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The grammar of morality : value and dilemma

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THE GRAMMAR OF MORALITY: VALUE AND DILEMMA

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Matthew Hanley

August 2004

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ABSTRACT

THE GRAMMAR OF MORALITY VALUE AND DILEMMA

by Matthew Hanley

Part 1 of this thesis argues for the integrity and indispensability of value. Numerous philosophical projects have argued that value has no place in a properly scientific view of the world. Many philosophers claim that value is nothing more than a human projection upon a value-free universe. This thesis argues that we have no such value-neutral worldview available to us. Instead, all our descriptions of the world—even scientific theories—are either value-infused or in some way dependent upon value. Indeed, language itself is impossible unless we recognize our interlocutors as agents with rights and responsibilities.

Part 2 argues that value is not undermined by inescapable moral dilemmas. Our commonsense grammar of value is not beset by contradictions and inconsistencies. Instead, every moral dilemma can be resolved with sufficient power. Moral dilemmas arise not from inconsistencies in moral thought, but from an inadequate control over ourselves and our environment.

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Part 1: Value

Unmisted by Love or Dislike

I. Introduction

We live inescapably in an evaluative language, and this bodes well for ethics and aesthetics. Our language, and our way of life, leans heavily on broad, general terms such as “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong,” “harm” and “help.” Moreover, language is rich with what Bernard Williams in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy has called “thicker,” more specific ethical words such as “*treachery* and *promise* and *brutality* and *courage*” (129). Just as significantly, words less obviously ethical yet clearly value-laden such as “elegant” and “clumsy,” “clever” and “stupid,” “erudite” and “ignorant,” “excellent” and “paltry,” “buffoon” and “savior” are well-nigh unavoidable. So, any philosophical project that seeks to undermine value might well be regarded as puzzling and ill-conceived.

But of course such projects exist. Although on the face of it, value terms across the English language appear in fine working order, and indeed value itself appears in fine working order, philosophy has long trafficked in what lies behind the face of things. To cite Williams again:

There are genuine ethical, and ultimately metaphysical, concerns underlying the worries about *ought* and *is* and the naturalistic fallacy. At the heart of them is an idea that our values are not “in the world,” that a properly untendentious description of the world would not mention any

values, that our values are in some sense imposed or projected on to our surroundings. (128)

However, the burden of proof lies with the non-cognitivists, “error theorists,” relativists, and other philosophers who claim to have undermined ethics and aesthetics and the language of value itself. Thomas Nagel tells us that “a defeasible presumption that values need not be illusory is entirely reasonable until it is shown not to be” (143). We need good cause before we censure all such language as relativistic or bankrupt or subjective or somehow lacking the integrity of scientific talk.

For science has been the primary inspiration for these projects. Naturalism, as conceived by Gilbert Harman, “says we must concentrate on finding the place of value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science” (“Is There a Single True Morality?” 29). And no doubt a natural science like physics strives to produce a world of facts, strives to produce objective depictions of our physical environment, to produce unbiased, value-free claims about how the physical world simply *is*. Yet the language of natural science, like all language, is guided by values, by norms—is *inescapably* guided by values and norms. Particular vocabularies, to appropriate the terminology of Richard Rorty’s pragmatism, aspire to value-free claims; the declarations of physics, chemistry, and even journalism are supposed to be unclouded by the idiosyncrasies and biases of individual scientists and journalists. All this is well and good assuming, once again, that such lack of bias, such “objectivity,” makes no pretense of having overcome all value. Harman’s conception of naturalism is, in some way, dependent upon a scientific, value-free picture of the world that serves as a screen for our human projections. I do not see

that we have such a screen. At best, the objective, value-free descriptions produced by the natural sciences are dependent upon and directed by the values, the virtues, that the natural sciences themselves are dependent upon. Even the most scientifically specialized language, specialized vocabulary, is dependent upon values and norms. We have found no way of using language, no matter how idiosyncratic, no matter how specialized, that is not in some way value dependent. Value is so ubiquitous and subtly shaded in the language we use that we have no clear demarcation between the ethical and the aesthetic, even between an evaluative term and a non-evaluative term, or so it seems to me. I see no clear distinction between moral values and those that are purely epistemic or prudential or otherwise “non-moral.”

Instead, all language is dependent upon values and norms that direct our behavior, our practices, our conduct. At the least, language is dependent upon correctness and incorrectness, appropriateness and inappropriateness. Or if Donald Davidson is right, then language and thought itself is dependent upon our ability to grasp the truth-value of our beliefs. To communicate through language, we must follow rules, be they rules governing truth conditions or appropriateness-conditions. But such usage rules of value terms push us towards the moral, if ever so subtly. Before we invoke moral principles, before we create moral theories, value terms are already influencing our lives. Language will not simply let us be. A member of a language community is pushed towards the right and away from the wrong.

But what of the philosophical projects seeking to undermine value, seeking to provide us with a value-neutral description of the world that we then project our subjective

values upon? A survey of some of the most powerful and well-known of these projects shows that none succeed. Or more appropriately, none really wants to. The insights of the most successful critiques of value are compatible with the claim that value is inescapable. For the status of value terms, their legitimacy, their power, does not compete with a science-minded, realist-minded ontology of the world's natural features. The status of value terms, their legitimacy and power, arises not from realism or a physicalist ontology, but from their indispensability, from their necessary role in our vital projects. Which specific values are indispensable is difficult to know, but *some* set of values is inescapable, especially the simplest and most basic. Hence, projects that seek to rescue value through an appeal to supervenience or emergence or secondary qualities or metaphysics of some sort are entirely unnecessary. Moral theories themselves are unnecessary for the legitimization of value. The task for those who wish to dismiss moral value is to do so without dismissing science, morality, moral theory, and language itself.

II. "Critique of Ethics and Theology"

"Critique of Ethics and Theology," Chapter VI in A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic, is one of the more famous, insightful, and ambitious attempts to undermine value, and other writers have taken up many of his positions and insights, including ethical emotivism, the separation of the normative from the descriptive in value terms, and ethical relativism. Ultimately, he concludes that "it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgements" because such judgments "have no objective validity whatsoever" (108). Ayer argues that all ethical judgments are empty,

that they are mere exclamations of emotion that fail to even qualify as statements. The synthetic judgments of science are models of verifiability. The “judgments” of ethics and aesthetics are literally emotive babble. His focus is obviously on judgments, on statements and their truth conditions, but value terms are targeted as well. Ethical terms like “duty,” “ought,” and “good,” as well as aesthetic terms like “beautiful” and “hideous,” are employed “not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response” (113). Value terms are unanalyzable pseudo-concepts that tell us of nothing but our own psychology. A cornerstone of his project is to free us from our false conceptions of value, to escape from the very value that I claim is inescapable.

Of course, Ayer is writing from a peculiar and radically empiricist perspective that relies upon “the principle that a synthetic proposition is significant only if it is empirically verifiable” (106). Language, Truth and Logic presents a grand, sweeping vision of what is sense and what nonsense, declares “that philosophy must develop into the logic of science” (153), and sets up science as the single means to justify substantive claims. Philosophy analyzes and clarifies the concepts of empirical science. Thus he rejects ethical intuitionism because it is impossible to empirically determine which of two conflicting intuitions is valid. Furthermore, ethical judgments cannot be recast as statements describing the speaker’s feelings, that is, as descriptive statements that would be, in principle at least, subject to verification. Indeed, they cannot be recast as *statements* at all. Instead, ethical judgments merely *evince* feelings. They are best interpreted as inarticulate cries of emotion. So, if we follow Ayer and construe the statement “Stealing

money is wrong” into the non-statement “Stealing money!!” (107), then clearly any empirical attempts to verify truth or falsity are irrelevant.

Chapter VI is more of a logico-empiricist *description* of ethical non-cognitivism than an argument for his position; however, he does supply at least one specific argument: If value claims were actual statements and not mere emotional noise, then it would be possible to imagine a dispute about value that turns on such statements. However, it is impossible to imagine such a dispute about value; instead all such disputes end up focusing on logic or facts. Therefore, value claims are not actual statements:

If anyone doubts the accuracy of this account of moral disputes, let him try to construct even an imaginary argument on a question of value which does not reduce itself to an argument about a question of logic or about an empirical matter of fact. I am confident that he will not succeed in producing a single example. (112)

Moral disputes are not even possible unless the disputants share the same moral attitudes, share a common core of values:

But if our opponent happens to have undergone a different process of moral “conditioning” from ourselves, so that, even when he acknowledges all the facts, he still disagrees with us about the moral value of the actions under discussion, then we abandon the attempt to convince him by argument.

(111)

Argument “fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact” (111). Although “pure questions of value” such as “Is pride a virtue or

a vice?” do seem open to argument, science-minded philosophers like Ayer and Harman still believe that such questions can turn wholly on the psychology of the disputants.

Arguably, that is why a pure question of value such as “All things being equal, ought we to be kind?” appears trivial and pointless. Unless disputants agree that we ought to be kind, unless they are psychologically predisposed to such a response, no dispute over, say, the kindness of euthanasia can get started.

But a common vocabulary is necessary for any dispute. An argument over the question, “Is a tree stump a chair?” requires agreement about what constitutes a chair. “All things being equal, are chairs for sitting?” appears as trivial and pointless as “All things being equal, ought we to be kind?” Of course, the notion of “chair” could well be clarified in the dispute, just as the notion of “kindness” could be clarified in the argument over euthanasia; otherwise, however, each dispute would likely reduce itself to “an argument about a question of logic or about an empirical matter of fact,” just as Ayer claims; and well it should, for such is the stuff of significant disputation.

Language is a public enterprise with public criteria of correct and incorrect usage. The problem with a private language, as Wittgenstein points out, is that in the absence of public feedback, the private language user would never know for sure if his or her words were being used correctly. The possibility of error is necessary for language. Bjorn Ramberg puts the point this way:

A descriptive utterance is descriptive in so far as it presents something as a *kind* of thing. But this is just to say that any linguistic utterance, as opposed to a mere noise, will have appropriateness-conditions. The

possibility of *error*, generalized in the notion of inappropriateness with respect to purpose, goal, or end, takes the form in (assertively-used) language of the possibility of a failure of a claim to be in accord with what it says something about. (363)

A value term like “cruelty” has appropriateness-conditions just like every other word; if it didn’t, it would be mere noise. Ayer is right that our rival might have “undergone a different process of moral ‘conditioning’ from ourselves” (111), but if this person does not know that “cruelty” is a pejorative, we would be arguing with someone who lacks a complete grasp of English.

Ayer indirectly acknowledges that ethical terms have an agreed upon normative usage, that we publicly employ these words to direct behavior:

It is worth mentioning that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling. They are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action. Indeed some of them are used in such a way as to give the sentences in which they occur the effect of commands. (108)

That cruelty ought not to occur is part of the grammar of the term, the use of the term, as Wittgenstein would say. Ayer might complain that the grammar or appropriateness-conditions of “cruelty” are loose, vague, and malleable; however, they are far from nonexistent. Ayer is right that people do not argue over questions such as “In general, is cruelty wrong?” He is right that they agree on this question before they begin their exchange—or at least they will if they both speak English. Each disputant is powerless to change the publicly fixed grammars of the terms he uses. Even if one idiosyncratically

stipulated that cruelty is morally permissible, such a disputant would have created a new word, and anyone who wished to engage in a meaningful discussion with him would have to accept his stipulation, accept his grammar, before the conversation began. Otherwise, each would be playing a different language game and confusion would result. For words to have meaning, we must each follow their rules of use. Again, the insight is

Wittgenstein's:

The rules constitute the meaning, and are not responsible to it. The meaning changes when one of its rules changes. If, for example, the game of chess is defined in terms of its rules, one cannot say the game changes if a rule for moving a piece were changed. Only when we are speaking of the history of the game can we talk of change. (4)

True, the meaning of cruelty, its rules of usage, may have changed over time, but if its usage rules were changed *now*, we would have a different word. Notice how the word “gay,” when associated with homosexuality, is functionally divorced from its older meanings. It is, in effect, a new word. In the end, Ayer's argument reducing value claims to mere emotive noise peculiar to a particular speaker fails to account for the generally accepted grammar of value terms. If we cannot be sure that our interlocutors “live in the same social order” (111) as Ayer puts it, if we cannot be sure that they abide by the same rules of usage, then we cannot rely on our language to communicate with them *on any subject*. So construed, he is right; disputants must agree on the usage of their terms, at least if a real argument is to occur. It has been noted that between Ayer's claim that ethical statements are mere noise, are non-statements, and the realist's claim that they are

literally true, there is considerable wiggle room for other positions. But any position that attempts to deflate the status of value claims needs to account for the public rules of usage that guide us as we make these claims. Only at the periphery are we unsure if an action is cruel, or if such cruelty is unavoidable. In short, arguments about a question of value reduce themselves to questions of logic or empirical fact because value terms have a generally accepted grammar of usage that both speakers implicitly accept before they begin their debate.

So much for Ayer's *argument* for his position. Of course, his logico-empiricist *description* of value statements stands or falls with his project as a whole.

III. "The Problem with Ethics"

According to Gilbert Harman, a self-proclaimed naturalist and moral relativist:

What a naturalist wants is to be able to locate value, justice, right, wrong, and so forth in the world in the way that tables, colors, genes, temperatures, and so on can be located in the world. ("Is There a Single True Morality?" 33)

More specifically, naturalists want to locate value in "dispositional properties of objects," as is the case of color, or in "clusters of atoms" (33), as is the case with tables, genes and temperatures. They see problems with value's "'location' in the world" (33). It appears to lie in us and not in nature. However, that we actually do locate value, justice, and so forth in the world is beyond dispute. We could not successfully use the word "cruelty" if there were not sufficiently clear guidelines for pointing to it. Science-minded philosophers have

to be careful that their worldview does not simply *assume* that value is chimerical, and no doubt Harman knows this. Hence, his task is to *show* that locating value in the world is problematical, that our usage of “cruelty” is somehow corrupt.

The first section of Harman’s The Nature of Morality is, tellingly, called “The problem with ethics” and is similar in spirit to Ayer’s work. Harman’s explicit target is not value in general, however; instead he argues that when we point to something like cruelty, such pointing tells us about ourselves and not about the world. Again, he is inspired by the sciences and in particular by their persuasive use of observation, a use ethics seems incapable of emulating. Observation “plays a role in science that it does not seem to play in ethics” (6). Specifically, there is no need to appeal to moral facts when an observer witnesses an immoral action; the observer’s psychology is sufficient to explain the observation of wrongness. If you round a corner and see “a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it” (4), you simply *see* the act as wrong. No facts are gathered, no evidence amassed so that a conclusion can be reached: “The fact that you made a particular moral observation when you did does not seem to be evidence about moral facts, only evidence about you and your moral sensibility” (7). How could it be possible to see wrongness? he wonders. How could it conceivably affect any of your senses? Surely the “wrongness” is not a fact of nature but an aspect of the observer’s psychology.

His basic point can be found in Hume’s Treatise:

Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance.

Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real

existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. [. . .] The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. (468-469)

Harman has modernized the argument; in particular, he is careful to note the subtleties of observation. All observations are directed and influenced by theory; none are pure: “What you perceive depends to some extent on the theory you hold, consciously or unconsciously” (4). A proton cannot affect your senses directly any more than rightness or wrongness can. However, particle physics provides a background theory that allows a physicist to see a vapor trail in a cloud chamber as evidence for his belief that “There goes a proton” (6). In general:

you need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral facts to explain the occurrence of the so-called moral observations I have been talking about. In the moral case, it would seem that you need only make assumptions about the psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation. In the scientific case, theory is tested against the world. (6)

Harman sees no compelling reason to believe that moral facts explain the observation of wrongness, that they explain the belief that setting the cat afire is wrong. Like Ayer, he

sees moral conditioning as the best explanation of this belief. On the other hand, the best explanation for the physicist's belief that "There goes a proton" is that a proton just went by.

