackburn and seems to display two features that are central to Lovibond’s work, 1) a focus on the case of ‘thick’ concepts, and 2) what looks like a global argument from late Wittgensteinian considerations about language in general to the rejection of expressivism as an account of moral discourse specifically. These two features are however arguably anomalies for him. A more typical example is: “You don’t know what it means to be shy and sensitive”, as a consideration raised against bullying and ostracism, where we are asked to note that “the language used to express a special reason-constituting conception of a situation need not be explicitly evaluative”⁵⁰⁵. If someone is nonetheless distracted by the terms shy and sensitive, which might be thought to be ‘thick’ terms, we could look to statements along the lines of “You don’t know what it’s like to be a minority” or perhaps “you don’t know what it’s like to lose someone you love” or “you don’t know what it’s like to be alone”, etc. McDowell notes that “[f]ailure to see what a circumstance means, in the loaded sense, is of course compatible with competence, by all ordinary tests, with the language used to describe the circumstance”⁵⁰⁶. Hence the communal standards or communal agreement in judgments that would determine the application of concepts such as “shy” and “sensitive” leaves the moral question unanswered, which is really a question of the way these things matter, of their significance. We might recall here Wittgenstein’s discussion of seeing-as; if two people looking at the drawing of the duck-rabbit only see a duck and a rabbit respectively, are they seeing the same thing or different things? Wittgenstein answers that there seem to be two different uses of the word “seeing” here (*PU* II p. 518); similarly we might say that there are two different uses of the word “knowing”, that while two people might know equally

⁵⁰⁵ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 85f.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

well in one sense what it is to be shy and sensitive, in another sense the bully doesn't fully know what it is. Gaita draws an analogous distinction between knowing that someone is a human and fully acknowledging their humanity; Alyosha Karamazov might arguably be working with a similar distinction when he says to Ivan, "You don't believe in God"⁵⁰⁷. If we take the realm of the factual to be the realm of what can in principle be established by shared methods or standards or at least by our natural "agreement in judgments", then this sense of knowing what something means takes us beyond the factual; here again it is careful attention to the phenomena of our moral life, rather than metaphysics, that brings us to the fact/value distinction. And this undermines the possibility of Lovibond's style of global argument for moral realism. If all correct application of concepts lives from nothing more than an "agreement in judgments" or from our sharing the same "whirl of organism", then this will also be true of the application of concepts such as *shy* and *sensitive* by ordinary standards; but McDowell makes it clear that this by itself does not settle the moral question, which calls for a more personal response, perhaps a greater effort of empathy and imagination, or even becoming a different person. Moreover many of McDowell's own formulations of the evaluative sensibility can be given a reading that directly references the fact/value distinction. His talk of "a conception of how things are" which "suffices on its own to show us the favourable light in which the actions appeared" can be read as distinguishing between *how things are* and *how* "how things are" *is conceived*; the notion of "a colouring of the agent's view of the world", which he classifies as a "cognitive state", could be read as allowing for the same world to be differently coloured by different agents.⁵⁰⁸ In this case, our ordinary factual knowledge of how things are might not be able to display the differences in moral vision. This is not very far removed from the early Wittgensteinian thesis that the complete description of the world would not contain any statement of value. (As I suggested in chapter three, we have gone beyond early Wittgenstein's view in holding that there are many different ways of *describing* the world that are not reducible to factual criteria, and that the characterization of *what it means to be shy and sensitive* could count as a description of the world in some sense; but this does not ultimately undermine a fact/value distinction that is immanent to moral thought.)

McDowell's account of how we reason about these questions of meaning and go about trying to persuade others is essentially Wittgenstein's notion of perspicuous presentation, though he does not

⁵⁰⁷ Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 341. Wittgenstein wrote in a journal entry: "Wenn Du mit Gott rechten willst, so heißt das, Du hast einen falschen Begriff von Gott, Du bist in einem Aberglauben. Du hast einen unrichtigen Begriff, wenn Du auf das Schicksal erzürnt bist. Du sollst Deine Begriffe umstellen. Zufriedenheit mit Deinem Schicksal müßte das erste Gebot der Weisheit sein." (DB 96) I assume that Wittgenstein is speaking here from the perspective of faith, and not implying that one who argues with God is making the sort of ordinary linguistic error that could be cleared up by pointing them to a dictionary.

⁵⁰⁸ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 86-9.

use that term. He writes:

Conveying what a circumstance means, in this loaded sense, is getting someone to see it in the special way in which a virtuous person would see it. In the attempt to do so, one exploits contrivances similar to those one exploits in other areas where the task is to back up the injunction “See it like this”: helpful juxtapositions of cases, descriptions with carefully chosen terms and carefully placed emphasis, and the like. (Compare, for instance, what one might do and say to someone who says “Jazz sounds to me like a mess, a mere welter of uncoordinated noise.”) No such contrivances can be guaranteed success, in the sense that failure would show irrationality on the part of the audience. That, together with the importance of rhetorical skills to their successful deployment, sets them apart from the sorts of thing we typically regard as paradigms of argument.⁵⁰⁹

I have been arguing along similar lines in previous chapters. But then the general argument that discourses that are anthropocentric in the sense of depending upon human sensibility can still concern genuine features of reality does nothing to remove the particular difficulties of the idea of moral objectivity and moral rationality.

5.6.2 Sentiment and sensibility

Blackburn and McDowell have responded to each other’s work on several occasions, and while McDowell steadfastly opposes himself to Blackburn’s “projectivism”, Blackburn throughout seems unsure as to whether there is more than a notional difference between their positions.⁵¹⁰ There is a way of reading McDowell that aligns him formally with Blackburn, such that both positions display the same formal expressivist structure but refer to different conceptions of what gets expressed, a sensibility or a sentiment. This would explain why Blackburn feels unsure if there is any difference in their positions; when Blackburn refers to “attitudes” he is quite unconcerned to spell out in any detail what an “attitude” amounts to, and when he refers specifically to “sentiments” or “passions” he has almost nothing philosophical to say about these. Generally he seems content to point us in the general direction of affect and desire and then return to the semantic and logical issues that really interest him. For McDowell, however, the difference between sentiment and sensibility is crucial; a focus on sensibility, because of the sort of thing that a sensibility is, undermines the image of ethical thought as a “projection” and allows for a more substantial notion of objectivity in moral thought.

McDowell’s criticism of Blackburn is that sentiments cannot play the foundational role he gives

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 85f.

⁵¹⁰ See for example Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 170.

them. Since Blackburn is an expressivist rather than a subjective realist, he does not think that the existence of sentiments provide us with a foundation for our ethical judgments; generally our sentiments do not enter into the content of our moral thought at all. However, Blackburn's metaethical story about how value comes into a value-free world starts with the sentiments. More precisely, we start with a value-free world and humans' aversions and attractions to various parts of that world; these aversions and attractions then come to be seen 'in' the world itself. McDowell feels that this gives us a poor understanding of ethics, but he focuses on the point that it gives us a poor understanding of sentiments themselves. We cannot understand responses such as *fear* or *amusement* except in terms of the features of the world they respond to, *the fearful* or *the amusing*. No self-contained psychological state we could locate would count as *amusement* in the absence of some features of the world that could intelligibly be found genuinely amusing. "Surely it undermines a projective account of a concept if we cannot home in on the subjective state whose projection is supposed to result in the seeming feature of reality in question without the aid of the concept of that feature, the concept that was to be projectively explained."⁵¹¹ McDowell however does not take the full-blooded realist option of starting with a world already containing *the amusing* and *the fearful* and using those to explain our emotional responses. Here he turns to the so-called "no priority view": "the extra features are neither parents nor children of our sentiments, but — if we must find an apt metaphor from the field of kinship relations — siblings."⁵¹² And he formulates the view in terms of 'extra features' meriting certain responses: "The idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property that (although there in the object) is essentially subjective in much the same way as the property that an object is represented as having by an experience of redness—that is, understood adequately only in terms of the appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility. The disanalogy, now, is that a virtue (say) is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate "attitude" (as a colour is merely such as to cause the appropriate experiences), but rather such as to *merit* it."⁵¹³ While this formulation defines values entirely in terms of responses, the insertion of the idea of *merit* into that definition also means that these responses themselves cannot be fully understood except in terms of the standards set by the values.

If the critique of Blackburn is relatively clear, McDowell's own no-priority proposal is often felt to be less than entirely clear. For example one might suppose that if *value* is something that needs to be explained philosophically at all, surely this notion of *merit* is at least as obscure if not more so,

⁵¹¹ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 158.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

and that the explanation of value cannot rest on this unexplained notion of certain features meriting certain responses. Many suppose that this is just where McDowell's purported "quietism" kicks in, that is: for some reason or another he chooses to be quiet about this.

In fact McDowell can be read as offering a kind of explanation of this interdependency of response and value feature in terms of "sensitivity". The point is easier to see if we start with the closely associated position of Wiggins, since he is much clearer about it. In one of his defenses of moral anti-non-cognitivism he refers to Wittgenstein's remarks on mathematics as a possible model, and to what he describes as "Wittgenstein's extended description of how a continuing cumulative process of making or constructing can amount to the creation of a shared form of life that is constitutive of rationality itself, furnishing proofs that are not compulsions but procedures to guide our conceptions, explaining, without explaining away, our sense that sometimes we have no alternative but to infer this from that."⁵¹⁴ And while he shares McDowell's critique of projectivism, he is happy to allow that our moral life might have been cumulatively built up out of mere sentiments or desires:

[N]o attempt to make sense of the human condition can really succeed if it treats the objects of psychological states as unequal partners or derivative elements in the conceptual structure of values and states and their objects. [...] Surely an adequate account of these matters will have to treat psychological states and their objects as equal and reciprocal partners, and is likely to need to see the identifications of the states and of the properties under which the states subsume their objects as interdependent. [...] Surely it can be true both that we desire x because we think x good, and that x is good because x is such that we desire x. It does not count against this point that the explanation of the 'because' is different in each direction. [...] such desiring by human beings directed in this way is one part of what is required for there to be such a thing as the perspective from which the non-instrumental goodness of x is there to be perceived. [...] We may see a pillar-box as red because it is red. But also pillar-boxes, painted as they are, *count* as red only because there actually exists a perceptual apparatus (e.g. our own) that discriminates, and learns on the basis of experience to group together, all and only the actually red things. [...] But this in no way impugns the idea that redness is an external, monadic property of a postbox. 'Red postbox' is not short for 'red to human beings postbox'. [...] All the same, it is in one interesting sense a *relative* property. For the category of colour is an anthropocentric category.⁵¹⁵

The idea of two directions of explanation formally echoes Diamond's point that while we don't eat certain animals because they are pets, nonetheless they are also pets because (among other things) we don't eat them. I might find it wrong to eat dog-meat because of what a dog is — I am being

⁵¹⁴ Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 128.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106f. He discusses the general idea in greater detail in the "A Sensible Subjectivism?" in *Needs, Values, Truth*.

guided by the reality of dogs rather than by my own desires or commitments or actions; but this is consistent with the idea that *dog* or *pet* is in some sense a constructed object, at least insofar as it plays a role in our moral life beyond that of a biological or anthropological classification, and that what people generally do with and to these animals is part of what makes up that concept. Wiggins' proposal is that my recognition of the goodness of something can explain my attitudes and actions without positing some extra desire (hence "we desire x because we think x good"), and can serve as a corrective standard for my desires; in allowing this direction of explanation he is opposing Blackburn's projectivism and in particular the idea that the meaning of a moral judgment derives from the "attitude" present as a psychological state in the individual judger. But in allowing for the other direction of explanation ("x is good because x is such that we desire x") Wiggins goes along with Blackburn's general sense that the explanation of our moral thought does not need to start with anything more than a naturalistic world and humans' various affective and motivational responses to that world — that our moral practice does not require any other metaphysical premises. In fact Wiggins can entertain the possibility that our moral sensibility "has its first origin in a primitive system of responses scarcely more differentiated than *boo* and *hurrah* — just as the language of consciousness has sometimes been supposed to have its origin in the verbalization of reactions of striving towards things (*ooh*) or away from them (*ouch* etc)."⁵¹⁶ We could also tell the story with 'feelings' rather than desires, as he does in "A Sensible Subjectivism?". But there is no reason to restrict ourselves to either desires or sentiments in this account; we could also bring in the various practices that Diamond uses to elucidate our notion of the *human*. This might be particularly helpful in the context of McDowell's virtue ethics and his emphasis on the ethical upbringing that shapes our motivational and evaluative propensities, giving a "certain determinate non-formal shape" to the practical intellect.⁵¹⁷ We could then see that a variety of "attitudes" of diverse sorts — various desires, pleasures and sentiments we all share or that we all come to share and to cultivate in our children as well as various practices — might give rise to a shared vision of life that exists among us, that is essentially a part of our world rather than a psychological state or a set of states and that serves as a corrective to our psychological states, although of course it will cease to be real if it cannot actually motivate enough of us often enough. As Wiggins writes, "a system of anthropocentric properties and human responses has surely taken on a life of its own. Civilization has begun."⁵¹⁸ This story does give a foundational role to our "attitudes" in the broadest sense; the "no-priority view" only holds for psychological states and their objects within a working second nature.

⁵¹⁶ Wiggins, "Moral Cognitivism", 69f.

⁵¹⁷ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 184f.

⁵¹⁸ Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 195.

In this way we can arrive at a view that is expressivist in a broad sense, but avoids the psychologism of Blackburn's account and preserves a more sophisticated understanding of our moral life and our sentiments by modifying the sort of thing that gets expressed — a sensibility rather than a sentiment, for example⁵¹⁹. One problem with this way of framing Wiggins and McDowell's approach is that a "sensibility" in this sense is not exactly "a sort of thing" at all and thus rather hard to locate — there are no limits to the facets of our life we might need to call on to explain how things come to matter to us absolutely, so ultimately the item that gets expressed according to this approach might be nothing less than our whole human life. But the advantage of aligning the approach formally with expressivism is to bring out two central features that McDowell's approach shares with Blackburn's and that of other expressivists: 1) the aspects of our life expressed in moral judgments are in fact *expressed* and not described — motivational dispositions do not generally enter into the content of our judgments; and 2) this allows us to explain the possibility of criticizing and correcting moral judgments in the same way we explain moral judgments themselves. When Blackburn is asked whether just any emotion that anyone expresses produces a correct moral judgment, his answer is that of course someone might express an appalling emotion, but my judgment that the emotion is appalling is itself the expression of my emotion. Similarly, McDowell does not suppose that just any sensibility produced by any ethical upbringing is right; but my judgment that someone else's upbringing went horribly wrong will be the expression of my sensibility: "the necessary scrutiny does not involve stepping outside the point of view constituted by an ethical sensibility"⁵²⁰. And the advantages of this view over traditional expressivism is that it is more realistic about our moral life and allows phenomena to come into view that are obscured by a more psychologistic version⁵²¹. The view of animals as "fellow creatures" or the view of the world as a "miracle" are beliefs that can only be held by someone whose will has a certain non-formal shape, who feels and desires in certain ways; they are not statements of plain fact that require supplementation by an independent desire or emotion in order to take on moral force.

⁵¹⁹ Wiggins speaks elsewhere of "...replacing the sentence-by-sentence 'commitment' that Hare and others provide, which has made *akrasia* into a problem for their theories, with an altogether looser sort of commitment that arises from the way in which the whole range of judgments that a person makes are conditioned by a background of commitments and habits of concern." Wiggins, *Needs, Value, Truth*, 331.

⁵²⁰ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 162. Elsewhere he writes: "the explanations that preclude our denying the reality of the special properties that are putatively discernible from some (broadly) evaluative point of view are themselves constructed from that point of view." (Ibid. 144f.) D'Arms and Jacobson comment on this structural similarity between McDowell and Blackburn; see "Sensibility Theory and Projectivism", 212.

⁵²¹ McDowell writes: "When one or another variety of philosophical non-cognitivism claims to capture the truth about what the experience of value is like, or (in a familiar surrogate for phenomenology) about what we mean by our evaluative language, the claim is never based on careful attention to the lived character of evaluative thought or discourse." McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 131.

Moreover, as I argued in the third chapter concerning “Wittgensteinian expressivism”, this modification of traditional expressivism gives more substance to the idea of moral thought as a real kind of thought about the world and thus involving rationality rather than just *arational* affect. It gives more substance to the distinction between *being right* and *seeming right* that for McDowell must be essential to any account of our moral life⁵²²; it allows us, at least in the case of an individual’s moral deliberation, to speak in terms of the *discovery* of value rather than its *invention*, as Wiggins aspires to do.⁵²³

A far more straightforward reading of McDowell than the one I present here would understand his talk of “sensibility” more narrowly as comprising the motivational and affective dispositions of the individual; then when he speaks of the sensibility *revealing* or *bringing into view* certain moral features of the world, as he often does, this would represent a straightforwardly realist theory that posits the existence of moral properties and takes the “sensibility” (or “ethical upbringing” or “second nature”) as the epistemic mode of access. The notion of moral properties would then be as mysterious as ever, and this would seem to be the point at which his alleged “quietism” kicks in — in simply leaving us with the mystery. We can instead bring out the strength of the “sensibility theory” by supposing instead that McDowell’s references to “sensibility”, “evaluative point of view”, “second nature” etc. are meant to comprise *whatever aspects of our life we need* to adduce to make it unmysterious that things matter to us absolutely in various ways. If we read him this way, we will also have to adjust our understanding of his use of visual metaphors in his moral writings, e.g. that values are *revealed* by a sensibility. McDowell makes no use of the idea of value properties sitting around before humans evolved their particular form of life; he accords them no causal role, for example, nor does he appeal to them to *justify* the emergence of our form of life. The use of visual metaphors to describe moral experience is first of all truer to the individuals’ experience than the terms used by traditional expressivists. The child is gradually brought into a world where value and significance exist among us in our shared life, and not in individuals’ heads; *how things matter* is revealed to the child alongside *how things are*. Secondly, even if we take a phylogenetic view rather than an ontogenetic view and look to the development of our collective moral life, we will

⁵²² McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* 175, 185. He also writes: “The only similarity there needs to be between ethics and science, for ethical realism properly understood to be acceptable, is that in both of them it can be rational to say of a conclusion that *logos* itself compels it.” (Ibid., 186). This is threatened by the possibility that our moral life is underdetermined in a way that the physical reality investigated by science is obviously not; but McDowell and Wiggins seem happy to leave this open as a contingent historical and cultural possibility, arguing only that the idea of rationally compelling moral conclusions cannot be excluded *a priori*. I discuss these issues in the next section.

⁵²³ See “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life” in *Needs, Values, Truth*.

never find anything that is initially self-contained and then projected onto the world. Hence McDowell's use of visual metaphors on my reading are primarily meant to oppose the metaphor of projection. Our moral life developed in the world, through acting in the world and developing concepts to help guide that action; we did not develop moral value offline and then hook it up to the world. Projection involves the idea of a value-neutral world and then something else being projected onto that. The problem is not so much with the idea of a value-neutral world; McDowell must have some sense of a "first nature" if the talk of "second nature" is to have any traction.⁵²⁴ Someone raised with a terrible ethical upbringing would be perceiving a value-free world (though their world-view might have alleged "values" it would have no actual values.) The flaw in the image of projection is its suggestion that the seminal elements of our moral life ever had any independent existence outside of our way of conceiving the world, for example as purely phenomenal items.