Ayer's conclusions are grander and more sweeping, but Harman's circumspect arguments clearly point in the same direction. He tentatively concludes that our best explanations of the world and our place in it need make no reference to moral facts but only to individual moral sensibilities, a conclusion directly analogous to Ayer's position that value claims are best construed as emotive exclamations. Both see the claims of ethics as lacking the status of the claims of science. Both argue that value—or moral facts and hypotheses in Harman's case—can be explained away as psychology:

Moral hypotheses do not help explain why people observe what they observe. So ethics is problematic and nihilism must be taken seriously. Nihilism is the doctrine that there are no moral facts, no moral truth, and no moral knowledge. (11)

Nicholas Sturgeon acknowledges that Harman is no moral nihilist (he is, remember, a relativist), but in "Moral Explanations" Sturgeon is keenly aware of the skeptical and nihilistic implications of Harman's argument. But Sturgeon will have none of it. Early on he alerts the reader that his method requires him to assume the existence of moral facts:

For it should be clear that assessment of this thesis not merely permits, but *requires*, that we provisionally assume the existence of moral facts. I can see no way of evaluating the claim that *even if* we assumed the existence of

moral facts they would still appear explanatorily irrelevant, without assuming the existence of some, to see how they would look. (57)

In order to rebut Harman's thesis, he finds it necessary to proceed as if there were moral facts. He wants to illustrate how these (putative) facts can do real explanatory work. So, his next move is to point out a type of moral fact—if such facts there be—of which Harman makes no mention: facts of character. Sturgeon claims the moral fact of Hitler's depraved character clearly figures in our best explanations of why he acted the way he did, that the fact of his depravity has just the sort of explanatory power that Harman claims it should not. Who besides someone morally depraved would start a world war and order the murder of so many innocent people? Sturgeon writes that only:

a morally depraved person could have initiated a world war, ordered the “final solution,” and done any number of other things Hitler did. That is why I believe that, if Hitler hadn't been morally depraved, he wouldn't have done those things, and hence that the fact of his moral depravity is relevant to an explanation of what he did. (68)

Hence, moral facts, contrary to Harman's claim, can have explanatory power.

However, Sturgeon has not addressed Harman's claim that moral facts seem irrelevant to explaining the *occurrence* of moral observations. The physicist observes a proton because, in fact, a proton is really there. Do we observe moral depravity because, in fact, moral depravity is really there? Or are such observations best explained by the observer's moral sensibilities, by examining the observer's particular psychology as well as the psychology of those observed? In his defense Harman says:

It is not sufficient that one be prepared to accept the counterfactual judgment that the person would not have acted in that way if the person had not had a bad character, if one does not see how the *badness* of the person's character could have such an effect. A naturalist believes one can see that only by locating badness of character in aspects of the world one sees can have that effect. ("Is There a Single True Morality?" 33-34)

Harman believes the "badness" can be located by the science of psychology. Hitler's psychologist can tell us why he acted as he did. Unfortunately, Sturgeon never explicitly addresses Harman's point about psychological explanations.

He does admit, though, that it is more puzzling "to consider Harman's own example in which you see the children igniting a cat and react immediately with the thought that this is wrong" (66). The crux of Harman's burning cat example is *observation*. Observation in no way figures into Sturgeon's discussion of moral character; there the focus is on the explanatory power of moral facts. But observation is key to Harman's thesis: "Conceived as an explanatory theory, morality, unlike science, seems to be cut off from observation" ("Is There a Single True Morality?" 9).

But it is difficult to explain the observation of wrongness in Harman's example "since what makes their action wrong, what its wrongness *consists* in, is presumably something like its being an act of gratuitous cruelty (or, perhaps we should add, of intense cruelty, and to a helpless victim) [. . .]" (Sturgeon 66).

Here Sturgeon is essentially reiterating Ramberg's point about appropriateness-conditions. Hoodlums setting a cat on fire is a very exemplar of wrongness and cruelty,

just what one would cite in order to teach the appropriateness-conditions of these words to someone who did not yet understand them. Understanding “cat,” “gasoline” and “hoodlum” also requires an understanding of appropriateness-conditions. There exist publicly accepted criteria for the usage of each of these words. All observers who saw the wrongness, who saw the cruelty, would see such things in much the same way that they would see the cat, the gasoline, the hoodlums. Our understanding of words guides our observations, *forms* our observations, really, leading us to pick out the appropriate features of our surroundings. How would one recognize hoodlums, as Harman calls them, unless one understands that they are a species of human being who perform cruel, wrong actions—like lighting cats on fire? Is the observation of hoodlums to be explained away by the psychology of the observer as well? If only natural features completely bereft of normative implications are to figure into observation, our landscape would be stark and inhuman, devoid of criminals, heroes, lechers, jerks, bullies, mentshes, and martyrs. Harman admits that nihilism is a real possibility, but I don’t see that he wants to rule out the observation of hoodlums.

And moreover, the observation of wrongness is an altogether inappropriate focus for his discussion. Pointing and saying “That’s wrong” is like pointing and saying “That’s scientific.” What is key are the specific details that prompt the observer to speak these claims: “Why did you point and say, ‘That’s wrong’?” “Because I just witnessed a gratuitous act of extreme cruelty inflicted upon a helpless victim.” The more specific the explanation one provides for the observation of wrongness, the less appropriate it becomes to explain away the observation in terms of individual psychology. Arguing that a

particular practice is wrong is, in large part, the attempt to get others to see that the practice in question falls under the *generally accepted* criteria that make “wrong” a valid, functioning word. If the point must be made in scientific terms, then *group* psychology, not individual, is the crux of the matter, the group psychology necessary for the successful use of language.

Harman’s position would be considerably bolstered by a successful, working account of a value-free natural world. He demonstrates little if he simply *assumes* that atoms and dispositional properties of objects must wholly account for observation, if he simply assumes that nature is value-free—that is the very assumption I am questioning. True enough, the normative aspects of ethical terms are not composed of atoms as are cats and gasoline, and Harman is right that even dispositional properties are probably inadequate to explain normativity.¹ But our language is so infused with these terms that if we strip them away, assuming for the moment that we can, we find ourselves unable to say much of what we need to. If we strip away the normative completely, we would be unable to use language at all—but more on that later.

Facts for Harman are, presumably, the natural features of the world that make our statements true or false; facts are the gasoline, the cat, the fire, and I suppose even the hoodlums (and their psychological dispositions or behavioral propensities) that account for the truth of the statement, “Those hoodlums are lighting a cat on fire!” But Harman is no foundationalist seeking to ground linguistic facts in some non-linguistic substrata. Linking true statements to the non-linguistic elements that make them true has proved to be no mean feat. Wilfred Sellars has famously asserted that non-linguistic givens are a

myth. A sentence must rely on other sentences for evidentiary support. Objects, sense data, nerve endings, atoms, dispositional features of objects—nothing in and of itself, nothing construed non-linguistically, can give us a foundation for our true beliefs.

Awareness, the very consciousness necessary for belief, is, according to Sellars, dependent upon language: “*all* awareness of *sorts, resemblances, facts*, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities—indeed, all awareness even of particulars—is a linguistic affair” (63).

We are *aware of* facts; facts are not an aspect of awareness. Sellars does not push us all the way into the cloudy realm of idealism. However, our awareness of facts depends on language. There is much to wonder at in his position, such as whether or not non-lingual animals are unconscious automata, but he is right, I believe, that we cannot ground our language on anything but other bits of language.

Along these same lines, making sense of how reality *corresponds* with true statements has been particularly difficult. Davidson puts the problem this way:

The notion of correspondence would be a help if we were able to say, in an *instructive* way, which fact or slice of reality it is that makes a particular sentence true. No-one has succeeded in doing this. If we ask, for example, what makes the sentence “The moon is a quarter of a million miles away” true, the only answer we come up with is that it is the fact that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away. (“Truth Rehabilitated” 66)

We’re stuck with the disquotational theory of truth; it’s the best we’ve got. Nor is it even clear that disquotation succeeds—Davidson for one thinks that it fails.² Just as we lack a vantage point outside the mind that would let us compare our perceptions of the world

with the world itself, we also lack a vantage point outside language to express how our statements correspond to their subject matter, how our linguistic awareness of facts corresponds with facts themselves. Science-minded philosophers, and especially scientists, often seem blithe in their talk of physical reality, but such talk requires a language whose connection to non-linguistic, physical reality is exasperatingly difficult to explicate. Although it seems safer to characterize rocks as a fact of nature than to characterize snobbery as a fact of nature, both are concepts expressed in language. It may appear strange and backward to appeal to language itself for the authority of value terms. Should we not turn to the world, to something independent of ourselves? That is the Peircean ideal. But again, worldly objects and events come to us conceptualized, and ethical terms are an important part of our conceptualizations. We think and communicate in a complex symbolism, a complex language, that we created. We see cats, fire, and hoodlums because we understand what these things are; we have the pertinent concepts, and the concepts are of our own making. Who else could have made them? It's not so easy to dismiss Rorty when he glibly says, "Would there still be snow if nobody had ever talked about it? Sure. Why? Because according to the norms *we* invoke when we use "snow," we are supposed to answer this question affirmatively" ("Response to Ramberg" 374).

Only someone who has effectively abandoned truth could make it appear that the continuing existence of snow depends upon how we talk about it. But Rorty knows that from *within* language, that strange and powerful tool, emerge issues of truth and objectivity. There is much to be learned from examining the rules of a game we have

cobbled together over long stretches of time—and continue to cobble together. I believe a twofold lesson to learn is that language is necessarily directed by value, and that it will always provide access to a value-suffused picture of our environments. Perhaps the world we perceive simply is; perhaps it is a neutral screen we project our values onto. However, we do not see it so. Value is a key tool in conceptualizing our surroundings. It does no good to assume that science provides us a way of seeing around the distortions of value when such a distortion-free perspective has not been provided. Currently, our best explanations of observation are dependent upon value.

Sturgeon complains that Harman's moral skepticism is really a broader species of general skepticism that would also impugn the physicist's beliefs about protons. The moral background theory, as Sturgeon calls it, that leads us to believe that Hitler was morally depraved could conceivably be in error. So then, of course, our beliefs about Hitler could be in error as well. But Sturgeon points out that doubting the background theory of particle physics would also cast doubt on the physicist's belief that "There went a proton." Doubting any broad background theory leads to skepticism. But Harman's skepticism is directed at *morality*. Hence, he cannot rely on a general skeptical argument, an argument that undermines the conclusions of *any* theory. According to Sturgeon, he needs, and has not provided, an argument that casts doubt on moral theory in particular.

However, Sturgeon seems unaware that "moral depravity" may merely *label* Hitler's behavior and therefore lack a meaningful connection to any background theory whatsoever. Nonetheless, Hitler's actions fall clearly within the appropriateness-conditions for "depravity" and "cruelty." To label Hitler so is no mistake. Moreover, it is

not just a label or an explanation or an ethical background theory that paints him as a depraved moral miscreant. Our language does so. People did not consciously succumb to Nazism because it was depraved, cruel, and wrong. One does not need an ethical background theory to know that, all things being equal, depravity, cruelty, and other wrongs are impermissible. The grammar of these words makes that much clear. In Contingency, irony, and solidarity, Rorty writes that an ironist realizes “that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (73). Perhaps this is true of *things*, but cruelty itself, the word each competent speaker of English has the skills to employ, cannot be redescribed as kindness. Cruelty can be explained away but not redescribed altogether. What constitutes cruelty, what constitutes a cruel intention or action, these are the key considerations, not whether cruelty is wrong. Hitler did not present Nazism as cruel, depraved, and wrong. Quite the contrary. People were led astray by—among a host of other considerations—grotesquely erroneous redescrptions of Jews and Aryans. Hitler, like all tyrants, set himself up publicly as a do-gooder. Rare, even nonexistent, is the villain who manipulates large chunks of the population by advocating thievery, murder, calumny or any other notion that a competent speaker of the language knows is wrong. The trick is to clothe such villainy as virtue. The blurry nature of value terms makes the villain’s job easier, but changing the meanings of words completely is a futile task. Even the totalitarian regime of Orwell’s 1984, a tyranny utterly devoid of any concern for public welfare, a tyranny that exists solely to monopolize power, a tyranny with authority over the very thoughts of its citizens, requires that people *love* Big Brother. O’Brian and his cohorts need the power of language on their side.

I don't see that Harman has undermined the normative power of ordinary language, or that he has pushed us towards nihilism, even the moderate nihilism that "holds that the purpose of moral judgments is not to describe the world but to express our moral feelings or to serve as imperatives we address to ourselves and to others" (The Nature of Morality 12). He has given us no reason to believe that the value judgment "There goes a hoodlum" does not describe the world. Nor has he given us reason to view this sentence as other than a value judgment. He has not redescribed "hoodlum" in terms of value-neutral, natural features, has not helped us understand it in terms of atoms or dispositional properties of objects. Mostly he has assumed that "our moral feelings" are superfluous, individual reactions to what simply *is*. He gives us no account of the competent language user who see the hoodlums light the cat on fire, recognizes the act as cruel and wrong, but is unmoved by the spectacle. Currently our best explanation for a physicist's belief that a proton just went by is that a proton just went by. Protons are tiny bits of matter usually found in the nuclei of atoms. Currently our best explanation for an observer's belief that a hoodlum just went by is that a hoodlum just went by. Hoodlums are cruel ruffians who do what they ought not. As Sturgeon points out, we can dismiss either belief if we doubt the background theories necessary for such observations, although common usage rather than a specific theory is required for observing hoodlums. So much the better for the claim, "There goes a hoodlum."

IV. “The Subjectivity of Values”

Harman’s discussion of moral observation focuses primarily on wrongness, but as I have tried to argue, neither value judgments nor moral facts are explicitly limited to wrongness, though at times it’s easy to get this impression from Harman. That wrongness is *the* key moral fact that realists must account for is an explicit point of J. L. Mackie’s discussion of moral skepticism. Mackie’s attack on value in chapter 1 of Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong dispenses with the modesty and circumspection that characterize Harman’s critique of moral facts. Mackie returns to Ayer’s sweeping dismissal of all value, ethical and aesthetic, bluntly claiming that “There are no objective values” (15):

The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called moral values or disvalues—rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an action’s being rotten and contemptible, and so on. It also includes non-moral values, notably aesthetic ones, beauty and various kinds of artistic merit. (15)

He is, in his own words, a moral skeptic.

After introducing his position, he spends the remainder of the first section of this chapter assuring the reader that the moral skepticism he advocates is a second order theory, a “meta-theory.” He is not exploring normative questions about how we ought to behave. Instead, his concern is with “the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world” (16). In section 5, “Standards of

evaluation,” he even allows that “there are certain kinds of value statements which undoubtedly can be true or false, even if, in the sense I intend, there are no objective values. Evaluations of many sorts are commonly made in relation to agreed and assumed standards” (25-26). This is, incidentally, the position Harman has adopted, that value statements can be true or false in relation to particular ethical theories.³ Mackie’s moral skepticism is not about running amok in the streets, although he does say that “perhaps the truest teachers of moral philosophy are the outlaws and thieves” who keep the rules of ethics among themselves but “with no pretence of receiving them as innate laws of nature” (10-11). Geoffrey Sayre-McCord complains in his introduction to *Essays on Moral Realism* that “What distinguishes realists from anti-realists about morals has disappointingly little to do with the particular moral claims each willingly endorses” (2).

Although he claims that his thesis leaves our everyday moral judgments intact, Mackie acknowledges that, “The denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all, that life has lost its purpose.” (34)

For his thesis is not trivial. He denies the claim to objectivity included in ordinary, first order moral judgments. His is an “‘error theory,’ a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false” (35). The closer this position is examined, the clearer it becomes that it has real implications for so-called first order moral judgments.

Mackie voices the familiar and powerful complaints about morality, that value judgments vary from culture to culture, that it is problematical to claim value supervenes

on natural features, that even a successful tale of supervenience raises “the corresponding epistemological difficulty of accounting for our knowledge of value entities or features and of their links with the features on which they would be consequential” (49). But perhaps his most powerful and most famous objection is his “argument from queerness” which has two parts:

one metaphysical, the other epistemological. If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. (38)

Mackie tells us that such objective values would have to be like Platonic Forms, those strange, lofty, beautiful Ideas that enlightened philosophers wordlessly and directly apprehend. Mackie admits that linking objective value to “what are admittedly among the wilder products of philosophical fancy” (41) might well be viewed as unfair, but the “objective prescriptivity,” the “moral authority” (42) latent in ordinary moral talk often passes unnoticed and unexamined. He has examined this latent element and found it queer indeed.

But in the course of his argument from queerness he asks a strange question: “What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong?” (41). This question betrays a queer aspect of Mackie’s queerness argument. Why must wrongness be

singled out as a moral fact? Why can't cruelty be one? By "moral fact" he must mean the queer, Platonic entity that fits so poorly in our scientific picture of the world. But moral facts are beside the point. The issue's crux lies in meaning. Once again, a speaker of English who does not understand that "cruelty" is wrong, that it ought to be avoided if possible, does not understand the word. Like Harman, he leans too hard on the broad, thin notion of wrongness when it is the specific, thick notions that do most of the work.

But Mackie's objection is that wrongness is not an intrinsic aspect of cruelty. After all, we can say, "You are a cruel human being," and be greeted with a response of "Thank you." People can choose to be cruel; they can choose to do wrong. However, such people have chosen to live outside morality, and this of course is a real option. The question "Why should I be moral?" presents real philosophical difficulties, difficulties that will not be solved by a simple recognition of the normative aspects of value terms. After all, it would make no sense to ask why one ought to be moral if being immoral or amoral were not real options. The amoral and the immoral choose to *ignore* the normative urgings that permeate language. We can say, "What you did was wrong," and again be greeted with a "Thank you." But notice how without further context this response sounds ironic. Kant claims that even the most hardened criminal knows when he does wrong. Another way to make this claim is to point out that even hardened criminals know how to use language correctly. "Was it cruel to rob the elderly woman's home, then tie her to a chair and set her dwelling ablaze? And if cruel, was such cruelty wrong?" Strange questions, to say the least. What is not strange, unfortunately, is the criminal's response, "Yeah, it was cruel and wrong. What of it?" The existence of criminals does not

undermine the normativity of value terms. We continually use such words to guide conduct: “That was a thoughtful thing to do.” “The last flourish in your dance routine was elegant.” “What an intelligent remark that was.” “Your actions lack integrity.” And such praise and condemnation are effectively dispensed without reference to moral facts about wrongness. Value is indelibly imprinted on the fabric of our language.

Mackie, like most everyone who writes on this topic, is perfectly aware of the normative nature of value terms. His term “objective prescriptivity” is meant to capture the considerable sway value terms have over our lives:

It is a very natural reaction to any non-cognitive analysis of ethical terms to protest that there is more to ethics than this, something more external to the maker of moral judgements, more authoritative over both him and those of or to whom he speaks. (32)

And he is right that the source of this external authority is typically left unexamined. Mackie’s examination concludes that belief in the external authority of moral judgments is in error. It is odd and unconvincing to strip moral judgments of their primary authority while simultaneously asserting your thesis has no implications for day-to-day morality. Harman calls him a nihilist with good reason. The source of morality’s external authority is not typically identified as language itself, a source that admittedly lacks the power and glamour of Platonic Forms. However, ethical terms’ rules of usage are external to the maker of moral judgments. As Ramberg puts the point, “what to mean by our noises cannot, in general, be a matter of subjective, deliberative choice” (362). Even when Mrs. Malaprop says “derangement” when she means “arrangement,” her usage of the former

term must meet the usage requirements of the latter; otherwise even she would not know what she means. Value is more than an easily eliminated intersubjective agreement; it is a necessary intersubjective agreement, at least if we are going to talk to one another, not to mention if we are going to do science itself—but this last point must wait for a discussion of Quine.

V. “Ethics, Mathematics and Relativism”

Jonathan Lear is sympathetic to Wittgenstein and the Wittgenstein-inspired attempts to bolster ethics’ claim to objectivity. In “Ethics, Mathematics and Relativism” he characterizes succinctly and powerfully the basic position I am attempting to undermine: “The ethical non-cognitivist alleges that values are a human creation: that we make them up and apply them to a morally inert world” (76). This thesis belongs to more than just the non-cognitivists, however. It is the heart of Mackie’s error theory and Ayer’s emotivism, and it has the sympathy of Harman and virtually all those who believe science provides the privileged, hard, objective picture of the world as it really is, “unmistaken by love or dislike,” to quote Sylvia Plath. Sayre-McCord writes, with Harman in mind, that:

Recently, it has become popular to hold that a moral theory passes only if it is explanatorily potent; that is, only if it contributes to our best explanations of our experiences. The problem with moral theory, on this view, is that it apparently contributes not at all to such explanations. (“Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence” 256)

This is, of course, the position I just argued against. Lear examines a different strategy used to counter the allegation that moral theory is explanatorily impotent. He sees the “sophisticated cognitivist” as attempting to deflect this allegation of the non-cognitivist by:

exhibiting mathematics as a paradigm of a human creation, impossible and unintelligible outside a shared form of life, that nevertheless lays strong claims to truth and objectivity. So if one can show that a moral outlook is a human creation in *this* sense, one will have sufficiently established its objectivity. (76)

Just because morality is a human creation does not mean it cannot figure into the best explanations of our experience. Math too is a human creation yet is indispensable to our best explanations, our best scientific theories.

Wittgenstein’s “revolution in philosophical perspective” (78), Lear tells us, undermined Platonism in mathematics. He turned around the way we used to think about universals. He claimed that to grasp a mathematical rule (or any rule) is not to grasp a universal; on the contrary, “it is not because we have grasped a universal or rule that we behave in a certain way, but because we act in certain ways that we say that we have grasped a rule or a universal” (78). Mathematical practice, like all practice, only makes sense within a certain form of life, within a certain way of living, a certain community with shared interests and needs, shared “perceptions of salience, routes of interest, feelings of naturalness” (78). So after Wittgenstein, it is much more difficult to see math as a discovery, as a Platonic realm that exists independently of us. But this is not to say that

math is no longer a source of objective truth. According to Lear, Wittgenstein's point is that we cannot hope to rise above the mathematical form of life and view math (or anything else) as it is independently of our interests and biases. We cannot step outside and see from the side how our ideas about number and mathematical functions and so forth line up with *Real, Objective* numbers and mathematical functions. "For outside the form of life there is nothing: no rules, no universals, no sameness, no reality" (78). It is *within* the mathematical form of life that its claims of truth and objectivity gain their legitimacy. Therefore, the sophisticated cognitivist's ploy is to cast ethics in a similar light, to assert that its claims to objectivity and truth also exist within the ethical form of life. Non-cognitivists who claim our values line up with nothing in the morally inert world have adopted a vantage point that is not available to us. We have no way of telling whether this is the case or not. Anyone, cognitivist or non, who attempts to adopt such a perspective will fail.

But despite his sympathies for this position, Lear nevertheless sees important failures in the analogies between math and ethics and hence reluctantly contributes to the possibility of a value-free world. He points out that the form of life that surrounds mathematics is peculiarly inflexible. That is to say, if we stretch our understanding and imagine a people who believe $7 + 5 = 13$, we find ourselves unable "to describe in detail how that belief fits in with their other arithmetical and non-arithmetical belief" (83). Either such a people will seem strangely blind to the evidence against their idiosyncratic belief, or their beliefs and actions will appear incoherent. We can't get very far in our descriptions of people with alternative arithmetic.

The case is quite different when considering ethical forms of life: “In the moral case, by contrast, ‘form of life’ seems to be a sociological expression used to pick out one group among others” (83). Who would dispute that different forms of life surround different ethical outlooks? Atheistic utilitarians can imagine and describe in detail, if well enough informed, the lives and beliefs of fundamentalist Hindus. And nothing intractable prevents the Hindus from so describing the utilitarians. Different ethical forms of life are not incomprehensible as are different arithmetical forms of life. Hence, the authority mathematics (or at least arithmetic) gains from its inescapability is nothing any ethical form of life can lay claim to.

Lear is right that the analogies between math and ethics are strained and that the two are disconnected from one another, perhaps even profoundly disconnected. No single ethical outlook is so inescapable, so inflexible, as the arithmetical outlook. But, *some* form of ethical outlook is inescapable, at least in the long run. No group of people lacking a sense of harm and help will endure. Nor do we need to appeal to Darwinism to support this point. If a sense of harm and help is necessary for the survival of human communities, and surely it is, then it becomes a truism to assert that those communities lacking a necessary condition for survival will fail to survive. One need not appeal to evolution to make this point. Sure, the people who believe $7 + 5 = 13$ are incomprehensible to us, whereas the people who have no concept of harm and help are merely doomed; math and ethics are each inescapable for different reasons. However, ethics may even have a hand up on math, practically speaking, in that a society without math, without even arithmetic, would have a better shot at survival than the one without

any ethical sense whatsoever. The objectivity of mathematical claims arises within the mathematical form of life, arises from a form of life with less variation than most, perhaps less variation than any. Ethical forms of life are manifold, and the claims of one often contradict the claims of another so that the objectivity of all ethical claims appears suspect, at least when compared to the claims of math. But any people, any independent society that continues to survive, will inevitably have a morality, some sort of morality. Since we are a people unable to understand $7 + 5 = 13$, we perforce believe $7 + 5 = 12$. Since we are the descendents of an enduring society, we perforce employ morality, understand morality, believe in morality. That is why Mackie works so hard, if unconvincingly, to distance his error theory from *immorality*. Sure, rogue individuals may deny morality or arithmetic or both, but a collective denial of morality would be as deadly as a collective denial of arithmetic would be deranged. Mackie has no desire to forward a position that would destroy society.

However, all this is to take at face value Lear's claim that we cannot fill out a form of life that holds that $7 + 5 = 13$ or that holds some other such supposed incomprehensibility. The Holy Trinity is a familiar means of asserting the synonymy of the numbers 1 and 3. And Wittgenstein, who lies at the center of Lear's exploration, admits that even the laws of logic are arbitrary:

In discussing the foundations of mathematics the fact that these laws are arbitrary is important, for in mathematics contradiction is a bugbear. A contradiction is a proposition of the form *p and not-p*. To forbid its

occurrence is to adopt one system of expression, which may recommend itself highly. This does not mean that we cannot use a contradiction. (71)

What is needed is a form of life that surrounds $7 + 5 = 13$ and makes use of it, makes sense of it in the way that, say, Roman Catholicism surrounds the synonymy of 1 and 3 with a sense and a use. Lear's own discussion of transfinite arithmetic presents the system as optional; an alternate approach is perfectly conceivable: "Transfinite arithmetic is a human invention, and if our moral outlook shares its status, it is not clear that we have secured any degree of moral objectivity" (89). But it hardly counts *against* morality that math too fails to be monolithic, that mathematicians too choose from different possibilities. On the contrary, if the mathematical and ethical are both linked to multiple forms of life, then all the more likely that ethics may share in math's objectivity. After all, it is not immediately clear that the existence of options undermines the objectivity of mathematics. Math may be objective because it is rigidly systematic or immune to contradiction (once set theory is patched up) even *after* mathematicians make their choices. Maybe much the same can be said of morality. But to be circumspect, admitting that morality is a human invention, and surely it is, no more undermines its authority than a similar admission undermines the authority of mathematics. This modest point stands even if we have only one arithmetic and many moralities. Wittgenstein warns us not to confuse a fact of nature with a rule of grammar: "We cannot say of a grammatical rule that it conforms to or contradicts a fact. The rules of grammar are independent of the facts we describe in our language" (65). Morality and mathematics are both grammars we have created. Neither is a fact of nature. We should take note and move on.

In a footnote on page 89, Lear claims that David Wiggins succumbs to the faulty math/morality analogy. Presumably, Lear has in mind Wiggins' observation, in "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life" (the only Wiggins work Lear cites), that if morality is a human invention like math, then "One cannot get more out of the enterprise of making than one has in one way or another put there" (130). Unanswered math questions are not solved by discovery but by invention, by putting more into the mathematical enterprise. "But then anyone who wishes to defend the truth status for practical judgments is released from claiming that every practical question already has an answer" (130). Assuming that both math and morality are invented grammars (and Wiggins does not definitively assert that this is so), then unanswered practical questions too may require that we put more into the enterprise. One can plausibly assert that practical judgments admit of plain truth while simultaneously denying that every practical question has a preexisting answer.⁴ Lear's arguments leave this point untouched. Wiggins is quite right to point out that in any invented grammar, resolving unanswered questions often requires creativity, requires filling in or expanding the system. Such expanding and filling no more undermines ethics than it does mathematics.

Moreover, Wiggins' "Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments" makes a key point in the argument for the inescapability of value. Currently, the hope that physics will eventually swallow all the sciences (and all value) is little more than that—a hope. Instead, Wiggins quite rightly positions psychology as the science most likely to explain away value. By the way, the project Wiggins describes is essentially Ayer's: "invent a language in which all ethical symbols are definable in non-ethical terms" (105), a

language which separates out the descriptive, empirically verifiable extension of the term from its emotive, action-stimulating subjective element. Then a value claim like “That winter jasmine smells *rank*” can convincingly be explained by appealing to the speaker’s personal or psychological history:

For such an explanation to work, all that is needed is for the theorist to call the shrub in question ‘winter jasmine’, and then to speak of the particular subject’s psychological ‘set’ with respect to winter jasmine and its smell. The theorist need commit himself to no more, and even less may suffice.
(159)

Of course, we have returned again to Harman: “[. . .] our having the moral beliefs we have can be explained entirely in terms of our upbringing and our psychology, without any appeal to an independent realm of values and obligations” (“Is There a Single True Morality?” 32). And in many instances, the value beliefs of an individual can be so explained away. Harman’s insight is weighty and acute. But Wiggins points out that the ultimate success of this position would require psychology to successfully redescribe virtually *every* value claim in clinical language:

What I question is whether one can imagine a psychological theorist’s dispensing entirely with value-properties not just in the case of non-standard reactions but in *every* case (even in the cases where there are standard shared responses to supposedly standard moral qualities), and whether one can imagine him dispensing altogether with predicates that

possess non-accidentally the same extension as his subjects' evaluative predicates do. (159)

Almost all of our everyday value judgments would have to be replaceable by value-neutral psychological descriptions, including both specific value judgments such as “I wish he were more than an addle-pated, Whiggish Pollyanna” and general value judgments such as “Hitler was evil” or “Hitler did wrong.” Perhaps most daunting is the task of explaining away value judgments held by most, if not all, competent speakers of English. “Gross, gratuitous cruelty is wrong” might be one such shared belief for the theorist to re-describe.