5.6.3 The question of objectivity and justification

Someone raised in a morally abhorrent culture will 'see' abhorrent values in the world and find this perception intersubjectively validated and corroborated by others in their community; in this sense their abhorrent sensibility will be just as 'objective' as ours, i.e. something they find *in the objects* of the world, not something they invent or decide upon. McDowell's approach is like Diamond's and Lovibond's in emphasizing *communal agreement* (in judgments, in modes of response, in a form of life) as essential for moral reality, yet also emphasizing that moral judgment must involve *the individual* fully and personally; someone who does not will certain things and cannot desire or take pleasure in certain things, for example because they are alienated from the values of their community, will not really be seeing those values and could not form the corresponding moral judgments. I hope that by this point it is not hard to see how these two things — communal agreement and personal expression — *could* be interconnected. A person's self-understanding and desires and emotions derive from the models given by their community, and yet the communal understanding only exists in being continually instantiated and exercised by its individuals. Moreover if the object of our communal understanding (our second nature, our form of life, our modes of response, our sensibility) is not fully determinate down to an arbitrary level of detail, as physical reality is, but rather open-ended and essentially contestable, then only the participating

⁵²⁴ McDowell seems to concede the possibility of a value-free view of the world when he writes, for example: "But if we restrict ourselves to explanations from a more external standpoint, at which values are not in our field of view, we deprive ourselves of a kind of intelligibility that we aspire to". (McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 145f.) While someone might have trouble living entirely within this view, and would at the very least be missing a certain kind of intelligibility, nonetheless McDowell does not seem to find this view inconceivable.

individual can say what the sensibility or form of life amounts to here and now, and they will not necessarily be deterred or refuted by actual communal disagreement in any particular case. Hence we will not be able to appeal to the “intellectual authority” established by the community as an objective foundation, as Lovibond intends; I am just as much of an authority as anyone else, and I can sometimes only determine what our form of life is by reflecting, through the use of *all* of my faculties, on what makes the most sense to *me*, on what *I* want to do or say here.⁵²⁵ The result is a more accurate picture of our moral life, but one that, because of its accuracy, seems to leave the issue of objectivity and justification unsettled.

We can bring the problem out more clearly with a comparison to color-ascriptions. We can say *red* is that which *tends to appear red* to people. Red is then an anthropocentric property, because it is defined with reference to a specifically *human* capacity, but it is still a plain and objective fact whether or not something is red. Because our visual capacity is biologically given with sufficient uniformity, the extension of red is not essentially contestable. McDowell writes that values are such as to *merit* the appropriate attitude, but we could reformulate this in terms that are completely analogous to the case of color: value properties are such as to elicit the appropriate attitudes. This formulation will be accurate and faithful to McDowell’s approach if we can hear this kind of statement — that *this* value property is such as to elicit *this* response or this attitude — not as an empirical statement about what actually happens in any number of cases, but as what I called earlier a “statement of essence”, i.e. a partisan description of an essentially contestable sensibility. On this model, someone who says that this property elicits this response can see themselves as truthfully describing the sensibility or the life-form that everyone else who disagrees with them is misdescribing. However, from another point of view the problem of objectivity seems to remain. If two people describe or simply exercise the sensibility differently in a particular case, and if the sensibility is something that just *is not there* to be accessed from any non-partisan point of view, then we can view this disagreement as an absolutely symmetrical situation in which each party believes him- or herself right, and there is nothing we can adduce to settle the dispute. The problem seems more acute in intercultural confrontations. For then two people brought up into different sensibilities could not be seen as divergently describing a common but essentially contested sensibility; if we see them as *describing* their sensibilities in making their moral judgments, then insofar as these sensibilities are variable cultural products we will not be able to construe them as even disagreeing with each other — they are simply talking about different things. Most of

⁵²⁵ As I mentioned above, she concedes that intellectual authority has less reach in morality than in other areas of discourse; but she has no other notion of objectivity to offer.

McDowell's examples of moral judgments involve agents *expressing* their sensibility in describing various situations normatively and evaluatively, and in this case it would be possible to read the agents as disagreeing about how to read a particular situation, even if their disagreement stems from the fact that they are expressing divergent sensibilities. But here the problem of objectivity is quite acute: we want to have some neutral consideration available to both parties that would establish which viewpoint is right, and until we do, it seems that every party's commitment to their position looks slightly questionable and dogmatic.

D'Arms and Jacobson describe this problem as follows: "Even if the phenomenology of moral judgment is as peremptory and noninferential as the perceptual metaphor suggests, it will not suffice simply to declare that the virtuous can see, and thereby know, what to do", since McDowell's model "fits what might be called 'faux virtues,' traits inculcated through the same developmental process of imitation and emotional feedback, as well as it does the genuine article."⁵²⁶ In other words, McDowell's writings on morality are purely metaethical in the sense that they give us nothing with which to arbitrate between various possible ethical views. Hence they complain that "McDowell's claim that only those purported reasons that the virtuous person describes really are reasons is acceptable only from the participant's standpoint, where it is also superfluous; it is unsupported from the theoretical standpoint."⁵²⁷ There is something accurate about this complaint. McDowell is not so 'quietist' as to suppose that we should literally say nothing about our moral views. His 'quietism' can be read as an anti-foundationalism entailing that 1) nothing outside our first-order moral thinking can be adduced to settle moral disputes, and 2) nothing general can be said to secure objectivity and justification in advance of specific cases. This does not mean that there is nothing a philosopher can say in support of any moral view; the philosopher would have to speak personally and draw on her own commitments in doing so, even if she tries to draw on those commitments likely to be shared by her audience. However, someone who philosophizes in the style of McDowell or of Wittgenstein will have nothing to say *qua* philosopher about any specific ethical issue. (Diamond and Gaita sometimes manage to achieve a philosophical style that does advocate for specific positions while remaining philosophical.) Hence the notions of objectivity, justification, rightness, truth, etc. are all largely deflationary in McDowell: the things you can say in support of the objectivity of your position, for example, are simply the things you can say in support of your position, which will of course depend entirely on the position in question and the audience in question.

⁵²⁶ D'Arms and Jacobson, "Sensibility Theory and Projectivism", 210.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

D'Arms and Jacobson seem to want more from McDowell and to see it as a potential weakness of the theory that it fails to offer us any means of arbitration between true and false moral sensibilities. Of course if McDowell is right then it is not a flaw in his theory but, if anything, a flaw in us; *we* have failed to secure a shared moral life with each other, we have come apart from one another. At the same time their demand is quite natural, as I argued in the second chapter. In the situation of seemingly intractable moral disagreement what we will tend to do is to look as hard as we can for a *relatively* neutral consideration that could settle the matter and put us on the same page. (In philosophizing we can simply stipulate that there is no such consideration to be found, in order to press the question of what we should say when our reasons come to an end, but in our actual lives we could never have this certainty.) Hence it is natural to hope that the philosopher could perhaps take a few steps back and find some absolutely neutral consideration that will settle all these types of dispute once and for all.

McDowell's quietism is admirable; just as the considerations in favor of mathematical truth and objectivity are simply the considerations in favor of particular first-order mathematical sentences, the considerations in favor of truth and objectivity in ethics are just the considerations we can marshal in favor of our first-order ethical views. However, McDowell seems overly optimistic about the prospects for moral truth; I have been arguing that a close look at the sorts of things we can say in support of our first-order ethical views shows that what Wiggins describes as "cognitive underdetermination" is almost inevitable. We can bring this out by looking at McDowell's treatment of the idea of "external reasons" in his paper "Might There Be External Reasons?".

"External reasons" are roughly speaking reasons I allegedly have that have no connection to my current motivational set — if I have reason to do *x*, even though that reason is unsupported by anything I happen to want, the reason is external. Bernard Williams famously argued that an external reason statement could only be a "bluff"; reasons are internal.⁵²⁸ McDowell concedes that there can be an element of moralism in the ascription of external reasons, particularly in accusations of irrationality.⁵²⁹ There is no purely rational path from my current motivational set to a reason external to it; so in a sense I am not making any mistake in not seeing the external reason, or at least not any procedural mistake, and it would be moralistic brow-beating to accuse me of being irrational. McDowell notes quite astutely, however, that Williams' case against external reasons

⁵²⁸ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 111.

⁵²⁹ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 103.

seems to hinge on the absence of any rational path to such reasons. We can without contradiction suppose that there *are* external reasons and at the same time that there might be no rational path for someone *to* those reasons. He writes: “we surely do not need to embrace the massively implausible implication that someone who has not been properly brought up [...] can be induced into seeing things straight by directing a piece of *reasoning* at him”.⁵³⁰ When we come to believe in a reason that was formerly external to our motivational set, “the transition to being so motivated is a transition *to* deliberating correctly, not one effected by deliberating correctly; effecting the transition may need some non-rational alteration such as conversion.”⁵³¹ If I cannot see a reason because it is external to my motivations, I am not necessarily being irrational — or at least there would be little point in accusing me of irrationality — nonetheless I am missing something, I am not seeing the matter as I should, I am not considering the matter correctly. I cannot come to see the reason *by* considering the matter aright, rather “*in* coming to believe the reason statement, the agent is coming to consider the matter aright”⁵³².

McDowell refers to the case of twelve-tone music, which is notoriously hard to hear. Let us suppose that someone who appreciates twelve-tone music is hearing something of value that is there to be heard in the music; in that sense they are hearing it ‘aright’. It would be pointless to accuse someone who can’t hear the music that way of irrationality; precisely because one has to be able to respond affectively to the music in certain ways to be able to perceive it aright, the person who can’t hear it is not making any error in deliberation and could not get to an appreciation of the music through any deliberative route. Nonetheless they are missing something. “There is an intelligible temptation to suppose that such a use of ‘aright’ cannot be more than bluster. That is indeed what it would be if it were meant somehow to impress outsiders, even in the absence of any ability to persuade them [...] Nothing more would be in question, in any particular appeal to a determinate conception of how the relevant matters are rightly considered, than confidence in some part of an ethical outlook.”⁵³³

The case of twelve-tone music raises a series of interesting problems. Firstly: The appreciator can see their view as more objective, because they can say that non-appreciator is missing specific things: this tension in the piece, this development, etc. — aspects of the piece that are really there in the piece to be heard, if one knows how to hear them. And if one can only hear these things if one is

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 101

⁵³¹ Ibid., 107.

⁵³² Ibid., 100.

⁵³³ Ibid., 109.

able to be moved affectively in certain ways – there might arguably be no other way of identifying tension, for example -- then this is an objectivity achieved not by deliberation but by formation of our pleasures and sentiments, which is of course an interesting result. But McDowell wants to have the appreciator say: “You are missing the reasons there are for seeking out opportunities to hear this music.”⁵³⁴ McDowell is perhaps driven to say this by the thought that the analogy of twelve-tone music will have to become relevant to questions of action if it is to be relevant to ethics; otherwise there seems little motivation to say this. I can concede that appreciators of twelve-tone music are hearing something that is really there and that I don’t know how to hear, but that does not necessarily mean that I have a reason to do anything, except perhaps to not make fun of their music. If I sought out opportunities to hear the music, I would just be bored more frequently; why should I do that? McDowell is perhaps assuming I would learn to appreciate the music more by hearing it more often. Even if this is true, it is still not clear that I have a reason to do this. If the ultimate payoff is just going to be a new pleasurable diversion, then I might say that I have plenty of pleasurable diversions already — I already know how to read detective novels, for example.⁵³⁵ If we accept Wiggins’ distinction between evaluations and directive judgments, and accept that there is often only a remote connection between evaluations and action-guidance,⁵³⁶ then this way of explaining the objectivity of evaluations will not necessarily translate into objectivity of action-guidance, which is for the most part what theorists are looking for when they look for objectivity in ethics. At any rate this suggests that the prospects for objectivity in moral thought might be more modest than we would wish.

Moreover, we shouldn’t assume that someone who, with greater exposure, learns to understand twelve-tone music better, will necessarily come to like the music better or to see more value in it. There surely exist people who have a deep and thorough understanding of musical theory and Western music history and can hear everything there is to be heard in twelve-tone music — they can hear *this* tension, *that* development, etc. — and simply don’t like it and don’t find it

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵³⁵ As a counter-analogy we might look at the way people in the fashion world view faces. I have no idea why certain women’s faces are thought to be suitable for modeling; I can see no rhyme or reason in the selection of women that show up on billboards (other than the fact that they are all skinny). Since those in the fashion world do tend to converge on certain faces, I have to suppose that they are not responding randomly, that they are in fact seeing something in the facial features I can’t see. There must be some real property there. But I take myself to have no reason to try to discern that property. I think the fashion industry has a loathsome attitude towards people and a particularly despicable way of casually objectifying women. Even in purely aesthetic and or even hedonistic terms I would say that people who have acquired this sensitivity to the property of suitable-for-modeling seem to have thereby unlearned their ability to see the great variety of ways that people can be beautiful. Acquiring that sensitivity would be no improvement at all. Thus I suppose there is a kind of “objectivity” in the view of the fashion world — they are seeing a property that’s really there in the ‘objects’ — but I have good reasons to shun *that* objectivity entirely.

⁵³⁶ The distinction is drawn in *Needs, Values, Truth*, 95; he describes the connection between evaluations and action as “remote” on p. 117. McDowell refers approvingly to Wiggins’ distinction in *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 131n.

aesthetically valuable. Hence the objectivity of the appreciator's view might fail to secure the objectivity of the value itself and not just the objectivity of action-guidance. In a loose sense one might say that the appreciator 'hears' the music differently than the musicologist who doesn't like twelve-tone music, but can we say that this musicologist is missing anything? In my case, the appreciator will be able to say what I'm missing — this tension, etc. — but what is the musicologist who hates twelve-tone music missing? "The beauty"? "The value"? These responses begin to verge on a kind of moralism and dogmatism at this point.

Turning away from the musical analogy now and speaking directly to ethics, we might imagine three different ways I could conceive an intractable ethical disagreement I have with someone:

- 1) I have run out of reasons to give the other, but they are simply seeing the matter wrong. I might say this even in a case where I can give no substantial characterization of what they are missing, for example where they fail to see certain people as fully human in Gaita's sense. As I discussed in the fourth chapter, in the case of a certain form of racism, the list of facts that the racist can agree on — that the other person of a certain ethnicity is in fact a human, that they do in fact suffer, etc. — might make the difference in conception invisible; what the racist fails to see is all these facts *in the proper light*, given the proper *depth*, etc. But I will be most comfortable saying that the other is wrong when I can more substantially characterize what they're missing. Even when I am very comfortable saying that the other is seeing something wrong, is missing something, the practical conclusions might differ depending on the case — I might or might not say that the other has reasons to try to see what they are missing. (In the case of racism, I would say this; most likely in ethical cases more than in aesthetic cases we will tend to say this.)
- 2) I have run out of reasons to give the other, and I cannot say that they are wrong, but I'm opposed to them. I feel this way about what we could call environmentalist anti-humanism, the view that humanity is more of an evil than a good and must be extinguished or at least radically curtailed⁵³⁷. One could arrive at this view quite easily by starting from the premise that the

⁵³⁷ I have no references to philosophers who espouse this view; it is a view that I encounter regularly in daily life and in non-philosophical media. For example at the time I was writing this chapter I happened to be reading a detective novel where the police commissioner says: "We are the curse of the planet; the earth would still be beautiful if there had never been any people." He remarks later that it might be "the best ideal of all" if women stopped having children, and another character concurs: "It's a beautiful thought. We wouldn't be there to regret the fact that we wouldn't be there." Van de Wetering, *Tumbleweed*, 105, 135. Though it's a very natural thought to have, and almost inevitable for any thoughtful person in this day and age, I have never met anyone who actually follows through and lives accordingly, but such people might exist.

natural world has an intrinsic value. This is a controversial premise, but it is certainly intelligible and not very hard to believe. From here one could take a broad view of what humans are doing to the natural environment and come to the obvious conclusion that we need to be decimated at the very least. I wouldn't say that people who feel this way have made any error anywhere, since they start from a reasonable premise and then apply ordinary moral concepts in quite standard ways. Nonetheless I am opposed to them, and would act against them. Since I have children, it is simply impossible for me to take their side; but even without children I would likely have too much invested in my concern for humanity in the abstract and for specific humans for me to take this view. Many moral philosophers tend to suppose that I could not oppose any view without thinking it wrong, and many seem to feel that it would be best if I had a theory according to which they are wrong, but in fact it is possible for us to simply oppose views without thinking them *wrong* in any way. The fact that I cannot see them as exactly wrong in any way will tend to make my opposition to them respectful or grudging or less contemptuous or indignant, but we could imagine a variety of responses.

- 3) I have run out of reasons to give the other, and there is nothing they are missing, nor am I opposed to them; we simply respond differently. We can modify Sartre's example and imagine two people who each have to decide whether to stay with their aging mother or join the Resistance. One decides to stay with his mother, the other decides to join the Resistance. They might try to persuade each other and then find that at some point there is nothing more to be said. Both can see the force of all the relevant considerations, and they simply take different paths. No-one is missing anything.

If we find these examples plausible, they show the need to expand McDowell's "quietism", which I defined as the claim that there is no general or extra-moral criterion of objectivity in morals; the specific considerations I can advance in favor of my view, addressing specific deficiencies in various other views, are the considerations that speak for the objectivity of that view. But even in a case where I remain confident in my view after reflection, and to that extent feel it to be objective, there will be no general criterion for how I conceive a disagreement or divergence between my view and a different view; this will *also* depend on the specifics of the case, the content of the specific reasons I have, etc. The appreciator of twelve-tone music who is appropriately modest and non-judgmental will most likely say that the musicologist who doesn't like twelve-tone music is not missing anything, that their experience is simply different. But if he sees music as the voice of God or the expression of the harmony of the universe, he might wish to say that the non-appreciative musicologist is wrong, even if it is still disconcerting that he cannot give any substantive

characterization of what the other is missing. Similarly, the case in 3) could become a case more like 2) or 1) if one of the two disputants feels strongly enough about their patriotism, say, or about the value of family or a mother's love. The specific considerations I can advance in favor of the objectivity of my view *might or might not* lead me to say that other views are wrong, or that others who see things differently are missing something; they might or might not lead me to say that the other has a reason to try to see it as I do, and can determine in quite various ways how unconditionally I see this reason, how much I blame them for their failure, what actions I have reason to take to oppose them, hinder them, punish them, etc.

In suggesting an expansion of McDowell's "quietism" I am not exactly arguing against him. But he seems overly optimistic about the scope of the objectivity we can secure; the objectivity secured by the reasons I have for my own moral view might not reach all the way to a universal determination of the actions to be taken in any situation, it might not even sufficiently determine the actions that *I* must take, and it might not rule out other possible moral views. It is possible to simply accept this — to accept that objectivity is certainly possible in moral thought but more modest in scope than one would expect in other areas of thought. As I discussed in chapter two, Cavell accepts quite frankly that moral rationality involves "modes of argument whose characteristic feature is exactly that they can secure the rationality of both protagonists in the absence of agreement about a conclusion"⁵³⁸, and Winch argues that in certain moral issues "the role of reason is not to arrive at a position the acceptance of which will be, as it were, definitive of a rational man of good will"⁵³⁹. McDowell however seems to assume that this cannot be true. He says about reasons for moral beliefs, for example, that if the reasons are good ones, "anyone exposed to them and not persuaded must be missing something"⁵⁴⁰ — and he seems to mean, not just that anyone who failed to see the force of the reason would be missing something, which Cavell would agree with, but that anyone who didn't adopt the belief on the basis of the reason would be missing something. And of course the same considerations that moved McDowell to deny weakness of will, namely that every difference in how the will is determined must amount to some difference in conception, should also lead him to deny the possibility of someone seeing everything that is there to be seen and simply responding differently. When someone sees the same reasons I do and goes on differently, as in the case 3) discussed above, McDowell is compelled to say that at least one of us must be missing something that is actually there —and if no-one is missing any of the reasons that are there, they

⁵³⁸ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* 263.

⁵³⁹ Winch, *Trying to Make Sense*, 189.

⁵⁴⁰ McDowell, *Critical Notice*, 379.

must be missing the *weight* of the reasons: “the idea of not reasoning correctly might be glossed in terms of not giving a consideration the right weight in deliberation.”⁵⁴¹ It has become quite popular in moral philosophy today to speak as if all the reasons we have actually possess quite specific *weights* and thus can be objectively ranked along a common axis according to weight; the problems with this idea are thought to be exclusively epistemological, i.e. that it is hard to determine the weights that the reasons have. But of course the real problem is that reasons don’t actually have weights; this way of speaking is at best a metaphor. We should object to this, not on the grounds of metaphysical scepticism about non-natural facts, but on the grounds that we don’t seem to know what we mean by “weight” except that we are more inclined to act on some reasons than others, that we take some reasons more seriously than others, and that the talk of “weight” gets introduced out of desperation when we’ve run out of more substantial things to say. We should object to this as well on the grounds that it leads us into moralism. Imagine someone insisting that anyone who isn’t enthusiastic about twelve-tone music simply doesn’t understand it, and who sticks to this line no matter how much understanding the other person is able to demonstrate. The other is missing none of its specific nuances, they’re only missing “the beauty of it”. We might as well say: whoever doesn’t like this music is missing something, and what they’re missing is the fact that they should like it. McDowell hopes to dispel the worry about moralism by assuring us that he does not want to browbeat the other by accusing them of “irrationality”, he only wishes to be able to say to himself that the other is missing something. But there are cases where continuing to insist even to oneself that the other is “missing” something is itself a kind of empty moralism. Sometimes moralism is almost unavoidable — where I have nothing left to say, but feel that I must say something, for example when I’m confronted with a Gaita-style racist, I will probably muddle along as best I can, and most of what I say will not amount to much more than an angry insistence upon my own view. Though this is less than optimal, there need not be any error here, but we can see at the same time how the forces internal to moral thought might lead us to nonsense, to imagine that we are saying more than we are actually managing to say.

Although McDowell for the most part disclaims the label “realism”, the thrust of his writings on morality is to argue that moral thought is not significantly different from scientific thought in terms of objectivity, justification, truth-value, etc. In a response to Bernard Williams, for example, he argues that moral thought and empirical science are both equally susceptible to the charge of “bootstrapping”, that empirical science is just as circular as our ethical thought in the sense that “it

⁵⁴¹ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 106.

aims (explicitly or implicitly) to be directed by standards of good and bad argument, and the standards available to it are not independent of its own substantive and disputable conclusions”⁵⁴². He wishes to emphasize that this kind of circularity is no bar to objectivity, just as he also wishes to argue with the analogy to color-ascription that “[i]t is a mistake to conceive objectivity in terms of complete independence from subjectivity.”⁵⁴³ He also acknowledges crucial differences between scientific and moral reasoning — for example, moral thought is “local” in the sense that “its characteristic concepts are not intelligible independently of particular cultural perspectives”⁵⁴⁴, which is likely related to another difference he acknowledges, namely that ethical thought is not under the causal control of circumstances in the same way, nor can it be prosecuted procedurally⁵⁴⁵. It is important to note that these do not principally debar us from achieving objectivity in ethics; but these differences will certainly affect the *reach* of the objectivity that we can achieve in ethics, and here his tendency is to downplay these differences. Moreover, his own emphasis on the personal nature of moral thought, i.e. the involvement of the will and the emotions in our moral vision, should also lead him to problematize the notion of objectivity in ethics more than he does. (It is possible that he is also overestimating the reach of our “ethical upbringing”, since grownups face plenty of objective uncertainties and dilemmas that are not answered by their upbringing, where a resolution must be improvised; this would also imply that he sees ethical perspectives as more *communal* and less *personal* than they in fact are.)

5.7 Non-naturalist realism and first-order proofs of moral realism

A species of non-naturalist realism quite close in spirit to McDowell’s but officially unrelated to Wittgenstein, associated with authors such as Scanlon, Nagel, Parfit, Dworkin, and Putnam, has been gaining currency lately. These authors share a sense of the irrelevance of any metaphysical objections to realism and appeal to a deflationary reading of truth and other realist predicates. The question of the truth-value of the utterance “murder is wrong” is for these authors only a question of whether murder is wrong (it is assumed here that *murder is wrong* is in fact a proposition, as it appears to be); there could be no metaphysical or epistemological objection or any objection other than a first-order moral one. The question of realism about any particular domain of thought and talk is simply a question of whether that domain displays the conceptual resources needed to

⁵⁴² McDowell, Critical Notice, 380.

⁵⁴³ McDowell, Mind, Value and Reality, 180.

⁵⁴⁴ McDowell, Critical Notice, 380.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 380, see also *Mind, Value and Reality* 110.

produce determinate truth-values for any of the statements made in that domain.⁵⁴⁶ These authors share McDowell's "quietism" in holding that our moral claims cannot be grounded in, or invalidated by, anything outside our first-order moral argumentation; and they seem to be even more "quietist" than McDowell in omitting to tell any kind of metaethical story that renders the idea of moral reality plausible and unmysterious, such as McDowell's story about ethical upbringing and second nature. They seem to feel that an appeal to the resources we have in moral thought should by itself be enough to render the idea of moral reality unmysterious. As Nagel writes:

[...] so there can be no decision in advance as to whether we are or are not talking about a real subject when we reflect and argue about morality. The answer must come from the results themselves. Only the effort to reason about morality can show us whether it is possible—whether, in thinking about what to do and how to live, we can find methods, reasons, and principles whose validity does not have to be subjectively or relativistically qualified.⁵⁴⁷

And hence he writes: "That is why we can defend moral reason only by abandoning metatheory for substantive ethics."⁵⁴⁸

In the first chapter, in connecting the "Open Question" argument to moral creativity, I argued for the mirror-image of this position: that metaphysical or epistemological objections are largely irrelevant to the strongest case for moral anti-realism, and that honest scrutiny of the argumentative

⁵⁴⁶ The notion that there are various "domains", such as mathematics, ethics, aesthetics, etc., each with its own standards and methods, is an assumption of this school of non-naturalist realism. On a certain reading, the "non-departmental conception" of ethical thought introduced in chapter one directly disputes the premise of these realist writers. In construing a version of the fact/value distinction in the work of Murdoch, Diamond claims: "Moral value is not a subject matter among other subject matters." In this article she characterizes *subject matter* more specifically: "Consider the discipline of history-writing. Considered as a discipline, it involves practices of justifying assertions, explanations, or conclusions by kinds of evidence, by consideration of alternative views, by raising objections to one's own interpretation and demonstrating how the evidence can be used to reply to such objections. There are, that is, in the discipline of history ways of establishing facts and of establishing understandings of facts, but these ways are tied to a *particular subject*. There is a close connection here between there being a subject (or range of subject matter) and there being particular methods, associated with the subject, of justifying claims about facts." (Diamond, "We Are Perpetually Moralists", 106.) The "non-departmental conception" might then be expanded to include three closely related aspects: 1) there is no proprietary vocabulary of moral thought and no syntactic or semantic marker of the ethical; 2) that moral thought is not thought about anything in particular, that it could be about any and every aspect of our experience, and 3) that there are no proprietary methods or standards of moral thought. If Nagel and Scanlon are right that the question of realism for any domain depends on whether the standards and methods of that domain allow for determination of truth-values for utterances within that domain, and if Diamond is right that moral thought is not in that sense a domain at all and has no standards or methods particular to it, then this style of argument for moral realism fails to get off the ground. Cavell also found this point quite self-evident: "To say a dispute is about a matter of fact is exactly to say that there are certain ways of settling it. Just as, to say that something is a *fact* is to say that it can be or has been discovered in certain ways. To say that *other* sorts of disputes (for example, moral ones) cannot be settled in *such* ways is not a 'hypothesis' and requires no 'psychological generalization', but is a point of grammar." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 296.

⁵⁴⁷ Nagel, *The Last Word*, 102.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

resources we have will show that there is always room for alternative ways of making moral sense of any situation. These non-naturalists, unlike Moore, seem at first to escape the force of the Open Question argument as I defended there, since they do not gesture towards moral facts as a way of justifying our moral reasoning, but rather point to our moral reasoning as a way of justifying the idea of moral facts. Hence these authors escape the force of the Open Question argument by disputing its *premise*: when they look at our moral resources, they do not find that all the questions really are open. The dispute between what we might call anti-metaphysical or immanent anti-realism and anti-metaphysical realism hinges on what we see when we look at our first-order or substantive moral thinking: whether we see endless room for improvisation, or clear paths leading ineluctably to specific conclusions. I have argued throughout this dissertation that we have both too much available to us in moral thought, and too little, for the prospects for realism to be very good. We have too much at our disposal in the sense that there are a great number of moral responses to any given fact that we can make sense of, too few in the sense that we have nothing by which to arbitrate between these responses. This overabundance and undetermination of moral reality is closely connected to the essentially personal nature of moral judgment. Someone would not count as sincerely believing in a moral judgment if it had no effect on their will and emotions. This is why I cannot hold the position I called “environmentalist anti-humanism”, which sees a negative value in the existence of humanity; I am simply not the person who can hold that position. As a father of children above all I simply cannot believe that. But as far as I can tell they are using moral concepts that I share and using them flawlessly in arriving at a position that is, for me, simply impossible. Of course it is not as if I have nothing to say to them except a reference to my own psychology. We also have at our disposal an “intuition” of allegiance to humanity — the idea that if anything is of value, it must be human flourishing — which is, I think, at the root of Thompson’s writing on morality. I could draw on something like this to articulate my own sense of what is impossible about anti-humanism, and I could probably go on talking about this for a while and arrive at quite persuasive formulations. But a determined anti-humanist could understand all of this and simply reject it as sentimental kitsch, and of course there *would* inevitably be a good deal of sentimental kitsch involved in any defense of the value of humanity. (How else would you defend something as basic as the value of humanity?) So it is hard to see how the moral resources we have could compel us to determinate answers to our questions about how to live and how to see our lives. Since I argued in the previous section that McDowell’s realism is founded on an implausible optimism about our moral resources — and since McDowell tells us continually that we should look to our first-order moral resources to settle the question of realism, but he never seems to spend any time actually looking at them — it is worth looking at different ways that non-naturalist writers characterize the first-order resources we have in order to argue for the truth of specific moral or

normative judgments. To this end I look first at Scanlon's characterization of the domain of thought about reasons for action, and then at Wiggins's argument that "there is nothing else to think" but that slavery is wrong, such that the fact that slavery is wrong can serve in a "vindicatory explanation" of our belief that slavery is wrong.

In his latest book Scanlon offers what he calls "a qualified defense of a realistic cognitivism about reasons: a view that is cognitivist in holding that claims about reasons for action can be correct or incorrect, but realistic also in recognizing that there may be limits to the range of cases in which such claims have determinate truth values."⁵⁴⁹ Moreover he hopes to defend the possibility that these truth values could be "independent of us" in at least two senses: that the truth values of these normative judgments do not depend upon our making the judgments, and that they do not depend "on what we, collectively, have done, chosen, or adopted, and would not be different had we done, chosen, or adopted something else"⁵⁵⁰. Scanlon's book is an interesting test case in that he tries to give a general account of our moral resources, or of what Nagel called our "methods, reasons and principles". The account is roughly that of reflective equilibrium, or as he writes:

How then do we come to know particular non-derivative truths about which things are reasons? My own answer is that we do this simply by thinking carefully about what seem to us to be reasons, considering what general principles about reasons would explain them, what implications these would have, and considering the plausibility of the implications of these principles.⁵⁵¹

This account of our method of normative deliberation is quite abstract and sparse, of course. Insofar as we are quietists we might see this as a virtue. We might just as well say that he has already said too much, however, and given us an overly narrow picture of practical deliberation. He seems to be looking exclusively at directly action-guiding statements and assuming that these must also take the form of principles of action; thus Murdoch's charge that contemporary philosophers of morality are missing all of the moral thought that happens outside of contexts of decision seems to apply to Scanlon here. To some extent this is explained by the fact that Scanlon is writing explicitly about reasons for action rather than about morality per se. However, we might find this an overly narrow view of deliberation about action generally — not every considered and reasonable action needs to be covered by a principle — and insofar as Scanlon's account of morality derives from this account of reasons⁵⁵², we can also complain as metaethicists that he has unnecessarily restricted the range of

⁵⁴⁹ Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, 2.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 93f.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁵² See his *What We Owe to Each Other*.

moral resources we actually have. Suppose that someone stops eating meat when he has the thought about some animal in his backyard: that animal is born into a world it does not understand, like me, and will die one day just like me. This is a perfectly intelligible bit of moral reasoning that does not involve any general principle about reasons, at least not one whose implications can be straightforwardly tested for plausibility.

Aside from this worry that saying anything substantive and general about our practical resources is saying too much, we could note the following two problems for Scanlon's account:

1) Why should we engage in this process? If I have intuitions about reasons for certain actions in specific cases, why not just act on those? Why should I seek general principles? If Scanlon had some more robustly realist, metaphysical idea of moral reality, we could ask why the method of seeking general principles should be more suited to uncover that reality than the method of simply acting intuitively from case to case, or any other method. Since he thinks there is normative reality only if and to the extent that we have resources within the domain of normative thought that compel determinate answers to normative questions, it is unfortunate for his theory that he represents normative thought as seeking a coherent body of general principles of action. Any time I have to act I will ultimately act, and thus I will ultimately arrive at determinate answer about what to do; whereas it is far from obvious that I could ever arrive at a determinate body of general principles that I could sincerely endorse. — But the greater issue is that we do not need a theoretical reason for Scanlon's method — i.e. that the method as formulated makes his philosophical goals harder or easier to achieve — but rather a first-order normative reason, and Scanlon would surely have to agree with this. Turning now to the domain of morality in particular, it is often remarked that the question “why be moral” is somehow unanswerable or senseless, and Scanlon himself argues this.⁵⁵³ But it is perfectly sensible to ask the moral question about any determinate characterization of morality: if *this* is “morality”, why should I be “moral”?

2) Scanlon likely feels that relying upon our specific intuitions about reasons in specific cases is too arbitrary, or that it could only produce determinations about why I should do here and now and not about what *one* should do. But of course not just any body of principles will do. Insofar as Scanlon offers a determinate method, it is not a method that avoids arbitrariness; quite various answers will be possible depending on the judgments I start with, the principles I formulate, and the decisions I make whenever there is a conflict between principles or between a principle and an intuition. As

⁵⁵³ Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, 10.

Scanlon writes:

There are many ways of reaching equilibrium. As I pointed out earlier, the normative status conferred on a judgment by its being in a set that is in reflective equilibrium depends on the quality of the decisions that are made in arriving at that equilibrium—decisions about what to count as a considered judgment at the outset and about what to modify in situations of conflict. So the most that could be said is that *p* is a reason for *x* to do *a* if the judgment that it is such a reason would be among *x*'s evaluative judgments in reflective equilibrium if the judgments *x* made in arriving at this equilibrium were sound.⁵⁵⁴

Insofar as Scanlon offers a determinate method, the results of the method absolutely depend upon our judgments and choices at various points in the process. Scanlon doesn't want normative reality to depend on our judgments and choices in this way, so he stipulates that the method must start from *sound* judgments and also make *sound* judgments at every decision point. But this crucial point of soundness is precisely what the method itself cannot determine.

It is worth noting that Scanlon seems to imagine the individual using this method by herself. If I had not already internalized a great number of norms by virtue of my upbringing and experience and did not already live in accordance with some sense of how one lives, and I asked myself what reason I had for various actions and what principles would cover those reasons, I would come up with nothing. Any answer at this point could only be arbitrary. I can only be compelled to some non-arbitrary answer about my reasons and their principles if I am already within a form of life in which certain things make sense and certain things matter in various ways. Now one context in which moral truth or moral reality become a real issue for us is when we encounter people from different cultural backgrounds and we come to question our own inherited norms. Another context in which moral reality becomes problematic is when my own inherited norms come to seem indeterminate or give conflicting answers, and we wonder whether the resources we have can genuinely compel us to determinate answers about what to do, rather than leaving us with moments of simple decision; whether our resources can genuinely compel us to determinate answers about how we should live or how we should see things, where this is of course more challenging the larger this "we" becomes. While someone using Scanlon's method might end up somehow producing specific answers to all her normative questions, it is far from clear that they will be *compelled* (independently of their judgments and choices) all the way to specific answers, nor that *we* will be thus compelled to specific answers.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 103.

Scanlon's ambitions in *Being Realistic About Reasons* are more modest; his three examples of solid normative truths are as follows:

- (1) For a person in control of a fast moving automobile, the fact that the car will injure and perhaps kill a pedestrian if the wheel is not turned is a reason to turn the wheel.
- (2) The fact that a person's child has died is a reason for that person to feel sad.
- (3) The fact that it would be enjoyable to listen to some very engaging music, moving one's body gently in time with it, is a reason to do this, or to continue doing it.⁵⁵⁵

The third one at least seems pretty unassailable. Scanlon's aim here is to establish realism about reasons in the sense that there is at least one true statement about reasons for action. Since he is not even considering all-things-considered ought statements, never mind moral statements, the goal is perhaps not hard to reach. The form of life shared by all humans is likely determinate enough to ground this statement about reasons for action. If we are looking for moral truth about questions that actually bother us (not whether we should dance when we feel like it) Scanlon's picture of the resources at our disposal in the normative domain makes the idea of normative truth or moral truth seem very unlikely.⁵⁵⁶

Wiggins presents an interesting contrast to Scanlon, as he has much more to say about the idea of truth than Scanlon does, and much less to say about the method of ethical thought, simply allowing there to be an unspecified "variety of modes of ethical persuasion"⁵⁵⁷. Wiggins emphasizes far more often and forcefully than Scanlon that moral realism might fail for reasons that are immanent to first-order moral thought, writing for example that "[i]t ought to be obvious, though [...] that it is

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁵⁶ Several times I have peripherally raised the question of whether there could be "bedrock moral certainties" analogous to the other "bedrock certainties" discussed in *On Certainty*. Pleasants argues for this in his "If Killing Isn't Wrong, Then Nothing Is", for example "[T]hat it is very wrong to kill an innocent and non-threatening person" (200). Diamond suggests something similar in arguing that our not eating each other is one of the preconditions of our moral life. These certainties seem to me to rest on the deeper bedrock certainty, or perhaps to comprise the bedrock certainty, that human life is fundamentally good, as do Scanlon's first two examples above. This is unquestionably a "bedrock certainty" in the sense of *On Certainty* in that for almost all of us, it never gets explicitly formulated but rather shows itself in everything we do. At the same time it *can* get explicitly formulated, and the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first century have led many people to formulate it in order to question or deny it, for reasons that are not trivial or obviously wrong. Hence the reference to "bedrock certainties" seems to me not to lend much support to the type of immanent argument for realism discussed here. However, here I am officially agnostic about whether there might be *any* moral truths that follow ineluctably from the resources in the domain of moral thought; I merely wish to insist that so far we have no reason to think that there must be any, and that the prospects do not look good. The most likely candidate for an unarguable moral statement is likely Bambrough's example, cited in Pleasants, that "a child about to undergo painful surgery [...] should therefore be given an anaesthetic." (198) While the value of humanity is arguable, it seems that pain is bad if anything is; we could only argue reasonably over Bambrough's example if the position that *nothing really matters one way or another* can be seen as reasonable.