VI. Quine

What appears most improbable, though, almost inconceivable, is that the theorist could succeed in this project without undermining psychology itself, without undermining science itself. Quine, the twentieth century's quintessential philosopher of science, has taught us that beliefs do not stand or fall as individuals. Ayer's notion of verification fails; we cannot determine the truth or falsity of sentences one by one. Our beliefs form a network, a web held together by logical implication (at least if we are science-minded). When faced with a sentence that threatens the coherence of our web of belief, we can choose to revise any number of different sentences in the web. A chemist who observes red when she expects green can resolve this tension in many different ways; she might choose to believe that she hallucinated, that she made an error, or that she just witnessed an exception to the laws of chemistry. The *evidence* does not necessarily push her in one direction or another. Something more than evidence is needed. She needs to form a

hypothesis with explanatory power that extends “back to explain the past and forward to predict the future” (The Web of Belief 66). Science needs hypothesis:

It is part of scientific rigor to recognize hypothesis as hypothesis and then to make the most of it. Having accepted the fact that our observations and our self-evident truths do not together suffice to predict the future, we frame hypotheses to make up the shortage. (65-66)

Of course, not all hypotheses are created equal; scientists want to rely on the best hypotheses and discard the rest. Already we can see that science is dependent upon a notion of “best,” is dependent upon value and value judgments. Those who use evolution to recast value beliefs as aids to survival have themselves decided that evolution is the *best* theory to account for our value beliefs, that it is better than, say, creationism. But science’s dependence on value goes deeper, at least according to Quine. He says that the formation of hypothesis ought to be guided by a particular set of virtues. Virtues guide scientists as they select between competing theories and hypotheses. The best hypotheses are conservative, modest, simple, general, refutable, and (in all likelihood) precise. In practice, these virtues can conflict—conservatism and generality almost always do—thereby forcing scientists to make difficult and nuanced decisions, decisions no simple algorithm can guide. Scientists preferred the simplicity of Einstein’s special theory of relativity to Newton’s unified laws of motion, supplemented and complicated as the latter was by Lorentz and others: “It was a glorious case of gaining simplicity at the sacrifice of conservatism; for the time-honored ether went by the board, and far older and more fundamental tenets went by the board too” (75). The inescapability of hypothesis ensures

that theories will always be underdetermined and that scientists will always need some value or set of values to guide their choices among competing hypotheses and theories. The best scientific practice demands it. If choosing the best theories and hypotheses cannot be definitively guided by “deduction from self-evident truths and observation” (65), what other option have we but to guide our decisions by our values? Such a technique beats despair, chance, or impulse. After all, we want the *best* scientific explanation. Not all of our beliefs are dependent upon the virtues, but a good many of our scientific ones are, whether we realize it or not.

So, psychological theorists re-describing all of our values into clinical terms would have to re-describe the virtues that guide their own hypotheses, just as they would have to re-describe the sentence, “Scientists ought to rely only on the best hypotheses,” and the sentence, “The best hypotheses are guided by Quine’s virtues.” Such a project makes me dizzy. Science’s objective, dispassionate descriptions have tremendous power, but such descriptive power is not without its dependencies. The scientific picture of a value-free world is itself dependent upon value. So much, I hope, has been clear for some time now.

But more than this, a scientist’s *integrity* is dependent upon good-faith use of the virtues and the scientific method. A group of physicists who intentionally publishes the theory most likely to bring them fame, rather than the theory most in conformity with Quine’s virtues, has done wrong. Science is not divorced from morality—no species of human behavior is. Science would be a different sort of undertaking, would be a different form of life with a different grammar, if scientists could legitimately value personal fame over virtuous theories. Science’s value-free picture of the world gains much of its authority

from scientists who value their integrity. Those without integrity, scientist or no, are not to be trusted. Nor will the demand for repeatable results provide perfect protection from an unscrupulous scientific community. Personally, I'm in no position to repeat the experiments done in linear accelerators. Scientists owe us—and one another—experimental results guided by honesty and principle. I don't see that the question, “Should scientists be guided by their integrity?” is strictly moral or epistemic—isn't it both? More important, I don't know why a strict categorization of the question is important. How do we neatly and precisely separate moral and epistemic values? Is not the messy, complex way values of every species are scattered through our language and practice evidence of the inescapability of morality? a scientist's *integrity* is dependent upon good-faith use of the virtues and the scientific method. A group of physicists who intentionally publishes the theory most likely to bring them fame, rather than the theory most in conformity with Quine's virtues, has done wrong. Science is not divorced from morality—no species of human behavior is. Science would be a different sort of undertaking, would be a different form of life with a different grammar, if scientists could legitimately value personal fame over virtuous theories. Science's value-free picture of the world gains much of its authority from scientists who value their integrity. Those without integrity, scientist or no, are not to be trusted. Nor will the demand for repeatable results provide perfect protection from an unscrupulous scientific community. Personally, I'm in no position to repeat the experiments done in linear accelerators. Scientists owe us—and one another—experimental results guided by honesty and principle. I don't see that the question, “Should scientists be guided by their integrity?” is strictly moral or

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I suggest that rather than search for clear demarcations separating etiquette, aesthetics, science, morality, and the rest, we accept that these subjects overlap. Wearing a t-shirt that pictures Joseph Stalin raises issues of etiquette, aesthetics, and morality, and it's not always clear which is which. An aesthetically sympathetic depiction of the tyrant could very well be morally offensive, and wearing the shirt to a gathering of gulag survivors could be an etiquette breach egregious enough to cause real pain. Both aesthetics and etiquette can bleed into the moral. "I wouldn't object to the shirt if Stalin weren't wearing that smirk and if he weren't depicted so heroically." Is such a comment about aesthetics or morality? And again, why is it necessary to maintain a clear distinction between the two? What's mysterious about saying, "I find the aesthetics of the depiction morally offensive"? Drawing clear dividing lines looks like a hopeless task to me. Value, epistemic *and* moral, is inescapable.

Moreover, determining which of our individual words is value-laden and which is not is a daunting task. Consider the following as one word sentences: "Teacher," "Pedant," "Educator," "Professor," "Pedagogue." Even stripped of further context, which of these is value neutral? Which is incapable of serving as criticism or praise? Any? All? None? Rorty's list of the "thicker, more rigid, more parochial" terms human beings employ to "justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives," suggests something of the

wide sweep of value: “‘Christ,’ ‘England,’ ‘professional standards,’ ‘decency,’ ‘kindness,’ ‘the Revolution,’ ‘the Church,’ ‘progressive,’ ‘rigorous,’ ‘creative’”

(Contingency, irony, and solidarity 73).

Wittgensteinians tell us that both realism and anti-realism rely on a side-long view we do not possess. We cannot step to the side, so to speak, and look up at statements and then down at non-verbal facts and declare that the two lineup or fail to lineup. We have no access to a transcendent viewpoint necessary to confirm either realism or anti-realism. Likewise, we cannot step out of value altogether. We have no view altogether unmisted by love or dislike. Value peppers too much of our language and our lives, our speech and our practice.

Furthermore, anyone who can use language can distinguish between right and wrong. Language requires the ability to distinguish correct from incorrect usage. There are right and wrong ways to use words. Once right and wrong have been introduced, there is no way free discussion can be prevented from spreading this distinction to other areas, if people are so inclined. Indeed, what is so distinctly different about calling a word usage wrong than calling any other type of action wrong? The two usages share a family resemblance, at least. Moral disapproval generally does not arise from hearing words used incorrectly—although it can; confusion is the more common response. But a grasp of normativity is necessary for language itself.

VII. Ramberg, Rorty, and Davidson

Few would expect Richard Rorty to defend value with an enthusiasm audacious enough to rival any realist. One would think postmodern irony and a general suspicion of inflated philosophical claims would temper his defense, as it tempers all his claims. But Bjorn Ramberg has managed to elicit from Rorty one of the more powerful endorsements of value to be found in the current philosophical scene—or so it seems to me. Specifically, Ramberg has helped him—and the rest of us—to understand Davidson’s insight into the indispensability of a normative vocabulary.

Ramberg emphasizes how our ability to describe is dependent upon norms. Indeed, the ability to communicate with language is itself dependent upon a language user’s ability to conform to norms. In “Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson,” he calls Rorty to task for failing to appreciate Davidson’s point, expressed in “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” that theories of agency:

are necessarily governed by concern for consistency and general coherence with the truth, and it is this that sets these theories forever apart from those that describe mindless objects, or describe objects as mindless. (cited by Ramberg 357)

Theories of agency must describe conscious beings who can conform to the norms of successful language use. Only an agent, only a *person*, has the mental states needed to respect consistency and general coherence with the truth.

But Rorty has abandoned truth and, in particular, representation as legitimate philosophical concerns, replacing them with his pragmatist’s notion of coping. He

therefore finds puzzling both Davidson's interest in truth and his related insistence on the privileged status of the mental. Instead, he contends "that the irreducibility of the intentional is no more philosophically interesting than the irreducibility of any descriptive vocabulary to any other" ("Response to Ramberg" 371). He finds nothing special about the mental. Moreover, he sees no pressing philosophical need to reduce the psychologist's ways of talking to the physicist's, to reduce mental events to physical ones. We have different ways of talking for different ends. Physicists can help us cope with a set of particular needs, psychologists with another set. There is nothing noteworthy about the irreducibility and uniqueness of theories of agencies—lots of theories are irreducible and unique.

But then Ramberg, in Rorty's own words, "set him straight." Rorty now says:

The key to understanding the relation between minds and bodies is not an understanding of the irreducibility of the intentional to the physical but the understanding of the inescapability of the normative. ("Response to Ramberg" 371)

Almost any descriptive vocabulary is escapable, is just one of an indefinite number of ways of talking. However, as Rorty now points out, "A normative vocabulary is presupposed by any descriptive vocabulary" (372). Unless we are members of a community of agents, of conscious beings to whom we "ascribe rights and responsibilities" (371), we cannot employ any descriptive vocabularies whatsoever. An agent engaged in description has the responsibility to recognize and respect the norms of descriptive language, has the responsibility to make proper use of her capacity to see past

the mistakes that *are* to the correct usage that *ought to be*. And she has the right to expect the same from her interlocutor, the right to expect her interlocutor to be “governed by concern for consistency and general coherence with the truth.” Language use contains a kind of implicit morality. The point can be made without the dramatic reference to rights and responsibilities, but here again we see an instance of the ubiquity of moral issues, see again the difficulty of drawing a neat line between the moral and the non-moral.

Generally, agents cannot use language unless they know the appropriate and inappropriate ways to employ the grammar and vocabulary and countless other nuances of language.

Communication is impossible with a being incapable of distinguishing between error and correctness. In short, Ramberg gets Rorty to admit that he turned a blind eye “to the fact that the mind-body distinction is intertwined with the person-thing distinction” (371).

Again, only a *person* can be guided by the norms necessary for language. To successfully deploy descriptive vocabularies, we must believe that the beings we talk with are persons, persons who, like us, possessed the mental states necessary for the formation of linguistic descriptions: “We cannot stop prescribing, and *just* describe, because the describing counts *as* describing only if rule-governed, only if conducted by people who talk about each other in the vocabulary of agency” (372).

Rorty has come to realize that he should “grant Davidson’s point that most of our beliefs about anything (snow, molecules, the moral law) must be true of that thing—must get that thing right” (374). He has granted Davidson his point that theories of agency “are necessarily governed by concern for consistency and general coherence with the truth.” However, such truth claims carry along no ontological or representational baggage, at

least not for Rorty. Note how we can “get right” something that does not exist: “Thanks to advances in archaeology and epigraphy, for example, we know a lot more about Zeus than was known in the Renaissance” (375).⁵ Ascribing a truth-value to a sentence, for Rorty, is not the same as making an ontological or representational assertion. It is simply a matter of getting the language right—hence his assertion that the continuing existence of snow is a linguistic matter. He has accepted Davidson’s view that “In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true” (“The Method of Truth in Metaphysics” 199), but *not* Davidson’s view that “It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality” (199). Rorty is loath to make any claims about reality.

Quine, Davidson’s teacher, dismisses the notion of a pre-logical people. He notes that the practice of translating native sentences into logical contradictions precludes the possibility of translation itself. Determining correct and incorrect translation is dependent upon logic. If a sentence translated as a logical contradiction doesn’t count as an error in translation, nothing will: “pre-logicality is a trait injected by bad translators” (“Carnap and Logical Truth” 109). Davidson expands this Quinean insight into the realm of interpretation. Unless we interpret people within our own language group as coherent and logical, we cannot understand them. Quine points out the need to be charitable in ascribing logicity when we translate; Davidson points out the need to be charitable in ascribing logicity and coherence whenever we listen to language with the goal of understanding.

Hence, language users must assume that they share standards of logic and coherence. Even Mrs. Malaprop must be assumed to possess a degree of logicity and coherence. Language users possess an elusive set of skills that allows them to interpret even her intentions. And of course, Mrs. Malaprop has a set of skills that lets her interpret herself. She—and her listeners—can apprehend the truth conditions of her wildest misuse of words. Rorty likes Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." He thinks that "Davidson has erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally" ("Response to Davidson" 74). So if Rorty is correct, language not only formulates our consciousness of the surrounding world, it alone is enough to create a community of persons with moral responsibilities towards one another. When we talk to another human being, we must assume, charitably, that the person is a rational being who recognizes the rights and responsibilities necessary for successful speech. We must charitably assume her to be a moral agent of sorts. With the exception of Platonic or theistic flights of fancy, this is probably the strongest claim for the inescapability of value that I have heard.

However, *truth* is only about getting language right—that's enough.

But few besides Rortian pragmatists believe truth need have no ontological or representational implications. Rorty's radical anti-representationalism and the primacy he gives to language push him to the edge of idealism. If language were beyond criticism and revision, the legitimacy of value terms would be inviolable. As it stands, if we take Rorty as our inspiration and cast aside ontology and representation, then the science-inspired doubts about value disappear. Ontology and representation are what led Ayer and

Mackie and Harman and so many others to cast a dubious eye upon value. They are what led the non-cognitivists to deny truth-value to value claims. How would an entity like value exist in the world independently of us? How does it fit into a picture, a representation, of physical reality? Toss such concerns aside, adopt Davidson's charitable position that "I can interpret your words correctly only by interpreting so as to put us largely in agreement" ("The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" 200), and the widespread use of value terms looks in good shape. If "massive error about the world is simply unintelligible" (201), our ubiquitous, "massive" use of value terms is safe.

Too bad the price to pay for Rorty's pragmatism and its appropriation of Davidson is irony, is the continual worry that we have "been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game" (Contingency, irony, and solidarity 75). After all, language is not beyond criticism and revision. Hence, ironists are:

never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. (Contingency, irony, and solidarity 73-74)

No matter how ubiquitous or inescapable, value terms are always subject to revision.

But I think Rorty has exaggerated our ability to revise. More important, reading Ramberg appears to have convinced Rorty himself that he has exaggerated this ability. Rorty has come to accept that we cannot revise our interlocutors into non-agents, into people incapable of respecting the norms necessary for language. We cannot revise away our ability to use language, and (for the moment at least) it looks like language requires

agents. Furthermore, he now thinks that most of our language norms must be obeyed: “Snow would not be what it is if we were mostly wrong about it, and the norms for the use of “snow” would not be the norms they are if we did not, most of the time, obey them” (“Response to Ramberg” 374). This point is once again, I believe, essentially Wittgenstein’s. A word’s rules of usage constitute its meaning, and therefore a change in a word’s usage results in a different word. Just as changing the rules of chess would result in a different game, so too would changing the rules of usage for “snow” result in a different word. We are not free to radically revise the norms of “snow” and still have snow. Likewise, we are not free to radically revise the norms of “cruelty” and still have cruelty. No one, not even an ironist, can redescribe cruelty so that, all things being equal, it becomes good and right and permissible. To do so would be to explain away cruelty altogether. As is the case for snow, the norms for the use of “cruelty” would not be the norms they are if we did not, most of the time, obey them.