⁵⁵⁷ Wiggins, *Ethics*, 349.

far from obvious whether ethical objectivism is correct, or to what extent it is. For in advance, we cannot know for sure whether or how often we can assemble perceptions or put together considerations ‘...’ that will combine to leave nothing else to think.”⁵⁵⁸ In his article “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life” he concedes the possibility of “cognitive underdeterminism”, according to which there might be too little meaning in the world or too many sources of meaning for a person to be genuinely compelled towards any one right way of living.⁵⁵⁹ Despite these frequent concessions, he characterizes his position as “a high optimism about the latent resources of first-order ethical consciousness”⁵⁶⁰; “[a]s I have characterized it, moral objectivism is not so much a cut-and-dried doctrine as an outlook, an outlook of qualified second-order optimism relating not to the future but to the conceptual and critical resources and the power of first-order ethical thought.”⁵⁶¹

One way Wiggins explicates the possibility of truth is the possibility of a “vindicatory explanation” of a belief *p*, such that the best explanation of why someone believes that *p* might be simply that *p*, alternately: that there is nothing else to think but *p*. For example:

Look, slavery is wrong, it’s wrong because ... [here are given many, many considerations, fully spelled out, appealing to what someone already knows and understands if they know what slavery is and what “wrong” means, all these considerations working together to leave no alternative, for one who is so informed, but to think that slavery is wrong]; so no wonder twentieth-century Europeans, who would accept that ... and whose beliefs are so many of them downwind of such considerations as ..., believe that slavery is wrong. They believe that it is wrong for just the kind of reasons why there is nothing else to think but that it *is* wrong.⁵⁶²

The question of moral realism, or moral “objectivism”, as Wiggins calls it, is: “Is there a substantial number of moral judgments such that they can command a measure of convergence in belief and such that the best explanation of that convergence in belief is vindicatory?”⁵⁶³

Wiggins does not suppose that we need to wait for actual convergence — the question is whether our shared moral resources would lead us to converge if we think properly. Similarly, he does not suppose that it is impossible to hold the position that slavery is justified — he supposes that it might

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 367.

⁵⁵⁹ Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 125.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 377.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 356.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 366f. The ellipses and parenthetical gestures are Wiggins’, not mine. See also Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs”, 66.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 67.

be impossible to hold to a workable scheme of moral ideas that justifies slavery. Hence

anyone with a rival or alternative view will need to show the moral and practical workability of a scheme of moral ideas which, in the face of the phenomena such as the slave trade and all its historical effects, dispenses with ideas like 'slavery', 'using human being as means, not ends', etc. ... to dispense with the concept of slavery in the actual circumstances of the slave trade as it actually was would be to dispense with altogether too much that makes up the idea of morality itself.⁵⁶⁴

And elsewhere he surmises that "by drawing upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding, such a wealth of considerations can now be produced, all bearing in some way or other upon the question of slavery, that, at some point in rehearsing these considerations, it will become apparent that there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable."⁵⁶⁵

Wiggins supposes here that our "shared understanding" leads to convergence. Yet he also writes: "Let it be clear that there is a difference between there being nothing else to think and there being nothing else *for us* to think; and equally clear that what we are concerned with is the first of these things, not the second."⁵⁶⁶ Given his emphasis on the historical accumulation of moral resources, he cannot really be appealing to a "shared understanding" that is biologically given and thus universally inherent in every gathering of humans. There must have been societies that did not have the requisite shared understanding; yet Wiggins still wishes to say that there is nothing else to think, i.e. that proper thinking leads to a convergence on the injustice of slavery. Here we might suppose that Wiggins follows McDowell in holding that, while there may be no rational *route to* the correct view from any given societal or individual state, nonetheless those who cannot see the insupportability of slavery are *missing* something that is there to be seen when we think properly. In fact Wiggins insists that the injustice of slavery is "the only reasonable response" for anyone for whom the question of the justice of slavery "has come into focus"⁵⁶⁷, even though it may not come into focus for everyone. And if he is serious about avoiding the relativistic danger in the idea that there might just be "nothing else *for us* to think", rather than just squeaking by on a technicality, he must also suppose that those for whom the question does not "come into focus" are missing something and not merely thinking differently than us. (If there were "nothing else to think" only

⁵⁶⁴ Wiggins, *Ethics* 369.

⁵⁶⁵ Wiggins, "Moral Cognitivism", 70.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁶⁷ Wiggins, *Ethics*, 368. Strictly speaking he says here that there is no way to avoid categorizing slavery as "slavery" once the question of whether it is slavery has come into focus; but for him the moral conclusion to slavery's insupportability and injustice seems to follow directly from its categorization as slavery. Diamond has pointed out in her response, which I discuss below, that this seems to be a misstep on Wiggins' part, as there was a lively debate about the morality of slavery among people who all were quite willing to categorize it as slavery.

given that the question arises, and yet the question only necessarily arises for us and not for anyone who is thinking properly, then it is still ultimately more accurate to say that there is “nothing else *for us* to think”). Using this McDowellian strategy, we could then say that while the achievement of this type of moral thought is historically contingent and involves non-universal moral resources, nonetheless its *validity* is not in any sense relative to us.

Elsewhere he addresses roughly the same issue as follows:

What is shaped and conditioned by the contingencies of human nature and the responses in which human beings can share is the sense of moral language. These things shape the content of the moral questions that we ask. But once that content is given and the sense of some moral question is determinate, it is not human nature and responses that determine the reference or truth-value of the putative answers to it.⁵⁶⁸

Again this cannot be the full explanation of how there could be *nothing else to think* about some moral question rather than *nothing else for us to think*. The dependency of sense but not reference on contingent human responses allows us to distinguish between e.g. *our thinking something wrong* and its *actually being wrong*; and it allows us to explain moral judgments as being about real situations in the world and not about ourselves and our responses (if our responses fix the sense but not the reference of moral concepts, then they are unlikely to enter into the content of our moral judgments.) But this could lead us to a position similar to Bernard Williams’, i.e. that there are determinate answers to moral questions once some moral language has come into focus for a particular community, but that no particular moral language *has* to come into focus for any particular community. If we want to say that we have come to our moral conclusions because there is *nothing else to think*, we will have to feel confident that the moral questions and concepts that have come into focus for us and led us to these conclusions are ones that *should* come into focus for any community of thinkers, that emerge from thought as such *properly* conducted, even if we might concede that there is no purely argumentative route that would bring these into focus for just any human community.

Diamond has argued in a recent response to Wiggins that his understanding of the real historical debate about slavery, and hence about the resources available to both sides, is somewhat flawed due to his focus on a single and unrepresentative historical source, namely a British parliamentary debate in 1833. There were a great many American defenders of slavery who used the concepts of *slavery, justice, natural rights*, etc. in their defenses of slavery; hence they were under no burden of showing the workability of a scheme of moral ideas that *dispenses* with any of these. She writes:

⁵⁶⁸ Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism”, 79.

The problem with that line of argument is that defences of slavery do not usually dispense with the notions that Wiggins thinks lead to the conclusion that slavery is unjust and insupportable. From Aristotle on, defenders of various forms of slavery have insisted that certain forms of enslavement are just. Again, there is a problem with Wiggins's point that you can't think anything at variance with the insupportability and injustice of slavery without opting out of any moral viewpoint that can even make sense of the question whether slavery is just or supportable. The problem there, at first sight anyway, is that defenders of slavery do apparently make sense of the question whether slavery is just, and provide what they take to be good reasons for the answer that they give. [...] People who defend slavery do not give up the concept of justice; they hold onto the concept but put it to very different work.⁵⁶⁹

Diamond seems to assume that both parties to the debates around slavery were thinking sincerely and in good faith, rather than producing self-serving rationalizations. This comes out for example when she writes: "They both *want* the concept of justice; they both take there to be something that is thinking well about justice in relation to slavery; they both want to make plain how they, as opposed to the people they disagree with, are thinking rightly about the justice of slavery."⁵⁷⁰ It would be easy to suppose that those 19th-century American defenders of slavery only wanted to concept of justice insofar as it didn't inconvenience them. But nonetheless Diamond does seem to locate the source of the disagreement about slavery more accurately than Wiggins does. She refers to his statement that "[a]t some point in running through these considerations, it will appear that the price of thinking anything at variance with the insupportability of slavery is to have opted out [...] of the point of view that [can be shared] between one person and another", and writes:

One way in which the idea of some people as being 'natural slaves' and of slaves as being a kind of property plays out in practice is that the moral point of view, as understood by pro-slavery thinkers, is not a point of view that can be shared 'between one person and another', but a point of view that can be shared only between some persons and others, not including slaves. Slaves have no point of view that need be taken into account; they have no voice that need be heard. [...] What I want to bring out here is that *what the moral point of view is*, is itself one of the things that is indispute, in the dispute about slavery.⁵⁷¹

The defenders of slavery do not abandon so many central moral concepts that they ultimately opt out of the shared point of view; rather, their use of any and all moral concepts is skewed by their different sense of *who* the point of view of moral thought, or thought in general, is shared with. And at this point one might suspect that this deeper difference shows that the two sides share no moral

⁵⁶⁹ Diamond, "Truth in Ethics", 12.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 13f.

concepts and could not really be addressing the same question. Diamond writes:

Well, *was* it a real disagreement? My answer would be that there are things that support saying that they did disagree; —that they meant to disagree, and they did, about the question whether slavery is just. But there are things that support saying that their conceptions of what it is to engage a moral question diverged deeply from each other, and hence that they were not really disagreeing with each other; they were taking vastly different views, all right, but not genuinely disagreeing. Wiggins takes engaging the question about slavery to involve speaking from a point of view that can be “common between one person and another”; but pro-slavery writers plainly do not engage in the dispute about slavery as from such a point of view. And both sides of the dispute provide reasons for holding that the thought of the other side has, as thought, utterly gone off the rail. Each side then appears to repudiate the idea that the other side has a genuine point of view. —And yet: the intention is to express a genuinely contrary point of view.⁵⁷²

Diamond is concerned in her paper with Wiggins’ criticism of an “insidious *presumption of symmetry*”⁵⁷³ between the two views. But the disagreement can be described symmetrically, as Diamond does and as I have done. This is connected to Diamond’s distinction between some moral thought being wrong and thought ‘going off the rails’, being pure confusion, a travesty of thought, no longer a kind of thought at all. As Diamond describes the debate over slavery, both sides see the other as being a pure confusion of moral thought, no sort of coherent thought at all. No-one *in* the debate presumes symmetry; though they should all be able to agree with Diamond’s symmetrical description as far as it goes, everyone in the debate will want to go further and say that the other side really *is* confused. To call the debate asymmetrical is to take a stand with one side or the other on the central issue. And of course one could also take a stand on the anti-slavery side without necessarily saying, in Diamond’s terms, that the defenders of slavery represent a kind of moral lunacy, or in Wiggins’ terms, that there really is *nothing else* (for *anyone*) to think. At this point the issue of whether we have satisfied Wiggins’ notion of truth — whether we have all converged on the conclusion that slavery is unjust, not just because there is nothing else for us to think, but because there is nothing else to think — seems to hinge on the point of whether *any* thinker must see the point of view of thought as one shareable between *any* person and *any* other person. I find that I do not wish to endorse this universally. A primitive society living in relative isolation from the modern world might be wise to resist the temptations of other points of view, and see their own thought about practical and other matters as thought shared between *them* and no-one else. I would not see this as a confusion or a mistake. It could be the best course for them to take. But it would be impossible for 19th-century Americans to coherently take this view. As people with a

⁵⁷² Ibid., 16f.

⁵⁷³ Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism”, 78.

moderate scientific education who enjoyed the benefits of science, as people with some awareness of the ongoing development of technology, as capitalists, and as moral philosophers or people acquainted with some philosophical debate, the defenders of slavery must have been at home in modes of thought in which the physical appearance or geographical origin of the thinker had no bearing on the validity of their thoughts and must have ultimately seen themselves as thinkers in these modes; they were trying to make an exception to this general pattern for the question of justice, with no apparent motivation for it other than the great inconvenience to themselves materially and psychologically of considering the matter more broadly. Hence I agree with Wiggins that the defense of slavery was not a sincere position; it was a sophistical edifice that ignored central and profound facets of the moral reality the defenders lived in and was ultimately just confusion. But if we don't see what we might call a *partial* point of view as a flaw in any gathering of humans, or any gathering of people we would represent as thinking, then there is ultimately "nothing else *for us* to think" given our historical reality and self-understanding.⁵⁷⁴ This is of course all we need practically; the "us" here extends to anyone I would ever come into discussion with. But it is interesting that this achievement, which should be more than enough for us, seems to be less than what Wiggins wants, despite the professed modesty of his aims as an anti-non-cognitivist.

Wiggins' appeal to "vindicatory explanation" is a shorter and more informal version of the more detailed approach he takes elsewhere, where he sets out five or six "marks" of the concept of truth and then tries to assess how well our first-order moral thought measures up. These marks include:

— "the answerability of truth to evidenced argument that will under favourable conditions converge upon agreement whose proper explanation involves that very truth";

— "the independence of truth both from our will and from our own limited means of recognizing the presence or absence of the property in a statement";

— "that every truth is true in virtue of something", such that "where there is disagreement there is

⁵⁷⁴ One might object that the idea was supposed to be that there is *nothing else to think* about a historically situated question, i.e. that there is *nothing else to think* in the relevant situation. Or: the question is not what we, with our "shared understanding", have to think, but what anyone would have to think if we equip them with this "shared understanding". This seems to be to make the distinction between *there is nothing else to think* and *there is nothing else for us to think* vacuous. Anyone who is in the position of a 19th-century American is a 19th-century American and not just anyone. If there is *nothing else to think* for anyone who is in the position of the 19th-century Americans, then there is just *nothing else for 19th-century Americans to think*.

always something or other at issue”;

— that “every plain truth is compatible with every other plain truth”, such that “all one by one assertible evaluations are *jointly* assertible”.⁵⁷⁵

We could ask whether the question about the moral point of view — or the related question about which notion of justice corresponding to which point of view is relevant — is really susceptible to “evidenced argument”. In the article where he sets out these “marks” of the concept of truth, Wiggins is in fact concerned with the meaning of life; he writes that he aims to “explore the possibility that the question of truth and the question of life’s meaning are among the most fundamental questions of moral philosophy.”⁵⁷⁶ The question of life’s meaning seems much less suited to these marks of truth than the question of the justice of slavery; in fact, of all the moral questions one might look into, this seems the least promising. Wiggins notes, for example, that if someone saw the meaning of their life in fulfilling God’s purpose for them, he as an unbeliever would not necessarily say that the person has thrown their life away.⁵⁷⁷ As an atheist I also wouldn’t say that someone dedicated to carrying out God’s purpose had led a meaningless life. Yet for that person, the meaningfulness of their life absolutely hinges upon the truth of their notion that God exists and has a purpose for them. This suggests a certain asymmetry between the first-personal and third-personal judgments about the meaningfulness of a life, so it is unclear how “evidenced argument” could lead to convergence about this, or how all assertions about meaning could be “jointly assertible”. I would judge the meaningfulness of someone else’s life by different sorts of criteria than they would use in the first-person; the first-personal judgments may not require any criteria. For example, I would tend to say that someone’s led a meaningful life if they have developed some talents and lived within the bonds of family and community; but the person who has done this might find it all ultimately very hollow and see it as meaningless. Conversely, someone who’s done nothing in life might still be able to insist that they’ve had a meaningful life, whereas from the outside I wouldn’t be able to find anything in their life I could hang an attribution of meaningfulness onto. This suggests also that the reason why “evidenced argument” might not play any role in first-personal judgments about meaningfulness, why they may not be true first-personally “in virtue of” anything, might be due to an involvement of the will in first-personal judgments about the meaningfulness of one’s life. Turning to the question of the meaning of life itself (and not the meaning of *a* life), it does not seem obvious that all such assertible judgments

⁵⁷⁵ Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, 115, 117.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

must be jointly assertible. If I arrive at some answer about the meaning of life, and someone else arrives at a different answer, I might feel that I cannot assert what they assert but that they are not wrong to assert it. (I would of course say that a lot of answers are wrong, but I wouldn't necessarily say that every answer that differs from mine is wrong.)

In conclusion we should ask about the larger purpose behind all of these non-naturalist defenses of realism or naturalism. The authors discussed in this chapter all allow for the possibility of an immanent failure of moral thought to satisfy the aspirations of realism, but they do not restrict themselves to arguing that success and failure are both real possibilities; they all write *optimistically* about the prospects of moral realism. They all think that the truth of moral realism depends upon our achievements of first-order moral reasoning, but none of them pursue first-order moral considerations very far; they are not doing the thing that, according to them, could actually produce or reveal moral truth. Instead they are writing *about* the fact that doing first-order moral reasoning is the only way to show moral realism to be true. (Scanlon and Wiggins gesture towards certain trains of thought that are meant to lead inevitably to certain conclusions, and I have argued here that those paths are less than inevitable, but the preponderance of metaethical writing over ethical writing among these non-naturalist realists is striking.) It is worth asking: what is the value of writing optimistically about the prospects of moral truth? There is obvious value in doing the first-order work of achieving some real shared moral understanding. In previous chapters I have been discussing authors such as Wittgenstein and Peter Winch and Cora Diamond, who take the opposite tack and emphasize, not the possibility of convergence, but rather the quite various and open-ended possibilities of response to any given situation. These authors are writing metaethically in the sense that they tend not to take a first-order position as philosophers but rather to sympathetically explore the various possible positions. One could interpret this as writing *pessimistically* about the prospects of moral truth; they emphasize that there is always another way of seeing the matter that also makes sense. I believe they are doing this with some sense of moral purpose, even though there is also simple curiosity and interest here, and to some extent it is surely also a matter of intellectual temperament. They wish to sympathetically articulate the various possibilities because they are worth respecting and taking seriously, first of all, and to undermine a tendency to dogmatism and blindness; and one could also see this as a necessary part of working towards some shared understanding, clearing the way for convergence.⁵⁷⁸ One could also see the work of the non-naturalist realists discussed here as clearing the path for real convergence around a shared understanding. Firstly, it is worth combatting the obstacles set up by an unsophisticated

⁵⁷⁸ This is a point that Wiggins in particular should appreciate; see his discussion of Montaigne in *Ethics*, 349.

expressivism or anti-cognitivism, for example: that moral truth must be metaphysically or epistemologically impossible, or that thought can make no real contribution to morals, since it is ultimately a question of sentiment. There is a point in doing metaethics to show that moral progress is theoretically possible. Secondly, one might suppose that the optimism of these authors could encourage us to try to achieve a shared understanding. I tend to think that this rather unproductive. Any optimism is obviously just baseless speculation (Wiggins himself speaks of “speculative optimism”⁵⁷⁹); we simply have no realistic idea to what extent “we” (for various values of “we”) have the resources to converge upon moral truth. The matter simply isn’t predictable; the most we could have is a *hunch*. Finally, however, one might suspect that a more dangerous motive lies behind some of these non-naturalist writings; we can see in Scanlon’s view of the regress problem emphasized by Korsgaard, which I discussed in chapter one. Korsgaard argues that moral or normative realism leads us into an endless regress, since any alleged moral or normative fact would leave us with the question of what to do with this fact, how to respond to it; the regress can only end when we *respond* finally. Scanlon argues to the contrary that every response raises the question of whether that response is right or is the thing to do; hence the regress can only end in a *judgment* about what is to be done or what reasons there are.⁵⁸⁰ I have discussed this in the first chapter and won’t recapitulate it here. But if we believe that we are only acting reasonably when we rest our actions on some ultimate truth-valued judgments about what to do, then we will need to hope that there is ultimately some completely determinate system of truths about what to do, or else we are unable to act reasonably. One response would be to do all the normative thinking we need to do as quickly as possible to get to this determinate system, so that we can finally start to act in the world on a reasonable basis. Of course this is simply unrealistic. A philosopher will never accomplish this. Another reaction, then, is to write metaethically as if there must be such a determinate system, one we simply haven’t fully articulated yet. But of course there musn’t be any such system — at the very least, we’ve never had any such system, and yet we do act in the world, and our acting isn’t always unreasonable — or if it is, that needs to be shown on a case by case basis. And the idea that all of our responses must be based in the recognition of the truth of a judgment obscures the possibility that our best moral thinking, the highest achievement of objectivity, might lead to forms of language that guide us in life yet are *not* truth-valued propositions. This motive for non-naturalist realism will lead us to assume, in other words, that *objectivity* in morals must be connected with *truth*, and *truth* understood in traditional analytical terms as a property of propositions, whereas the examples of moral thought adduced in the previous chapters suggest that objectivity in morals

⁵⁷⁹ Wiggins, “Moral Cognitivism”, 79.

⁵⁸⁰ See Scanlon, *Being Realistic*, 14 and 63.

might lead us to other forms of thought.

6 Truth, relativism and literature

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes by taking up three loose ends that have been pertinent to the arguments of this thesis throughout but only treated peripherally so far. The first chapter of this thesis tried to show that no set of facts will be morally conclusive for all rational agents or even for all humans, and if we understand a “fact” as something discoverable by established and impersonal methods, then no facts will even be morally authoritative at all. This needs to be understood properly to avoid a suggestion of revisionism: if my son falls of the trampoline, that fact itself is the reason I take him to the hospital — I do not wait for a concern to arise in me. That the man on the side of the road is injured and needs help is the reason why I stop to help. These facts mean something to us given our form of life, our standing cares and commitments, etc.; insofar as this background can come into question — or insofar as this is always, necessarily, an *ongoing* question, as Lovibond claims — there is no fact that can close that question for us, at least without our personal effort of imagination that makes something out of the fact. Certainly our moral problems are not answered by free-standing facts of the form: *one should not kill*, etc. This argument from the first chapter has been hopefully made clearer and more plausible by the considerations in the fourth chapter, showing how the facts of our nature, seen as independently available facts, cannot answer our moral concerns. The second chapter presented two contrasting metaethical intuitions about where we place ethics within our lives, and I suggested that we might see these as corresponding to the early and late Wittgensteinian views of ethics. One might think that morality comes into force at those points where we cannot appeal to any shared understanding, and the more substantial reasons I hoped to use to persuade you have been proven ineffective; here, where I have nothing else left, I need *morality* to bind you — “it’s just wrong”, “one shouldn’t do this”, etc. On this view, every moral expression is only moral insofar as it implies or entails some sort of absolute ‘thin’ judgment of this kind that is thought to have an independent force. On the second view, moral thought consists in the expression, articulation or creation of this shared understanding. I have turned to writers in the Wittgensteinian tradition to develop various possibilities of ethical reasoning within this second view, while also emphasizing our perennial tendency to overrun these limits, to be morally disappointed with morality and wish for more. Chapters three and four discussed various ways of articulating and creating a shared moral understanding, and showed how moral thought can achieve objectivity, although it is not necessarily able to reveal considerations that lead everyone to the same conduct insofar as they are thinking properly; and I argued that we can see moral thought as aiming at *reality* and *truth* if we allow for a looser understanding of these two terms. Chapter five tried to show that the hopes that the objectivity we can achieve will reach all the way to a

determination of action for all rational agents or even all humans, such that we end up with “facts” about what to do, is overoptimistic, leads us into dogmatism, and obscures the possibilities of other forms of objectivity in moral reflection not tied to propositional truth. I now turn to three problems that have arisen throughout. One very standard objection to traditional moral expressivism is that moral judgments clearly take propositional form and act like propositions, in that they can enter into inferences and behave normally with all logical operations; so section 6.2 tries to examine the variety of roles that propositional truth can have in various examples and, in a discussion of the Frege-Geach problem, to show that nothing I have written so far commits me to denying anything that is part of our practice of moral judgment. Section 6.3 deals with the threat of relativism; I try to show how to what extent one could legitimately, without bias or error or illusion, make universally prescriptive judgments, i.e. hold everyone to certain norms. Section 6.4 returns to my original motivation for investigating Wittgensteinian metaethics, i.e. the sense that ethical theory is an oxymoron and that deductive argument has far less of a role than is assumed, that literary methods are more central.

6.2 Truth and propositionality

Here is a collection of moral utterances:

1. You're behaving like a beast and you ought to want to behave better.
2. How extraordinary that anything should exist!
3. An innocent person *cannot* be punished.
4. Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar.
5. I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death;
I am not on his pay-roll.
6. You don't know what it's like to be shy and sensitive.
7. We have all of us one human heart.
8. The Laws of Athens are my parents.

These will serve as the basis for the following two sections investigating the question of the truth-valuedness of moral utterances and the Frege-Greuch problem.

6.2.1 Are moral utterances truth-valued propositions?

Starting with the first example: “You’re behaving like a beast” could easily be simply true or false. Of course all humans behave in some way like animals, so on one interpretation it will be trivially true. The speaker of 1) must have some more specific sense of how she means the analogy to animals and what sort of behaviors count as “beastly” in contrast to others; but if she has some more specific sense, then the other’s behavior will either be “beastly” in that sense or it won’t be. If both speaker and addressee live a life in which “beastliness” in this sense is something ugly and shameful, something not to be done, then the reminder that the behavior in question is “beastly” will have moral force for them; if they don’t, then it won’t. I suggested in the first chapter that the remark would turn out to be a non-moral utterance if the conversation continues as follows: “Well, I don’t care if my behavior is beastly”, “Ah then that’s alright”. (Here the speaker was perhaps drawing the addressee’s attention to the fact that his behavior ran counter to extant norms of morality or simply of etiquette, which might be relevant for the addressee for prudential reasons.) I had argued as well that the continuation “you ought to want to behave better” reveals the initial utterance to be meant morally in this case. However, this is also an oversimplification: this second statement could also be read as describing an extant morality that neither party feels personally very bothered by, but that they perhaps must respect for prudential reasons in that moment. (“Remember, we’re among ‘good’, upstanding citizens here, so: you ought to want to behave better.”) As a description of an extant morality it can be either true or false (though of course due to the open texture of people’s shared notions of morality it will often be hard or impossible to determine the truth-value). If the statement is true as a description of an extant morality and if both speaker and addressee live a life within this morality, then the reminder will have moral force for them; if they don’t, then it won’t. There is no special problem of truth-value here; the problem is that the truth-value of the statement doesn’t necessarily help us with our moral question. One of the strengths of the approach that is described as “Wittgensteinian constructivism” in chapter three is that every human being who is not grossly incapacitated (braindead, comatose etc.) will live *some* kind of life, i.e. will be living according to some sense of what matters, what is to be done, etc., that is in some sense derived from a communal understanding they were raised in; so there will be some point at which they are unable to sincerely say “Ah then that’s alright”, and we will have some moral leverage over them *somewhere*. But any particular description of extant morality might mean

nothing to them personally. I have also argued in the first chapter that where the speaker sees “you’re behaving like a beast” or “you ought to want to behave better” as morally decisive and can expect the addressee to see it likewise, but in fact it means nothing to the addressee personally, the speaker will likely be quite frustrated. They will not be able to say “Ah then that’s alright”. They might then be led to the fantasy that they are able to describe, not just an extant morality, but independent moral facts that exist somehow, that somehow have force over everyone. I have argued in the second chapter that this sort of utterance cannot have a truth-value simply because its meaning cannot be resolved — the “somehow” must remain unresolved: “It was in fact just the occult character [...] which you needed for your purposes.” (BB 5) Of course one could also go on to say “you ought to want to behave better”, not as an incoherent description, but as a perfectly coherent description of one’s own morality that one is *insisting* upon and holding the other to. When I say to my children “we are putting on our shoes and leaving the house now”, this is in a sense a proposition describing what we are doing, and as such it is likely to be simply false. I am saying it, not because it is true, but to make it true. It is worth noting here that the phenomenon Thompson is impressed by, the unique generality of moral judgments, could easily be explained along these lines. Thompson’s approach would suggest that a statement like “we don’t kill innocent people” can be true, despite the empirical fact that in another sense we obviously do kill innocent people, because the statement has a type of generality such that it is not falsified by simple empirical quantity that way. But we could explain the phenomenon much more simply as follows: the statement “we don’t kill innocent people” describes us in a very ordinary sense and has a very ordinary generality, either Fregean or statistical, and as such it has the truth-value of *false*. We say it anyway because we are describing a possible pattern of human behavior and trying to impose this on people. The “generality” Thompson notices could then be this: the fact that we do sometimes kill innocent people does not make us wrong when we say “we don’t kill innocent people”, because we are not trying to describe what we actually do; we are describing a counterfactual model and vehemently laying it down.

2) “How extraordinary that anything should exist!” — I have suggested that this expresses an attitude that could be part of a more humble and less egocentric life, and could in that sense be part of someone’s progress to a morally more objective view; and that within the Christian tradition similar expressions have had this role. To have a propositional truth-value, it would have to be transformed into a proposition, for example: “It is extraordinary that anything should exist.” Taken in a relative sense, it has the truth-value *false*. I have argued however that the statement makes an unstable, non-empirical use of an empirical concept. There are reasons to think that there might be wisdom in performing this spiritual and conceptual exercise. It may not be impossible to see it as a

true proposition, but that may not also be the most illuminating model of the expression, and the speaker him- or herself may not see it that way.

3) “An innocent person *cannot* be punished.” — I have argued, following Winch, that we can see this as proposing a new grammar of the concepts *innocence* and *guilt* and *punishment*. It is not entirely novel, as it draws on an existing connection between *guilt* and *punishment*; but in our conventional grammar it is nonetheless possible for an innocent person to be punished. The spirit of this grammatical proposal is to change our attitudes, and as Winch reads the expression, the primary interest is the way it would alter the attitude of a guilty person to their punishment. The grammar might be proposed with an end to cutting off a lot of self-serving rationalizations, and could be seen as bringing greater objectivity in that sense. As a description of our actual grammar, it has the truth-value *false*. But even though it takes the form of a descriptive proposition, and it clearly *is* describing something, the truth-value it has as a description is irrelevant to the moral force. We are proposing a grammar, and insofar as we feel we are right to do so, it is not because the description of the grammar is *true* as such.

4) “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar”. — It is no accident that this sentence was put right at the front of the German constitution in 1949, right after the German state had just finished violating people’s dignity on a massive scale. It seems flatly untrue; history shows that it is possible to violate human dignity, and that history is precisely the reason why it was so important to write the *inviolability* of human dignity into the new constitution. (If it really were impossible to violate human dignity, there would be nothing to worry about on that account, and the sentence would serve no practical purpose.) We can read this sentence as a signpost saying: whatever we do, we don’t do this. The state is drawing a line and holding itself to that line. As the poet George Oppen wrote: “We are brothers, we are brothers?—these things are composed of a moral substance only if they are untrue.”⁵⁸¹

5) “I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his pay-roll.” — This comes from a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Conscientious Objector”. I introduce it for the first time here, but it seems to me to fit among the sorts of examples Diamond discusses in “Eating Meat, Eating People” and other writings. The poem goes on:

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends

⁵⁸¹ George Oppen, *Collected Poems*, 189.

nor of my enemies either.

Though he promise me much,
I will not map him the route to any man's door.
Am I a spy in the land of the living,
that I should deliver men to Death?⁵⁸²

The speaker is expressing a decision, a resolve. The moral force is in the way she articulates this resolve; if other people are moved by the way she pictures the situation, they will act similarly. She personifies death, and pictures those who kill as working for death, working for the *other side*. The poem turns martial metaphors into an argument for pacifism. It speaks about enemies in the ordinary sense — “my friends” and “my enemies” — and relativizes this distinction compared to the greater enemy we all share, our ‘common enemy’⁵⁸³ one might say. Those who kill are in a more profound sense enemies to all of *us*, the living; they are working for death, betraying the living to death, *spies* for death. Obviously you shouldn't be a spy for death. We all know that killing is wrong, but in wartime it is easy to think that this is an exception, that here and now it's permissible, perhaps even obligatory. The poem makes the error in this way of thinking perspicuous; it makes quite plain what you are doing when you kill. (This description of what the poem is doing is from the point of view of someone convinced by it, of course.) It forcefully articulates the moral impossibility a person sees, and insofar as it is persuasive, the picture it offers will make killing morally impossible for others as well. If we want to say that the poem is true, we are clearly not speaking of truth as a property of propositions; we are speaking of the ‘truth’ that works of art can be said to have.

6) “You don't know what it's like to be shy and sensitive.” — This example should help combat the impression that I am only picking obscure religious images and poetic fragments from past centuries. It has similarities to other examples like “you don't know what it's like to be a minority in this society”, for example. Many of the public moral issues of our time are driven by the affected groups' articulation of their own experience, of what it is like to be gay and face the threat of ostracism from one's own family and community, what it is like to be a young black man in America and be under constant suspicion and threat from the police, etc. Feminists nowadays are not in the position of arguing for the premise that women deserve equal treatment — almost no-one

⁵⁸² Silkin (ed.), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, 226.

⁵⁸³ Diamond speaks of death as our “common enemy” in her description of Dickens' work in “How Many Legs”, 170; see section 3.3.

would explicitly deny this — but rather of articulating what it is like to face thousands of “microaggressions” every day, to be objectified and dismissed in countless minor ways, etc. McDowell’s example pertains to a specific case he is imagining and not to any systematic issue; and we could imagine an endless number of similar cases. Of course it could be *true* that someone doesn’t know what it’s like to be shy and sensitive; there is no problem of truth-valuedness here. The moral work is being done by the sense of “what it’s like”; and McDowell comes close to conceding that this cannot be captured propositionally when he writes that “[f]ailure to see what a circumstance means, in the loaded sense, is of course compatible with competence, by all ordinary tests, with the language used to describe the circumstance”⁵⁸⁴. Of course if someone is competent with the words “shy” and “sensitive” but fails to fully see what it means, I can try to describe it for them, and I would use other words besides “shy” and “sensitive” to describe it; but then it seems conceivable that the person would see the truth of *those* descriptions and yet fail to *fully* realize the meaning of *those*. McDowell should ultimately be in agreement with Donatelli that, in this sort of example at least, the ethical is not “something that we have to look for in the proposition or beside the proposition [...] but in our involvement with propositions.”⁵⁸⁵ And it is easy to suppose that McDowell is talking about nothing more complicated than plain empathy — that our propositional knowledge lacks any moral force if it is not supplemented by empathy. (Of course it would also be possible to suggest that the *fully loaded* proposition “he is shy and sensitive” differs from the *ordinary* proposition “he is shy and sensitive”, that the former has a moral force the latter lacks. Assuming that the fully loaded sense of “shy and sensitive” does not differ in extension from the ordinary sense, both propositions, if true, will be made true by the same things.⁵⁸⁶)

7) “We have all of us one human heart.” — Literally, this is not true. One could say that biologically, we all have the same kind of heart, but this doesn’t help much either (though it’s also not *entirely* irrelevant.) The expression gives us a kind of *picture* and cannot be translated into a determinate proposition. Partly what it means is: we all love and hate and fear, etc. Of course nothing of moral significance follows from this deductively. There is no real contradiction in knowing that all living humans have emotions and extorting or abusing others, causing them pain and fear, etc. But most of us only do evil when we fail to keep vividly in mind the reality of others’ lives, the reality of their hopes and their suffering. Either we try to put this out of mind, or else our own concerns are so overwhelming that they simply leave no space for any real awareness of

⁵⁸⁴ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 86; see the discussion in 5.5.1.

⁵⁸⁵ Donatelli, “The Problem of ‘The Higher’”, 11; see 1.2.

⁵⁸⁶ I thank Gunnarsson for this suggestion. I do not really mind if people see it this way, but it strikes me as a rather awkward explanation, the only point of which is to somehow shoehorn *propositionality* into McDowell’s example.

others' lives. "We have all of us one human heart" makes the reality of others' lives *perspicuous*. It also carries a suggestion that I am harming myself when I harm others, that there is no real difference between myself and any other person or between my suffering and theirs. But of course it is not a fact that we are all essentially "one human heart". This is a statement of *identification*. Mostly we identify with our own concerns, but we could identify with the passions of humanity in general, and the expression encourages this identification. Insofar as the line moves us, it moves us at least for a moment to an identification with "the human heart" in general. — It resembles Chesterton's argument that "travel narrows the mind"; he writes:

At least a man must make a double effort of moral humility and imaginative energy to prevent it from narrowing his mind. Indeed there is something touching and even tragic about the thought of the thoughtless tourist, who might have stayed at home loving Laplanders, embracing Chinamen, and clasping Patagonians to his heart in Hampstead or Surbiton, but for his blind and suicidal impulse to go and see what they looked like. This is not meant for nonsense; still less is it meant for the silliest sort of nonsense, which is cynicism. The human bond that he feels at home is not an illusion. On the contrary, it is rather an inner reality. Man is inside all men. In a real sense any man may be inside any men. But to travel is to leave the inside and draw dangerously near the outside. So long as he thought of men in the abstract, like naked toiling figures in some classic frieze, merely as those who labour and love their children and die, he was thinking the fundamental truth about them. By going to look at their unfamiliar manners and customs he is inviting them to disguise themselves in fantastic masks and costumes.⁵⁸⁷

It is true as a statistical generalization that men "labor and love their children and die". When Chesterton says that this is "the fundamental truth about them", he is making a statement of essence. It follows from my argument in 4.5 that one might be able to intelligibly assert that it is true that this is "the fundamental truth about them", but that it is at least a difficult and marginal case of truth-valuedness.