But we need not be Rortian pragmatists to accept Davidson’s insights into the nature of agency. We need not be Rortian pragmatists to accept Rorty’s point about the inescapability of a normative vocabulary. Rorty’s pragmatism and irony have no immediate bearing on our dependency on value. Whether value claims are merely appropriate or inappropriate, correct or incorrect, rather than true or false, whether value terms imply an ontology or not, whether they represent reality or not, whether they are part of a grammar or a fact of nature—none of these considerations has an immediate bearing on value’s *indispensability*. I’ve tried to show that there’s no excessive price to pay for extending our interpretive charity to value claims and to value terms in general.

On the contrary, an uncharitable attitude is difficult, even impossible to maintain. We may cast a jaundiced eye on particular values, but we can't get by, we can't describe the world in ways that we need, we can't do the science that we need, without *some* set of values. Davidson tells us, "We cannot interpret on the basis of known truths, not because we know none, but because we do not always know which they are" ("The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" 200-201). I think the situation is similar for value and value claims. We do not always know which values are legitimate, which are "true," so to speak, although the most basic are necessary for the process of evaluation itself, a topic I'll say more on in Part 2. As difficult as it may be to imagine, decency or sincerity or any number of other values may eventually be exposed as hollow or chimerical; particular value claims may come to be viewed as mistaken. However, explaining away *all* value, *all* value claims, and gazing upon the world with eyes unmisted by love or dislike, is what we cannot do.

Part 2: Dilemma

Past Harm and Help

I. Introduction

If value necessarily informs our lives and shapes our world, it may nonetheless be compromised by incoherence, by conflict and inconsistency. Science has no tolerance for contradictory claims, nor does any rational belief system. If I simultaneously believe the minister elected in 1964 was a conservative and that the minister elected in 1964 was not a conservative, I have problems. So, if value claims such as "Don't be cruel" and "Be

generous,” and so forth, inevitably generate logical contradictions when put into practice, value too has problems. More subtly, if morality generates two legitimate ought-claims that are mutually exclusive, again, a difficulty is at hand. Something is wrong with a brand of thought that demands that I perform both action A *and* action not-A when the performance of one effectively blocks my ability to perform the other. And of course, it is a longstanding concern that value—and morality in general—is inconsistent, that it generates conflicting demands, that it is incoherent. More than one moral theory has listed among its goals the elimination of conflicting moral demands and the establishment of moral coherence.

In his essay “Ethical Consistency,” however, Bernard Williams famously asserts that ethics is doomed to *inconsistency*, that it presents us with multiple demands that we cannot possibly meet. Upstanding, admirable people can be faced with conflicting options so that no matter what course of action they choose room is left for legitimate regret, a regret that tacitly acknowledges that morality placed two legitimate demands on the agent even though it was possible to fulfill but one. Unhappily, ethics can demand that a firefighter save a group of children he has never met *and* that he save his own wife, even though the flames consuming the fragile structure eliminate the chance of rescuing both. Good people are left to lament the impossibility of doing all that they ought. And ethicists are left to wonder about the authority and the truth-value of ethical claims.

Williams is basically right, I believe, but a crucial part of the story has been left out. He works hard to show that the contingent nature of moral conflict prevents it from being neatly explained away by deontic logic. Contradictory ought-claims contradict one

another because of contingent facts about the world. “I ought to save the children” and “I ought to save my wife” conflict because of the limits of fire fighting technology, not because of logic. Using logic to blithely manipulate a contingent conflict into a logical one to thereby unseat one of the contradictory statements is a mistake. Moral thought is in trouble if it artificially transmutes the contingent into the logical to escape moral dilemmas. Williams is right that deontic logic (at least as he presents it) artificially dispatches moral conflict. However, the tenacity of moral dilemmas does not impugn moral thought so much as humanity’s ability to meet the demands of morality. The firefighter will feel regret no matter what decision he makes because he has limited power over his circumstances, not because of any shortcoming of moral thought. It is strange, at least, to argue that legitimate regret can arise from a mode of thought beset by incoherence.

Moral thought is as consistent as most other forms of thought. It is beset by no glaring inconsistency or conflict. All too often humanity’s limited power is the source of regret, conflict, and tragedy; all too often we lack the capacity to manifest the visions of morality. Deep moral conflict, an authentic tear in the coherence of morality, requires a dilemma that no amount of power could resolve. Morality is not so much logically inconsistent as we are fragile and weak-willed.

II. “Ethical Consistency”

Williams begins “Ethical Consistency” by showing how conflicting beliefs differ from conflicting desires. Conflicting beliefs tend to cancel each other out—at least once

the conflict is brought to the believer's attention. If someone believes the Minister who took office in 1964 was a conservative, but then learns that this particular Minister was *not* a conservative, maintaining the original belief becomes almost impossible, unless the believer has failed to "put them together" (42). People need assistance of some sort—forgetfulness, mental illness, desperate psychological need—if they are to hold conflicting beliefs. Cases where subjects cling to false or conflicting beliefs, "are secondary, even peculiar" (44). Conflicting desires, William points out, are another matter. A lazy man who wants a drink "might perhaps represent his difficulty to himself as his both wanting to remain seated and wanting to get up" (42). Conflicting desires do not tend to cancel one another out in the manner of conflicting beliefs; on the contrary, they can be perversely enduring. Ultimately, the import of this distinction is that the conflicting demands of morality are more like conflicting desires than conflicting beliefs; they lack the tendency to cancel each other out. We regret our inability to undertake the two tasks because both were morally obligatory. Moral conflicts are not "all soluble without remainder" (52). More specifically, his central thesis concerns the inadequacies of moral thought and its logic: "[. . .] it is surely falsifying of moral thought to represent its logic as demanding that in a conflict situation one of the conflicting 'ought's must be totally rejected" (56). And moral thought's inadequacies lie in its failure to appreciate the contingent nature of so many moral conflicts.

By the third paragraph of his essay, Williams has distinguished between those beliefs and desires that conflict because of logical considerations and those that conflict because of contingent matters of fact. Beliefs that are logically incompatible are

inconsistent, those whose incompatibility is of a contingent nature are *conflicting*.

Likewise, many incompatible desires arise “from some contingent matter of fact” (42).

The lazy man who wants to both get up to get a drink and sit slothfully where he is can satisfy both of these conflicting desires through the contingency of a passing servant or friend who will fetch the drink for him. The man is not beset by a logical impossibility.

This distinction between “conflict” and “inconsistency” is an important tool in Williams’ criticisms of deontic logic. Deontic logic artificially transforms clashing “oughts” into the semblance of clashing beliefs, that is, into contradictory statements that an agent must choose between. Instead Williams claims that incompatible ought-claims are *conflicting* rather than *inconsistent*. The implication is that he has unearthed yet another way in which morality appears to be more about desire than reason.

On page 53, Williams sketches out an argument that produces contradictory moral demands:

- (i) I ought to do a
- (ii) I ought to do b
- (iii) I cannot do a and b

From (i) and (ii), by agglomeration

- (iv) I ought to do a and b;

from (iii) by ‘*ought*’ *implies* ‘*can*’ used contrapositively,

- (v) It is not the case that I ought to do a and b.

Such an argument allows a logician to glibly “use the agglomeration principle contrapositively to unseat one or other of (i) and (ii)” (53) and thereby eliminate the

contradiction. The argument and its attendant principles provide an artificial means to eliminate one of two conflicting ought-claims in a manner not unlike that which eliminates one of two conflicting beliefs. Conflicting “oughts” cease to be like stubbornly enduring conflicting desires and are made to resemble conflicting beliefs. In this manner, the argument sketched above supports the “many ethical theorists” (such as Ross and Hare) who assert that the acceptance of recalcitrant moral conflicts involves “some sort of logical inconsistency” (46), some sort of error in reasoning.

But what is glib and inauthentic about such logic is its failure to recognize the contingent source of the contradiction. Williams points out that there is no logical conflict between Agamemnon’s duty to fulfill his responsibilities as commander and his duty to not kill his daughter. Instead, “the conflict arises from a contingent impossibility” (54). The dilemma arises, as so many do, because “*as things are*, there is no way of doing the first without doing the second” (54; emphasis added). The agglomeration principle that combined “I ought to do a” and “I ought to do b” into “I ought to do a and b” is itself suspect. He points out that “in the general field of evaluation” (54) beyond morality, the agglomeration principle often does not hold. Someone may want to marry Robin *or* Daryl, but marrying *both* is not typically desirable or advisable. Someone may enjoy throwing back a few drinks and similarly enjoy operating heavy machinery; however, agglomerating the two pastimes is hardly prudent. Likewise, why should we assume that two ought claims can be legitimately agglomerated when circumstances prevent us from acting on both? A realistic assessment of moral dilemmas reveals the facile character of such a move. If a contrapositive application of the agglomeration principle blithely

demands that the firefighter dismiss one of his two incompatible duties to save his wife *and* the children, and blithely dismisses his lingering regret as contrary to logic, then so much the worse for the agglomeration principle. Williams offers no “knock-down disproof of the agglomeration principle,” but instead suggests, persuasively, “that if a more realistic picture of moral thought emerges from abandoning it, we should have no qualms in abandoning it” (54). The source of the conflict, he tells us, lies in morality’s expectation that we act on *each* moral demand, not on *both*. All too many ought claims do not agglomerate; they demand separate actions, incompatible actions. Lingering regret plagues the agent because ethics requires two separate, distinct deeds, and the agent’s inability to perform each of them has nothing to do with logic.

Williams admits that this argument relies on psychology, specifically on our psychological reactions to particular situations; we are puzzled when beliefs conflict, frustrated when desires conflict, and beset by regret when moral demands conflict. And Christopher Gowans doubts “that the mere fact of regret in and of itself evidences, or even tends to evidence, that something *is* regrettable” (15), despite Williams’ arguments to the contrary. However, I do not see that Williams need lean so heavily on the sentiment of regret. He points out that when he is beset by conflicting ought-claims he does “not think in terms of banishing error”: “I think, if constructively at all, in terms of acting for the best, and this is a frame of mind that *acknowledges* the presence of both the two ‘ought’s” (46). This seems right. Despite the objections of moral theorists who, purportedly, labor through their chosen algorithms (or whatever decision aids their theory provides) to determine the *correct* course of action, moral dilemmas do not demand that we banish

error, do not demand that we avoid mistakes and thereby act *correctly*. They require us to make do, require that we get by. This is because the correct course of action is perfectly clear—*both* “oughts” should be acted upon, but because this is impossible, we flounder about for the next best course of action, or so I shall argue. For Williams’ part, a utilitarian emergency provision:

gives me a way of “acting for the best”; but this is not the same as to revise or reconsider the reasons for the original ‘ought’s, nor does it provide me with the thought “If that had occurred to me in the first place, there need have been no conflict.” (56)

Even the utilitarian firefighter who saves the children rather than his wife is painfully aware that such a deed is a clear second best—or as Williams might say, he is painfully aware that the duty to save his wife was powerful and legitimate, yet he did not fulfill it.

Ethical theories driven by algorithms at first glance appear incapable of making sense of moral dilemmas in any meaningful way. Dilemmas look like *mere* psychological phenomena, the indecision of an agent unable—or unwilling—to maximize utility or respect the categorical imperative, or whatnot. According to utilitarianism, the psychological phenomenon of regret ought to be encouraged or discouraged as befits the maximization of desirable ends. A utilitarian would, I suppose, stand by the claim, “If that had occurred to me in the first place, there need have been no conflict.” Saving a group of children rather than a single adult is a pretty clear way to minimize suffering. But as William Shaw points out in Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism, utilitarians “of all stripes” agree that “people should not try to apply the utilitarian

standard directly to every situation they encounter” (148). Much of the time they ought to navigate by commonsense moral guidelines. Henry Sidgwick argues that ordinary folk should *always* navigate by commonsense moral guidelines. So, if utilitarianism is a meta-theory, a primary, overarching algorithm that churns out secondary normative guidelines and principles, then there appears to be plenty of opportunity for agents to be torn between conflicting commonsense moral standards, standards they must be psychologically committed to if utility is to be maximized. There appears to be plenty of opportunity for regret. Moreover, in a moral quagmire the agent must, presumably, seek guidance from a meta-theory—one he is typically asked to ignore—as he chooses to override one of two conflicting commonsense standards he knows by heart. Surely there is room here for second guessing, for questioning the merits of his decision. Was he right to turn to the meta-theory? Did he override the proper commonsense standard? And, as always, he is left to wonder if he did in fact minimize suffering. Surely he is vulnerable to the tug of the commonsense demand he rejected. Surely he is vulnerable to regret, despite any reassurances that he did the best he could. But the difficulties of utilitarian decision making aside, Williams’ position explicitly denies that ethical theories can explain away moral dilemmas—a point I’ll say more on later.

III. Deep Moral Dilemmas

I believe Williams is right that two (or more) conflicting ought-claims can demand our loyalty. And the source of the conflict indeed lies in contingencies rather than necessities. However, such conflicts do not impugn moral thought, contrary to what

Williams suggests. Instead, vexing contingencies not only create the dilemma, but block its resolution as well. It is the shortcomings of human beings, not those of moral thought, that render the dilemmas insoluble. Our myriad inadequacies are the true origin of irresolvable moral conflict. Ought-claims stubbornly conflict due to our weaknesses, our limited power over ourselves and our environments. The problem lies not with moral thought but with us. In most moral conflicts, the proper course of action is perfectly obvious, *but beyond our power to perform*. A deep moral dilemma, one that authentically threatens the coherence of moral thought, has no *conceivable* solution; in it the demands of morality are so confused or contradictory or incomprehensible that ethical behavior cannot be determined at all.

But the existence of such deep dilemmas is by no means a foregone conclusion. I believe that if we have adequate power at hand, all moral dilemmas are resolvable. The firefighter ought to save his wife *and* the children. Artemis ought to blow Agamemnon a wind without the sacrifice of his daughter. Or consider the familiar scenarios used to expose the extremes of utilitarianism; they often present moral dilemmas. In the sinking lifeboat it seems that we ought not to throw passengers overboard and that we ought to. What is really needed, of course, is a ship sufficiently stocked with fit lifesaving equipment. It seems that we ought not to torture innocent children, but it also seems that we should do all we can to save the thousands of lives threatened by the terrorist who has a daughter he would be loathe to see tortured. It goes without saying that an effective means to find and disable the terrorist's explosives would quickly dispatch the dilemma. When first confronted with such scenarios, students invariably search for ways around the

problem, rotating people in and out of the lifeboat and so forth, because they realize, consciously or not, that the rub lies not with morality—it is clear morality demands that everyone be saved—but with our ingenuity, our resourcefulness, our power over our environment. The dilemma's inescapability is contingent, not logical. Much of the appeal of heroes and gods and other supernatural allies lies in their ability to do what we cannot, in their ability to overcome the contingencies that thwart us. *Deus ex machina* may be a dramatically unsatisfactory way to resolve the conflict of a Greek tragedy, Aeschylus knew better than to bring such aid to Agamemnon, but of course, the gods did possess the power to help the unfortunate warrior whether he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia or not. Such divine solutions point to the thoroughly contingent nature of the dilemma.