8) "The Laws of Athens are my parents." — In citing this example Diamond is criticizing Frankena's discussion of Socrates' arguments that he ought to stay in Athens rather than trying to escape. Frankena discusses three arguments in the *Crito*, the third of which involves the notion that the laws of Athens are Socrates' parents. He presents the conclusion that Socrates ought not to escape as following from "a general moral rule or principle which, upon reflection, he and his friend Crito accept as valid", namely "that we ought to obey or respect our parents and teachers", and from "another premise which involves a statement of fact and applies the rule or principle to the case in

⁵⁸⁷ Chesterton, *What I Saw in America*, 1.

hand”, namely “if I escape I will be disobeying my parent and teacher”⁵⁸⁸. In other words: the moral conclusion follows ineluctably from a moral principle both agree on and a factual statement.

Diamond writes:

But it is because we are so used to such talk that we do not see how very odd it is as an account of Socrates’s thought. The oddness of it is most easily brought out if we consider the statement of fact in the third argument: that if Socrates escapes he will be disobeying his parent. That is not a fact unless it is a fact that the Laws of Athens are Socrates’s parents. How is that a fact? If Socrates had said, “Crito, you don’t know this, but I was brought up by wolves,” there would certainly have been a fact about Socrates’s upbringing of which Crito had previously been ignorant. But that is not the sort of fact about his upbringing that Socrates thinks Crito needs to recognize. (“Unbeknownst to you, Crito, I was brought up, not by my folks, but by the Laws of Athens.”)⁵⁸⁹

Crito does not disagree with Socrates because he had failed to see the quite simple syllogism Frankena presents. The real work is being done, not by the syllogism, but by the ‘fact’ that the Laws of Athens are Socrates’ parents. If we are willing to accept this, we will hardly need the syllogism. (That does not mean that if we accept this, the moral question will be settled. It might be morally permitted to disobey one’s parents in this case.) Of course the statement poses as a factual statement and could be treated as such, for example if we wanted to write out a more complete syllogism:

We ought to obey or respect our parents and teachers;
The Laws of Athens are my parents;
Therefore I ought to obey the Laws of Athens.
To escape would be to disobey the Laws of Athens;
Therefore I ought not to escape.

It is possible to treat the second premise as a truth-valued proposition and allow it to pass its truth-value down the line to the conclusion of the syllogism. But if that premise becomes the point of contention and we start to consider whether it *is* in fact true, I think it’s hard to know what to say. It seems perhaps to resemble statements of identification. It is certainly not literally true, but it might have validity for Socrates as a metaphorical expression of the way he sees himself in relation to his state.

A certain sort of philosophical opponent will want to say that I have cut off the discussion of every example at the point where it was about to turn interesting. If seeing everything as extraordinary

⁵⁸⁸ Frankena, *Ethics*, 2.

⁵⁸⁹ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 310.

represents a certain conceptual exercise, I as suggested in chapter one, surely the person who says “How extraordinary that anything should exist!” also thinks — this opponent might say — that *it is right to practice this conceptual exercise* or that *one ought to*. It might be true that “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar” is strictly speaking false, since human dignity can be violated; but surely (the opponent might say) humans do have this property of dignity, and this property is what justifies the notion *one ought not to violate human dignity*⁵⁹⁰. Etc. Now in the first case, someone who says “how extraordinary that anything should exist” might not intend any kind of universal prescription, and their expression might still be recognizably moral. In either case it is hard to imagine an actual speaker, outside of a philosophy seminar, going on to say the things that the opponent says they might say. After all, the statements suggested by this opponent seem so much less persuasive and illuminating than the original statements. If Cavell is right that the meanings of our *ought*-statement are exhausted by the considerations we can advance in explaining them, and if McDowell is right that my conception of the situation gives us the *complete* explanation of my reason and, in happy cases at least, the motivation for what I do, and does not need supplementation by an extra desire, then surely we do not need to supplement our conception by adducing an additional belief of the form: *you ought to do x* or *it is right to do x*. The person who says “Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar” has likely said all that they want to say. We should ask, at this point, what motivates this philosophical opponent to go further. My goal in this thesis has been to explain morality in the sense of explaining how certain thoughts and expressions can have a unique kind of necessity for us, changing not just what we do but what we can will, or at least: what we can will when we are honest with ourselves and look at what we are doing. I have tried, in each case, to take the explanation to the point where this is clearest. When we want to go further and suggest that all of these moral expressions essentially hinge on some absolute and ‘thin’ judgment, then moral necessity seems more mysterious all of a sudden. One might conclude that this philosophical opponent has succumbed to the temptation to look for something that officially makes someone right rather than looking instead to understand how we think.

6.2.2 The Frege-Geach Problem

The so-called “Frege-Geach problem” is thought to be a powerful and perhaps decisive objection to any moral theory that treats moral judgments as anything other than truth-valued propositions. The problem is often formulated as follows: moral judgments can play a role within inferences and lead

⁵⁹⁰ I am indebted to Gunnarsson for this suggestion as well.

to valid conclusions; but this would seem to be impossible if they are not truth-valued propositions.⁵⁹¹ If we suppose that “Murder is wrong” means “Boo!(murder)”, it is hard to explain the meaning of a conditional such as “If murder is wrong, then getting your little brother to murder people is wrong.”⁵⁹² The person who says *that* is not necessarily booing anything (just as the person who says a non-moral conditional is not asserting the antecedent). Frege has shown that the assertion of *p* is not part of the meaning of *p*, which must have the same meaning in asserted and in unasserted contexts. If we make Booing! part of the meaning of “murder is wrong”, then when the syntactic string “murder is wrong” occurs in unbooed contexts such as “If murder is wrong...” it will have to have a different meaning. But then every alleged inference involving a conditional with a moral judgment as its antecedent will be a simple case of equivocation. That is, in the inference:

Murder is wrong;
If murder is wrong, then getting your little brother to murder people is wrong;
Therefore: Getting your little brother to murder people is wrong

will not be valid if the syntactic string “murder is wrong” has a different meaning in the first premise than it would have, on the Boo! theory, in the second. We wanted an inference of the form: *p*; if *p* then *q*; so *q*. If “murder is wrong” must be given a different meaning in the unbooed context, then we will instead have the faulty inference: *p*; if *q* then *r*; so *r*.

I have argued in 3.3 that on what I called “Wittgensteinian expressivism”, we are not committed to arguing that moral expressions secretly have a different underlying form than what they seem to have; we would not translate “murder is wrong” into “Boo!(murder)”. Nonetheless I have been denying that many moral expressions have truth-values, so the problem of their ability to enter into inferences might seem to arise here as well.

Another example might help. The principle of gun safety “All guns are always loaded” takes the form of an empirical description and has a truth-value. I think the principle is meant to enter into inferences such as the following:

You should not point a loaded gun at anyone you don’t intend to kill;
This is a gun;

⁵⁹¹ See Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 40ff., and Geach, “Assertion”, 463. I discuss this problem briefly in 3.3 as well.

⁵⁹² This is Miller’s example.

All guns are always loaded;
So: This gun is loaded;
So: you should not point this gun at anyone you don't intend to kill.

But the person who espouses the principle "All guns are always loaded" would not be happy with the following inference:

You shouldn't go into those woods at dusk without a loaded gun;
This is a gun;
All guns are always loaded;
So: This gun is loaded;
So: I can go into those woods at dusk with this gun.

"All guns are always loaded" is a description with the truth-value *false*; but even though it's important that the sentence takes the form of a description, the truth-value it has as a description is not important. The principle has a kind of validity; the validity that it has asks us to treat it as *true* for the first sort of syllogism, and to withdraw the principle from the second sort. The principle is an empirical description that we hold ourselves to, as if it were true — but not in every context.

The Frege-Geach problem is typically posed as a problem for expressivist renderings of 'thin' moral judgments, such as "murder is wrong", "you ought not to steal", etc. These can be understood as perfectly meaningful descriptions of extant systems of moral norms and as such will have truth-values and can be put into inferences, e.g.:

You shouldn't steal;
If you shouldn't steal, you also shouldn't download philosophy books without paying;
So: You shouldn't download philosophy books without paying.

This inference could be drawn by someone for whom the conclusion is not in any way a moral conclusion; they might be alienated from that system of moral norms but nonetheless understand it well enough to be able to draw inferences within it. We might mark this by putting scare quotes around every occurrence of "shouldn't". The utterance "You shouldn't steal" can enter into the ordinary logical connections, but if it lacks moral force for the speaker, that moral force cannot get passed down to the conclusion. What makes these utterances moral is not rendered visible by these logical connections, but by "our involvement in the propositions"; and as the example of gun safety

shows, sometimes this involvement will lead us *not* to draw certain inferences that would be possible in a strictly formal sense. And someone could also espouse a norm that is false as a description of extant moral norms, e.g. “You should steal” (an anarchist might say this); but we could still treat this as a true description in the same way for inferential purposes.

Most of the examples listed in 6.1 take the form of descriptions (at least 1, 3, 4, 7 and 8), so they could intelligibly enter into inferences. In some cases some possible inferences will represent directions we do not wish to go — e.g., if an innocent person cannot be punished, then those innocent people in prison are not really being punished, so what are they complaining about? Or: If human dignity is inviolable, then these acts of genocide could not possibly be violating anyone’s dignity. Sometimes we will be treating an utterance with a truth-value of false as if it were true; sometimes we will be treating an utterance with *no* truth-value as if it were true. In all of these cases the moral conviction will not be brought about by any formal pattern of inference anyways. For example:

I shouldn’t harm myself.

If we all of us have one human heart, then I cannot harm another without harming myself.

We all of us have one human heart.

So: If I harm another, I am harming myself.

So: I should not harm another.

Here the moral work obviously happens within the second premise, and formally this simply has the structure: if p then q . Here q follows in a sense from p , but it does not follow logically, at least not in any strict sense of logic. Moral notions such as “one human heart” or “fellow creature” or “spy for Death” draw on our existing commitments and passions to reorient us — if an animal is a “fellow creature”, it follows from that and from what fellowship is for us that I cannot want to use that animal. Diamond writes says about a Wordsworth poem, “That Old Cumberland Beggar”, that it

is especially interesting as an example, because the moral aim is very clear, and because there is actually an argument (given in enthymematic form) in it, roughly this:

None of the created forms can exist divorced from good;

Therefore least of all can any human being be scorned without sin;

Therefore the old beggar is not to be deemed useless.

But it would be absurd to believe that that argument (or that argument more fully spelled out) is what is intended to do the work of convincing anyone who had been inclined to deem old beggars useless. We have not only the structure and content of the poem, but Wordsworth's Preface, to make clear that the moral force of the poem is created by the way objects are described and feelings given in connection with each other: that is how Wordsworth thinks to enlighten the understanding and ameliorate the affections of those readers who can respond to such poems.⁵⁹³

However, the Frege-Geach problem extends beyond the role of moral judgments in inference; if we claim that some moral judgments are not truth-valued propositions and yet find that in ordinary language can apply any logical operators to these judgments, such as negation, conjunction, etc., we run into the Frege-Geach problem. As Schroeder writes:

[...] we do not even understand 'boo murder?', let alone is it clear why this question would be answered by 'boo murder!'. We do not even understand 'not boo murder!', let alone is it clear why it is inconsistent with 'boo murder!'. And we do not even understand 'if boo murder, then boo defenestration!', let alone is it remotely clear how it, together with 'boo murder!', should yield a logically valid argument for 'boo defenestration!'. Yet 'murder is wrong' has precisely these relationships with 'is murder wrong?', 'murder is not wrong', and 'if murder is wrong, then defenestration is wrong'.⁵⁹⁴

Schroeder claims as well: "*Every* construction in natural languages seems to work equally well no matter whether normative or descriptive language is involved, and to yield complex sentences with the same semantic properties."⁵⁹⁵ If moral thought sometimes involves reflection upon the meaning of individual words, and sometimes involves whole narratives or fables or works art, then it is not true that all moral or all normative language could become the argument of truth-functional operators. Schroeder has a specific notion of what "normative language" looks like — he is only thinking of sentences that at least *look* propositional. I have been focussing here on sentential units rather than narratives or words because they are easier to deal with, and I have argued that some moral utterances in sentence form will be able to enter into any and all logical operations; but in this case what is moral about them will not be rendered visible by any presentation of their logical connections, since the moral force is found in "our involvement with the propositions". In other cases, we will not always treat moral expressions like propositions in *all* contexts. I might settle on the expression that animals are our fellow creatures, and be willing in some contexts to draw inferences from this and other premises, but not be willing to say that it is *true* that animals are our fellow creatures or that someone who denies this is wrong. If I say "the world is a miracle", I would

⁵⁹³ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 297f.

⁵⁹⁴ Schroeder, *Being For*, 5.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

not necessarily say that someone who says “the world is not a miracle” has said something untrue. In his “Lectures on Religious Belief”, Wittgenstein argues that when I disagree with someone’s religious belief, this disagreement does not necessarily take the form of me asserting the contrary of what the other asserts; Wittgenstein even claims at one point that he is unable to contradict someone who believes in the Last Judgment. (*LC* 53-5) He seeks to understand religious expressions by asking, of a certain expression, “what he makes follow from it”, “what conclusions are you going to draw ... Are eyebrows going to be talked about, in connection with the Eye of God?” (*LC* 62, 71). In summary: the Frege-Geach problem is thought to be an objection to expressivism when it is assumed that we obviously treat our moral expressions *fully* as propositions. But this isn’t obvious and requires investigation. Sometimes we will treat moral expressions that take descriptive form as propositions for all logical purposes, even though we do not care what their truth-value actually is or they do not even have a clear truth-value, since despite their form the moral expressions are not meant to be accurate descriptions; and sometimes we will *not* want to treat them as propositions in all contexts. Insofar as it turns out that we do not treat all of our moral expressions as propositions in all contexts, this is an argument against realism or at least a problem for the more simplistic forms of realism.

6.3 Relativism

I have been arguing that the valuable insights offered by Korsgaard, Thompson and McDowell in their metaethical writings are all skewed in various ways by these authors’ desire to theoretically secure objectivity; I argued that they all acknowledge the essentially personal nature of moral thought, but lose track of it in reaching for a theoretical promise of objectivity. Hence at various points someone may have wanted to object that I seem to be leading us towards relativism. A conclusion of relativism might seem almost inevitable if we agree with Cavell that morality involves “modes of argument whose characteristic feature is exactly that they can secure the rationality of both protagonists in the absence of agreement about a conclusion.”⁵⁹⁶ Now some moral judgments are frankly relativistic and nonetheless recognizably moral — for example whatever Americans say about what *real Americans* do. These judgments are not intended to be universally applicable, though the fact that some Americans are comfortable making such relativistic judgments will affect their moral attitudes to non-Americans. And people sometimes make moral judgments that are purely individual in scope; some students in my seminars have made remarks along the lines: because of my relationship to my cat/dog, *I* cannot eat meat, where it has

⁵⁹⁶ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 263.

been clear in context that they are expressing a moral impossibility and not a psychological impossibility (where the test of the difference is whether it makes sense to ask: “but have you tried?” — when one finds that one cannot will something, one also cannot try to carry it out.⁵⁹⁷) Someone might suspect that the person who says “I cannot eat meat” is being falsely modest or has been raised not to express themselves moralistically out of politeness; it seems to me that there is no reason not to take this sort of statement at face value as an expression of individual moral resolve that does not involve the extra step of universally prescribing anything. And I might in fact feel that it is not my place to make any universal prescriptions because it is not my place to judge others. In Christian terms one might say: I only have to reckon with God’s judgment and not the world’s; and as for the others, they will likewise face Judgment Day, but *I* am not their judge. Someone might nonetheless object that universal prescriptions have a priority in our lives, in that no-one would be able to judge for themselves what they must or cannot do morally speaking if they were not raised within a form of life in which it was taught to them that certain things mattered, certain things were not done, etc.; no-one can form any moral resolve from scratch. But one could also argue for the priority of individual moral resolve in the following sense: the only moral judgments that *I* have to make by virtue of leading a human life, are judgments about how to lead my own human life; there is no necessity at all about judging others.

So moral thought does not inevitably take the form of universalistic principles, which are themselves morally questionable; and the issue of moral relativism need not inevitably arise. But of course we do often judge people *absolutely* for their actions, and people will want to know if this is necessarily confused or incoherent on what I have called a Wittgensteinian metaethics. My discussion in 5.6 of the difficulty of achieving genuinely universally compelling moral reasoning might give this impression.

It will be helpful to look at moral judgments what it means to be human, what death means, what our individuality means, etc. I have argued that these can be understood as judgments about a shared but essentially contested object, the human life-form; hence people with different views can be construed as disagreeing about a common subject. If I think that death is a curse and someone else thinks it a blessing, we are disagreeing about *what death is*. If we derive practical norms from our understanding of these things, we might also hold others to these norms categorically. Suppose for example I see death as our “common enemy” and arrive at a form of pacifism as a result. Since basically every human is aware of their own mortality and everyone else’s, I might suppose that

⁵⁹⁷ See Hertzberg, “On Moral Necessity”, 110-16 and the discussion here in 3.3

everyone else is could come to see death as our “common enemy” if they thought about it — there is nothing there that would be essentially inaccessible to any human culture — and thus I might think that everyone is either a pacifist or mistaken. Here I will look briefly at a different path one might take to the stance that *there is nothing else to think* than that certain forms of treatment are morally impossible. Rather than Wiggins’ notion that slavery can only be defended if we give up certain indispensable moral concepts, I will sketch a roughly Gaita-esque argument to the effect that not fully acknowledging another’s humanity, or only acknowledging their existence as means or obstacles rather than ends in themselves, is only possible with a certain failure of imagination; hence that anyone who thinks otherwise has failed to think properly and is missing something.

Gaita holds that each individual human is an absolute value, which means, among other things, that we wrong someone when we do not treat their will as a limit on our own will in certain ways, as a source of unconditional claims and demands. He links this to “our common understanding (but strangely ignored by most moral philosophers) that human beings are individuals in the way nothing else in nature is [...] that human beings are irreplaceable in the way that nothing else is”. “[T]his sense of individuality”, he writes, “is internal to our sense of what it is to wrong someone”.⁵⁹⁸ But of course in any instrumental sense most humans are very much *replaceable*. The essential irreplaceability of each human comes out in the experience of love, or more generally in “the power of human beings to affect one another in ways they cannot fathom”⁵⁹⁹. Insofar as I depend on others for food or water or shelter, or merely sexual needs, etc., I depend on others in quite fathomable ways, and they are replaceable. (Bill could help me build a shelter just as well as Bob could.) If we love someone, we might say that we live toward that other person, that our whole life is about that person, our whole sense of self refers essentially to that person; another person would not do just as well. And when we are in love we want to say things like: the other is *everything* to me, they are *the whole world*, etc. Gaita does not want to say that we can only see the absolute value of those we love, however; but seeing an absolute value in a stranger would be unintelligible “unless we also saw him as the intelligible object of someone’s love”⁶⁰⁰.

We could fill out Gaita’s idea as follows: when I come to a sense of my own absolute dependence on another human, and when I come to a sense of how every human could in this way mean everything to another human, and of the enormous chasm between what a human can mean for me and what any other innerworldly thing could mean to me, I arrive at a view of humans wherein it

⁵⁹⁸ Gaita, “Ethical Individuality”, 125.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

makes sense to speak of each human as a source of unconditional claims on each other human. If I see an injured man on the road and I'm tempted to keep walking because I don't want to be late for an appointment, this understanding of how humans can be everything to each other will make my own reasons for wanting to walk past seem quite trivial; it would be a grotesque error of judgment to keep walking. There is simply no comparison between the need the injured man has to be acknowledged as someone in need, and my need not to be late for a meeting; there is an absolute, categorical distinction, similar to the distinction (insofar as we can meaningfully draw this distinction) between the world as a whole and any innerworldly thing.

It is important that I have given nothing like a deductive argument to any normative conclusion here; I have only tried to articulate a view of humans as the only sort of thing in the world that can present absolute and unconditional claims on us, and to show how this view makes sense against the background of certain experiences, i.e. the experience of love. The view derives from experiences and reflections that are available to all humans everywhere, and from reflections upon experiences that *matter* to every human everywhere. Even if the meaning of sexuality and romantic love and the institution of marriage is culturally variable, loving another human being (for example loving one's mother) is our common human experience if anything is. Moreover, on Gaita's view *failing* to acknowledge others' absolute value is just as common as the acknowledgement is. His subject in his book *A Common Humanity* is "the ways human beings are sometimes invisible, or only partially visible, to one another"⁶⁰¹ So if we encounter a society where people seem to regularly treat each other as mere means or objects in certain circumstances, we will not have to conclude that they lack 'our' sense of the absolute value of each human life; the simplest explanation will be that they are simply failing, just as we fail, through sheer laziness or thoughtlessness or the temptations of our egocentric tendencies. But in failing, one could argue, they will be missing or forgetting something that is genuinely there to be seen when we properly exercise our faculties.

This last point about the proper exercise of our faculties of thought is contentious. What is involved in fully acknowledging another's humanity is not the knowledge that the other is a human, at least if not if we understand this knowledge as information, nor the knowledge that that human is loved or could be loved by another human. Someone who cruelly exploits others isn't generally ignorant of the fact that someone might love their victims, though they wouldn't see this fact as relevant; and as a piece of information it isn't relevant. What fully acknowledging someone's humanity amounts to is something in the neighborhood of the following: to vividly feel how much one depends

⁶⁰¹ Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, xx.

absolutely on others, how much others mean to oneself, and to see others as likewise enmeshed in human relations in which we mean everything to each other. If this is right, then fully acknowledging another's humanity is an achievement of self-awareness and imagination. Now it is not exactly clear that others who do not exercise their imagination in this way are *failing* to. To say that it is a failure, that others are missing something, that for those who think as they should there is nothing else to think, implies a view of what belongs to thought properly exercised. Other people will think other things and have different views about what thought properly exercised looks like. We might imagine two criminals who are about to kill someone for his money, when one says: "but someone must love this person we're about to kill ... the loss of his life is an infinite loss, not comparable to any amount of money." The other criminal will of course understand this, but might think that the first criminal is distracting himself with sentimental considerations and failing to be practical-minded. That the thought of each human's absolute value is available to everyone, does not mean thought properly exercised must go that way. The environmentalist anti-humanist might also contest Gaita's proposal. If we want to describe her charitably, we can suppose that she normally would be alive to the value of each human life, but in light of what a scourge and a virus we have become, these thoughts that Gaita articulates are *silenced* for her; in light of our actual reality, they are weightless sentimentalism and a distraction. (Similarly, certain forms of poetry were obviously weightless kitsch after the experience of World War I.) And there is of course a great amount of kitsch in Gaita's articulations of absolute value; it's hard to write about basic moral certainties any other way.

Gaita could intelligibly insist that his vision of absolute value is thinking proper and that to think otherwise is to miss something, that when we exercise our faculties there is nothing else to think. But other people will think something else about what belongs to thought properly exercised. If we suppose that "thought properly exercised" is an essentially contestable object, then there will be no essentially non-partisan way of showing who is right. If Gaita runs out of things to say in defense of his position, he could still say that he's right, but in the absence of anything substantial to back up this, it remains a pretty empty assertion — it amounts to simply insisting upon his position.

But this does not lead us to *relativism*. Gaita is not necessarily wrong or confused if he does continue to insist upon his position, and he can coherently see it as faithful to the essentially contestable object, faithful to thought itself properly exercised. One of the lessons of the discussion of essentially contestable objects is that only participants in the object or practice can intelligibly make "statements of essence". We cannot imagine a non-participant reporting neutrally that "both sides are right" or "neither side is wrong". These are only intelligible as statements of participants,

and in the case we are imagining, there is no participant who wants to say that. — Gaita could also make the empty assertion “my position is right” if he wants to, and could start yelling it and browbeating his interlocutor if he likes, without necessarily being confused. After all, perhaps it will start to work if he says it often enough, with enough conviction.⁶⁰²

For the charge of relativism to get off the ground, it is not enough that people think different things. If someone thinks differently than I do and in violation of some standard we both share, then that person is simply wrong. Relativism only becomes a serious problem when people are discussing a shared question but think differently enough that there are no shared standards or commitments in light of which one is wrong; if we simply have two diverging opinions and no ‘evidence’ for either. If Gaita is appealing to standards or commitments that other humans lack, but nonetheless applies his judgment to all humans, one might accuse him of arrogance or dogmatism, of imposing his norms on others; the accusation could be sharpened if he is appealing to standards that other humans could not understand or could not think their way to. On the first count, I think Gaita is in the clear; insofar as he appeals to any ‘standard’, it is a standard found in the experience of love — to love someone is to value them absolutely. Everyone is familiar with this. The question is whether we take this experience as subjective and partial, or as revealing something about all of us. (It is very convenient to see it as something subjective.) But there might be a people who experience love but see its significance differently enough that they couldn’t intelligibly give is the universalizing role Gaita does. Of course someone who raises this objection would have to do the work of describing or imagining these people. With such basic human realities, it seems to me the only plausible worst-case scenario is that it might sometimes be *hard to say* whether Gaita’s thoughts are accessible to them, whether there is any way to get from their thoughts to Gaita’s. But *this* doesn’t have to stop Gaita from insisting upon his view and holding people to it. When my children do something wrong it’s often unclear whether they “know better” or could have done differently. (Could my son have had the thought that hanging from the lamp would cause it to tip over and break? He couldn’t have predicted it as well as I could, but similar things have happened in his experience.) In these cases I often hold them accountable because that is how they become accountable. — But it is worth looking at how we connect the thought of other peoples to our own, how we determine whether we have the same thoughts and how we determine whether we *could*

⁶⁰² We raise children largely by asserting things loudly and frequently until they stick. Moreover, this was apparently a quite effective method among Moore’s acolytes, according to Keynes’ account, as discussed by MacIntyre: “‘In practice, victory was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility’ and Keynes goes on to describe the effectiveness of Moore’s gasps of incredulity and head-shaking, of Strachey’s grim silences and of Lowes Dickinson’s shrugs.” MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 16.

have the same thoughts, whether there is a route from their thought to ours. I hope to clarify this point by showing how Thompson assumes overly stringent conditions on the universal accessibility of the thoughts of justice.

In “What Is It to Wrong Someone”, Thompson is concerned with the “bipolar dikaiological nexus” that we all stand in such that one person can *wrong* the other, one can *owe* the other something, etc. He seems to argue that if all humans stand in this nexus, then all humans must share some common causal history such that “an arc of normative current” can pass “between the agent-poles”.⁶⁰³ What *makes it true* that I owe someone money in the bipolar nexus of poker are the rules of poker and the fact that we are both playing poker; what *makes it true* that I owe someone financial compensation in the bipolar nexus of tort law is that we both live in the same jurisdiction of tort law; so what conditions, he asks, *make it true* that I owe any other human being basic considerations of justice? He imagines that there must be some connection between all humans, a connection that he pictures in disturbingly quasi-physical terms, but it is possible to read this as a flowery metaphoric for a more reasonable condition: if I am to apply concepts of rights and duties to all humans everywhere, it must be “no accident” if every human everywhere could apply those same concepts. This sounds in Thompson’s writing like a metaethical (or “metadikaiological”) condition (his talk of “truth-makers” encourages this reading, I think), but it is possible to read it as a moral argument: if the concepts of justice are completely foreign to some humans, who are you to impose this bipolar nexus on them? This is supported by the sort of internalism that Thompson endorses and describes as “actuality”, i.e. that moral norms must spring from my own nature, rather than being externally mandated; and again this can also be seen as an argument in moral rather than metaethical terms: moral norms descend into pompous moralism and manipulation when they do not express my own nature in some way. And this is precisely where the charge of relativism is born.

Thompson offers discusses three alternative sorts of theory, the Humean, the neo-Aristotelian, and the Kantian, and argues that only the neo-Aristotelian account can tell a causal story that matches the scope we give our dikaiological judgments. We extend considerations of justice to all humans, and the neo-Aristotelian story looks for the foundations of justice in our shared human nature. Approaches that seek to found justice either on convention or on some more-than-human rational nature cannot point to any shared causal story. He writes, for example, about Kantian and neo-Kantian notions of the *agent*: “One feature that all of these concepts share is that a pair of agents

⁶⁰³ Thompson, “What Is It to Wrong Someone”, 335.

can come together to fall under any one of them in complete natural-causal independence of one another, without any shared dependence on anything we can understand as a common source.”⁶⁰⁴ In the discussion of Thompson’s neo-Aristotelianism in chapter four I have argued that when we appeal to humanity in moral reasoning, we are for the most part not referring to a biologically given nature but to what we have made of being human; hence we are not necessarily appealing to anything present in the causal history of all human communities. If we nonetheless apply the corresponding moral judgments to all humans, we will need to question the need for any sort of common source present in our causal history to underlie these judgments — whether our moral judgments need to be “actual” for all humans in that causal sense.

We can begin by noting that Thompson applies rather counterintuitive identity criteria to the concepts of *life-form*, *practice* and *language*. He says about the concept of *species* or *life-form*:

The first point to emphasize is that it is perfectly intelligible to speak of a pair of occupants of this category which are exactly the same in their inner constitution, but are nevertheless distinct species or distinct life forms. Such is the relation that the life form you and I share bears to the life form shared by all the exactly similar humanoids up on the philosopher’s Twin Earth: they are on all accounts properly ‘twin humans’, not humans; their form is not human form but twin human form. The anatomical, pathological, and cardiological text-books published up there may say exactly the same things as ours do, and the diagrams may look exactly the same, but their treatises are speaking of and diagramming something else.⁶⁰⁵

Insofar as Thompson founds moral considerations upon species-membership, this would contradict Horgan and Timmons’ idea that we would consider ourselves in genuine moral disagreement with the Twin Earthers in their thought experiment. But I see no reason to deny that we would be able to acknowledge the humanity of these Twin Earthers and see ourselves as capable of wronging each other. He goes on to speak of the identity criteria of *social practices*:

So it would be with an independently developed Twin English spoken somewhere in the South Seas: it would be a different language. If Captain Cook, overhearing the locals, mistakes them for fellow English speakers—descendants perhaps of earlier shipwrecked Englishmen—he will be wrong. And if he asks (in English), ‘Do you know where I can get a shave?’ and they answer (in Twin English), ‘Go up Mindanao Avenue three blocks, turn left on to Fiji and you’ll see it on your right,’ and in the end he even gets a shave, still this will not be a conversation; nor, more obviously, will Cook be gaining testamentary knowledge about the places of

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 364.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 361.

things. Grammars and dictionaries of the two languages (written, let's suppose, in a third language) will say all the same things, but they will once again say them about different things.⁶⁰⁶

Insofar as Captain Cook assumes that his interlocutors are “descendants perhaps of earlier shipwrecked Englishmen”, he is wrong about this — but why should this lead us to deny that he is having a conversation? He clearly *is* having a conversation. And in imagining a ‘twin chess’ or *tzschess*, Thompson writes:

Chess and *tzschess* are, once again, different games with exactly the same rules. As a result, at least on first meeting, in ignorance of these facts, there will intuitively be nothing that the ostensibly opposed players are playing.⁶⁰⁷

Again, this seems an incredible denial based on nothing more than Thompson's assumption that our criteria of identity for games *must* involve a common causal history. But it is interesting that Thompson qualifies his denial, writing that “at least on first meeting, in ignorance of these facts” they will not be playing a game together. He is perhaps thinking of the following possibility: once they realize that *chess* and *tzschess* arose independently of each other, they might realize that they haven't been playing a game together at all. This will be frustrating for them, since they want to play a game together, and it now seems to be impossible. But they might get the following idea: they could both invent a new game, the game of *chäss*, and give this game the same rules as *chess* and *tzschess*; since both parties will have been present at the invention of *chäss*, they should be able to play it together. Or alternately: once they realize they have not been playing a game together, they could decide to play *tzschess* together, and the *tzschess* player could teach the *chess* player the rules of *tzschess*, either by demonstrating each individual rule, or just by saying: “the rules are the same as in chess.” (Although the latter is strictly speaking impossible. Since they haven't yet played a game together — the first alleged game wasn't in fact any game — the *tzschess* player has never seen a game of *chess* and cannot know what the rules of *chess* are, so they will have to go through every individual rule of *tzschess*.) Of course these ceremonies are all quite pointless, but Thompson's qualification does raise the issue of whether what we want to say about the identity of social practices might be different before and after participants of the respective practices have begun interacting with each other.

Let us take a closer look at the case where English is spoken in England, and Twin English spoken

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 361.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 362.

in the South Seas somewhere, and these communities have so far had no contact with one another. Would we in fact want to say that these are the *same* language or two numerically distinct languages? I suspect that most people would say that it's hard to say or that there is no answer. If I am right about this, it suggests suggests that our criteria of identity for languages are not precise enough to make any firm determination about the situation Thompson envisages, or at least not as clear-cut as Thompson thinks.⁶⁰⁸ But what will we say after Captain Cook has gotten directions and perhaps chatted with the barber about the weather while getting his shave? It is incredible to say that he hasn't really talked to the barber about the weather, and at some point, if not right at the point of initial contact, it will be senseless to speak of two different but identical languages. (Let us suppose that an English-speaker and an Twin English-speaker meet on a Dutch trading vessel, fall in love, get married, settle down on a Micronesian island and raise children together, speaking to their children in what they both call "English", all without realizing that anything is amiss — are we supposed to say that they have never talked to each other about anything at all? Or are they only conversing if they decide to speak Twin English and the English-speaker goes to work learning Twin English? And how would an English-speaker go about learning Twin English? And which language do the children speak?)

Similarly, any distinction between different life forms, Earth humans and Twin Earthers, would quickly lose any point if they actually began to interact, and certainly by the point that they began to have families together; and any distinction between *chess* and *tzschess* would lose its point by the time that players of both provenances are playing together indiscriminately in tournaments. Thompson's only convincing example is the twin legal regimes of the Lombards and the Schlombards — a Lombard and a Schlombard might believe they are signing a contract with each other that in fact falls under no legal order, and hence they might fail to be interacting within any legal bipolar nexus. But legal regimes pertain to a jurisdiction defined by geography, e.g., or descent from people living in a certain geographical area, such that combining the twin legal regimes would require an explicit act of redefining jurisdiction on the part of both legal systems.

In my discussion of Gallie's work in chapter four I argued that we can identify something as a work of art, even when it comes from a culture far removed from us in time and space, without resting this identification on the hypothesis that the art-work and our art-works all somehow stem from the same Ur-work long ago. We can know that something is art because we can participate in the

⁶⁰⁸ Wittgenstein's brief discussion of personal identity in the "Blue Book" suggests that our criteria of identity for persons will not allow of any clear determination of sameness in the sorts of outlandish cases that come up in the literature; see *BB* 61.

experience of the work's intentionality. Similarly, we will count ourselves as speaking the same language when we find that our thoughts meet each other in this language, when we can think together and come to an understanding in the language, without resting this on the hypothesis of any common causal source. Thompson wishes to find a common causal origin to the dikaiological nexus because he supposes that the nexus only holds when both parties can be expected to think that it holds. Two people are only playing chess if they both understand themselves as playing chess; any two people of the "manifold of persons" defined by a legal order can only be under any real obligation to each other if the people in that manifold can generally be expected to understand and apply the concepts of that legal order. "A *ius* and the concepts through which the associated nexuses are expressed must come into the world together"⁶⁰⁹. Hence if all humans stand in some nexus of justice to one another, then all humans must be in principle capable of applying to one another the concepts of that nexus of justice. They all must be using the same concepts, then; and this leads Thompson to think that they must all have gotten their concepts from the same source. But it is worth asking how we actually sameness of concept and whether we really depend on the hypothesis of a common source in making that identification. The life of a people with one of their words will never be identical to our life with one of our words in all particulars; if we can find enough relevant connections, we will treat two words as expressing the same concept, and accordingly treat the people with certain normative expectations in conversation.⁶¹⁰

If Gaita wishes to say that every human owes every other human an acknowledgment of the other's humanity — that all humans stand in that bipolar nexus, in Thompson's terms — then according to Thompson's argument, Gaita must assume that all humans in principle can apply the concepts involved in that nexus. The only particular concepts Gaita needs are *humanity*, *love*, perhaps something like: *value*. It is easy to believe that all human communities everywhere will have some notions such that their life with those notions has enough relevant similarities to our notions of humanity, etc., that they can be identified with each other. (They need not have corresponding *words*.) Of course it is compatible with that they do not go on with their concept quite the same way as Gaita does with "humanity". (We are happy to accept that *Schnee ist weiss* means *Snow is white*, even though the life of the German-speaking community with the word "Schnee" is probably not the exact same as the life of the English-speaking community with "snow".) Some of them might refer to someone as a "human" and yet use them as an object rather than as a human. Some of us might do the same. Gaita thinks that we could see what is wrong with this by reflecting on what it

⁶⁰⁹ Thompson, "What Is It to Wrong Someone", 367.

⁶¹⁰ I am indebted in this section to Diamond's articles "How Old Are These Bones" and "Criticising from Outside".

means to be human, and we could perhaps say the same of humans in any community. When two cultures begin to interact with each other, they set up the logical space in which certain concepts are identified with each other, and they also thereby establish what paths there are in thought from the beliefs of one group to those of the other. It is easy to imagine that we will be able to find a path in the thought of any human community to Gaita's idea of fully acknowledging the other's humanity. I have argued that his idea might not be the *inevitable* result of rational reflection, but it is a very natural idea, probably an idea that anyone anywhere *could* arrive at. If so, then Thompson's condition will be fulfilled: if two humans anywhere see each other as owing each other a certain respect based solely on their humanity, it will be "no accident" that they have both conceived the situation this way, and it will be "actual" in that it follows from their understanding of what they are as humans; we have fulfilled the condition without speculating that Gaita's moral notion of the human must have a place in our shared causal history. It will thus be intelligible and reasonable if Gaita demands of every human an acknowledgement of everyone's humanity; he is probably not imposing anything on any community that is beyond their understanding or appreciation.