Moreover, notice how these solutions that lie beyond our power do nevertheless direct our future actions—or should. The firefighter who is unable to save both his wife and the children has a responsibility to do what he can to better the available technology so that in the future he can save everyone who needs saving. Ships ought to have enough lifeboats for all on board. We need to work hard to eliminate the sources of terrorism—and so on. Technology can enhance our ability to avoid and resolve dilemmas—as it can enhance our capacity to meet many of morality's demands. A primary goal of safety and disaster preparations is to obviate difficult moral choices. In a deep dilemma, no amount of preparation, no technology, no amount of power over ourselves or our environment could possibly help. It is worth wondering, in passing, whether rich nations are (appear?) more ethically advanced than poor ones because they have more power over contingencies. In particular, socioeconomic rights to adequate shelter, education,

nutrition, and healthcare are not cheap. Rich nations' gluttonous use of natural resources may in (very) small part be so difficult to foreswear because it enables them to furnish such rights. Moreover, slavery, human sacrifice, and female infanticide may all appear more acceptable in tribal and ancient societies because they lack the capabilities bestowed by modern technology. Doubly disheartening is that so much of our technology is used to dominate and destroy or to satisfy frivolous wants and desires rather than fulfill our moral duties.

Williams complains that no amount of experience could teach us to elude moral dilemmas, that they are not only irresolvable, but unavoidable. This is no doubt the case, but the fault lies in contingencies and not in the consistency of moral thought. In short, we cannot avoid what we cannot control.

I argued that it was a mistake for Mackie to doubt the wrongness of cruelty, that it was strange, at least, for him to wonder openly why an act of deliberate cruelty is wrong. However, because there are situations that demand that we are cruel, because we must sometimes be cruel to be kind, Mackie's doubt has a *prima facie* plausibility. Casting innocent people out of sinking lifeboats no doubt looks like cruelty, yet in certain circumstances it may well be the best course of action available. More than one culture has initiation rites and other rituals that look cruel, no doubt *are* cruel, yet play an important and valid role in people's lives. In short, Mackie's claim that value terms lack normative implications has merit. Sometimes we ought to be cruel, and sometimes we ought not to. Cruelty is simply a type of behavior; it carries no implication that it ought not to occur.

The response to Mackie's position often relies on the phrase, "all things being equal." That is, "*All things being equal*, we ought not to be cruel." I believe the phrase "all things being equal" is typically a shorthand indication that we have at hand the power to do what we ought. Everyone knows that we ought not to throw people out of lifeboats, but sometimes such an act is the lesser of two evils. Cruel initiation rites prepare people for a difficult world, often a world devoid of Western-style medical care and, in particular, its pain killing medications. For all that is lost when such rituals die, it may be no accident that their death coincides with the appearance of morphine and antibiotics. Likewise, the harsh and (apparently) cruel practices of military boot camps are not inflicted upon U.S. civilians who will never face the hardships of battle. Once again, to convincingly argue against the position that, all things being equal, we ought not to be cruel, one needs a scenario where no conceivable means of avoiding cruelty exists. In the absence of such a counter-example, the normativity of thick ethical terms such as "cruelty" is secure.

In the end, I don't see that Williams explains the exact nature or source of the regret so important to his thesis. After all, if moral thought is incoherent, if it is unreasonable enough to present us with moral conflicts that "are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without remainder" (52), then why does it generate justifiable regret in decent, rational people? Why should we fret and fuss over a species of thought that is muddled and inconsistent, a species of thought whose claims are of dubious integrity? These questions evaporate when we better understand the regret a moral dilemma can leave in its wake. Specifically, we regret our inability to act on both ought-

claims. We regret our inability to manifest what ought to be. We regret our own shortcomings, our own failings. The firefighter can always wonder whether a faster, more efficient and skilled response to the fire might have saved everyone in the building. Government agents torturing a terrorist's daughter can wonder if they've overlooked a less horrifying means to locate the terrorist's bombs—and so forth. Such regret cannot exist without a clear, coherent moral duty. Indeed, inconsistent, conflicting moral thought would *undermine* such regret. Deontic logic may well be in trouble (it *is* in trouble if you ask me), but the grammar of morality, which is both broader and more inclusive, is fine.

By the way, the utilitarian demand that we maximize utility looks much more likely to generate regret than does the categorical imperative of Kantian ethics. As I said before, we can never be sure that our actions have maximized utility. There is no way to know, even after the fact, that the “best” course of action was chosen. Such doubt plays straight into the hands of regret. It would be disciplined utilitarians, indeed, who could cast innocents overboard and then banish all regret, even while they wondered if they had acted for the best. R. M. Hare allows that a perfectly rational agent, an “archangel,” would suffer profound repugnance and anguish whenever a deeply held moral principle was overridden by the demand to maximize utility—he would expect as much. (The ultimate source of these feelings, however, I will discuss later.) The categorical imperative has its shortcoming too, of course, but it does purport to describe our duty *before* we act. A Kantian looks to have fewer doubts to dwell on.

Williams also works hard to throw conflicting desires and conflicting “oughts” into the same pot, to link them through their shared failure to cancel one or the other out. But

it is important to note that the ought-claims of morality can require the modification of our desires. Desires are part of the contingencies we so often lack the power to change. We expect criminals to purge themselves of the desire to commit crimes—authentic rehabilitation is largely dependent upon such a transformation. At the very least, we expect them not to *act* on these desires. Kant had his reasons for placing human passions in the deterministic realm of phenomena. Our desires are no doubt important elements of our identities, of who we are, but if we are to become admirable people, our desires are often the first aspect of ourselves we must control and modify. Moral ought-claims trump any desire that prevents us from fulfilling our duty, a point that Williams notes in the final arguments of his essay.

But more important—and apparently contrary to Williams’ thesis—ought-claims must be logically consistent with one another; they must cohere as a group. Williams himself questions the very possibility of anyone holding:

moral principles or general moral views which are intrinsically inconsistent with one another, in the sense that there could be no conceivable world in which anyone could act in accordance with both of them. (45)

The man who believes he ought not to participate in blood sports, yet believes foxhunting is the moral duty of landed gentry, such as himself, is in much the same position as the man who believes a certain Minister elected in 1964 was a Conservative, even while he believes no Conservative was elected that year. Once each person examines the web of his beliefs, he will discover the two propositions imply a logical contradiction—and one of the two must go. Moral beliefs, even those entangled in moral dilemmas, are subject to

the same demands of logical consistency as other beliefs. It is illogical to believe both “I ought to perform action A” and “I ought not to perform action A.” A deep moral dilemma needs to both prohibit us from unseating one of the two contradictory claims *and* to preserve the logical contradiction no matter how the contingencies of the situation are manipulated.

The construction of such a dilemma is no mean feat. There is no end to the number of ways we can conceivably manipulate ourselves and our environments, and therefore no end to the doubt that our imaginations, and not moral thought, have failed us, no end to the doubt that we have simply missed the contingencies that can be manipulated to eliminate the stubborn logical inconsistency. Even more formidable is the task of fashioning a scenario so perplexing that it blocks us from unseating one of two contradictory claims. As far as I can tell, deep dilemmas are a priori inconceivable.

However, even such an irresolvable moral dilemma, as mystifying as it would have to be, may provide but a single instance of the failure of moral thought. Morality’s coherence will have failed in that instance alone, unless, for some reason, the single failure points out a shortcoming that runs through all of morality. The needed correction could well be neater and more satisfying than the one mathematicians devised for set theory. Indeed, a deep moral dilemma might share a family resemblance with Russell’s paradox. And if set theory is worth saving, then why not morality? But all this is necessarily abstract speculation in the absence of an actual deep moral dilemma.

IV. Beyond Morality

In general, I think moral ought-claims do agglomerate, do pile one upon another to create an enormous set of demands. And securing the resources to act on all of these demands, to bring about the obligatory change, is a difficult, demanding, endless job—an impossible job, really. Morality does not let us rest smugly with the status quo. Instead, it continually reminds us of all that needs to be done, of all the improvements to ourselves and our environments that ought to be enacted. After all, the grammar of the word “ought” demands change of some sort. The *moral* “ought” implies vast, profound changes to the status quo. We ought to create dwellings impervious to fire. We ought to create ships incapable of sinking. We ought to eliminate the sources of terrorism as well as its means and motivations. The list has no end—or rather, it has this end: *complete control over all contingencies that can thwart the fulfillment of our moral obligations*. Legitimate non-moral concerns, be they aesthetic, scientific, athletic, spiritual or whatnot, (arguably) preclude the necessity of spending all our resources towards the achievement of such an end. And an ethic of care may well help us understand the importance of focusing on our friends, family, and loved ones rather than on an abstract ethical ideal. The impossibility of achieving this end also helps spare us from the terrible burden of undertaking it. But the task’s impossibility does not keep us from recognizing it as the logical culmination of morality’s demands.

Williams is right that “Ought implies can” is not “a totally luminous principle” (54). It makes perfect sense for the firefighter to cry out in frustration, “I *know* I ought to save my wife *and* the kids, but I can’t do both without a second hook and ladder!” His

moral duty is so obvious that anyone who stated it in the heat of a firefight would look idiotic, much like someone who pointed out that hungry people ought to try eating food to ease their pangs. The validity of the exclamation is patent. “I ought to perform the task but I lack the necessary means” is as coherent a statement as any. Rescue workers awaiting the delivery of food for starving children are all too aware of the duty that cries out to be fulfilled. To deny the relevance, the authority, the poignancy of the duty to feed the children, simply because the rescue workers cannot discharge it, strikes me as a mistake. The “Ought implies can” principle looks to be more about assigning legitimate *blame* than it is about determining our moral duty. We do not blame people who cannot do what they ought, but we do expect them to perform those actions once the means become available—when we *would* blame them if they then persisted in their failure to act.

Decent, admirable people often feel the pull of moral duties that they lack the power to perform. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be decent, admirable people. The recognition of such duties is an important part of being moral, of knowing what we need to work towards, of differentiating between evils we must endure and that which simply *is*, that which is morally neutral. Morality is a practical undertaking; it is about what we do and do not do. But an important aspect of practical enterprises is preparing the ground, so to speak, for future practices that are currently out of reach. The inadequate healthcare that much of the human race must endure is not a morally neutral feature of the world; it is a terrible source of suffering, and just because we (probably) lack the means to provide sufficient healthcare to everyone who needs it does not mean we have no duty to do so.

Nor is it a morally neutral fact that a woman has never been president of the United States; it is evidence of the pertinacity of gender bias, and our inability to edify the whole voting populace does not mean that it is a task that ought not to be undertaken. The amount of time and resources we should spend working towards these goals is a question of *practice*, a vital question of practice.

A moral person knows (though not necessarily consciously) that the termination of *all* harm is a duty implied by the pejorative character of the word “harm”: all things being equal, harm ought not to occur. Universal happiness coupled to the cessation of suffering is the culmination of morality’s vision. The extravagance of this culmination hardly undermines the coherence of ethics—its immediate practicality perhaps, but not its coherence. Morality’s ultimate goal falls out from the simple understanding that harm is bad and help is good, that one ought to be eliminated and the other encouraged. Harm and help are not the be all and end all of morality, nor are they necessarily its beginning, though anthropologists somewhere or someday may claim as much. They are simply notions broad and basic enough to look beyond it. If we were past harm and help, then we would be past morality as well.

Morality points beyond itself. A completed, perfect healthcare would place us past illness and injury, beyond harm itself. The means capable of this wondrous achievement would be so radical and profound that the term “healthcare” hardly seems adequate. On the other hand, were we perfectly self-sufficient, perfectly happy, we would need no help of any sort, no acts of kindness or generosity or benevolence. Again, the means to achieve so much would be miraculous. Myths of paradise—like myths of the hero—bespeak an

unfulfilled longing. Paradise is the completion of world and self, the end of our strivings with and among ourselves and with that which lies beyond ourselves. But paradise is not only the cessation of suffering and the establishment of bliss; it is the end of our need for ethics, the end of all our duties and obligations. None of this is to say that ethics points to some Eden every rational agent would desire or agree upon; ethics has no equivalent of a Peircean completed science. The continuing relevance of ethics is a symptom of the human predicament, a sign that our condition could be better. The call to end suffering and establish universal happiness is little more than the acknowledgement that we could be better off. There are, and always will be, duties to fulfill. Even if the end of morality has little immediate practical application, it does, nonetheless, point to our less than perfect control over the contingencies of world and self and thereby frees us from the mistaken notion that moral thought is inconsistent.

Moral thought requires us to look beyond what is to what ought to be, and for moral thought to be inconsistent, morality's vision of what ought to be must be inconsistent, incoherent, contradictory. Frankly, I don't see that morality is beset by such problems, not in any significant way, at least. Natural language's stockpile of value terms do not conflict with one another in any sort of logical way. Prudence does not conflict with courage, nor generosity with thrift. Contingencies can make the choice between two contrasting virtues difficult to make, but obviously *statements* are necessary for the formation of contradictions—even if the conflict between values is “formal,” as Thomas Nagel claims in “The Fragmentation of Value.” Conflicts do not *necessarily* arise between utilitarian concerns for the general welfare and what Nagel calls the

“perfectionist” values that smile on “certain achievements or creations” (176) that (supposedly) have no practical application. Odd, at least, is his implication that our appreciation of the “general benefits of medical research and education” inevitably collide with our appreciation of abstruse “fundamental advances [. . .] in mathematics or astronomy” (176). Even if utility “takes into account the number of people whose interests are affected” (178) while perfectionist values do not, the needs of the scientist and the needs of the multitudes can be satisfied with adequate resources. Logic does not demand that we choose between the benefits of medical research and the benefits of abstruse mathematical research. *Tension* is the most that can exist between value terms—and tension does exist. But it is nothing that sufficient power cannot resolve.

Part V. Commonsense Morality

Properly construed, our everyday, commonsense morality is not only coherent but indispensable. Henry Sidgwick’s critique of commonsense morality in The Method of Ethics focuses, misleadingly I think, on *principles*, on duties and rules. However, our most basic, indispensable commonsense morality resides in sentences such as “Good” and “Bad” and in value terms such as “harm” and “help.” Principles, duties, and rules are far more fragile constructions than value terms—and moral theories even more so. Principles and theories are subject to revision in ways that “good” and “bad” are not. Principles and theories lack the inescapability, and hence the authority, of value in general. The commonsense claim (according to Sidgwick) that “we owe more to our own children than to others whose happiness equally depends on our exertions” (346) is subject to debate in

a way that “Harm is bad” is not. No ethical discussion can even begin without basic value terms. Not only is *some* set of value terms inescapable, the most basic are inescapable.

We cannot evaluate the merits of moral theories—or commonsense principles—if we do not have a value-infused language that transcends them, that has meaning outside of them. Utilitarianism cannot evaluate the claim that right action maximizes utility; outside means are required. The value terms of natural language are required. Commonsense morality, as expressed by the set of value terms present in a natural language, is necessary for the process of evaluation. But when commonsense rules and duties are favored, and basic value terms neglected, commonsense morality is in danger of becoming a straw man.

Commonsense morality, as I have construed it, even presents some hope for moral progress. Moral progress is possible when suffering is eased and happiness nurtured. We are making good use of commonsense when we realize that slavery is *cruel*, that universal public education is *helpful*, that the absence of women’s suffrage is *unfair*, that equal rights for homosexuals is *just*. Of course, much hard work, conceptual and empirical, must go into choosing between subtly different options, but eliminating the gross suffering that has been inflicted upon women, homosexuals, slaves—and far too many others—is an obvious duty. The point is that commonsense is no pawn of the status quo. On the contrary, the cruelty or kindness of any tradition or custom, any principle or rule, is always open to scrutiny.

Nor is commonsense morality limited to a single language group. “Good,” “bad,” “harm,” “help” are all excellent candidates for translation—if any value terms are. Once cross-cultural communication is established, the arduous, interminable tasks of moral

discussion and debate can begin. And, again, if terms such as “cruelty” have been successfully translated, neither culture can argue that an unnecessarily cruel practice is permissible. Practices that appear cruel must be defended against the charge. If someone begins arguing that, all things being equal, cruelty is good, then either the person has not mastered the word or translation has failed. In Hume’s “Dialogue” at the end of An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Palamedes conjures up a strange people from the land of “Fourli” whose customs appear cruel and inhumane. But Palamedes’ descriptions of the Fourli customs founder on the subtleties of translation. If “Alcheic was a murderer and a parricide” (108), such attributes could not be construed as virtues. “Murderer” and “parricide,” with their requisite negative connotations, could not possibly be appropriate translations of the Fourli words—not if each word represents a *virtue*. Once the translator coins two new words, as appears to be necessary, the obvious question to put to the Fourli is why these practices ought not to be construed as cruel—the very question that ought to be put to the Greeks and Romans on whom Palamedes modeled the Fourli. Wittgenstein helps us see that Palamedes splits in two a single task. There is no need “*first* to learn the meaning of the terms in their language, and *then* to know the import of those terms, and the praise or blame attached to them” (107; emphasis added). We cannot fully understand the meaning of a term without understanding the praise or blame attached to it. If the term refers to a complex practice or belief within the alien culture’s form of life, then it is perfectly legitimate to question if praise or blame has been *appropriately* attached—a legitimate question to ask of one’s native culture, as well. But again, basic terms like “good” and “bad” cannot be revised without undermining the

process of evaluation itself. As I've said, survival would be difficult, at the very least, for a culture lacking notions of "good" and "bad," "harm" and "help." But most important, it's difficult to see how cultures *with* such concepts would not agree that, all things being equal, we ought to help and ought not to harm. As much seems a necessary condition for the understanding of each word.

Postmodernism's complaint that we have no meta-theory with which to evaluate our distinct and incommensurable theoretical viewpoints, or "narratives," fails to fully appreciate the utility of a *whole* natural language and the indispensability of basic value terms. Consider, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Lyotard is right that language has its theoretical subsets.

Moreover, the view from within these subsets can look comprehensive. But the means to legitimize the narrative of science—or any other specific narrative—are not, to use Lyotard's term, "immanent" to that narrative. Science must be "reasonable" and "impartial"; it must meet certain commonsense demands. So too must moral theories be "humane" and "fair"—not to mention "reasonable" and "impartial." Any narrative, if it indeed be narrative, must meet generally accepted criteria of language usage.

Commonsense morality is not threatened by postmodern fragmentation. I don't see that the notions of cruelty and kindness—or any other commonsense notions—are the unique possessions of a particular narrative, a particular theory, a particular culture, or any other particular "language particles" (xxiv). A natural language cannot deteriorate into unique, incommensurable fragments and still be a natural language. No doubt the *application* and *interpretation* of value terms can be colored, profoundly, by individual theories, but to

strip cruelty of its pejorative character is, again, to destroy it, not revise it. The terms “cruel,” “helpful,” “unfair,” and “just” need no theoretical aid to be key elements in the supporting arguments for the theses mentioned in an earlier paragraph: Slavery is cruel. Cruelty ought not to occur. Therefore, slavery ought not to occur. At the risk of sounding glib, I don’t see how such an argument is beholden to a particular language narrative, a particular cloud “of sociality” (xxiv). Terms as vague as “harm” and “help” are nevertheless specific enough for competent users of English to put them into play without recourse to one or another fragmentary, incommensurable language perspective. Postmodernism, or at least Lyotard, has not appreciated the import of Donald Davidson’s “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.” The notion of incommensurable conceptual schemes is not even coherent.

The holism of natural language looks to present moral theorists with a daunting project. These theorists always tell us that their theories begin in, and respect, ordinary moral considerations, that they are not cut from whole cloth. But enormous indeed is the task of fashioning a theory capable of swallowing every commonsense moral belief—except, of course, those that it dismisses. A whole natural language displays a vast panoply of subtle, nuanced, commonsense views. It is shot through with value. Morality is not easily isolated, is not easily captured by a particular narrative or viewpoint. Indeed, morality is not supposed to be within the purview of a single, incommensurable perspective. Instead, it is supposed to reach out to every human endeavor; it is supposed to have a universal relevance. That morality will be described by a single theory seems no more likely than that nature will be described by a single science. The complex weave of

the moral—and the scientific—spreads throughout the web of language. I think moral theories begin in waters, to risk another metaphor, too vast to swallow.

In general, moral theorists, like all theorists, are challenged from one side by Wittgenstein's insight that the rules of usage change subtly—or not so subtly—from language game to language game. Fairness in sports will not necessarily share some unique essence with fairness in business, fairness in the courtroom, fairness in love, or any other species of fairness. A family resemblance is the most that can be found uniting the different usages of fairness—or any word. Each unique usage pulls one or more accepted usage rules from a set of such rules, but no one rule, no one Platonic essence, will unify all the different usages. Language theorist Mark Platts tacitly acknowledges the Wittgensteinian point by steering his version of moral realism around “the (usually fruitless) task of producing ‘informative’ compositional analyses of these [moral] expressions producing truly necessary and sufficient conditions for their application” (283). So varied and rich are the grammars of value terms that capturing them all in a single theory is tough, to say the least.

From the other side, moral theorists are challenged by Quinean holism. Sentences cannot be verified one at a time; they link together in a vast interrelated web held together by logical inference. I have argued that moral beliefs are as subject to the demands of logical coherence as any other beliefs. Therefore, any rejection or revision of a moral belief can potentially resonate throughout the language. For example, the utilitarian rejection of the claim that killing innocent people is always wrong has widespread implications. Children are typically characterized as innocent people; therefore killing

children is not necessarily wrong—nor is killing anyone whose death would maximize utility. Any moral theory that revises commonsense principles or beliefs must be able to justify all the logical implications of the revision. Moral theories begin in the immense interrelated web of value sentences that constitute commonsense morality, and their challenge is to justify every distant reverberation that their novel claims send rippling through the language.

I suppose the gist of these two points is that value terms are varied and abundant, and that revising existing moral principles can have far-reaching repercussions.

VI. Moral Theory and the Human Condition

At any rate, Williams is, unfortunately, right that moral dilemmas exist that we are powerless to resolve. And it is true that we can legitimately regret such a lack of power. He is also right that morality will never be all that we want it to be—or more accurately, *we and the world* will never be all that we want them to be. We are stuck with a clear sense of our moral duty and a clear sense that we will never be able to completely fulfill it. We want morality to give us definite answers in every predicament that besets us—*but answers that are within our means*. The “Ought implies can” principle is a vain longing for those definite, attainable answers. Morality helps us make do with the sadness and pain of human existence and helps us foster our fragile joys and exultations, but ironically, one of the primary means of bettering the human condition, one of our primary means of coping, is also one of the primary means by which we learn of our multitudinous inadequacies. We cannot escape the knowledge that what we limited, finite beings can do

is often but an ad hoc compromise, a meager substitute for what we would do were we stronger, more temperate, more admirable.

There is no authoritative resolution, no plainly correct course of action, no single algorithm to guide us when we are unable to do what we should. The firefighter stuck between his family loyalties and his duties as a public servant is, unfortunately, out in the cold. He has to make do. His predicament is all the more terrible because the proper course of action, his clear moral duty, is beyond his means to achieve—and he knows it. Such knowledge can be painful indeed. It often leaves a scarring residue of regret—not to mention frustration, anger, and an embittered sense of impotence.

Ultimately, the authority of any moral theory that says, for example, that the firefighter ought to save the children rather than his wife, will be undercut by the painfully obvious claim that he ought to save both of them, a claim so obvious there is little need to speak it. We can't banish from our minds those deeds of heroes and angels, those deeds that depict the heights of moral action. We know everything else is second best. Poetic language aside, *any solution to a moral dilemma that chooses but one of the two conflicting options, one of the two "horns," is inferior to a solution that allows us to choose both. And in every moral dilemma, our inability to choose both arises from contingencies and not from any inconsistency in moral thought.*

But I believe the point can be stated in even broader terms. In any moral quandary whatsoever, in any situation where we are uncertain what is right (assuming all practical moral problems do not collapse into dilemmas), if no problem in the grammar of morality exists, then contingencies are the source of the quandary. This much seems clear

enough—tautological even. Either the quandary's source is grammatical or it is not grammatical. But from this it follows that any moral theory's solution to a (non-grammatical) moral quandary will be a makeshift substitute for a more complete control over contingencies. The claims of the moral theory will be in competition with the “power solution,” the solution that would be more helpful or less harmful via superior control over the troublesome contingencies. Nor is a moral theory needed to determine which solution would in fact be “more helpful or less harmful”; with complete control over contingencies, the general usage guidelines of “help” and “harm” are guidelines enough. What moral quandary would not dissolve in the face of omnipotence? And the full force of omnipotence is rarely needed to solve moral problems. Hume pointed out that women's vulnerability to pregnancy resulted in stricter sexual mores for them than men. Looking back, we can understand how these lopsided mores could well have prevented unwanted pregnancies more effectively than a standard that attempted to restrict the sexes equally. Patriarchal biases of the time most likely made enforcement of such equal restrictions untenable. The standard has the look of a commonsense principle justified by the meta-theory utilitarianism. But this principle was, at best, a makeshift measure to compensate for the lack of effective birth control. (At worst, it was a mode of gratuitous oppression.) We can see, even if Hume's contemporaries could not, the dubious authority of such a convention—*even if it did minimize suffering*. It was a temporary stand-in for a fair and just apportioning of sexual responsibility.

We need morality because we are vulnerable creatures with limited power, and the commonsense principles “Help,” and “Do no harm,” are probably broad enough to

circumscribe all our moral duties. Hence, in many circumstances they are sufficient behavioral guidelines. Someone asks for help jumping a dead car battery. Anger goads you to raise your hand against a sleeping dog. Jump the battery; curb your anger. Easy enough. But moral quandaries prey on the limits of our powers. Circumstances have conspired to block our moral duty, and we are left to scramble for alternatives. Persistent, unavoidable moral quandaries drive us to moral theory. Were there no quandaries, there would be no continuing need for theory, at least those driven by algorithms. Moral theories supplement the commonsense morality contained in natural language—but they do not override it, not as long as their dictates are substitutes for better control over the contingencies that keep us from less harmful and more helpful solutions. In general, we need help and can't avoid doing harm because we lack full control over ourselves and our surroundings. Moral theories help us cope with our lack of full control. Unfortunately, such help will always be provisional. *Moral theory is only needed in those situations where its authority is undermined, those situations where it is a substitute for greater power.* The two primary goals of theory are to give us insights into the existing, commonsense morality and to modify its dictates in trying situations. An ethic of care is particularly adept at the former; algorithmic theories are particularly adept at the latter. Moral theory is certainly not needed for the legitimization of value itself; value is what legitimates moral theory. Again, theory can clarify what is and create alternatives where there are none. Utilitarianism, for example, supplants “Do no harm” with “Choose that course of action that does the least harm.” Kantian ethics claims that true harm requires malicious intentions, and in the absence of such intentions, no real harm has been done.

What constitutes harm and help is tweaked and modified so that we can better cope. But as coping aids, moral theories lack the standing to make final, authoritative, ultimate dictates on morality. People are right to react with doubt and concern when utilitarianism demands that innocents be sacrificed to maximize utility, or when Kant proclaims that we should not lie to axe murderers who are hunting down our loved ones. Such assertions are ways to make do—or perhaps in the Kantian case, a refusal to make do.

It is interesting to note that Kantian ethics is well-suited to those who strive to be heroic, those who refuse to be pushed around by their own powerlessness, who stand by the moral law no matter the consequences. Utilitarianism is for the less idealistic, for those who, in their pragmatic way, make peace with the contingencies beyond their control. In the sinking lifeboat, the Kantians staunchly refuse to use human beings as mere objects to cast overboard so that fewer will drown. Consequences—and contingencies—be damned. The utilitarians grit their teeth and toss over those whose deaths will bring the least unhappiness. They resign themselves to their inability to save everyone and choose the next best course of action—saving as many as they can. But it should be clear by now that each theory's position is a compromise forced by a lack of power. Whether their actions are guided by utilitarianism or Kantian ethics, the unfortunates trapped in sinking lifeboats are vulnerable to regret. But primarily, they are left to bemoan the tragic fragility of human life. Neither theory can provide an authoritatively *correct* solution to the dilemma. Each “solution” is but a second best stand-in for the heroic or miraculous.

Aside from both theories' rather stubborn insistence that intrinsic value lies in consequences and not motivation or *visa versa*, even the conflict between utilitarianism and Kantian ethics is largely a product of contingencies. Consequences and motivation *both* are important moral considerations, and no *logical* conflict exists between the maximization of utility and respect for the categorical imperative. Only unfavorable contingencies can prevent good will from maximizing utility. Similarly unusual contingencies are needed to twist "bad will," as it were, into positive consequences. Otherwise, the choice between proper motivation and beneficial consequences is unnecessary. Any maxim that fails the test of universalizability victimizes someone—or if it doesn't, mere chance is to thank. Again, respecting rational agents as ends in themselves, and not means to some other end, requires that we harm no one willfully. All things being equal, both forms of the categorical imperative maximize utility. In the kingdom of ends, the ideal fulfillment of Kantian ethics, utility is maximized. Moreover, if utilitarianism broadens the scope of our moral obligations beyond rational, lawmaking agents to any being susceptible to suffering, then so much the better. But utilitarians must remember, of course, that their championing of *any* motivation that maximizes utility is a product of their willingness to accept untoward contingencies. The common sin of moral theories is the sin of exclusivity, of asserting sole dominion over the province of the moral. When seen—properly I believe—as coping mechanisms, virtue ethics, an ethic of care, rights theory, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, theories of justice, and commonsense morality can co-exist—ought to co-exist.

VII. Pluralism

We need morality as long as we fall short of its goals. As long as we are unable to help all those who need help, as long as we succumb to destructive desires, we will have moral duties to fulfill. And as technology augments our ability to help and ameliorate harm, new quandaries arise. Modern transportation makes it possible to help those in need no matter where on earth they live. How much ought we to give? Male sex criminals can be chemically castrated. Ought we to do so? Both the creative alternatives and the conceptual insights of moral theory can help us cobble together compromise solutions to these and many other moral questions. Because there is no fact of the matter about what we ought to do when confronted with our powerlessness, with our failings, because there is no fact of the matter about what we should do in our overcrowded sinking lifeboats, in such predicaments we must bring to bear all the power we have at hand, technological and intellectual. When our clear duty is out of reach, we have to rank the alternatives as best we can. Any insight into the complexities of a specific moral dilemma can help. Commonsense morality, utilitarianism, an ethic of care, virtue theory, Kantian ethics, theories of justice, rights theory—any and every means we have of finding the crux of a particular moral problem ought to be put into play. The failure to do so is the failure to cope as best as we can.

I think it an important philosophical project to smooth out the subtle and not so subtle logical conflicts lurking among different theories, although I am not convinced that logical conflict is as rife or as deep as many might think. Even the conflict between John Rawls' welfare society and Robert Nozick's minimal state is a product of contingencies.

Were we more generous beings, as one day, conceivably, we may be (especially if we follow Peter Singer), rational agents in Rawls' original position could well agree to Nozick's views on entitlement. Why use government to hoist up those at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder if we can rely on human generosity to do so? People ought to be able to keep what they have legitimately earned, and people should not be allowed to fall into abject poverty while others are fantastically rich. These two claims do not conflict without the addition of premises describing some less than optimal contingencies.