6.4 The role of argument and the role of literary modes of expression in moral thought

Wittgenstein wrote in a journal entry: "Ich glaube meine Stellung zur Philosophie dadurch zusammengefaßt zu haben indem ich sagte: Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur *dichten*." (CV 28) The results of this dissertation could perhaps be similarly summarized by saying: moral thought actually could only be poetry. This is false, but there is a grain of truth in it, and it is no coincidence that those philosophers writing on moral topics in the Wittgensteinian tradition have focussed so much on literature. One way of describing the essentially personal nature of moral deliberation is to say: it is not just an exercise of theoretical reason, but rather the person's total response to their experience, involving all their faculties, including their affective nature and their imagination. Diamond suggests that we can only follow the sorts of considerations she develops about animal life if we "attend to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties"⁶¹¹ — one might say that she focusses especially on the true use of the imagination in moral thought to overcome corrupt imagination, i.e. "self-indulgent fantasy". The poet Wallace Stevens said about the use of imagination in poetry:

[...] we may say that the best definition of true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties. Poetry is the

⁶¹¹ Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 296.

scholar's art. The acute intelligence of the imagination, the illimitable resources of its memory, its power to possess the moment it perceives — if we were speaking of light itself, and thinking of the relationship between objects and light, no further demonstration would be necessary. Like light, it adds nothing, except itself.⁶¹²

If one buys the view of moral thought I have been developing here, and one buys this view of the poetic imagination, then it will seem that moral thought and poetic imagination are made for each other. Of course there might also be other morally illuminating modes of thought as well. But one way of reformulating the critique of authors such as Blackburn, Korsgaard, Thompson and McDowell I developed in the preceding chapters is to say: while their views all try to account for the essentially personal nature of morality, none of them pose the question of which modes of thought are suited to address essentially personal problems. Blackburn for example holds that moral judgments are the expressions of our stable attitudes. But he expects that this view will lead us to see the content of morality in terms of roughly consequentialist principles. While “there is no essential connection” between projectivism in general and consequentialism, nonetheless:

A projectivist is unlikely to take the moral sentiments as simply given. He will fill out the story by attempting an explanation of the practice of moralizing. This turns to its function, and particularly to its social function. In Mackie's terms, morality is an invention that is successful because it enables things to go well among people with a natural inheritance of needs and desires that they must together fulfil. Moral thought becomes a practice with a purpose. [...] there must be at least a limit to the extent to which moral thought can oppose consequentialist, teleological reasoning.⁶¹³

Yet on Blackburn's own view of moral reasoning, this alleged fact about the origin of the moral practice is first and foremost just a fact, and one could take any number of different attitudes toward that fact, or none at all. The ‘purpose’ of the practice might not be my purpose and might mean nothing to me. I might take the attitude that the human species is a malevolent virus that needs to be stopped. Blackburn's argument here can only be morally relevant, on his own view, if it is addressed to our attitudes and seeks to change our attitudes; and in that regard it strikes me as rather ineffective. It does not even seem to be the *expression* of his own attitudes, even though it leads to a result that probably *matches* his own attitudes. Though Blackburn can write quite striking and effective prose, but here he has not chosen to use any rhetorical means to persuade us to take up what he apparently sees as the appropriate attitude toward the alleged fact of the origin of moral practice. In fact he does not, at any point, stop to ask whether there are modes of thought that are suited to express and contest stable attitudes, whether the sort of argument he offers here is even the

⁶¹² Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 61.

⁶¹³ Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 164.

kind of thing that could, on his own view, have moral force. It seems at first glance that literature would be better suited for this purpose than the sort of argument Blackburn offers, since literature can move us in ways arguments cannot. This is all the more true if we modify the notion of “attitude” as I suggested in chapter three; these attitudes are often expressed in metaphorical or symbolic language that deploys familiar concepts in unfamiliar ways, hence in prose that is in a broad sense literary. On this Wittgensteinian notion of “attitude” we will often turn to symbolic language, not just to move someone to take up the attitude we are endorsing, but to even be able to express the attitude in the first place, to be able to say what we want to say. — Korsgaard thinks that the authority of any moral knowledge must be founded in our practical identity. She also offers an argument that is meant to show how a specific practical identity, that of rational agent, is rationally compelling for everyone who reflects along certain lines. Many of her critics have claimed that the argument is not compelling and have tried to formalize it and show that certain of its steps do not follow from the previous ones.⁶¹⁴ But it is noteworthy that Korsgaard does not pause at the notion of “practical identity” and then, before offering any kind of argument, ask instead how practical identity gets formed and allow this to influence the style of her own normative considerations going forward. It is probably safe to say that no-one has ever argued their way into a practical identity. For the most part practical identity is probably formed by upbringing more than anything else. But it might also be plausible that an expression like St. Vincent Millay’s “Am I a spy in the land of the living” might change someone’s sense of self, and *thereby* change their view of their moral obligations, in exactly the way that Korsgaard has in mind. This would suggest that if she really wishes to convert us to a different practical identity as rational agents, she might need not argument so much as the sort of compelling poetic imagery that Kant used in imagining a “kingdom of ends”. And here again one might suspect that the role of poetic language is not just to move someone to a practical identity we can conceive independently, but to *conceive* an identity — otherwise poetic language will seem to have a purely manipulative role. (We do not first formulate an identity in one set of terms and then try to badger people into it using inflated rhetoric — rather the language that moves me to see myself differently *is* how I see myself.) — Thompson says that “we have no way of judging what practical thoughts and what range of upbringings might be characteristic of the human, and sound in a human, except through application of our fundamental practical judgments”⁶¹⁵. I have argued that if Thompson wants to understand the human life-form as something that can *only* be known through the self-reflection of participants, then we have to

⁶¹⁴ One version of the argument is found on pp. 120f of *The Sources of Normativity*; Cohen formalizes the argument on p. 185 of *The Sources of Normativity* and goes into detailed critique in the following pages.

⁶¹⁵ Thompson, “Human Form”, 73.

understand human life-form not as a biologically given nature but as an essentially contestable object. It is worth asking, then, how we contest essentially contestable objects, and in particular how we contest our sense of humanity. And it seems at least *prima facie* plausible that literature is a vehicle for thinking about what it means to be human.⁶¹⁶ Gaita has argued moreover that when we talk about “the realm of meaning” rather than the realm of facts, the form and the content of our words cannot be distinguished — there is no content to the view of animals as “our fellow creatures”, for example, that can be entirely separated from the choice of that exact form of words to express it.⁶¹⁷ To that extent that inseparability of form and content is one of the distinguishing marks of literary prose, we will be using literary speech to articulate the meaning of being human even where we are not relying on specific literary works. — McDowell finally describes moral knowledge, for example knowing what it is to be shy and sensitive, as involving a certain non-formal shape of the will and the capacity for certain desires. He has suggested *perspicuous presentation* as the method of conveying this knowledge — or more specifically “helpful juxtapositions of cases, descriptions with carefully chosen terms and carefully placed emphases, and the like” — and emphasizes as well “the importance of rhetorical skills”⁶¹⁸. If we can see the method of perspicuous presentation as practiced by Wittgenstein in his “Bemerkungen zu Frazers *Golden Bough*” as a literary genre, this might help to make sense of Wittgenstein’s remark that philosophy “actually” can only be written poetically.⁶¹⁹ However, it is odd that McDowell does not arrive at the far more obvious idea that a *novel* or a *film* could convey the knowledge of what it is to be shy and sensitive.

The various forms of “internalism” that all these author endorse seem to lead directly to the idea that literary speech much play a central role in moral thought. In fact the more we emphasize the personal nature of morality, as these authors do, the more it can come to seem puzzling how argument could play *any* role for us. However, I do not to say that deductive arguments involving moral principles have no role to play in our moral lives. To see the role of both deductive argument and literary modes of speech more clearly, I would like to offer a brief sketch of how moral

⁶¹⁶ Gallie suggests that in his example of a kind of bowling, ‘what bowling really is’ gets contested by certain performances of bowling as well as by the fans’ descriptions of those performances. By analogy this would suggest that what it means to be human or what is proper to a human life gets contested by certain exemplary performances of living a human life — one might think of Jesus Christ, Siddharta Gautama, the Mahatma Ghandi, etc. — and by descriptions of these performances.

⁶¹⁷ See e.g. Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog*, 105. An article of Diamond’s refers to MacIntyre’s description of “what death meant in heroic societies” — that, roughly, while there is in these societies a distinction between those with honor and those without, it is also a central theme of these societies that “death waits for both alike” — and seems to suggest that the use of iambic meter is essential to this view; see Diamond, “How Many Legs?”, 171.

⁶¹⁸ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, 85f.; see section 5.5.1 here.

⁶¹⁹ For a discussion of the idea of philosophy as poetry and the arguably poetic quality of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing, see Perloff, “‘But isn’t *the same* at least the same?’” and Schalkwyk, “Wittgenstein’s ‘Imperfect Garden’”.

considerations enter into our lives in the first place. A survey of typical works in normative philosophy nowadays might leave someone with the impression that moral deliberation essentially looks like this: there is a body of moral principles ‘out there’ to be discovered, and we discover them by consulting our intuition for candidate principles, deducing consequences of these principles for various cases, consulting our intuition again about these consequences, accordingly revising the principles, etc. On this view, literary modes of speech would essentially only be used to motivate people to act on principles we have discovered by essentially non-literary means, by intuition and deduction. But on this view of moral deliberation, the whole business looks not just epistemologically dubious but above all optional. That is, on this view we cannot explain why a basically reasonable person who has enough other things to do in her life — who needs to take care of the obligations of work and family, and would like to exercise, read books, etc. — would begin to consult her intuition about possible principles of conduct, deduce consequences of the principles for outlandish cases, etc. (Has she run out of sudokus?) If this is a description of what morality is for us, then it is easy to think that we have all been duped into internalizing certain norms as a result of various power-games.

Let us suppose that this reasonable person who has enough to do in her life comes into contact with the current practices of factory farming. These factories are rather inaccessible nowadays, but we can suppose, to keep the example simple, that she just stumbles across a typical meat factory, and that seeing it becomes a problem for her. For it to become a problem, we do not need to suppose that anything she sees stands in contradiction to a principle she finds intuitive. If it did, this doesn’t need to matter. If she found the principle intuitive that we should not cause suffering whenever we can avoid it, and she sees the factory workers causing avoidable suffering, she might just as well think: eating meat must be alright, since everyone does it; if it turns out that eating meat involves causing avoidable suffering, then it turns out that the principle is wrong. She will only have a problem that is actually a problem if she looks at the reality of factory farming and thinks: *I don’t want this* — I don’t want to spend my money on making *this* happen. (She does not need to have any intuitive principles for factory farming to become a problem; but I *am* presupposing that she has been raised within a form of life wherein suffering matters in certain ways.) She now has a problem because she has various wants, and one of them is now very inconvenient in light of the others. She enjoys meat and wants to continue eating it; she has no idea how to plan meals without meat, and doesn’t want to change her routine; she doesn’t want to be excluded from social gatherings and attract attention to herself for her delicate sensibility, or seem to be putting on airs, etc.; but, on the other hand, she certainly doesn’t want *this* either. She will face a strong temptation to try to forget about what she’s seen, so she can go on managing her wants as she always has; if she could put the

reality out of her mind, the problematic want will gradually weaken in force. This is where conscience comes in — i.e. the sense that she knows what she is trying to forget, the knowledge that she is lying to herself. And while she will probably think, looking at factory farming being practiced in front of her, *I want to not have seen this*, she might also at the same time think: *I don't want this to go unseen*, or: *I don't want this to be forgotten*. So she has a problem, a moral problem.

We could sketch a different way that morality enters our lives if we imagine her thinking instead: “is this who we are?” or: “is this who I am, I pay people to do this to animals?” Here her problem could be put this way: when she sees the reality of factory farming, she can no longer recognize herself. She now has to figure out who she is, since who she seems to be now is something she can't possibly be. And principles might play a role in the emergence of the problem as well. If she has the principle that suffering is bad, and this is a theoretical conviction or an “intuition”, then she could simply drop or modify the principle to accommodate what she's seen; but if she is firmly opposed to suffering of all kinds, and genuinely desires a world without suffering, then the sight of a meat factory will create a problem for her. (She might also be passionately opposed to violence in all its forms, and then, on seeing the farm, realize: Of course, this is *also* violence.)

If we accept these descriptions of how morality enters into our lives, we will see that morality is not the name of something mysterious, some system of rules of conduct that sometimes stands in the way of my simply doing whatever I want. Rather: sometimes doing what I want is not simple; sometimes knowing who I am is not simple; and then we will find ourselves inextricably involved in considerations we recognize as moral. But we are misled partly by the fact that “morality” is used as a noun, and partly by our desire for a system of rules that relieves us of the burden of what would otherwise be an endless responsibility for all of our choices. As Diamond writes in a discussion of Coetzee's writings on animal life, the lack of any clearly defined moral relationship to non-human animals leaves endlessly “exposed.”⁶²⁰

Just as principles can play a role in the emergence of a moral problem, there are ways for principles and deductive arguments to help us work through the problem. She might easily stop eating meat without any principle — or rather, she would only have a principle in the sense that someone who observes her behavior could ascribe to her the principle that she doesn't eat meat. She could simply lose her taste for meat and not think of it as any kind of principle. But she could also respond to her problem by committing herself to the principle: I won't eat any meat. And she might also form a

⁶²⁰ Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality”, 111; see the conclusion of section 3.2.

universal principle: No-one should eat meat. (I am simplifying here, for she might easily just think that no-one should consume the products of factory farming.) She would now be in a position to use this principle within inferences. Deductive argument would play a greater role as she sees her experience as leading her to a more general insight, such as: suffering (*all* suffering) is an evil that we must try to avoid whenever possible; one could draw quite a few consequences from this sort of principle. (She might also *not* deduce consequences from that principle in certain contexts — for example, that we have a duty to exterminate or curtail certain predator species to ameliorate the suffering of prey species. This has always struck me as a line of thought that very quickly becomes ludicrous, and she might think that she didn't really intend for the principle to be used like that.) And principles are *very likely* to play a role for her if she tries to get out of the problem. She might, for example, respond to her experience by trying to justify factory farming. This is already an evasive maneuver, since her original problem was not that she lacks justification but that *she doesn't want this*.⁶²¹ If she is to face her problem squarely she must come to terms with what she really wants and not change the topic to one of justification. But if she tries to get out of the problem, she might end up deciding on a principle like: it is wrong to cause suffering in rational beings. Or she might try to work out some sort of compromise with herself by coming up with a principle whereby she is justified in discounting the suffering of animals that fail certain capacity tests. Then she will have to stop eating pork perhaps and she will feel better about herself for having done something, but she can go on eating chicken. She will, in other words, look for principles that sound right (are “intuitive”) but are also relatively arbitrary, so that she can keep changing the principles until she finds some from which she can deduce implications that allow her to eat meat, and that give her justification for putting what she has seen out of her mind, treating it as a mere subjective emotional reaction. So while there *can* be a positive role for moral principles in someone's honest and searching response to experience, moral principles will almost inevitably play a role in our *evasion* of our moral problems. Hence it could also be argued on moral grounds that we should just throw out the whole idea of moral principles and of moral justification, as it allows us to hide from our conscience.⁶²²

One could pick a different case to describe “how morality enters our lives”; here I have understood the question ontogenetically rather than phylogenetically, looking at how a particular moral problem

⁶²¹ Here again Diamond's use of the Cavellian notion of “deflection” in the context of the problem of animals is relevant; see “The Difficulty of Reality”.

⁶²² This might be the gist of what the fictional character Elizabeth Costello is arguing in Coetzee's story “The Lives of Animals” — she seems to be claiming that rational argumentation is one of our most reliable ways of not seeing animals and not seeing what we're doing to them. A similar point is made, without reference to animals, by Michael Kremer in “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense”.

might enter into an individual's life, rather than asking, as Diamond does, how our form of life can give rise to any kind of moral relationship. I have not picked a case that particularly foregrounds the role of literary modes of speech. The case foregrounds simple experience, and shows as well how sparse and questionable is the role of straightforward argumentation from principles is. The case seems to me quite typical in that regard. The largest issue where a moral shift has occurred in the public consciousness in our own time, aside perhaps from the issue of animals, is gay rights. If the human life-form is an essentially contestable object, people could feel that it is essential to our way of life that there are men and women, that these are different in certain ways, that love and marriage is a union of man and woman, that a relation between two men cannot really be marriage, etc. This is a *perfectly coherent* view and it has not to my knowledge been discredited by any argument. (One of the virtues of thinking of our life-form as an essentially contestable object is that it renders the traditional view *intelligible* and also renders the imperviousness of the debate to principled argument intelligible.) But someone who wishes to hold this traditional view in this day and age will inevitably have to explain themselves to an actual gay person. The gay person will surely say: I want to have a life that includes love and sex, and perhaps marriage and children, just like everyone else — to try to achieve this with someone of the opposite sex would be a cruel lie — so what are you really asking of me? And now the conservative might find that they cannot be the person they would have to be to really believe this — essentially, someone who's trying to impose their delicate sensibilities on everyone else at the cost of others' happiness. Hence moral conversion happens here not through argument but through confrontation with the reality of what having the traditional view actually amounts to.

What is the role of literary speech in these examples? The woman in the original example concerning factory farming could try to change someone else's mind without dragging them to a factory farm (which are purposefully inaccessible) by evoking the horrors of it. To some extent a plain description of the events will do; because they are so bloody, they may not need to be supplemented. In the case of gay rights, the straightforward report of events might do less work and one might need to work harder on one's prose to get across *what it's actually like* to be denied all these aspects of a full life. Someone opposed to gay rights might feel that life-long celibacy wouldn't be *that* bad; this could be a failure of their imagination, one that could be revealed to them perhaps by a gifted writer. Moreover, someone who finds that they cannot eat meat might try to articulate their reaction — these are fellow creatures, how can we use them like this? — and this articulation will be at least analogous to literature in the sense that the form and the content of the expression will be inseparable. In some cases this articulation might not come after the fact of the person's response; the articulation might settle what the person really wants, such that they only

know what to do now that they have found these words to conceive the situation. And there might not be any fine line between cases where the right form of words *settles* what she really wants, and cases where the right form of words *accurately expresses* what she really wants; this use of language to negotiate one's wants can "span the gulf between propositions and expressions of decision". Those words, once found, could then be offered to others in the hope of persuading them to see the situation likewise.

I have argued that Korsgaard, Thompson, and McDowell all acknowledge the essentially personal nature of moral judgment but lose sight of it in their haste to theoretically secure objectivity. Here I have argued that these three authors and Blackburn as well all acknowledge the personal in ethics yet have very little or no interest in the question of which essentially personal modes of thought are accordingly suited to address moral problems. Here I have argued here that literature — literary works, but more so literary prose — can have a central role in moral deliberation. It is possible, however, that literature no longer does play this role for us, and that the examples I have been using are all in a sense very old-fashioned. In an age of the increasing dominance of visual media, where people form their characters and self-understanding surrounded by a sea of images, a future Wittgensteinian metaethics might need to look at the connections between visual culture and moral thought.⁶²³

⁶²³ See for example Bodola/Schoellner (eds.), *Picturing Life: Wittgenstein's Visual Ethics*.

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