Ultimately, though, Thoreau is right; government—like ethics—is a crutch to cast away when we're ready, although there's little reason, unfortunately, to think that we ever will be ready. Our ethical challenges are as much technological as ideological, I think. And one ideological task is to strip ethical theories, especially those driven by algorithms, of their urge to squeeze a scientific precision from a mode of thought that is intrinsically unscientific. Aristotle—and not Sidgwick or Kant—appreciated the unscientific character of ethics. More recently, an ethic of care has also shunned a science-inspired approach, instead wisely focusing on the role of specific contextual detail in moral reasoning.

But each moral theory I've mentioned is inspired by some real ethical insight. Virtue ethics recognizes the importance of character. As Williams is fond of saying, not only the nature of the deed matters, but what sort of man performs the deed. An ethic of care is an important corrective to the theoretical excesses of utilitarianism and Kantian ethics; it provides insights of a caring, nurturing perspective that long has been suppressed and ignored. More than that, it wisely contextualizes moral decision making. Rights theory has had a profound, worldwide influence on political thought. John Rawls and

Robert Nozick both have much enlightening to say about the difficulties of distributive justice. The influence and profundity of utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are beyond question.

Pursuing the truth, pursuing a correct course of action, can be a single-minded, monochromatic task. Making do is much more messy. We must grab *everything* at hand and be creative. *Moral pluralism* is the best approach available to us, the most honest, the most representative of, and responsive to, our predicament. Obviously, we don't want to confuse ourselves with conflicting demands, but we do need to sort wisely through the multifaceted commonsense and theoretical insights into motivation, consequence, sentiment, virtue, care, character, entitlement, justice, and so forth. To rely on a single approach is to mistakenly believe that a correct course of action exists even when the correct course of action is beyond our reach. Harm and help are philosophically interesting notions, dwelling as they do at the most basic level of morality yet pointing beyond it; however, in practice they don't help a whole lot. "Do no harm!" doesn't move us very far towards a compromise solution integrating the best of the minimal state and the welfare society. Noting that the conflict would disappear were we different sorts of beings is not a great aid to practice, either. But we need to guard against smugness, against the hubris of assuredness, of believing we have *the* right answer. Even when we lack complete control over contingencies, there may nonetheless be a "best" solution at hand (utilitarianism's quest to minimize suffering is particularly powerful), but it will always fall short of the solution that we can imagine but cannot enact. More likely, though, there

will be no sure fire way to choose the best solution from the ones available to us. We will have to make do.

The task of this paper has been essentially Wittgensteinian in character. I've sought to clear up the grammar of value and morality; to straighten up the rules and meanings of the game before we begin to play. The "rules" of morality, like the rules of chess, have evolved over time, emerging out of the moral form of life itself. But we can, and should, stop the game to think through and clarify the rules before we begin to play again. This I have (modestly I hope) tried to do. However, it might be objected that my thesis fails to appreciate that morality is for *us*, for human beings with imperfect control over the contingencies of the world, and not for gods and angels. The moral form of life is a human form of life and should not ask of us what we cannot do. But chess is, again, an apt example of how simple, coherent rules can spiral into complexities whose mastery is past us. Before we begin the game of chess, we learn the rules, and they may very well seem simple enough, but in the course of actual play, the variables multiply at a fantastic rate. Soon we are confronted with the limits of our intelligence. How far into the future of the game can we visualize? How many different moves and counter-moves can we think through and remember? We soon realize the answer is "Not enough." Fully informed moves whose every ramification is tallied and understood are not within our powers. The rules of morality rarely, if ever, twist and gnarl into complexities that outstrip our intellectual capacities. Instead, moral rules author dilemmas that outstrip our control over world and self. Of course, the appeal and purpose of chess is to challenge us, to cast us into intellectual waters too deep to fathom, whereas morality's purpose is to

guide our behavior and intentions. However, when contingencies twist our code of ethics into dilemmas, rewriting the code and then pretending the dilemmas disappear is hardly in the spirit of the game. And ethics is a serious game—as serious as they come. No doubt we need to bend the rules when the terrible befalls us, when events go hideously awry, but to assert that we are bending no rules, that all along they allowed the sacrificing of innocents or the destruction of multitudes so that the innocents may be spared, is to close our eyes to our own human failings and vulnerabilities. An honest and effective confrontation of moral dilemmas is a twofold task: we must manipulate our moral rules, twist them about as best we can, *and* work to expand our powers so that in the future a straighter moral path awaits us.

VIII. The Sacred

Moral philosophy inspired by Wittgenstein often ignores his actual position on the subject. He is famous, of course, for placing morality beyond the world, placing it in a realm beyond the reach of language. In the Tractatus he writes, “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental” (6.421). The world of which we can speak, the world circumscribed by logic, is morally and aesthetically inert. All value and sense lie beyond it, and “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (7). In “A Lecture on Ethics” he echoes much of the Tractatus as he again places ethics outside the bounds of 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. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (86)

Unlike the logical positivists who appropriated him, Wittgenstein had profound respect and sympathy for religious and ethical forms of life, as this passage shows. He did have regular conversations with G. E. Moore, however, and Moore's attack on naturalism in Principia Ethica held powerful sway in 1929—as it does today with moral anti-realists—and Wittgenstein was not immune. Still, I believe there continues to be provocative and prescient aspects of this essay.

Wittgenstein never got the chance to read Quine. Nevertheless, he formulates the value-neutral scientific world view in a manner that may well escape current Quinean concerns about indeterminacy. Quine wholeheartedly agrees with Ayer and Mackie and Harman that the natural world simply *is*, that value is the creation and concern of societies and begins and end with them. But unfortunately for human knowledge, Quine's three theses of indeterminacy—indeterminacy of translation, inscrutability of reference, and underdetermination of scientific theory—force us to turn to epistemic virtues. I argued in Part 1 that once value of any sort sneaks into our methods, it is extremely difficult to keep it from spreading throughout our worldview. However, Wittgenstein's *omniscient*

observer, one with complete knowledge of “all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and [. . .] all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived” (83) could conceivably block these limiting indeterminacies and thereby obviate the need for epistemic value of any kind. Translation is indeterminate because we have no access to speakers’ “private stimulus meaning” (“Three Indeterminacies” 4), to the patterns of sensory stimulation associated with observational speech acts. All the translator has access to is behavior. The inaccessibility of stimulus meaning ultimately led Quine to abandon it. After all, who knows if the stimulus meanings of the native and the linguist are in any way similar as they each observe a rabbit? But an omniscient man could solve these problems. He would know each native’s stimulus meaning as he or she says “Gavagai” and points. He could compare these stimulus meanings with one another and with his own—assuming an omniscient being has such stimulations—and determine the exact relevance of the “homology of nerve endings from one individual to another” (“Three Indeterminacies” 2). He could, I suppose, create a single translation manual with a supplement, if need be, describing the idiosyncrasies of every speaker of the language. He would have no need to fall back on epistemic virtues to aid his choice among competing manuals because, as far as I can tell, there would be no competing manuals. Next consider the problems of reference. A specific inscrutability of reference, Quine tells us, “is relative to a manual of translation. To say that ‘gavagai’ is translated as ‘rabbit,’ instead of opting for any of the alternative manuals” (“Three Indeterminacies” 6). Once more, the omniscient man would know which alternative would be most appropriate for every speaker of the language; for reification would be no problem for him. He would

know just what does and does not exist and could determine when “rabbit,” or “rabbit stage” or “rabbit leg” is the most appropriate translation. He could link every speaker’s stimulus meaning with the object creating that stimulation. He could get right everything there is to get right in the process of translation. Lastly, this man’s complete knowledge would make it easy to choose among competing scientific theories—if he would need recourse to *theory* at all. He could verify his sentences one at a time. In short, it is perfectly plausible that those exigencies that push us inevitably towards epistemic values—and hence value in general—vanish with omniscience. So, if this omniscient man

wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we would call an *ethical* judgment or anything that would logically imply such a judgment. (83)

All ethical judgments would be descriptions of group or individual psychology. He could complete Hume’s project—and hence Ayer’s and Harman’s—of reducing every value judgment to “a sentiment of disapprobation.” But most important, no one could accuse the omniscient man of tacitly harboring his own set of values and ethical judgments. His superhuman means of obtaining knowledge would require no recourse to value of any kind. His picture of a value-free world could be constructed with value-free tools.

Needless to say, this discussion of omniscience is very rough and highly speculative; not being omniscient ourselves we have no way of determining just what such a being would know. We are stuck in our conceptualized world, and many of our essential conceptualizing tools are value laden. The key point is, however, that it is an *ideal* science

that strips nature of all value and not the theory beholden, perspectival science that we are stuck with—a point science-minded philosophers should note. To completely dismiss value, it only remains to show, contra Ramberg-Rorty-Davidson, that language usage is independent of value. Rorty's rather highfalutin claim that language use requires rights and responsibilities might possibly be explained away through an appeal to Wittgensteinian notions of rule following. All this is just to say that the scientific view of a value-free world is powerful and plausible. Hence the need to argue against it.

Wittgenstein's use of omniscience is subtle and provocative. In its unique way, it reminds us that the Peircean ideal of a completed science is in principle unattainable because of our limited epistemological powers. The apprehension of *absolute* value is beyond us for similar reasons, and absolute value is Wittgenstein's true subject in "A Lecture on Ethics."

Wittgenstein goes on to argue that straightforward value claims such as "This man is a good runner" are similes for factual, scientific statements. Stripped of metaphorical language the sentence simply means "that he runs a certain number of miles in a certain number of minutes" (83). Value terms such as "good" and "right" are used in this innocuous, "relative" manner all the time. However, ethical statements are *absolute* judgments of value. When we search for their literal meanings, for the factual, "scientific" sentences for which they are metaphors, we find nothing. The miraculous disappears. In part, this is because "the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle" (85). But the search is also futile because absolute value claims point beyond the world, "beyond significant language" (86). The same odd metaphysical entities from

Mackie's argument from queerness appear in the "Lecture." Wittgenstein makes virtually the same point as Mackie, although years earlier, of course:

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. (83)

And like Mackie, he dismisses such metaphysical entities as chimeras: "No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge" (83). At least no such state of affairs can be expressed in language. The Right and The Good cannot be expressed in language.

It is telling that in his search for this mysterious literal meaning of absolute value claims Wittgenstein turns to the transcendent, to miracles and mystical experience. Wittgenstein's topic in the "Lecture" is not so much the pedestrian meanings of "harm" and "help," meanings that I have argued are grounded in ordinary usage rules that are *not* dependent on the transcendent, are not dependent on the queer metaphysical entities that Mackie and Wittgenstein dismiss. Wittgenstein's subject matter is not so much ordinary day-to-day morality. Instead, he is writing about the transcendent, about "the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable." Ethics, aesthetics, religion all swirl together into a single concern. He is writing about the sacred, about the divine. His

biographer Ray Monk tells us that in a notebook from this period he writes, “What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics” (278).

I have argued that morality points past itself to a kind of paradise beyond harm and help. Of course, stones are beyond harm and help, as are the dead, but clearly neither of these is the completion of morality’s vision. The sacred ineffable is the completion. For the simple moral edict “Help” to pass from relevance, human beings must be fully realized, fully actualized, fully completed. The fundamental, rudimentary value term “help” points to an ineffable human fulfillment. As Rorty might make the point, we have no experience of such a completed form of life and thereby lack the usage norms necessary to speak of it. So much is past language. But Plato, Lao Tsu, Christ, Kant, Buddha, Mohammed, Rainer Maria Rilke, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Kierkegaard, and many others have spoken of the transcendent—reveled in it, really. For Plato’s guardians, ruling the state becomes an onerous duty, a less than pleasant task they are beholden to perform, only because they would rather be contemplating the Forms. Among Plato’s heavenly Ideas they are complete. No longer must they make do with shadows, but instead can stand before Beauty, Justice, and ultimately Good itself. It is no wonder that Plato does not say more about the Forms; as it is, he has probably said too much. Rilke writes that “beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure” (151). Beauty undiluted would consume us. Angels terrify, tenanted as they are amid Beauty itself, and imbued with an “overwhelming existence” (151) that we can only comprehend as our dissolution. If we were beyond help, we would be different beings, beings who *know* what we now can only guess at, beings like Rilke’s angels. And

it is no accident that when Wittgenstein seeks to fix his mind on what he means “by absolute or ethical value” he calls on “the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. [. . .] ‘I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens’” (84). Within ordinary everyday morality is an aspiration to safety—the apotheosis of safety. The moral calling to help, as pedestrian as it is, as grounded in ordinary language as it is, is nonetheless linked with the transcendent realization of the human.

For hundred of years, utilitarians have searched for the proper *telos* to maximize. Suggestions have ranged from pleasure to happiness, from desire-satisfaction theory to the objective-list approach. William Shaw lucidly charts the quest in Chapter 2 of his book and in the end advocates the all-encompassing notion of “well-being.” But well-being is a broad, vague, working substitute for our ultimate completion, a catchall phrase for the general human want—as is each of the proffered utilitarian ends. They all look thin and sallow next to more specific visions of human fulfillment, metaphorical though they be, visions such as the one Joseph Campbell has culled from world mythology:

I think what we are looking for is a way of experiencing the world that will open to us the transcendent that informs it, and at the same time forms ourselves within it. That is what people want. That is what the soul asks for. (53)

In Campbell’s view, myth and the mythological experience are guides to a *telos* more particular than pleasure or happiness or well-being:

The center of the world is the *axis mundi*, the central point, the pole around which all revolves. The central point of the world is the point where

stillness and movement are together. Movement is time, but stillness is eternity. Realizing how this moment of your life is actually a moment of eternity, and experiencing the eternal aspect of what you're doing in the temporal experience—this is the mythological experience. (89)

Apprehending this “Point of intersection of the timeless/With time,” (44) as T.S. Eliot has it, is, of course, an ineffable human fulfillment, “an occupation for the saint” (44).

Utilitarianism's demand that we *minimize* suffering is powerful and difficult to dismiss, but it is no accident that it has failed to express an essential human *telos*, failed to express what ought to be *maximized*. Such a *telos* cannot be corralled by human language. And so we have sacred metaphors whose literal meanings go unsaid. Even Kant's heavenly kingdom of ends, where everything has a dignity or a price, falls short of morality's most distant vision, falls short of the ultimate human end. Like Nozick's utopia of the minimal state, it is a kingdom where our vulnerability necessitates that we still perform duties, that we still respect the rights of others. Only a “sovereign” in the kingdom of ends is a finished being beyond all help, “a completely independent being without need and with unlimited power adequate to his will” (40). Only the sovereign is the culmination of morality and therefore past its reach. But for the rest of us, as long as “price” has relevance, as it does for mere members of Kant's ideal nation, as long as there are rights to protect, as there are within the minimal state, then all are not secure and beyond all need of help, even if their societies are utopian or ruled by gods. Everyone must be perfectly safe, perfectly whole. Wittgenstein is right, morality, in its distant culmination at least, in

its sacred vision at least, is about more than just coping, much more. More than we can say.

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Notes

¹ See his discussion of color, pp. 22-23.

² See his “The Structure and Content of Truth,” The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 6 June 1990.

³ See his, and Judith Jarvis Thomson’s, Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

⁴ However, whether Wiggins’ notion of plain truth, a notion he takes pains to fill out, stands up to scrutiny is another issue. I find much more appealing Davidson’s claim that truth is among the clearest, most basic notions we possess and that it is a mistake to believe it can be described or defined in clearer, more basic terms. See Davidson’s “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,” The Journal of Philosophy, Vol., XCII, No. 6 June 1996.

⁵ And although claiming that something doesn’t exist certainly sounds like an ontological assertion, Rorty would no doubt respond that *coping*, not ontology, requires us to make the point about Zeus.